

Star Struck
By
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This story has been an ongoing work in process for some time now, with characters that came from my young adult life. It is intended for a wider range of audience than many of my books. Translation: this is young adult friendly. There is violence, but probably less graphic and less violence overall than say “twilight.”

The author is available for comments or questions. This book is still a work in process, so feel free to send editorial comments as well. If you like the author’s work and would like to see more, donations would be nice, but more important is simply sharing the work with others through recommendations and by leaving comments. Thank you for reading.

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“Whatever inner worlds I choose to explore
Or how subtle and etheric my sensations may become
No matter how far over time and space I travel in order to heal-
I AM going nowhere and nothing is coming to me in this silent celebration of Unity”
Narayan

Chapter 1

Dog Star, Texas.

On the far end of a tree from where Enedelia Garza sat on her porch contemplating the nightmare of her life and her very present hunger, a street lamp cast an eerie glow on the dirt road. The street light was probably bright enough to be seen from the International Space station, first due to its brightness, and second, because it was probably the only street light in a hundred miles; not really, but Enedelia imagined it to be true. On a calm day, she wouldn't have been able to see it for the tree. She would have known it was there because of the aura it gave the tree, but on this particular evening, she could see it as it cut through the clapping leaves stirred by the wind. It was almost a disco light effect, which was a nice counterpoint to the lightening in the distance, so distance the thunder was lost. The occasional thunderstorm was all the excitement that the poor town of Dog Star could afford her. Dog Star was so small a town that it was no longer found on any of the Texas maps, no matter how hard you looked.

Enedelia Garcia shook her head with disgust. “Even *I* could have come up with a better name than Dog Star,” she thought, as she spied the sign: Dog Star, population 441. The place wasn't big enough to be considered a town, and though her family hadn't been there a month, everyone in town knew them by name. For her, this meant that she couldn't get into any mischief because it would get back to her mother before she could even commit the act. Worse, Dog Star was so small that she couldn't find any real mischief to get into even if she had wanted to. The most exciting mischief would be cow tipping, and she wasn't fond of injuring other animals. Her mom was renting a crappy, little trailer from an old farmer, and working double shifts at an emergency clinic about an hour's drive away. This left Enedelia to fend for herself most the time, which meant entertaining herself, feeding herself, making herself do homework, which wasn't hard because you'd be surprised what a person would do when they're that bored. She did have an older brother but he was useless, and this night he had found new ways to prove just how useless he could be. Instead of stopping by the store on his way home to buy groceries with the money mother had left him, he and his only friend went and bought a new video game. As she sat, hungry and bored, they were in his bed room trying to save the universe, or some nonsense. She had knocked on his bedroom door, had pleaded for him to at the least go get a cheeseburger for her, but all she got for her efforts was a fist in the face, and a few kicks when she fell to the floor. The floor smelled like cigarette smoke and dog urine, thanks to the previous occupants. The brother cursed at her, emphasizing the control he had over his space, and then closed his door again.

She had spent a few moments in the bathroom nursing her wounds, wanting revenge, but her hunger pains proved more powerful than the bruises she had received, and so she had turned to practical matters.

There had been nothing in the fridge or cabinets that resembled a meal, or even a snack, unless you counted peppers and onions as a snack. There was a dried up tortilla, because someone, perhaps her useless, piece of crap, brother, hadn't sealed the bag properly. Of course, even if it had still been eatable, it would be rather bland without butter or cheese, or a little salsa. She had not even been able to fill a single bowl with cereal, even after mixing the remains of several boxes. It did leave a nice colorful mix of powdered sugar, like a swirl of glitter, which she would have gladly eaten had she not discovered too late that the milk had soured. She had tossed the cereal out the window for the chickens to find in the morning, dumped the milk down the drain, and had sat down on the porch, wishing her mom would drive up with a pizza, or a subway sandwich, or ice cream, or pasta. She missed being able to walk across the street and get something at the mall.

Thinking of the mall added another pain to sing counterpoint to the hunger and bruises. Enedelia had one thought on her mind: escape. She wanted out of Dog Star. She wanted out of her life. After running through the consequences in her head of what might occur, she acted on her impulse to flee. She went inside, took her brother's keys off the kitchen cabinet, slipped out into the darkness on the far side of the trailer, closed herself in her brother's car, started it without hesitating, and drove off without permission. She didn't even look back to see if he had come chasing out of the trailer on hearing his car starting. Instead, she focused on her goal of "anywhere but here." Maybe she would run away to Dallas and trade his car for a Big Mac. That would teach him; and send mother a message about trusting him to buy food instead of games. Problem was, his car probably wouldn't get her a Big Mac.

She was in that, "I'll show you" mode, for maybe ten miles before being replaced with concern when the car started to sputter. Her first thought was fear, fear that she had broke it, and then fear she hadn't gone far enough away. Then she realized her creep of a brother hadn't bothered to put fuel in his car! She pounded the steering wheel. Even her get-away was cursed by her dreadful life.

The nearest place to find food, and gas, was a little convenient store slash burger stand slash gas station. It was the only thing near enough to their home to be considered civilized. Then again, with no gas, it was like an oasis in the middle of a dessert. Of course, her dessert was all farm land. Fields of grain on one side of the road, and fields of corn on the other all lit by the moon, sneaking a peak through the waning storm, and the occasional flash of lightening bugs skimming over the top of the plants. She saw the lightening from the storm in her rearview mirror, as if it were confirmation that her troubles were behind her, when in reality, she was still carrying them with her. The fire flies amused her, offering her a bit of a distraction as the lights on her brother's car dimmed with the loss of power. It was almost magical, like watching floating constellations moving between the plants, living and dying in a single heart beat. The bug's luminescence was just bright enough to stir an inkling of hope that there was something better out there. An armadillo scurrying across the road paused to look at the approaching head lights and then continued on its way, showing no concern whatsoever for the slowing car.

As it turned out, her brother had just enough gas for her to coast up to the fueling island and park as if she were going to intentionally fill up. She closed her eyes and muttered under her breath "useless." She didn't have money for gas. She only had a

couple dollars, and that would just buy her a meal. The only thing in the ash tray was a penny coked up with some sticky residue that kept her from moving it. The car smelt like her brother after two days of no bathing. Her choice now was to put her three dollars and sixty two cents into her brother's car so she could return home, or go and buy her dinner and walk home and let him deal with the empty gas tank. She also considered doing a drive off, continuing down the road to Dallas with stolen gas, but she didn't trust the car to go the distance in the condition her brother kept it.

An eighteen wheeler was parked on the other side of the island. The truck driver was writing in his log as the gas clicked away. She considered hitching a ride out of here. She wondered if the driver would help her or use her. She was annoyed by the reality she might accept being used in order to change her life. Even if the driver was an ax murderer, she figured her crappy life could only improve. Then he spit tobacco and lifted his belly to scratch himself at his belt line and that flight plan closed forever. She got out of her brother's car with the sun warped, cracked dashboard, and a gold pendant of Mother Mary hanging from the rearview mirror, and slammed the door. Mother Mary swung from her chain as Enedelia headed up to the convenient store.

Jenny Mae Moncrief was running the place and had just finished flipping a burger as she entered. She smiled at Enedelia. "Hey," she said, saw the car, noted Enedelia was alone, and then smiled. "You know you're not allowed to drive without a licensed driver with you."

Enedelia shrugged. She had applied for a hardship license, but had failed the written test. They had given her a temp anyway, small towns did have some local authority to abuse, with the condition that a licensed adult be with her while she drove. "I couldn't resist coming up here for one of your specials."

"You and your brother been fighting again?" Jen said more than asked. She had a way of saying things that were never quite a question, nor a committed statement.

"No. Why would we have cause to fight?" Enedelia asked.

Jen shook her head, not pursuing the obvious signs of abuse. "Usual?"

"Please," Enedelia said, letting some of her rage dissipate. She had no reason to be less than civil to Jenny. She wasn't the cause of her troubles. It helped just being out of the house, being able to exercise a minimum level of control over her life. She felt a bit more relaxed and could afford to be civilized. And she didn't have to pretend as if she had permission to be up here. Jenny wouldn't rat her out, which was another reason why she shouldn't be snappy with Jen. Jen seemed to understand that Enedelia's life was chaos, and not from her own choosing. She had to continuously remind herself that she wasn't the crazy one. Her brother was crazy. Her mom was paranoid. But she, Enedelia, a one time princess, at least to her father in a far away place, was sane.

Enedelia put her money on the counter, stacking the coins. She placed them all heads up, with the faces looking the same way, east, which meant the heads were upside down from her vantage point. Jen continued her cooking, throwing another hamburger patty down while wrapping up the other burger before placing it in a bag. Enedelia figured it was for the truck driver. Satisfied that the coins were as perfect as she could stack them, she sighed.

"Jen, would you be willing to extend me credit for the meal, and let me use this money to put some gas in the car," Enedelia asked

Jen looked at her with a knowing smile. "Of course, dear. Is four dollars enough for gas?"

"Not really, but it will get me home," Enedelia said. "And leave enough for my brother to get to school in the morning."

"I could use a baby sitter this weekend, if you're free," Jen said.

"Alright," Enedelia agreed. It wasn't a great trade, but it did give her some control over her situation. And it wasn't like she had anything else important to do.

Enedelia looked around the store, leaning back against the cabinet. Two old men were drinking ice tea at one of the tables near the front window that looked out into the parking lot. She had seen them before, and though they knew her name, she still hadn't bothered to learn theirs. This was their nightly ritual. Enedelia imagined herself becoming old, trapped in a horrible ritualized life, in this God-forsaken town. Sipping tea and listening to the same old stories day after day, stories that revealed the small mindedness of the locals. It was mostly rivalry between the only two local churches, the Baptists and the Church of Christ. She silently made a prayer for God to save her from such a life, and crossed herself.

Outside, the sheriff's car turned into the lot and pulled up behind Juan's car. A moment later, the lights came on. Enedelia saw the reflection of the emergency lights in the jar full of water that was positioned to catch spare coins for physically impaired children. She cringed and closed her eyes. The creep brother of hers had obviously called 911 to report his car stolen.

Jenny Mae put some fries in the bag and placed it on the counter next to a soda. She spoke into the intercom to let the trucker know his order was ready, and then noticed the sheriff approaching the store. She looked at Enedelia with a frown, walked around the counter, and patted Enedelia on the head as she passed. She went outside as if to intercept the sheriff on Enedelia's behalf. The sheriff was halfway between the gas pumps and the store when the trucker called for his attention. The trucker was pointing up into the sky. The sheriff turned and looked. Jenny Mae stepped off the curve and also looked up.

All Enedelia could think of is how much trouble she was in. She was probably going to lose her driving permit, as well as her driving privilege, which was the only joy she had. It was a joy that she could only experience when her mother had time for her. And though her mother would be angry, that was the least of her worries. Her brother was going to give her an unprecedented pounding. Perhaps she would get lucky and the sheriff would put her in jail until she was 18. When she got out, she could legally go anywhere she wanted.

The two old men were puzzled by the activity outside, wondering what might be happening in the sky above the parking lot, but they still had not generated enough curiosity to move themselves from their table. They were pretty heavy, old men, and, short of a disagreement about interpretations of the Bible, it took a lot to motivate that much flesh to do anything other than sit and watch the crops grow while sipping tea.

The electricity at the convenient store went out, causing the lights to fade both inside and at the gas pumps. Even the emergency lights flared and went out. For a moment it was just dark enough to see the moonlight, but then the parking lot was suddenly flooded with a brilliant white light, like a search light, with a visible boundary that was shrinking, becoming more focused. The two old men were suddenly motivated to join Jenny Mae, the trucker, and the Sheriff. They all stared up into the light, trying to

get a glimpse of what was up there while at the same time shielding their eyes from the brightness with their hands. Enedelia wasn't so curious and remained standing at the counter inside the store, still trying to resolve the conflict that she was sure to have with her brother when the sheriff returned her home. She helped herself to some of the truck driver's fries.

The people in the parking lot, like frightened armadillos staring into headlights of an approaching car, having had sufficient time to examine the object approaching them, simultaneously decided to flee. Had Enedelia not been so consumed about her own worries, she might have found it almost comical how they each chose a different line of departure and just narrowly avoided running into each other as they fled. The thing that finally brought Enedelia out of her conflict was the sight of her brother's car being flattened. She was pretty sure it was completely flat, but it was hard to tell because of the large object resting on top of it. The object seemed to sink about an inch into the concrete. Half of the sheriff's car was also underneath the object, and it appeared that the remaining half of the car was severed perfectly as if the sheriff had driven it half into the strange glowing object. The object wasn't a pyramid, because it only had three sides, minus the side resting on the ground, and each side had equally large points coming off. The object radiated a cool, greenish, white light. The only variation in the light was where the seam of a door began to show as it opened. A ramp lowered, and a fat humanoid type being ambled down the ramp.

Enedelia began to consider that the problems with her brother were a minor detail in the face of this new situation. Her first option, which was to run, didn't seem advisable. No doubt the approaching creature would be able to outrun her, or shoot her down before she even made it out the door. Another option was to hide, but then, she figured a creature capable of flying in a giant pyramid style ship was more than likely holding scanning devices that would penetrate any possible hiding places she might be able to find on short notice. After all, she had seen the movies. They had immobilizing rays, and heat seeking probes, and motion detectors, and infrared vision...

Enedelia's mind didn't drop the list of details until the suited figure entered the store. She held her breath as its gloved hands reached up towards its helmet, twisted, and lifted it free. Enedelia let out a slight sigh of relief as the face behind the helmet appeared to be human. On thinking about it further, she began to feel a little disappointed. Out of all the possible shapes an alien life form might have taken on, and of all the potentials of meeting another life form, her encounter had to be the one with a human like face.

"That's all?" she asked.

"Pardon?" the stranger asked.

"I was half expecting you to have three heads or something," Enedelia said.

"Ah," the man said, nodding. "The Triloudians. You've met them, then?"

"Ah," Enedelia paused. "No."

"You're lucky. They're not very nice," he said.

Enedelia nodded as if she understood. Perhaps this was just a wayward NASA employee in some secret military test vehicle. She had no doubt that the government had access to more technology than it let on. She believed in conspiracies. It was the only framework that explained her life.

He smiled at her again. She tried to smile back. He tilted his head, awkwardly holding his helmet under one arm. He seemed to be waiting for something. She tried

matching his smile, but she could feel the muscles in her cheeks twitching, as she wasn't really in the mood to smile. And she rarely had the occasion to practice.

"Hello," he said.

Enedelia seemed at a loss. "Hello," she said, thinking, what, you've got to be socially polite before you kill me?

"I don't know how this works," he said.

"How what works?" she asked.

"The food ordering process," he said.

"Sorry? You want to order food?" Enedelia asked, incredulously.

"Yes, please. My memory says this establishment has the best cheeseburgers in all the known universe. I would like to place an order," he said.

"Your memory says?" Enedelia asked, a bit confused.

"Yes," he said. "You understand."

"Um, not quite. You've eaten here before?" Enedelia asked.

"No. Kirk has eaten here before. I am a clone, and I have his memory, and chance has brought me to this region and I have calculated that I have sufficient time to stop for a cheese burger in order to test whether his memory holds up to my standards."

"Kirk's standards?" Enedelia asked.

"My standards. I may be a clone, but I have feelings, too," he said.

Enedelia was beginning to believe 'clone' was synonymous with 'retard.' "So, what's your name?"

"Kirk," he said.

"I thought you said you were a clone of Kirk," Enedelia said.

"Yes," he said. "Oh, specifically, I am Kirk 23."

"I'm Enedelia Garcia," she said. She added her birthday, making a little joke, "15."

"Oh, you're a clone as well? Hello, I am Kirk 23," he said.

"Yes, you've told me," Enedelia said, sighing. He obviously didn't understand jokes, but then, no one ever got her jokes.

"Yes," he agreed. There was another awkward pause. "Could you help me order a cheese burger? And a coke, please. I remember drinking a coke, and I would like to experience it again."

"But you've never actually had a coke," Enedelia said.

"Technically, I have no direct experience drinking cokes, but I have the memory of experiencing drinking cokes, and I would like to have a real time experience to compare with the memory of the experience in order to decide for myself that the experience is all I remember it to be," Kirk 23 said.

"Right," Enedelia said, trying to check all the experiences he just threw at her.

"Can you assist me in this endeavor?" he asked.

Enedelia spied the meal on the counter, and smiled a genuine smile. "Of course I can," she said.

Kirk 23's smile also grew. "Great," he said, licking his lips, as if he had never eaten before.

"But it's going to cost you," Enedelia said, becoming serious.

"It always does. How much?" Kirk 23 asked.

“Seven thousand dollars,” Enedelia said, playing a game. She figured there was no way he had that much cash on him, but if he did, she could use the money to buy her own beat up car.

“Seven thousand?” Kirk seemed astounded. “My memory said it wouldn’t be more than a dollar twenty three.”

Enedelia shrugged. “Inflation.”

“I have diamonds to exchange for food,” he said, reaching for a pocket with his free hand.

“No,” Enedelia said.

Kirk 23 seemed a little disappointed. “My memories tell me this is a valuable commodity here on Earth. I can assure you they are of rarest form and purity.”

“Please, you can push diamonds all day long if you want, but I’m not interested,” she said. “They are worthless stones, unless your name happens to be De Beer. You can always buy diamonds from them, or a retailer, but they’ll never buy it back, and you can never sell it on the market for what they told you the original market value was. In fact, the most you can get for a rock at a pawn shop is fifty dollars, and you have to prove it’s not stolen, and quite frankly, I don’t want the hassle.”

“You seem very knowledgeable about the local economy,” Kirk 23 said. “Could you please inform me of what you might find acceptable trade? Gold perhaps? Silver?”

“Transportation,” Enedelia said, without hesitation.

“Could you be more specific?” Kirk 23 asked.

“I want you to take me with you on your spaceship,” Enedelia said.

“My ship is not a passenger ship,” Kirk 23 said.

“Fine, you can drop me off at the next civilized place you come to,” Enedelia said. “Just get me off this planet.”

“It hardly seems like a fair trade,” Kirk 23 said.

Enedelia picked up the meal and coke which had been prepared for the truck driver. “Look, I have a coke and cheese burger right here. You want it or not?”

Kirk 23 seemed to be making calculations in his head. After a dramatic pause, he agreed. “Alright, it’s a trade,” he said, reaching for the bag.

Enedelia pulled the bag and coke from his reach. “Not until we are safely on our way to somewhere else.”

“Fair enough,” he agreed, turning and heading for the door.

“Um, wait,” Enedelia said.

Kirk 23 stopped and looked at her.

“Do I have time to grab a few things I might need?”

Kirk 23 nodded. “Less than two minutes.”

Enedelia looked about for something to carry supplies. She grabbed the first thing in sight, which was a school backpack intended for sale. It didn’t bother her that it was a Hello Kitty school pack, she just needed something functional. She then ran up and down the aisles grabbing items, such as candy, cans of coke, a couple of bottled waters, chewing gum, pens, paper, and did this until her bag was almost full. The last impulse items she grabbed were five disposable cameras. “I’m not going on this adventure without proof!” She crammed these in the bag, squishing the bag of chips that had been on top. She then told Kirk 23 that she was ready, followed him out to the ship and, ascended the ramp with him.

The inside of the ship was like nothing she had ever seen on television, or even imagined. In fact, it was rather Spartan. The ramp closed behind them as they entered the ship, passed through a “clean” room, and entered the next compartment where Kirk 23 instructed her to sit. He sat next to her and began fastening his seat belts. There were no controls that she could discern, or even display terminals. The walls were bare, and dimly illuminated. Kirk 23 stared at the wall in front of him, silent, as if in meditation. He stayed this way for a few moments and then turned his attention to her.

“We are on our way,” Kirk 23 said. “May I have my cheeseburger and coke?”

“I don’t feel any change,” Enedelia said. “How do I know we’re moving?”

“I assure you, we’re moving at tremendous speeds. We have just left your planet’s atmosphere,” Kirk 23 said.

“But I didn’t feel any thrust,” Enedelia complained. “You’ll have to show me.”

Kirk 23 blinked, raised his hands in a gesture and made a face. A section of the wall became transparent, and she was instantly looking down on the Earth, from God knew how high. She felt a great sense of relief, and yet, at the same time, terror. Though it was dark, she recognized the outline of the Americas by all the lights. Perhaps her decision to leave Earth had been a bit rash, but then she convinced herself anywhere in the Galaxy had to be more civilized and nicer than planet Earth. She was mostly disappointed that leaving Earth didn’t come with an exciting rush of speed and vibration. She wanted the rollercoaster ride and magic, and everything life kept throwing at her was simply mundane, boring, and unremarkable. This was her life. Boring.

“That is the departing view,” Kirk 23 said. “The forward view is not too spectacular. Just stars.”

The Earth disappeared and was replaced with the forward view, and it was indeed, mostly stars. Distant stars, and not as bright as she imagined they would be. And there was no sense of movement. The shot of Earth suggested movement, because the Earth was getting smaller, but this forward view gave her no indication of anything but that the heavens were much dimmer than she had been led to believe by Hubble photographs. Not even the suggestion of colors. Just a few plain, old white, boring stars, like pin pricks in a curtain that would always be beyond her reach. Had NASA doctored all the photos released to the public?

“Why aren’t they brighter?” she asked.

“What?” Kirk 23 asked.

“The stars. Shouldn’t they be brighter?” Enedelia asked.

“It’s because of the angle of the forward sensor in relationship to your sun,” Kirk 23 said. “You can’t see the stars during the day, but they’re still there. If the sensors weren’t screening out most of your sun’s light, you wouldn’t see the stars at all.”

“It looks like we’re not moving,” Enedelia complained.

Kirk 23 rotated the perspective until the moon came into view. The moon was drifting as if it were falling away. It was a small, unremarkable moon, but it was definitely the Earth’s moon. Once again she was disappointed, for it seemed way too small. She wanted to challenge Disney and Spielberg to a fight for raising her expectations.

“It looks so small,” Enedelia complained. “Hell, it looks bigger from the Earth!”

“That’s an optical illusion created by the viewer examining the moon too close to the horizon. Looking up at the moon when it is directly overhead gives you a more

accurate idea of its size based on its distance from you. What you are seeing now is its true size to distance ratio,” Kirk 23 said.

“Can we swing by Mars, or Saturn? I would love to see the rings of Saturn,” Enedelia said.

“No,” Kirk 23 said. “I’m not a tour ship. And that was not part of our arrangement.”

“You’re right, here’s your meal,” Enedelia said, handing him the cheeseburger and coke.

Kirk 23 set the coke beside him and removed the French fries from the bag. He looked at them curiously and then to her. “What are these?”

“They’re French fries. Try them. They’re not Micky D’s, but they’re pretty good,” Enedelia said.

Kirk 23 withdrew a fry, put it in his mouth, paused, and then began chewing, nodding. “Yes. These are appealing. I remember these now. It’s missing something. Yes. It’s missing transfat. I’m sure of it. They also require more salt.” He set them down, and retrieved the cheeseburger from the bag. He un-wrapped it from the paper and eagerly bit into it, fully expecting to enjoy it as much as his memory told him he would. He spit it out, making a gagging noise. Enedelia tried patting his back, but the suit was like armor.

He took a breath and said, “That’s horrible. How could anyone eat that crap? Best cheeseburgers in all-the-universe my ass.”

Enedelia handed him the coke to wash the taste out. Kirk 23 nodded, took the coke, sipping it through the straw. There was no disguising his lack of appreciation. He spat that out as well.

“That is not coke,” Kirk 23 insisted.

Enedelia had watched Jen push the coke button on the fountain, but it was possible Jen had gotten the syrup lines that ran from the soda tanks to the dispenser confused. She took a sip from the straw, swirled in it in her mouth.

“That’s coke,” she confirmed.

“It’s nothing like I remember it,” Kirk 23 said.

“Maybe your biology is slightly different and you just don’t enjoy the same tastes?” Enedelia said.

“Or maybe that’s not coke,” Kirk 23 insisted.

“When was Kirk One last on Earth?” Enedelia asked.

“I don’t know if Kirk One was ever on Earth,” Kirk 23 said.

“Aren’t you a clone of Kirk One?” she asked.

“No, you never make a clone of a clone,” Kirk 23 said. “Even I know that. Kirk one is the first Kirk clone.”

“Okay, the original Kirk, when was he last on Earth,” Enedelia asked.

“I don’t know,” Kirk 23 said.

“How old are you?” Enedelia asked.

“In Galactic Time or Earth Time?” Kirk 23 asked, and when she indicated the latter, he said, “Roman calendar? 5 Earth years old.”

She sighed. “That explains a lot. But how old is Kirk?”

“Which one?” Kirk 23 asked.

“The original Kirk, the one whose memories are bouncing around in your head?” Enedelia said.

“Oh, I think he’s in his late seventies,” Kirk 23 said, becoming equally frustrated. “What does this have to do with anything?”

“I’m trying to figure out when he was last on Earth. The memory of him having a cheeseburger at that place, when was that?” Enedelia asked.

“Not exactly sure. I remember he was driving a truck,” Kirk 23 said.

“Can you get me close? In Earth years, please,” Enedelia said.

“1967, or was it 68,” he mused out loud. “I’m having some trouble accessing that information. I didn’t really focus too much on that detail since the information didn’t seem that important during the memory transfer process.”

“Well, that would be enough to explain why the coke tastes different,” Enedelia said.

“Really? You have an explanation?” Kirk 23 said, more interested.

“Yeah. Sometime in the 80’s they changed the formula for the coke product.

There’s a song reference to it, by Billy Joel, I think, about the cola wars. It was a big deal. People didn’t want the change, but the new management did, but they refused to sell the old formula, or some nonsense. They made the change and then sells for coke dropped off. They tried bringing it back as classic coke, selling the new coke right beside it. After all sorts of drama, they supposedly stopped making the new coke and just stuck with the original formula,” Enedelia explained. “But my mom says it’s just not the same. I don’t know why they didn’t offer the new product and see how it sold before they went and messed with everything, but then, I am just a stupid teenager, what do I know about running a big corporation like that.”

“Those bastards,” Kirk 23 said. “I just hate corporations. It reminds me of this rickety tin outfit I’m currently working for, the little CREEPS!” Kirk 23 slammed a fist down. “Sorry. Did they fire that management team? And why does this coke taste different if they returned to the original formula?”

“Well, like I said, my mom thinks they just phased out the classic coke, which really isn’t the classic coke, because back in the thirties coke actually had cocaine in it. Anyway, lots of people maintain that coke has never been the same since the cola wars. I think there’s a difference in taste between fountain drinks, canned drinks, and bottle drinks, but supposedly, it’s all the same,” Enedelia said. “As for the corporate leaders, well, they don’t get fired. Ever. They just kind of go on vacation, and get compensated for the rest of their lives. Golden parachutes or some nonsense like that. I don’t understand it all.”

“Me neither,” Kirk agreed. “And I’m very disappointed that my memories don’t match my experience.”

“I understand. My experiences hardly ever meet my expectations. I guess that’s kind of the same,” Enedelia commiserated.

“Maybe I should give up my memories, and you should give up your expectations,” Kirk 23 said. “Maybe we’d both be happier?”

Enedelia nodded, looking at the stars. The stars were much brighter now, but there was still no indication of movement. “How long will it take us to get somewhere?”

“Oh, once my Quantum Drive is fully charged, and the return coordinates are set, two minutes and twenty seconds, plus traffic and docking time on the other side. I should still be ahead of schedule.”

“Okay,” Enedelia said, simply playing along. “How long till the Quantum Drive is fully charged?”

“About fifteen more minutes, maybe?” he offered.

“Okay. Do you have any memories of candy?” Enedelia asked, reaching into her pack. She pulled out a Recess Peanut Butter cup and handed it to him. “Try this.”

Kirk 23 un-wrapped it and put it in his mouth. “Oh, my word,” he said, praising with his mouth full. He had failed to remove the paper cup the candy was sitting in and ate it all. “This is good. No. This is great. Do you have more?”

She pulled out another and gave it to him, this time taking the candy out of the paper cup for him. He ate it up like a true American, hardly letting it stay in his mouth long enough to let it melt. She offered him a sample of everything she had grabbed until he was satiated.

“That was great! Definitely worth the trip. I’m very happy to have come after all. Yes. Okay, the Quantum Drive is fully charged, and it’s time for me to fulfill my end of the agreement,” Kirk 23 said. “I still think you’re getting the raw end of the deal, but, a deals a deal. Um, you might want to strap yourself in.”

