

Eldritch Science

March 2020



Floating Weightless
Jose R. Sanchez

Editorial

We still have the content item: First Chapters! Yes, if you are a Neffer and have published novels, send us the first chapter (and, if you wish, the cover image), and we'll publish it as an introduction to your tale. This issue, we have in store the first chapters of Marla Anderson's NanoMorphosis and my Eclipse—The Girl Who Saved the World.

As a Reader reward, your Editor has published a series of SF novels, most recently Airy Castles All Ablaze, Eclipse—The Girl Who Saved the World, Against Three Lands, Minutegirls, Mistress of the Waves, and The One World. If any of you would like a free review copy of any or all of these, you have but to ask.

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Gather Some Stars by Jens Hieber

"Scoop up the sea, pour it in a bowl
and dine on it and rice,
reach out, gather some stars,
and mix them with salt to eat,"
~Angkarn Kalayanapong~

The night Saengdao found the Nai beetle started out like so many others – feeling obligated to hang out with her friends at the game arcade while she should have been at home.

She sat in the game chair, and as always, the street around her became a blur as the racer sped up, the starting sound still ringing in her ear. Saengdao tried to focus on the tarmac ahead, forgetting the noise from before she had put the helmet on. She swerved around a bicycle laden high with produce, managed to get pointed forward again, before having to slow behind the red lights of a mini-truck emblazoned with fading letters.

They'd picked a night-course for her. Supposedly the bright lights of the stores flashing by on either side made it easier to differentiate background from obstacles. A siren wailed behind her as she frantically glanced into the mirror, then

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threw her eyes back onto the street.

Too late.

A rickshaw had darted out of a side street; moments later, her seat shuddered, ending the session as all others had. She'd crashed again, her low score flashing up in the corner: 300 stars.

Saengdao tore the helmet off, placing a nonchalant, carefree smile on her face and tried not to be hurt by her friends' laughter.

"Slow Saeng, Slow Saeng," rang the familiar chorus, Malee leading. Without the helmet, the wave of sounds, beeps, thudding music, and excited chatter of the game parlor washed through her mind. The flashing lights were bad enough but it was the sounds that got to her. She flipped up the wheel and leveraged herself from the seat, handing the helmet to Tasanee, who was next.

As the taller girl adjusted the seat, Saengdao checked over her shoulder to make sure her brother was still sitting where she had deposited him. Kasem was absorbed in something on his phone and appeared quite content. She could afford to stay until the end of this turn before having to make her excuses.

Tasanee pulled down the helmet and the drink advertisement on the large screen faded, replaced by the famous 'Fast' logo. The screen replicated what the player actualized within the helmet, allowing opponents, or friends, to see and participate.

"I'll show you how to do that track, Slow Saeng," the girl said over her shoulder.

But Saengdao's discouragement had lessened her interest for one day. The nickname they used for her now was at least better than 'dirty hands'. She feigned attention while surreptitiously glancing toward a group of older boys at the next station, laughing and joking as they played the same game. Everyone was playing it, ever since it had risen to popularity a few months ago, beating out 'Legends of Knives'. The game arcades were quick to supply students like her with a place to spend their money.

A few minutes later, Tasanee whooped in delight as her score of several thousand stars flashed on the screen. Malee impatiently waited her turn while Saengdao managed to get out a congratulatory "Well done."

"You just have to react quicker and keep your eyes on everything," Tasanee explained. "You want to try again, Slow Saeng?"

Time to make her excuses. "I would like to, but I need to get my brother home. You know how it is."

"Just one more round," Malee insisted.

"My dad will already be wondering where we are," she answered, inwardly cringing at how that would sound.

"Yeah, your dad is really strict," Malee said. "I guess we'll go to Gardens and hang out there?"

"Yes, let's," Tasanee said.

"Bye. See you tomorrow," Saengdao said, the heft of her schoolbag reminding her of the work she still had to do this evening. Turning to her brother in the corner, she had to tap his arm a few times before getting his attention.

"I don't see why you hang out with them," Kasem said, not looking up from his phone. She turned him towards the door, and did not answer.

A quick look behind her showed that her friends were talking and laughing about something. Hopefully not her lack of speed.

#

They turned off Pracha Uthit road down the narrow alley that led to their building. Auntie Khun Mae had already closed up her stall which stood right on the corner, the shiny padlock glinting against the corroded metal shutters. During the day, this alley saw a lot of foot and motorcycle traffic, but that slowed after dark.

Their building stood on the right, the entire courtyard behind the broken fence filled with her father's junked cars. Kasem ran off into the heap to the back where her father would no doubt be working under some vehicle, greasy and behind schedule. Saengdao decided to walk quietly through, not wanting to have to explain why they were late.

As she walked by, careful not to catch the skirt of her uniform on anything greasy, she overheard her father and brother speaking. Kasem sat on a tire, playing with a lug nut. The tottering stacks of old mufflers, slightly rusted pieces of body-work and worn tires made maneuvering difficult. She'd

learned the hard way not to show up with any dirty smudges on her clothing and especially on her hands.

“Sakda said that maybe I should become a doctor,” Kasem was explaining to her father’s legs, sticking out from under the hood of a maroon Nissan. It was a newer model too, must have come in today. If her father was working on it so quickly, prioritizing it, it must be from a new and high paying client.

“What kind of doctor?” her father’s muted voice asked from under the car.

“Well, he said I could become one of the surgery doctors, but I don’t think I’d like cutting on people,” Kasem said. “But I like poking people, so maybe like the guy that gets to hit knees with the little hammer.”

“You’ll need to study hard,” her father said. “Then you can become a doctor instead of being a mechanic like me. Where is Saengdao?”

Kasem didn’t move, just kept fiddling with the lug nut. Grinning, he looked up at her, but she shook her head.

“She already went up,” he finally answered.

She heard her father sigh. “Perhaps some day she will come back in here. Oh, well. Auntie Khun Mae said she’d have food ready for you again this evening. Now go and do your homework.”

With a twinge of guilt, Saengdao turned silently up the narrow staircase behind the building, Kasem following her. They never went in the front door as the family that lived there didn’t like to be disturbed. They lived on the top floor and so had to climb past Auntie Khun Mae’s apartment, her bright blue door standing in sharp contrast to the dark grey streaks covering the once white walls.

She dropped her schoolbag beside the table in the tiny, unused kitchen and climbed through the slender doorway that led out of her father’s bedroom onto the small balcony. It was cramped with a few plants that she kept alive, the laundry she’d hung up that morning and the small chair she kept up here. On the far end, the tiny shrine her mother had so often prayed before stood in disrepair, the brown, withered flowers almost disintegrating.

This was her favorite place in the world. The low roof kept the rain from her during the rainy

season but gave her enough view of the sky. On a clear evening, the brightest stars shone clearly through the light pollution. She watched them often, wondering if their light was different from all the other lights.

Lower down, far in the distance, she could just make out a tiny section of the river. In between it and her balcony, she looked over the dirty rooftops, the tangled wires, and blowing laundry of the many houses in this part of the city. At night, the dirt faded and was replaced by the bright lights, the reds and electric blues interspersed with the softer oranges and yellows. She especially enjoyed the flow of the red tail-lights in contrast with the oncoming whites.

And directly down below she had full sight of the outdoor portion of the garage. She couldn’t see her father or the car he was working on, but the piles of car parts under the tarp awning, the three rusting cars that had been there for so long, and the fluorescent light with the moth were comforting in their steadfast familiarity. Her father didn’t speak much when he worked, but he was on the phone with someone now, and she missed his voice as she missed spending time in the garage.

This place, this balcony with its view into the vast distance and the intimate garage, was her refuge, her peaceful place to think. Here, she had had so many conversations with her mother when she had been younger. Now she sat alone and thought through the events of the day. When Anurak had caught her looking at him. When she hadn’t been able to answer Ms. Kongsangchai’s question in front of the whole class. The chorus of ‘slow Saeng’.

It was here, in this quiet, reflective place that she felt truly herself since she didn’t spend time in the garage anymore. And it was here that she found the Nai beetle. She recognized it instantly from stories her mother had told. It clung to the upper branches of the little bush she had faithfully watered for so long. The beetle was a small one, barely larger than her thumbnail. The dark zig-zag separating the shiny green from the glistening light blue. Her grandfather had had one which he’d carried around with him on a bracelet that doubled as a hair tie.

She reached in and scooped up the shiny creature; it willingly crawled along her index finger and stopped to stare her in the eyes. This would keep them from calling her ‘slow Saeng.’ This beetle was the answer to her problems; now she could be fast as well. For once, she would be good at something and earn the respect of Malee and Tasanee.

“Saengdao, come and get your rice,” Auntie Khun Mae said from her kitchen window. It was directly below the balcony and auntie knew she’d be sitting up there.

“Yes, auntie. I’ll be down in a minute,” she answered, still mesmerized by the small creature on her finger.

“Don’t be long,” auntie said. “And bring your brother.”

She cupped the beetle gently, wondering how best to keep it. She also had no idea what she needed to do to get it to stay with her. If only her mother were still around.

Then she remembered something her mother had once said; she brushed back the hair behind her right ear and placed the Nai beetle there. She felt it cling on before she let her hair fall back into place. A woman in the king’s court, many centuries ago, had worn her beetle there. Nothing felt any different. Perhaps it would take some time for the beetle to feel it belonged.

Walking slowly, she stood in front of her brother on the couch. “Time to go downstairs and eat,” she said, feeling a slight headache coming on.

“Just a minute, one more level,” he said without looking up.

“No, auntie said to come down.” She thought she heard a faint echo of Kasem speaking.

She reached to grab his phone, and he made to pull it back quickly. But as he pulled it back, it also seemed to stay in place. She quickly adjusted, reaching for where she had seen him almost move his phone and grabbed it. Her headache got worse.

She ran to the stairs, eliciting loud screeches of protest. But he followed her, as she had intended. She wouldn’t be able to do that much longer, but for the time being, he was still small enough that he couldn’t take it back from her. Once they got to



Two Kitties — Angela K. Scott

Auntie Khun Mae’s apartment, she handed the phone back to Kasem and pushed open the bright blue door.

They sat at the large table, unoccupied but for themselves and Auntie Khun Mae. She lived by herself, now that her children had all grown. They came to visit occasionally, but Saengdao got the sense that they did so only out of obligation. Auntie did not mention them often, but Saengdao knew she missed them and wished they would come more frequently. Instead, she had taken charge of the two children upstairs and fed them almost on a daily basis. Saengdao suspected that her father paid auntie to feed them so he could continue to work long into the evenings down in the garage.

“Auntie,” she asked as the older woman placed bowls of rice with khanaeng greens and ground pork before them. “Did mama ever tell you any stories about our grandfather?”

“Sure, dear,” auntie said. “Everyone knew your grandfather. The Great Channarong, he was called. None could match him for speed and dexterity.” She seated herself and began to eat, at which point Saengdao also picked up her spoon to begin.

“Kasem, put down your phone and eat with us,” she hissed. He might be oblivious, but he was

not rude, and quickly put his device down so as not to offend auntie.

"There were many that were stronger or larger than Channarong, and later in his life many younger men who appeared to be faster and in better condition. But always he beat them," she explained. "I saw him in his last fight. Already he had told everyone he would not fight again. A well-known fighter from the north had come just to combat him and the audience in the temple courtyard by the sea was very excited."

"Are you talking about grandpa?" Kasem asked.

"Shh, yes," Saengdao said.

"Your grandfather had always trained a lot and was in good condition. But he could not fight as long anymore, and many younger fighters had begun to take advantage of this, attempting to tire him and stretch the fights. But your grandfather was very patient. He knew how to bide his time. Eventually, they would always become impatient."

"And then, he'd beat them," Kasem said.

"Yes," auntie said. "It was as though he knew what they would do before they did it. He could block their attacks, arms, legs, shins, elbows. No matter from where the next attack came, he knew it. And when he saw an opening, he knew just when to strike so that the opponent could not block in time."

"Do you know what made him so good," Saengdao asked hopefully.

"No, though some said it was his great experience. But even in his youth, he had been the same. In his last fight, he almost lost. The large fighter from Chiang Mai was very patient and would not be lured into attacking. Eventually, your grandfather was so tired he had to attack. I will never forget the tired old man, attacking with such speed, evading his opponent's kicks and punches, landing each blow. Long gray hair held by his hair tie, sweat streaming down his stringy torso. And then the warrior from Chiang Mai went down and accepted defeat."

"Wow, I wish I had known him," Kasem said, scooping more rice into his mouth. Saengdao had met him, though she was too young to remember. She still had a picture of when she had been but a

year old, seated on her grandfather's lap.

"Will you take food down to your father?"

Auntie directed her question at Kasem.

"I will take it," Saengdao said quickly. For some reason, this evening she missed the greasy oil-smell and the harsh fluorescent lighting more than usual. As long as she didn't touch anything.

On her way down the stairs, right before she made the turn on the triangular steps, her vision blurred. By the time she reached the bottom-most step, she felt dizzy and nauseous, the headache pounding in all its ferocity. She stilled her feet, holding the tray of food before her and waited for it to pass. She slowly moved forward and everything appeared to be as it should.

"I've brought you some food, papa," she said, placing the tray on a rusted metal box nearby. He appeared to be in the same position under the hood. He said something which came through only as a mumbling and then his legs began to slide out from under the car. But they also stayed where they were.

Her father stood up, but also stayed under the car. Now he gave her a quick smile and glanced over at the tray of food. But also began to come out from under the car.

Then he said, "Thank you, Saeng, have you done your homework?" And he stood up and gave her a quick smile.

Her father seated himself on a tire and took up his bowl. And he moved over to the tray of food.

"Thank you, Saeng, have you done your homework?"

The nausea returned, a sudden pain behind her eyes increased and Saengdao felt that she would soon lose her balance. It took all her concentration to say, "Not yet, I will do that now," before she turned and hurried up the stairs.

Why had that been so disorienting? Why had she been seeing double? Was this how the Nai beetle's power manifested? This would not speed her up, just confuse her.

But, the moment she was the only one moving, everything settled back to normal. Walking by Kasem on the way to the balcony showed him with too many fingers as they moved across his phone's screen, but otherwise the world appeared sane

around her.

Saengdao plopped herself down on the chair again and stared out into the city lights and the stars above them. The lights of the cars were streaking, as they did in night photos with slow shutter speeds. But the sea of stars above was stationary. They were slow, like her. They shone, constant and unmoving. She sought sometimes to grasp them, to embrace them and their light.

The clanging bell from the nearby temple reverberated with a distorted echo; yes, her mother had told her the truth. The Nai beetle allowed its possessor to see a moment into the future.

Rather, her mother had explained, the holder of the beetle was actually a moment in the future while also remaining in the present. It was like having two present moments back to back. That was how her grandfather had been undefeated in his fights. Had that been cheating? She pushed the thought down, not allowing herself to think of that.

He had seen his opponents move, both in their present and in his longer, consecutive presents. His knowledge of the future moment allowed him to react in the present moment. Judging by her current disorientation and pounding headache, it would take a while to get used to seeing two moments at once.

Just then, auntie's cat walked by on the wall just to the left of her balcony. The tabby looked like two cats, identical copies walking in single file, jumping one after the other onto the low wall that would let it in through the kitchen window. She focused on a specific stone and counted the time it took from the one instance of cat to the other. Just a moment. Just a second.

Her headache had begun to subside.

She felt a small smile on her lips. Now she would show those girls that she was not slow.

#

The next day, Saengdao was already outside the game arcade, waiting for the other two girls by the time they were dropped off. She had left school as early as she could, dragging Kasem along behind her. He had strict instructions not to mention the extra hours they had spent here late the previ-

ous evening.

"Did you hear what Pensri said?" Tasanee asked. "Apparently, she walked into the room and saw—"

"Yeah, she told me. I wonder— Oh, you're here already." Malee said.

"Hey Saeng, you got here so fast," Tasanee said. "For a change."

"Let's go in, it's hot out here," Saengdao said, blocking out the time echoes as best she could. An attendant held the door for them, recognizing them as high-spending, regular students. They were ushered to the same cubicle she had left the evening before.

By this point, Saengdao had adjusted somewhat into her new way of seeing the world. It was possible to focus on one version of the time echoes, either present or future, and tune out the other. It took great concentration to really interact with both at once, but at least she no longer got herself distracted by events that were about to happen.

Malee settled into the seat, pulling her helmet onto her head and set her track. She picked her song and the 'Fast' logo disappeared to reveal her screen.

Malee was notoriously good at this game and swerved in and out, avoiding the oncoming traffic when necessary and even speeding around pedestrians on the sidewalk.

But for once, Saengdao was not dazzled by the blurry speed of it all. She saw clearly, knew where Malee was likely to turn before she did, and saw a moment before she did when the pedestrian stepped out from behind the car.

Tasanee took her turn and finally the time for Saengdao's triumph was present.

She had picked a different, more complicated track, one she had practiced the night before, waving away her friends' offers of help. She settled into the seat and pulled the helmet down, immersing herself in the digital reality. For the first time, she felt some form of confidence around her friends.

The track appeared, the numbers counted and she shot down the road. She concentrated on the future events, saw the pickup ahead slow far enough in advance that she could get into the other

lane. She sped around the first corner and adjusted the turn in time to avoid the lamppost, then swerved through several lanes and around the stopped truck. She pulled to a halt at the crossing, waiting only a moment before speeding on; she'd hit that old lady in her previous run-through.

Saengdao ignored the surprised vocalizations from her friends that drifted through the virtual sounds. She continued down the track, knowing that her score was increasing beyond any she had achieved around them in the past. By the time she was approaching the final, tricky stretch of the track, her confidence allowed her to speed up even more. She saw all, avoided all, and knew she would beat any of their scores.

She skidded across the finish line and jumped up in triumph, her score flashing jubilantly: 16,090 stars. Her smile was real this time when she turned to face her stunned friends.

"Wow, that was really good," Tasanee said. "How did you manage that?"

"You must have gotten lucky," Malee said. "Slow Saeng doesn't react that quickly. Maybe you should try again."

"Sure," Saengdao said. "Why don't you select a track for me."

Malee selected the one she had driven earlier, even picking the same car. Saengdao had not driven this track before, but having just watched Malee on it, knew she would succeed. She pushed down the small portion of her mind that told her she was cheating and set off.

It didn't take long before her score was ahead of Malee's earlier one. She tried to concentrate on the track but couldn't tune out the conversation happening behind her.

"Slow Saeng is not so slow anymore," Tasanee said. "Maybe she needs a new nickname."

"Yeah, maybe we should go back to calling her 'dirty hands,'" Malee said.

"Or, how about 'tag-along'?" Tasanee suggested.

Saengdao's moment of triumph vanished in a cold rain of disappointment. Could they not be happy for her even for a moment? She had matched them at their preferred method of entertainment, one that she had not even been good at.

And they had simply moved to a new nickname.

Her vision blurred, though not because of the Nai beetle. She dropped her hands from the controller, watching the race car career into a startled vendor.

"Yes, great job, tag-along," Malee sneered. "This is a dumb game anyway."

Saengdao stood up and took off her helmet and looked at the girls she had wanted so much to be friends with. Perhaps they would not accept her, no matter how fast she was. No matter how clean her hands might be, she really was just a tag along.

"We're going to the Garden again," Malee said.

"Do you want to tag-along or do you need to get home to your father?"

The confidence and courage from a moment before came back and Saengdao watched herself turn and head towards her brother. The part of her that had not yet turned saw the puzzled expressions of the two girls.

"Let's go home," she said to Kasem, picking up her schoolbag. The taste of salt on her tongue dissipated quickly as her face dried.

"Great driving," he answered without looking up from his phone as he followed her out.

She didn't normally confide in her brother, but he had paid her a compliment. "Why can't they see that?"

"Some people just can't see past themselves," he said, sticking his phone into his back pocket. They stopped a moment to buy boiled peanuts from the elderly man at the corner before continuing.

"I guess I just wanted to fit in somewhere," Saengdao admitted. "I thought that by being good at 'Fast' I could do that."

"Maybe you're not meant to be fast," Kasem said. "Your skill is with fixing cars, not driving them. Why did you stop working in the garage with papa?"

"A girl can't be a mechanic. I'd have dirty hands all the time, like papa."

"Why can't you be a mechanic? If you're good at it, it doesn't matter if your hands are dirty, right?"

As they walked on in the city twilight, she

thought of her favorite place in the world. She loved the balcony; it was quiet, reflective, and put her in a good mood. But most of the best memories she held from when she was younger were not just from there. They also included many hours spent in the garage with her father. He had laughed then, told jokes while he worked. That had all changed when their mother had passed. Was that when she had left the garage? Or when the girls had teased her about her dirty hands?

When they reached their alley, Kasem ran ahead and was in the house before Saengdao even reached the garage. She watched his present disappear up the stairs, following his future self. She stepped past the ancient Datsun that had sat near the entrance for as long as she could remember. A moth and its future shadow were flickering around the outside light, right under the faded blue sign that said 'Lamon Automobiles'.

Her father was hard at work under the dash of the Nissan, the hood already closed. He would be done soon; he only closed the hood when he was certain nothing more needed to be done under it. Hopefully that meant he would eat when they did and maybe even spend some time with them this evening.

"Papa, can I tell you something?" she asked.

"Sure, just give me a moment," his muffled voice emerged from inside the Nissan.

Yes, she had missed this place, though she walked through it every day. She went over to the stool at the littered desk and sat on it, dropping her bag alongside as she had so often as a young child.

Her father straightened up twice, slowly walked over to her and stopped. "What is it?"

"I'm sorry I have been ignoring you and not spending time here in the garage. I want to learn from you and work with you here," she said, watching her father's face carefully. Joy flickered a moment before being replaced by concern. It was quick, but she saw it.

"You see how much I have to work," he said. "This is no work for you. You should not be poor like I am. I want you to get your education and go and work in a place that is better than this dirty old garage."

"I'm good with the cars, you said so yourself. I

know it might be dirty and unladylike, but I want to."

She watched the war within play out on his face. He wanted a better life for her than he had had, but could not conceal his approval of her interests.

"You could get a much better paying job, Saeng."

"Papa, let Kasem do that," Saengdao said.

"He's good at school, he's quick and knows how to interact with people. I'm slow, I like to take my time, and I understand the slow and steady work. Whenever I'm not on the balcony or here in the garage, I feel as though I'm only ever rushing to catch up with the future. Here, I feel at peace, in the present."

"What about school?" her father asked. "You must go to school."

"Of course. But I also want to help you here, learn from you here, and maybe someday take over for you. Together, we can work better than you can alone and you won't have to work so many hours each day." She could feel a moistness in her eyes and reached up to wipe them. She brushed her hair back and felt the beetle behind her ear.

She looked up at her father and saw a small smile on his face. "I don't know if this is a good idea, Saeng, but I've missed having you here in the garage. I always told your mother that if you'd been a boy I would have taught you everything I know. But maybe I still can."

She jumped up, gave him a quick hug and rushed upstairs with her bag. She had a beetle she needed to return to its bush.

Where You G.O.H. When You Die by Adam Goss

Commander Rick Broadstar knew this was the end, and he smiled. Alarms sounded all around him as system after system fried. Circuitry and panels sparked and burned, filling the starfighter's cockpit with smoke. The whole ship shuddered as the gravity waves from the newly born singularity pulled on his vessel and slammed shrapnel and de-

bris against the hull. Soon the radiation would hit him, broiling him before the dense gravity of the singularity pulled his body and ship into a microscopic string and crushed him into quantum oblivion - assuming the ship didn't rupture or explode first.

Not such a bad way to go for a Space Command veteran and galactic hero, given the miracle that he had just pulled off. He thought that there should be music playing, something grand and dramatic to fit his final moments.

The Galactic Aggregation would be safe; the fiendish plot cooked up by the Zordanians to start interstellar civil war as a market for their new Sun-Dragon weapons had been foiled. Broadstar and his cohorts had infiltrated the Zordanian construction base, located on an asteroid hidden in a fold of N-space, and sabotaged the dreadful weapons, imploding them. The remains of those monstrosities, once capable of devouring stars like dragons of ancient myth, were the cause of the black hole. It was only a matter of time now.

Wiping sweat and sticky locks of fine hair from his brow, he patted the armrest of his pilot's seat. "Well, dear girl, it looks like you've got me all to yourself to the very end." His trustworthy starfighter was an older model, and despite numerous jerry-riggings and personal modifications, Broadstar had never put in an A.I. to keep him company. He liked and respected artificial intelligences, but to force a sentient program into his ship, a ship that constantly flew into dangerous situations, would be cruel and unfair. He had had enough companionship outside his fighter anyways: all those lovely women from so many exotic worlds who shared their beds with him, the old friends in space station bars and repair hangars, his supportive commanding officers back at Command, and, most of all, his friends through thick and thin: Nirala, Joey, B't'gal, R-7, Wonorog, "Spike" O'Hanson...

He hoped to whatever gods there might be that they all escaped in one piece, and with the evidence the Aggregation would need to put a stop to the rising threat of war. He had last glimpsed them running for the hangar while he held off the station's shock troops. He had escaped the base him-

self only seconds before the implosion. But there would be no cheating death, no last daring heroic rescue or escape. Not this time.

Smoke filled the cabin now, making him cough, and the starfighter shuddered badly. It would be an easy thing to break the cockpit shield, or take the suicide pill locked away in the emergency supplies, or even to just put his laser pistol to his head and press the trigger... But he was Rick Broadstar, Galactic Hero, savior of worlds and innocents. And he was stubborn. Taking the easy way out just wasn't in him. He'd see his existence through to the bitter end, and meet whatever afterlife there was on his feet, ready to go again.

A hunk of rock that had once been part of the asteroid base was coming straight on at him. This was it. Even if they were functional, the fighter's shields would never have held up.