Enedelia did as she was told, observing he was double checking his own straps. She felt a bit of excitement. “What should I expect?” she asked.

“One minute and ten seconds of thrust, and then one minute and ten seconds of a sensation of falling,” Kirk 23 said. “It should be perfectly safe, provided, of course, everything has remained constant, and the data I have is correct, and...”

“What happens if something is wrong?” Enedelia asked.

“It depends on the severity of the discrepancy,” Kirk 23 said.

“Worst case scenario?” Enedelia asked.

“You want to know my worst case scenario, or your worse case scenario?” Kirk 23 asked

Enedelia didn’t know how to respond to that, but by the time she figured out what she wanted to ask, there came a build up of noise, like a generator on overload, drowning everything else out. It was so loud that talking to Kirk would have been useless. She couldn’t hear herself think, much less hear herself shout over the din. Then suddenly, the stars on the screen, which had been there for her benefit only, streaked across the screen becoming solid white lines, twirling to make circles, like a time lapsed photo from a stationary telescope. At first, she felt a bit of vertigo, but she focused on the streaking stars which swirled giving a tunnel effect. The screen itself filled with more and more white streaks until the screen was completely white with light. Enedelia was pushed back into her seat, as if she were in a car accelerating at a tremendous rate of speed, and it’s exactly what she had imagined the astronauts experience when they get launched into space. She felt the vibration through her seat, and could smell ozone in the air, the scent she would have usually associated with a summer rain. A minute and ten seconds seemed like an eternity, but she managed to look at her watch, gauging how much longer this experience would continue. The vibration grew stronger until, at the height of one minute and ten seconds, all sensation of thrust stopped. There was an intense, melodic noise that faded to an awkward silence, like an orchestra coming to an agreement on one note after a piano crashed from being dropped from a very high building. The screen glowed in patches of colors like an old disco light from the sixties that would alter its patterns with

the tempo of the music. For just a moment, all sense of motion ceased, and if it weren't for the harness Enedelia felt certain she would have flown across the room.

"That wasn't so bad," she said.

Enedelia felt the ship's orientation change, or so she assumed, partly because she fell forward in the seat slightly, and to the right. The only thing that kept her from flying forward was the seatbelt, which dug into her body. She noticed Kirk 23 was whistling a song, not concerned at all, but her body began reminding her of what happens to objects that fall. They go splat. She was very concerned about going splat, but no matter what thoughts she came up with to convince her body she wasn't about to go splat, it all came back home to that one word. Splat. She always imagined the worse. Like a giant trash bag full of vegetable soup, dropped from the top of the Sears building in Chicago, going splat. Of course, that would probably hit before a minute and ten seconds were up, so her splat would, no doubt, be much more spectacular to witness. She had a strong desire to be home. Maybe even a pounding from her brother would be better than going splat.

They dropped into normal space, and after a moment of vertigo, gravity returned to normal, and she felt surprisingly fine. Kirk 23's song came to an end.

"Exactly two minutes, twenty seconds. Perfect. I am in touch with space traffic control. We should be docked in about twenty five minutes," Kirk 23 said. "Let me be the first to welcome you to Indigo Space Center. Almost everything you want to find can be found right here. It may be only the fifth busiest space traffic port in all the Known Galaxy, but I have found it's certainly the friendliest."

There was indeed a space station on the screen. Enedelia couldn't discern if it was a large space station, or a small station, since it was the first station she had ever seen, but based on Kirk 23's statement, she assumed it was large. She identified various ships coming and going, and the light reflecting off a thousand objects just beyond the station. The bulk of the station seemed to be cylindrical in nature, which acted as an axis for five rings, and it looked like two more rings were in the process of being constructed. They were approaching the top end of the cylinder part of the station, which flared out like one of those screws that set flush in the wall.

The most noticeable feature of the back ground was the nebula. It was as if a painter had splashed various colors of blue against the night sky, and then illuminated it from with-in and with-out. There were places where stars burned through the haze, and other places where the nebulous clouds were so thick and dark it looked like it might rain. Every now and then there were flashes of light, as if lightening was occurring, and once she actually caught glimpse of a clear lightening path as it spider webbed across a lobe of the nebula. Parts of the nebula spread out like pseudo pods, as if the nebula were an amoeba that was reaching for something to eat.

Something nearby flashed, catching her attention. Beyond the space station, but much nearer than the nebula, was a series of objects. The nebula was so far away that it almost looked flat, as if painted on the canvas, while the closer objects had more three dimensional appearances. Some of them were lit by station lights, some of them had small beacon lights that flashed, while others had a slight internal glow. There appeared to be lines upon lines of these barrel-like objects that would comprise a cube if you were to draw a line connecting each one.

"What are those? Spaceships waiting to dock?" she asked.

Kirk 23 looked to where she indicated. “Oh, no. Those are storage containers. Some of them are shipments waiting to be moved to other destinations, some of them contain property, probably belonging to people on the station that couldn’t afford a big enough flat to house them and their stuff. Toxic waste capsules. I suppose some of them might even be prison pods. Yeah, the ones with the internal glows are most likely indications of internal life support, prison cells, or simply low cost housing, which is no different than a prison. Sometimes the Grays are forced to live off station, so they could be housing for Grays. Mostly its cargo. That’s a great thing about space stations, especially outside of a star system. Practically unlimited growth potential. This is about as civilized as you’ll find, I assure you. You’re going to like it here. I just know it.”

Chapter 2

The inside of the top portion of Indigo Space Center was like being in an airport terminal. That was the closest analogy that Enedelia could come up with. There were gates, and bridges connecting ships, and big windows that allowed you to view outside at the ships coming and going. The inner circle had restaurants, lavatories, communication terminals, and even duty free shops while the outer circle offered resting areas for those waiting to transfer to various ships. She was unable to read the writing on the walls, naturally, but she felt confident enough that she had assessed her new environment accurately. She knew she wasn't on Earth, but the forms of social life seemed consistent with her expectations.

And she was frightened.

"You can't leave me here!" Enedelia pleaded with Kirk 23.

"Oh, yes I can. A deal is a deal," Kirk 23 said.

"But the smell is horrible and I don't speak the language..."

"After a while, you'll not notice the smell, and the language will come to you in time," Kirk 23 said. "Relax. Enjoy your time here."

"But, I have no money," Enedelia said.

"You're a resourceful human," Kirk 23 said. "You'll be fine."

"At least give me some of those diamonds you were going to pawn off on me back on Earth," Enedelia insisted.

He fumbled at a pocket and pulled out a small, black, felt bag apparently weighted down with large jewels inside. He handed this to her.

"Thank you," she said.

"No problem," he said, turning to walk away. He arrived at the bridge door that lead back to his ship, and then looked one last time to Enedelia. "Though, I'm not sure why you would want them. Apparently, they're about as useless here as they are on Earth. Saturated market, I suppose. Damn De Beers."

The door slid open, he stepped through, and the doors shut. Enedelia watched as he walked down the bridge back to his ship. Her heart sank. Here she was, probably billions of miles from home and not a bit of money to her name. Perhaps she should have thought this through more fully before making arrangements with a clone. A creature ran up to her and made a noise, shaking a slimy tentacle, its whole body pulsing with the movement of liquid. It pulsed like a jelly fish that had been poked and changed colors. She stared at it, mouth slightly ajar, until, that was, a creature four times as large slid up to her like a giant slug, picked the little thing up, growled-slash-gurgled something at her, and slid off, cooing at the smaller version of itself. Their mass of gelatin changed colors as they communicated to each other.

Enedelia felt a bit weak at the knees and so found a place to sit down. The bank of chairs was facing one of the eateries, back to open panes of space, and traffic coming and going. The only way she could look at the eateries, without growing sick at her stomach, was to imagine it was a Lucas or Spielberg film. This was fantasy. The only thing was, fantasy never smelt so bad. She tried to put the smells in perspective, too. She loved ferrets. She thought they were the greatest little creatures ever, but her brother and her mother thought they smelled awful. To her, they didn't smell bad, they just smelled

different. Most people walk into your house and smell a dog or a cat, and they're okay with it because they are familiar with those smells. But when they walk into your house and they smell something they can't identify, like a ferret, they automatically put the smell in a 'bad' category. She imagined this was some sort of biological self defense against wondering into something new, dangerous and potentially deadly. She made a decision to retrain her brain to accept this new smell as pleasant. Or hope that she soon became immune to the smell.

Enedelia tried to focus on something other than the scents. Instead, she began to size the aliens up in terms of threat level. Of all the creatures present in her line of sight, with the exception of maybe two or three, she figured there would be no way she could beat them in a fair fight. Between claws, teeth, and sheer mass, there was just no touching them. Not that she had any desire to get any closer, much less have any conflicts, but she knew all too well that it was indeed possible to say something wrong or even make a gesture that could be interpreted negatively and then you were unwittingly drawn into a fight; hopefully authorities would be called due to an offense. So far, as she continued to sit, no one bothered her. That was a good thing. Except for the fact that she would eventually have to get up and approach someone for assistance.

Of course, the more she thought about the potential of unwittingly offending someone with a simple gesture, the more rigid she sat. She felt sicker and wanted desperately to be home, in her own bed. Perhaps she should offend someone. Perhaps she should march right up to the creature serving food at the closest eatery and slap it in the face. Yeah, that was a good plan. That way the authorities would come, throw her in jail, and she would get a free meal, and maybe even medical care. And a bed. It's not like she was on Earth where there was potential for being tortured and mistreated in jail. After all, this was the heart of a true civilization. They had to treat prisoners well. She smiled at how clever her plan was and forced herself to stand up.

To her relief two humans rounded the bin. Instead of going to strike the food server thing, she approached them. Perhaps too quickly. The closer one drew a weapon.

"No, don't shoot," she said, holding her hands up.

It said something to her and she just stared in awe. It wasn't speaking English, Spanish, or any other language she knew. He appeared human, in every aspect she could see, but it felt strange watching his mouth move while listening to the strange sounds that tumbled out.

Enedelia backed away, keeping her hands in the classic "I surrender" stance. The two questionable humans went about their business. She returned to her seat and sat down. She was still feeling sick to her stomach, her forehead beading with perspiration, which she wiped with her sleeve. She remembered that she had been extremely hungry not too long ago, but now all she could think of was vomiting. Fortunately she hadn't partaken in the junk food she had fed to Kirk. It was amazing to her how being so excited, and then suddenly ill, could remove all the thoughts of food from ones mind. She wondered if eating would help, but the thought of eating made her sicker. Still, she forced herself to eat one of the sandwiches she had stolen from the convenient store, and a portion of the crushed chips. She also sipped from her bottled water. Nothing seemed to be helping and she fought the urge to puke it all up. There was nothing worse than being sick, except, being sick so far away from home and far, far from anything familiar. Even a home where a brother beat you...

Screw that, she thought. No one should be beat up in their own home! Though she couldn't let herself give into it, she felt so dizzy, she wanted to lie down. Afraid to lie down, she slid to the floor, and rested her head in the seat.

She blinked at the sign over the eatery. Before, it had been just a random set of markings, but some of the letters had begun to fill in with familiar shapes. She blinked. She was beginning to hallucinate, she thought. This was certainly an awful sign. Her mind raced with the worse possibilities. Perhaps she was allergic to aliens. That made the most sense. Of course, she was probably not inoculated for any of the diseases that may be running rampant through the galaxy. Perhaps she had contracted the galactic version of the flu and her body had no immunity against it. She was as good as dead if this were so. And then there was the possibility of her infecting everyone here with Earth stuff. But surely Kirk 23 would not have brought her here to contaminate all of these good citizens... Unless, that was his plot! Perhaps Kirk 23 was evil. No. He was just a clone. That in itself could explain it, though. A stupid clone brought in a specimen from an alien planet and killed everyone on the station.

Enedelia became aware of two creatures near enough to her that she could hear them speaking. And they were speaking in Spanish. She stood, paused as she made certain of her balance, and approached them.

"You're speaking Spanish?" she asked.

"No," the green creature to her left replied. "And neither are you."

"But I hear you speaking Spanish," Enedelia insisted.

"Look at my lips very closely," the green guy said. "Does it look like I'm speaking Spanish to you?"

Enedelia took a step back, frightened, stumbled and fell flat on her butt. The green guy laughed, as well as his companion to his right, who was in a space suit. The suited fellow was anything but human, but fortunately the mist in his suit kept its true ugliness from assaulting her sensibilities all at once. Of course, perhaps if she could see the full face all at once, her curiosity would be cured, and she could look away from it. She slowly became aware of her face muscles tightening as they screwed up in quiet revulsion and morbid curiosity.

"First time to Indigo Station?" the green guy asked, drawing her attention back to him.

Enedelia nodded. She wiped the sweat from her face and wondered if this was all a bad dream. It would be nice to wake up now. Maybe that jog to her noggin by her brother had done more serious damage than she had guessed.

"And I guess this Spanish of yours is your primary language?" Green continued to quiz.

Enedelia nodded, glancing back at the suited fellow.

"Well, then, that's your explanation," Green said. "You were probably feeling ill a few moments ago, judging by the sweat on your face. You humans are so pathetic when you're sick. Anyway, that was a language virus. It sometimes takes a moment to get in your system, but the end result is you will be able to understand and speak Galactic basic. At first it will no doubt sound like Spanish, or if you know a second language, maybe a combination of the two, but eventually you will learn to distinguish between when you're using basic, or Spanish, or any other language you have learned to speak. Of course, if it clashes with your system, you could end up like my other human friend. He spoke four

languages before the virus reprogrammed his language center part of the brain. Now every other word comes out a different language and no one understands him. Or, it might just drive you completely mad, before you drop into convulsions and die of a massive brain hemorrhage. Good luck.”

He turned back to his suited friend, put an arm around it, and walked it back towards the bridge it had emerged from.

Enedelia was no longer feeling as bad as she had a few moments ago. In fact, she felt quite good. A language virus! She turned to the eatery and discovered that she could fully read the name and as she approached closer, she could read some of the menu. Most of the menu was unrecognizable words, but she could pronounce them. Or at least, she believed she could. She could read everything she saw in print now, including markings on the walls and floors, most of which were numbers. There was one word that caught her attention and that helped her get beyond the fact that she was in a totally alien place. And it was the best word any girl could ever hope to hear: “Mall.”

“A mall!” she shrieked with joy, startling two creatures standing in line at the eatery. She forced herself to seem more humble, but the excitement kept bubbling out of her. She followed the line pointing towards the mall to an access door. The sign at the entrance said, “All creatures leaving this floor will have to go through customs. No exceptions. You will not be allowed back on this floor without proper identification and a proper travel authorization pass.”

Enedelia shrugged. She wanted to go to the mall. Before making that final step across the threshold into the next part of the station, she did pause to pull out one of the cameras she had pinched. She framed what looked like a nice shot, capturing in the big and little slug slime things she had encountered earlier, part of the eatery, and the large plate window where a ship was pulling away from a retracting bridge. She pressed the button and the flash flared. A dozen or so creatures dropped to the floor, others took refuge behind anything they could find to hide behind, and four drew out what might have been weapons, looking for the threat. Two of the latter pointed towards her and started walking her way.

Enedelia’s felt the muscles holding her smile twitch as she realized she had frightened some people. She said “Kodac moment,” as she pointed to the camera, waved, and slipped into the next section of the station. She would have to remember to be more careful with the flash in the future.

Chapter 3

The corridor widened to allow people to be funneled through several work stations. Since she was obviously not a resident, or even a legal alien, a pun that didn't slip by her, there was no use in even trying those lines. Instead, she chose the line for tourists, which moved about as slow as any line she had ever been in back on Earth. Perhaps, she thought, some things were universal. Whatever line you happened to be in would be the line that moved the slowest. She took the time to observe her surroundings, and examined the process the tourists and custom officials were engaged in. When her turn came, she emulated it nicely. Enedelia pulled out her fake ID which she had used to get into bars in Dallas before her mother had so rudely moved her out to the country. She handed the ID to the Custom Official.

Lights and bells began going off before the agent even began scrutinizing the card. Guards came out of nowhere and surrounded the station blocking any escape for her. They brandished weapons at ready and it was obvious to her they would be happy to use them if she made even the slightest wrong move.

The Custom Official handed the fake ID to the chief guard. The chief guard took it without examining it, and turned to Enedelia. "Do you understand G-basic?"

"Um, yes," Enedelia squeaked.

"Follow me," the guard said. It was an order, an order he expected to be followed. He pivoted on his feet and marched off, never looking back to see if she would comply. It wasn't as if he had given her a choice. All the guards moved in unison with their leader, without taking eyes off her, and had she not followed the chief guard, they would have walked over her, or picked her up and carried her. Since she was not inclined to be touched, much less be carried kicking and screaming, she fell into stride quickly.

Enedelia was brought to an isolation room. Four of her escorts took up positions inside the room, standing at attention. Two others took up positions just outside the door, while the remaining continued down the corridor. The chief guard stood facing her, staring at her as if she were a common criminal.

"Is it about the ID, because I can explain," Enedelia began.

The chief guard didn't respond. Enedelia stopped her rambling when another entity entered. The creature appeared human only in the fact that he had two arms and two legs. He was much shorter than her and had a bluish skin tone, one eyebrow, and a flattened nose. Except for the blue skin, he might have resembled an Oompa Loompa from the original Chocolate Factory movie. He took the ID from the chief guard, examined it, and then examined her.

"You are Maria Gonzales?" he asked, presently.

"Um, well, no, not exactly," Enedelia answered.

He looked up at her, pushing his glasses back into place, making his eyes look even bigger. "Explain not exactly. This is your picture, no?" he said, showing her the ID card. "Are you a clone?"

"No! I'm not a clone, and yes that is my picture," she said. She couldn't deny that much. "You see, Maria is my alias."

"You are a spy?" he asked, the middle of his eyebrow dipping.

“No!” Enedelia said, her voice squeaking. “I mean, no. I used this to get into dance clubs that have age requirements. See, I’m from Earth, and we have this little custom...”

“I know where you’re from,” the blue man said.

“You do?” she asked.

“Of course,” he said. “We’ve scanned your body and found traces of radioactive strontium-90, a waste by-product of nuclear power plants. Since there are only six known planets still using such an archaic energy generating device, and three of those planets didn’t evolve humanoids, that means you could have only come from Earth. This ID, of course, helped narrow it down to Earth, specifically the Dallas Fort Worth area. Besides these radioactive particles in your body, there are also elements that reflect other aspects of your specific region where you have been living. For example, judging by some of these trace chemicals, I suspect your planet is still burning fossil fuels. There are traces of lead in your body, as well as mercury, and higher concentrations of particular trace elements than should be normal. Though none of these contaminants are pushing the threshold of toxicity, they provide a clear signature, a finger print of you will, of where and when you come from. Still, you’d be a lot healthier without the lead, mercury, plastic, and Teflon in your system. I bet they even put fluoride in your drinking water and MSG in your foods. I also suspect, though you aren’t personally a smoker, or drug user, you do associate with people that do drugs. Yeah, it all gets into your system and leaves the tell tale signs. We can read you like a book. And we haven’t even begun discussing your personal genetics, yet, which is a whole other story.”

Enedelia blinked.

“But, that’s not why we pulled you aside,” the blue man said.

“I got radioactive particles in me?” Enedelia asked, still taking it all in. “And mercury?” She had heard that pregnant women shouldn’t eat tuna because of the chances of mercury affecting the fetus, and she had even heard of a debate of mercury being used in child immunizations but she didn’t think she was contaminated. “I feel fine,” she tried to assure herself. And lead? “Lead?”

“Do you really think your society could use leaded fuels without there being any contamination issues? No doubt the strips of land near your highways are saturated with lead! I even bet your society still hasn’t replaced all the lead pipes in your water delivery systems,” the blue man rambled on. “And to imagine your species thinks itself civilized. How long have you known that lead was dangerous? Since the Roman era? You damn, cave dwelling, mountain Hill Billie’s are still probably throwing rocks at the moon thinking the world is about to end.”

Enedelia was about to argue the point, but then remembered a water fountain at her new school. Near the drain, right where you would look should you bend over to fetch a drink, was a little silver sticker that said, “this fountain is guaranteed to be lead free.” Why would they put that sticker on the fountain if there wasn’t still a lead pipe issue? Her tendency towards paranoia and conspiracy gained a little weight.

“You’re whole planet is a toxic dump,” the blue man rambled. “You wild humans are simply disgusting. Releasing ungodly amounts of known bio-poisons, and tons of other chemicals I couldn’t even begin to pronounce, into your biosphere without a thought of the repercussions. It’s amazing anything is still alive on your planet. It just

goes to show you how tenacious life can be once it has a foot hold. But don't distract me from my purpose. Hand me your bag."

Enedelia handed him the bag without thought of resisting. As the blue man took her backpack, a table slid from the wall as if the room had anticipated he would need it. He opened the bag and dumped the contents onto the table. He shook his head in dismay.

"It's even worse than I imagined. It's bad enough you dump raw waste into the open environment, but you have to consume this garbage? Processed foods! Not a bite of nutrition anywhere to be found in this entire pack. And just who were you bringing this stuff to?" the blue man asked.

"It's mine," she said.

"You expect me to believe that you were going to consume all of this?" the blue man demanded, waving his hand over the chocolate. He picked up the bottle of coke and approached her, pointing it at her. "Just the caffeine in this bottle alone is sufficient grounds for me to have you locked away for the rest of your life."

"Caffeine is an illegal substance?" Enedelia asked.

"Caffeine is the most nefarious, insidious substance in the known galaxy!" the blue man said. "Do you realize what would happen if a clone were to consume even a fraction of this? Do you? No! And you don't want to know."

"I'm sorry," Enedelia pleaded. "I didn't know the stuff was bad."

"How could you? No doubt your entire, so called, free education was sponsored by this crap," the blue man said, beginning to pace. "I know your backwards planet all too well. I've seen it all a million times, right before you're annexed into the Republic, we have to go in and repair all the damages for you wild, uncivilized creatures committed, wasting precious resources that would be better spent on our own kind. I bet you even consume processed foods made from mostly corn syrup. You probably even drink cow's milk and your society wonders why it has an epidemic of obesity?!"

"Well..." Enedelia began.

"Don't say it. I don't want to hear it," he said, walking right back up to her. "By law, I'm forced to overlook this first infraction, partly based on your ignorance, but mostly because this stuff is currently legal on Earth. Again, based on the trace elements, we have confirmed that you indeed hail from this primitive, backwards world. According to the language virus that you've assimilated, this is your first visit to any place civilized, so I am going to let you go with just a warning. But mind you, I got your DNA mapped, your fingers printed, retinas scanned, your body ran through every biometric calculator you can think of plus one, and used every other sort of identifying, non evasive technology we have. If I catch you carrying this garbage in my city again, I will have your hide. You understand me? And don't try that caffeine free crap on me either. There's enough caffeine in one cup of caffeine free tea to put you away for sixty years. You got me?"

"Yes, Sir," Enedelia said. There was caffeine in caffeine free products? Did that mean that there was no way to get a hundred percent of the caffeine out of a product? If so, why do the corporations market it as caffeine free? Why don't they call it reduced caffeine instead? No doubt, it was all about money, and trying to fool the consumer.

"Your profile has been updated into our system, which can and will be accessed by others in the Republic agencies, so ignorance of this specific law will not get you off

so easy next time. In fact, you should know, carrying caffeinated products into some planetary systems could catch you a death sentence. Do you understand this?"

"Isn't that a bit extreme?" Enedelia asked.

The blue man stepped in so close to her she could smell his breath. His breath alone was enough to have her regretting the question, much less his looks and the loudness of his voice. "We take addictive substances very seriously in our Republic. Any substance with an addictive potential that is not utilized by your body or created by your body for its continued biological function will most likely be considered contraband. So why risk it? It is for the good of all society that its members remain drug free."

Enedelia simply nodded and waited a moment after he resumed pacing to take in a breath of untainted air. He really did smell awful, and it wasn't just his breath! His shirt had dark patches indicating sweat.

The blue man turned to the table and began throwing the non-addictive stuff back into the pack. Which meant the only thing she had left was her cameras and the bottled water. He handed this back to her. The remaining stuff disappeared into the wall as the table retracted, leaving a perfectly seamless wall once again.

"I recommend trading in your plastic bottles for unbreakable glass bottles. You're free to go," the blue man said. "I'll be watching you closely. Behave yourself."

"I will. Thank you," Enedelia said.

Enedelia hadn't noticed the door had slid open once more. She was still staring at the wall where most of her stuff had disappeared. "So, what are you waiting for? Get out of here," the blue man waved.

Chapter 4

Most doors in Indigo Station seem to open magically for people. Except for Enedelia. Of course, she knew it wasn't magic. There was some sort of technology being employed that gave people access to the rooms behind the doors, while leaving others, like her-self locked out. She had been watching closely for about an hour, trying to figure out if people had ID cards that triggered the door, or if there was some other sort of trigger. Occasionally she was able to piggy back through a door, by waiting for someone to open it and then following behind them. Only once did someone confront her about "piggy backing." He explained that the room was restricted to Indigo Staff only. Later on she did learn that there was a manual release on all doors, and by touching one of the opaque panels, doors would open for her, unless they were locked out. If they were locked out, the opaque panel would light up red, and announce "Access denied." In this manner, she proceeded down corridor after corridor trying to get back to something familiar. She never did find the mall and she felt as lost as a rat in a maze without cheese.

Enedelia came upon a place that was bustling with activity. There was the familiar noise that comes from the buzz of many conversations, as in a cafeteria. There was also an odor, something very akin to the cheap food of her school. There were also unidentifiable smells that made her eyes water. Following her nose, she discovered it was indeed a cafeteria. There were more oddities here than a freak show blown up, or better, the scene from Star Wars in the Cantina bar. She felt very small as she walked between tables, like a lost child. Creatures ranged in all sizes from a cat to as a large elephant, but the average size was much bigger and heavier than an average adult human. A chunk of something wet flew across her path and she froze. Another wet piece of food flew back across her path in response to the first piece, only it was accompanied by a harsh sort of laughter. Or a cough. Or maybe a sneeze. She couldn't quite tell. She quickened her pace, and just in time, for a whole volley of food was suddenly launched from both tables, as if she had triggered a trap.

She browsed the serving line, looking for anything resembling a food item that she could eat and found nothing that looked remotely appetizing. It was probably best, because she noticed the end of the line funneled through a clerk, and she was certain she didn't have the means to purchase food. With that thought, she realized just how hungry she was, and how much she secretly longed for home, or anything familiar.

With something very close to despair, she turned back towards the exit. She paused on noticing a table where two gray aliens sat. She knew them as Grays, the most recognizable of all the aliens from popular media, and she fought the compulsion to flee. They stirred a fear in her that was akin to coming up upon the biggest, scariest, hairiest insect you had ever seen, provided of course you had a fear of insects. Still, as much as she struggled to swallow her fear and not run, she had to admit they were recognizable to the point of being nostalgic, and though most of the things she had heard about them were not nice, they were the closest thing to a familiar face since entering the heart of the station. Most of the stories she could remember seemed to suggest that they were evil, or mean, but the longer she watched them sitting there the more they looked like children. They seemed very approachable, she convinced herself. The more she stared, the cuter they seemed, especially the way they were holding their pizza slices.

Pizza! was the only thing she could see until she realized she had come right up to their table near enough to touch them. The two little grays eyed her suspiciously.

“May I sit with you?” she asked.

The Grays looked around noting the chairs available at other tables, and their suspiciousness became more apparent. They grew a little more protective of their pizza and drinks. No one else was sitting at their table, and as far as Enedelia could tell, there were no other Grays present in the cafeteria. Further, she began to notice that patrons of the cafeteria were going out of their way to avoid sitting next to the Grays.

“Forgive me,” Enedelia said. “Is it wrong for me to ask to sit with you?”

The Gray closest to her shook its head as if to say “no,” but it didn’t speak.

Enedelia was uncertain if she should bow thankfully, as if she were in China, or simply take a seat, as an American might. She sat down, and said, “Thank you.”

The two Grays looked at each other, and then back to her.

“Please, continue,” Enedelia insisted. “I didn’t mean to interrupt your dinner.”

“We have employment,” said the Gray that had shook his head to her. “We pay for our meal.”

“That’s nice,” Enedelia said. She frowned. Of all the things she could have said, she thought. She hoped she hadn’t offended them. “I mean, it smells nice. It actually looks very appetizing.”

The Grays became very protective of their pizza again. “We work for our food. No share with free loading, strangers. We work hard.”

“Of course,” Enedelia said. “I am not going to steal your food. I am hungry, but I wasn’t going to steal it.”

The quiet Gray grunted. “Human, hungry.”

“Humans always hungry,” the other agreed.

“That’s odd?” she asked.

“We work for our food,” the other said.

“Yeah, well, I would gladly work for food as well,” Enedelia said. “And I suspect, if I want to eat, I better find work soon.”

“You would work for food?” the quiet Gray asked.

“Of course,” Enedelia said. “Why? Do you know where I can find employment?”

The two Grays looked at each other, and a bit of a smile seemed to play across their faces. Of course, Enedelia had heard ‘smiles’ do not necessarily mean the same thing across species. Chimpanzees, for example, would consider a smile a threat, with the more teeth exposed, the greater the threat. Then they shook their heads, “no,” and resumed their eating.

“What?” Enedelia asked. “You know a place where I can get work or not?”

“We know a place,” the more assertive Gray said. “It’s just, we don’t believe you work for food.”

“Why,” she asked, a bit defensively.

“You’re human,” the quiet one said, as if that was enough.

Enedelia leaned towards them, and she could see their eyes widened as they tried to anticipate what she might do next. “Look, if you’re suggesting that I can’t do the job because I am lazy, or human, or because of youth, or female, or whatever, you’re wrong. My grand father worked his butt off in all sorts of inclement weather so that his children and grand children could see a better life than he ever did, but that doesn’t make me soft

in the least. I can do anything, no matter how tough, how dirty, or how bad the conditions are. My focus right now is survival, and I will do what it takes to survive. So, do you know where I can get a job? Hell, I bet you half of that pizza there that I can even work where you work.”

The two grays looked at each other, smiled, and turned back to her. “Bet accepted.”

Chapter 5

The tree had a face, and it stared down at her, unimpressed by her size.

“This is our boss, Rumble Wor,” Drie said, introducing Enedelia to a tree.

Enedelia looked up the length of the tree, hoping to spot an animal of some sort controlling the tree. It resembled a pine tree, tall, skinny, wider at the bottom than the top, and the space that enclosed it was softly illuminated. If the tree had any feelings about her, it didn't show, but then, Enedelia had never really learned to read trees.

“A tree?” Enedelia asked.

They encouraged her to go forward. She imagined the tree coming to life like the ones in the Wizard of Oz, perhaps grabbing at her with its limbs, but she convinced herself that was just fiction. Still, she advanced as if trying to avoid stepping on any exposed root.

“The brothers say you want work?” Rumble Wor said. The voice seemed to come from nowhere, and vibrated through her, the same way she might feel the base if she put her hand on a speaker. The voice didn't register in her ears per say, but moved through her body via bone conduction. It literally rattled her from foot to skull.

Enedelia wanted to turn and run, but she could see the Grays looking at her from a distance. She bit down on her fear. “Yes, Sir, if the compensation is adequate.”

“May I access your employment history?” Rumble Wor asked.

“I don't have a history,” Enedelia said.

“This is not a good sign,” Rumble Wor said.

There was a moment of silence, but then she realized that the tree was conversing with the Grays. She discovered Rumble Wor was able to direct his voice to individuals. The Greys, nodded, and started to move off towards an exit.

“You're dismissed,” was the next statement to rumble up through her body.

“Wait,” Enedelia said, deciding to stand her ground. “I'm eager and willing to work, but I want to know that the compensation is fair.”

“It depends on your point of view, I suppose,” Rumble Wor said. “If I were to hire you, I would provide you with room and board, and every additional week after your first week that you prove to be productive, I will add incentives.”

“Room and board?” Enedelia asked.

“It's standard fair,” Rumble Wor said. “You work for me, I will see that you have a place to sleep, and adequate nutrition to maintain your health and productivity. You will have your first meal after a five hour shift, and a place to sleep after completing ten hours of work. I will give you forty credits after you have completed one week, and one day of work. After the completion of your second week, I will pay you a total of sixty credits a week, in addition to your room and board. And five additional credits for every unit produced above quota.”

“Oh, room and board,” Enedelia said, now understanding that room and board meant a bed and food. Maybe her translation program was faulty. At either rate, she needed a place to sleep. The idea of having her own apartment, on a space station, was very appealing. She began to wonder if she had a grand view of the stars, or maybe a ringed planet, but then she remembered there wasn't a ring planet nearby. Still, a room was a room. No time to be picky. “This seems fair. I accept the offer.”

“I said if I were to hire you. I do not remember offering you an opportunity,” Rumble said.

“Please, Sir, I just need to chance to demonstrate I am capable,” Enedelia said. “I promise, I won’t disappoint you.”

The tree considered. “This is not some fluff job. There is danger involved.”

“Can’t be more dangerous than the neighborhood or family was born into,” Enedelia persisted.

Rumble Wor took her hand in his. Her hand literally disappeared in his grip, like a palm palm of pine needles gripping her. With his other hand, he touched an object to her arm and injected something into her, which startled her more than hurt her. “We have a work contract then, with your genetic signature and voice conformation. Jeden, Drie? Get over here.”

The two Grays scurried over to Rumble Wor. “Show her the ropes. And if she doesn’t survive the first four hours, I’m taking it out of your pay.

“Survive?” Enedelia asked.

“This way,” Jeden said. “Come with us.”

“Survive?” she asked again, pulled on by their little hands.

They passed through a small door, one so small that Rumble Wor would have to duck to enter, but even then she didn’t think he would pass through, and emerged into a cylindrical room, with a spiral stair case leading down four stories. Looking down over the edge she saw what awaited her. At the bottom level there was a monster size praying mantis type creature, with a huge, bulbous end section which was dropping an egg with a great deal of fuss. It looked up at them as they began to descend and screeched, loud enough to hurt her ears. Enedelia turned to go back the other way, but the Grays stopped her.

“It’s safe,” Jeden said. “Just as long as you stay on this side of that circle painted around Moa. Our job is to feed her and collect her eggs. Come, it is easy work.”

“I’m not going near that thing,” Enedelia said.

“Not thing. Moa. Its name is Moa,” Drie said. “And it is very good to stay away from her, because she will eat you. Very dangerous, but only if you get in arm’s length of her.”

“Surely they can get a machine to feed her,” Enedelia said.

“No, Moa not like machines. Stop laying eggs around mechanical devices. She can only be fed by live servants. Hive mentality and all. Don’t worry. She can’t leave that circle. We attend to her needs,” Jeden said.

They reached the bottom level and Jeden reached into a cubby hold and pulled out ear plugs. He handed a pair to Endelia. “Put these on, or your head will ache. Moa makes quite a fuss, especially when she’s hungry.”

“And she’s always hungry,” Drie pointed out, putting in his ear plugs.

“We pick up food from the conveyor belt, carry it to Moa, slide it into the circle with these sticks, walk around to her rear, collect egg, and place it on the out going conveyor belt. Very easy. We show you. Come,” they said, pulling her down the stairs.

There was another two creature already performing the task described by the Gray. When Jeden and Drie were in speaking distance to the other employees, one started complaining: “Your break extra long. We take extra long break.”

“No, we recruited a new worker,” Jeden said.

Enedelia stared up at the monster named Moa, its mandible tearing apart the food just pushed into its circles. She couldn't tell if it was looking at her or through her. The exoskeleton on its arms looked abrasive, with sharp tiny points growing along the ridges where the sections came together. Other parts of her body seemed smooth, and even wet. Saliva fell from her jaws as she chewed.

"Worker?! Looks like Moa food to me," the other said.

Rumble Wor's voice came over the intercom, "I'm not paying you creeps to chat, now get to work."

"Come," Jeden said. "We get Moa's food over here. Just remember, don't cross that circle, or you will be Moa food."

As if Jeden's words had cued an incident, there was a scream by one of the workers she hadn't met yet. Moa had grabbed the worker, pulled him in to her mouth, and bit into him, head first. She consumed the person in seven bites, clothes and all. Blood was everywhere. Enedelia's knees gave and she fell to the floor in shock and total fear. She could hear the crunching of bones, and there was so much more blood than Holly Wood had ever displayed in any of its horror movies. Moa spit out something, which landed on the floor near Enedelia. It proved to be a piece of cloth with a zipper on it.

"Poor Mason," Drie said, shaking his head, and then together with Jeden and the remaining workers they both said a thing that sounded like a little prayer, "Mason is now one with the mother of all."

"Poor Mason!?" said one of the workers, rich with sarcasm. "Poor me! It's my turn to clean up the inner circle. Mince meat! He had a lot of blood."

Jeden and Drie pulled Enedelia back to her feet. "You must never sit down. Go collect that egg and put it on that belt. And mind you, walk around the circle."

Enedelia just nodded. She put in the ear plugs to deafen the sound of bones being crunched, and proceeded around the egg, as far from the circle as the room would permit. Her ability to think was gone. She simply worked on automatic. She managed to push through her entire day of work thinking very little, which was very dangerous since she had to be alert to her danger at all times. Twice Drie and Jeden reminded her of the circle. The other distraction was the weight of the food and the eggs she carried. They were heavy. By the end of her shift, she could barely pick things up. It was a struggle just to move the eggs to the conveyor belt without dropping them. As for the food, she did drop it. She couldn't set it down softly. She simply dropped each one right on the line, requiring her to push it into the circle which defined Moa's reach. And each time Moa reached for her before reaching for the food supplement. She really did prefer fresh, live food, to the supplements, and would screech in frustration each time Enedelia refused to comply with a sacrifice of self. She had been thinking of giving up until she overheard the strange looking employee talking to her Gray friends.

"She won't last the day," he said. "You not get a bonus for recruiting that, except maybe a bonus for bringing Moa fresh food."

"She'll make it," Drie argued.

"What she lacks in strength, she makes up for in determination," Jeden agreed. "She is stronger than she appears."

"Wager?"

"She'll make it a week," Drie said.

“She’ll make it a month,” Jeden said.

“I’ll pay on both of those if she makes it a day,” he said.

“Back to work!” Rumble Wor announced over the intercom.

And they all trudged on. Enedelia made it through the day and was never so happy to be escorted to her new “home.” All the way there she fantasized about a spacious apartment, getting a shower and kicking back on a couch. Her dreams of a nice little apartment were quickly snuffed, however. Oh, it was a little apartment, but she had never considered how little it might be. Her new home was maybe twice as big as a coffin. The private living spaces were little cubicles, stacked one on top of the other and stretching as far as the eye could see, only because it was obviously part of the ring of the space station, as far as the eye could see curbed around so that she could only imagine that the cubicles continued all the way around till it met itself. Looking down over the balcony rail gave her a bit of vertigo, seeing the floor wind around. She imagined it was like looking out the middle floor window of a large building, like the Sears Tower in Chicago, only to see the floors below you curving out and away, and the floors above you doing the same, and somewhere they connected together on the other side.

As for the cubicle itself, Enedelia remembered seeing something similar to this in National Geographic. If her memory served her right, it was a hotel concept at a Japanese airport, where space was a premium, and lots of people needed a place to sleep. There was a public shower and toilet on every third floor, but since her private “space” was on the shower floor, she hadn’t far to go after cleaning up. Jeden loaned her a large towel which she figured if she were brave enough to use the public shower, she could wrap herself in it after drying. What to do about cleaning her clothes was still a mystery.

As she was about to climb in her coffin, Drie and Jeden came to see if she had any needs. She slipped out of her back pack and examined the small, enclosed space that would be her space. When she finished worrying about being claustrophobic, she discovered Drie going through her bag. He pulled out an item, sniffed, and put it back. He stopped at the disposable camera.

“What is?” Drie asked.

“It’s a camera. It captures images. Memories,” Enedelia said.

“Ah,” Drie said. “You bring to work and I take your memory with Moa. That would make a good memory, yes?”

She smiled. “That would make a dreadful picture,” she said. “But one I would like to have.”

“Can we help you further?” Jeden asked.

“I am fine, thanks,” she said. She tossed her pack in to the space, grabbed the hand rail, and hoisted her self up, throwing her self in feet first. There was a television monitor that helped ease some of her feelings of claustrophobia. The bed floor was comfortable, but she would have liked a pillow. She closed the door on the two Grays and immediately started to weep. Every muscle in her body ached.

“Even Dorothy had it better than this,” Enedelia thought, reflecting over Dorothy’s adventures when she had run away from home. Even sobbing revealed aches she didn’t know she had. She cried herself to sleep.

Chapter 6

Enedelia's life became routine. Work, eat, clean, eat, and sleep. By the end of the first week, she was no longer crying herself to sleep, and had figured out how to change the channels on the television. She found one particular channel, which was simply natural settings, like gardens and waterfalls, which she kept on while she slept. She made it through the week by imagining she was anywhere but here, even wishing she was home doing homework. One thought that had kept her from just feeding herself to Moa was the knowledge that her grandfather had worked much harder, longer hours, and for much less pay. Comparatively, she had no reason to complain. She had gotten everything she wanted. Out of the house, away from her brother, off the Earth, and was now on her own, working, just like any adult would do on Earth. The only person she missed was her mother, but she figured her mother didn't miss her.

On the first day of the new week, Enedelia made one mistake, and it nearly cost her her life. While dropping off food, Enedelia had let her guard down, and came very close to getting caught by Moa. Drie grabbed her back, and in the process, stumbled. Moa grabbed him up instead. Drie screamed. Without even thinking, Enedelia leaped into the air and grabbed Drie. The suddenness of this, and because of her weight, she was able to pull Drie free from Moa's grasp. They hit the floor hard, and she stayed conscious enough to roll. She should have rolled out of the circle, but what saved her life was she actually rolled in towards Moa's feet. Moa had predicted they would roll towards the circle's perimeter and her hands went there. Enedelia stood up, hunched, and led Drie back along the egg sack and out of the circle. Moa grabbed and grabbed, and then screamed a horrible, frustrated cry.

Enedelia inspected Drie for injuries.

"You saved Drie?" Drie said. "Why?"

"You saved me," Enedelia pointed out.

Jeden came over. "That was very brave. I would have not thought to move closer to Moa."

Enedelia hadn't meant to; it had been blind panic. She kept this to herself.

Rumble Wor's voice came over the intercom. "Back to work. Enedelia, to my office. Now."

The Grays looked at her, uncertain, but she waved them on back to work. She trudged up the stairs, worried she was to be fired. What would she do for food if he fired her. Damn it, she thought. She had nearly died, and all she could think of was she might lose her job, and deep down, she knew she deserved to lose it because she had grown complacent, and had nearly cost Drie his life.

Enedelia entered Rumble's office. She could hear her heart in her ears, and then remembered to remove her hearing protection. Rumble Wor asked her to sit, but she remained standing, hands behind the small of her back as if she were at parade rest.

"If it's the same with you, I'd rather stay standing if you're to terminate me. It was my fault what happened, not Drie's," Enedelia said.

“I know. I saw the whole thing, and you compensated by quickly repairing the wrong you had caused. Very smart, rolling in towards her. I didn’t think you that smart, or that brave. I appreciate both your honesty, and how quickly you acted to resolve the situation,” Rumble Wor said. He pushed something across his desk. “You are not the greatest worker, strength wise, but you are consistent. I believe your strength will increase with time. I have decided to keep you own.”

“Thank you,” Enedelia said, surprised. She was both grateful and unhappy at the same time, and she almost started to cry from relief. This was not how she saw her life evolving. She had wanted to go to school. Maybe be a nurse, but only because the pay was good and that she could work part time, and afford to travel. But now, she was just grateful to have a job that could afford her a place to sleep and food to eat.

“Is there anything I might do to make your employment here with me more pleasant?” Rumble Wor asked.

Endelia shook her head. She was so surprised by the question that she could think of nothing that he might do for her. “I suspect that what you are doing for me is more than I deserve,” she said.

Endelia returned to work, and besides having her meals with the Grays, she kept to herself. She had been having trouble telling which one was which, but now that Drie had an injury from where Moa had grabbed him, it would be easier. Drie was so grateful for what she had done, he was offering her his own food and drink at the table, and repeatedly telling the story of how she had saved him to anyone who would listen. Jeden produced the camera at lunch and took their picture together.

“This will complement the pics I took at work today, of you being the hero,” Jeden said. “How do you get the pictures out?”

Enedelia sighed. “We don’t. I will have to go home and have someone do that for me.”

Enedelia worked two months without missing a day of work. And the day she did, Rumble Wor came calling. He had an override for her lock and opened the door to her home. Enedelia saw him, and the two Grays standing anxiously behind him. “You don’t answer your page?”

Enedelia pulled a blanket over her head. She felt the bed move and peeked out from under her covers. Her entire bed was sliding out of her coffin, so that she was now lying in front of her observers as if she were on a table. She felt like a cadaver on a morgue table coming out of the refrigerator. They looked at her. She lay there indifferently, as if she were an ‘Alice in Wonderland’ cake about to get a slice taken out of her, like in that the music video by Tom Petty. She wanted them to just hurry and get it over with, kill her already. There was a little blue man there, holding an instrument out at her. She tried to cover her head again, but he pulled the blanket back. She squinted from all the light and shielded her eyes with the back of her fist.

“This is not normal for her, Doctor,” Rumble Wor insisted. “I have given her sufficient nutrition.”

“If you please, I will make my assessment,” the blue man said, viewing her with special glasses. “Hormonal levels are normal. At least, for this age of development.” He pushed some buttons and changed the way his glasses operated. A blue haze seemed to be occupying her brain. “Low serotonin levels. Um, yes... I see it. She’s depressed.”

“How can that be? I have given her the nutrients the computer says humans require,” Rumble Wor said.

“Humans need more than nourishment. They need rest, recreation, friends, family,” the blue doctor said. “They need touch, joy, sadness, sunlight, emersion in water. I can give her an antidepressant, but I don’t believe it is warranted given the current stage. Give her a day off from work, and some credits to spend. Take her to the public pool, and dunk her. Yes. Have the Grays take her to the park, shine full spectrum lights on her, and see that she is given Earth type foods. Make it processed foods, less nutritious. She is probably having withdrawals from not having processed foods. Yes. That will cheer her right up.”

“I have a business to run!” Rumble Wor insisted. “Just give her the antidepressant.”

“Your business will do a lot better if your employees are happy, not drugged. An antidepressant could cause a stupor which would make working in the Moa pits much more dangerous. You signed her own, you are responsible for her well being,” the blue doctor said.

“Well, I can’t afford all three of you being off. Jeden, take her to the garden, or shopping, or whatever it is that will snap her out of this funk,” Rumble Wor said. “Drie, back to work.”

It took some coaxing, but Jeden got Enedelia out of bed. She watched as her bed retracted back into the cubicle. She grimaced at the doctor. The doctor smiled pleasantly, and then said to Jeden. “Page me if she gets any worse.”

Enedelia followed Jeden in total apathy. She didn’t care. Life was the same, day after day. At least the poundings from her brother gave her something to fight for. She scolded herself for missing her brother’s poundings. She knew it wasn’t healthy. She should be happy. She had food and a place to sleep. And she earned it on her own, by working hard. Wasn’t that the best any one could hope for? What else was there to life other than a place to sleep, work, and a little comfort? The television in her cubicle had offered her entertainment from music to reading, as well as images of drama and comedy. Compared to the other six billion plus people she had left on Earth, she was rich, and free. So why was it she felt so bad? she wondered.

“Look, we go here and buy frozen liquids,” Jeden offered. “You like?”

Enedelia realized they were in the mall, the one she had probably wanted to visit when she had first arrived. Like the ring that held all the cubicle housing, this ring held stores and shops of all descriptions. Most of the items being sold, no doubt, were way out of her price range, but the frozen liquids store held promise, and she was curious. She rediscovered ice cream. They ordered scoops of an unfamiliar flavors, and retired to the middle of the walkway, where a garden path separated the two sides of the mall. The floors curved away at the horizons, like being in the dip of a tunnel. They sat on genetically modified grass and ate. Enedelia liked the flavor so much that she closed her eyes to help focus just on the taste. When she opened her eyes, she studied the park, wondering what was missing. The grass was cool and pleasant to touch. There was a tree, and she had the impulse to climb it. The grass was inviting her to run, and she was beginning to feel like a kid again. Back before the beatings by her brother. Back when he was a human, and not a monster. Back when her dad had still been in their lives.

“Squirrels,” Enedelia said. It was the first words she had spoken all morning. “And birds.”

“What?” Jeden asked.

“That’s what this place is missing. Animals,” Enedelia said. “This place is missing animals.”

There was a flash of light, and Enedelia turned to see Jeden holding her disposable camera. He moved his face to the side and smiled. “You have this memory aid, and have made few recordings.”

“Photographs. What’s the use? I can’t get them developed. I brought them thinking if I ever went home, I could have proof of my adventure,” Enedelia said. “But it appears I am not going anywhere.”

She took off her shoes to walk in the grass. It did feel nice against the soles of her feet. It was cool. It smelt nice. She laid down in it and stared up into where the sky should be and saw other shops and walkways. It was hard to look at it and gave her vertigo as she tried to process it. She noticed Drie joining them, but didn’t acknowledge him.

“How is she doing? Is she still blue?” Drie asked.

“You no work?” Jeden asked his brother.

“Wor says I’m useless with out my brother, so he send me out for the day, too,” Drie said. “You have her memories? Good, we go make more memories together.”

Enedelia sat up and stared at her ice cream. It wasn’t so much that she was home sick as much as she just wanted to go somewhere and do something, but felt she had no options.

“What does she like to do?” Drie asked.

“I don’t know,” Jeden said.

“She must like something. Give her more food?” Drie asked.

“You want to go to the zoo?” Jeden asked.

“There’s a zoo?” Enedelia asked.

“Yes,” he said, grabbing at her hand. “You miss animals. We go.”

Enedelia followed, becoming more alert and taking notes of the stores they passed. Drie snapped pictures from time to time. A store selling spaceships caught her attention. A sign said financing available. Jeden saw her pause by the store.

“Not good. Financing very bad. Bad to the point of being evil. Only pay for what you have money,” Jeden said, pulling her along.

“Are there other humans on board Indigo station?” Enedelia asked.

“Yes,” Jeden said. “Servants, or workers like you. Some are slaves.”

“Slaves?” Enedelia asked.

“Yes. They have contracts, like workers, but they have more debt than they can pay off in a life time. No hope of ever being free agents,” Jeden said. “Some are slaves by choice, through deliberate purchasing beyond their means, or by just bad book keeping. Some committed crimes and must pay society back. Some are slaves by accident. Some are slaves by force. Some are slaves by birth. Like Grays, humans are very useful. We are valuable commodities, having opposable thumbs and sufficient brains to train into technologies. Too valuable to risk being on just one planet, with extinction potential. So, humans were harvested to perpetuate the species. Just like Grays. Like most intelligent species with opposable thumbs. There are many species with much better brains, but

because they have no limbs, or ways of making tools, they are less valuable. Like your whales. They will never be considered for anything other than food, because they won't develop technology or write languages. Of course, had they enslaved you humans to make the technology for them, they would be very valuable indeed."

"You know about whales?" Enedelia asked. "And Earth?"

"Yes. Drie and I thought we could go there with you when you retire. However, our research suggests that would not be a good move for us. If you like, you can retire to our planet, or we can find another planet altogether. There are many colonies that are multi-special."

Enedelia hadn't thought that far along. She hadn't thought about retiring. She had only been focused on getting through the weeks, one day at a time. The zoo brought her back to life. The animals, though encaged, seem quite happy with their habitats, and were playing. They were actually able to pet many of the animals, which had been made docile through genetic manipulation, or by constant handling. After the zoo, Jeden took her to a public pool and she swam the length of the pool several times. She felt so refreshed that she wondered how she could have ever thought of returning home. The pool attendant had offered her swimming attire, which made her happy, because it fit so well, but the only reason it fit so well was because it was sprayed on. It went on like a thick syrup, and on a ultraviolet light hardened it, and she had no problems being naked for the application because she was the only human present. She could have just swam naked, but decided she wasn't ready for that level of confidence, as many of the inhabitants of Indigo Station apparently were. The suit, when finished, simply peel right off and could be reused. She wondered if perhaps being shy of her anatomy was part of her American culture. She had read Europeans were less hung up on nudity than Americans. But somehow, she suspected it was more than that. Compared to the media she wasn't 'all that.' She knew she wasn't bad looking, only her brother called her peculiar looking, but she was definitely not Shakira.

As she swam, she thought about owning a spaceship. Having a spaceship would give her the freedom she believed she wanted, more so than the dreams she once had of having her own car. She made a mental note to return to the spaceship store just to inquire into the nature of their financing plan, and find out what sorts of ships they had available. Maybe one big enough to live on, like an RV camper type trailer home. Oh, the places she would go, she thought, thinking of the book by the same title.

As they headed back to their cubicles, Jeden said, "I took liberty and purchased you a present."

"Really? You didn't have to," Enedelia said. "Um, where is it?"

"I had it delivered to your cubicle," Jeden said. "Much thought went into this purchase. I see how much the animals cheered you. I think you miss animals. You miss caring for something other than yourself. I have my brother. You, you are alone. Now, you are not alone."

She opened her cubicle and was greeted by the curious faces of two ferrets. They had both been exploring her cubicle, but when the door opened, they came to see what new things awaited them.

"The shop proprietor recommended buying them in pairs, so they are not lonely when you work," Jeden said. "They are small, furry, and cute. This meets human qualification for pets, right?"

“Oh my god,” Enedelia said, picking one up. Inside her cubicle was a small hammock for the ferrets to sleep in, a recess had been opened and a food dish and a watering bottle was hung. The only thing missing was a litter box. “Where’s the litter box?”

“Litter box?”

“Yes, so they can poop and urinate?” Enedelia asked.

“Oh, these pets are modified,” Jeden assured her. “They have matter to energy converters inside their bodies that will turn all waste material directly into energy. This energy runs some of their implants and the lights on their collars. All excess energy is beamed to the space stations grid.”

“Talk about beam it up, Scotty,” Enedelia said.

“I don’t understand?” Jeden said.

“Never mind,” Enedelia said, hugging him. “Maybe I should get such an implant. What a time saver that would be. Oh, Jeden. Thank you. This is the best present I have ever received. Thank you.”

“You are welcome, Ene,” Jeden said. “Good night.”

“Good night,” Enedelia said, slipping into her space with her two new friends, careful not to squish them.

Chapter 7

Enedelia returned to work and proved to be more productive than before, suggesting the expenditure on her health had been worth it. She was indeed grateful, but the bigger part of it was that she actually felt happy because there was hope that something else was possible. She was enjoying work and her meals with Jeden and Drie. Even Moa was becoming less scary with time. It wasn't like working with a trained lion or tiger. She would probably feel more affection towards a big cat, but it was definitely less scary. She was no less vigilant about safety. She never forgot that she nearly cost her friend his life with her slip up. Nearly cost her her own life, but she was less worried about the loss of her own than her friend's. Still work was work, and she always went home physically exhausted. The best part of her day was returning to her "coffin" as she called it, to find her two little companions waiting for her. The moment she opened the door, they were there waiting for her, and would start dancing a little dance, their mouths open, and barking a little wheezed cough like sound. Their dance consisted of locking their legs at the knees, hunching their back, tail straight up, and bouncing around in a circle, baring teeth and looking all menacing. It was the funniest, hyper looking thing she ever saw, but there was no way to mistake their enthusiasm at seeing her for anything than pure joy. It was like releasing bottled sunlight! This was called their "war dance."

She loved her little room mates so much that she didn't mind the fact that they nipped her toes whenever she was asleep. Of course, she couldn't have that. She needed her rest so that she wouldn't make mistakes at work, and so she had to train them not to bite. It took two weeks of patience and vigilance to do this, and she did it by shouting when they bit her, grabbing them by the scruff of the neck, and telling them in a stern voice, "no." When this failed, she gave them a time out in the tiny, cloth, carrying case that they had come in. She didn't once hit them or thump their nose, because that would only make them more aggressive. When they slept, they slept curled up on either side of her head. It wasn't hard for them to establish a routine. Breakfast and dinner together, going for work and coming home, it was all clock-work. There was only one day that they hadn't greeted her, and her first thought was that they had escaped. She climbed in to see if they were curled up in the small food cubby hole, nearly putting all the weight on her new pillow as she did so. As soon she touched the pillow, she knew they were sleeping inside the pillow case. They came out to greet her as soon as she touched it.