"I'd say my only regret is that I have only one life to give for my duty and galaxy, but I gotta admit I wish I was in Sindia's bed on Pollux Prime right now..."

Seconds before impact, Rick Broadstar thought he saw a strange glow on the surface of the rock facing him. The explorer in him briefly wondered at it - was it from the radiation around the singularity? But the soldier in him said it was simply too late to explore one more mystery of the universe - this universe or any other.

And then he died.

Then everything went white.

#

Broadstar's intention to land in the afterlife on his feet was the first thing to go wrong. He did not land on his feet. What he did do was find himself on his hands and knees on a hard, white tiled floor, emptying his stomach in a most undignified manner into a bodily waste receptacle. After a couple heaves he sputtered and coughed. "Oh, blarg. I knew I shouldn't have eaten those Zordanian rations..."

His eyes narrowed as it hit him. "Since when does any being's idea of Paradise have toilets?" he muttered. As he looked around the little room he was in, he could feel his heart beating, and he realized was actually *breathing*. Wasn't he supposed to be dead? Since he had never been *permanently*

dead before (having had just near-death experiences, a few resurrections and being presumed dead on several occasions), he decided he would have to keep an open mind about it.

A gentle knocking sounded. “Mr. Ingles? Are you okay in there?” The muffled voice sounded like it belonged to a young human woman.

He wiped his chin on the sleeve of his flight jacket and struggled to his feet. His legs felt like they would barely support him, they were so wobbly. Turning around he saw a door from which the knocking came again. It took him a few moments of fumbling to work the strange lock and handle.

He had been right. A young human woman looked up at him in concern. Her clothes seemed practically primeval: laced moccasins, coarse blue trousers with wrinkles and rips in them, and a tight yellow shirt emblazoned with the silhouette of a ringed planet. A small badge over her right breast had the same logo along with words that strongly resembled Aggregate Basic: *Stacy Williamson – Astrocon-22 Volunteer*. The room beyond in which she stood looked like living quarters.

“Mr. Ingles?” she said again. “Are you alright?”

Was she talking to him? She was looking right at him. He was about to say that he was not this “Ingles” person, but his experience with holo-deceptions and the wily telepathic sorcerers of Galtos Eta kicked in. He merely nodded and managed a weak smile. *Play along for now.*

The girl labeled “Stacy” just smiled back at him. “Oh, good. The concierge told us how late you got in after your delayed flight. I hope you’re feeling better now! At least you didn’t get your costume messed up. Come on, let’s get you started.” The words came out in an excited rush. Dazed, Broadstar just wiped his hands on his trousers and then followed her out of the living quarters.

In the hallway, there was carpeting beneath his boots, a garish red and gold pattern that complemented the pale beige, brown and gold patterns on the walls of... whatever this place was. He gathered it was meant to look elegant, but he’d seen better décor on Wonorog’s rural bog planet! Colors and noise greeted him downstairs. Dozens of

people – no, *hundreds*, if not more, were standing and wandering about, most of them human. Some were dressed as primitively as Stacy (who was still chattering in a charming albeit incomprehensible manner – she reminded him a little of Sindia’s younger sister). Others were dressed in a manner that Broadstar considered more normal, though the exact styles and ethnic or organizational nature of the uniforms, armor, robes and dresses were unfamiliar to him. There were also biped non-humans roaming about with odd pelts and faces, none of them species from the Aggregation and all totally unfamiliar. Everyone around him was talking animatedly. They all wore badges similar to Stacy’s.

Lord of Lords, I must have been recruited by some weird army of angels! He felt like a green Academy cadet again, and a small smile played on his lips. Many of the faces around him exhibited excitement and wonder. Were they all fresh recruits like himself? It was possible; people died every day all over the universe.

The girl led him to a table along the wall. “Here he is, Derek! I found him!” she said to a stout man with a wispy beard on his face. He wore the same yellow t-shirt and badge as Stacy. The man in question smiled broadly and stood, offering his hand. Broadstar shook it firmly.

“Mr. Ingles, it’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Derek Quinn, one of Astrocon’s coordinators. We’re relieved to finally see you here. I have your itinerary in this envelope.”

The galactic hero accepted the thin manila container and looked inside: sheets with fine printing on them, and a badge. They certainly started basic training here quickly!

Derek said, “As you’ll note on the schedule, you’re due to be on stage for questions in just over an hour. The Green Room is down the hall, got a nice spread in there from a local deli. You’re welcome to relax there until then.”

Broadstar had no idea what Derek was talking about, but it didn’t matter. He had so many questions he wanted to ask and he didn’t feel like waiting for over an hour to ask them. Clearly this was a busy place, however, so he resigned himself to the fact that his turn would come. “Thank you, but if it’s all right with you I’d like to look around?”

Derek smiled and nodded. “Not a problem. Stacy, why don’t you grab Alex from security and accompany Mr. Ingles until his session?”

“Sure thing!” She dashed through the thickening crowd while the Aggregate commander fumbled with his badge, sticking his thumb with the pin. The label read “Stephen Ingles – G.O.H.” Some kind of new identity and rank? This was definitely going to take a lot of getting used to!

A minute later Stacy returned accompanying a tall, beefy man with long hair tied in a ponytail, who looked like one of the Aggregation’s finest out of uniform. The yellow-shirted pair escorted him down the hall and into a huge room. The sight made him freeze in the entryway.

It was part bazaar and part diplomatic cocktail party, without the cocktails. There had to be a thousand people in here at least! More strangely dressed humans and strangely built aliens wandered along rows of tables loaded with all sorts of paraphernalia. Broadstar witnessed a monetary exchange going on at a nearby table. It was odd that the afterlife would need money. *Good thing I’ll be earning a soldier’s pay, presumably!*

The noise was worse here than in the hallway as so many voices echoed off the walls. Rather than raising his voice to his guides, he simply gestured to where he was headed. Stacy and Alex followed along a step beside and behind.

It soon became apparent to him that this was less a bazaar and more of a junk market. Oh, there were a *few* fineries: a booth here that sold stylish garments of natural fibers, leather and synthetics; a table there that offered top-of-the-line bladed weapons as well as what looked like mint-condition antiques. But beyond that, everything seemed to be old, cheaply made from synthetics, or just plain fake! Plastic toys presumably intended to resemble spacecraft instead of real working scale models, stuffed critters that would have sent the Aluuxian Taxidermist’s Guild into a collective apoplectic fit, crude media storage devices with covers depicting outrageous-looking melodramas, and... books...

Maker of All Things, these people are still using paper books! he thought as he gaped in wonder at the piles on one table. Long ago in the Aggregation these flimsy things would have been consid-

ered archeological prizes, but by Broadstar’s time they were just anachronistic remnants of primitive civilization! A truly advanced society would only use shielded electrostatic storage to preserve knowledge and art against the ravages of time.

As he was looking around, his heart almost stopped. At the far end of a row were his comrades, Joey, “Spike” O’Hanson and Nirala! *They must not have escaped the base’s destruction and were being recruited as well.* He started towards them, hoping they had the answers he needed.

As he drew closer, he was alarmed to see they were accompanied by two Zordanian shocktroops, a sight that made Broadstar reach for his laser pistol. Yet his friends seemed totally unconcerned about the troops’ presence. Was this a warrior’s Valhalla, with fallen fighters from all sides recruited for a higher purpose? He could only wonder as the group saw him, his friends smiling in delight.

It was then that he got a good look at their faces. They were *not* Joey, “Spike” O’Hanson and Nirala, but imposters dressed just like them!

The mixed group came over, letting him see that they were not wearing actual uniforms, but fakes. Granted, they were well-made enough to fool him at a distance, but up close they were blatantly cobbled together from homespun or more cheaply-made synthetics. He suddenly realized that everyone in the crowd who looked to be wearing advanced apparel was really a fraud. Uniforms were in fact crude costumes. Colored skin was instead cosmetic decoration that gave off a chemical reek. The unfamiliar aliens weren’t really alien at all, just humans in disguise. And the toy-like weapons they all carried were the most obvious fakes of all.

Was this some kind of Zordanian deception? Had he been pulled out of his starfighter at the last moment somehow? He thought a moment, avoiding the looks people were giving him as he pretended to inspect a fake laser-sword. *No, no I remember the impact of the asteroid.* Maybe some higher force had resurrected him, but it could not have been the Zordanians. Besides, the “Zordanian troops” were just as fake as his “friends” here!

Rick Broadstar began to wonder if this was actually Hell. He cast a nervous glance back at Stacy and Alex, who smiled at him cheerfully. No

horns or fangs or sudden demonic transformations there. They looked and acted like all this was completely normal. And everyone around him in this strange place was talking and smiling as if they were at some great party, their emotions the only thing that seemed definitely real and true. The group dressed like his former friends and enemies were bombarding him with compliments and questions that made no sense.

Desperate for answers himself, Broadstar spotted a sign which read “Tarot Readings and Fortunes - \$5.00.” Presumably the \$ symbol meant the local currency, but all he had on him was a magnetic chit for Aggregate credits. He excused himself from the group as politely as he could manage and wandered over to the booth with the sign. There had to be a way for him to get an audience with the seer, assuming the seer was genuine and not as fake as everything around him. What he would have given for a Denebian mind-surfer at that moment!

The curtain on the fortune teller’s booth parted as a gaily dressed woman with long curly brown hair stepped out. She stopped short as she came face to face with Broadstar. Her jaw dropped in surprise and her eyes widened as if in delighted recognition. Despite the subtle crow’s feet around her eyes she was very attractive indeed. There was a spicy scent about her that was heady and potent but which he could not recognize.

“Oh! I’m sorry Mr. Ingles, I didn’t know you were standing there! I could have knocked you over!” She smiled and blushed.

The warmth and bashfulness of her response were so genuine, Broadstar could not help but smile back and relax a little. Remembering his manners, he finally said, “Oh! No, it’s, ah, it’s no problem. Really. Actually, I was just looking at your sign and thinking I could very much use your services.”

“Me? You want *my* services?” The woman was in such shock that Broadstar thought she might swoon and faint into his arms. “I don’t know what to say! Well, no, that’s silly, I do know what to say: Thank you! I would be honored to give you a reading, Mr. Ingles! Oh, you just made my weekend!”

Wondering what a “weekend” was, he continued. “You’re welcome milady, but there’s only one problem. I, ah, I’m afraid I don’t have the right currency on me at the moment.”

“Only Canadian bills, huh? I’m guessing you came straight from shooting in Vancouver? Don’t worry about it, Mr. Ingles. It’s my pleasure to give this one on the house!”

She excused herself to run to something called “the ladies’ room” while Broadstar was left wondering why he would have to go up onto the roof for his fortune to be told, or why being shot was better than being hit with an asteroid. Maybe she was more like a Jolian astrologer? He didn’t dare try to figure out the rest of what she had said, lest he wanted a headache. He just stood waiting, smiling and nodding nervously at Stacy and Alex who smiled and nodded back.

The woman returned after a few minutes, her skirts swishing about and showing a great deal of smooth long leg where the garment was split on the sides. The woman smiled and ushered him inside the curtained booth, bidding him to have a seat at a small table. As she took the seat across, he noted she wore three badges on her blouse. One was like the one he wore, except hers read “Sylvia MacMillan – Vendor.” The other two read “Beam me up Scotty, there’s no intelligent life down here!” and “Support your local medical examiner – die strangely.”

Broadstar didn’t know what “beaming” might be, but he had visited worlds where the stated sentiment would have fit. As for the other badge, well, he could only agree that this death was definitely strange!

“First, allow me to introduce myself. My name’s Sylvia, as maybe you guessed,” she said with a shy chuckle, tapping her name badge with a red fingernail. “I’ll be giving you a tarot card reading as well as a reading of your aura. And unlike any fortune tellers you may have been to before, I am more than just an entertainer. I will give you a very specific reading, not just some vague interpretation. I know, I know, it sounds like a wild claim, but trust me. I don’t do this for kicks.”

“Or for Canadian bills.”

“Well, I’ll certainly do it for a handsome actor

with dry wit.”

Broadstar blinked. *Actor?*

She then held out a stack of cards and asked him to hold them and concentrate on whatever questions he might want answered.

He mentally shoved aside the cold sensation that the word “actor” had gripped his stomach with and hoped Sylvia’s claims to mental powers weren’t as fake as the rest of the afterlife. Broadstar did as instructed, starting with focusing on his question: What the blarg had happened to him?! He handed the deck back to Sylvia, who started shuffling it and dealing the cards face up in a layout not unlike Rentarian solitaire, only she wasn’t stacking the cards.

Finished, Sylvia stared at the cards and frowned, shaking her head, eyes narrowing. “What the... This makes no sense at all.” She looked up at him and met his eyes steadily. “I know many people don’t put much stock in this sort of thing, but I truly believe I’ve told truthful and accurate fortunes in the past. The cards have always painted a clear picture for me, but *this*...!”

“What is it?”

“It’s like... it’s like the cards are confused! The meaning’s all scrambled, and it shouldn’t be. Most tarot readers just go by what the cards stand for in general, but for me they really help me focus and see beyond the usual five senses. I could give you a flat interpretation, but I can’t ignore the images I’m getting in my head from what I’m seeing here. And what I’m seeing in my mind just doesn’t add up! I don’t know how to read this without it coming out sounding like contradictory nonsense. Like here at start, the Death card. That signifies change and transition, not literal death. But in my head, I’m getting this crazy and incredibly strong image that you started this life by actually dying!” She sighed and looked at him apologetically. “I guess it’s just as well I’m not charging you. I’d hate for you to feel you’d wasted your money on this. I swear, I would give the same answer to you if you’d paid, and I’d be refunding your money. I really don’t know what to make of this. Never seen anything like it before...” She trailed off as she frowned over the cards again.

“I don’t think it’s been a waste at all!” Broad-

star could barely restrain his excitement. If the seer could really tell he’d died, then she was on the right track without realizing it. “You said you would analyze my aura. Please do it? You just might be able to answer some questions I have, and believe me I need them answered badly! I feel so lost here!”

Sylvia looked up from the cards with sympathy. “Must be a little overwhelming, all these fans here around you. The price of fame, right? Sure, just close your eyes, breathe deeply, and hold still.” She reached out to lightly touch his temples with cool fingertips, closing her own eyes. Broadstar did as he was instructed, taking slow steady breaths, trying to relax his body. They both remained silent for many seconds.

All of a sudden Sylvia gasped and pulled back, her eyes staring wide at him.

His own eyes flew open. Eagerly he asked “Well?”

She drew back more as if about to bolt from the booth, her eyes now darting about as if she were unable to be sure of what was around her. Finally, she looked at him again and whispered, “Rick Broadstar?”

“Yes! Yes, that’s right! I’m not this ‘Mister Ingles’ like everyone’s been calling me since I got here. My name is Rick Broadstar, I’m a Commander in the Galactic Aggregation... and I died. Can you tell me what happened to bring me here?”

She stared at him again, her face looking like it was about to invert itself into a hyperdimensional tesseract. She reached out and touched his temples again, closing her eyes. “It’s not a psychic malady... You didn’t have a nervous breakdown, and you’re not hypnotized... Jesus, Buddha and Gaia! You’re really the *real* Rick Broadstar!”

“I know!”

His frank reply elicited a sharp, nervous laugh. She shook her head and sat back, looking as dazed as he had felt since his arrival. “This is... this is just... freakin’ *weird*! I mean... things like this can’t be real. No wonder the cards made no sense! They were being truthful, I just didn’t – *couldn’t* understand.” She took a deep breath and composed herself. “Okay, let’s start this over. Tell me, what was the last thing you remember before you found

yourself here?"

He outlined the mission to stop the Zordanians as succinctly as he could, all the way up to his death in the collision. Her expression became more and more incredulous.

"Mr. Ing- I mean, Commander Broadstar, believe it or not, I know all about those events, and so do most of the people at this convention I bet!"

"This isn't the afterlife? A convention of what then? Just where and when *am* I?!"

Taking another deep breath, Sylvia said, "This is the 22nd Astrocon convention for science fiction and fantasy enthusiasts. You're at the Sheraton Hotel, in the city of San Francisco, California, on the planet Earth. The year is 2021, A.D."

"Earth? You mean, *Old* Earth? But... But Earth was destroyed in the days leading up to the founding of the Galactic Aggregation! Solar storms were going to incinerate it, and humanity had its first-"

"First contact with alien life who managed to save the human race and incorporate them into galactic civilization," she finished for him. "I know. It's part of the background of 'Beyond the Stars,' a popular television series that just went off the air last... oh, Goddess. The last episode aired just last night!"

"Huh?"

"It's a... oh, just stay here a second!" She stood and left the booth quickly, and returned shortly with a stiff paper shape about as tall as himself. "This is you! See?" She turned it so that the image on the shape was visible.

Broadstar's jaw fell open. It *was* him! It was a picture of him, with his ponytail of black hair, strong cleft chin and confident grin, in the same uniform he wore now (only cleaner), in a friendly and dramatic pose, complete with laser-pistol slung on the hip. Near the bottom were the words "Stephen Ingles (Commander Rick Broadstar) – BEYOND THE STARS – Sundays at 7 P.M. on SFN, the Science-Fantasy Network!"

"This is you," repeated Sylvia, letting the paper picture stand up on its own. "At least, this is the actor who *portrays* you in a space opera! You're just a fictional character in this reality!"

"Well," said Broadstar, picking his words care-

fully, "if he's me, and I'm him, and I'm the one who's *here*... then where is this Stephen Ingles person?"

"I don't know! In limbo somewhere, transplanted maybe. I hope he's... Oh *no*, I hope he didn't get switched with you and end up being dead himself! Oh boy..." She sat down heavily on her stool and held her head in her hands, looking as sick as Broadstar felt.

"There must be a way to undo this. I am the one supposed to be dead. This actor fellow doesn't deserve to suffer my fate! Is there anyone in this reality who can help me?"

Sylvia stared at him incredulously. "Are you *kidding* me? This sort of thing would never be believed by anyone in this reality! If you made claims about your true identity, they'd haul you off to the looney bin!" Broadstar figured "they" must be the authorities, but before he could ask for clarification on the rest, Sylvia continued ranting. "This isn't some larger-than-life story world. You think this sort of thing happens here every day?" Broadstar just looked at her. "Doesn't it?"

Sylvia just stared at him.

"I don't know about you," he went on, "but personally I've traveled backwards in time, jumped between universes, had my mind and body switched with that of my nemesis Dr. Bloodlock, contracted hideous diseases that were thankfully cured just in time, blown up enemy starships and battle stations, been impregnated by alien lovers, dueled with demigods, visited faraway galaxies... Perfectly normal, everyday events." He shrugged and smiled.

The fortune teller continued to stare at him.

"What?" said Broadstar, getting annoyed.

Finally, Sylvia found her voice (amazingly enough, right where she'd left it all along). "Those things all happened in the show because someone wrote about them. It's a fictional story, a fantasy! None of it's real!"

"It is to me," he said simply.

"Oh boy, do you have a problem..."

The implications finally sunk in. "You mean, it's not just this... this 'convention' where things are fake. This whole world doesn't have starships or aliens or high technology."

“Not unless you count thermonuclear missiles and the internet,” she replied, slumping back against a corner pole.

“Thermonuclear...? Frag! That’s child’s play tech! We build those things in grade school!”

Sylvia just shook her head. “This is way beyond me. You need somebody like the Dalai Lama or NASA...”

Broadstar felt like having a conniption. This whole situation was preposterous! But before he could voice his opinion loudly and in the most colorful language he knew, the booth’s curtain parted and Stacy’s face appeared.

“Mr. Ingles? I’m sorry to interrupt, but you’re needed on stage in a couple minutes. It’s time for your questions and answers session.”

“He can’t! He’s mustn’t!”

“Um, I’m not sure I can do-”

“Come on, Mr. Ingles, the con committee shelled out a lot of money to get you here this weekend. You can relax some more after you do this and sign some autographs. Let’s go, we’ll be late!”

Looking helplessly at each other, Broadstar stood up uncertainly and stepped out of the booth as Sylvia just shook her head.

“He’s gonna be so lost.”

Numbly, the Aggregate commander followed his chatterbox and burly escorts through the maze of vendors and into another large room. Here rows of chairs were set up before a raised platform against a blank white screen. Seating was filling up rapidly. A cluster of young adolescent boys and girls in Aggregate uniforms stood and saluted him. Broadstar returned the salute automatically before realizing what he’d done. He did his best to disguise his confusion again as he was led off to the side of the stage.

A middle-aged woman wearing primitive optical prosthetics stepped onto the stage and spoke into a crude bulky instrument. Her voice boomed on speakers hidden somewhere. “Alright everyone, it’s the moment you’ve all been waiting for. My name’s Cynthia Anderson, I’m one of the committee directors for Astrocon 22, and it’s my very, very great pleasure to introduce our media guest of honor. You all know him from his starring role as

‘Commander Rick Broadstar’ on ‘Beyond the Stars,’ and today he’s graciously joined us to talk about his experiences and answer your questions. Let’s all give a great big Aggregate welcome to STEPHEN INGLES!”

The gathered audience stood, cheered and applauded. Awkwardly, Broadstar climbed the short steps onto the platform, smiling nervously to the woman who introduced him. He looked out over the small sea of costumed and primitively dressed people, spotting Sylvia’s worried face at the back of the crowd. Flashes of light from small imaging devices made him see spots. His mind raced frantically. There was no discrete way out of this. He couldn’t fake an illness like he’d done in so many prison cells - it might be taken seriously, and he was not about to allow this primitive world’s witch doctors to mess around with his body, even if these were humans like himself! *Lord of Lords, what would the actor have done in this situation?*

“Um...” He started to speak, and was tapped on the shoulder. The woman, Cynthia Anderson, was gesturing to the voice amplifier. Nodding, he stepped closer to it and leaned in. “...Good day to you, people of Old Earth!”

Apparently it wasn’t a bad start, for the audience laughed and applauded again.

“I, ah, I really don’t know what to say except I’m glad to see so many friendly faces. It definitely beats meeting the Zordanians or Dr. Bloodlock any day. Your support means a great deal, whether I’m a galactic hero or an actor...” He trailed off, looking to Sylvia for help. All she could do was throw up her hands and shrug. “I think I’ll just start off with questions, and go from there?” He steeled himself, for it was painfully clear to him now that *his* questions were not going to be the ones asked or answered. *I might as well have a Belcox interrogation torture drone bolted to my head!*

Cynthia was now among the audience members with another voice amplifier, holding it up for a little boy with his hand raised. He smiled, showing a couple teeth missing, and said in a shy voice, “Did you and Queen Artia ever get married?” The question produced a few laughs and sweet-sounding comments of “Awww!” and “That’s so cute!”

Broadstar blinked and found himself feeling charmed by the boy's innocence. *At least he thinks it was real!* He smiled and shook his head. "Ah, I'm afraid not, little cadet. That didn't happen. Sorry. Would have been nice though!" It really would have been, too. Duty had kept him from accepting her offer. If he *had* accepted, he might have been with her now instead of being in this crazy, primitive reality!

An older boy with severe acne and a bit of a gut raised his hand, drawing Broadstar's and Cynthia's attention. "Mr. Ingles," he said in a cracking voice, "can you tell me why in episode forty-five, 'Rings Over Rigel,' you were piloting the Rigelian snow-skimmer with your left hand? The 'Aggregate Tech Manual' says those ships need both hands to fly it." There were looks of annoyance from the people around him, to which the adolescent was oblivious.

Broadstar frowned and thought back to that mission on Rigel V. He remembered the snow-skimmer. Hadn't there been some problem with it? Oh, right! "Actually," he said with a smile, "that is true. However, if you, ah... if you watch closely, I guess, you'll note that the controls were damaged. It had to be operated with just the left control. Let me tell you, it was a pretty difficult bit of skimming! Even I was amazed I was able to work it." There were a few chuckles and groans at that. Sylvia was hiding her face in her hands.

"But Mr. Ingles," the teenager persisted. "In the same episode, when you fired against the terrorists, you pressed the button for the laser cannons, and instead the neutron torpedoes fired. How did that happen?"

The commander blinked, and blinked again. The kid was right! He had pressed the trigger for the lasers, and the torpedoes had launched instead. At the time he figured he had just hit the wrong trigger, but now... His jaw dropped and he scratched the back of his neck where he was sweating under his ponytail. "Truthfully, I don't really know! Some kind of mistake, I guess." The woman with the amplifier quickly moved on to another person. Broadstar didn't know whether to be relieved or confused. He really had no explanation for that malfunction!

The questions continued for a while, some easily answered and some for which he had to completely bluff his way though. An Arcturan Gamesmaster would have been equally hard pressed to field mysterious questions like "Why did Jordan Milhouse leave the series?" and "What goes on behind the camera when you're shooting a scene?" Mercifully, Cynthia eventually announced there was time for one more question before the finale presentation. A woman stood up and asked him what it was like to work with the other actors on the show. Thinking quickly, all Rick Broadstar could think of saying was, "It was a very rewarding experience. They are the finest people I've ever served- I mean, ever worked with, and I'd give anything to be able to work with them again." Only Sylvia knew how much he really meant those words.

Cynthia smiled and spoke into the amplifier herself. "Well, in a way we might be able to give you that, Mr. Ingles. If everyone will turn their attention to the big screen please, we have a special treat for you. A large-screen showing of part of last night's series finale of 'Beyond the Stars,' which showed Commander Broadstar in his last and greatest moments, and a fine piece of acting by Mr. Ingles. Let it run, Tom!"



Fairy Cat — Angela K. Scott

The lights in the room dimmed and images appeared on the blank white screen, music and sound effects playing on the audio speakers. Except for the fact that there had been no music, and sound could not really be heard in space, the events unfolding before his eyes were just as Broadstar remembered them.