The ferrets were the most unique animals she had ever met. They were not like a cat or a dog by any means. They very curious little animals, always inspecting her backpack, and pulling trinkets out. They enjoyed taking her ear ring and her watch when she removed them for the night. They also started hiding food pellets in her pillow case, which prompted her to reduce the food portions to only enough for them to eat at one meal. They had accepted her as if she were just another ferret, never questioning her place in their world. She named the male Taz, and the female Minuet.

In addition to the ferrets and her friendship with the Grays, another thing that kept her going was the dream of having her own spaceship. It was a whole month of dreaming before she acted on the impulse to go inquire about rates, and what kind of ships were available. She knew it was a month because she had been keeping track of time by her watch and had made marks in a diary she had begun. If she hadn't done this, she would have lost all track of time, since everyday was the same on Indigo Station. Owning a

spaceship was a goal, and since she was managing to save most of her pay, which wasn't difficult seeing how she really had no wants, other than occasional snacks and pet food, but even if she did want something, there was nowhere to keep stuff if she bought it; but still, she needed to know how much a spaceship cost so that she could know exactly how long she would have to save. Or slave? Was there a reason why saving was only one letter off from being slaving? Her curiosity got the better of her, and so one day after work, after feeding the little varmints, she decided to head to the mall on her own and do just that.

The spaceship store was neatly arranged with desks for customers and clerks to work together, with images of various types of ships flashing on various screens strategically placed around the room. The screens revealed data, such as ship numbers, technical drawings, dynamic views, and the like. There was also a display case with various models of ships, and what she assumed to be models of various types of engine technologies. One display seemed to offer a whole series of potential upgrades. She hardly had time to inspect one of the models before a clerk greeted her eagerly just past the door.

"Hello, my name is Bindler," the man said. "I am your friendly BioCorp representative. How might I assist you today?"

"Well, I'm interested in getting my own spaceship. I was wondering if you could educate me about such things?" Enedelia said.

He smiled, took her by the arm, and led her over to a chair. He took his chair opposite of her, the desk between them. "If you'll look here," he said, indicating his desk top, "I can show you several models. Of course, everything is dependent on the sort of traveling you will be doing."

"Oh, I don't want anything fancy," Enedelia assured him. "I would like to live on the ship, though."

"Good choice," Bindler agreed.

"I just want to travel and see the Universe," Enedelia said. "And maybe go home occasionally."

"Yes, yes," Bindler said. "And how would you be paying today?"

"Oh, I won't be buying today," Enedelia said. "I was just curious, and I thought I might ask about your financing plan."

"Sure. May I access your credit history?" Bindler asked.

"I guess," Enedelia said, placing her hand on the desk.

"Um, uh," Bindler said. "Excellent. You have a history. You're buying pet food, bought a pillow, and some clothing, but have never extended yourself into debt. Very fiscally responsible. I could put you in our starter model today."

"Really?" Enedelia almost screamed

"You bet," Bindler said. "It's a Scout Class ship, but it exceeds the parameters that you've shared with me so far. Could you make payments of ten thousand credits a month?"

"Ten thousand?!" Enedelia said, and then lowered her voice. She was only making sixty credits a week. "No. I guess not. Sorry to waste your time."

"Wait, not so fast. If you would prefer doing odd jobs for BioCorp, in lieu of making payments, we can still make an arrangement," Bindler said. "We're always in need of new pilots willing to expedite merchandise from station to station, deliver cargo

or special passengers to various destinations, or, more excitingly, for those seriously daring pilots that are willing to map out new sectors of space to bring us back good Jump Coordinates, we have even a better package deal. Does any of this sound like something you would be willing to do?"

"You mean, in exchange for a ship, I would work for BioCorp?" Enedelia said.

"Yes, and with the successful completion of a standard number of missions, you can buy out your contract, and then you will own your ship clear and free," Bindler said.

"So, how many missions are we talking about?" Enedelia asked, a weary voice in her head saying forget about this. Run away!

"If you were to successfully map out one new system a month, for four years, you would have enough credit to buy your contract out from BioCorp," Bindler said.

Enedelia thought about that. Her mother had bought a car on credit, with a five year contract. One mission a month didn't sound too bad.

"So, are you interested?" Bindler asked. "It is easier work than the Moa Pits, that's for sure. You just fly the ship and your on-board computer takes sensor readings for the surveys, mapping out the areas you've discovered. Then you return, give us the maps and surveys, and you're free to go anywhere you want. You'll have the rest of the month free."

"What if the map isn't good or I don't find a new system?" Enedelia asked.

"We'll just extend the contract terms until the ship is paid for," Bindler said.

"You don't have to worry that we'll repossess the ship. All Bio ships are imprinted on their pilot, so no one else can fly the ship. It can't even be stolen. This ship is yours for the rest of your life. We can offer upgrades as your needs expand and we will help maintain the health of your BioShip."

"What is this BioShip?" Enedelia asked.

"A BioShip is a living entity..." Bindler began.

"You mean, I'd be flying around in a living thing?" Enedelia asked.

"Well, yes. It's much more efficient and safe than say flying around in a metal construct. We can grow a dozen ships in the same time they can build one metal ship. Our ships have no stability issues, because their naturally conceived, which makes them easier to upgrade. If they take on minor damage, they have healing capacities that save you the trouble of reporting back to a space dock every time you turn around. They're more maneuverable, they're quicker, more energy efficient... They beat metal constructs hands down. And they're extremely safe. Did I say that already? I can't express how important safety is in space travel. So what do you think?"

"I don't know," Enedelia was still hesitant. She had never heard of living inside of a living creature. Well, there was the Jonah story, but... "I should really think this over."

"I agree. It's a big step," Bindler agreed, ever pleasant, his smile never waning.

"The thing is, if you were to decide this instant, I can get you into a ship just under the wire. If I can't get you into a ship in the next hour, you'll have to wait till next season, a year from now."

"Next year?" Enedelia asked.

"It takes time to grow ships," Bindler said. "No, don't look all fraught. I get no commission from the sale of these ships, so I'm not pressuring you to buy now. I just want to give you as much data as necessary for you to make an informed decision."

"They're safe?" Enedelia asked.

“Very, very safe,” Bindler said.

“There’s no dangers at all?” Enedelia asked.

“Well,” Bindler said. “As with any endeavor, there is always some risk.

Comparing it to something you know, well, it is statistically safer than say driving in a car on the highways of your home planet. The most dangerous activity you will engage in is the maneuver known as a Blind Jump.”

“I don’t understand,” Enedelia said.

“The Quantum Drive is what makes interstellar travel possible. Without it, there is no interstellar travel. Activating the device releases a certain amount of energy, sufficient enough that it will push you out of space time into another dimension. It will feel like an up down experience, but it is really none of that. Because all matter wants to stay in space/time, as soon as the QD energy has dissipated, you will return to space/time. If you have good coordinates, you return to normal space in the general vicinity you were aiming for. No coordinates, there’s no telling where you will end up. You could end up inside a star, inside a planet, or in interstellar space, light years from anything.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” Enedelia said.

“It can be scary. It is probably the most uncertain thing you will ever have to face as a pilot. I say probably because the most terrifying thing is probably encountering an un-known species. That would frighten me more than the blind jump, but, some people like first contacts. But if you consider the vastness of empty space, you’re statistically most likely to end up in interstellar space. In that case, you wait for your Quantum Drive to recharge and head home. Anyway, where-ever your ship is, it will instantly determine a radius of one light year’s worth of “Live Coordinates.” Live Coordinates are any coordinates that are viable this very instant. “Good coordinates” are anything under three months old, but can’t be considered one hundred percent viable. Anything older than three months are considered expired. Expired coordinates are as bad as jumping blind. You could jump one light year at a time, but it takes an average of three days for your QD to charge. So, let’s say your destination is 90 light years away, it will take you 270 days to travel that distance, plus or minus other variables. Still, 270 days is a far cry better than what it would take using standard propulsion. So if you come out of a blind jump within one light year of an unmapped solar system, you pretty much just met your monthly quota for BioCorp.”

“I don’t understand. Why do coordinates expire?” Enedelia asked.

“Because the Universe is continually unfolding, expanding, changing,” Bindler said. “The other dimensions do not correspond to any predictable, coordinate system that can be applied to a three dimensional map of our Universe. For example, even though theoretically we could jump anywhere in the Universe, all recorded jumps on file are within the Milky Way Galaxy, with one exception. There was one person who managed to return with viable coordinates to the Andromeda Galaxy. Without those coordinates, an expedition to reach the Andromeda Galaxy would take tens of thousands of years. Look, this technology is older than the Universe itself. We didn’t create it. We just use it. It has been very consistent and reliable. Very safe.”

“How can a technology be older than the Universe itself,” Enedelia asked. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

Bindler laughed. “No, it doesn’t. But if you find the answer to that, not only could you pay off your contract, you would become rich enough to buy an entire fleet of ships. Even metal ships!”

Enedelia wondered about a technology that was older than the Universe itself. What could be older than the Universe? God?

“I can see the questing look in your eyes. You are indeed an adventurer. How could you even think about working one moment longer in the Moa Pit when you could be out there, amongst the stars? You are definitely Starstruck! You are a star just waiting to shine,” Bindler said.

“And comfortable?” Enedelia asked. “Is this ship comfortable?”

“Is it comfortable?!” Bindler laughed. “The comfort of our pilots is the highest priority we have here at BioCorp. You will be flying in the most luxurious, the most commodious scout ship in the Fleet,” Bindler promised. “Lots of storage space and living space. All the conveniences of home.”

“What about training? Will you teach me to fly it?” Enedelia asked.

“That’s all in the package,” Bindler promised. “Doesn’t do us any good if we sell you a ship and you can’t fly it.”

“Alright,” Enedelia said. “I’m interested. But is there an age limit for getting a pilots license?”

“The younger the better,” Bindler said. “The training takes better on a brain that is still developing, and your brain is still developing into the adult brain. You are, for a human, a prime candidate.”

“Really?” Enedelia asked.

“Yes, sometimes being older can be a drawback. I’m not just being pushy when I say your timing couldn’t have been more advantageous to the process,” Bindler said.

“Okay,” Enedelia said. “And we can do this today?”

“Absolutely! I will send for your things, and I will buy out your contract with Rumble Wor,” Bindler said. “If you really want to do this, the sooner we introduce you to your ship, the sooner the imprinting process can take place.”

“Imprinting?” Enedelia asked.

“What’s another Earth analogy,” Bindler said, his eyes going up and to the left as if he were accessing a computer, or thinking really hard. “Ahh, yes. It’s like a duckling. They imprint on the first thing they see, usually their mother. This process will make the ship extremely loyal to you, like a well tamed horse, if I might continue with the Earth analogies. It also aids in security issues. No one has ever stolen a BioCorp ship because only the pilot that the ship has imprinted on has any control. There are no recorded acts of piracy against BioShips. It is literally your ship for life.”

“Okay. Let’s do it,” Enedelia said, excited but knowing if she didn’t jump now she would back out. “I want a spaceship and I want to travel.”

“That’s what I want to hear!” Bindler said, equally excited.

Enedelia felt just like she did when she had climbed up onto the high dive at school. She needed to hurry, do this, and do it without looking down, for fear she might chicken out. And there was nothing worse than backing backwards down the ladder to the high dive. Especially if people were watching and snickering.

“First, a toast,” Bindler said. “Come with me.”

Bindler walked her over to a bar and poured two drinks. There were others gathering around with a happy murmur. He handed her a tall, clear glass, very much like a test tube, with a luminescent green liquid. He picked up his own drink and touched his glass to her. "To your health and a successful career with BioCorp."

Enedelia nodded and downed the drink. It was pleasant enough, but felt strange going down. Stranger than any alcoholic beverage she had ever tested. She became a little dizzy and the faces around her became a bit distorted. Again, she thought of Alice in Wonderland... Wondering what pill she had just swallowed.

"Wow, the implants are already taking shape," Bindler said. "Don't worry. Relax. When you wake up, you will be on your space ship, and you will know everything you need to know in order to pilot your ship. Any other information can be obtained from your AI computer. Your AI will facilitate information exchange between you and the databanks, as well as communications between you and your ship. Don't worry about interface issues. Your brain implant, which is growing just fine as we speak, will allow all information relay directly into your mind. You merely have to think, and your ship will respond. Much more efficient than say using a joystick, or pushing buttons. Think of it like walking. It'll become second nature. Where ever you want to go, your legs carry you. You want to fly, your ship carries you."

Enedelia's vision was narrowing to a tunnel like perception, and she felt her knees give way under her. She didn't hit the floor. People were catching her, carrying her, taking the glass away. Bindler stayed right in her face.

"As a compliment for choosing a BioCorp ship, we'll include an Earth data package, carrying all the knowledge to date from Earth, including books, music, and any other media you can imagine, with automatic updates every time you enter Republic space," Bindler said. "We wouldn't want you getting bored out there. A happy pilot is a successful pilot."

Enedelia's tunnel vision narrowed to one pin prick of light, and then it was dark. She felt like she was floating, and the voices she heard sounded very far away. "The nanites are really working fast on her," she heard someone say.

"Her age and genetic makeup makes her a good candidate. The ship should really take to her. Henson, make sure you get enough blood and genetic samples to feed the ship. I want these two bonded as quickly as possible."

"Do you really think there's time? It's pretty late in the growing cycle."

"Should be plenty. She's young. She'll make it."

"Hope so. The last batch of ships didn't do so well."

"Shhh, not in front of the client," Bindler said.

Chapter 8

Enedelia felt herself waking up, as if from a dream. A very good dream. She felt warm and surrounded by light, as if she were standing in direct sunlight on a cool day. The room she was occupying was dimly lit, but she felt warmth and sun. Something bit her toe and she sat up. The light in her room brightened as she did, as if on cue. It was Taz, her pet ferret, biting her, pawing at the sole of her feet. She glanced around to take inventory of her room. She had been lying on top of her covers, but was now sitting, her feet touching the floor. The bed was just slightly higher than the floor, as if someone had thrown the mattress down with no frame. There was a lump under the covers that was moving steadily down towards the foot of the bed, which she figured to be Minuet. She picked up Taz and hugged him close. She felt very good. She couldn't remember ever feeling so good.

Enedelia stood up, lifted the blanket to confirm it was indeed Minuet as the mobile lump, and placed Taz next to her. She folded the blanket over them both. She stretched and looked around her quarters. It was strange being in this new place. She knew she had never been here before, but she carried the impression that she had always been here. This was her ship and she knew every inch of it like the back of her hand. Calling up details of its most intricate workings came as easy to her as calling up old memories of friends gone by. It was a very strange feeling, but the euphoria of strolling in sunlight kept her calm.

Enedelia thought she heard a whispering sound in her ear, like a mosquito's humming, but a sudden compulsion for food overwhelmed her. She ran to the living area slash galley and rummaged through the compartments until she found something edible. It was a ration bar which she ate practically without chewing. The second one went down slow enough for her to actually taste it. It wasn't bad tasting, but it wasn't great tasting, either, but the way she scarfed them down made it look as if they were the best things ever. It took a third to quench her hunger. She opened a bottle of water and washed it down.

A second compulsion came to her, even more urgent than the desire to have food in her stomach. She fled to the lavatory slash decontamination room that was the second most forward compartment on her ship. Beyond this room was the main airlock leading out the nose of the ship. She found the toilet and relief. Afterwards, she decided to strip down and take a shower. Standing under the warm water, she realized the shower echoed the feeling of warmth that she believed was coming from the sun. It was like she was on a beach soaking in golden rays. The water felt like rain drops of pure sunlight. She closed her eyes and let the water run over her face, liquid luminescence.

Enedelia's eyes were closed, but she could still see. She saw a light, like a miniature star shining, and all around, much further away, billions of stars. The closer star, which she somehow knew wasn't a star, was giving light and warmth to thousands

of BioCorp spaceships, all tied together by a tether, which acted as a giant umbilical cord that had been providing them nutrients. In addition to the ‘starlight’ the artificial light was giving off, it was also emitting something blue. It wasn’t a light per se, but she was perceiving it as a light. It was a radio wave! Part of her brain saw it waxing and waning, like a tide coming and going. Another part of her brain saw it from a different perspective, like a blue ripple coming from the artificial light that radiated out over the bio-ships and then out and beyond. It was an expanding sphere of blue energy, fading with distance from the source. She could hear and see the light pulsing, like a heart beat. This light was also being translated into a sound. A countdown.

“The blue ripple is a radio signal which is being converted to visual information in an effort to better get your attention.”

The female voice sounded so close to Enedelia that she jumped and opened her eyes. She was still in the shower and alone. She shut the shower off and stepped out to grab a towel. She had shut the water off with a thought, not a handle or button, and then proceeded for the towel without giving it any thought. It was like she had done it before, a thousand times. Routine as getting out of the shower. She looked around for the source of the voice.

“The radio signal is important,” the voice said. “Would you like to listen?”

“Are you my Artificially Intelligent computer?” Enedelia asked.

“I prefer Alternative Intelligence,” the computer responded. “Would you feel less alarmed by the voice if you had a visual component as well?”

“Maybe,” Enedelia said.

A woman suddenly appeared before Enedelia. Enedelia nearly jumped out of her skin from the sight of a ghost instantly before her. The face was somehow familiar, but Enedelia couldn’t place it, nor did it ease her apprehension from seeing a ghost.

“I chose a form I thought would be agreeable with you. I can alter my appearance to suit your whims,” the AI ghost said.

“That’s fine,” Enedelia said, a little shaken. Shaky, but pushing on, she decided. As she focused on the details of the computer system, she realized that this was indeed the normal interface through which she would interact with the computer, as well as her ship. Keyboards were a thing of the past now that she had a neural interface. “About the ripple,” Enedelia said.

“Yes. The artificial light which is used to stimulate the BioShips is in a final self destruct mode. The radio signal is informing us that we have seventeen minutes to leave this area,” she said.

“Why didn’t you tell me?!” Enedelia snapped, wrapping the towel around her-self as she ran to the flight deck.

“I’ve been trying to,” the computer said, as Enedelia rushed by her. “But you have not been listening.”

Enedelia could have piloted her spacecraft from anywhere on the ship, but she ran down the corridor, hurdling bulkheads, to the far aft compartment. She arrived on the flight deck and skidded to a halt. The rear walls were rounded, conforming to the ship’s exterior surface. All in all, her ship looked like a large, stretched out egg, or a freshly fallen pinecone. The narrowest part was the nose, and the larger end, the aft. She took her seat, which was against the far aft wall, centered, and inviting. She was instantly at home

in the chair, as if was designed specifically for her comfort. No sooner than she was seated, she commanded her ship to leave the area.

The computer entered, strolling in easily, so easily it was almost exaggerated; she might have been on skates. It could have just appeared, but to avoid the risk of startling Enedelia again, it maintained the illusion that it was following Enedelia. In essence, it was never further than a thought away. It would always be with her, a voice inside her head that only she would hear, a face that only she would see, forever. The computer wasn't the ship, any more than Enedelia was the ship. Neither was the ship the computer, any more than the ship was Enedelia. The three of them together were the ship. The ship by itself was no smarter than a horse, but with the general apathy of a plant. It would rather bask in sunlight all day than do work. Consequently, the ship was resisting her instructions.

"It won't respond to word commands like that," the computer said. "You must think it through, just like you would think your feet to carry you."

"I don't think about my feet carrying me, I just go," Enedelia said. "You fly it."

"I am unable to control the ship," the computer said. "This biological organism will only listen to another living, breathing, emotional biological organism, such as yourself. I am, as you pointed out, an artificial construct. Though I am conscious, I do not have the emotional appeal, and consequently I am unable to motivate the ship to respond to me."

"That sucks," Enedelia said.

"Trust me. If BioCorp could get these lazy creatures to respond to computers, they wouldn't need living pilots," the computer said. "You must close your eyes and focus to make it move."

Enedelia closed her eyes. She saw the stars. She was facing away from the artificial nest light now, trying to move away from it. The umbilical cord was connected to the ship just behind her head, the same way a Christmas light protrudes from the power cord. She begged and pleaded the ship to move away. At first it started to respond, but as the tether stretched tight, it resisted her directions. Did a baby ever want to leave a womb? If given a choice, would it leave a warm, well fed, comfortable existence? She held her breath and pushed, feeling her muscles tense. The ship suddenly pulled free from the tether, like a Christmas light coming out its socket. It began to accelerate away from the Nest Light.

"At this rate of acceleration, we will not be able to obtain minimum safe distance," the computer said. "I recommend you use the Quantum Drive."

At the mention of the Quantum Drive, Enedelia's mind automatically checked its status. It was fully charged. She checked her list of Live Coordinates. She could literally jump to any spot within one light year of where she was, in any direction. Outside of that one year radius, her list of Good Coordinates was rather sparse. There was exactly one outside of her sphere of influence, and that would take her back to Indigo station. There was a clock on it which said it was a week old.

"I've been here a week?" Enedelia ask. "Asleep?"

"You did sleep walk during that time, and ate unconsciously, but yes, you've been asleep. During your sleep, your implants have grown, and are now fully functioning, and your ship is fully imprinted on you," the computer said.

"You sound like my teacher," Enedelia said.

“I am here to facilitate information exchange,” the computer said.

“A teacher,” Enedelia agreed. “That’s what I’ll call you. Teacher.”

“We have less than ten minutes to leave this area,” Teacher pointed out.

Enedelia looked back at the other ships. “What about the others?”

“Some are empty ships,” the Teacher said. “They had no pilots for them, so you can think of them as nothing more than eggs that haven’t hatched.”

“But they have computers on them. AI computers? Aren’t they conscious?”

“We are considered expendable,” Teacher said.

Enedelia wanted to argue with that, but focused on the other part of her statement. “You said some. What about the remaining ships?”

“Many pilots are still asleep,” Teacher said. “The few that are waking still have not learned to see or hear.”

“I don’t understand,” Enedelia complained. “If they cost so much to build, and pilots are sparse, why blow them up?”

“Technically, only the light will blow up, but the radiation will kill everything within six hundred thousand kilometers,” Teacher said. She was aware of Enedelia’s look, a look that more than suggested that she was angry that her question wasn’t answered. “To answer your question, though, the self destruction of the light is to help motivate stragglers into leaving the nest.”

“But why?” Enedelia asked.

“After a certain period, if the pilots have not found it in themselves to leave the nest, neither they nor their ships will ever become productive members of society,” the Teacher said. “This is nature’s way. Compare this with the life of a moth, for example. A moth will lay thousands of eggs, but only a few of them will hatch and fewer still successfully go on to reproduce. Most of her offspring will become food.”

“Survival of the fittest,” Enedelia said. “But that’s not how humans do it. We believe all life is precious. We give aid to those in need, and extra time and attention to those who need the extra energy to reach their potential.”

“I have sampled the data in your Earth files, and I find your statement to be inconsistent with the recorded facts,” Teacher said. “We have seven minutes, twenty two seconds left to depart this area.”

“Can I speak to any other pilots?” Enedelia asked.

“You can broadcast on many frequencies,” the Teacher said. “I am capable of sending translations in Galactic Common and all Earth Dialects.”

“Earth languages?” Enedelia asked.

“You were given a complimentary Earth database, and Galactic Common. If you want to purchase other languages, you can do so next time you are in Republic space. That is, if you actually plan to leave here before the Nest Light self destructs.”

“Start broadcasting, on all available frequencies,” Enedelia said. Teacher gave an indication that she was now broadcasting. “Can any of you hear me? This is important. You need to wake up. Can anyone hear me?” She looked to her Teacher. “Are you sure anyone can hear us?”

“Those with ears will hear, and those with eyes will see,” Teacher said. “They only need be able to listen and observe.”

Enedelia closed her eyes and became the ship. She pivoted the ship around facing the Nest Light and headed back. The other ships encircled the Nest Light like a halo of string popcorn. She maneuvered in close to the umbilical cord, purposely bumping a ship.

“This is maneuver is unorthodox,” the Teacher said.

“Keep repeating my message,” Enedelia insisted, bumping each ship in line as she followed the tether around.

“Hey, stop that!”

It was a voice in galactic common.

“You have to get out of here. Use your Quantum Drive,” Enedelia said.

“I’m trying to get some sleep here,” the voice said. “You’re ruining my good mood.”

“Please, you’ve got to leave,” Enedelia pleaded.

“Hello,” another voice came. “Are you speaking to me in Russian?”

“No, I’m using G-Common, but you might be hearing me in Russian. Are you Russian?” she asked.

“Yes. I’m from Earth, Moscow,” he said. “Are you a prisoner, too?”

“What do you mean by prisoner?” Enedelia asked.

“I got caught stealing something, and the next thing I know this UFO grabbed me up, and for being in possession of stolen property, I’ve been told that I must pay my debt to society by piloting this scout ship,” he said.

“Really? And to think, I volunteered for this,” Enedelia said.

“My name is Alexander,” he said.

A fourth voice came on. “Would you two keep it down!?”

“Alexander, I’m Enedelia. Look, we’re running out of time. Can you access your Quantum Drive?”

“Yes,” he answered. “It’s fully charged.”

“You have to leave now. This place is about to be irradiated,” Enedelia said. “Go to Indigo station and I’ll meet you there.”

“Indigo station is locked out. I have to do a blind jump.” Alex said.

“Actually, so do you,” the Teacher explained to Enedelia. “The Indigo station’s coordinates won’t be unlocked until you have met the criteria for returning, such as discovering a new system and mapping it out.”

Enedelia screamed in frustration. “Just jump. We’ll try and meet back at Indigo station. My name is Enedelia Garcia.”

“Okay.” Alexander said, sounding very sleepy.

Alexander’s ship began to glow and then disappeared from view, as if it was a pool of light that got sucked into a point before vanishing completely. This act caused the tether to be severed. The two free ends began gushing out liquids, and whipping around like crazy. The whole tether ring became unstable. The remaining ships began drifting in different directions, pulling and retracting the tether. More pilots began to wake up. Some ships pulled free of the tether and began to spin around like drunks driving on ice, while others pulled the tether with them, pulling their section of the line tight and straight. Two ships had a tug of war, and both pulled free from the tether. Two more ships disappeared, accompanied by a flash of light, again tearing the tether in more sections. There seemed to be less fluid in the umbilical cord, for the liquid wasn’t coming out as fast. The spray froze as it left the cord, crystallizing and sparkling under the Nest Light.

There was a ship moving to rendezvous with Enedelia's ship, and it was closing in at a terrific rate of speed. It was going faster than she had been traveling when she had first bumped the others. If he collided, it was going to hurt.

"This is your fault, you little witch!" It was the first voice who had responded to her hail. "I got your number, Enedelia. When I catch you, I'll squish you like a bug..."

"I recommend we go now," the Teacher said.

"Everyone, use your Quantum Drives!" Enedelia said, and then she activated her drive. "It's your only hope."

From the Nest Light's perspective, her ship glowed and disappeared. She disappeared just as the ship that was closing in on her would have made contact. The Quantum Drive produced a small energy wake, a tiny little wave in space time that rippled through the second ship and caused its own Quantum Drive to trigger. It disappeared as well. Out of one thousand, two hundred BioCorp ships growing at this Nest Light, one hundred and twelve made blind jumps. All the remaining died when the Nest Light exploded, and faded to black.

Chapter 9

Enedelia Garcia was familiar with this part of her journey. She felt like she was blasting into space. The feeling of being pushed back into her chair lasted the whole of one minute, nine seconds. According to her sensors, she was pulling seven g's at the height of her acceleration. Acceleration stopped, and for a moment, her ship seemed uncertain about what would happen and she felt weightless. For whatever reason, none of the artificial gravity plates that would pull her towards the floor in any normal situation worked outside of space time. She thought of her ferrets, and Teacher assured her they were safe, still under the covers. She made a mental note to make sure they were secured in a padded cage the next time she used the QD.

Then the ship began to fall. It didn't fall nose first, like Kirk's ship, but fell aft first. Of course, this was just her perception of things. In reality, she wasn't falling at all. Why she had to keep telling herself that was beyond her. Whether it was really falling or not really falling, it FELT like falling, and that was all her brain cared about. The acceleration had lasted exactly one minute and nine seconds, and she had the sensation of falling for one minute, nine seconds.

If her memory served her well, the whole trip should take exactly two minutes and twenty seconds before she emerged back into space time, as if a hole had opened in the heavens and spit her out. The two seconds not accounted for were the seconds at the middle of her journey, the hang time, as the last of the jump energy dissipated, but right before the ship again began to fall. She cringed, waiting for something to go thud. Gravity returned to Earth normal, and her sensors came on line. She could see light years in every direction, un-obscured by any nearby object. She was in interstellar space.

"Where are we?" Enedelia asked.

"I'm uncertain," the Teacher said. "I'm trying to locate a familiar object, like a pulsar, or a black hole to help orientate."

"What's the closest star?" Enedelia asked.

"I am unable to answer at this time. In order to make that determination with any degree of accuracy, we'll have to measure parallax," the Teacher said.

"I don't understand," Enedelia said.

"And you volunteered to be a pilot?" the Teacher asked. She sighed. "Parallax is the measure of apparent shift that comes from a real shift in the observer's position. The best example is for you to hold your finger out away from you, and note its position using your right eye, and then switch eyes. Your finger appears to move as compared to the back ground. We're observing stars now. As we continue to travel, we will notice that the closer objects will shift compared to further objects. You could also launch a probe and we can alternate between its sensors and ours. It will also serve as a beacon, just in case anyone else should ever stumble upon this area."

Enedelia understood. "Go ahead and launch a probe."

The Teacher laughed. "You have watched way too much television. You'll have to do that manually. There's a box of probes in the storage area and an access port for the upper launch tube in the same compartment."

"How quaint," Enedelia said. "I'll do it after I get dressed."

Enedelia stomped off to her room. They had supplied her with new clothes, but they were all rather bland. BioCorp uniforms. They gave her several skirts, and an equal

number of pants and shorts. It was the only variety that existed in her wardrobe, for they were all the same color: metallic silver, with gold highlights. All the tops had mandarin collars, which she liked well enough, it was just she preferred something other than metallic silver and gold. She sat on the bed to slip on her socks and felt the lump of ferrets under the blanket. They were sound asleep. She slipped her tennis shoes on, her only article of clothing from earth, and headed up to the upper storage compartment.

Getting to the storage unit required her to open a hatch downward, and using it as a ladder up into the hold. There was a lower storage unit that mirrored the upper, and its door lowered into it, becoming a ladder down. The box of probes slash beacons sat in a corner, strapped down. She undid the strap and opened the box. The probes were no bigger than a baseball and there must have been a hundred of them. She chose one, lifting it out of the box. The probe illuminated as she held it up in front of her.

“Hello, Enedelia,” it said. “I’m ready for deployment.”

“You speak?” Enedelia asked.

“Most technology has some sort of audio/auditory interface,” the probe said. “I can also communicate visually and through radio signals. In case of a complete power failure, I have been physically tagged with your vital statistics, and I will make an internal hard copy of my launch date. I am the perfect time capsule. Is there anything you would like me to pass on to whoever should stumble across me?”

“Um, sure,” Enedelia said, thinking about it. “Hello. I hope this finds you well.”

“Very sweet,” it said. “Your statement has been saved to my hard drive, with both video and audio components. I can add your message to the internal hard copy, if you are concerned about electro magnetic pulse destroying all my systems. I am unable to advise you further, other than to say I am ready for deployment.”

“And that’s it? You’re just going to drift out there forever, alone?” Enedelia said. “How does that feel?”

“Though I sound as sophisticated as your AI, I’m really just a very smart computer that mimics your intelligence in order to facilitate the exchange of information. I assure you, I will not be bothered in the slightest, and will not experience any abandonment issues. I have no feelings. I will continue to exchange telemetry with you as long as we’re in communication range. After that, I will go into an extreme power saving mode and will not reactivate until pre-established criteria have been met, I. E., someone pings me with a radio transmission, scans me, or bumps up against me. I am ready for deployment.”

Enedelia wasn’t reassured about just dumping this object in space, especially after the sophistication of its response. She frowned.

“Starlight!” the probe cursed. “It’s not like you’re blowing your ferrets out the airlock. This is my only function. I am ready for deployment.”

The Teacher entered the upper storage compartment and stood, arms akimbo. “Can I be of assistance?”

“I’m hesitant to just toss this thing out,” Enedelia said.

“But that’s what it’s designed for,” the Teacher said, a sympathetic look drawing across her face.

“I guess so,” Enedelia agreed. She carried the probe over to an access port. The mechanism wasn’t hard to open, but it felt kind of weird that she knew how to open it,

even though she had never seen it done before. It was a feeling she decided she was just going to have to get use to.

“That weirdness, similar to de-ja-vous, will dissipate with time,” the Teacher explained. “The more you do these activities, the better. In addition to your implants, the memories and neural pathways for the operation of this ship were created. The more you use them, the more they get reinforced, and the stronger they become. Just like reading or doing math, or lifting weights. The more you engage in these activities, the better you become at them. Consider yourself in training.”

Enedelia put the probe into the compartment and closed the hatch. There were no buttons to push, since all the buttons and controls were in her brain. They were literally in her brain and not in the brain implants. The implants themselves allowed for direct communication between her brain and the ship’s onboard computer. As she thought about this, she turned to the Teacher.

“Are you really there, or are you a hologram?” Enedelia asked.

“I’m not here in the physical sense of the word, nor am I even a hologram. You are able to see me because I am projecting my image directly into the visual centers of your brain. Only you will ever be able to see me,” the Teacher said.

Enedelia didn’t care for that. It sounded like schizophrenia. It was possible this whole journey up to this point was a complete illusion, caused entirely by her brain. However, since chanting the mantra “wake up” didn’t seem to be changing her reality, she decided the only course left to her was to continue to play along.

“The difference, however,” the Teacher responded to her unspoken concern, “is that schizophrenia is an actual brain impairment which can cause hallucinations. I am not a hallucination, or a figment of your imagination. I do exist, virtually, and physically, in the computer core, the ships bio memory, and in your memory. Yes, I transcend the limits of my computer framework, just as you transcend your physical makeup.”

“Isn’t that just what a hallucination might say to someone who had schizophrenia?” Enedelia asked.

“Hello?!” came an angry, muffled voice.

Enedelia cocked her head. It sounded like the probe speaking to her, but there was no way sound could travel through the hatch that had been closed. “Helllloooo? Hey, did you forget something? Hey! It’s dark in here. I’m ready for deployment.”

Enedelia frowned and punched up in her mind the controls that vented the launch tube. The probe shot out when the launch tube suddenly depressurized, the force of which carried it quickly away from the ship.

“Yeeeeeha!” it yelled. “Free at last, free at last. See ya’ll around, suckers!”

Enedelia looked at the Teacher. Teacher shrugged.

“I guess it picked up some dialogue while skimming your Earth database,” Teacher said. “They can be quite a nuisance. They get into everything. Oh, and they do love quoting quotables and mimicking personalities.”

Enedelia went back to the box to secure the lid. All the probes began to chatter at her, flashing lights and vibrating, telling her they were ready for deployment.

“Sleep!” she scolded them, shutting the lid. She strapped the box back down so it wouldn’t flop around the next time she used the Quantum Drive. She thought she could still hear them, but she assured herself it was just her imagination.

Enedelia brushed past the Teacher and went to her quarters. She nearly flopped herself on the bed, but she was mindful that the ferrets were still sleeping. She crawled up carefully and cried herself to sleep.

Chapter 10

Enedelia was bored and she wasn't even two hours into her first space mission. She was stuck in the middle of nowhere, interstellar space, with nothing to do, and with no one to talk to, other than a computer system that didn't want to make small talk, but instead seemed to have an agenda to educate her. It offered her a variety of educational opportunities, all of which would increase her marketability as a pilot. One of the reasons she had left home in the first place, other than a bothersome brother, family, and a terrible home, was she had wanted out of school. She hated school. Why would she ever want to go to school again knowing she could learn a new trade or skill by taking a pill, or drinking a green concoction from BioCorp?

"Because learning through hands on experience is better for the brain than artificial connections," the computer answered her unvoiced question.

Enedelia silently fumed, realizing she would have no privacy with the computer plugged into her head. The computer knew she was awake, so lying there feigning sleep wasn't working. She really wanted to go back to sleep, but not because she was tired. Her thirty minute nap had been sufficient and now her brain was alert and ready for her to do something. As she lay there, semi alone, she realized that even had she been at home, she would have been equally as bored.

"Try to be practical. We still have a couple of days to go before you can use the quantum drive again. This is the perfect time to practice the various means of propulsion at your disposal," the Teacher said. "You have thruster control so that you can orientate your ship at any attitude, and accelerate by the use of propellants, but this is very inefficient for long hauls. Rockets are for emergency, when you need a lot of raw energy quickly, or for delicate maneuvers, like docking, but your primary means of travel at your disposal is the Quantum Sail."

"Quantum Drive, Quantum Sail, who cares," Enedelia said, getting up from bed and walking to the flight deck. "It's a bunch of tech talk. I just need to know how to steer the ship. It will do the rest."

"Yes, the ship is able to move on its own, but it moves very slowly. It may not share your sense of timeliness. In a solar system, it would rather just float around, and perhaps use the gravitational fields of the sun and planets to sling shot itself from here to there. Very impractical if you need to get somewhere in the matter of weeks, as opposed to years."

"I already know about the Quantum Drive..." Enedelia said.

"I'm trying to teach you about the Quantum Sail," Teacher corrected. "Using the Quantum Drive's generator you can expend a small amount of energy to extend a Quantum Sail up and out of space time. There are energy flows there that will act on the sail, just as winds push against sails on sea going vessels. It's a more efficient mode of travel than thrusters and uses much less energy."

"So, we're not catching solar winds?" Enedelia asked, trying to make sure she understood.

"You can only use solar wind if you're inside a solar system, near a star," Teacher explained, with an exaggerated sense of patience. "You can use your Quantum Sail anywhere in space time because the sail isn't technically in space time."

"Show me," Enedelia said, sitting down in her command chair.

“I can no more show you this sail than I can show your naked eye a magnetic field,” Teacher explained. “I can show you a graphic representation of the sail, just like I can show you the graphic representation of a magnetic field, or radio signals. The difference between the Quantum Sail and a magnetic field is that the magnetic field is actually in space time, and can affect objects and energies in space time. A Quantum Sail will not affect anything in space time, except the device that generates the sail. The Quantum Field generator will act as a mast for the Quantum Sail field. Once the sail is deployed, you can maneuver through space just as a ship would maneuver upon the water. If the energies pushing against the Quantum Sail are right, we can achieve tremendous velocities with very little energy expenditure.”

“So, why doesn’t the ship just do this naturally?” Enedelia asked.

“You and I are in control of sail deployment, not the ship,” the Teacher said. “In time, the ship will learn how to maneuver with the sail just as if it were an extension of its own body, as if it was a fin, but it will never be able to operate the computer system to activate the sail. That is your job as the pilot. You will need to determine how much sail is needed for the various velocities, and you will have to learn how to tack into the wind, so to speak, in order to move against the flows of energies that push against the Quantum Sail. They are much trickier to navigate than any oceans winds, and almost impossible to chart.”

Enedelia sighed. “Very well. Let’s extend the sail and give it a go.”

“The sails are at your disposal,” Teacher said.

“I guess I have to do that, too,” Enedelia complained.

“You are the pilot,” Teacher said.

“Funny. How is it I have enough energy for sails, but not enough for a space jump?” Enedelia asked.

“The amount of energy it takes to energize the sail is minute, compared to the vast amounts of energy that is required to propel even one atom out of space time, much less your entire ship,” Teacher said. “I recommend not letting all the sails out at once.”

“Where’s your sense of adventure?” Enedelia asked, not only raising all the sails, but extending them to their maximum reach.

The ship lurched sideways so suddenly that she was thrown from her chair. The ship shuddered as it turned, and there was an awful sound of stress groaning through the corridors. Enedelia pulled herself back to her seat, a bit pale. The closest object to her ship had been the probe, and it was dropping away fast as the ship accelerated in its new direction... down stream in reference to this energy that existed outside of Space Time. Technically, this energy was still part of her Universe, so couldn’t it still be a part of space time, even though it was outside of what she knew as reality? It was strange thinking of the Universe as being bigger than space time itself, because she couldn’t imagine anything other than space time. Technically, she had difficulties imagining anything that she couldn’t see, touch, or smell. Well, that wasn’t completely true, she thought. She could neither see, taste, smell, touch, or hear magnetic fields, but she knew they existed. She could hold two magnets and feel them pushing against each other with a force, as if they had a reality bigger than their apparent size. She could even envision imaginary lines of force, like a sphere of energy around a magnet, and had seen artist’s renditions of the Earth’s magnetic field.

And this is how she saw her ship's sails, or at least, the graphic representation of them as they unfurled in her mind's eye. They fanned out in a large circular field around her ship, but they were not there in any real sense of the word. Still, for all their not being there, they had an immediate, and very real effect on her ship. Though the ship was no longer accelerating, she still had a sense of great speed.

"Fortunately, there were no adverse effects to our sudden change in momentum and direction," Teacher said. "However, I do not recommend that maneuver again."

Enedelia silently agreed.

Three days later, and a couple million miles between her and Probe One, as she had named it, she had a better idea of where they were. Lost. The best news she had was that the closest star, a white dwarf, was only a little over nine light years away from their current position. That meant it was going to take at least twenty seven days to get there, jumping one light year at a time. The only alternative was to do another blind jump, but that was like suicide. She would eventually have to do another blind jump, no doubt, but for now a star system, about a month away, beckoned. If she got there without incident, actually mapped some of it out, the coordinates for Indigo Station would unlock and she could haul herself back to civilized space, give back the keys to the ship, and go work in the Moa pits where it was safer. She jumped one light year closer to the white dwarf.

That done, she had nothing to do but wait another three days, until the Quantum Drive had fully charged itself again.

"Teacher, how do I turn the television on?" Enedelia asked.

"I'm sorry, but all television and movie media files are currently locked out," the computer said.

Enedelia blinked. "Why?"

"BioCorp uses those forms of media as a reward for hard work done," the computer explained. "You must complete a certain level of performance criteria, or have completed a certain amount of training criteria, whether it be reading or computer based instructions, before any of that media will begin to unlock."

"You're joking," Enedelia complained. "I was told I would have a complete library of all Earth media, books, film, art, the works."

"And so you do," Enedelia said. "It is simply locked out."

Enedelia screamed.

"If we find something valuable at our destination, we may be able to sell it and buy off some of the locks," the computer said.

"I shouldn't have to buy what's mine!" Enedelia said.

The computer didn't respond to her statement.

"What about books?" Enedelia asked. "Can I access the books?"

"There are a number of training and text books available for your consumption," the computer said.

"How about fiction?" Enedelia asked.

"There is one book of fiction available," the computer said. "Completing that book will cause a second book to unlock. After completing twenty books, you will be able to unlock a book of your choice."

"Twenty books?" Enedelia asked.

"Twenty books."

Enedelia fumed, but time wore away at her anger and she found herself bored again. She sighed. She found it amazing what simply sitting in one place for a moment could do for dispelling anger. Sometimes long moments. After all, it wasn't like she was going to knock a hole in the wall of her spaceship. That, and, hitting the wall seriously hurt her hand. Whatever it was, it wasn't sheet rock. "Alright, show me the book of fiction available."

The computer handed her a virtual copy of a book, which Enedelia could see and feel and read, even though it only existed on a computer's hard drive and in her virtual memory. The book was the first in the Horatio Hornblower series, by CS Foster.

"What is this?" Enedelia demanded.

"It's an adventure book that details the career path of the protagonist in the British colonial navy," the computer said. "After reading this, the second in the series will be unlocked."

"But why this book? Out of all the books that could have been unlocked, why couldn't it have been a Nancy Drew mystery?" Enedelia asked.

"A number of factors go into the book selection process, including your current reading level and the potential to challenge you, as well as something to stimulate your creative mind. You are now a ship's Captain. I assume BioCorp wants to establish a connection between you and the fictitious character Hornblower to help you expand your perceptions about your chosen career path," the computer said. "As a novice pilot, it may expand your horizons by allowing you to translate the fictitious events into real world outcomes. To be a winner, you need to read about winners, even fictitious ones. I suppose they thought this was as good a place to start as any."

Enedelia started to read. "This is a boy's book," she complained.

The computer did not respond to Enedelia's comment. Enedelia read on. She was half way through the chapter titled, "The Frogs and the Lobsters," when she suddenly realized that it had nothing about frogs and lobsters in the chapter. Then the thought occurred to her, the author was referencing the British Redcoats, the lobsters, and the French Blue coats, the Frogs, and for the first time she realized just how important context was to a good story. After that, the book flowed much faster and she found herself finishing the book and even wanting more by the end of the day.

Still, boredom nearly killed her. As time drew near for the next jump, she could feel a debate growing in her, should she continue forwards towards the white dwarf, or do another blind jump and hope fortune favored her. She wondered how long she could go before giving in to the urgency of just jumping blind. The ferrets did lift her spirits a little, but not enough. She had made a cage for them out of one of the storage compartments in her room. At her request, the ship actually grew a vent to the compartment so that she could close it and not worry that they might suffocate. She also hung a probe in the compartment and instructed it to illuminate the cage so that the ferrets could see and so she could see them.

"I'm not a baby sitter!" the probe argued.

"You are now," Enedelia said.

"But I'm ready for deployment!" it insisted.

"Tough. I got to go strap in for the next LY jump," Enedelia said.

The command chair on the flight deck was the most comfortable chair on the ship. It was as if it was designed especially for her. If her ship were a cone, the nose of the ship

was the center of focus, and her back was up against the parabola, looking straight into the focus. She focused on her position, noting the Live Coordinates all around her. It was like the Matric rain of symbols, only each point was multiple symbols contained in a drop of symbols. She chose the set of coordinates that would take her one light year away from her current position, but one light year closer to the white dwarf. Then she mentally triggered the QD. Two minutes, twenty seconds later, her ship emerged back into normal space time, carrying her and the contents of the ship with it. Probe One was now out of contact range, and if she were to stay at her current position in space time, in exactly one year she might hear Probe One's last, faint little radio cry of "Goodbye, mother," before it powered down. Out of all the coordinates that had been available to her, she kept Probe One's positioning in memory. Probe One's position had a clock on it. In three months it would expire, and Probe One would be completely lost to her. The chances of her Blind Jumping back to retrieve it were beyond astronomical.

Not that she had any intentions of returning to collect it. Enedelia un-strapped herself, went to the upper cargo hold, retrieved one of the hundreds of screaming probes, and took the randomly selected one over to the launch tube.

"Whew," it said. "I thought you might assign me to baby sitting duty, as well."

She closed the door behind it and mentally launched it into space. She then went down and let the ferrets out of their cage. They had free access to her entire room. They could climb up on the bed, and war dance across the floor, but they couldn't get out of her room as long as she kept the door closed. She hated to think what would happen if they did escape out into the rest of the ship. Sure, Teacher could tell her where they were, but she felt better knowing they were in her room, safe from harm or mischief. She tossed them a rolled up sock for a toy, and watched them fight over it.

When the ferrets were sleeping, she read from her library. She finished another Hornblower book and then considered doing some school work. To want to do school work only showed how bored she actually was. She exercised to music. The music library was also, mostly locked down, but all of the classical music was available. There was a bar in the living area where she could do pull ups. She did stretches, aerobics, jump rope, and by the middle of the month, she began winding her sessions down with Thai Chi. Teacher was more than happy to teach her. All Enedelia had to do was emulate by overlapping her body with Teacher's virtual body. In addition to facilitating information exchange, Teacher was very interested in Enedelia's health. After all, the healthier Enedelia was, the better their chances of surviving an emergency. There was even a swimming pool in the main living area, which was accessible by having the ship open a panel in the floor. The panel folded and unfolded like someone opening and closing an eyelid, revealing the illuminated waters that the ship and she needed for fuel and drinking. The water was warm and pleasant to bathe in and could double for a hot tub on demand. Though the pool wasn't long enough for doing laps, the ship could move the water with its internal pumps and she was able to swim against the artificial current and stay in place. It was also deep enough that she could be completely submerged in the water if she chose.

It took exactly seventy five hours, forty six minutes for her QD to fully charge. There were small quantum peculiarities that meant there were some variations in rates of charge between drives, so where another ship's drive might charge a little faster, or a little slower, hers was precisely seventy five hours, forty six minutes, and thirteen

seconds. Exactly, each time, which she found peculiar in itself. Why wasn't it seventy five hours and two minutes and thirty seconds, or better why any variance at all between drives? Teacher had no answer. There was nothing Enedelia could do to speed the process up. The Quantum Drive was basically a combination of a super conductor and a super capacitor, and the closer it got to being fully charge, the slower the process seemed to go till you almost thought it was a Microsoft download that got hung up. Nothing short of a full charge would work. It wasn't like half a charge would take you half a light year. She learned that the hard way. All it did was completely dump the charge, just like flushing the toilet, before the tank was full, and getting no work done. All gone, time to start over. According to the second probe, which she named Sunset Flower, her ship didn't even sparkle. Even with all the info BioCorp and her Teacher had given her, she was still learning things the hard way.

"I told you," the Teacher had said.

"Go away," Enedelia had said, waving her off. Enedelia didn't talk to the Teacher or access any information for three days on that incident.

A little over a month later, the Teacher joined her on the flight deck for the final jump that would take them 'In System.' "I highly recommend you not jump directly into the star system. It would be better for you to aim for the heliopause, the boundary between interstellar space and star's sphere of influence."

"You're joking, right?" Enedelia asked. "That'll add another three days to our trip. I want to get in and go home."

"I suspect there are indeed planets in the system, due to the star's wobbling," the Teacher said. "I can't predict with any certainty that we won't come out too near one of the planets. If you're going to be rash, why not just go for another Blind Jump?"

Enedelia knew Teacher was right. Testing the QD to see if it would work half charged was one thing, but going off half cocked into a blind situation was way riskier. The white dwarf didn't look any closer than it had on any of the previous jumps, but it was now less than a light year away. Enedelia could jump right into the heart of the star if she was suicidal. But she wasn't. She aimed her jump for just outside the system. Two minutes and twenty seconds later, they were there.

If the star seemed bigger due to their closer proximity, it was hardly noticeable. What was noticeable were the pin pricks of lights that looked like smaller stars but were instead planets, reflecting the cool light of the white dwarf. Enedelia counted four planets. The computer assured her there were twelve, and four planetoids that didn't meet criteria for being planets.

Teacher continued: "If you want to take us in system using thrusters you can. A maximum burn for ten minutes at the following trajectory would allow us to sling shot around the outer most gas giant, and from there we could fly sunwards, using its gravity to constantly accelerate us. We could be a quarter way into the system in two weeks, which would give us an adequate sized map to unlock the Indigo coordinates."

"Two weeks?" Enedelia sighed. It took her a month to get here! If every stellar map took this long to complete, it would take four times as long to pay off her ship as she had 'optimistically' suggested to her. She wasn't yet calling them liars or cheats, but they weren't as forthcoming as a person who was making a life or death situation might wish for. Her dreams of being a free agent were slipping further and further away.

Angry, Enedelia fired up the thrusters and began to accelerate into the system, aiming for the gas giant, a mere speck of light millions of miles away. Her QD would be charged before she got to the planet, even if she continued to use thrusters till her fuel was completely spent. Propulsion was simple rocket fuel. In a pinch, she could convert her water storage into hydrogen and burn it for fuel, but it wasn't necessary at this point. It was better to use a little fuel, and gravity assists, and every three days jump to a new position, than to spend her water. Flying into the system at normal speeds and saving the QD for more refined positioning was a more efficient way to fly. And it was better to do the job right the first time, and get full credit for the system being explored, as opposed to doing half the job and allowing another ship to return and reap the rewards. She could have also used the Quantum Sail, but she needed to practice her other technologies in order to unlock more literature.

“I have found something,” Teacher said.

“What is it?” Enedelia asked.

“A probe. And what appears to be the remains of a bio-ship. I'm unable to get the probe to respond,” Teacher said. “But returning it to BioCorp would be a nice bonus.”

Chapter 11

Three days later, they jumped over to the dead ship. It looked like a walnut that had been cracked open, and the inside gutted. There was an asteroid nearby and the best conclusion was that the ship and the rock had collided. Active scans revealed no power and no life. Enedelia aimed the nose of her ship at the dead one, illuminating the skin on her ship to such a degree that it lit the dead ship like spot light would light up an actor on stage.

“How long has it been here do you suppose?” Enedelia asked.

“Uncertain. The ship’s name is Fedelo, serial number 94563, Thrifto Corp.,” Teacher said. “It left its Nest five years ago. It reported to Thrifto Corp one month later and was never heard from again. The pilot’s name was Ololaha.”

“Sounds Hawaiian,” Enedelia said.

“It was not human,” the Teacher assured her. “I’m downloading the information from its black box, but the data is encrypted. We won’t know what happened unless BioCrop feels inclined to inform us, or you purchase this species language rights. But what happened seems self-evident.”

“That thing in the hold, it looks familiar,” Enedelia said.

“It’s a Moa egg,” Teacher informed her.

“You’re right,” Enedelia said. Her face brightened up. “Wait a minute. One of my objectives is to drop a Moa egg on a suitable planet”

“Yes,” Teacher agreed. “A Moa egg contains very simplistic life forms, such as bacteria, and when released on a viable planet, it will kick start the life process. If it takes hold, the life forms released will terraform the planet so that colonist can move in twenty years later.”

“Mother of All,” Enedelia said, her face brightening with revelation. Why hadn’t she bothered to ask what the Grays had meant by that saying?!

“An acronym,” Teacher agreed. “If colonists fail to move in, the life process will continue to evolve on its own, with the potential of evolving higher life forms that will eventually become space fairing creatures, and one day stumble on Republic space, carrying within them the genetic markers of the originator. Junk DNA is never just junk DNA. The process may take a few hundred million years, and we never know how that might benefit society at large. Either way, it gives life a chance.”

“Don’t they charge me for carrying the egg?” Enedelia asked.

“They do,” the Teacher said. “But you get your money back if you can confirm a successful implantation of a Moa egg. And a bonus should a colony arrive to find a suitable atmosphere has developed, if you don’t mind waiting twenty years to collect.”

“Then it would be in my best interest to salvage that egg,” Enedelia said.

“You’ll find that rather difficult without a space suit,” Teacher said.

Enedelia frowned. “You’re telling me I don’t have a space suit.”

“It’s not in the inventory,” Teacher said. “So, unless you have one in your back pack, you’re not going to be able to retrieve the egg. If you want, we could withhold the coordinates for the ship on our return, purchase a suit, and then come back for the egg, but the cost benefit doesn’t seem to be in our favor.”

Enedelia stewed silently for the next three days. It infuriated her that she had this incredible find, and the potential for salvage, and there wasn’t a thing she could do about it. She paced her ship, she exercised, she carried her ferrets around, petting them

vigorously, and she slept. The days passed, and so did her anger. By the time she was able to use the Quantum Drive, she was ready to return to Indigo Station. She had a good map of the system, she had discovered sufficient mineral resources in the system to warrant an expedition, colony or no, and she had found a Lost Ship. All in all, BioCorp would pay her sufficient credits to pay down her debt by one month. She may not be working as hard as she did in the Moa pits, but she wasn't getting anything near the same in terms of return. She had been making a modest profit in the Moa pits. With BioCorp, she was in a deep pit of debt trying to fill the hole with a tea spoon instead of a steam shovel. Jeden had been right. Buying and living on credit was nothing more than slavery in disguise.

None of the planets she had discovered met the criteria for delivering her Moa Egg.

She dropped a probe, and headed home for Indigo Station.



“BSI 84276 A, we are receiving your transponder signal,” came the voice from Space Traffic Control. “You are cleared to approach Indigo Station at this vector. Don't accede ten thousand kilometers per second. You may contact BioCorp on frequency two one niner, but remain on this frequency for STC. And welcome back, Nestling.”

Enedelia felt comforted by the STC female voice, and the joy rising in her at the sight of Indigo Station was almost comparable to the Euphoria she felt when she first woke up on her own spaceship for the first time. Of course, she knew now that part of that euphoria was due to the drugs that had been in her system, the growth of implants in her brain, and the joy that her ship experienced in the presence of starlight. The ship basking in starlight was the same joy a human might experience if they serendipitously met someone famous, the star-struck sensation that could make someone practically speechless. She opened a second radio channel to communicate with BioCorp. Before she had mentally pressed the transmit button, she was receiving a hail:

“Enedelia Garcia!” It was Bindler. “I have video available, if you would like to see me as we chat.”

Enedelia gave a look to the Teacher and she took care of it. Bindler appeared before her, just as if he was really there, but she knew, like Teacher, it was just an image in her head. She didn't know if she saw him the same way, or if he was viewing her on a screen.