There was the heated firefight with the Zordanian shocktroops, Broadstar – Ingles – holding them back with twin laser pistols firing while Nirala led the others to their fighters. There went the fighters escaping into hyperspace, to Broadstar's great relief. *They really made it out alive.* Soon afterwards his own starfighter appeared, along with a flash of light and a BOOM as the construction station and its resident Sun-Dragons imploded.

Dramatic music played as Ingles smiled and said his final line: "I regret I have only one life to give for my duty and galaxy." That wasn't what Broadstar had really said, but it was close enough – he really wasn't comfortable with the idea of total strangers hearing him long for Sindia's bed. Then the ship exploded on impact with the asteroid fragment as the music reached a crescendo, accompanied by a great fiery explosion. Broadstar – or Ingles – was gone.

People in the audience were sniffing. Broadstar found his eyes misting up, too.

An additional scene with his old comrades started to play out on the screen, but before he could find out what they were saying or doing the lights came up and people cheered and applauded, drowning out his friends' words before the playback shut off. Starting to feel outraged at their celebration of his death, he caught Sylvia's frantic waving. She mimed taking a bow, and it clicked suddenly. They weren't cheering his *demise*. They were cheering the end of an excellent story. Feeling very peculiar about the whole thing, Broadstar shrugged and bowed to the audience. Whistles joined the cacophony of claps and shouts.

Soon he was escorted by Stacy from the platform to a table. Within minutes people were lining up, showing pictures of him and asking him for his signature. He gave autographs for over an hour, using the primitive stylus handed to him. Between

that and all the handshaking with happy visitors who praised him and his work, he thought his hand would fall off at the wrist by the end of it. Finally, the line of people came to an end, and Broadstar was escorted to the Green Room where he could sit back on a couch and relax. He found to his surprise that he was hungry, and though the food was unfamiliar to him it tasted pretty good. He actually went back for seconds of something called "potato salad."

As he ate and thought, he watched the people in the suite with him. There were actors, artists, writers, performers – artisans of so many types. He listened to them talk about their favorite stories and past experiences, their travel ordeals and concerns about finding their next source of income. Slowly he came to realize that despite how obviously fake and shoddy so much of the paraphernalia around him was, they were considered prized treasures and works of art here, to be appreciated by people who did not have a narrow view of the world. People who looked up at the stars, as Broadstar's own distant ancestors once had, and dreamed of better times and places.

They'd make good citizens of the Aggregation... even if they are weird.

The day wore on as he explored the convention halls, watching and listening to the people all around him. Was everyone on the planet like this? Probably not, but it was nice to know there were events like this where he would always be welcome. He tried to find Sylvia again, but she wasn't at her booth, and there were so many people even the convention staff couldn't seem to locate her.

After many hours Stacy came and found him again. "There you are, Mr. Ingles. Boy you sure are hard to keep track of! Your limousine's waiting outside."

He blinked, setting down the flyers for "Beyond the Stars" fan clubs. "Waiting for what?" He didn't dare ask what a limousine was.

She looked at him with a mixture of sympathy and disbelief. "You *must* be tired! Your limo! To take you to the airport? You've got a flight tonight back to Vancouver. Tomorrow's Sunday and your agent told us you had to be back there for the last day of Canadicon 8."

“Oh... Oh, right, of course.” He swallowed and looked around, looking for Sylvia. She was the only person who knew the truth about him, the only one who might ever believe him. How could he go traipsing around this Earth without her counsel? Reluctantly, he put on his best stoic look, the kind he always wore before battle, and nodded to Stacy to lead the way. Maybe he could find this “Deli Lemon” or whatever it was Sylvia had mentioned...

On the sunny street outside, where exhaust fumes from primitive combustion vehicles wanted to make him cough, Broadstar stopped at his real name being called. “Commander! *Rick wait!*” He turned, the limo’s door open and waiting for him, as Sylvia MacMillan came hurrying from the hotel lobby.

“Sylvia! Oh, thank the Cosmos! I was afraid I wasn’t going to see you again!” He smiled with the kind of relief he hadn’t felt since he’d passed his final exams at the Academy. “I tried to find you again but couldn’t.”

Sylvia caught her breath and managed a weak smile. “I’m sorry, Commander, I was up in my room, trying to figure out some way to help you. But even if I’d lost you today, I’d have done my best to follow you to your next public appearance. You realize you’re going to be living Stephen Ingles’ life, unless some way is found to switch you two back?” At his grim nod, she opened up a cloth bag and handed him a small piece of stiff paper. “My business card. For the sake of the Goddess, *don’t* lose it. It has my full name, my mailing address, cell phone number and e-mail on it. If you have any trouble, you contact me, okay? I’ll do my best to help you in any way I can.”

Habitual modesty escaped his lips before he could restrain himself. “Oh, Sylvia, you don’t have to go to such trouble-”

“Oh, yes! I do! You’ll be lost without help, believe me. I can’t let you go off in good conscience without a friend you can trust. Besides, consider it my thank-you for all the entertainment you’ve provided the last few years.”

Deciding not to argue the point of who had really done the entertaining, he smiled and pocketed the card. “Thank you, then, for everything... Are

you married, Sylvia?”

“Married? Me? Um, no, why do youMMMPPH!” Her reply was cut off as he planted a long deep kiss on her lips, the kind that had always made Sindia on Pollux Alfa melt in his arms.

He saw it had a similar effect on Sylvia. She just stood there, wavering with a dazed expression and a ridiculous smile on her lips, as he got into the limo. Soon after it pulled into traffic.

Commander Rick Broadstar looked out the windows of the vehicle, taking in the sights of the world that was to be his new home for the time being, and contemplated his future. He was bound for an unexpected destiny, the final fate it seemed of all great Galactic Heroes of this world.

The con circuit.

Jezebel's Escape by Allegra Gulino

A cacophony of destruction – exploding buildings, screeching vehicles and roaring jets – filled the house, while Jezebel tapped the ball with her paws down the hallway, until it bumped down the steps.

She ceased her half-hearted trot and peered over the top stair, toward the painful din and the lights strobing on the foyer wall. “Mom!”

Without lowering the TV’s volume, a woman sharply replied, “Huh? Jez?”

She cut the volume a little and yelled, “What?”

Her mother’s harshness stung her eyes. Not in a million years, would she toss the ball back.

“Nothing.” Abandoning the ball, Jezebel padded to her bedroom. Pausing at the door, always ajar, she eyed the purple and pink tones within and wondered when her mother would turn the nightmare off. It had been on since late morning, now it was past dinner time. Why didn’t her mother notice how Jezebel would disappear when she played her catastrophe films?

Avoiding her abrasive parent made it hard for Jezebel to tell how far she was in her drinking. Maybe driving her away was Mom’s plan.

She blotted the tears from her bare, human face with her forelegs’ grey fur.

The sound of collapsing edifices and muddled hollering vibrated through the second story floor and buzzed her feet. Rising from her haunches, Jezebel head butted the door open and entered her room.

Through the window – which was open a couple of inches, as Jezebel preferred – and against dusk’s fading, mauve tone, was motion in the leaves. A bird.

She soundlessly crept across the carpet with her lime green eyes nailed on her prey. The bird flittered, then pecked at an insect on the bark. As she had done many times, Jezebel coiled beneath the window sill, chose her moment, then leapt at the pane.

But, as her forepaws struck the glass, the bird’s perch quivered, empty.

She thumped down on all fours and blanched at the new, jagged fissure in the window pane. “Holy snot cakes!” Her recent growth spurt must have intensified the force of her blow.

She hooked one of the curtains with her claws and tugged it across the window to hide the damage. But, instead of sliding across the rod, its rings snagged.

“Come on, you,” she yanked, unexpectedly tearing the bracket from the wall. The curtain’s lavender, velvet bulk frumpled down and the curtain rod jounced against the floor. Its metal end scratched the floral wallpaper.

Horried, Jezebel sprang behind the open trunk, which – lined with blankets – functioned as her bed, and gazed, wild-eyed at the new monster heaped on the floor. Despite her consternation, her rump twitched and tail lashed. With distended claws, she charged the velvet creature, to bite and dig at it in a frenzy.

The bedroom door swung suddenly inward and pounded its rubber stopper. “Whaz goin’ on? I almoz fell on yur stupid ball.”

Slurred words, poor pitch control – drunk.

In dingy slippers Mom stomped toward the window, wafting gin vapors. “Oh my God, what’d shyou do?”

“I-I didn’t mean to...,” Jezebel backed away from the curtain.

Mom’s blotchy face pinched with rage, “Broke the window too! You...” for an instant, her mouth twisted over an unspoken cuss word, “...geddin the closet. Now!”

Beneath her mother’s glare, Jezebel slunk toward her door. The airless linen closet was in the hallway, just outside her bedroom. Her mother followed, whipping her stained bathrobe closed and muttering from on high, “Stop being an animal.”

While that insult had been spoken more times than she could count, this time something in Jezebel snapped. She bounded past the closet door and surged downstairs, skittered across the kitchen tiles and burst through the pet door’s hanging flap, into the back yard. This is it, she thought, gathering speed, to try to scurry her slightly larger self up the six foot high wood fence. She had never attempted it.

“Jezzz!” her mother screamed from her bedroom window, “Get, back, here, thizinstant!” She slammed it shut, despite Jezebel’s frequent requests to keep it open.

Furious at this additional punishment, she sprang and clambered up the fence’s weathered boards in a chittering, clawed hustle, and made it! She minced along the narrow top beam to the far corner – the boundary of her small outdoor space. On both sides were the other town homes’ identically fenced yards. But, straight ahead was the marshy, undeveloped forest.

The first story laundry door, which Jezebel had exited, whammed open. “Damn it, Jez!” Her mother’s engorged face jerked about, searching the neglected garden.

Before her hard brown eyes fastened on her, Jezebel had jumped down and darted into the dark wood.

#

After following several sunsets, hiding when vehicles passed, scrambling for shelter as ‘copters shuddered the sky – Jezebel was scared, but felt more alive than ever. Yet, running on the scant protein from crickets and daddy long legs, she was very hungry.

She chased a mole that kept eluding her diving under the crinkly leaves. Then, she came upon a clearing in the wood – the silvery moonlight illuminated an abandoned neighborhood. Crumbling houses were parked in scraggly yards which were divvied up by spans of cracked pavement, broken up by saplings and weeds. It was one of the cast-off developments that she'd only heard about on the news. As pestilence and climate change disasters claimed more human lives, no one had wanted to live in the out-of-date residences, far from the city.

An owl screeched in a nearby copse of trees, while distant airplanes tore across the sky – even there, their jarring notes were inescapable. However, they were omnipresent in her old, urban neighborhood.

In the end, will Mom find me? Drag me back there – to my pastel prison?

Her father had left after her birth, exclaiming, “I can’t live with that freak!” She knows this because when drunk or semi-conscious, her mother would utter his hateful words, then curse him as a coward and complain about raising Jezebel alone.

A week ago, Mom had explained to an unknown relative on the phone that her desperation to have a child, to “keep us together,” had made the costly experimental drugs seem worth it. The conversation was during a rare moment of sobriety – Jezebel had resented that her mother had chosen not to spend it with her daughter.

Mom had chanted the drug commercial's log line: ‘A cure, to fill our empty nurseries and mend broken hearts,’ as if it were a curse. While pregnant, she'd been too preoccupied with her tumultuous marital relationship to attend health checks – or so she had claimed. The other person had argued against her every point. Crying at the end of the contentious call, Mom had reached for the bottle, breaking two days of abstinence.

Hoping for some kind of connection, even a sorrowful one, Jezebel had eavesdropped. Once the call was over, the clank of the glass and bottle demolished her hope. Instead of staying for the dreadful glugging sound, she had fled to grieve alone in the back yard.

The story goes that a small percentage of the fertility drug's gene splice components were from

captive animals – a horrible mistake or sabotage. When the first “splicies” were born, the company that sold the drug was shut down. But, the black market mixed those drugs with others and repackaged them with new names, claiming that they were, better than those overseen by the corrupt FDA.

The government's failure to protect its citizens during the Collapse, followed by their cover-ups and excuses, had proven its untrustworthiness. Instead, people used underground networks for healthcare – Mom did.

The cell division caused by the tainted drugs only rebelled in the final stages of fetal development. On discovery, many late-term abortions were performed, but not every woman had access to the difficult procedure. That the only visible signs of humanity in the “splicies” were faces, in animal bodies was an abomination and a reproach. Religious and ethical infighting followed. But, there was a small, vocal group, mockingly called the “splicie cuddlers,” that argued that the chimeras deserved loving homes. They were ostracized – Mother should know. Despite her intentions to make a loving home, being twice abandoned was too much. So she turned to alcohol.

Something rustled beyond the corner of a dilapidated house, ten yards away.

Jezebel's fur bristled, and she arched her back.

A breeze crumbled scree and twigs across the boarder between the dwelling's shadow and the moonlight. The debris were stirred by the striped paws of a cat with a human face – a tabby chimera! Its smooth, feminine voice called to her, “It's okay.”

Dumbfounded by seeing another of her kind, Jezebel maintained her threatening arch.

Behind her were louder stirrings – a huge German Shepard with a golden mane and dark, flat face – a dog chimera!

Screeching, Jezebel shifted the profile of her fuzzy arch sideways to intimidate the newcomer.

Ignoring her, it growled, masculine and jaded, “Another spy. She'll report us to the Makers.” He hunkered down, as if to spring on Jezebel.

“No,” Jezebel gasped. “I'm no spy – I ran away.”

"Hear that," the tabby had sauntered nearer and scratched the back of her head with a fluttering hind leg. Itch relieved, she continued to the dog, "Look at her. She's a kit – not first generation, like us."

"Makes no difference." The dog shook, with a great twisting and flapping of his ears and pelt.

Jezebel vented, "Ree – oww!"

Snarling at her, he retorted to the tabby, "Those pee-pole want us dead."

The tabby's answer was nonchalant, "Then, inspect."

While the fearsome dog brushed Jezebel to one side, then another with his paw tipped with thick, blunt nails, the tabby came up and assured Jezebel, "Don't worry, he won't hurt you."

Jezebel refrained from lashing out or screeching.

"Roll over," he barked.

She reluctantly did – exposing her white-patched belly.

With delicate taps on her abdomen, he determined that she wore nothing, no collar, bugs or other devices. He snorted his completion of the search.

Jezebel scrambled to her feet, then staggered. There were several more chimeras gathered around – cats, long-haired and short, an ivory poodle and a black Labrador.

"So many, I thought..." Jezebel trailed off.

"That you were the only one around here?"

The tabby regarded Jezebel kindly, "What's your name, kit?"

"Jezebel." Glaring at the dog, "What's yours?"

The dog huffed at her audacity.

"Cedrick's his name," the tabby replied for him, "and I'm Ankh." With a sardonic grin, she added, "the appointed leader of Furtown." The olive complexioned skin of her face had tabby markings around the eyes – an Egyptian flair.

Jezebel found herself wheedling, "Oh please, can I stay with you?" She paused, then stated, "Humans...ah, the Makers are mean."

Sharing her rejection, the chimeras meowed or scoffed empathetically.

Signing, Ankh said, "In their eyes, we blur the line between children and pets. Raising us was too emotionally hard."

With a final look at Cedrick, whose pointed ears were flattened against his head, perhaps at a remembered trauma, Ankh trilled, "Yes, Jezebel, you can stay with us."

#

Thus, Jezebel became the youngest member of Furtown. Starved for love, she quickly established relationships with its occupants, and fell into the cautious rhythm of the place. Though their valley seemed remote from the Makers, avoiding detection from outsiders dictated the manner in which they did everything.

Chimeras' animal genes determined their growth rate, so at five months old, Jezebel's development was comparable to a human preteen, considered too young to participate in Furtown's nightly hunting parties. But, she was given a guard shift – the first couple of hours after dawn – and cleaning duties.

Though she craved Ankh's company as a savvy mother figure, the leader was in frequent conferences with her security officer, Cedrick, who wouldn't shed his wariness toward Jezebel. Instead, she bonded with Ricky, Melody, Lizt and Cleo – the other cats. After Jezebel learned to relax around the big, rambunctious dog, Georgie the Labrador also became a friend.

But, Pierre, the poodle, remained aloof. It was told that he was horribly abused and suffered from melancholy. Jezebel proceeded gently with him. After a couple of weeks, even he was amused by her antics and once, wordlessly shared a crayfish delicacy with her.

Given their human noses and mouths, the splicies had peculiar dietary needs – meat must be shred and preferably, cooked, unlike how the domestic animals that they resembled eat. Also, despite their intelligence, they lacked hands. Without the dexterity and industry of the Makers, their ingenuity was constantly challenged.

Nevertheless, after a month in the defunct homes with her new companions, Jezebel was en-

joying herself more than she had dreamed possible.

In the meantime, Furtown took in two more refugees: Penny, a black cat and Jasper, a beagle, which brought their number to eleven.

#

After completing her watch on a snowy day, Jezebel had just eaten breakfast with the others, and had gone to a bedroom window to meditate on the flakes sprinkling over the slowly thickening white layer. Then, the alarm was sounded by the late morning shift – a mimicked Screech Owl call, a double rattle, a rest, and a final shake of a designated holly tree branch.

She dashed to the living room.

Cedrick and Ankh had gone outside. In the kitchen and adjoining living room, the others whispered in the dusty air and peeped through the windows, for a signal as to whether they should flee or remain hidden.

Jezebel shared the kitchen window ledge with Melody, a calico, and Litz, a Himalayan. Upon first glance between the slats of the dented blinds, she almost fell off.

Makers, and not just the derelict teens who occasionally pass – adults! Dressed in parkas, knit hats, and snow boots, seven people fanned out through Furtown, looking into windows with flashlights and trying locked doors.

Litz's voluminous fur puffed out around his tan, blue-eyed face, doubling his size. He moaned, "they're searching for us."

Blinking her bi-colored eyes – one amber and one green, Melody reminded, "Last watch just swept our snow tracks." Indeed, only the treaded, oblong craters from the humans' boots marked their passage through four inches of snow.

Jezebel stared at a broadly made woman with inwardly rotated arms, so that her curled, gloved fingers stuck out. She heavily followed the others.

"It's Mom," Jezebel quavered, hunkering onto the counter, to one side of the sill. "Could she have traced me?"

Litz also stepped down to the counter. "My father's at the head of group."

Jezebel had seen a Southeast Asian man, with a salt and pepper beard leading them.

Awed, he continued, "And I've been here much longer than you."

"Oh, God. Are they all our family?"

"I see none of mine," Melody replied, with her tri-colored, patched self balanced on the sill.

After assessing the entire neighborhood, the people zeroed in on the house that the splicies occupied – it had the least amount of structural damage. To everyone's alarm, Litz's father thunked up their front steps and put a small parcel down. Then, he signaled to the others, and mumbling, the group plodded back the way they came. Five minutes later, they were gone.

#

According to the correspondence they left, the Makers didn't want to abduct the residents. To make up for poor treatment, they offered support – to send supplies, to repair portions of Furtown, to have doctors come and check on the chimeras, along with occasional family visits. Despite their own straits, they had pooled their funds to implement the changes. They were acting like Mom's old group, the "splicie cuddlers." But, could they be trusted?

Furtown's residents were unnerved. After gathering their thoughts for a bit, they had a meeting.

Cedrick, Melody, Pierre and Cleo wanted run away, before they were captured.

On the other hand, Jezebel, after experiencing the drama of her first heat cycle, was inclined to accept, particularly for the doctor visits. Her mother had said that reproducing splicies would be a disaster. Ricky, a black and white first generation cat with arthritis, also desired medical care. Georgie, the homesick Labrador, could barely contain her glee at the thought of the visits, and Jasper; the newly arrived beagle, wanted the sagging, holey roofs and moldy wallboards repaired.

The views of Litz, Penny and most importantly, Ankh, were somewhere in the middle. Penny thought they should leave, but then keep watch on Furtown, to see if the Makers did what they prom-

ised. Litz kept shaking his chocolate ruff and muttering that what they needed from the Makers was a token – something of value, to convince them of their sincerity. Ankh agreed, but felt that asking for such would put them at a strategic disadvantage.

Jezebel couldn't help fidgeting. She dreaded seeing her mother, but was sure that the feeling was mutual. No doubt, Mom had been relieved that Jezebel's demands and hassles had ended, at least under her roof. While Jezebel understood all the views that were expressed, she hung on the vision of what the Makers could provide: comfort and stability, medical care. She had expressed that twice at the beginning.

Sighing, she flung out a piece of string between her fore-claws like a fisher's net, only to pull back dust bunnies and linoleum tile shards. Night was drawing close and she was getting hungry. What would they do?

During a brief hush, Ankh's soft statement filled the room, "Penny's plan is the best."

The black cat blinked her deep green eyes and ducked her head.

Satisfied, Cedrick nodded.

Ankh continued, "It's a way to test the Makers at keeping their word, with minimal risk. We'll move to the caves, send regular scouts and see what they do."

While the circle broke up, Jezebel asked Litz, "What are the caves like?"

With a curled lip, he replied, "Unpleasant."

#

Litz was right about the caves. In the foothills along the river, a couple of miles from Furtown, they were more like animal burrows than the stalactite braced cathedrals which Jezebel hoped for. Even with blankets and pillows, there was no helping the dank, cold environs and low, dripping ceiling. Without electricity in Furtown, they still could cook on a stove with a copious propane tank and matches. But, in the caves, the matches wouldn't light without the gas burners – they only bent and broke after repeated tries.

Thus, Ankh ordered that meals be stealthily made at Furtown at night and delivered to the

caves. The volunteer cooks went in alternating teams – either Pierre and Melody or Georgie and Penny – the cats did the dexterous work, while the dogs toted bags of cooked rations on their backs, tied with string. Meanwhile, Cedrick scouted ahead and stood watch, while they prepared the food. Like that, they could only bring half of the normal amount of chow.

Jezebel tried to convince the group to eat insects like she had, but that idea was met without enthusiasm.

Then the Makers dropped off a huge carton of not just food, but tools which the chimeras could use with paws and teeth: long stemmed, push-button lighters, water jugs with pull tab caps, push-bottles of antiseptic soap and an easily used can opener. It was apparent that the humans took an inventory of what the chimeras had already stock piled in the main house, so they didn't send rubber bands or plastic bags, which were already in large supply.

Though glad at the donation, Ankh decreed that they would continue to live in the caves, until other promises were kept. Resolutely, they gathered around the fire, made possible by their new lighter and endured another night in the muddy cave.

The next day, a bustling disturbance from Furtown swept through the valley, to the caves. Roaring construction vehicles, screaming electric saws, tapping hammers and more. The repairs had begun.

The chimeras avoided the day's hub-bub, but after dark they inspected the progress. Each trip increased their conviction that the "cuddlers" had meant what they said. But, Ankh and Cedrick remained skeptical. "This could all be a trap."

That baleful statement failed to curb Jezebel's enthusiasm for their drastically upgraded new home. First, they got the water and power systems running, and replaced the weather-damaged exterior of the main house and another across the street. They demolished the rest of the neighborhood and let the greenery flourish in their place.

In the pair of houses, except for coffee tables, which were the perfect height to dine on, the Makers removed the human furniture and decorations:

the sagging beds, collapsed sofas, toe-pinching rocking chairs, useless paintings.

Along the walls in each bedroom, they added wide shelves, about a foot from the floor, later to be covered in plush beds. Above these, they made cat playgrounds, consisting of small, carpeted platforms at different heights on the walls, with sisal lined ramps connecting them. Viewing perches were installed at all the windows, and the filthy carpets and fractured tiles were replaced with wall-to-wall ceramic.

Lazy Susans were built into the cabinets, whose doors were removed. A rope was tied around the refrigerator door handle, to be pulled open with one's teeth. The living rooms became dining areas, with coffee tables and pads to sit on.

The bathroom fixtures were ripped out and the floor paved with concrete with a central drain, and easy-to turn facets were installed at their height. More fantastically, the linen closets were transformed into a step in dryer, operated by weight sensors in the floor, with air jets installed at several locations.

All the interior doors were removed and the outside ones were upgraded with two-way hinges, and had bolt locks installed a foot from the floor – they locked or unlocked easily. Unaided, Jezebel could push a door open.

Signs of Spring were emerging when the construction wound down with the removal of thorny plants and poison ivy. In sunny areas, edible herbs were planted, and aromatic cedar saplings were sunk into new holes, watered and tamped down.

#

"The Makers gave us a way to lock the house. That's a big deal," Georgie insisted one afternoon, while pacing her sturdy black bulk in front of the cave opening.

Sitting around and in the cave, many nodded at her assertion. It was a statement of trust on the part of the humans. The majority of chimeras were ready to enjoy the superb new Furtown, especially Ricky, whose arthritis in the damp cave had worsened over the Winter. His ears, one black and one white flicked back. "We can't get medical aid, until we move."

"Yes," Jezebel blurted. Then, more meekly, "We need it. Flea and tick treatment..." she left unvoiced her mounting desire to be sterilized, to no longer have to go through the maddening urges of being in heat, without a mate her age.

Cleo was grooming – it had become an all day occupation for the smoky Persian cat. Litz too, frequently hacked up fur balls. Despite his efforts, his cream and brown coat was barely presentable. And Pierre's white coat had become a dingy, matted mess.

"They've proven themselves," Cleo paused, her tongue tip visible between her lips, which some interpreted as a dig at Ankh. "Now, can we leave this cold, dirty hole?"

Above the many-voiced exclamations of support, Cedrick barked, "Here, here!" The most grim and formidable of the bunch rumbled, "The Makers," it was notable that he didn't use his derisive term of pee-pole, "...went out of their way for us." He sat, his powerful chest puffed out, "At this point, a trap is unlikely."

With ears pricked, all turned to Ankh, whose Silver Tabby coat clashed with the earthen backdrop. "I know waiting's been hard, but it was the right choice. We'll never forget the trauma they inflicted on us before." She thoughtfully closed her eyes and curled her chin downward.

Opening her golden eyes, she rejoined, "But, it seems, they truly want to make amends, and..." she nodded at Cleo and Ricky, "we've stayed here long enough."

They broke into an overjoyed ruckus.

#

Furtown's renovations were so well designed, that compared to the wrecks they had lived in and their sparse cave dwelling period, it was like a utopia. The plentiful food, tidy, warm shelter and hygiene tools were a delight. For a day, even the serious-minded gave in to revelry.

But, the following day, Ankh called a meeting to discuss how to strategize their upcoming contact with the Makers. Their leader's shrewdness was impressed on all, even upon Jezebel, who was exhausted from her gleeful romping.

Ankh summarized, “We have to keep our boundaries, as a race.” She glanced at Cedrick, whose brows had for the entire meeting, been gathered into knots. “Yes, we’ll accept their aid, but we can’t allow them to change who we are. Especially after family comes.”

“They’d have us cut the bonds we’ve made here,” Pierre unexpectedly added – he hadn’t yet spoken at a meeting. “This,” his newly clean, fluffy head swiveled to regard the occupants, “this is our true family.”

The elder residents nodded.

But, the newcomers, Jezebel, Penny and Jasper, weren’t outwardly supportive of his sentiment. Jezebel blurted, “We should decide that,” and was instantly bashful.

A variety of disconcerted sounds were released.

“She’s right,” Litz said from her right, with an affectionate lean against her.

For the first time in her life, Jezebel was validated.

He continued, “If such bonds are enforced by either side, that’s not family – it’s containment.” He flipped a forepaw behind his ear for a scratch, enlivening his brown mane. Then, he went on self-deprecatingly, “I mean, the percentage who want to return is most likely nil. But, it’s the principle.”

Penny eyed the Himalayan with appreciation. “We must have freedom of choice.”

Cedrick sneered, “Ankh isn’t suggesting otherwise. She...,” he tipped his chin up, “...we think that deceit is part of human nature.”

“And,” Melody added, “we’re going to be dependent on them again.”

“Exactly,” Cedrick said. “So, we must stay on guard.”

There was a solemn quiet.

Then, with her irrepressible tail wagging, Georgie added, “But, can’t we enjoy this? So far? And if their help is genuine...”

Ankh broke in, “...that’s possible too. Maybe they’re a bit dependent on us – on this working.” Her dark-ringed, gold eyes narrowed. “Maybe we need to make that so.”

How would we do that? Jezebel silently wondered.

“At least,” Jasper added, “we don’t have to hide anymore.”

The meeting broke up on that positive notion, but for the rest of the day, there was no more romping.

#

Three weeks later, “It’s for your own good,” Bobby told her, while the tip of his ginger, striped tail curled upward and flattened – brushing the platform’s beige carpet, with a metronome’s accuracy. Regarding Jezebel, his saffron eyes tipped toward the center of his forehead.

“But, it’s an untruth,” she protested, “I can’t fool myself.”

She looked away from the attractive male, a month older than her, and willingly brought by his parents to Furtown. He was one of four who arrived since the building was complete. With his less abusive upbringing, how could he council her? But, his idea of interpreting her mother’s visit in a positive light was intriguing.

“Trust me, I know about dysfunction,” he added. “My parents seemed reasonable to you all, but they’re good at masking their mental games.”

“I wish my mother could mask her cruelty.” She glanced out the window, at the chimera dogs wrestling in the back yard. “When she’s drunk, it’s all up front.”

“So, there’s no second guessing,” he declared off-hand.

She narrowed her eyes, “Just open hatred.” She jumped from the wall platform to a dog bed, then to the floor. Striding away, she said over her shoulder, “Nice try.”

She left the room, turned a corner, and sped toward the back porch, almost colliding with Litz.

“Beg pardon,” he exclaimed, while she rushed past and out into the yard.

Like when she had originally escaped, her emotions rose and twirled around themselves, like a maelstrom. She wanted to both run and to lie down and weep. Worst of all, she longed for Bobby to follow her.

“No distractions,” she scolded herself, again regretting that she had opted to wait on being steri-

lized. Bobby wasn't either, though Furtown's first generation denizens already were.

Jezebel needed privacy to process that morning's interaction with Mom. Though she was sober, she spoke consoling words as if she was dictating. Then, halfway through proclaiming her worry at the loss of her daughter, she gave up the artifice for the weary statement, "You don't look as shabby as I thought. With other splinters looking after you."

Mom's implication that she needed to be looked after by those whom she regarded as equals was infuriating. At the time, Jezebel couldn't think of how to counter it. I just took it, like I always do.

She sprinted toward an old oak on the side of the main house and charged up the massive trunk, only slowing at the forth intersection of branches. The saddle-like crook where, in their search for sunlight, two hearty limbs divided the trunk into a 'v', had room for her to recline, with her claws hooked into the bark.

Cloaked with the gold of the setting sun, the peaked roofs and the bountiful greenery of Spring in Furtown was a visual balm. Her fondness for its occupants and environs so clashed with her internal storm, that she cried for several minutes. As her tears spent themselves, clarity rinsed the detritus from her mind.

She tried Bobby's suggestion – visualized how she wished the meeting with her mother had gone: Mom's heartfelt apologies for her cruelty and drinking. Her relief at seeing Jezebel well and growing. Instead of going on about her entering AA treatment to the point of self-aggrandizement, "yes, I'm being accountable with you...", she asked after Jezebel's friends and the activities there. She was glad that her daughter had found this, "...wonderful community. It's so much better than what I could provide. I'll see you next week, my dear Jez."

It was a movie, staring a tender stranger who wore Mom's face and spoke with Mom's voice – words that she would never admit. Because they weren't true.

Self pity at reality's hurtful injustice wracked sobs from Jezebel, until she remembered one of

Bobby's statements: "We have to give ourselves what our families couldn't." There was no denying that the idea, if not the method, was brilliant.

She vowed, "I'm not letting her nastiness scar me," and pictured her mother's power over her shriveling. Its brittle vine snapped, and fell away.

The image was replaced by her actual view. Between the tree's branches and leaves, feathery clouds spread against the cerulean sky, and were dipped in fuchsia and orange near the wooded horizon. She was aware of how small and light she was, how embracing and vast the sky.

"Jezebel!" It was Bobby. In the dappled shadows far under her tree, his small, lithe form melted in and out of the bronze light, as if he was spawned from it. "I was arrogant – sorry! I just wanted to help. Jezebel?"

She took in a deep breath, then answered, "I'm up here."

Through the dense foliage and network of boughs, his eyes met hers, "Wow, you really must be angry!"

She laughed.

"Can I come up?"

"No, I'll come down!" Studying the elaborate tree configurations below her, "But, how?" she murmured. "Oh, I see."

With distended claws, she took a head-first, diagonal path over a mound in the trunk and scrambled to a lower crook. There she paused, examining the structures and found another route, skirting the trunk and landing on a lower branch. Stepping down to an adjacent one, she found another passable segment, leading to a broad limb. In a few minutes, she let gravity compel her spread-eagled, spike-footed body down the remaining tree trunk, and sprang into the turf near Bobby.

With his ears plastered against his head, his eyes were as round as marbles, "You ok?"

"Yeah," she said, exhilarated.

After a few blinks, he sat. "Well, shut my mouth! You can handle anything, Jezebel."

"But, I like company. Sometimes." She walked away with her tail like a flagpole.

#

“After six months of regular interactions with the chimera residents of Furtown, last month’s introduction of teachers, to improve their spotty – pun intended – literacy...”

Lizt and his audience groaned.

“When are they going to stop being cute?”

Cedrick snarled.

Shaking his head, Lizt searched the newspaper page for where he was in the story, then continued reading aloud, “...education in math, geography, history, and so forth. The splicies were correct – advancing their learning staves off boredom. Though they could never contribute to society, they’ve shown remarkable promise in grasping complex problems.” He pauses, with distaste creasing his face.

At his side, Penny grumbled, “So, we’re just oddities with no purpose. They’ll never get it!”

Lizt’s ears cocked in her direction, waiting to see if she had finished. No one replied. The group wasn’t convinced that they should justify their existence – a principal so important to humans that they themselves strive and compete to the point of exhaustion, to prove it.

With no other interruptions, Lizt read out, “But, this pales in comparison to the latest development – Furtown’s first offspring! Though the parents wouldn’t allow us to take pictures of their litter, all four kits are healthy and resemble their parents, except for one...”

From her lookout, atop the porch bannister, “Hide it,” Ankh hissed. She had been scanning the back yard.

In the sudden collapse common to tired dogs, Jasper sprawled his long, chestnut and white body across the local paper.

Soft voices approached. Then, Bobby sprang up the porch steps in a tiger-like bound. Surveying his relaxed friends in the breezy shade, “Hey, all,” he said, then bowed his head to lap from a water bowl.

Through half closed lids, they perceived Jezebel’s grey form ascending the stairs at a measured pace, followed by a tumble of frisking kits – three in number and colored in a smattering of grey and ginger with white chests and ‘socks.’

She sat with her back to the others, watching her young ambush each other on the stairs. As their paws hit the cool concrete porch, they pranced through the open door and into the main house.

Raising his head, Bobby, said, “I’m goin’a getch’a,” and trotted after them.

But, Jezebel remained where she was. “Come on, Clara,” she called into the yard.

They heard a distant squeal, “flower!”

“You can bring it,” Jezebel replied.

In a few moments, her last kit clambered up the first step. On the final stair, a dandelion bounced – the long-stemmed weed was gripped in her raccoon-like hand. Treading on the closed fist had encumbered Clara. Yet, in other instances she excelled at manipulating things. Even at two months old, she adored arranging the toys which the Makers brought into patterns on the floor, and regularly brushed Pierre, Lizt and Cleo until gleaming.

“For you, Mommy,” she said, rubbing against Jezebel.

“How sweet.” With eyes squeezed shut, Jezebel nuzzled her. “I love your gift.” After a moment, she cheerily said, “Let’s get some snacks.”

As they drew near, Lizt’s China blue eyes lingered on the dandelion as it incrementally bobbed against the floor, with each of Clara’s strides. Then they met Jezebel’s peaceful mien. He smiled, “A lovely gift, much appreciated.”

As Day Follows Night by Karen L. Kobylarz

Though the water clock by the door indicated she had arrived early, Marha raced into the dining hall. Where in the name of the Crystal was Kilha? Marha craned her neck hoping to glimpse her cousin’s sun-colored locks. While she and Kilha were returning to their rooms after the day’s trials, a messenger had handed Kilha a letter. Kilha had rushed from her chamber without changing, the missive clutched in her hand. Why hadn’t she shared the message with Marha?

Fellow Initiates mingled around the tables, waiting for dinner. Marha wended through them until she spotted a familiar green shawl. Kilha sat at a corner table with Sebhina, an auburn-haired girl from a southern borough.

Kilha tapped her fingers against the tabletop. “The Council hasn’t appointed anyone to join their ranks in all the months we’ve been here.” The messenger’s letter lay folded beneath her palm. “Councilors are supposed to be so wise and revered. Instead, they’re a bunch of snobby elites who’ve spent too many years in this precious Compound. They know nothing about life in our boroughs. Councilors always talk about the Crystal and its magic, but they never show us. They need to give us some answers.”

Sebhina narrowed her eyes and lowered her voice. “So you think the Council is flawed?”

Marha sat beside Kilha, her skin tingling at the direction of the conversation. “They could be less secretive.” She eyed the letter beneath Kilha’s hand. “News from Grandmother?”

Kilha shook her head. “Local gossip from Vinhenta.” She tucked the message into her sleeve.

Vinhenta? Marha sucked her lower lip. If the letter was from their neighbor in Sekhat Borough, why was Kilha hiding it?

Kilha readjusted her shawl. Aromas of spice and pine clung to the knitted wool—echoes of a cooler place, where wind carried the briny scent of the sea, and warmth came from hearth fires and their grandmother’s steaming homemade stews.

Marha sighed. Over six months had passed since she and Kilha had left Sekhat and journeyed to the Compound. Their farewell meal with Grandmother—hen stew, peppered with thyme and parsley—smelled and tasted more pungent and flavorful than any feast served in the Compound.

Kilha clasped the rough-hewn stone resting against her breast and slid the talisman across its chain. “Think, Sebhina,” she whispered. “Months of instruction and trials, and the Councilors give us platitudes. ‘The Crystal protects life,’ they say. So why didn’t they use it during the Burning Sickness? That plague killed hundreds. Marha and I both lost our parents.”

Marha twisted the ring band of her own talisman. The word parents conjured shadows. The Burning Sickness had left scars. Half their borough had died, and survivors had twisted and useless limbs, their bodies covered in scabs. The memories lumped in Marha’s stomach.

“I lost family, too.” Sebhina’s reply nudged Marha back to the present. “But— The Councilors!”

The five members, led by High Councilor Idhon, entered the hall, ascended the dais at the far end, and settled at the main table. Servers followed with the first course. More Initiates joined Kilha, Sebhina, and Marha, and the conversation shifted to today’s trials.

Marha silently thanked the Almighty. Enough complaints and unpleasant memories. She would press Kilha about the contents of Vinhenta’s letter tomorrow.

#

The door to the chamber smacked open. Marha jolted upright in bed and blinked in the early light. The husky form of High Councilor Idhon stalked toward her.

She squirmed as Idhon seized her arm and yanked her from the covers. Her talisman ring might not have enough power left for a spell, but if she could manage a swift punch, the red stone would leave a nasty mark.

Idhon tightened his hold on her, his sun-browned features grim. His talisman, amber set in a gold band, gleamed in warning. He had magic ready and could strike before she invoked a spell. “Fully awake, are you?” His gray eyes locked with her hazel ones. “I’m surprised you’re still here. Many Initiates have commented that the dark-haired one always follows the blonde. What was your part in the plan?”

Marha smoothed her hair. Yes, she and Kilha were inseparable, but— “What plan?”

Idhon arched his pale eyebrows. “You expect me to believe that you don’t know?”

The son of a desert rat. Marha pulled free from him and tugged the sleeves of her night tunic. “I don’t. What happened?”

“Where’s Kilha?”

Marha blinked, her insides quivering. “In her chambers. Where else?” She glanced at her ring, forged in the same fire as Kilha’s talisman. A speck of green appeared in the red stone, a sign her cousin was safe.

Idhon snorted. He pulled her robe from the wall hook and tossed it to her. After she put on the garment, he grabbed her wrist and dragged her across the hall to Kilha’s room. He waited in the doorway as she entered.

Kilha’s bed was empty, the sheets unrumpled. The homespun gowns their grandmother had made her still hung in the wardrobe, but the green shawl was missing. Marha sucked in a breath. Where had Kilha gone, and why had she left on her own? Bereft of parents, they had sworn they would remain together always.

Idhon grasped both sides of the doorframe as if he feared Marha would bolt. “Well?”

“I don’t know. I swear by the Crystal.” As Marha invoked the ancient gem, Kilha’s words before dinner rushed back: “Councilors always talk about the Crystal and its magic, but they never show us. They need to give us some answers” Words between friends, nothing more. Kilha dreamed of becoming a full-fledged Council member. She wouldn’t have jeopardized her chances.

Idhon chuckled, a hollow sound. “By the Crystal, indeed. Let’s hope your cousin hasn’t suffered a fate like her accomplice.”

His harsh words struck like a stomach-punch. Marha blinked. “What?”

Idhon leaned against the doorjamb. “There is much the legends do not say about the Crystal, including why we keep the gem secured.”

Marha tensed. “To hoard its power?”

Idhon’s cheek twitched, and he rubbed his face. “Is that what you think? I will show you why.” He seized her hand and led her through the narrow corridor separating the Initiate Hostel from the Council Mansion and up a stone staircase to a locked room on the second floor.

Idhon pressed his talisman ring against the latch. “Uba-skail.” The door opened, revealing a space filled with shadows. A thin stream of light flowed from a half-opened window at the far end, and a curtained bed stood in the middle.

Idhon’s grip tightened, and his eyes locked with hers. “Few Initiates learn what you will today, but you may be the only one who can make Kilha see reason.” He shoved her forward. “Go, take a long look. When you’re done, meet me in the public chambers. Tell me then if you think the Crystal is safe in Kilha’s hands.” He stepped back and slammed the door behind her.

Marha crept through the gloom, past the bed, toward the light. The window overlooked the main garden with its open courtyard and quiet pool. There, at the water’s edge, a giant, human-headed cat, with fiery orange fur and cloud-white wings, paced. The creature mewed as if in pain, and its eyes flicked in her direction.

Marha stumbled backward. The beast bore Sebhina’s face.

Sebhina raked the grass with her paws and tore the bushes lining the pool. Was she Kilha’s accomplice? Had the Crystal done this to her?

Marha took another step back. The Crystal was a source of creation—good, not evil.

“Terrible, isn’t it?” a woman’s voice murmured behind her. “The price of magic.”

Marha faced the curtained bed in the center of the room.

One of the drapes parted, revealing a woman. She was propped on one elbow, her long hair as pale as the moons in daytime, her bronzed skin drawn so tight, it clung to her bones. “Idhon told me of the Crystal’s disappearance and that I might need to speak to you, Marha.” The woman shifted, one leg at a time, to sit on the edge of the mattress. “You have heard the Crystal protects life. All life. It can read hearts and sense the difference between good and evil.” She tapped a skeletal finger against her chest. “But some life has no heart, no soul. So the Crystal cannot tell its purpose.”

Marha swallowed and edged closer. Despite her white hair and frail build, the woman’s face and hands remained unlined by age. “Who are you?” Her voice cracked.

The woman winced. “I am Dilhoa.”

Marha’s stomach clenched. Lady Dilhoa, Idhon’s wife, dismissed by most Initiates as reclusive and foolish. “Why are you here? Are you ill?”

Dilhoa sighed and rested her hands in her lap. “Not long after our marriage, I began to suffer from a wasting sickness. I touched the Crystal, and the gem saved my life, but a living thing caused my illness. Death cannot touch me, but my disease is immortal also, a result Idhon and the other Councilors did not foresee. My health waxes and wanes. For three or four days each moon-cycle, I am well, but afterward, I regress to this weak state.” She lifted her hands and let them fall to her sides.

Marha hugged herself. If Kilha stole the Crystal, the gem might have changed her also. “Idhon says my cousin has the Crystal.”

“What does she plan to do with it?”

“I don’t know.”

Pity shaded Dilhoa’s wide amber eyes. “If she uses the Crystal for healing, her patients may not thank her.” She took a drinking cup from the nightstand, smashed the vessel, and slashed her arm from wrist to elbow with one of the shards.

Marha yelped.

Blood poured down Dilhoa’s arm and evaporated as the wound closed. “Pray your cousin hasn’t touched the Crystal.”

Outside, Sebhina wailed.

Dilhoa dropped the shard and turned her head to the window. “Some new beast roams the garden.”

“Initiate Sebhina. Her face is still human, but she has a lynx’s body. And wings.”

Dilhoa shuddered. “Sebhina must have intended to steal the Crystal. The gem recognized this and punished her.”

Marha gulped. “And Kilha?”

“Find her before she touches it.” Dilhoa eased herself beneath the covers and closed her eyes. “If she has not already done so.”

Pulse pumping in her ears, Marha dashed from the room and found Idhon pacing the length of the public chambers. She pounded her knuckles against the wall and wished she had something to throw instead. “I’ll find Kilha,” she said as he faced her.

Idhon nodded. “I had hoped you would agree. At present, only you, Sebhina, Dilhoa, and I know the Crystal was stolen. I would prefer to keep it

thus. Kilha is your kin, and you have the best chance of bringing her and the Crystal back unharmed—if you agree to my terms.” He motioned her forward.

Marha listened and acquiesced. Before the last hues of dawn faded to blue, she left the Council Compound, using her talisman to follow Kilha’s trail and praying to the Almighty she wasn’t too late.

#

Mountains stretched in an endless row, stark and barren as the desert from which they arose. Their jagged peaks pierced a sky bloodied by sunset.

Marha reached the foot of the tallest one and clambered up the side. Dirt caked her skin, coated her clothes, tangled in her hair, and choked every breath. Her talisman ring flashed, sensing the molten fire hidden beneath the ground, power waiting to be tapped. The light played across the pale threads twined between the setting and the stone. Threads tying her to the Council, allowing Idhon to watch her from his chamber in the Compound. Green speckles danced across the gem. Kilha was near.

Marha hastened along a narrow path leading to a long, vertical cleft about a quarter of the way up the slope. Several paces ahead, something emerald lay against the rock.

She darted forward and snatched Kilha’s shawl. Evergreens, sea brine, peat fires... So many days running in Grandmother’s fields, the pale green of corn giving way to wheat’s honey-gold, the stalks brushing their skin. Kilha always a few steps ahead, her hair, a shade lighter than the grain, streaming behind her. Studying together, applying to be Initiates together, arriving at the Council Compound together.

The woven fabric bunched between Marha’s fingers as she continued her climb. A wind blew from behind, striking her back in steady beats. A winged shadow spread across the mountain path before her.

Marha glanced skyward. Creation’s fire!

Sebhina had followed her. “Kilha will pay for tricking me and leaving me behind.” The words were a mixture of purr and growl.

Marha ran faster to reach the cleft before Sebhina could interfere. A paw thumped between Marha's shoulder blades and slammed her into the slope.

The shadow soared over Marha and settled on the path ahead. "Show me what you found."

Marha lifted herself on her elbows. "You want this?" She held the shawl aloft in one hand and pressed the other against the rock to tap the power beneath the stone into her talisman ring. "Speru, Ananihilia tha."

The stone warmed and threatened to sear her skin. Power flowed, hotter than fire, to her ring. Marha gritted her teeth and averted her gaze as light burst from the talisman.

Sebhina scrunched her eyes and recoiled with a hiss.

The light faded. Marha stood and rushed past Sebhina, up the sloping path toward the cleft in the mountain.

"You can't protect Kilha forever," Sebhina called after her.

The talisman flickered in recognition—kin calling to kin. Kilha was inside the mountain. Marha pressed her hands against the fissure. "Uba-skail." With an angry groan, the crack widened to reveal a small cave.

Behind her, the sounds of panting and claws scratching stone grew louder. Marha squeezed inside the opening.

Gusts of wing-wind roared through the crevice, and claws raked against the rock. A paw snagged her hair. Marha pulled free and pointed her talisman at the entrance. "Neta-bha."

The opening narrowed, making it impossible for Sebhina to follow. Sebhina growled in fury.

Marha kept her talisman raised and her attention on the crack. When Sebhina's curses and the beat of her wings faded, Marha leaned against the cave wall, still gripping Kilha's shawl. If the Crystal had transformed Sebhina into a monster, what might it have done to Kilha?

Marha turned the talisman toward her. Green specks flurried across the stone. Kilha had to be near.

Marha flung the shawl over her shoulders. Another light danced in the stone. Her talisman's nat-

ural crimson surrendered to an amber beam, a reminder that High Councilor Idhon watched. "You can't afford to let family sentiment guide you," he said across the distance. "It will hinder you."

Marha snorted. "If you didn't want to hinder me, you should've kept Sebhina on a leash."

"Remember, if you fail, I will have to send Hunters after Kilha. They won't share your concern for Kilha's safety, and once she is caught, alive or dead, the news will travel. Everyone in Sekhat and the other fourteen boroughs will know the granddaughters of Imakha are thieves."

His threat chilled her. Grandmother had endured enough losses. Family honor would not be added to them.

"Remember what Dilhoa showed you."

The price of magic and a fate worse than Sebhina's, even worse than the loss of honor. Marha clenched her fists and focused on the tunnel ahead. "Het-kharu." Her ring flared and released enough power to light her way.

After trudging down rough passages and narrow tunnels, Marha staggered into a flat open space. To one side sat four bundles and a water jug. By the jug lay, a small cloth bag.

Was the Crystal in the bag?

Marha moved closer, knelt, and lifted the flap.

Light assailed her. Glowing shades of yellow, green, blue, and white spun like a potter's wheel. They sparked, and so did her talisman. Marha shut her eyes, but the colors slid beneath her lids, reaching deeper, teasing out the past. She and Kilha sitting at Grandmother's table, parchment unrolled before them. The winding letters, the arcane words, Grandmother's bony fingers tapping the scrolls. "Study these, children. Master the spells, and the Council may call you to join them."

Marha jerked back and opened her eyes. She hadn't touched the Crystal, but somehow the jewel had reached into her mind and ferreted out a memory. How had the old teaching poem described the Crystal? A gem that read hearts.

"There you are, Straggler." Kilha emerged from the back of the cave, her golden hair cascading past her shoulders, emerald robes frayed at the edges. She crouched beside Marha.

Marha clasped Kilha's hand. "Thank the Almighty, you haven't transformed."

Kilha grinned. "You've seen Sebhina."

Marha nodded.

"I expected the Crystal might react that way."

Kilha rocked back on her heels. "That's why I asked her to help me. Sebhina never did have much sense. After she changed into a beast, I wrapped my hand in my shawl to lift the Crystal and put it in the bag. I need to harness the gem's power without touching it. I'm sorry for not telling you my plan earlier, but now that you're here, we can find a solution."

The back of Marha's neck prickled. What was Kilha saying? That she had used Sebhina like some kind of test subject? She slipped off the shawl and handed it to Kilha.

Kilha laughed as she draped the garment around her shoulders. "Here we are, like day and night."

"One always following the other." Marha finished Grandmother's favorite adage with a smile



Strife by Angela K. Scott

and studied the Crystal's lights, so colorful, so graceful, so hypnotic.

Kilha rested a hand on her shoulder. "You're thinking of them, too, aren't you?"

Marha tore her gaze from the Crystal. "Hmm?"

Kilha's touch became a squeeze. "Our parents. Remember how we imagined what they were like." Her eyes narrowed and her jaw clenched. "What we might have had if not for the—"

"Burning Sickness." Marha shuddered. "Are you thinking the Crystal can undo the past?"