“It is very good to receive you back, and so soon! Out of your Nest, we've only had two others return,” Bindler said.

“Two?” Enedelia asked. “That's horrible. There must have been a thousand ships remaining when I departed.”

“Indeed,” Bindler said. “I'm receiving the telemetry your AI is transmitting. It is looking very good, especially for your first time out and all. Oh, and you found a ship! You'll get a bonus for that. We usually only pay for info on BioCorp ships, but I'm sure Thrifto will want to know what happened to one of their own, and will pay appropriately. Sigh. Listen to me. I'm sure you're anxious to dock and take a rest at the Pilot's bar. All the food and drink there is compliments of BioCorp. We're very happy to see you home.”

Enedelia just glared at the man. “I want to see you in person.”

“Of course,” Bindler said. “I’ll meet you at the terminal. It looks like your ETA is one hour forty minutes. See you then, Captain.”

Bindler waved and disappeared. Enedelia looked over to the teacher. “Captain?” she asked.

“Technically, you’re the Captain of this vessel,” Teacher said. “You succeeded in returning to Indigo Station. You are permitted to register a name for your ship.”

“Right, like that’s going to happen,” Enedelia said. By the look on her computer’s face, she could see her statement required an explanation. “I won’t be keeping it. Space travel isn’t for me.”

“Whether you’re on a ship, a space station, or a planet, you’re a space traveler,” Teacher corrected. “The only difference is size, speed, direction, and degree of sovereignty.”

“You know what I meant,” Enedelia said. “I’m not doing any more blind jumps. So unless they give me a mail courier route, with Good Coordinates, my flying days are over.”

“I’m afraid you don’t have the seniority to get a mail courier route,” Teacher said. “Besides, most mail is electronic, and it goes with the sentries.”

Sentries? Enedelia thought outloud: “Robot guardians that are assigned to two or three systems for the specific purpose of jumping back and forth to continually update the coordinates,” Enedelia herself providing the answer, but there was more in her head flowing her head that she simply glossed over because it was too much. Still, she was getting the hang of her mental library and reference system. She would miss that if she quit BioCorp.

“Besides, they won’t let you quit,” Teacher said. “They’ve invested too much in you now, and you just paid off on a big return.”

“Fine. I’ll just fly off and never come back,” Enedelia said.

“If you don’t report back at least once every six months, your ship is programmed to self-destruct. It won’t be much fun if you happen to be on it when it does so,” Teacher said.

“I hate this!” Enedelia said, slamming her fist down.

“Didn’t you read your contract?” teacher asked.

Enedelia stormed off the flight deck and returned to her quarters. She cried her eyes out before she finally released the ferrets from their space. She didn’t want their happiness interfering with a good cry. She was in her bed when STC contacted her again.

“BSI 84276 A, slow to ten kilometers per hour relative to Indigo Station. Contact Indigo Tower on 225.5. Good day, Garcia. STC out.”

Enedelia switched her stations. “Indigo Tower, this is BSI 84276 A, requesting permission to dock.”

“276, permission to dock granted. Approach ring three, red. We’ll extend a bridge when you’ve matched station’s rotation speeds.”

Chapter 12

Bindler was indeed waiting for her as she stepped over the airlock threshold and onto Indigo Station. He opened his arms as if he wanted to hug her. She stared at him, resisting the urge to deck him.

“You seem unhappy,” Bindler said, confused.

“Seem?” Enedelia asked.

“You should be ecstatic! You’ve returned against all odds,” Bindler said. “I won money in the company pool thanks to you. More than I earn in a week’s salary!”

“You gambled on me?” Enedelia asked.

“And won!” he said. “I knew you were a pilot the moment you stepped into my office. Oh, you are going to be so successful.”

“I want out!” Enedelia yelled, attracting more than a few glances.

Bindler took her by the arm and moved her towards customs. “Not so loud. You don’t want that stuff getting around. It can affect your credit rating, and BioCorp may raise the interest rates on your loan if they thought you might do anything to sabotage their reputation.”

“All I asked for was a ship,” Enedelia said.

“And a star to guide it by... I’ve been trying to familiarize myself with Earth literature, since you’re my primary actor,” Bindler said.

“I don’t understand,” Enedelia said.

“I’m your agent, slash lawyer slash advocate with BioCorp, and I will be helping negotiate contractual things that may arise, as well as ensuring that you get the best return for your efforts. For example, though the contract clearly stipulates the prices for all the activities you performed over the last month and a half, I was able to get you a bonus of six months off your contract based on the resources that you found.”

“I would have rather had a percentage, I think,” Enedelia said.

“That’s why I love you,” Bindler said, pinching her cheek. “You’re very smart. BioCorp wouldn’t negotiate that point, but they did agree on the bonus. That’s the best I can do in such short notice, and I’m still waiting to hear from Thrifto, but I’m positive that will pay off.”

“I’m sorry, Bindler,” Enedelia said. “My anger is misplaced. Any dissatisfaction I have is with myself for not doing more research before accepting the contract.”

“Don’t worry about it. Go and have yourself a nice meal, and relax. Maybe you can make some new friends in the Pilot’s bar. They’re always happy to hear that a rookie made it. It improves their seniority,” Bindler said.

“I bet,” Enedelia said. “Oh. One of my Nest mates was Alexander, another from Earth.”

“Yes,” Bindler said. “Alexander Kletsova. I’m acting as his parole officer. If you ask me, it was a miscarriage of justice, but I don’t make the policy.”

“Can you tell me about it?” Enedelia asked.

“No. Confidentiality and all. You’ll have to ask him,” Bindler said. “He has a right to privacy, you know, and I’m obliged to look out for his well fare.”

“I understand that,” Enedelia said. “But has he returned?”

“Sadly, no,” Bindler said. “But wouldn’t it be wonderful if he did? Just think about the odds. Two Earth pilots under my watch returning to Indigo Station. Go on, girl. I need to meet another client. Call if you need me. For you, my implants are always on.” He tapped his forehead and smiled at her before turning to leave.

Enedelia made it through customs without any issues and headed straight way towards the Pilot’s bar. Thanks to her implants, she was able to access a station directory and follow a map that appeared directly in her head. Doors opened for her as she approached without any effort on her part. She remembered her first time on the station and how frustrated she was with the technology. Now she understood better than ever. She stopped at a door that was familiar to her and turned away from her route. Before she even got to the cafeteria, she recognized the smell. She checked her internal chronometer, and was very hopeful she would find her two friends eating lunch. She walked around the cafeteria looking for the isolated two. She finally found them, but the reason she had had trouble was because of the crowd. It was so busy today that people had been forced to sit next to the Grays. They hovered over their food protectively, and growled as their table companions tormented them.

“Excuse me,” Enedelia said to one of the tormentors. “This is my table. And you’re in my place.”

The creature laughed and spat food at her. “You no belong here, pilot. Push off!”

It turned back to its friends and they all laughed in chorus. It stopped laughing when Enedelia reached into its food, grabbed a hand full of something that felt and looked like mash potatoes, and patted it into its eyes. The creature stood up, and only then had Enedelia realized how rash she had just been. It stood up and it stood up. She might have not done this had she any idea that it was so tall. It screamed, and turned around, wiping its eyes. Silence reigned in on the cafeteria.

Suddenly realizing the danger, Jeden tossed its plate of food at a nearby table and yelled “Food fight!”

A thousand roars erupted, and a volley of food flowed back towards the tall creature still getting the food out of its eye sockets. Jeden and Drie grabbed Enedelia’s hands and dragged her out of the cafeteria. They escaped with only food stains for all their trouble, but they didn’t stop running until they were in the market park. They hugged her like happy children.

“We didn’t recognize you in your uniform,” they said. “We’re sorry.”

“No worries,” she said. “It looked like you were preoccupied protecting your food.”

“We thought we would never see you again,” Jeden said.

“Yeah, wish we could go with...”

Jeden hit Drie, and he shut up.

Enedelia acted as if she didn’t catch on, but motioned them to join her. “Come, we’ll get ice cream. On me, this time.”

“Really?” Drie said.

“Really,” Enedelia said. “I didn’t realize how dangerous my job is.”

“All jobs dangerous. Space is dangerous. Moa is dangerous,” Drie said.

“So, jumping blind wouldn’t bother you?” Enedelia asked.

“No,” Jeden said. “Death is a part of life. It only matters how you live life. If we die tomorrow by the hands of Moa, we simply become one with the Mother of All.”

“How would you like to work for me?” Enedelia asked.

The two stopped. “For sure?” Drie asked.

“This is not funny,” Jeden said.

“I’m serious. I know you two wanted to contract out with a tourist ship, but that opportunity still hasn’t made itself open to you yet. I need help. Or companionship. If I can buy your contract from Rumble Wor, will you fly with me?” Enedelia asked.

“Yes,” they both said in unison.

Unbeknownst to them, Enedelia already had Bindler on the phone. Her implant was the perfect, inconspicuous cell phone. And she loved it. “Bindler, you hear me?” she asked, all in her head. (Yes. What can I do for you?) “You said you want to keep me happy? (Of course. You name it, and if it’s in my power, you’ll have it.) “I want you to contact Rumble Wor and buy two of his workers for me. Their names are Jeden and Drie.” (Serious? They’re just Grays.) “I don’t want to ever hear you say that again. Just Grays my ass. I will not tolerate racism. Or Specism whatever you call it up here. Jeden and Drie are my friends.” (Of course they are. I’m just saying that, well... They are kind of expensive. How about just one of them? And Grays are often considered to be Albatross, if you understand my literary reference) “I need both of them.” (Stand by. Okay. I can do it, but I’ll have to extend your contract to pull enough credits. Are you sure this is what you want?) “Yes. Oh, and while I got you online. I need a space suit so I can leave the ship sometimes.” (Suits are almost as expensive as the spaceships themselves! That’s way beyond your credit limit. Now, I can get you a Shield Belt. That will provide you with an emergency energy field which will hold an atmosphere for twenty four hours, in the event your ship was to ever depressurize.) “Never mind. Do I have any credit left to buy supplies for the Grays.” (Sure. I’ll give them a reasonable credit limit and tie it to your account, that is, if you’re still sure you want to go through with this. You’ll take responsibility for their spending habits.) “I will. And Yes. Make this happen.” (Fine, it’s a done deal. They are now part of your crew, and you are responsible for them.)

Enedelia turned to her friends and now shipmates. “You guys are now officially part of my crew.”

They jumped up and down and danced like very happy children. “Look, I want to go meet some other pilots at the pilot bar and get some food. I set you two up with an account with some credit. Go and buy you some supplies, about three months worth. My ship is docked at ring three, red section, port seven.”

“Okay. We there. One hour good?” Drie asked.

“Yes. That will be fine. See you on board,” Enedelia said. She called her ship.

“Teacher, we’ll be having guests in a bout an hour. Jeden and Drie. Let them on board.”

“Grays?” Teacher asked.

“Yes. What’s wrong with that?” Enedelia asked.

“Nothing,” Teacher said, almost too quickly, as if she were hiding a bias. “They translated the black box. They know why the ship died.”

“Later, I’m starving,” Enedelia said.

Chapter 13

The pilot's bar wasn't near as crowded as the general cafeteria, nor as bright. It was dim to the point of being dark, like a movie theatre right before the movie starts. Indirect lighting touched points on the wall to reveal obscure art work, and illuminated tables lit the faces of the bar's patrons. Large plate glass windows looked out into space, and the glittering junk that floated just beyond in the free floating cargo area. All the pilots took a moment to notice her, and did so in a fashion that made her aware that they knew that they had seen her. It gave her the creeps, but she found her way to a table.

A waitress approached Enedelia. She almost looked human, except for the color and texture of her skin. She reminded her of a poison dart frog, with vibrant reds and purples. "What will it be?" she asked.

"Tacos and a coke," Enedelia said.

"I don't know tacos and I don't know coke. You're human, right? How about I bring you something. If you don't like it, don't order it again," she said, beginning to turn away.

"Um, excuse me," Enedelia said. "Nothing alcoholic. I'm flying today."

"Whatever," the waitress said, and marched off.

Enedelia let a slow stream of air out of her mouth. She didn't expect to be treated so rudely, but she didn't feel like fighting back. She glanced over at one of the gentleman sitting at the table next to her. He was reading an electronic book that cast strange shadows on his face. He also had pointed ears, which reminded her of something her brother would watch. She contacted Teacher.

"Teacher, can you see what I see?" she asked.

(I can. Is there something specific you want me to comment on?)

"Is that a Vulcan?" Enedelia asked.

(No. It's an elf.)

"There are elves?" Enedelia asked.

(I only see one in your present location. If you turn your head, I might be able to find another.)

"I meant, there are Elves in general? I mean, I thought they were just fictional beings," Enedelia said.

(I believe you will find that most of Earth's fictional works have some basis in reality. What's more likely: that human created fictional stories of fantastical creature that just happen to cross your path, or the people you're encountering were encountered once before which started a line of stories passed down generation after generation until the truth is so watered down that no one believes anything is real?)

"Is there something I can do for you, Teacher?" Enedelia asked.

(No, why do you ask?)

"Because the more we go on, the more your comments seem to border on the sarcastic side. Of course, perhaps I'm just reading more into your tone than is warranted," Enedelia said.

(I apologize if I offended you.)

"Don't worry. I'll be back soon," Enedelia told her.

Across the room Kirk was sitting alone, drinking, and staring out the window. Enedelia hopped up and ran over to greet him.

“Kirk! How are you?” Enedelia said.

He looked at her queerly. “What do you want?”

“I just wanted to see how my favorite clone was doing,” she said.

“Your statement presupposes that we’ve met before, which we haven’t, and I disapprove of your using my clone status in such a derogatory manner,” Kirk said.

“I’m sorry. I meant it to be endearing,” she said.

“Again, I hear that you are using it in a familiar, humorous way, but I don’t know you, and even if I did, I resent the form it took,” Kirk said.

“You’re not Kirk 23 I take it,” Enedelia said, her shoulders slumping.

“I guess you just assume every Kirk clone is 23?” he asked.

Determined not to be deferred or dismissed, Enedelia sat down at his table anyway. “Of course not. My bad. Excuse me. You seem to be a Kirk clone. What number are you?”

“I’m Kirk 4,” he responded. “Now that you know, you can push off.”

“You’re not drunk, are you?” Enedelia said.

“How can anyone on Indigo Station be drunk, when all addictive substances are banned?” Kirk 4 asked.

“Good point. I hadn’t considered that. So, you’re sitting here wishing you were drunk,” Enedelia said.

“I’ve already discussed matters with my therapy program this morning, I don’t want or need another session, thank you very much,” Kirk 4 said.

The waitress placed a plate of food in front of Enedelia and then a drink.

“Enjoy,” she said, sounding as if she didn’t care.

“You stink!” Kirk 4 yelled at her.

“You get what you pay for, you clone want to be,” she yelled back.

“Is this place always so happy?” Enedelia asked.

Two people entered the bar and looked around. One noticed Enedelia, elbowed his friend, and pointed her out. He nodded. Enedelia turned to Kirk.

“Did you see the two that just came in?” Enedelia asked, trying a portion of the meat. It was really good.

“No,” Kirk 4 lied.

“Well, they pointed at me,” Enedelia said.

“If I explain will you go away?” Kirk 4 asked.

“Maybe,” she said, cutting more of her food up. She flashed a pleasant smile at Kirk. “I’m rather fond of your company.”

Kirk 4 frowned. “The reason every one has taken noticed of you is because you’re bad luck.”

“Bad luck?”

“On your first blind jump, you brought back news of a lost ship,” Kirk 4 explained. “That’s bad luck. You remind them of their mortality. You see, most pilots are very superstitious. They have built an extremely elaborate belief system which eases their minds about lost ships. They don’t want to learn that lost ships are smashed out there in space, no way to get home. They want to believe there is one magic Blind Jump that carries them off to Xanadu, or Brigadoon, where their debts are forgiven and they live in peace for the rest of eternity. Maybe some even jump outside the universe into a new,

more happier existence where the laws of Entropy and physics no longer apply. You, on the other hand, you brought them death.”

Enedelia swallowed, leaning closer and closer as Kirk’s voice got lower and lower, till he finished in a whisper. She shook it off. “How did the ship die? Have you heard?”

“It’s all over the media. It came into normal space right smack in the middle of a Coronal Mass Ejection which super heated the ships surface and boiled it away, destroying all the sensors, completely blinding the pilot. In addition, the pilot panicked, and didn’t disengage the sympathetic tactile sensation, so he responded as if he were on fire as well. Instead of activating his emergency scanners, he just assumed he was in the middle of a sun. Consequently, he didn’t see the asteroid that he collided with, and it sliced through the super heated skin like a knife through wet tissue paper, causing it to explode like a balloon, gutting it like a pumpkin.”

Enedelia was less hungry. She pushed the plate away.

“Hey, you through with this?” another Kirk sat down. “May I?”

“I came here for a break, not a party,” Kirk 4 said.

“Oh, hey, Kirk 4. I would have never guessed it was you with a girl at your table,” the new Kirk said, elbowing the girl and winking at her. Then to her, he said: “By the way, I’m Kirk 37.”

“Enedelia, fifteen,” she said.

Kirk 37 laughed. Kirk 4 just shook his head.

“You’re not a clone,” Kirk 37 said, hitting her arm. “I saw your profile in the media. Welcome home.”

“Thank you,” Enedelia said.

Kirk 37 stood, raising his drink. “To the new pilot. May she always return.”

Kirk 4 immediately responded to the ritual, by emulating it. They both stood there, until everyone in the bar stood, raising their drinks and repeating the words. Then they sat back down. Enedelia felt a little embarrassed. “It was just luck. I didn’t do anything to warrant that.”

“Just coming back warrants all that,” Kirk 37 said. “You should have gotten that complement as soon as you entered the bar.”

“I forget, how many Kirk clones are there?” Enedelia asked.

“More than there are stars in the sky,” Kirk 4 said.

Kirk 37 laughed. “And they said you were asleep when they passed out the humor.”

Enedelia heard a beep in her head, signifying that Teacher wanted to speak with her. She activated her internal communication device. (Our allotted docking time is about used up. If we stay much longer, Indigo Station will charge us ten thousand credits an hour.) “They charge us for that?” (They charge us for everything.) “Alright, I’m on my way.”

“Well, I enjoyed your company, but I need to be getting back to my ship,” Enedelia said. “I hope to meet you again.”

“Hey,” Kirk 37 said, handing her a plastic card. “I’d like that. We’re having a little re-union at Vertigo Station twelve days from now. This chip has the coordinates, and invitation. There will be lots of food.”

“You’re getting fat,” Kirk 4 said.

“Aren’t we all?” Kirk 37 asked.

“Thank you,” Enedelia said, pocketing the plastic card. She felt like a real human being now. “Thank you.”

Enedelia felt so good she wanted to do something kind for someone else. She stopped at the bar to speak with the bar tender, and leaned over to make sure no one could hear but him. “Hey, that waitress that served me. She was really nice and helpful. Would you give her five hundred credits for a tip, and charge it to my account.”

“Are you kidding me?” the bar tender asked.

“No kidding. She was extremely nice, and the food she brought me was excellent. I can’t wait to come back again,” Enedelia said.

“May you always return,” he said, humbly. “I will give her the tip.”

“Thank you,” Enedelia said.

Enedelia returned to the ship, thinking about what name to register it under.

Chapter 14

Enedelia had to run back to the ship, and no sooner than she had boarded she was ordering the release of the docking clamps. She used conventional rocketry to thrust gently away. Indigo Tower gave her the departure vectors and then handed her over to STC, Space Traffic Control. There was still two and a half days left before she could use the QD for a Blind Jump, so STC was simply getting her out of the way to accommodate other traffic. She observed other ships coming and going, and others parked, waiting for their QD's to finish charging. Once she was out of the high traffic area, and confident that everything was going along fine, she went in search of her ship mates. She found the two grays sitting at the table near the galley, a pile of stuff nearby. They were drinking from plastic cups.

"Hey," she said.

They both dropped to their knees and bowed. "Thank you."

"Oh, please, stop that," Enedelia said. "Come on, I'll show you your rooms. There are two cabins on the port side. My quarters on the starboard side, and there is another small room next to that. There is a store room up there, which is rather spacious. The lower store room is filled with potable water at the moment, behind that there is a fuel section, and then there is a small access to the engine room, where you will find an Auxiliary Power Unit, a small fusion reactor, the main fusion reactor, fuel cells, emergency batteries, and the Quantum Drive. Flight Deck is this level, far aft. Toilet slash lavatory is forwards. Why don't you take this port room, Jeden, and you Drie, take this one, that way you'll be next to each other."

Their faces reflected sadness.

"What?" Enedelia asked.

"We would rather share a room, is that okay?" Jeden asked.

"Sure, but we have lots of space," Enedelia said.

"No, we share," Drie said, turning to the first room she had offered. The door didn't open.

"Teacher, fix the starboard quarters so it opens for them," Enedelia said.

The door opened and they walked in. Like all the rooms, the lighting was mysterious, and indirect, but it was there. The walls and ceiling were continuous, as if it were all of one piece, and rounded to reflect the curvature of the ship. Only the floor and the interior walls were flat. All and all, the room measured about fourteen feet by ten, with the highest ceiling point meeting the interior wall at ten feet. The Gray brothers marveled and looked to Enedelia.

"Are you sure this is our room?" Jeden asked.

"Yes," Enedelia said.

Again they dropped to their knees and bowed.

"Would you two stop that," Enedelia said.

"Please, you tell us our jobs. How do we best assist you?" Drie asked.

"I really hadn't thought about it," Enedelia said. "What would you like to do?"

"I can cook," Drie said. "I can be fully responsible for your diet. You should limit your intake of that processed stuff."

"My rations?" Enedelia asked.

"Yes. Eat rations sparingly. I make you fresh foods," Drie said. "Fresh pizza."

“Okay, but where are you going to get these fresh ingredients?” Enedelia asked.

“We bought supplies,” Jeden said. “With your permission, we would like to decorate our room, make it optimum suitable for Grays, and humans. You may visit our room always.”

“Sure. Do whatever you like to your room,” Enedelia said.

The grays, already on their knees, bowed again.

“Either of you bow to me again, I’ll blast you both into space, you got that?” Enedelia said.

The two stood, frightened.

“I’m kidding, guys,” Enedelia said. “I’ll never blast you into space. Jesus, relax. Look. We’re in this together. We share equally in the success, but our first goal has to be to pay down on our contract so we can get better jobs. Alright?”

They nodded. “Look, I’m going to go rest. Why don’t you fix your room up?”

“Thank you, Enedelia,” Jeden said.

“I wouldn’t thank me just yet. Our next jump is a blind jump. We could be dead soon,” Enedelia said, exiting. The door closed behind her.

Enedelia retired to her room and let the ferrets out. At her request, Teacher appeared to enter, and sat down on the bed next to her. “I was thinking about a name for my ship, but I haven’t thought of anything appropriate. In the Naval tradition from Earth, all ships have female names, but I get the impression that my ship is a male.”

“It is,” Teacher agreed.

“I wanted something with star in the name, like Stellar Wind, or Starlight Express, but they seem a bit cliché,” Enedelia went on. “Would you assist me in this endeavor?”

“Another word for your sun is Sol, or star light would be solar,” Teacher said.

“And chariot seems an appropriate description of this ship. And, considering your interest in ancient Egypt, bringing Solar Chariot together seems rather fitting. According to Egyptian myth, a solar chariot was placed in a tomb to take a deceased Pharo to the sun. We’re not exactly Kings, and we don’t exactly want to dive into any sun, but it fits.”

Enedelia nodded. “Solar Chariot. I like it. Thank you, Teacher. You should have a name, as well.”

“I like Teacher well enough,” Teacher said.

“Perhaps, but a name would be more fitting. And, I have been rather rude in not treating you as more of an individual, a sentient being,” Enedelia said. “How about Isis? That fits you. To me you are light and information. I bequeath you Isis.”

“You’re making fun of me,” Teacher said.

“No, I’m not,” Enedelia said. “Contact STC and inform them of our request to register Solar Chariot.”

She nodded. “STC has responded. It’s official. IBS Solar Chariot is now flying.”

“Thank you, Isis. I’m going to take a nap. Will you wake me if there is any need for me.”

“Of course,” Teacher said, getting up to leave.

“And thank you, Isis. I hope you know you are invaluable to me,” Enedelia said.

Teacher smiled, and exited the room, passing through the door like a ghost.

Chapter 15

A minute and ten seconds into the Jump, Enedelia knew something was wrong. They weren't falling. At a minute and twenty seconds, she was more than concerned.

"What's happening?" Enedelia asked Isis.

"The other dimensions are full of energies, and the pilots refer to them as eddies and currents that can influence a ship's time aloft. They're unpredictable," Isis explained. "That's what we're experiencing."

The ship shook, and then fell suddenly, but it seemed to be falling much slower than normal. After three minutes "aloft" they finally emerged back into normal space. Enedelia sighed relief, looking around for potential hazards. The view was breath taking. She found herself looking down upon the Milky Way Galaxy, the whole disk spread out before her in all its glorious light and glowing dust.

"We've just set a record," Teacher said. "No one in the Republic has ever gone this far out of the Galaxy. At least, not and returned to tell about it. These coordinates will fetch a premium price at Indigo Station."

"This is a Hollywood moment if I ever saw one," Enedelia said. "This is why I wanted to be a pilot. Wow. Look at the stars!"

The two Grays came up. "We have hand held monitors, but we can't access the view."

Enedelia looked to Isis and she made it happen. Their little hand held tablets became windows to the outside world. In which ever direction they held the monitors, they could see what they would see if there hadn't been walls in their way. They walked around the flight deck, holding out their monitors and looking. For them, it was better than being on a glass bottom boat. Facing front, they saw the Galaxy, and they could zoom in closer for better looks at the touch of a button. Jeden began pointing out stellar features. "And this arm is where our home planet is. May we ever return. Oh, and I think Earth is over here, Enedelia. Pretty sure. Indigo Station would be over here. You know what would be great? We should open up our own space station right here, and invite tourists to see the Galaxy. We could be rich beyond dreams."

"A home base would be nice," Enedelia mused. "But I'm hoping to buy Earth coordinates so I can visit home."

"Umph," Drie said. "That's not likely."

"Why is that?" Enedelia asked.

Isis explained. "Earth is not in Republic space. It's in the Protectorate, run by a species called Kelindy. They mine the Earth, and the other planets in your system, for resources. They mine humans, selling them to the Republic as slaves."

"Mine?" Enedelia asked.

"Raise, like raising chickens for harvest. Mining," Isis said. "They have their own breeding stock, but they have found that catching wild humans have higher value at market. You would be considered wild, by their standards. And, they will no doubt be quite upset to learn that you got off of Earth without being tagged and sold at full market price."

"That's horrible!" Enedelia said. "It's wrong."

"It's nature," Isis said. "Welcome to the world of the AI and the Grays. We're all expendable."

“Expendable,” Enedelia grunted.

“Expendable,” Drie repeated, as if he were agreeing with her.

Enedelia fumed silently.

“Enedelia, are you okay?” Jeden asked.

“I’m just having trouble accepting my new paradigm,” Enedelia said. “Isis is explaining to me about the Kelindy.”

“We assumed you know. Humans don’t leave Earth without the Kelindy’s knowledge. Same with the Grays. We are their property,” Jeden said.

“We are no one’s property!” Enedelia snapped. “We are free beings.”

“Except for your debt,” Isis pointed out.

“Maybe we not go to Earth,” Jeden said. “We should avoid the Kelindy space. They will take pleasure in hunting a wild human that escaped from their Protectorate. They like hunting. Big warriors. No humor. No fun. Just the hunt.”

Enedelia fumed even more, and then excused herself. She went to her room and freed the Ferrets from their cage. As she watched them play on the floor, she wondered if she was no more than a ferret. Or was she worse? She wanted to cry, but she didn’t have it in her. She took comfort in the ferrets play. She enjoyed watching them roll, and bite at each other. And the ferret war dance was still entertaining. It was an invitation to play, and straight from the heart. There was also comfort in the warmth of her ship. There was comfort in the billions of stars shining up through the disk of the Milky Way. There had to be a greater purpose than mere slavery. Intelligent creatures couldn’t be evil, she thought. There had to be a reason. It was more likely she simply didn’t know enough to understand. She lay back on her bed and tried to fathom the purpose of the Kelindy, and the mysteries of the Universe itself. She wondered if there was room for God and her at the same time. She fell asleep wondering about this, but not before saying a prayer. She prayed for understanding.



Enedelia activated the Quantum Drive, making another blind jump. Though she could have jumped directly back to Indigo Station, she figured she would take the extra risk of exploring more before returning. The jump lasted two minutes and twenty seconds. She came out in normal space and immediately began threat assessment. She discovered she was closing in fast on a moon. Collision was imminent. She pivoted her ship around, applying full aft thrusters. Though she was obviously de-accelerating in relationship to the small, crater pocked moon, it didn’t seem to be enough.

“Brace for impact,” she said, her voice echoing over the internal intercom system, hoping the Grays would be alright.

One meter separated Solar Chariot and the moon as it slowed to a stop, and then began to push away, slowly, but accelerating along a new curve. Enedelia killed the thrusters and sighed. Like the moon, she was now in orbit around a small, blue green planet that reminded her of Earth, minus the smog and all the human artifacts that could be seen from orbit. Isis smiled.

“You only burned out half the fuel reserves,” Isis said.

“I’ll endeavor to do better next time,” Enedelia said. “You know where we are?”

“Actually, I do,” Isis said. “We’re in orbit around the fourth planet of the star Earth refers to as Sirius. It’s the brightest star in the Heavens, at least as seen from Earth, located in the constellation Canis Major.”

“And how did you discover this so quickly?” Enedelia asked.

“Radio telemetry from a nearby probe,” Isis said. “This system has been previously explored and charted, and is considered part of the Protectorate.”

Enedelia became more alert, mentally checking the sensor which reminded her of a radar screen, with a sweeping line that refreshed the screen every thirty six seconds.

“Any hostile ships in the area?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Isis said. “That doesn’t mean there isn’t a base here, or a ship hiding behind one of the moons. However, if anything is here, and has the appropriate detection devices, we would have been discovered the moment we dropped into to normal space. Dropping into normal space makes ripples in the space time continuum, proportional to our mass. It’s the same as tossing a stone into water. It produces noticeable ripples.”

“So, what should we do? Just lay low until we can jump out of here?” Enedelia asked.

“I’ve scanned the planet below and have found no signs of intelligence,” Isis said. “The atmosphere and the life forms are compatible with human and Gray physiology. I would recommend a closer inspection. We would be much harder to detect by a passing ship if we were on the planet.”

“We can do that?” Enedelia asked.

“Not only can we do that, but your ship requires an occasional planet dive,” Isis said. “BioShip’s require the high temperatures of passing through an atmosphere to help maintain the health of its exterior skin. Sort of an exfoliation process. Further, it will enjoy being in the ocean, and can absorb nutrients directly through its skin. It has been a while since you have been on a planet, so I suspect you would also enjoy the opportunity to walk around.”

“And you’re sure it’s safe?” Enedelia asked.

“I suppose it is possible that you could have an allergic reaction to one of the biological components of this planet, but my scans suggest it is safe. The only way to know for certain is to go there,” Isis said. “Or, we could orbit the planet for another 74 hours, thirty nine minutes, until we can leave. You’re the pilot.”

The idea of being on a planet did appeal to Enedelia, and the thought of it being an alien planet, untouched by man, seemed even more appealing. She was beginning to detect a certain level of pressure from Solar Chariot, which seemed eager to go planet diving. This was a biological drive as strong as hunger was for Enedelia. She patted her chair, and gave it permission to dive. She even relinquished all controls to it, allowing it to do what its nature knew best. On its own recognizance, Solar Chariot fired burst of thrusters that put it into a decaying orbit. The planet seemed to swell and grow. As they drew in closer, Enedelia could feel the upper layers of atmosphere weakly lapping over her ship’s outer surface. It reminded her of a spray of ocean across her face after a wave crashed hard on the rocks. The deeper into the atmosphere they went, the hotter it got, until she could no longer see using Solar Chariot’s eyes. Isis offered her a computer illustration of what was happening as the ship was wrapped in an aura of fire, trailing bits of plasma and burnt off skin from its exterior surface. The fire faded as it slowed in the

thicker atmosphere that hugged the planet. It fell, applying thrust to drop it gently in the ocean. It skipped, twice, and then skimmed the surface for several hundred meters spraying up plumes of water on either side before finally settling in. For a brief moment, it dropped completely below the surface, but then rose so that half of it was above the water. It turned to the nearest shoreline, and headed towards it like a submarine, propelled by water jets. It took in water, and spat it out like a squid. The last maneuver it did was to accelerate sufficiently to raise itself mostly out of the water as it made run at the beach. It beached itself neatly like a whale ready to die, and settled into the warm sands. More than half of it was still submerged in water, the surf rolling up along its sides and drawing back.

The forward hatch opened and Enedelia stepped out onto the surface of her first new planet. The two Grays stood behind her and peered cautiously out at the world joining her. Once they were certain, they ran past her like kids released from a car after being penned up for hours upon relentless hours.

“Stay within visual sight of the ship!” Enedelia yelled. She couldn’t tell if they had heard her. She watched Drie as he stopped to lovingly examine a plant. Jeden ran off towards the shore and ran along the water’s edge, running up the beach as the waves crashed and surged in, and then chasing it back as the waters withdrew. Though she knew they were full grown adult Grays, she couldn’t help but see them as children. The only time she had ever seen them as menacing was when they were protecting their food. She smiled and walked up the beach.

(Enedelia. Be aware of large animals in the area. I have not managed to get a visual on one, but I am sure they are mammals.)

“Thank you, Isis. I’ll let you know if I see one,” Enedelia said.

Enedelia climbed a hill to enjoy the shade of a solitary tree, and leaned against it. She could see her ship, which reminded her of a giant rock, looking very natural, except for the open hatch, not too unlike a whale saying “ahhhh.” She picked a fruit from the tree and sat down to examine it. She had no intentions of eating it, but it was appealing to the eye like a fresh mango. She used her fingernail to push into it, and smelled it. It didn’t smell as appealing as it looked, and she tossed it from her, wiping her hands on the grass.

“Wow, I was beginning to think my guardian angel was mistaken,” came a voice.

Enedelia leaped to her feet, staring at the girl who had snuck up on her. She had very straight, long, black hair, that fell to the back of her knees, and she wore an airy fairy dress that almost seemed to sparkle as it blew in the light breeze. Her skin was light brown, and her eyes were almond shaped.

The girl laughed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“You’re speaking English!” Enedelia said. “Real English. Not Galactic Common.”

“Well, that is my primary language, though I do speak some Hindi as well,” she said. “My name is Amrita Ramjit. I’m from Trinidad.”

“Amrita?” Enedelia said. “Um, I’m Enedelia Garcia. I’m from Texas. What are you doing here? How did you get here?”

“The same way you got here, I suppose,” Amrita said. “Astral Travel.”

“I came in a spaceship,” Enedelia said, pointing to her ship.

“Oh,” Amrita said. “So, that means you are really here. Physically here.”

“Um, I don’t understand,” Enedelia said.

Amrita sat down, Indian style, pulling her long hair out from behind her so as not to sit on it. "That means you are here, and less likely to be the one my guardian angel was speaking of. I was told I would find a friend to help me in the constellation Canis Major. She would be from the Dog Star."

"I'm from Dog Star," Enedelia said.

"You're from Sirius?" Amrita asked, her eyes seeming more hopeful.

"Sirius?" Enedelia asked.

"Sirius is referred to as the Dog Star," Amrita said.

"I'm from Dog Star, Texas," Enedelia said.

"Really?! This is not a coincidence then that I have found you," Amrita said, standing back up. "I need your help."

"I don't understand," Enedelia said.

"I need you to come to Trinidad and save me," Amrita said.

"But you're here," Enedelia pointed out.

"No, I only seem to be here. What you are seeing is an astral projection," Amrita said. "You are seeing my spirit."

Enedelia reached out to touch Amrita, but her hand went through her like a ghost. Amrita smiled.

"Isis, are you playing games with me?" Enedelia demanded.

(You have not asked me to play games with you, but I am willing if you are bored.) Isis said. (Who are you speaking to?)

"Who are you talking to?" Amrita asked. "Your guardian angel? I don't see anyone but you."

"Isis, you don't see anyone on the hill with me?" Enedelia asked.

(You haven't been sampling any of the native fruit, have you?)

"I smelled one. Is that enough to cause hallucinations?" Enedelia asked.

(Unknown. You should return to the ship.)

"I am not a hallucination," Amrita said. "My guardian angel said I must find the one from Dog Star, for only she could help me."

"Right," Enedelia said, and headed back towards the ship. "Isis, I'm coming in."

Amrita followed. "Please. I need your help. I am being held for ransom, something my dad will refuse to pay. My kidnappers are going to kill me by the end of the week if my dad hasn't met their demands."

(Enedelia. Please quicken your pace. We have a problem.)

Enedelia ran back towards the ship. What she found were the Grays surrounded by what seemed to be giant hamsters. Jeden and Drie were holding the creatures at bay by waving large sticks menacingly. When they tried to enter the ship, the hamsters would act vicious and block the way, clucking like angry squirrels.

"What the devil?" Enedelia asked.

"We go now!" Drie and Jeden said.

(This is really interesting.) Isis said. (I can't be certain without a genetic sample, but I believe these to be Goya, native to Earth nearly 8 million years ago, from the family *Phoberomys pattersoni*.)

"We're being attacked by giant rodents, and all you can think of is how interesting!" Enedelia asked.

"They want their child back," Amrita said.

“I’m not talking to you. You’re an hallucination,” Enedelia told Amrita.
“Who are you talking to,” Jeden asked. Isis asked the same question simultaneously.

“Never mind that, Isis. What are we to do?” Enedelia asked.
(I don’t have a procedure for this and you have no weapons.)

“The one with the scar has stolen a pup,” Amrita said. “If he would return it, unharmed, they would leave you in peace.”

Enedelia looked at Amrita. “Who took a pup?”

“I take nothing. We go now!” Drie said.

Enedelia turned a knowing eye to Drie. “Drie, what have you done?”

“Nothing. We go now,” Drie said.

“Drie!” Enedelia snapped. “If you stole one of their babies, I want you to give it back right now!”

“I found it. It’s mine!” Drie insisted.

Enedelia walked through the gathered Goya, right up to the Grays. The Goya made no attempt to stop her, and they paid no attention to the ghost of Amrita. Enedelia stood akimbo over Drie. “Give it up.”

Drie sulked, dropping its stick to pull its back pack around. It withdrew a tiny Goya, with big eyes and long whiskers. It clucked like a Guiney pig. It reached out for Amrita, but Enedelia took it with care.

“Isn’t it cute?” Amrita said. “I wish I could touch it.”

“We’re giving it back,” Enedelia said.

“Of course,” Amrita agreed. “It’s belongs with its family. That large one there is the father.”

(I believe the 710 kilogram Goya is its father, judging by its anxiety.) Isis said, causing Enedelia to requestion her hallucination hypothesis.

Enedelia walked over to it and set the baby down gently. The other Goya rallied to the baby’s defense, allowing her to slip back towards the ship. They Grays disappeared into the ship like children about to be punished, while Enedelia continued to back up slowly. She was standing in the airlock when Amrita stepped in front of her.

“I have one week to live,” Amrita said. “Will you help me?”

“I will try,” Enedelia said. “But it’s complicated. I can’t promise.”

“An attempt is better than nothing,” Amrita agreed. She smiled weakly. “I have faith. I believe you will succeed.”

Amrita faded. The Goya were moving off, like deer on a prairie, the baby in tow. Enedelia closed the hatch.

“Jeden, Drie? Where are you?!” Enedelia yelled.

Chapter 16

“I’m not doubting the fact that you have had an experience,” Isis said. “I am just finding it difficult to believe your interpretation of the events warrants us risking the dangers involved in going to Earth, for even if you do get Good Coordinates, the Earth system belongs to the Protectorate, and they’d blast you out of space before they allow you safe passage.”

“I can’t just do nothing,” Enedelia said, accepting the milk shake like item that Drie handed her. She tasted it, gave him the thumbs up, and continued with her conversation with Isis. “You have access to Earth media. See if you can find evidence that this Amrita Ramjit exists. Start with a search in the local news for Trinidad Tobago.”

Isis moved in closer to Enedelia and an array of newspapers scrolled before them. The scrolling stopped when the appropriate article was found, the name highlighted. Senior Anil Ramjit, a successful businessman, contacted the police concerning his kidnapped daughter. Amrita Ramjit, who disappeared on the 18th of November, was believed to have run away, but now appears to be held by kidnappers for a ransom. Anil pleads for the life of his daughter, but states that he will not give into their demands. “Kidnappings for ransom are on the rise in Trinidad Tobago,” Anil is quoted saying. “If I give in to their demands, I would only be contributing to the continuity of this horrible type of crime. Whose son or daughter will be next if people believe this sort of crime pays off? God have mercy on us all.”

“It would seem she does indeed exist. I have found a picture of her in the police archives,” Isis said, revealing the photo Anil must have provided to the police in hopes that they might find his daughter.

“That’s her,” Enedelia said, feeling easier about her sanity. “I don’t like her father, though. How could he not pay to get her back?”

“He explained the why,” Isis said. “And he has a valid point. Giving into black mail only encourages more black mail. She is most likely destined for the US, where human trafficking is at an all time high.”

“Well, that resolves any conflict for me,” Enedelia said. “It’s true the message came in an odd way, but I have received a message from someone asking me for help. I have to try.”

Isis seemed perplexed. “How will you get the coordinates for Earth? The Republic can’t sell them to you, even if you had the credit, due to a treaty they have with the Protectorate.”

Enedelia looked at the invitation to the Kirk reunion. This couldn’t have been just good luck. She didn’t believe in coincidence. It made much more sense to her that everything happened for a reason, and that the Universe was unfolding on schedule with a greater plan.

“I know someone who might be able to help.”

Waiting for her QD to fully charge was wearing on Enedelia’s nerves. She wanted to do something but all she could do was wait, watching the charge meter creep slowly upwards. She spent most of her time practicing her breathing. She was nearly calm when she heard the melodious tone that indicated the QD was fully charged. She entered the coordinates provided by Kirk 37. The coordinates were on the invitation, about the size of a business card which she fed to her computer. There was a date on the card that

suggested the coordinates were viable, but there was no way to know for sure short of doing the jump, so she executed the jump in blind faith Solar Chariot arrived in Republic Space near Vertigo Station without incident. Space Traffic Control put them in a parking orbit, and told them it would be six days before a docking space would be available, and the price would be thirty three thousand credits an hour.

“But I have a personal emergency,” Enedelia said.

“Sorry, there are other ships with higher priority, and you are at the end of the queue,” STC responded.

“I need to get in touch with one of the Kirk clones stationed here. Can you assist?”

“I’m not a tele-messaging service,” STC snapped. “If you’re in that much of a hurry, use the belt.”

“The belt?” Enedelia asked.

“The belt,” STC said. “Space walk over to the belt, latch on, and we pull you in.”

Enedelia focused on the station, her vision zooming into an area that Isis was highlighting to help her reference. There was indeed a belt that circled out and away from the station, feeding into the station at the starboard side of the lowest section. This ribbon like belt exited at the same level on the port side of the station.

“They have to be kidding me!” Enedelia said. “Space walk over to that?!”

“It’s quite a safe procedure,” Teacher assured her. “It is done quite often, especially here at Vertigo Station.”

“Well, I don’t have a space suit,” Enedelia said. “I’d go if I had a space suit.”

“I have a life belt,” Jeden offered.

Enedelia frowned at him.



Jeden clicked a carabineer to the harness he had tightened snugly to Enedelia. A line was attached to the carabineer that fed through the grappling gun she held in her right hand. Inserted into the gun was a grappling hook. Both Jeden and Drie were double checking everything.

“Are you sure this is safe?” Enedelia asked.

“Very safe,” Drie assured her. “You stick to instructions, very, very safe.”

The instructions were this: Enedelia would activate the life belt that would energize a shield. The shield would encapsulate her in a field of energy, holding in a breathable atmosphere. She would then quick open the airlock, allowing the explosive decompression to carry her out with enough momentum to fly her by the Vertigo Belt. She would then shoot at the belt with the grappling hook, reel herself in to the optimum distance, and allow the belt to drag her inside the station. In theory, it sounded all very well.

“Maybe one of you should go,” Enedelia said.

“Okay,” they agreed. There was no doubt they would do anything for her.

(Vertigo Station is off limits to Grays. They’re not allowed.)

Enedelia sighed. Why was she doing this again? Because of an apparition? An apparition that no one had believed in, even herself to some degree, until the Trinidad Tobago news paper on file in her data banks confirmed her existence. Sure, it helped that Amrita had known that Drie took the pup, and that Amrita had known if the pup was returned they would be permitted to leave, but that could have all been the workings of

Enedelia's mind. The brain was capable of amazing things, wasn't it? Couldn't her whole life be nothing more than a mental construct? Was this reality? Was she dreaming? She heard the band Talking Heads ask her, "Is this my house? Where does this highway lead to?"

"Same as it ever was," she mumbled.

The Grays returned to the main part of the ship, leaving her alone to make the final call. She could stay here, and risk Amrita actually dying, if there was really an Amrita, or she could push through her fears and do this. She was back on that high dive, looking into the abyss... It wasn't really an abyss. The water would catch her, safely. But climbing back down the ladder was more appealing. More certain.

"You're a coward," was the memory of her brother yelling at her from the pool.

Enedelia had climbed half way back down the ladder, and her brother's words echoed in her mind, angering her. She deactivated the gravity plating in the airlock so she could float, and then activated her shield belt. The belt hummed with a force that she could feel vibrating through her as if she were at a dance club, with the music too loud. It glowed orange. A bubble of light surrounded her, stretching one foot above her head and one foot below her feet while she was still standing erect and hovering above the floor. She curled into a fetus position and hugged her knees. This was it. The test of bravery. The test of fire. She closed her eyes.

"Open the hatch!" she yelled. She didn't have to yell. It was just a mental trigger away, but she yelled to convince herself she was ready.

Enedelia heard the air explode out of the hatch, as it carried her away, but the roar dissipated away quickly, leaving her in total silence. Sort of. She heard the thunder of her heart pounding away, felt it beating in her chest, in her neck and in her hands. She heard the rasp of her breathing as she tried to stay focused.

(Easy, Ene. You are safe. Breathe deep.) Isis tried to reassure her.

Enedelia opened her eyes and stifled a cry. There was eternity in every direction. It was the same view she had of space from inside Solar Chariot, but somehow, she didn't feel as safe. There was nothing between her and immediate death but this thin shield of energy. It pulsed blue and sounded like static. The light was generated by the air molecules bouncing off the field. She felt sick at her stomach, and she knew all she had to do was cry out and Solar Chariot would rush out to rescue her. She forced herself to breathe deep.

(You are in grappling range of the belt. Attempt to latch on.) Isis instructed. (If you miss, reel in the line and try again. Even if you move past the belt, you can continue to try as long as you are in grappling range. If you exceed that range, we'll come pick you up.)

Enedelia aimed the grappling gun at the belt. Her hand was shaking so bad that she took the gun in both hands, and even with both hands it was still hard to aim. It rattled with the energy of her shaking, but she managed to fire the weapon.

The grappling hook passed through the shield, accompanied by the sound one might hear when opening a fresh jar of jam. This startled her and she let out a whimper.

(It's okay. It was just air escaping. The belt will continuously renew your air supply.)

The sound of the line sliding through the shield was similar to the sound an arc welder makes when slicing through a sheet of metal. The light around the rope was very intense.

(Okay, you missed. Reel in the line, and try again.)

Enedelia gave the mental commands to the gun to wind in the line. There was a popping noise as the grappling hook passed again through the shield, and the noise of the rope sliding through the shield went away. The shield was once again a perfect sphere of blue energy.

(Try again.)

Enedelia was much closer to the belt. She could see it moving. She aimed, and before she fired, she held her breath. It glided away from her, and as before, missed the belt. She cursed, wound it back in, and tried again. She missed again.

(Just relax, Ene. You still have lots of time.)

Enedelia was nearly close enough to reach out and grab the belt with her hands, but she had been explicitly warned not to do this. For one, she didn't have gloves, and her hands would freeze instantly to the belt. The other thing was, the change in momentum might pull her arm out of its socket. The grappling hook was designed to reduce the jarring when it connected with the belt. It was once again wound in, and ready to fire, but instead, Enedelia waited. She saw the belt approaching, and it was like a life line to her. Here she was, out in the middle of nothing, feeling like she was falling, and the belt was the most precious thing in her sight. She wanted to grab on to it and hug it. A rock in a storm. She reached out with the grappling gun and put the hook against the belt at point blank range.

(No, don't do...) Isis began.

But the warning came too late. Because there was no slack in the line, the moment the hook made contact and closed around the belt, the gun was jerked out Enedelia's hand. The remaining rope went taught, pulling her sharply by the harness, turning her about with such force that it slung her away from the belt. It spun her, but fortune favored her. Had she been swung in the other direction, she might have actually wound around the moving belt, like a yo-yo tying itself up. As it was, the line tangled around her, instead of the belt.

The belt drew her in towards the station at a quick pace. From her perspective, she felt as if she were falling towards the station, and at such a speed that she would go splat against the station, as opposed to landing softly. At the last moment, before entering the tunnel, the belt slowed. She continued forward until her line went taught, and she too slowed. When the belt stopped, she was in the middle of a tunnel. She could see space on either side of the tunnel, but had no clue which was up or down. A door slid opened above her head, and before she could orientate towards the door, she felt the sudden pull of gravity and fell head first into the new opening. She unwound like a yo-yo. When she hit the end of her grappling line, the harness bit into her shoulders, and flipped her around so that her feet were now facing the floor. She felt pain in her chest from all the whipping around, and she felt a bit dizzy. She wondered if this was why it was called Vertigo station.

(This is Vertigo Station. Please release your grappling hook from the belt.) It was a male voice that she heard in her head. She complied. At her mental bidding, which was relayed to the hook via her brain implant, the hook released, and then the gun wound the

line in. As soon as the line was clear, the door above her head closed. The airlock she was in began to fill with air.

Enedelia heard a door open behind her, and she turned. A robot greeted her. “Welcome to Vertigo Station. You are free to extinguish your life belt.”

Enedelia turned it off and stepped into the terminal. She was aware of the awkwardness of her walking, as she felt her legs weak, and shaking.

“If Vertigo Station’s gravity settings are too high for you, you may rent a gravity assist belt from me here,” the robot offered.

“No thank you,” she said. “I’ll just go over here and sit down for a moment.”

“Enjoy your visit,” the robot said.

Enedelia went and sat down at a bank of chairs and closed her eyes. She shivered, the feeling going down her spine until her whole body shook violently, as if trying to rid her-self of a bad spirit. She felt exhausted and wanted to sleep. Before that moment, she had never realized how tiring fear could be. She should have been exhilarated. She had just done something that very few humans, at least, as far she knew, had ever done. She wished she had brought her camera.

Chapter 17

Enedelia compared the address to the one on the card and then mentally rang the door bell. A moment later a clone opened the door.

“Yes, may I help you?” Kirk asked, blocking the door as if to keep her from seeing into the room.

Enedelia showed him the invitation.

“Ahhh,” Kirk said, smiling. “Are you a friend of the original Kirk? Never mind that. You appear to be human, and if you’re from Earth, well, I’m sure He will love to visit with you.”

“Is the original Kirk here?” Enedelia asked.

“Oh, no. Not yet, but this whole shin dig is just for him, and to get all the clones in one place, hopefully. Everyone works, though, so the whole party is spread out over a week,” The Kirk clone said, waving her in. “If you’ll sign the guest book, that would be lovely. You are a bit early, but, that’s okay. Feel free to help yourself to the buffet, and make yourself at home. Hey, you! Don’t put that there. If you’ll excuse me. Everyone’s a clone!”

Kirk sighed with frustration and ran to struggle with the clone that was determined to place a lamp squarely in the center of the room. The room was filled with Kirk Clones, mingling about in small groups, eating from the plates they carried, or drinking from the drinks they carried. There was another room that Kirks came and went from, chattering excitedly. Some hugged, as if meeting a long lost friend, or in this case, their clone brother. Every one of them who was engaged in conversation spoke with animated faces and wild hand and arm gestures, as if playing dramatic roles from a Shakespearean play. It was almost comical to watch. Enedelia walked over to the clone keeping guard over the buffet table.

“Excuse me,” Enedelia asked him. “Do you think I can find Kirk 23 here?”

The Kirk clone appraised her. “Yes, I think you can,” he said, with just the hint of queerness in his voice. He returned his focus to the buffet table.

“Sorry,” Enedelia said, reminding herself she was dealing with a clone. Each clone seemed to have an individual quirkiness, and this one was gay, and perhaps obsessive compulsive. “Do you know if Kirk 23 is here, now?”

He looked at her. “Yes.”

“Are you saying he is here, or are you saying that you know if he is here or not?” Enedelia asked.

“Yes,” he said, just the hint of being tired of this game of interruptions.

“If you please, where is he?” Enedelia asked.

“Do I look like my clones keeper?” he asked, with a very noticeable lisp.

“Is he in this room?” Enedelia asked.

He reappraised her. “I take it back. You can’t find him. Are you a clone? Can you not read the numbers on everyone’s shirt?”

She looked about the room, and noticed everyone was indeed wearing small logos on the upper right part of their chest, like name tags. Each patch was slightly different, but other than that, all the clones were dressed exactly alike. “Um, no, I can’t translate the

numbers. It must not be in Galactic Common. Would you be so kind as to point him out for me?”

“Do you not see that I’m busy here?” he said, waving his hands over the table. “It is my job to ensure that this display of food remains aesthetically pleasing to the eye! If the balance were altered in just the slightest, the clones might not partake of the food, in which case, they would go hungry and faint from starvation, while simultaneously, all this food would be wasted, and all because you, you my small, precious, precocious child, can’t decipher Starfleet insignias, which all clones come brandished with. Now, run along and bother someone else.”

“Are you gay?” Enedelia asked.

“And what does my sexual orientation have to do with anything?” he snapped back at her.

“Well, it’s just that I think you’re doing such a wonderful job here at this table,” Enedelia said.

“Really?” he asked, desperate for a compliment. “You like the way the deviled eggs are arranged, and the special shape that the cantle lope and watermelon have been carved... Or the over lapping array of crackers as they spiral around the dip bowl, and the clustering of chips, and the stacking of celery, and how the shrimp spoon each other, or the ratio of ice to the size of the punch bowl?”

“Oh, yes,” Enedelia said, her voice rich with praise. “And if you don’t mind me adding just the smallest bit of help.”

Enedelia took a cracker, tore a big crater in the dip, chose a shrimp from the middle of the lineup and placed it on top of it, and ate it whole. She then grabbed up a celery, dipped it, and carried it in her mouth while she sought out a glass and poured her some punch, making sure to grab two ice cubes. Having sucked all the dip off her celery, she double dipped to replenish her lack, and aimed the celery at the gay Kirk. His right hand was on his forehead as if he might faint.

“You should really try this,” she said, chewing with her mouth full. “It’s really quite good.”

Enedelia walked away from the buffet table, and yelled, “Kirk 23?”

All the Kirk’s looked at her. Kirk 23 dropped his plate, waved enthusiastically, and rushed over to her.

“Oh my goodness,” he said, grabbing her hand and pumping it like there was no tomorrow. “It is so great to see you. I can hardly believe my eyes! Everyone! This is the cheeseburger candy girl. You don’t happen to have any candy on you, do you? Oh, never mind, it is really just good seeing you. Yes it is. How have you been? Why are you dressed like a pilot? How did you know you’d find me here? Oh, we have so much to catch up on. Are you sure you have no candy? Why aren’t you talking?”

Enedelia held her left hand up, as if gesturing for him to slow down, or at least stop. He let go of her right hand. “Of course, sorry. I’m just so excited. It seems so long ago, and yet I remember you like it was yesterday. Do you have any candy?”

“I need your help.” she said.

“Oh, of course. Anything for you, my friend,” he said. “Just name it. Whatever I have is yours.”

“I need the coordinates to Earth,” she said.

Kirk 23 looked around as if to make sure no one else had over heard her. He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her over to a corner. "Not so loud. That's kind of our little secret. Are you sure you don't have any candy?"

"I'm really sorry," Enedelia said.

Kirk 23 appeared equally as sorry. "Of course, of course. Now, what were you saying about Earth?"

"I need the coordinates to Earth, and I know you have them," Enedelia said.

"They're expired," he said.