Kilha lifted her head, her eyes luminous. "Possibly." Her voice choked. She rose and turned, the pouch in her grasp. "If it protects life, it should destroy illness, the Burning Sickness and others, too."

Many illnesses killed or disfigured their victims for life, but what of Dilhoa, marred for eternity? Marha puckered her lips and straightened. She needed to tell Kilha about Dilhoa, especially if... "Are you ill?"

"Not me. Grandmother."

Marha clapped a hand over her mouth. Not Grandmother with her age-defying face and boundless energy. Not the woman so full of stories.

"Vinhenta wrote that Grandmother's heart is weakening." Kilha patted her sleeve, suggesting the message remained hidden there. "You must have noticed Grandmother's letters have been shorter of late and her handwriting shakier."

Marha's hand fell to her side, a tightness rising in her throat. Grandmother was the only parent they had known, but the Crystal didn't differentiate between health and disease. She extended her palm. "May I?"

Kilha surrendered the pouch. The cloth hugged the facets of the gem as Marha placed the bag on the cavern floor.

Marha fingered the flap, the prickles in her neck trailing down her back. The pale green light exerted a gentle pressure behind her eyes. Marha's ring flared, and the Crystal's light turned pale red. She closed the pouch. "Kilha, did you see? The light changed from your color to mine."

Kilha nodded and leaned closer. “The Crystal senses the talismans. I’ve learned that much.” She grasped the coarse stone hanging from her chain, a green gem mined from the same vein of rainbow jasper as Marha’s.

Marha reopened the pouch. Swirls of red and green light flooded the space.

Kilha shielded her eyes.

Marha squinted, her brow furrowing. Idhon never advised her how to handle the Crystal or how to share her encounter with Dilhoa, but Marha could guess. “We can’t use our hands.” That had been Sebhina’s mistake. If they could prod it with something else...

Marha wagged her fingers. “Give me your talisman.”

Kilha clutched her stone. “I’m not sacrificing mine just because I didn’t waste days making it look pretty.”

Marha chuckled. Typical Kilha, defensive and in a hurry. “No one forced you to forge a talisman in less time than it takes to eat a fig. I want to borrow the chain.”

After a long pause, Kilha removed the pendant and gave the links to Marha.

Marha slid her ring on the chain and dangled the talisman above the open pouch. Soft light streamed from the Crystal and assumed a reddish hue when it touched the talisman stone. As the light spread up the chain, toward Marha’s fingers, the glow deepened to the browns of mud-brick walls, the darker tones of an ebony chair, and a scarlet rug sprawled before a flickering fireplace.

“Tell us the one about the Crystal, Grandmother.” Kilha’s child voice said.

Impossible. They weren’t children anymore. Yet, there to Marha’s left, cross-legged on the rug, an eight-year-old Kilha turned her blue eyes upward.

Grandmother sat in her chair before them, hair tied back. She cocked her head. “Before the Almighty made the world, there was Creative Power.” Grandmother bent forward and stabbed one finger in the air for emphasis. “From it, came the skies, lands, seas, and all the things that dwell within them. Afterward, a spark of Creation re-

mained, which the Almighty placed inside a crystal.”

Kilha shifted to her knees. “The Crystal’s very powerful?” She pushed back locks of hair that had slipped from their combs.

Grandmother lowered her hands to her lap. “The most powerful magic of all.” She studied her gnarled knuckles and the age lines etched into the skin. “The Crystal can change creation itself, undo what’s been done and create things anew.”

Gaze hardening, Kilha rose and placed her hands on her hips. “Why doesn’t the Council use it?”

Grandmother tented her fingers. Her eyes, as blue as Kilha’s, retreated behind drooping lids. “That is not a question I can answer.” She pushed herself from the chair. “Come, children, it’s time to eat.”

“No.” Kilha tore the combs from her hair, flung them into the fire, and stalked away.

Marha frowned at the memory. Thank the Almighty, Kilha had learned to control her temper.

In the vision, Grandmother arched her eyebrows and faced Marha. “Kilha stole the Crystal instead of waiting for the Council to show her the truth. She also didn’t share her plan with you until now.”

Marha juggled the links in her hand. “She wants to save you, Grandmother. So do I.”

“I know, but have you forgotten Lady Dilhoa’s warning?” Grandmother stretched a finger toward Marha’s talisman ring. “Show Kilha what you learned, and pray she’ll see reason.”

Soft red light haloed Grandmother, the empty chair, the rug at her feet, the fireplace, and the retreating form of Kilha-as-child. Gold mingled with red. The light turned amber, the images blurred, and Dilhoa’s voice whispered, “Some life has no heart, no soul... The Crystal cannot tell its purpose.”

“Marha, what is it?” A hand on her shoulder—the grown-up Kilha interrupting her trance. “Why is the light changing?”

“There is something I have to show you.” Each word Marha uttered carried a sting.

Kilha's eyes hovered before her, curtained by pale hair. The grip on her shoulder tightened. "What?"

Marha nodded toward the Crystal. "Look here." She touched the band of her talisman ring and willed a message to Idhon: We're ready now. She nudged the Crystal to project her memory of Dilhoa.

Heartbeats passed. Ten, twenty... Over a hundred went by before Kilha relaxed her hold, and Marha plunged them both into a world of amber light.

The brilliance yielded to the view from the window in that spacious chamber. The lush greenery and white-washed terraces of the Council's private garden stretched below. Sebhina in her new monstrous form pawed the bushes, filling the air with her panicked cries.

"Terrible, isn't it?" Dilhoa murmured. "The price of magic..."

#

"Find her before she touches it..." Dilhoa's warning faded, and the world blurred into a sheet of amber.

A yank on the chain holding Marha's talisman shattered the link between stone and Crystal. Marha sprawled on the cavern floor.

Kilha stood above Marha, her face ashen, the rough-hewn talisman in her hand. Her gaze flicked to Marha's gemstone, which glowed with Idhon's yellowish light. "The High Councilor sent you? Did he lead you to Dilhoa?" When Marha nodded, Kilha raised her fists and shook them. "You never once considered it might be a trick?" She extended her free hand to the Crystal's pouch.

Marha slid her ring from the chain to her finger. "We've studied magic long enough to know the difference between reality and illusion." She rolled onto her knees and scrambled for the pouch.

Kilha fixed Marha with an unwavering glare.

Marha stared back, her chest tightening. Kilha didn't believe the vision? Marha would have to convince her some other way. "We could study the Crystal, test its powers, but that could take days, months. Does Grandmother have that long? If we bring the Crystal to her, can we be sure what it will do?" Marha rose and offered the chain.

Kilha seized the links, blue eyes darkening to stormy gray. "Coward."

The word hung between them.

Marha tightened her fingers around the pouch. "Kilha, come back to the Council Mansion, meet Dilhoa."

Kilha replaced her stone on its chain and lifted her talisman. "Speru mekhat."

Wind gusted from the talisman and struck Marha. She teetered backward, the bag slipping from her grasp.

Kilha scooped up the pouch.

Marha snatched at the bag and snagged the bottom. The cloth ripped, and the Crystal tumbled free. Marha's hand flew out and caught the jewel. A jolt tore through her, and a rainbow of colors danced around her fingertips, flickering yellow, blue, and white.

Something roared in her ears, not breaking stone, but a firm beat-beat-beat. Her heart pounded as pain lanced through her. By the Almighty, would she transform into a winged monster like Sebhina? Something worse?

Marha struggled to rise and lurched up the passageway. She had to return the Crystal to Idhon.

Footfalls came behind her: Kilha. As night follows day, day follows night. "Speru mekhat."

Another burst of unnatural wind soared over Marha and struck the walls of the cave. The mountain quivered and thundered. Pulverized rock battered her face, and the Crystal's power wove through her like needles. Head bowed, Marha pushed onward.

A rumble came from above. Hairline cracks, running parallel to the tunnel floor, split the ceiling.

"Neta-bha." Kilha must have noticed the breaches and was trying to reverse them with a sealing spell. A faint green light lit the corridor and faded. Kilha shrieked in frustration.

Marha brushed her thumb over her talisman, but before she could speak a command, the ceiling cracks widened. The Crystal clutched in one hand, Marha scurried down the passage. Kilha would follow. The Almighty knew she wanted the gem badly enough. Save Kilha, return the Crystal. To succeed, Marha had to get both out of the cave.

The sealed entrance lay ahead. Marha intoned a spell of opening, and the stone parted, a gaping gray maw in the Crystal's light. She lurched forward. Almost there.

Kilha called, her words lost in the rumbling of the mountain.

The air thickened with dust. Stones crumbled down, forcing Marha to crawl toward the opening. Her back burned, and her arms throbbed with the effort.

Debris rained on her and the opening narrowed to less than two hand spans. A silvering sky appeared beyond. Marha gripped the Crystal until its facets bit into her skin. Creation's fire. She would never reach the outside, but the Crystal might, and the Crystal's return meant everything, no shame for Grandmother to bear.

The mountain roared. No more time. A rainbow of colors danced around Marha's fingertips. Sebhina waited on the slopes, longing for revenge. Sebhina would find and take the Crystal to the Council. Marha labored to her feet and tossed the Crystal through the opening. "Sebhina!" The cave entrance rushed toward her, and everything vanished in a reddish mist.

#

Light poured through a window.

"Marha?"

Idhon's voice. Whitewashed ceiling, plastered walls. A familiar doorframe.

Marha sat upright. Covers tumbled into her lap, and a mattress rustled beneath her. Sebhina crouched at her bedside on feline haunches. The Crystal lay nearby on a nightstand, colors swirling in its heart.

"Marha," Idhon said a second time. Sebhina flinched, her gaze drawn to the other side of the room. Idhon sat forward in a chair, his gray eyes more shaded than usual.

Marha licked dry lips. "The Crystal. I—" She swallowed hard, steeling herself for Idhon's fury. "I touched it."

He stood and watched her in silence.

Sebhina pawed the floor, her tail twitching. "She hasn't changed." A growl lurked behind her words.

"No?" Idhon arched his eyebrows, an odd tinge in his voice as if... pleased? Marha frowned as he moved closer. "Do you feel the same?" His tone softened.

Marha put her hands to her forehead, ran them through her hair. "I think so. Kilha and I quarreled. The bag ripped. Without thinking, I grabbed the Crystal. There was pain... light. I thought I was dying."

Idhon stroked his chin and nodded.

A chill snaked across her shoulders. "Kilha? Where is she?" Kilha's punishment would be severe but private if Idhon kept his promise.

Idhon stepped back. "Your grandmother will be proud of you. So will everyone in Sekhat."

The coldness inside Marha grew. Why wasn't he answering her question? Beside her, the Crystal pulsed, multicolored lights dancing in its facets. Back in the cave, those facets had dug into her palm.

Oh, no. Marha reached beyond the gem and scoured the nightstand for anything sharp. When she found nothing, she turned to Sebhina. "Scratch me." She extended one arm and ran a finger along the vein from wrist to elbow. "Deep enough so I bleed."

Sebhina gaped.

"Do it."

Sebhina raised a paw. Marha shut her eyes. Claws tore her skin, and Marha choked down a cry. After ten heartbeats, Marha willed herself to look. Four long, fresh cuts dwindled to channels and became droplets no bigger than pinpricks. Then these, too, disappeared.

Sebhina flinched, and Marha shivered. Great Almighty, what more changes would come?

Idhon cleared his throat. "You touched the Crystal in the cave, Marha. Any physical change would have happened there."

Marha raised her healed arm to the light of the window. The limb remained as human as the rest of her.

Idhon grinned. "The Crystal studied your heart and found you worthy. Nothing can harm you now, not sickness, not age." His smile faded. "Not death."

Marha's thoughts churned. No doubt he thought of Dilhoa in her upper room, enduring her immortal illness. The Crystal protects life.

If all who intoned that phrase knew the full meaning.

Marha rose from the bed and faced Idhon. "What happened to Kilha?"

Idhon tensed. He lifted the Crystal as if it were a child's ball, and Marha gasped. The High Councilor was immortal, too. He raised the gem, and in its heart, the mountain appeared, looming skyward. The cave was a shadowy gash. The peak trembled, and a red cloud haloed in golden light escaped from the opening. An avalanche of stone followed, crushing the entrance. Idhon nodded at the vision of the ruined mountainside. "She is there."

Marha's eyes stung with tears. The chill inside turned to an ache. She tried to speak but could only shake her head.

"That was not the Crystal's doing." Idhon's voice remained low. "Kilha caused the cave to collapse with her spells. She destroyed herself."

Marha turned from him, wiping her face with one hand. The ache in her chest rushed to her throat. She would have to tell her ailing grandmother Kilha was dead.

Idhon waved at the image in the Crystal. The red cloud, which had settled at the foot of the mountain, shifted into the form of a woman with long, black hair. "The Crystal transformed you into something incorporeal so you could escape and returned you to human form once you were safe. Sebhina found you and brought you back." He returned the Crystal to the nightstand and placed his hands on Marha's shoulders. "When you are ready, I look forward to hearing your full report, Councilor Marha." Idhon dipped his head and departed.

Councilor?

Marha considered everything that word meant. The title marked her as a guardian of the Crystal, an immortal one the gem had chosen.

Sebhina swished her tail and watched Marha.

In the heart of the Crystal, the image of the mountain lingered: Kilha's tomb. Marha relaxed her fingers and stroked her talisman ring. The red stone flashed from gold to crimson before going dark, dead, silent.

Sebhina slinked beside her. "What now?" The purr in her voice held a note of hope, and Marha's grief ebbed. She went to the wardrobe and changed into a clean tunic.

The Crystal pulsed on the nightstand. Kilha had been wrong to steal the Crystal, but her desire to save Grandmother had come from love. Marha grasped the gem, and rainbow light tickled up her forearm as if to say, I agree.

She faced Sebhina. "I'll take my seat at the Council. They need to change how they secure the Crystal and how they present it to the world. What happened to you and to Kilha must never happen again."

Marha tightened her grip on the Crystal. No more night following day. As they left the room, Marha led the way.

Detour by George Phillies

Captain Marcus O'Bryan glared listlessly across his bridge deck. Command of the Twilight Princess was supposed to be the pinnacle of his career. The Princess was Orpheus High Lines' finest starship, her fittings a triumph of modern Artistic Engineering. Now everything had gone wrong. Halfway through her voyage's longest leg, passenger after passenger fell unconscious. His crew joined them. The ship's physicians had no explanation, no alternative other than placing the sick into temporal stasis. He had a skeleton watch, barely enough men to fly the ship.

The nasal voice of Chief Engineer Ostwald Mengler intruded on O'Bryan's reverie. "Sir? There's uncharted turbulence, level seven, dead ahead. We can avoid most of it. We sideswipe a vortex line in ten minutes." O'Bryan's displays flashed to life. The turbulence bank, now swimming into range of the ship's detectors, displayed as a shimmering mass of distortions in the fabric of space.

"Can we avoid?" O'Brien told himself he should ask, no matter how obvious the answer.

"It's very large, Sir. We'd lose at least ten hours. This area was extensively surveyed before our new route was approved. I don't see how it

could have been missed." Mengler brought the survey report up in false color.

"Surveys! At least the old Conquistador-class scouts had nice big windows. You could look out and see what just hit you. Compute a path around it. Alert the crew!" O'Bryan leaned back. Most passengers were already in stasis. The remaining engineering staff, spread the length of the ship, was problematic. For healthy men, turbulence was unpleasant. For men drifting toward unconsciousness, turbulence was potentially lethal. He had choices, all bad. If he went through the turbulence, he might be left with too few people to fly the ship. If he did an emergency stop, changed course, and worked up to speed again, the extra flying time might kill. No one might be alive to pilot the ship at voyage's end.

A clatter of dishes marked a robot delivering his dinner. The noise was a welcome intrusion into his gathering gloom. He could put the ship into orbit, someplace, put absolutely everyone into stasis, and hope for rescue before engineering failure did them in. In the Rift, that approach was foredoomed.

"Sailing Master?" O'Bryan peered haggardly through the transceiver at Master Richard Hamilton. They had both been on active duty for three days. Chemical substitutes for sleep were wearing a bit thin. "Any help?"

"I sent you an additional person, a qualified engineer. There are no other possibilities." Hamilton spread his hands.

"Mr. Hamilton," the Captain's voice was shrill. "I must check with Dr. Kiyamura. No. You go and talk to him. You know how he is over a transceiver. He must be told -- no matter his ethicals -- he must get volunteers for forced revivification. We can't go on if we lose more officers. I know. Some people will d... will be irreversibly terminated. Friends of mine. What else can we do? We must protect the passengers."

Mengler glanced up at the Captain. "Ready for course change." O'Bryan surveyed his domain. Helm and Engineering consoles were manned---all you really needed to steer. The servitor and its human escort had stayed entirely out of his sight. He nodded. The Bridge's full-field visual displays

snapped into place, blocking his sight of the room. Background sounds faded to silence. When he spoke, the voice-to-text converter displayed his written orders to his officers. They might fail to hear, or be momentarily distracted. Text conversion meant the orders waited to be read.

On the display, blue threads of light crept toward the ship's prow. O'Bryan gritted his teeth. He hated even low-level turbulence. The deck shuddered. His skin felt heat and cold and jabs of pain---his nerves responding to spatial distortions. The deck seemed to sag infinitely down, then snapped back to place.

O'Bryan's task was to monitor his crew. He stood figuratively at their shoulders. Was the ship responding properly? Automatic controls made space flight possible, but extensive human judgement was needed. And judgement was needed now! The turn was too sluggish, taking them deeper and deeper into the turbulence.

"Engineering!" he called. "We're losing drive phasing. Mengler! Mengler?"

The Captain's voice-to-text converter came to life. "Mengler(?) disabled: turbulence plus Yamamoto syndrome. Passenger Marshall-FitzRyan/Warrant Engineering Officer via Sailing Master/A Level Engineering papers/request clarification." O'Bryan blanched. Who was FitzRyan? He must be the passenger Hamilton just mentioned. Whoever he was, he had valid papers. The safety interlocks would have ignored him if he didn't.

"Are the controls familiar?" Of all the positions to lose, engineering was the worst. O'Bryan braced for the answer.

"Your drives and controls were lifted from Canopus Class giant scouts, which I've flown regularly." Marshall-FitzRyan answered. "Sailing Master said the controls matched." O'Bryan tapped a touchpanel. The authorization matrix said 'PASS'. There really were not any alternatives. The turbulence was getting worse.

The Helmsman slipped in a few sentences. "Canopus is an Outer Reach survey vessel. We're functionally identical, just more chrome around the drive cores."

The captain tensed. "Very well. Proceed with caution." Ever so slowly, the drives shifted back

into phase. The Twilight Princess answered properly to her helm again.

"You're Outer Reach?" O'Bryan said to FitzRyan.

"Correct." FitzRyan's words formed on the heads-up display. "Controls match your Engineering specs. I wasn't sure the manual was totally up-to-date. Shall I finish the retuning?" The Captain's estimate of FitzRyan's judgement went up appreciably. FitzRyan had done the absolute minimum, given that it was definitely not desirable to fly straight into a turbulence line. Having done the minimum, he had the sense to ask for further instructions. O'Bryan wished the turbulence would come to an end so they could talk like normal human beings.

Warning lights paled from amber to white. The turbulence receded. O'Bryan yawned, ridding himself of cramps in his back. The heads-up display vanished. He would have to thank FitzRyan, whose competent intervention had prevented a real mess. He looked over to the Engineering console, where the robodoc was loading poor Mengler into a stasis shell. Next to it stood a girl, perhaps eleven if tall for her age. Where, he puzzled, was Passenger FitzRyan? And how had a child gotten onto his bridge? Damn the Security computer! And double-damn its alleged programmers!!

She glanced up at him, blue-green eyes sparkling over her smile. Her hair was the finest of spun gold, gleaming though a fragment of the sun itself lay trapped within. With almost military precision, she wore a long-coat pantsuit laced with bronze piping.

"Young lady," he asked, more harshly than he quite intended, "What are you doing there? Where is the other passenger, the one who adjusted the controls?"

"Other passenger?" She sounded totally baffled. Contrary to O'Bryan's expectations for someone her age, she gave no sign of being paralyzed by a fear of being disciplined. "That was I who retuned your drive." Her voice had a childish trill, but none of the hesitation of a child being challenged by an adult.

"Will you please come here?" O'Bryan realized he was using in the tones he reserved for

adults. Her stride up the stairs to the Captain's console was vigorous and assured. You're treating her as an adult because she is well-dressed, O'Bryan thought. She's well-clothed. Most modern children look scruffy.

"I have flight papers," she said.

He looked back, smiling gently. "I'm afraid the sort of papers you have aren't really going to be useful. Where are you from? Newholme?"

"These," she pulled her certificates from her purse, "ought to be adequate."

O'Bryan managed to avoid choking. "Why don't you sit down?" he stammered, gesturing at an acceleration couch. He held a set of Flight Certificates. He could have believed a white J level packet, representing an ability to read datapanel with accurately. From its color, the rose-garnet case in his hand represented senior flight licenses.

The hologram was the girl's. Scanners confirmed that the papers were hers. Data plates spelled out her name and ratings. "Barbara Marshall-FitzRyan," he read, "A-level Pilot clearance, Master Singleship Pilot, Engineering A level/ Canopus class,..." This, he thought, is ridiculous. How can a ten-year-old have this background? Through the corners of his eyes, he noticed a tight grin on her lips. He shook his head again. "What's your home port?"

"Outer Reach. Cymbeline."

"Oh, Cymbeline. You have a private pocket-calc, in where you can't drop it." He tapped his skull.

"It's not separate from me. I'm as much in o-as n-mind." She abruptly stopped talking. The techniques which enhanced her neuronal n-mind with massively-parallel organano optic processors - o-mind --were illegal in the Republic. There was no need to correct his tap of the head: Her o-brain sat in her chest cavity, using her lungs to enhance cooling capacity. He pursed his lips, suddenly deep in thought.

She glanced over his library. O-mind borrowed control of her eyes, optimizing focus at the visual periphery where its detectors were located. For the barest shade of an instant, n-vision blurred: despite careful re-engineering, the eye's lens had noticeable spherical aberration. In the shade of an

instant, o-thought scanned the wall, storing each title, binding style, and place on the shelf. By the time she glanced back to the Captain, n- and o-memories both knew the Captain's interests and hobbies: ocean sailing, ocean navigation, and philosophy of reason.

"Are you really that bothered," she began, "that I'm a woman?"

"That hadn't even occurred to me. We aren't all that bigoted," he answered. "Most of us, anyhow. If you'll forgive my bluntness, how did an eleven-year-old, Outer Reach or not, manage to earn all these papers?"

"All...what?" Her face flushed slightly. She hadn't expected his question. "Things are a bit different on Cymbeline." He remained baffled. To fly a ship you needed masses of empirical knowledge, not just the talent for logical extrapolation that marked child geniuses. "First extension? I'm a bit older than twelve."

"Oh, of course." He should have recognized the obvious. Extension blocked aging. A Republic adult expected centuries of mature good health. The Outer Reach used extension twice. Full extension prevented old age. First extension, applied reversibly to children, separated physical and mental maturity. In the Outer Reach you gained a profession, a mature standpoint on life, and then grew up and faced the hormonal issues. "You retuned the drives cleanly. What more can a Captain ask of Engineering? But..." he hesitated.

"Yes?" She smiled again. It was a captivating smile.

"I don't care how old you are. You don't get A-level clearances without emotional maturity. But turbulence---most kids your, ummh, physical age--and that's what counts, isn't it?--would be out cold." O'Bryan wondered how reliable she was in a real emergency.

"I've manned duty posts in unshielded force eight storms. It's mostly a matter of being tough with yourself. I guess Republic children are never asked to be tough," she countered.

"That's for sure. Most are never asked for anything. Especially anything like work. Thank you again for stepping in when you did. We were in a spot of trouble, or close to." O'Bryan strained to

show enthusiasm. For all her good looks, her ageless serenity grated against his sensibilities.

She forced a wider smile. "Look, if you need an engineer, I'd be happy to continue. I'd asked the Purser earlier, but he said the Sailing Master had picked the passengers he wanted."

O'Bryan shook his head. "If I recall Mr. Hamilton's words aright, he looked among the male passengers. An unfortunate oversight, though not an oversight unnatural in the Solar Republic. So welcome on deck. You've heard my helmsman, Mr. Murchison, though I prefer my Bridge Deck to know each other's first names."

"The name's 'Clyde' to friends, especially those in a storm." The Helmsman, a lanky young man with shocking red hair, grinned broadly.

"Barbara' is fine. I'd be delighted to talk, though I ought to take another look-through on the controls." She waited for the Captain's nod. As she turned her back, O'Bryan gave Murchison a firm thumb's-up sign. Murchison grinned stiffly. O'Bryan saw the look in Murchison's eyes. The Helmsman wasn't quite comfortable with his new crewmate yet. Not surprising, considered O'Bryan. There'd never been a female bridge officer on this ship, let alone an officer on first extension.

O'Bryan hoped that Murchison didn't believe all the nonsense in the tabloids. Supposedly Cymbelines were inhuman monsters with superstrength and instant reflexes. Anticipating Murchison's thoughts, O'Bryan excused himself and left Murchison with the conn. The ship's course was clear. Letting Murchison and FitzRyan talk would ease Clyde's discomforts.

#

"This can't be your first flight, then, Barbara?" Murchison finally asked.

"Hardly, Clyde. I had my maiden flight twelve, no, thirteen years ago. I was old then for that, by our standards." She could feel his discomfort. "I've been in my share of sticky spots. Two with Guild Inquiries afterward." She saw him frown at that remark. "Came out with commendations both times." He nodded in admiration.

"That's good. That's very good. I mean, Barbara, if the Captain seemed cold, it wasn't intentional. He just didn't think you might have proper flight papers. Especially not the level you do," Clyde explained defensively.

"Is being a woman that strange, Clyde? I'd thought that there were female officers in the Republic," she asked.

"Well, some. I've even met one. But Barbara, you keep saying 'woman'. That's not the problem. We know the Outer Reach has first-rate female officers. Even the Republic has a few. It's how old you are---I mean, how old you look. "

"I'm not that short, and definitely not that fragile. I can take more turbulence, or more acceleration for that matter, than most grown-ups. I have, though I didn't enjoy it," She had flown her ships to safety.

"What's bothering the Captain---and I've flown with him for years, I know how he thinks---is your age. He doesn't see"---Barbara could tell that 'he' meant 'I'---"how you could take being locked up in a little girl's body. Don't you miss not having boy-friends?" asked Murchison,

"Clyde, I've got plenty of friends." She giggled softly. "Oh. That sort of friend. No, Cymbeline isn't so different from Earth. I'll have them in time. But I don't think about it now. First extension is a chance to grow up, without getting distracted." Barbara said.

"What I should ask is how well you really know our controls. We may be reverse-engineered from a Canopus-class, as closely as possible, but the arts and crafts types sometimes move switch-banks hither or thither." He gestured at the panels in front of her.

"The Sailing Master dropped the ship's engineering specs in my Cabin Library, all three terawords of them. I had a good ten minutes to study." His face showed dismay. Oh, right, she thought. "Cabin Libraries have datacable?" O-mind caught the first premonitory tremor of a nod. "Which I can use." She pulled up a sleeve to expose her forearm. Black circles marked optical interface ports, extensions of her o-brain lying almost exposed to the open air. He flinched, ever so slightly. "My o-mind is as much me as my sense of smell." O-

mind chided n-mind more harshly. She was being impolite.

Murchison shook his head. "At the Laurent Academy we had a professor from Cymbeline. I saw him in action. If you've integrated the file, I'm completely happy."

Barbara smiled. She was sure he had other reactions, but couldn't interpret them. She stared at the meter panels in front of her. "Are there unlogged calibration factors hidden someplace? Your Engineer was using programs I can't access, not while he's in stasis. The computer data panels and the hard-wired meters have stopped matching. We should have constant speed. The meters claim we're losing a light a second. That doesn't make sense."

"Agreed." Murchison paged the Captain. "I always trust meters. They're the way God intended starships to be wired. To slow down that fast, we'd need to be heading straight at a star. But the screens are dark." He waved at the ceiling display, which showed only distant faint points of light.

"We're still slowing down. The backups to the acceleration compensators went to stand-by. Computer denies it, but the hardwire lines say we did. What are those backups, anyway? The manuals are a bit vague," she said.

"There's an acceleration compensator on each crew position. If the main bridge compensator goes down, the positions stay at one gee. The space between our posts loses acceleration shielding, so the rest of the bridge can have a six gee gravitational field. If I stay at my post, I feel nothing. If I leave my post, and head towards you, I get about three paces, hit uncompensated acceleration, and---Pow!---pilot pancake."

Barbara shook her head. "There must be a star in front of us. Drive fields are polarizing."

"But there's nothing there. The scanners would show anything dark and dense," he objected.

Barbara slipped an ellipsoidal coverplate off her porthole. "Dead ahead. Magnitude minus six absolute. The other stars don't match the ones on the display, either. It must be as messed up as the datapanel."

"Clyde," snapped O'Bryan, now back at his post. "Cut the ceiling display. Let's see what's really there."

"Done." Murchison tapped at his keypad. The starfield displayed across the Flight Deck's domed ceiling did not change. "There seems to be a slight hangup here." Murchison tapped again and again at his keypad, all the time staring in disbelief at the ceiling.

"Why is the display still on?" asked O'Bryan.

"That's it. The datapanel says the display is off. Yes, I see it, too. But the computer says it isn't there, and gives me error messages when I try to turn it off again," said Murchison.

"Pull the plug," suggested Barbara. "We're losing five lights a second. Internal gravity, without compensators, would be six gees."

O'Bryan reached to the intercom. "Hamilton! To the Bridge! On the double!"

Sailing Master Hamilton's face appeared on a transceiver plate. "Not possible, Captain. I'm sealed out of the Engineering Spaces. And the transceiver was dead until you called me." His face blurred into static snow.

O'Bryan leaned back confusedly. Frozen in indecision, he looked at the other people on the Bridge. He and Murchison perched like birds on their individual flight consoles, suspended well above the main flight deck. Fifteen feet below him, Barbara pored over her meters and data panels, trying to find a rational explanation.

After a silence, Barbara turned and fixed O'Bryan in her eyes. Captain," she half whispered, "If you want to dump your computer completely, I can hold the hyperdrive steady on manual."

"Dump it? All the way? No, let me think. Meanwhile, please cut the display. The connectors are behind your console," reminded O'Bryan.

"Check." O-mind searched a terabit of engineering specs. She dropped to hands and knees and disappeared behind a bank of dials and meters. She could imagine a Solar Republic girl, refusing to crawl because her clothes might get dirty. It was a shame, but duty had precedence over convenience. The display above him flickered, blanked out, to be replaced with real stars, which shone wanly through a now-transparent cabin ceiling. Dead ahead, shining bright through reflections of cabin lights, a single sun obstructed their path. Where had it come from? Their plotted

route showed no star there. Why hadn't the image intensifiers revealed it? Nothing made sense, even if you assumed that the liner's computer banks were in as bad shape as its crew.

"Clyde, let's go to manual. I just hope the lower decks aren't thoroughly confused," O'Bryan ordered.

"That will not be necessary." A voice from behind whirled both officers in their seats. The voice belonged to a stranger perched on the rear balcony. "You have no further need for your ship. I am taking control at this time."

"You'll what?" shot back O'Bryan. "Young man, this is a very poor time for jokes. We have an ailing computer, and a crew too sick to work." The shadows and backlighting hid the intruder's face.

"We do not jest." The intruder turned on another bank of lights, revealing a black uniform with silver trim. "I am ArchDeacon Rupert, and this ship is now given over to the service of Aruble, Lord of the Upper Dark."

"Oh, God! A Chaos lunatic. Don't you people know that you're all dead?" O'Bryan asked.

Murchison shook his head. "Lord Aruble? You've got to be joking. Those stories are twentieth century fairy tales."

"The Unenlightened cannot recognize that, unbeknownst even to Himself, The True Prophet wrote His Works while under Divine Guidance. This is of no consequence. We are in control, and I will direct the final course adjustments. Pilot!" Rupert snapped.

"You can jolly well join your master!" Murchison dove for a cabinet. The air around him sized. He screamed and fell twitching to the deck.

"Well shot, von Morwitz!" Rupert's gaze remained fixed on the Captain.

"Thank you!" A second intruder, clad in white and gold braid, stepped into sight on the balcony. "The passengers are sealed out from the Engineering spaces, awaiting your tender mercies after we rendezvous with the Obliterator. I have dealt with the untermensch below in a final manner. Only the three crewmen here remain alive in the Engineering Spaces."

"Three?" Rupert shrank back in sudden fear. "I found two."

"The third cowers under an acceleration chair. You!" von Morwitz snarled, "Get up, you coward! I have you in my sights. Up! Or I'll fry you where you lurk."

Barbara peered around the edge of her couch. She found herself staring down the muzzle of a weapon. What was it? Not a machine pistol or a disruptor. Shaking with fright, she tried to stand.

"That is a crew person?" asked Rupert. "Isn't it a little small?"

"No one else is on the bridge," answered von Morwitz. "Security displays say a crew member is at her exact physical location. Can I help it if untermensch machines cannot distinguish adults and children?"

Rupert glared at O'Bryan. "Our course is pre-computed. Your remote controls are entirely adequate for the simple maneuvers we will now perform. And you might be in the way. Join now the Upper Dark!" There was a flicker around O'Bryan. He fell soundlessly to the floor.

Barbara leaned over and gagged. Her blood roared in her ears. "Little child," she heard distantly. "Little child, you should be strong. He didn't suffer nearly enough. His true suffering is yet to come."

"Yet?" Barbara forced herself to stare at Rupert. Perhaps the Captain was alive.

"Yes, oh yes. Later! Later for your fellow passengers will be the Blessed Suffering of Aruble." A beatific glow crossed Rupert's face.

"Well, Eric, let's finish this. Congratulations!"

"Yes," answered von Morwitz. "Congratulations. Hail Aruble!" His final words lacked conviction.

"Hail the Leader!" Rupert, sounding no more convinced, took the helm. "You pulled our program bubbles from the ship's computer?"

"Every one. The data panels now show reality, not the illusions they displayed until moments ago. The life support now distinguishes your plague virus from standard air additives. We approach our destination. The ship now accepts only our orders. You see the command roster?" von Morwitz pointed at a data panel.

"Yes, but why is this little girl listed? Surely Solar pervers do not employ children?" said Rupert.

"Some emergency failsafe," answered von Morwitz. "I think everyone on the bridge is listed automatically. She's at the bottom, so she can't do things as long as we're here." He looked up. "You! You are Barbara, nicht wahr?"

"Yes." Her voice quavered. She faced a pair of apparent lunatics, complete with unknown weapons, bizarre costumes, and phony European accents. She tried to sound like a petulant ten-year-old ill-mannered Inner Arm brat. "Who do you guys think you are? Don't you know it's against the law to carry guns?"

The white and gold uniform shivered with laughter. "I am Erich von Morwitz, Commodore of the Faith's Invincible Space Navy, and this is my comrade-in-arms Michael Rupert. Now, what is a little girl doing up here with all these old men?" He gestured at the bodies around him.

"The, the, Captain O'Bryan said I could help, as long as I was very, very careful to do exactly what he said---and never, ever touch any controls, no matter what. You don't want me to do that, do you? I was afraid he might ask me to do---it's too complicated, and I'm afraid." Putting a crying flutter in her voice ought to confuse them.

"A wise set of orders! You will not touch any controls, is that clear?" he barked.

"Yes, yes, I'd never do that. I want to sit down, I..." She affected lapsing into tears.

"Go ahead. But face me! And no monkey business, or it's the end for you!" von Morwitz made a slicing gesture across his throat. Barbara dropped into a chair and covered her eyes, pretending to cry. After a little digital filtering, the pirates' conversation would be entirely audible.

"We are on course," announced Rupert.

"Decelerating as per plan. Only the overhead display is malfunctioning."

"We can live without that," von Morwitz responded.

"Then you have another ship, and we have a Gift for the Upper Dark!" Rupert gestured at Barbara.

"Gift? You won't hurt me, will you?" She knew very well what they planned. Chaos Servants

had bloody altars, instruments of torture, and mind-control drugs to forestall insanity. Getting away from them was absolute top priority. If the pirates would keep talking, they might give her some clue as to how she could get off the bridge, reach a pin-nace, and escape.

"Hurt? We only cut the throats of old men. For a pearl like you, my dear, the outcome will be far more exquisite, far more brilliant." Rupert looked upwards in rapturous prayer.

"It is perhaps a shame to waste her," von Morwitz remarked blandly. "From her hair and eye color, and her height at her age, she appears to be ideal genetic material, suitable for breeding future generations of Naval Officers."

"The deal," snapped Rupert, "is that the Navy gets the ships, while the Clergy get the passengers, especially the young, the beloved of Aruble."

"True. The Clergy receive the final benefit of the young. I merely suggest that, even as the Clergy make temporary use of our ships, the Fleet make temporary use of her body. Strictly for reproductive purposes, of course. What else could you possibly want from that body?" von Morwitz, without denying his partner's claims, continued to probe Rupert's calm.

"Of course," grumbled Rupert.

"How old are you?" snapped von Morwitz at Barbara.

"Thirteen," she answered. And then some, she added to herself. The older the better, for this argument. If the fools she faced could be persuaded to view her as a walking embryo tank, she was prepared to play along, at least for now. Anything for time!

"You see, von Morwitz? At her age, she should have blossomed. She hasn't. She must have defective genes!" Rupert glanced back at the helm. "Two hours to rendezvous. Meanwhile, the trash in the passenger compartments...?"

"I spy upon them. They know nothing. They think only that their captain is sick." von Morwitz eyed Barbara again. She smiled, wishing she had some idea how to make her smile more seductive. N- and o-memories returned a complete blanks on the topic. The question was disgusting, but sud-

denly a good answer would have been really, really useful.

"Who's this Leader fellow?" she asked. "Is he is a good guy?"

"Who is The Leader?" He pointed at his shoulder patch, which merged lightning bolts, fleur-de-llys, bumblebees, and scarlet stars. "Of the Totalitarian Front, of course. You have heard of us, haven't you?" She nodded weakly.

"Go ahead," said Rupert. "Recruit her. It is too rare that Our Lord in the Darkness is offered a member of the Action Arm."

von Morwitz ignored his partner's jabs. "The Front seeks to revive the common political philosophy of great twentieth century leaders, Stalin, Napoleon, Takamura, and Hitler, as revealed in the True Faith of Aruble. We almost won in Europe, some decades back, but the traitors in our midst had no sooner gained a parliamentary majority for the Front than they voted us out of our own Party."

"You were the Democratic Fascists." Rupert shrugged apologetically.

"Didn't Hitler kill people?" Barbara really wasn't sure. History had never been her strong point. The names as belonging to the remote past, someplace between Elizabeth I and the stardrive. Hadn't Takamura been Shogun of Hawaii? The pirates seemed to have two factions. Could they be persuaded to fight?

"Your schoolbooks," von Morwitz responded unctuously, "are contaminated by twenty-third century lies of the Caliph of Jerusalem. All competent historians agree, and it has been scientifically proved, that Hitler was a great humanitarian."

"After twenty centuries liars can distort everything." Rupert had the sound of a man totally confident that his truths were historically inevitable.

"That's why The Faith is so strong. Only our one true religion could survive so long without any change at all."

Barbara leaned back. They were crazy. They also had the ship and its security systems. Claiming an age of thirteen hadn't gone well. They might have been more interested if she'd claimed to be younger. All she had were her bare hands. In an action novel, she could swagger seductively between them, get them each to put an arm over

her shoulder, and then take them both out with a two-handed karate chop. She knew she was a lot faster than they expected, and somewhat stronger, but not that much stronger. They both had a hundred pounds on her, and were armed to the teeth. She stared at the consoles around her, pretending to be amused by the pretty lights. The ship was still slowing down, its acceleration compensators close to maximum power.

"You guys must be real clever. Did you invent the death ray, too?" Barbara asked.

"In fact, it is my own invention, and a highly clever one, showing the superiority of totalitarian science." Von Morwitz waved his pistol. "It's a drive turbulence generator. When I shoot, the target gets hit by twelfth level turbulence. Even behind a wired control panel or a ship bulkhead, you get level eight force, enough to knock out your teeth. The secret is how to control where turbulence happens. The weapon creates a sphere of potential turbulence. Microwaves beam power. Where there are microwaves, there is turbulence. Elsewhere there is no turbulence."

"Microwaves? Are those like submillimeter waves?" She hoped he wouldn't notice how astute her question was. What wavelength was he using?

"No, no, a fraction of a centimeter, hence the muzzle. Microwaves diffract. They leak around corners. With old-fashioned materials like sheet titanium, I have shot someone around three corners. With composite materials the scattering is diffuse, so I can fire without getting a ray back in the face. The ray is less clever than my sabotage of the computer banks. The crew thought they were on course while they headed in a completely wrong direction. In all their displays, only the turbulence lines were real. The rest was illusion. Now, no more! I am busy!" he announced.

He's a dunce, Barbara thought, like everyone else in the Solar Republic. A lot of ego, no common sense, no tolerance for pain. I can take force eight turbulence all day. I could take force twelve for a few seconds, I think, if it would do any good. All I need is a plan, and some sort of screen. Then what? I might be able to walk their guns down, but they hardly need weapons to fight me. She thought some more, waiting for clues to fall into

place. To take the role of an amazon princess from some hero tale was impossible. She would pretend to be an innocent pretty little girl. They seemed to like gold-braid uniforms. Her cloth-of-gold gown was true to her mother's aphorism: 'When in Rome, be a Roman candle.'

A half-hour passed. Barbara hoped the pirates had relaxed. "Mister, ummh, ArchDeacon Rupert? If I'm going to meet Aruble, couldn't I please be a little better dressed? My mother always says clothing counts a lot on first impressions," she asked.

"Daughter, I am delighted that you appreciate the honor about to be bestowed upon you." His enthusiasm sounded genuine. "But where can I find you better clothing?"

"It's in my cabin. A robot could fetch it. I wouldn't have to leave you. No one would ever notice a robot," she said.

"Well, all right. After all, it is for the Glory of Our Lord of the Upper Dark," Rupert answered.

* * * * *

von Morwitz made a show of scanning the parcel, then let Barbara step into the Ready Room to dress. She slid the box open cautiously, half-afraid that some one had smuggled a bomb, despite von Morwitz's precautions. The box held the expected dress and, at the extreme bottom, an envelope. She desperately wanted to tear it open. Instead, she pretended not to see it. She would affect to find it at the very end, after she was dressed. von Morwitz was doubtless using the security monitors to watch her change, and not just to see if she was smuggling a machine pistol onto the Bridge, either. She made sure he saw everything, everything except the o-mind ports in her wrists. She was very careful, and hoped he would be too busy looking elsewhere if she made a slip. The note was best used to lull her captors' suspicions. Dressed, she knotted her kerchief over her head, spent a few moments checking in a mirror, and stepped back into the Bridge.

"Do I look better now?" she asked. Her gown was scarlet, heavily woven throughout with gold lace. Cuffs, collar, stockings, and gloves glittered in the light. A gold-mesh kerchief hid the top of

her head, its metallic sheen accenting her hair. Around her neck ran a gold chain, stamped in heavy square links ending in a massive sunburst. The ruby it framed burned brilliantly.

She heard Rupert's breath as an indrawn hiss. "Lord Aruble will be highly pleased that you wear his colors."

"Oh, wonderful," she simpered. "I'm glad he'll like it. But what should I do with this note I found? I'm sure it wasn't there when Mommy packed everything. Besides, the outside isn't her handwriting." She waved the unopened envelope.

"What does it say?" Rupert had his gun out.

"I didn't think you'd want me to read it. I don't want to get into trouble." She handed it to von Morwitz.

"Very clever." von Morwitz opened the envelope. "Neutral paper. To the scanners it looked just like the box. Let's see it." He laughed. "It says they hear us, see us, know what we're doing, and can't get in to stop us, so they want you, little girl, to kill us both. They even say how. Of course, letting all the air out of this room would kill you, too, but they promise you a new body: a grown-up body." He looked thoughtful for a moment. "Would you like a grown-up body? I prefer you now. Any healthy person would! They must think we are complete idiots who took absolutely no precautions at all."

"Hush!" countered Rupert. "They hear us, remember! No need to advertise exactly how thorough our precautions have been." Rupert wished von Morwitz would stop boasting. There were still only two of them. If the Sailing Master and friends entered Engineering, matters might become rather sticky. "Why? Why did you actually give us this note? Don't bother to lie. Unless you want to feel the sting of my weapon. Von Morwitz has a verifier pointed at you."

"I want you to trust me." O-mind locked her face in bemused innocence. "I want to meet Lord Aruble, not have someone kill me." He has a verifier, she thought, but my heart beats at the rate o-mind sets for it.

Von Morwitz stared at his datapad. "The verifier confirms her words. Rupert? Do you want also her oath signed in her own blood? Her friends told

her to go kill herself. It would be a truly painful death. What sort of friends are those?"

"Yeah, real friends," she chimed in. She fumed at Hamilton's casual suggestion that she should save his ship by dying. Sacrifice in the course of duty was one thing, but she was a passenger. The pirates hadn't killed her yet because they still thought she was only a little girl. Hamilton's comments about reincarnation practically told the pirates how old she really was.

From what the note did not say, they couldn't bring her back in first extension. She knew they couldn't restore her o-brain. It could be replaced later, though the process involved a decade of rehabilitation. She wasn't sure whether becoming an adult was better or worse than losing half of her mind. In either case, she would lose the clarity and insights of her o-mind until she reached Cymbeline again.

A child's incompletely developed brain really couldn't hold even her n-mind; for a time, it would act as a gentle soporific. On the other hand, an adult mind would come with new sets of emotions and desires, with which she had never learned to cope. Passions! How could people in the Republic stand up to their lusts with little more than a child's set of thoughts and restraints? With that stress, you would go out of your mind or spend all your time... Of course, Republic adolescents supposedly did spend all their time doing that. It sounded pretty terrible. How could you grow up if you had no time to sit back and think without your body providing massive distractions?

It didn't really matter. She had her own plan to execute. The pirates most likely assumed that her gown was woven from metallized plastic. The glint was actually masses of pure gold. The extra weight dragged, enough she was grateful of her conditioning, but for once the material had an entirely practical use.

* * * * *

"Five minutes to rendezvous," Rupert announced

"Can I see your friends yet?" Barbara stuck her head into the porthole, in the same motion sliding

the porthole cover back under her acceleration couch. She knew it was too soon, saw nothing, and drifted back into her seat. "One of the real emergency lights is blinking," she added.

"Which one?" asked Rupert. His data panels showed nothing. Had von Morwitz's program adjustments all been removed from the computer banks?

"Right here," said Barbara, pointing at the console with one arm. She leaned forward to read the label, her body screening her left arm from the pirates' sight. "It says 'Drive Int, interf...' pretending not to know the word. Not looking down, she counted off switches on the panel to her left, opened a safety cover, and pressed the tabs underneath.

"Just the Obliterator coming up," said von Morwitz. "Nothing to worry about. We just see a little drive interference."

"Yes," said Barbara, "That's right. This emergency light!" She waved her hands. N-mind braced itself for pain. O-controlled motions were twenty-fold faster than their n-counterparts, for the seconds it took them to exhaust local metabolic reserves, but even genengineered muscles rebelled against being driven so hard. O-mind momentarily took complete control of her hand, setting her nerves on fire as it splayed her fingers. In a few instants she struck a dozen widely-spaced switches, all by seeming accident.

"Don't touch those," screamed Rupert. "Sit down! Eric, she cut helm power. I can't see what we're doing."

"I'm sorry. I'm real sorry," whined Barbara. "I was only trying to help. Should I put it back? I think it was one of these." She affected confusion again.

"No, sit. Eric, go fix it!" She sat. Obediently, von Morwitz rose and started down the stairs.

You cut the acceleration compensators, she thought. Once he's away from his post, he hits six gravities. That's a fifteen foot drop for his head, and impact momentum scales as the half power of the acceleration. Call it a forty foot equivalent fall, with a half-ton pushing him.

"What?" von Morwitz clutched at the railing, lost his hold, and fell face forwards down the

stairs, ending with exaggerated quickness in a backshattering flip into the deckplates. Okay, though Barbara, now if number two idiot will please run to his friend's aid, we'll be done the easy way.

"Eric?" called Rupert. Barbara hoped he had not noticed. There was something odd about what he had just witnessed. Rupert tossed a stylus across the room. It glided lazily through the air, reached the field boundary, and slammed deckwards at six gravities. Bother! Barbara thought.

Rupert paled, then looked piercingly at Barbara. "That was no accident, was it? You know how to use some controls, don't you? Hamilton's detailed orders were all just a ruse to fool us, except for his crack about 'not underestimating the gravity of the situation'. Well, you live by those controls, and now you will die by them. Die! Die! Die!"

She turned her back and started throwing switches. The helm was nominally without power, but Rupert had ways around that. She had to isolate him completely, and let Hamilton into Engineering.

The beam from Rupert's weapon took her in the back. She was confident that her gown contained a better mesh than any set of control cables. The blast from the weapon was a spray of ice scouring her skin. It leaked around corners, through gaps in the weave, numbing her wrists and the back of her neck. Turbulence leaked up her sleeves, setting digital hallucinations chittering through datacables into her o-mind. She kept tapping at two keypads. Soon she would finish, and Rupert would be completely trapped.

His weapon struck again and again. It was like standing in a blizzard, holding a place against the wind while the cold etched deeper and deeper toward her bones. For a fraction of a minute, the microwave beam reflected from something buried in the wall. The reflection left her dazed, half-blinded. She could hear a clanking sound behind her. Rupert had finally remembered the non-helm controls. The sound was a maintenance robot inching its way towards her. The bursts of cold from his weapon turned into a spray of frigid needles, locking the muscles of her back and shoulders.

She let her knees sag. She had planned that she would pretend to collapse, but the pretense was a little shallow. Stiffly, she clutched at the port-hole cover. Her hearing had blurred. Rupert raved in a language she could no longer understand. Stray irrelevant ideas crept across her brain, driven by the weapon's static. If she were a Technodeist, she found herself thinking, she would be on her knees, offering up hosannahs of praise to St. Faraday for his protection. Her metallized dress seemed to work as well without those prayers. She pivoted, lifting up the cover as a shield. Wherever the microwaves go, she thought, there goes the turbulence---and this is a half-meter reflector.

Her head burned. For an instant, she took the full unshielded force of Rupert's weapon. o-mind staggered through optonic chaos. The reflector covered her face. Barbara gradually realized that Rupert's weapon had ceased to fire. A glance around the cover revealed Rupert sprawled across the deck. The medical display confirmed he was unconscious. His pistol lay on the deck below. He couldn't have gotten more turbulence, she estimated, than I did, counting that stuff in my face. He's out cold, and I'm still standing. n- and o-minds allowed her a grin of pride.

A maintenance robot crept closer. "Back!" she croaked, her voice almost gone. "Orders cancelled!" Would it obey, she wondered? Or would it continue to chase her?

"As you command!" the maintenance robot responded. It rolled back towards its storage closet.

"Command?" she asked herself. Who did the ship acknowledge as Captain? Someone had to be in command, and that person had better have a way to deal with the pirate raider on their tail. To her surprise, hers was the only name on the Command list.

She wanted nothing more than to lie down and lose herself in darkness. Rupert and von Morwitz were both out cold, medical robots dutifully loading them into stasis shells. She tried to remember. Had she turned off the Security monitors and restored Bridge gravity? She distantly heard Hamilton on the transceiver.

"Miss FitzRyan! Miss FitzRyan! The ship still won't let me through! It thinks I'm a pirate.

You've got to reset..." His voice faded into the roar in her ears.

The world was swathed in cotton fog, through which clear thoughts slowly marched. The pirate was still in hyperdrive. A solution to the pirate problem became apparent. She began programming the hyperdrive settings. Fortunately, all she needed from o-mind were a few math calculations.

"I'll get'm" she mumbled. Before Hamilton could respond, she threw the main drives into action. "Emergency escape," she slurred to the computer. Her voice was almost gone. Telltales warned of unusual stresses on the engines. She had expected the other ship to be damaged, not to dissolve into pyrotechnic sparks. The pirates, she guessed, had expected no resistance, and were not prepared for surprises. The liner surged ahead. She fell back into her acceleration couch, exhausted, unable to do more than watch foamspace swirl around her like snowflakes flying before a winter's gale.

First Chapter Look NanoMorphosis by Marla L. Anderson

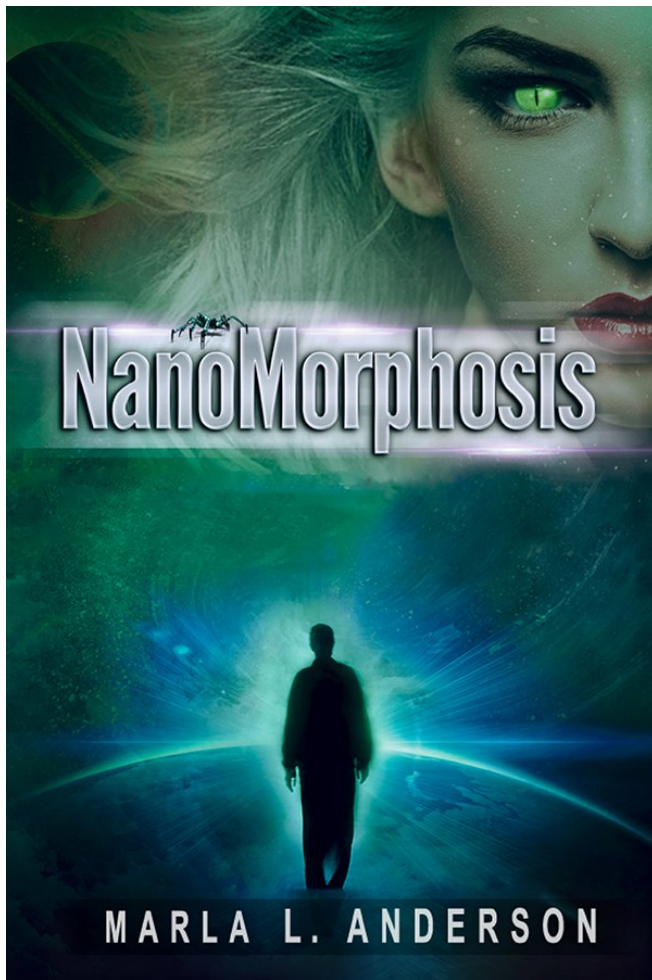
Chapter 1

Earth Year 2183

Houston, North Americas

The Houston Olympic Dome enclosed four levels of rotating grandstands. Above the stands, giant holoscreens provided three-dimensional close-ups of the on-field action. Built to withstand the worst inclement weather, the stadium kept the 80,000 spectators filling its seats and the playing field below dry even while an immense tropical storm raged outside—a common occurrence in the gulf region these days.

Usually, people came here to watch tech-enhanced football players go head-to-head, but today an austere stage sat in centerfield, with a dozen chairs facing a podium. This was the Annual Commemoration Ceremony; the first Daniel Walker had ever attended. It had taken fifteen years to get him here, a wait that had fueled the public's hunger to hear from him to a near frantic state.



Nanomorphosis Cover

Every time the camera sent a live image of Daniel to the holoscreens, the crowd grew louder. Hundreds, if not thousands, pointed, whistled or waved at him.

Sitting onstage, Daniel stared at his knees, struggling to breathe under the weight of all that attention. He rubbed his damp palms across his slacks, trying to remember his opening line.

In the seat beside him, his uncle, Dr. McCormack, whispered, “Nervous?”

Daniel shrugged, avoiding eye contact.

As usual, his uncle wore a rumpled plaid jacket with mismatched pants. Daniel remembered asking him years ago if the International Medical Research Center appreciated having their chief of surgery look like he pulled his clothes out of a dumpster. The snarky remark earned him a lecture on the perils of judging others by appearance, includ-

ing quotes by Thomas Paine and other philosophers on the subject of superficiality. Daniel learned to curb his tongue after that.

“You’ve drawn quite a crowd,” McCormack said, looking up and around.

Daniel followed his gaze. The holoscreens zoomed in on spectators in the stands and VIP’s on the stage. When he saw his own face displayed again, he grimaced, then forced himself to smile and wave at the crowd. Nearly everyone wore scarlet and gold, the official ceremonial colors. People tooted golden horns and waved cold-fire flags alive with harmless red flames. Daniel had chosen a dark suit, white shirt, no tie. The only red and gold on him was the commemorative pin on his lapel.

“Must be billions more watching at home—all dying to hear what ‘little Danny’ is finally going to say.”

“It’s not all about me,” Daniel countered. He looked back down at his knees and blew out a breath to unwind the knot in his stomach.

McCormack snorted. “You just keep telling yourself that.”

“Are you trying to rattle me?”

“No, I—course not. I’m just trying to understand why you signed up for this.”

“Maybe it’s time to put an end to all this ‘poor little Danny’ crap.”

“Okay, but why now after all these years? It’s not like anything’s changed, has it?” McCormack raised an eyebrow, waiting.

Daniel squirmed. He needed to give him an answer but wasn’t ready to reveal the whole truth of it just yet. “I wanted to impress someone.”

McCormack choked back a laugh. “So this is about a girl?”

“No,” Daniel snapped. “Don’t be stupid. It’s about finally getting an interstellar ship.”

McCormack’s amusement vanished. “What? How?”

Daniel sighed. “I didn’t want to say anything yet. Nothing’s for certain, but I’m on the short list for ACES’ new director.”

“ACES? *The* ACES—the Allied Coalition for Exploration of Space? Good Lord, Danny. You really think you’re ready for that?”

“Yes. Absolutely.” Daniel’s ire rose. “And those therapy sessions you keep ordering for me need to stop.”

McCormack glowered and looked away.

Seeing the worry lines in his uncle’s face, Daniel softened his tone. “Look, I know you just want to help, but try to remember that I spent two years in the military, running through battle simulations.”

“Yes, I know but—”

“And earned four advanced degrees in the sciences after that. Think I’ve proven myself.”

McCormack sighed deeply and nodded. He covered the back of Daniel’s hand with his weathered one. “You’re right. You’re a grown man. A very successful one and you don’t need me meddling in your life.” He paused to smile and look around. “You’re also right that this isn’t all about you. It’s about them.” He pointed to the crowd. “What they need to hear.”

Daniel glanced up, feeling more pressure than ever.

“I may not say it often, but your parents would be proud of you—as proud as I am.”

Daniel’s throat tightened. “Thanks.” His vocal cords constricted further as he noted the deep lines in his uncle’s face—evidence of old age creeping up on the only living person he still thought of as family. Ironical, since they weren’t related. This generous, kind-hearted man had been his father’s best friend. Daniel knew something more needed to be said, but just then a hand landed on his shoulder.

Senator Nelson Bromberg posed for the floating cameras aimed in their direction.

Daniel wanted to punch him.

“Looking forward to your speech, my boy. Remember, keep it short and sweet.”

Daniel watched Bromberg walk away to take a seat between a stately blonde and a severe-looking man in a gray suit.

“Asshole,” Daniel said under his breath.

“Speaking of . . . do you recognize the one he’s sitting with?” McCormack asked, keeping his voice low.

“Holly LaCroix?” The therapy sessions his uncle sent to him usually included her old news report.



Comfort by Angela K. Scott

“No, not her—him.”

Daniel stared at the profile of the man conversing with Bromberg—long thin nose, pointed chin—no one he recognized. He shook his head.

“The New York Archbishop for the Unified Church of Earth. Word is he’s in line to replace the UCE’s Supreme Father.”

Daniel narrowed his eyes. “What’s he doing here?”

Before McCormack could answer, the holoscreens darkened to black and the crowd hushed. Daniel braced himself for what was coming next—one of the many reasons he avoided these ceremonies. In bright orange letters ‘BREAKING NEWS!’ zipped across the circled screens, then were replaced by a neatly coiffed blonde, news anchor Holly LaCroix. Some questioned the propriety of playing the original broadcast of the attack at these ceremonies, but those in charge insisted on refreshing people’s memories. Stoking continued fear of an alien invasion had proved the most effective tool ever for distracting the masses from the shenanigans of the governing class.

Aloft, Holly’s multiple images spoke in unison. “We interrupt this program to bring you breaking news. We have just learned that the science team on Enyo may have been attacked while broadcasting their dedication ceremony for the installation of Luna University’s new stationary deep-space telescope. We do not know yet who is responsible but are working to obtain a recording of

the live broadcast and will share that with you shortly.”

“The Cannon Long View telescope,” she explained during the interim, “was named after Annie Jump Cannon, a pioneering woman astronomer who—we have it?” Holly glanced to the side. “All right, here is that broadcast now. Keep in mind there is a ten-hour delay. These images were recorded by an automated video robot, which I’m told is still transmitting. Along with you, I will be seeing this video for the first time, but I will offer what commentary I can.”

Daniel didn’t need her commentary. His memory was as real and unforgiving as the cold-steel floor under his feet.

The screen image split, the left side showing Holly, the right, Enyo’s black star-filled sky, where a tall man in a spacesuit stood on a dark rocky surface. Behind him, a gigantic mirrored dish tilted on a reticulated robotic platform that seemed to grow from the bare rock. Off in the distance stood their tall egg-shaped vessel.

“You’re looking at the team’s leader, Dr. Benjamin Walker, standing in front of the Cannon telescope. His team consists of nine other scientists including his wife, Charlotte Walker. I’m told their ten-year-old son, Daniel, also accompanied the team.” Holly gestured at the image. “You can see their transport in the background.”

The camera swiveled to show space-suited people gathered together, all of them rendered anonymous by their helmets, and similar height until a much shorter version squeezed to the front. Wearing an oversized spacesuit, the smaller figure moved awkwardly until another reached out to steady him.

“That must be little Danny there.” Holly smiled.

Hearing his boyhood nickname tightened Daniel’s stomach.

The camera refocused on his father, Dr. Walker, who began to deliver a well-rehearsed speech—stirring words about the value of space exploration for mankind’s future—but then a rumbling sound drowned him out and the recorded image shook violently. Dr. Walker turned aside, and the confused voices of those with him rose in the back-

ground. He waved for silence. “Everyone wait here, until I find out what it is.” The camera remained focused on the telescope as Walker strode out of view. Moments later, a man screamed, and the murmuring voices cried out in alarm. The camera jostled and went sideways, showing the legs of fleeing scientists. A pair of over-sized, wedge-shaped boots much too large for any human flashed by in pursuit.

Holly gasped. “What was that?”

Amid the screams, Daniel’s young voice called for help.

The automated camera righted itself, then focused on a creature striding away on two backward-bending legs. The thing had a large head, and a pair of overlong arms, one of which carried a suited human less than a third its size. The creature’s head swiveled ninety degrees, revealing a protruding profile that curved out and downward like the beak of a predatory bird.

Holly, shocked into silence now, offered no comment.

The transmission showed more giant beaked creatures moving in the distance, their legs bending in reverse like stalking ostriches.

Wide-eyed Holly turned aside to speak to someone off-camera. “Has—has any of this been verified?” Shaking her head, she looked back and continued her commentary. “It’s hard to see what exactly is going on from this distance, but it appears that these—these creatures are piling things into a net of some sort.”

Not things . . . people! Daniel thought angrily.

In the transmission, a boy’s voice called out, “Mom! Dad!”

“That must be poor little Danny,” Holly said.

The transmission zoomed in on the source of the sound, focusing on a small figure caught in the grip of one of the creatures.

“But we didn’t do anything,” the boy yelled, and took a swing at his captor.

As Daniel watched, hate and fury rose in his chest like bile.

More beaked creatures approached. The one holding the boy lifted him high for inspection. He thrashed wildly, fell loose from the creature’s grip and scrambled away. The creature went after him,

but the boy threw himself inside one of the science team's storage tubes and closed the lid. The creature bent over the long tube, spun and rolled it about in an apparent attempt to find an opening.

Breathe, Daniel reminded himself. He never thought he would need to use his survival training, not back then in that tube, and certainly not here now, fifteen years later.

The right side of the screens went black.

"It appears we've lost the feed." Holly turned back to her audience. "These are disturbing images, but keep in mind, none of this has been confirmed and it's quite possible someone is playing an elaborate hoax. You history buffs may recall the first, back in the 1940's, when a radio show created widespread panic. Pure fiction, and this may be as well." She paused and smiled. "Giant bird-headed aliens, a child in danger—does seem a bit melodramatic."

Idiot! Daniel shook his head, still annoyed by her old comment.

It turned out the news station cut the feed to spare viewers the worst of it, images of bloody human body parts. Danny had also been spared seeing that part of the carnage, as he was already trapped in a pitch-dark cargo tube. He remembered screaming as he tumbled about. When the movement finally stopped, his helmet light was broken, and he was left in absolute dark and silence to imagine what terrible things the monsters would do once they got the tube open.

The video feed returned, showing an empty alien landscape, the creatures gone from view. Only the closed storage tube remained visible. Daniel stared at it, claustrophobic fear closing in on him. He struggled against it, but when the image shuddered and the stadium sound system rumbled, shaking his heart as it had then, he was back in that tube.

It's like before, when the monsters' ship landed. They must be taking off.

Emotions rushed through him—first relief—*They're not going to eat me*—then terror—*They're leaving me here!*

He pushed hard on the tube's lid, unable to budge it. He felt for a release, a button, a lever,

something, but these things were never meant to be opened from the inside. He knew the combination for the tube's exterior panel, but that did him little good now. The silence in his helmet turned to an empty roar.

Wait, maybe my headset's broken, like the helmet light. That's why I can't hear anyone. Dad and the others must be out there, waiting until it's safe.

Forgetting for a moment that there was no air for sound to travel through, he pounded on the inner wall inches above his head, his only thought to alert Dad to his plight.

He'll come get me and everything will be okay, like before, when we were all together, happy and excited.

He remembered his father's proud words, his mother's big smile; then his mind switched to screams, to her dark hair floating above a crushed helmet and monsters making a pile of limp human bodies, one onto another.

No one's coming. They're dead. They're all dead.

"No!" Daniel said aloud.

McCormack grabbed Daniel's clenched fist.

"You're okay, Danny."

Daniel flattened his hand and nodded, hoping no one else had heard him. "Sorry."

The feed on the screens above were dead silent now, but the image of the closed storage tube remained. The stadium crowd watched in reverent silence as a full eleven seconds ticked off on the display—as per tradition—one to mark each day poor little Danny spent trapped and alone inside that tube.

As the seconds counted down, the silence grew into that same empty roar Daniel experienced in that tube, pulling him into the past. He fought to remain grounded in the present. It didn't work.

Panicked, Danny clawed at the tube's round metal walls, screaming for help until his throat burned and he gasped for breath. Time passed immeasurably in the dark silence as he went in and out of consciousness, each time waking to the same nightmare. The vicious cycle of screaming and fainting continued until finally, in an act of

pure self-preservation, his mind tricked him.

"Danny!" his father's disembodied voice called out.

He stopped crying.

"Come on, use your head."

He took a long slow breath.

"You know the drill—follow protocol, plan for the worst."

"Right," he answered, and took stock of his situation. He already knew what crowded around him—hand-sized canisters of condensed oxygen. He counted and did the math. Twenty-eight days' worth—*probably longer since I'm small and can't do anything but lie here*. He made emergency adjustments to his suit controls, moving them to their lowest settings.

"Fully charged, an ECS can recycle fluids and keep you alive for a week, even longer with minimal activity," he recited from memory, or did his father remind him?

"True, but I shouldn't need that long. Lunar City, from where we launched, is a ten-day journey, but the Kuiper Belt outposts are only two."

"You can do two, easy."

"Sure. Easy."

Time ticked by achingly slow. The blackness took on a living quality, undulating, thickening, as if alive. His skin itched beyond his reach. Despite knowing it impossible, he pictured bugs crawling inside his suit—

"Ugh!" Daniel shuddered.

"You okay?" McCormack asked.

Daniel snapped back to the ceremony in progress and nodded. On the holoscreens above, Holly LaCroix talked about messages coming in from concerned viewers.

The locked cargo tube abandoned on the surface of Enyo still remained visible to her right.

Dammit!

Daniel closed his eyes against the image but couldn't stop falling into the past again.

No one to talk to, nothing to see, nothing to do. During his training, his parents had warned him isolation was the biggest enemy. In the void, people go crazy imagining things—like bugs in your suit.

"Keep yourself mentally occupied. Practice your math, tell yourself stories, make plans, lots of plans," his Dad's voice told him.

"Okay," he replied, lost in the hallucination, and started to think about plans, his and theirs, especially his parents' search for an Earth twin—his anger growing because they'd never see it, never know if they'd been right.

"It's not fair!" he yelled into the dark. That's when it occurred to him that 'crazy' might also mean talking to dead people. "No, you can't be dead. You have to finish what you started."

"I'm sorry, Danny; we can't, but you can," his mother answered. "Picture what an interstellar ship like that would be like. Make it real in your mind."

The more he visualized an interstellar ship, the more real it became. His tiny prison vanished as he walked through the corridors of a huge multi-leveled vessel. Rooms and equipment surrounded him. He felt the floors under his feet, the walls with his hands, and smelled cool clean air pumping through the vents. He saw powerful fusion reactors, talked to scientists on board, and marched beside soldiers armed with terrifying weapons ready to lay waste to the monsters. He imagined traveling to a new world and taking people there to build settlements. While a part of him knew this imagined future existed only in his mind, the waking dream felt more solid than anything truly happening to him and he became convinced his life depended on making it so.

And if those bug-eyed, beak-faced monsters get in my way . . .

"I'll kill them all."

"Pardon?" McCormack inquired beside him.

Daniel startled back to the present, fearing he'd spoken the old vow aloud, hoping he hadn't.

"Nothing. Never mind."

Maybe crazy is reliving the same thing over and over.

His uncle's eyebrows formed a deep 'V' above the bridge of his nose.

Daniel looked away and focused on the holoscreens again, where Holly LaCroix stared into the camera, skepticism showing in her forced neutral expression.

"Those of you calling for a rescue mission to

Enyo, please keep in mind this attack is as yet unconfirmed. As we all know, images can be edited, even created from whole cloth. Our experts are analyzing the recording and we will bring you updates as they—”

She paused in mid-breath to touch her ear, and her eyes widened.

“We have verification. I—I’m being told all communication has been lost with our manned outposts in the Kuiper Belt including Pluto, Eris and Sedna. UN Armed Forces are launching as we speak.”

She took a deep breath and looked at the camera with a raw new intensity.

“For anyone just tuning in, our Kuiper Belt outposts are under attack. We have experienced first contact, and it was an act of war.”

The playback ended there, and the screens went dark. The stadium remained hushed and expectant. From her seat next to Senator Bromberg, the present-day Holly LaCroix rose and approached the podium. The screens lit up again to show her face. She looked almost the same as she did in her history-making report fifteen years ago, right down to her same signature swept-back hairstyle, heavy gold necklace, and scarlet red dress.

“That was a day none of us will ever forget.” Her voice echoed throughout the stadium. “Nor will we forget the fearful days that followed as we all waited to learn who, if anyone, had survived. It took eleven days to reach Enyo, but oh, what joy we shared when poor little Danny was found alive.” She smiled in Daniel’s direction and clapped, instigating a roar of approval from the crowd. When it died down, she no longer smiled. “Sadly, he was the only one.”

The cameras zeroed in to catch Daniel’s expected emotional breakdown. Instead, he set his jaw tight and nodded as the cameras projected him on the screens above. Whether he liked it or not, ‘Little Danny,’ as everyone thought of him still, remained a symbol of perseverance against the alien threat.

“We named them Garuda after the birdlike Hindu demi-god,” Holly stated.

That fact still infuriated him. *They’re not that big and there’s nothing god-like about them.*

“And concluded little Danny was spared be-

cause of his youth, left as a warning to never explore the heavens again,” she continued.

Daniel never bought into that theory, but the world took it to heart, and the search for new planets died of fright. Each commemoration put the attacks a year further back in history, but Earth remained on high alert, its deep-space program frozen in time.

As someone who’d met the enemy and lived to tell about it, Daniel had the gravitas to sway people. That’s why he was here today. He’d polished his speech until certain it would have the desired effect—if only he could remember his opening line. He blinked in dismay at the blankness in his mind.

Holly LaCroix finished her speech and introduced him all too soon. Static reverberated in Daniel’s head as he took his place at the podium. Looking out at the sea of people waiting for him to speak, he nearly panicked before remembering what his uncle had said.

It’s not about you. It’s about them, what they need to hear.

He took a deep breath, smiled, and began.

“A great man once said, ‘We have nothing to fear but fear itself.’ I have looked in the eyes of the enemy and it frightened me far less than what’s coming out of the mouths of our leaders today. The greatest threat to the human race isn’t out there. It’s right here among us, taking over our lives, our government, our future—imprisoning us on a doomed planet.

“Earth’s habitable land is shrinking—miles of coastline gone, forests turned to ash, with what’s left pummeled by raging storms like the one outside this stadium here today—driving us underground, or beneath sealed domes like this one. If people are to have any quality of life, perhaps even survive at all, we must conquer our fears and find a new world. Not just for ourselves, but for our children and grandchildren.

“Sadly, the only ventures beyond our solar system are those of the privately run Extra-Terrestrial Trade Association which continues to raid Nereus for exotic pets. This trade is nothing I applaud but does prove that we can still travel into deep space and return successfully. Yes, some ships fail to

return, but it hasn't stopped the ETTA from going. Why do we allow ships to travel to distant worlds for mere profit, yet deny those who would do so for the betterment of mankind?"

"The answer, of course, is money and politics. The trade is profitable. Exploration is expensive. And by continually reminding us about the existence of an extra-terrestrial threat, our government has cemented its rule. Some of it is good—border disputes have ceased, and national pride's gone out of fashion. There hasn't been an organized war on Earth since, but peace at home has come at a high price—fear. That fear has fueled the belief that space exploration is a dangerous evil. This is perilous thinking, people, and it is being exploited by a pseudo-religion. Its leaders would take us on a path to annihilation.

"The time has come to stop listening to cowards who preach surrender!"

He paused for dramatic effect, then went on to condemn the fear mongers, naming names, including Bromberg's and leaders of the Unified Church of Earth. When Daniel exclaimed that it was time to stand up for humanity, the crowd jumped to its feet and roared in approval.

The ceremony's organizers expected him to introduce Bromberg as his good friend and the next speaker. He did neither, leaving the podium amidst thunderous applause. The Senator glared and clenched his hands as if he wanted to strangle Daniel.

Daniel strode past Bromberg, jostling the Senator's shoulder. His uncle stood to join him and together they exited the stage. Daniel waved to the crowd still on its feet and kept moving. McCormack trotted his far shorter legs to keep up. Once they entered the tunnels beneath the stadium, the noise lessened.

"Holy crap, Danny," his uncle said. "You insulted the wrong people just now."

"I'm only worried about impressing the right ones," Daniel replied.

"The wrong ones in positions of power can make your life miserable. Senator Bromberg is not a forgiving man."

Daniel glanced at him without slowing. "What he can't forgive is that I didn't die in that cargo tube."



Faery Thoughts by Angela K. Scott

"I'm sure that's not true. Even so, why antagonize him?"

"Because he's an unrepentant asshole. He denies exploration of space, but takes money from ETTA, and passes laws protecting them. Some say he even keeps Nereids himself."

"Seems unlikely. He's a card-carrying member of the UCE. I've heard him denounce the Nereid pet trade on numerous occasions."

"It's what he does behind closed doors I worry about."

A message alert vibrated on Daniel's wrist. He

stopped to see what his strict privacy settings allowed through.

“Terrific speech.” The message was from Cedric Peterson, Chairman Overseer of the Allied Coalition for Exploration of Space.

Daniel punched a fist in the air. “Yes!” He showed his uncle the message. “Said I wanted to impress the right people—looks like I just did.”

McCormack frowned at him. “You don’t really intend to do this ... to go to Tau Medea?”

“Augh!” Daniel threw his hands into the air. “How can you even ask me that? I’ve only been talking about it ... forever. I don’t know why no one takes me seriously—especially you.”

“I do, of course, I do, but—” McCormack ran a hand over the top of his gray head and let out a breath. “I just didn’t see it ever happening.”

“It will if I can get support. ACES is a big step in the right direction, but the main thing is to swing public opinion. To do that, I need people with influence, people like you, Uncle Charlie.”

McCormack let out an incredulous laugh.

“You’re talking about a major campaign—speeches, press conferences, media interviews.”

“I understand that.”

“Do you?” McCormack held his hands out palms up in a pleading gesture. “Do you really? You’ll have to come out of your scientific cocoon, get down in the mud with the very people you despise. Play politics.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes. I just need back up.”

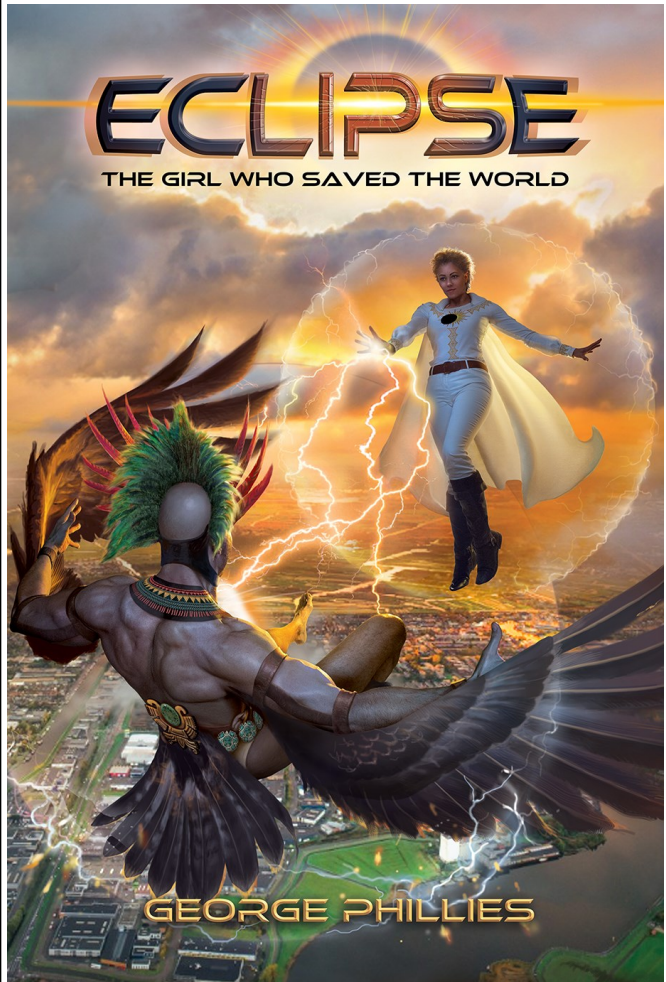
For a moment, Daniel thought he was in for another lecture.

Instead, McCormack nodded. “Fine. I’ll twist arms and empty the wallets of everyone I know. But only on one condition. If you pull this off, you take me with you. I want to be your chief of medicine.”

Daniel stared in mute surprise.

“I’m one hell of a doctor, you know.” McCormack glared at him.

“I know. Just never thought you’d consider it—but the answer is yes, hell yes.” Daniel stuck out his hand to shake his uncle’s. “You got yourself a deal.”



Eclipse Cover by Brad Fraunfelter

First Chapter Look Eclipse— The Girl Who Saved the World by George Phillies

Meet Eclipse.

She's twelve. She's hardworking, bright, self-reliant, good with tools, vigorously physically fit, tough as nails, still young enough to disguise herself as a boy. She's also a persona: She flies, reads minds, and is not afraid of necessary violence.

She had a bit of a problem with her mom. Her mom threw her out of the house. Then Mom blew up the house and disappeared.

Now she's procured the Holy Namestone, the Key to Paradise. And everyone in the world will be happy to kill her to get their hands on it.

Meet Trisha.

She's not quite a year older than Eclipse. She's friendly, considerate, really good in school, athletic, does more than her share around the house. She's also a persona. She has super-speed...an hour of housework in a minute. She flies, including from here to the next galaxy in an hour.

She also has a bit of a problem with her parents. They always treat her with complete contempt, totally grounded her, and won't say why.

Her brother and sister are personas, too. Year-younger sister Janie is a budding world chess and go champion. She also reads minds, sees distant events, and can kill with a glance. Her twin brother Brian is incredibly good with tools, builds fantastic models from scratch, has a nearly unbreakable force field, and summons plasma beams that cut battleships in half.

Flashforward**The Invisible Fortress
Evening**

I woke up at half past dark. To put it mildly, I hurt. If there were any places where I didn't hurt, I couldn't find them. Most girls of my twelve years, hurting this much, would have lain there crying for their mommies. For me, of course, crying for help where anyone could hear me would be worse than useless. It would get me killed. Yes, I was doing mind control on myself. My pain nerves screamed their agony, but thanks to mind control I only heard them as distant murmurs. Mind control meant I could sleep. I still knew I hurt. A lot. 'Hurt a lot' was still infinitely better than the alternative, which involved being seriously dead.

I wondered confusedly what had happened. I was lying in bed, not in my normal sleeping position. The room was dark. For minutes I was too dazed to think clearly. I peered over my bedsheet and quilt ...I was in my own bedroom. Beyond the glass wall separating me from my balcony, the silent stars glittered in a cloudless night sky. If I waited long enough, I'd see the stars sink one by one into the pitch-black hills of the coastal range.

The shadows on the wall were my collection of Captain Infinity Atomic Soaker pistols, ultrasoakers, except the one pistol that very definitely did not project water.

Suddenly I remembered. Atlanticea. It was the most wonderful memory in the world...or would have been if I didn't hurt so much. I'd threaded the Maze, the Maze that defeated Julius Caesar and Jackie Fisher and Spearthrower Owl and the French Imperial Guard. I'd reached the Tomb and matched wits with the Martyr himself. He'd given me that palm-size sphere of crystalline sky, the Namestone, the Key to the Earthly Paradise. No one else in history had ever come close to capturing it. I'd done it! The Namestone was the birthday present I'd given to myself, a couple months late for my twelfth birthday. It was almost as good a birthday present as my two ponies. Snapdragon and Daffodil are better. I gave them to me, too.

On the bright side, when I grabbed the Namestone my chances of living another six hours moved up from zero. Death...That's the penalty for not solving the Maze. On the less bright side, when I grabbed the Namestone my reward was a big list of people who want to kill me.

Thanks to the Maze, I am seriously wrecked up. Credit for some wrecking up goes to the League of Nations, and to a Lord of Eternity. They'd both made a maximum effort to kill me, just to get their hands on the Namestone. They almost succeeded. Almost, not quite, but 'almost' only counts in horseshoes, and with hand grenades.

No matter how tired I felt, I called very slightly on my gifts. The null links to my pets were quiet. Two ponies slumbered in their barn. Two cats cuddled together dreamily in the loft above. Anything else was very small, or very far away. Perception? The only thing I worried about was the Namestone. There it was in my den, almost impossible for me to find behind its quarter inch of impervium shielding. And I knew exactly where to look. No one else would ever find it. The Namestone. I have it. Not the League of Nations. Not the Lords of Eternity. Me. Eclipse! I have the Namestone. In my home! It's mine, all mine!

The healing matrix was fixing me, but...oh

right, healing matrix. I should have remembered that already. I said I'm a bit dazed, didn't I? I summoned the glyph for Medico, its associated rules engine. Nothing in violet. Nothing was killing me despite the matrix. Of course, the matrix is supposed to drag me conscious if I am dying, and it hadn't. Nothing blue, long-term near-death threat. Red warnings? Let's see. Three broken ribs, stitched by telekinesis. That's why I was on my back, the lousy sleeping position Medico told me to use. My right shoulder? Nothing broken, but bits of force field are holding things where they belong while the matrix forces repairs. Internal bleeding from high-impact collisions? Cured. Gold - a black eye, a few bone bruises, but I've been here before, just not so many ways at the same time. Green - slices, scrapes, abrasions -- my skin is being returned to perfection as I lie here. My face was cleaned up by the Namestone before I faced the Martyr, but the rest of me was my problem. My healing matrix is fixing everything, way faster than I'd heal naturally. I still need a couple weeks to recover.

Home! That's the keyword. I'm home and safe. I dropped my mind out-of-body. Astral projection is decidedly not my strongest gift, but I can pull it off. If I am very careful. Actually, the preset didn't give me any choice. Some time back I did mind control on myself, so that whenever I was in a serious fight, escaped, and got back home safe, I would go out-of-body, whether I wanted to or not. If someone planted mind controls on me, I probably break them when I leave my body behind. I stepped out from my body. The preset grabbed my gifts and ran a scan, fast as thought, to see what trojans might be lurking in my mind-space. Yes, the scan runs at the speed of thought, but it has a lot of mind to scan. Meanwhile, I hovered above my body, looking into my momentarily sightless silver-gray eyes and platinum-white eyelashes, listening to me breathe, ever so slowly.

Done. Control of my mind returned to me. There is a way to break the mind control, if things go wrong, but everything went the way it was supposed to. Mum had been careful about showing me exactly how to arrange that preset, because seven ways from Sunday doing mind control on yourself is dangerous. I dropped my mind back

into my body, wiggled fingers and toes, and blinked twice. Everything worked.

Gifts? Just before I left Atlanticea I'd pushed my gifts way deep, much deeper than I'd expected to need them, driving my shields toward their ultimate limits. Now I shouldn't even consider calling any of my gifts. Not flight. Not teleportation. Not any of the neat ways I can seriously wreck things. Not force field - yes, there's a low-level screen tacking my ribs together. I could go way deep into my gifts right now, if I absolutely had to, but if I did, I'm going to hurt myself.

My memories took me back to Atlanticea. The Martyr gave me the Namestone. I climbed the Outer Stairs, out of the Maze into the waking world. Ahead of me, wisps of cloud were incandescent white against a cerulean sky. I was sufficiently wrecked up that climbing those stairs was incredibly demanding. After each step, I half-felt ready to quit. Before I did the Maze, I had zero-lined all of my gifts, flat as possible. Under the rules, while in the Maze, any gift I called, the Maze could call at three times the power. That was its rule. Curiously, three times zero is zero. I did not give the Maze any advantages.

While I climbed the stairs, I desperately tried to re-open my power levels. I could barely touch The Sky. After a moment of terror, The Sky opened. With The Sky powering my gifts, my force field would stop a determined punch. I could fly somewhat faster than I could walk. With an effort that left me dizzy and gasping for breath I managed to reach down to The Breaking Wave. With The Breaking Wave powering my gifts, I could fly faster than most sports cars. I am not embarrassed to say that the first gift that I called was mind control, to suppress pain. Just before I sliced the last fellow open from guggle to zatch, he gut-punched me. Hard. After my next step I managed to find life support. With broken ribs, it hurt to breathe. Once I didn't need to breathe, I could focus. I remembered to summon the Medico rules engine. It would have been truly stupid to bleed to death after I got my hands on the Namestone. Medico reported that I was not dying, not even close. Mayhaps the Namestone would have protected me until I finished climbing the Outer

Stairs. I didn't count on it.

I kept reaching for more power levels, further and further down. They came more and more easily. The Sea of Grass, The Temple, The Sun, and The Matrix opened up. Each time I reached a deeper level, my access to my higher, weaker levels broadened. Now, with the Sky powering my force fields, I was probably bullet proof. OK, I did not forget to call my shields. I might have a reception committee, someone who thought it was easier to steal the Namestone from me than from the Maze. Before I reached the top of the Stairs, I was sort of back to normal. I could touch all the power levels I can usually reach. I just couldn't tap them for very much. Not yet. Not without taking a lot more damage. I could go way deep into my gifts if I had to. I hoped I didn't.

At the top of the Outer Stairs I had company. Waiting for me were Valkyria, the super-heavy combatant of the League of Nations Elite Strike Team, and the Screaming Skull, himself. Alas, they weren't fighting each other, so I couldn't smile once, duck twice, and flee their island paradise.

"Where is she, little girl? Where is the bearer of the Holy Namestone? I'm here to take it for the League!" That was Valkyria, shouting at me. Valkyria? Six feet tall, impervium-plated battle armor, heavy duty body field, not to mention a flaming sword that was mostly a special effect shrouding a pointblank range plasma attack. Yes, there is also an endarium blade inside the flames. Her explosive throwing katana remained in its scabbard, over her back where her other arm could reach it. There is a tradition of people in plate mail being idiots. At the moment Valkyria was living up to the tradition. Her long blonde hair fluttered in the ocean breeze. Bad form. Mum always said Valkyria should wear her hair short or mound it under a helmet, failing which someone would grab it and spin her head over heels into the ground.

I suppose I shouldn't've been surprised. For thousands of years the Namestone has been the Key to Heaven, the artifact that will transform the World into the Millennial Kingdom. All you needed to do in order to use the Key was to get your hands on it. That was easier said than done. To take the Namestone, you had to solve the Maze.

Vast numbers of people have tried and failed, with fatal consequences for them. The League of Nations has passed decree after decree claiming the Namestone for themselves, just so soon as someone else does their work for them and removes it from the Maze. Now I had the Namestone, so they wanted it. I'd removed it from the Maze, so they were going to give me a chance to hand it over voluntarily. Their idea of 'voluntary' is a bit strained.

Valkyria must have thought I'd be intimidated when she shouted at me. Sorry, but I just did the Maze. Next to the solid shadows, Valkyria did not impress. I was a bit miffed. OK, she does have three-quarters of a foot on me, but 'little girl' is not the nicest imaginable greeting. True or not, 'Little girl' is rude. Valkyria should have been less threatening. After all, I was carrying the most powerful artifact in the world. I still needed a few minutes before I could teleport out. I had to play for time.

I did a crash drop, calling all the power I could find. Crash drops into bottom levels are seriously bad for the health. For a moment, Medico flashed blue-shading-toward-violet warning glyphs at me. I was approaching killing myself by overloading. I shoved all the power I could find into my shields. I really wanted to teleport away. Teleport is a life-saving gift, as good a gift as flight, but teleporting far enough to avoid a chase needed a lot of power, more than I could call just yet. Yes, I could have switched power from shields to teleport, and jumped out. The moment I shifted the power out of my shields, they would have faded, enough that I'd surely have been toast before I could disappear.

"I'm twenty feet in front of you," I answered. After it was too late, it occurred to me to answer 'she's twenty feet behind me, but I have to leave before she can come up here'. Oh, well. I never expected that question.

"Aren't you ... isn't the real Bearer taller?" Valkyria asked. She sounded confused.

I glowered. OK, I'm not into my teen growth spurt yet, an event I don't yet see how to avoid, though I'm looking, but it's not as if I didn't pass five feet last year. "I am tall," I answered. That's when I ran out of patience. Valkyria hadn't even

been civil to me. She might at least have congratulated me on walking the Maze. If she wanted to insult me, there's no reason I couldn't return the favor. "Wait!" I continued. "Who are you? Isn't the real Valkyria a bit less pudgy? I mean, how do they manage to squeeze you into that armor?" Her nostrils flared. I guess she's sensitive about her weight.

"You!" Valkyria shouted. "Inform the Bearer. She must hand the Holy Namestone over to League of Nations. At once! As fast as possible! Immediately! That is a direct order! From The League of Nations!" I could hear her Prussian mindset without reading her mind. Unless something had gone very wrong, the whole world had watched me do the Maze. Valkyria should have recognized me.

"I am the Bearer. If you wanted the Namestone, you should have walked the Maze first and taken it," I answered. I called my gifts as fast as possible, reinforcing my shields, but when you start at absolute zero this takes a while. I confess I was getting a bit nervous that the Screaming Skull was standing there, politely not saying anything. No, we haven't met, but when your mother is a persona, you tend to inherit bits of her gift fine structure, enough that he'd eventually figure out whose daughter I am. That would for sure not be good.

"Give it to me! Now! The League has decreed: The Namestone is the property of the world," she demanded.

"Give it to you? You and which army?" I asked. I yawned. That was an act. I should have been more polite. In my own defense, I was thoroughly exhausted, not to mention I'd taken major body damage during the hand-to-hand combat segments. I expected congratulations, not threats. After all, people have been trying to thread the Lesser Maze for three thousand years, with no success. I'd done it. Old English proverb: Battles are events between inadequate opportunities for rest. I wasn't resting. I was powering up my gifts as fast as possible. It was even money whether I'd power up fast enough to escape, or whether I beat the Maze and lost to my welcoming committee. Some people my age would have been terrified. I was too busy, not to mention too tired, to be frightened.

"This one?" She waved her fingers. What had to be the whole League of Nations Elite Strike Force teleported in at her back. There were several dozen of them, not that I counted them carefully. Mind you, I don't know who most of them are, other than really tackily dressed, not at all like my highly stylish and tasteful garb, but the Strike Force is respectably powerful. The Strike Force began to spread, left and right.

"That's far enough," I announced. They kept spreading.

It's a very special gesture with hand and wrist. My palm ends up facing skyward, the Namestone a cerulean flame a few inches above, Namestone's tuneless tune being heard distantly in every ear. Yes, I did remember to cue my body aura, not to mention my personal theme music, a bold brass opening folding into the richer tones of the flugelhorn. No, I can still call on Namestone's power even if I can't move. Nor do I need the music or aura to call on all my gifts. My aura actually is the same blue as the Namestone's glow. My platinum blonde hair and pale gray garb look really well with it.

"Behold the Holy Namestone. Come no closer or face my wrath." Mum taught me how to sound truly pompous. To my surprise, it worked. Europalord did not quite fall on his fat face when he tripped over his own feet. Of course, he is a drain, so personal combat training is not quite the issue it is with his team-mates. His task is to sit there and suck power out of his opponents, incidentally shoving it all into his personal force field. "The Namestone is mine," I reminded them.

"You're defying the League!" Valkyria shouted. "International law specifies: The League of Nations owns the Namestone. Hand it over, you stupid girl!" In retrospect, she might have done better if she'd been a bit more tactful. She could hardly have done worse.

"You know the Maze Rule: Namestone belongs to he who takes it. I took it," I said.

"No, it belongs to the League!" she screamed.

"You keep repeating that same wrong statement. I just told you: I took it. It's mine! Are you deaf, or just stupid? Or maybe both; you're for sure stupid." I answered. By now I was in a really

sour mood. I wanted to go home and go to bed. And, very soon, I would have broadened my call on enough levels of power to do just that. I could feel teleport blocks in place around me, meaning I was going to need a lot of power to smash them into little pieces. No, I do not feel guilty about what would happen to the people and machines creating those blocks when I did the smashing. Meanwhile, Valkyria is said to be short-tempered. People who are busy losing their tempers for sure aren't thinking clearly, a positive outcome for me. Well, a positive outcome, except I was in the process of losing my own temper.

"The Namestone is too dangerous for mortals," the Screaming Skull announced. "Give it to me, or it is you who will face my wrath."

"You're supposed to be an improvement over her, fatso?" I snapped. I could have been more polite to the Screaming Skull, but exhaustion makes me impatient. Besides, the Skull is a (whole bunch of words Mum would not like to hear me use) egomaniac with delusions of adequacy. Unfortunately, the Skull is also really good at telling people to drop dead, and having it happen. I did not quite use any of those words Mum did not like, though I was tempted. Insulting him might cause him to think even less than he usually does, assuming that is possible.

"Team! The Namestone is indestructible! Kill her!" Valkyria shouted. Oh, dear, I thought, not to mention several other words Mum would not have approved of my using, Valkyria is even more short-tempered than rumored. She could readily have drawn out this conversation for some time yet, say until I felt comfortable about teleporting away. No such luck. Valkyria tossed her explosive throwing katana. Her katana's explosion packs the power density of a starcore weapon. Her team launched a totally bizarre mixture of high power attacks. Not one of her team-mates seemed to notice that if they killed me I would drop the Namestone, which would then roll back down the Stairs into the Maze, there to be returned to the Martyr. Mayhaps Valkyria counted on the explosion from her throwing sword to blast the Namestone free.

I'd forgotten the Screaming Skull, even though I had just told him off. Over-focus is very dangerous in combat, but at this point I was outnumbered



Noble Battle — Angela K. Scott

close to twenty to one. I'd paid too much attention to Valkyria, and paid no attention to the Skull, even after he threatened me. He used the moment to launch his most deadly attack, the Shower of Total Death. Being attacked by the League of Nations Elite Team was bad news, but the Skull is a Lord of Eternity. His attack? It works on people, it works on a tree, and now I'll see if it works on me. I've actually never been positive my second level shields do anything. It's not as if there are a lot of second level attacks wandering around to test them against.

My scramble for more and more power levels worked. Barely. My shields did everything needed. Then Valkyria's katana hit me. Of course, I've seen starcore energy densities before, real ones, and my shields worked just fine that time, too. It's just I was very tired, the gifts being used against me were incredibly powerful, and I had to go truly deep to hold my defenses against all of them at the same time. I didn't quite fall over, but

the world was getting a bit gray. Medico flashed a warning, blue shading farther into violet. My reception committee was coming too close to killing me through my own shields, assuming I didn't kill myself first with the crash drop I had just made. For half an instant, the Skull looked surprised. He could tell: I was not drawing on the Namestone. He'd tried to kill me, and my personal defenses were good enough to stop his (several other words that would not meet with Mum's approval) attack in its tracks.

I really wanted to grab Valkyria's broadsword. Using it to give her a straighter backbone sounded really appealing. Kicking her face in also sounded attractive. Alas, if I continued to fight, they got to do the same. Besides, she was wearing armor. Here and now was not a favorable battlefield. I did not give them a second chance. I was down through enough levels to hold all my shields, keep slack, shatter the teleport blocks, and teleport. I flicked my wrist back. Namestone vanished. I smashed the blocks and teleported out, far far away, all the way to the Dark Side of the Moon, then a half dozen fast jumps, one triple cycle loop, and finally a pause in case someone was following me. I'd ended someplace that looks like it could be my base. It isn't, but it looks really basey. Base-like? Basious? OK, it looks like a high-power persona base.

Pursuers who could track my teleports, a truly rare gift, would see I had stopped moving and charge after me. I hadn't hurt any of them yet, but if someone followed my jumps they'd learn how good I am at wrecking things. That's very good at wrecking things. Wrecking pursuers, in particular. I waited until the teleport traces faded away. There were no pursuers. Fortunately, teleport traces do not fade by becoming ever fainter, so you don't have to wonder if someone with really, really good tracking gifts can follow you. Teleport traces chug along and then stop dead, gone forever. A few more jumps brought me to the second-floor study in my very own house. I don't remember what I did next. I must have dropped the Namestone into its hiding place, stripped off my garb, and fallen into bed, because here I am, lying under my quilt, looking up at the stars.

One of the times when I woke up, the healing

matrix prompted me to ramp down my mind control, so the matrix could tell exactly where I'd been injured. I overdid it. I cut the mind control off. Pain swallowed me. I burst into sobs and uncontrollable tears. The healing matrix kept me from going into shock. After a few minutes I remembered I could ramp control back up. By then I was soaked in sweat.

That brought me to the here and now. I was incredibly thirsty. Stomach said a solid meal was in order. I rolled out of bed, every muscle complaining. The floor was beautifully finished silken-smooth hardwood, chill beneath my bare feet. I padded to my bathroom for a glass of water. I was more than a bit cold, but water was definitely the first priority. I remembered to check the bathroom scale. I'd lost weight. A fair piece of weight, remembering that I'm all of five-foot-three and muscular-slim in bare feet.

A night light threw a feeble shadow up the stairs. I dropped into my down bathrobe, shoulder and ribs protesting at the motion, and headed to the kitchen. Down bathrobe? I'd left the heat pump at low, keeping the house temperature in the mid-50s, enough to keep the pipes from freezing.

Yes, I have some neat photographs of the Pluto ruins, taken with me and camera inside my body field, but right now my gifts were very definitely turned off. The robe kept me warm, or I'd be cold indeed. Climbing down the stairs was painful. I held firmly to the railing, taking some of the weight off my knees. Besides hand-to-hand combat, the Maze set other physical and mental challenges, enough to push me to all my limits. Mum had taught me to be thoughtful and physically vigorous, but endurance and weight training only take you so far.

The oven clock said my half past dark was in fact just one hour past sunset. The oven light was more than enough, especially when I knew exactly where everything was stashed. Sunset? I must have slept the day around. No, I'd woken up once and again for a glass of water.

I'd had the foresight to cook in advance. Cold chicken fresh off the bone, soda biscuits with unsalted butter, stir-fry curried vegetables warmed in the microwave, more chicken and soda biscuits,

milk, sliced plum tomatoes, and finally rum raisin ice cream with chocolate fudge crumbles did just fine.

Soon I was going to go back to sleep. The healing matrix said not-quite-dawn as my drift from slumber moment. Was there anything I really had to do first? The very slightest bit of telepathy, no matter how dizzy it left me, confirmed ponies and barn-cats were all safe. I already knew that, but I wasn't thinking clearly enough to realize I'd checked once that my pets were well. The ponies would want currycombing tomorrow. Dishes were rinsed and in the dishwasher. Counters were bare. I dragged myself up my stairs.

My garb? It was in the closet, absolutely clean, not a stitch out of place. Clean? After what happened to me? That must have been the Namestone, insisting that the Bearer always looks perfect. In fact, when I met Valkyria, my garb had been immaculate, down to the flawless drape of my cape. I'd remembered to flare the cape so the video audience could see my sigil, the moon occulting the sun.

Namestone? Safe in its hidey-hole. Anything else? Rules engines, your opinions? The usual warning is that you can carry one rules engine 'Marksman on how to shoot', or if you're really good a second 'Medico on how to use your healing matrix', but if you try carrying four rules engines you go bats. Mum taught me how to break that limit. I'm a working demonstration. I have like fifty of them floating around, actually not inside my head where they'd cause problems, all being called at once. My rules engines all had something they wanted to tell me, but mostly they cancelled. The ones on buying and running a house were pretty calm. The emergency priority flag rose above 'Psychist – going bats for fun and profit'. The Lesser Maze was too much for almost anyone. I was building up pressure again about Mum.

Everything I now had, I'd earned for myself. From Mum, the Maze, and aftermath I'd learned the most important lesson there can be: Never trust anyone. Not ever! Not anyone! For a moment bitter tears overwhelmed me. I washed my face, noticed I was getting cold from standing in bare feet, and went to bed. Curled up under my quilt, I drifted off, to sleep, perchance to dream.

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Reaching for the Stars — Angela K. Scott

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