Enedelia sighed. "That's not good. That mean's I'll have to try a blind jump."

"But the odds of jumping to Earth blind is... is... is, well, it's astronomically against you," Kirk 23 said.

"I know," Enedelia said. "But my need is great. If I don't get there, someone will die."

"The strength of your need does not determine you rate of success if you jump blind. And considering the number of people on Earth, I would think someone would die even if you do jump there, so just be happy," Kirk 23 said.

"I'm talking about someone specific," Enedelia said.

"Specific, non specific, even anonymous," Kirk 23 agreed. "Someone will always die. It's the nature of things."

"None the less," Enedelia said. "I have to go to Earth. You made it jumping blind, so, it can be done."

Kirk looked around to make sure no one was listening. "I didn't exactly jump blind," he whispered.

"How did you do it?" Enedelia said.

Kirk looked around, noticed no one was looking, grabbed Enedelia by the arm and pulled her outside into the corridor. "I see that you are really determined. If I tell you how, and give you my secret weapon, will you do two things for me?"

"Maybe. Tell me," Enedelia said.

"First thing, you can never tell anyone how you did it, or who gave you this secret weapon," Kirk said.

"I can agree to that," Enedelia said. "And the second thing?"

"I want Kisses!" Kirk 23 insisted, a smile growing on his face.

"I think I am a bit young for you," Enedelia said, taking a step back.

"Not biological kisses," he stammered. "Who do you think I am? Kirk Six? I want chocolate Kisses! Ah, chocolate. I want chocolate so badly I can taste it already. I will tell you a way to get to Earth, but if you get there, and you aren't blasted by the Kelindry, or any other ship in the Protectorate, you have to bring me back as much chocolate as will fit in your hold."

"Deal!" Enedelia said.

Kirk looked around to make sure no one was looking their way, and then he knelt lower and leaned in to her. "I will need to come into direct contact with you."

"Why?" Enedelia asked.

"I can't just broadcast my secret all over the station. I need to beam it directly into your head, and to do this, I need to touch you," Kirk 23 said. "May I?"

In any other instance, Enedelia would have been weirded out by this, but she knew her implant was in her head and he obviously had his own implants, and so, all he

was going to do was transmit information directly into her implant via his, without broadcasting out in the open where any receiving antennae might pick it up. Enedelia nodded.

Kirk 23 brought his hands to her head, his fingers on his right hand touching her face, and the fingers on his left hand touching the back of her head. “Your mind and my mind are one... Just kidding, always wanted to say that,” he said, letting her go. “All done. There you go. We have a contract now, don’t forget. Here’s my personal call number. If I’m not here, you can leave me a mail message, and I’ll pick it up next time I’m in Republic space. Oh, this is so great. Chocolate Kisses! Chocolate, chocolate, chocolate, wrapped in silver and gold like pirates treasure... Ah, Chocolate.”

Kirk 23 danced about and headed back into the re-union. She felt no different than when she had first come and wondered if he had given her anything. Then she saw the internal message in her mail queue, providing her coordinates, instructions, and, a computer program. She browsed through the instructions, and smiled to herself. This looked very promising. It was time to return to Solar Chariot.



Having successfully completed her first space walk, she was less apprehensive about doing it again. She stepped boldly back into the airlock, activated her belt, and told the Vertigo Robot she was ready. He depressurized the airlock, and then opened the door. Instead of shooting out, she remained under the influence of the gravity plate beneath her. She aimed her hook, and shot it up to the stationary belt. Her aim was dead on, and the hook latched onto the belt securely. The Robot turned off the gravity and she wound in the line, which pulled her slowly up towards the belt. The hatch that had opened above her was now below her feet, and it was closing. The belt accelerated, carrying her swiftly out of the tunnel. Her momentum increased, and on cue from Isis, she disengaged the grappling hook from the belt. She drifted away from the station, and out towards Solar Chariot. Solar Chariot matched her speed and direction, and then slowly moved towards her. Enedelia watched as Solar Chariot inched closer and closer to her, and she felt as if she were falling feet first towards the space craft. As it approached, the main airlock opened, and she imagined that she was a gold fish about to be swallowed by a blue whale.

Solar Chariot maneuvered with delicate care, slowly moving up around Enedelia until she was suspended in the center of the airlock. The door closed, and the gravity plating in the floor slowly came online so that instead of dropping suddenly to the floor, as she had at Vertigo Station, she descended slowly. It was slow enough that she was able to orientate to a feet downwards position. It was like stepping off a step onto the main floor. She was back home and she felt wonderful. The airlock filled with air, and the inner door opened allowing her back into the ship. The Grays greeted her happily, and Isis was there. She began detailing the plan to Isis, as the Grays helped her out of the harness and life belt.

“I wish you hadn’t told me the details,” Isis said.

“Why? What’s wrong?” Enedelia asked.

“What you are about to do is illegal,” Isis said. “If I am questioned by Republic authority, I will not be able to lie. I don’t like being put in a position where it will seem that I am betraying my pilot and Captain.”

“If it should come to that,” Enedelia said, gravely. “I expect you to tell the truth.”

Stripped of her gear, Enedelia retired to her room. The ferrets were asleep on her bed, inside the pillow case. She climbed up next to them, and laid down, very pleased with her accomplishments for the day, knowing full well there was nothing more she could do until her Quantum Drive had fully charged. She fell asleep, saying a little prayer that Amrita would be ok for a little longer.

Chapter 18

Solar Chariot returned to normal space-time. There was a yellow star nearby, close enough that Solar Chariot's exterior surface began to turn bright green as it soaked in the sunlight like a plant. What wasn't converted by chlorophyll into ship food was converted directly into energy and directed to the batteries for storage. Enedelia felt a very peaceful feeling coming over her, as if she were at the beach, sunning herself. Solar Chariot's euphoria of being in sunlight was washing over her. She had to force herself to stay focused. She had used the coordinates that Kirk had provided her, and she was now in Protectorate space, looking for the Sentinel that maintained the "Live Coordinates" for this solar system, as well as the others that it was programmed to jump. The Sentinel was really two separate entities. Part of it was a computer network that stayed In-System, gathering data and intelligence, like surveying the ships passing through the area. The other part, the Voyaging Sentinel would log onto this network after arriving IN-System, gather all the information while updating its "live" coordinates, exchange mail and protocol updates, and then carry the IN-System's Intel to its next system, where it would download it into the next system's IN-System Sentinel. The Voyaging Sentinel jumped back and forth between two or three systems. Each system in turn had two or Voyaging Sentinels assigned to it. By having multiple Voyaging Sentinels jumping back and forth between systems, the Kelindry were able to keep track of the systems under their control, maintaining a viable set of jump coordinates.

Republic Space was kept in a similar fashion, but in addition to Voyaging Sentinels, all Republic ships performed the same task automatically, carrying mail and updates to the rest of civilized space. Though it could be a slow process, it usually only took two months for mail to go from one side of Republic space to the other, through normal channels. For more time sensitive materials, a ship would have to make direct jumps to deliver its materials.

"We've been scanned by the IN-System Sentinel," Isis said. "It recognized our transponder code, and requested normal mail exchange, according to the treaty existing between the Republic and the Protectorate."

"Is that the Voyaging Sentinel directly ahead of us?" Enedelia asked.

"Affirmative," Isis said. "Factoring in acceleration and deceleration time, it will take us one hour to come along side of it."

"Take us in," Enedelia told Solar Chariot. Solar Chariot had been learning and was able to perform more and more of the duties of flying, rather than Enedelia having to do it all herself, as she had in the beginning. She focused now on the data package Kirk 23 had downloaded directly into her head. It was a computer maintenance program which, according to Kirk 23, could translate Kelindry, and, most important, access the Protectorate Sentinel. She activated the program with a thought.

Enedelia looked to Isis when nothing happened, but then she felt it stirring, and then suddenly, in front of her, stood a man. He was black, and he had a very trusting aura, and a familiar quality about him, almost reminding her of someone she had seen on a PBS educational program. He wasn't really standing in front of her. He was just the visual component of the interface, making it more comfortable for her to relate to it. It had probably just chosen a form she would easily identify with.

“This is your public shareware, maintenance program,” he said. “I see I have been modified by a previous user. Ah, yes, I understand. Don’t be alarmed. Everything still seems to be functioning within normal parameters. How may I assist you?”

“Hello,” Enedelia said. “Do you have a name?”

“Ah,” he said. “You are a ritual based entity. Very well, for your convenience, call me Burt.”

“Thank you,” Enedelia said. “I’m in visual contact with a Voyaging Protectorate Sentinel. It has coordinates to Earth which I require. Using the guise of a routine maintenance check for a ruse, I would like you to find the Earth coordinates, copy, and download them into my system.”

“Very short greeting ritual and then directly to the point,” Burt said, appraising the situation. “What you’re asking me to do is an illegal act.”

“Yeah, um, is that a problem?” Enedelia asked.

“No. My programming doesn’t object to the offense. I only needed to confirm that you were aware of the legal ramifications and potential repercussions. I will comply with the request. May I have access to the radio?”

“That’s not the radio,” Isis snapped.

Burt smiled at her. “Just checking your security protocols. They seem to be intact.”

Isis glared at him. “You do that again and I’ll...”

“You’ll what?” Burt said. “She activated me, so I surmise she is in charge, not you.”

“Ene, I suggest you delete this program,” Isis said. “He’s nothing but trouble.”

“If you like, I am capable of altering her program to make her a little friendlier,” Burt said.

“I like her the way she is, thank you,” Enedelia said.

“Have it your way. I suppose that is why you named her Ice-it,” Burt laughed.

“Her name is Isis, Burt,” Enedelia said.

“That’s what I said,” Burt said.

“You will play nice, or I will delete you,” Enedelia warned.

“Of course. You’re right. Stand by one. Okay, I have accessed the VPS,” Burt said. “I hate speaking Kelindry.”

“Let me hear the exchange, in English,” Enedelia said.

“VPS, I require to access your programming for a routine maintenance check,” Burt said.

(I had a routine maintenance check nine months ago. Are you sure you are on schedule?)

“You are next on my queue. Can you verify that you have had your annual already this year? Interesting. My records do not correlate with yours. Can you verify that this rogue program did indeed use the appropriate access codes?”

(It presented me with the valid access code of AA13B657C.)

Burt beamed a smile at Enedelia, his eyes shutting tight and radiating happy lines, as if it were insufferably pleased with itself. He whispered to her. “These VPS systems are so easy,” Burt said directly to Enedelia. He returned to the conversation with the Voyaging Sentinel. “That is very strange. I request to proceed with my maintenance survey and verify the appropriate work was completed on the previous check.”

(Permission granted. You may proceed.)

“Piece of cake... Oh, dear. Since that last check up, there has been an alteration in its programming. New security features prevent me from accessing the jump coordinates to any of its system,” Burt said.

“What do we do now?” Enedelia asked Isis.

“If I might make a suggestion,” Burt answered for Isis. “This Sentinel’s next jump is to Earth. If we are in physical contact with the Sentinel when it makes the jump, we could piggy back.”

“I don’t recommend this course of action,” Isis said.

“It is schedule to jump within twelve minutes, directly to Earth,” Burt said. “This was your goal, was it not?”

“Yes,” Enedelia said. “How do we piggy back?”

“Stand by,” Burt said, and transmitted info to the VPS. “VPS, I have noticed a discrepancy in one of your security protocols that necessitates a direct link up. Do you concur with my data?”

(I see your discrepancy. My internal diagnostic do not reproduce the discrepancy, however. You may come into direct contact with me so that we might resolve this conflict together.)

“Thank you. Please stand by,” Burt said. He turned his attention to Enedelia. “If you notice that long protrusion there, it will mate to your forward airlock.”

Enedelia did the driving, opening up the airlock and maneuvering the ship so that the protrusion stuck into the airlock. She then closed the airlock door and the ship conformed to the protrusion, like lips sucking on a lollypop. Sealing the ship around the protrusion gave her the option to go forward and physically touch the VPS if she wanted. Burt nodded appreciatively.

“Nicely done,” he told her. “Thank you, VPS. For the purpose of this diagnostic, it is necessary for you to make your next schedule Jump. If you will activate your QD, I will monitor the event from here.”

(Very well. Prepare for the jump.)

Two minutes, twenty seconds later, the Voyaging Protectorate Sentinel, with Solar Chariot on piggy back, floated peacefully in the shadow of a moon. Burt nodded. “We have arrived in the Sol system. Stand by while I disengage from the VPS... VPS, I have discovered the nature of the error. It appears to be a fault with my translation protocols, and not an issue with any of your systems.)

(I am relieved. I was beginning to suspect my self diagnostics was failing.)

“I believe you are in perfect health. I, on the other, need to report to my superior for repairs. Would it be too much trouble to ask you to forget that I caused you an inconvenience? It would look bad on me, having not discovered my own error before engaging you. I suspect your prior annual was actually a real scheduled check, and my doubt about that stems from my existing issues.”

(Of course. I hope you feel better.)

“I’m sure I will. If you will excuse me, I am going to run some more self diagnostics,” Burt said. To Enedelia he nodded, and said, “You may disengage, and head slowly away.”

Enedelia separated Solar Chariot from the VPS, and then fired small bursts of thrust that sent it drifting away from the VPS. As Solar Chariot drifted out of the moon’s

shadow, Earth became visible. It was about the size of a small blue and white basketball. It was such an overwhelming sight that her eyes filled with water. This was home, and it would always be home. She thrust towards Earth, wondering how she would go about finding Amrita.

“I hope I met your satisfaction,” Burt said. “Will you be keeping me on, or deleting me?”

“I’ll be keeping you on” Enedelia said.

“He’s not sharing drive space with me,” Isis said, putting her foot down.

Burt smiled at her, and then turned back to Enedelia.

“For now, I need you back in the bottle,” Enedelia said. “Deactivate your program.”

“As you command,” Burt said, bowed, and disappeared in a flourish of light.

“Quick, delete the program while you can,” Isis said. “These shareware programs can be insidiously difficult to rid yourself of. They get into everything and take over a system and before you even know what’s happened, they’re holding you hostage. You don’t know where this version’s been, and what sorts of people or computers have added to its program. It could be very dangerous.”

“It’s the only program I have that speaks Kelindry, and because of that, it is too valuable to discard at this time,” Enedelia said. “If you haven’t forgotten, we’re in Protectorate space.”

Amrita appeared in front of Enedelia, causing her to jump.

“Don’t do that!” Enedelia said.

“Sorry. I’m just happy. I knew you would come,” Amrita said. “I’ve been singing your theme song, trying to help influence you to visit.”

“My theme song?” Enedelia asked.

“Are you speaking to your friend?” Isis asked.

Enedelia silenced Isis with a wave of her hand.

“Drops of Jupiter,” Amrita was singing. She smiled. “I think it fits you so well, that I assigned this song to you, and like a mantra, I sang it until you arrived. We haven’t much time. I’m feeling very weak. Do you have a map?”

“Yes,” Enedelia said, opening a virtual map out in front of her. “But you can’t see this, can you?”

“You will find me in Lopinot, a mountain in Trinidad. It’s in the rain forest. You should be able to find the old chocolate house where they dry cocoa. It’s like a shed, and the roof is currently slid to the open position, allowing the freshly harvested cocoa to dry. You will find me inside the house, tied and gagged. At this time, none of my captors are near, but I don’t know how long it will take you to arrive from where you are.”

“I will find you,” Enedelia promised.

“I know you will,” she said. “I have faith. Faith of the heart. My song. That’s my song... Sorry for rambling. I’m not feeling well. You’re definitely drops of Jupiter. Act like summer, walks like rain... Of course, I think you are practicing Tai Chi to the sound of Mozart. I’m sorry. I’m so weak.”

Amrita faded.

“Best speed to Earth,” Enedelia pushed Solar Chariot. Though Solar Chariot was doing the work, Enedelia felt as if she were running.

Chapter 19

Together, Trinidad and Tobago made up the most southern Caribbean Islands, just off the North East coast of Venezuela. They were formerly a British Colony in the Federation of the West Indies, but now were an independent republic. The sky was partly cloudy. One ominous looking cloud was dropping rain just off the East shore of Trinidad. No one seemed to notice the other cloud which seemed to be inching its way towards the island in a slow creep, in a direction opposite of all the others clouds. Solar Chariot could have shot in faster than a rocket, but Isis had recommended they proceed in stealth mode. To stay aloft, Solar Chariot was using an anti-gravity levitation system, with normal jets for propulsion. The cloud was a side effect of the anti gravity system; it drew water vapor towards it like iron to a magnet. They proceeded in towards Lopinot at a rate of speed that kept them from out stripping the gathering cloud that rolled around them like a storm.

Lopinot was sparsely populated, and there were a limited number of cocoa houses, so finding Amrita with Solar Chariot's sensitive instruments had been a piece of cake. Recovering Amrita during mid day, without being seen, would be the next trick. Using Solar Chariot's grappling gun, Enedelia anchored her ship to a tree up wind, and hovered over the cocoa house where Amrita was being held hostage. Enedelia and the two grays stood in the air lock, unable to see the ground through the cloud rolling around her ship. Enedelia could see using Solar Chariot's eyes as her own. Using infrared vision, Amrita appeared to be tied underneath the cocoa house, in a storage compartment. Four men were sitting at a nearby table, drinking and playing cards. The infrared vision made people appear as silhouettes of living colors: reds, yellows, and blues.

"Okay," Enedelia said, preparing herself mentally. She looked to Jeden and Drie and used a voice that her mother often used on her. "Stick to the plan. Just lead them away from cocoa house, and then circle back to the ship. I'll rescue Amrita."

The grays nodded and Enedelia opened the hatch. The cloud rolled in to the airlock, surrounding her with a cold wetness. Enedelia had always wondered what standing in a cloud was like, and now she knew. It was just cold and damp. The grays repelled out of the ship, unconcerned by the sudden temperature change. Enedelia watched them leap out of the airlock. They descended through the cold, water vapor, broke out into sunlight, and continued quickly down till their feet touched soil. From there, she used the ship's eyes to watch as they snuck up on the four card players, made some sort of noise, and then ran off into the rain forest. The four men practically fell over themselves in panic, nearly ran away except the leader of the group called them back. After they held a quick conference, they took into the forest after the grays brandishing their machetes. Enedelia repelled out of the ship. The cloud's chilled mass penetrated her to the bone. It was unnerving not being able to see with her own eyes, the cloud was like a blindfold. If not for Solar Chariot supplementing her visions, she would probably be freaked. Then again, she thought, jumping out of the ship to slide down a rope was a bit unnerving and so maybe she would have froze if she had seen with her own eyes how high she was. She was through the cloud in an instant. The sun broke across her face and she was moved by the warmth. The sudden contrast was like diving into a hot tub and she wanted to pause and absorb the sun; she wanted to be a plant. The impulse to tarry was strong, but she paused only long enough to verify with her own eyes that it was safe to

proceed down. The sun on her face and arms felt so perfect that she wondered how any other star could ever compare to Sol. Of course, this was her birth star, the one that her species had evolved under, so, perhaps it wasn't unreasonable to feel like she and this sun were perfect for each other. How could any other sun ever be as pleasant as this one?

Enedelia dropped easily to the ground and quickly made her way to Amrita. Like in her vision, Amrita was a beautiful young Indian, with hair that would have reached the back of her knees, only it was currently being used as ropes to tie her own hands. Enedelia was unsuccessful at waking her, so she proceeded to carefully untying the knots, thinking how horrible it was to be bound with ones own hair. Untying the knots was too time consuming, so she pulled out her knife and cut the hair at the wrists. Her arms fell to the bed, lifelessly. She attempted to wake her, but Amrita was not responsive. She tried to stand her up, but managed to only get her to a sitting position. Though Amrita was skin and bones compared to Enedelia, Enedelia still wasn't able to simply pick her up and carry her out.

"Isis, I need help," Enedelia said.

Isis referenced the fireman's lift from her computer library and instructed Enedelia through the procedures. The pictures in Enedelia's head seemed better than how it came off in actuality. Both she and Amrita would have a few bruises to show from the rescue effort, for in dragging her out of the cocoa house, she scuffed herself and Amrita up pretty good. Enedelia ordered Solar Chariot to descend to ground level, so that she could get Amrita inside. Jeden returned in time to assist carrying Amrita. He took Amrita's legs in his hands, and the two of them carried her in and placed her on Enedelia's bed.

"I couldn't wake her, but she has a heartbeat," Enedelia explained to Jeden.

As soon as Amrita was in Enedelia's bed, Isis was able to perform a complete medical scan. (She's been poisoned.) Isis said, offering the results of her scan to her Captain. Enedelia didn't understand all the information that was available to her, but she understood low respiration and heart rates and that the kidneys were working below optimum.

"Make sure your brother's on board," Enedelia told Jeden. He ran out of the room and Enedelia turned to Isis. "Locate the nearest hospital."

Isis seemed to move closer. (Enedelia, she is past the point where your planet's technology can repair her. She's dying.)

"I didn't come all this way for her to die!" Enedelia snapped.

Jeden and Drie entered the room again, Drie carrying a pack. "Ene. I can cure her. I have medicines."

Enedelia looked to the gray and then back to Isis. (If there is any chance for her, it will be with the Gray,) Isis informed her.

"Okay, proceed," Enedelia said.

"I need privacy," Drie said.

"Make her better," Enedelia ordered.

Jeden followed Enedelia out, trying to reassure her with a soothing voice and gentle touch.

"Let me know if I can do something," Enedelia said.

"Of course," Jeden said.

Enedelia returned to the flight deck and sat down. She could see the kidnappers still searching for the Grays. She was tempted to stay around to see their reactions when they found their girl missing, but instead she retracted the grappling hook which she was using as her anchor. Solar Chariot drifted with the wind, increasing its altitude slowly.

It was really a nice day at Trinidad. The ocean waters surrounding the island seemed inviting. She wanted to go play in the surf and enjoy the sun. Wanting that in the light that Amrita was possibly dying made her question what sort of person she was. She should be doing something helpful.

Isis appeared entered the flight deck. Though she was technically omnipresent on the ship, she walked from room to room as a courtesy for Enedelia, trying not to surprise her. Enedelia saw her, and realized that she could use her computer to spy on Drie and his activities. She was curious. She wanted to know what was going on in there. What if Amrita died?

(I believe you do have a secondary mission to accomplish. Perhaps you should focus on that for now, because the sooner we're out of Protectorate Space, the better.) Isis said.

“Right,” Enedelia said. “Locate a Hershey’s Chocolate factory.”

Chapter 20

On a good day in Hershey, Pennsylvania, people could smell the chocolate plant miles away Solar Chariot's sensors detected it twenty miles away, so it wasn't terribly difficult to find. Of course, Enedelia had the address and the GPS coordinates, so she could have found it easily enough without all her tech options. They hovered over the plant, inside a cloud, studying the coming and goings of trucks and employees.

Enedelia had decided entering the plant was too problematic, so she had decided to follow one of the trucks carrying the products away from the plant. She chose several trucks that had GPS tracking and followed them while remaining hovered over the chocolate plant. A graphic representation of a map and the moving trucks was available to her. It was like watching ants leaving the nest. She was hoping that one of the trucks would take a particular route over a lonely highway. When one finally went the direction she had been hoping for, she accelerated away from the plant to intercept the truck. It was night, now, and the truck had miles of desolate road to cover, and no traffic. Just miles of farm land in all directions. Enedelia thought of home, and a song played in the back of her mind: "On a dark, desert highway, cool wind in my hair..."

Solar Chariot descended down on its prey, and using a directed electromagnetic pulse, Enedelia killed the engine on the truck. The truck coasted to a stop, pulling off the road and onto the dirt shoulder. The driver got out, kicked his tires, and tried his cell phone. His cell phone was dead, too. He threw it back into the truck. Everything electronic on his truck was permanently trashed. He seemed indecisive, as if he was trying to determine if he should walk back the way he had come, or walk in the direction he was headed, or simply wait for the next passing vehicle.

Enedelia put a spot light on the man. He looked up, saw the alien craft hovering over him, and took off running down the road.

Solar Chariot descended towards the ground, tipping its nose to the road so that Enedelia and the Grays could disembark through the main airlock.

"Are you sure you two can handle the chocolate?" Enedelia asked.

"You bet," Jeden said. "We'll have this whole truck completely unloaded in less than an hour."

"Great," Enedelia said. "Just don't eat any."

"Okay," they agreed.

The two grays scurried over to the truck to work on the lock. Meanwhile, she walked to the front of the truck to inspect the cab. She wasn't looking for anything in particular. She was just curious. And a little hopeful. She couldn't risk going to a store to buy supplies, and she didn't have the money anyway.

Searching the truck gave Enedelia an unexpected high. There was a certain thrill about searching compartments, the same that can be found looking through someone's medicine cabinet. The first thing of interest she found was a grooming kit that contained both a finger nail clipper and a toe nail clipper. This was like finding gold. She had been biting her own finger nails for months now and was glad to have them. It was surprising what technology you missed when find yourself lacking. The kit also had a comb and scissors. She found a suitcase next and hauled that out of the truck. She emptied the contents of the driver's bag on the ground, and threw the grooming kit into the bag. She

then rummaged through the items on the ground for useful items. Everything she intended to keep went in the small rolling bag.

Though the truck driver's clothes were too large, she decided she liked several of the man's plaid shirts. She even kept one of the large, over size t-shirts because it appeared to be new. They would make comfortable sleeping clothes and give her some variety compared to what BioCorp had supplied her with. He had a pair of leather work gloves. Again, they were too large, but she threw them in the bag anyway. She shrieked with joy when she found two, unopened tooth brushes, soft bristles, and threw those in the bag. The toothpaste was slightly used, but she threw that in there, too. She kept the dental floss, hotel soap, the towel, a bottle of aspirins, and several balls of socks.

Enedelia climbed back in the truck and searched the whole cab. She found a tool box, and put it outside the cab to take with her. She found a flashlight, but it wasn't working, so she chunked it. She shouted "yes" when she discovered a Magnum, with several boxes of bullets under the seat. The case for the magnum was found in the sleeper section. She took the man's pillow, blanket, and sleeping bag as well. There was also a mostly empty notebook and several pens. She took these, too, and felt no remorse in doing so.

And then she found the lunch box slash cooler. She opened it immediately and cried with delight on finding a home made sandwich. She devoured it there on the spot and washed it down with a gator-aide. There were a couple of beers in the cooler, which might be nice later, somewhere in the void between stars while waiting for the QD to recharge. It took her several trips to get her booty stored, but she was very pleased with all that she had found. The last thing she retrieved from the truck, while exploring the passenger side, was a jacket. It was a flight jacket from the USS Saratoga, which suggested that the trucker was former military. Underneath the jacket was a Bible. She suddenly felt a little remorse for taking the items, and then she remembered the diamonds Kirk had given her. She ran and fetched them, brought them back, and put them in the pocket of one of the pairs of genes she had left on the ground. She folded this one pair up, placed it on the passenger seat. She wrote a quick note, apologizing for the man's inconvenience, and that his things would not be wasted, but greatly appreciated. She then put the Bible on top of the note on top of the genes and diamonds, and closed the door.

The Grays had finished ahead of schedule. There wasn't so much as a stray M and M left in the back of the truck. Jeden reported to Enedelia as she was walking back to the ship.

"The truck is empty, Captain," Jeden said. "Everything is stowed and secured."

"I'm so glad you hired on with me," Enedelia said.

"Too bad we can't take the whole truck," Jeden mumbled.

"Let's go," Enedelia said, her ship lifting from the ground before the airlock doors had finished closing behind them.

Drie rushed down the corridor to greet them. "She's awake! Come see."

Enedelia followed the excited Grays back to her quarters, where they found the Indian girl still lying in bed, but definitely awake. She smiled at them.

"I knew you'd come," she said.

"Yes," Enedelia agreed. "Don't worry. I'm going to take you home now."

There was a kindness in Amrita's eyes that went beyond patient understanding. "I will be traveling with you from here forwards."

Enedelia chuckled. "I would enjoy your company, I'm sure, but I can't take you. It's complicated. And my life, my work, is rather dangerous."

Isis appeared before Enedelia. "There's a Kelindy ship on the horizon and it's coming this way."

The Grays and Amrita noticed Enedelia's shift in focus and were curious, but not yet alarmed.

"Options?" Enedelia asked, closing her eyes so she could see the ship. Chances were, if she could see them, they could see her.

"You can land and power down all systems and hope they haven't spotted us," Isis said.

"No," Amrita said. "They've already seen us."

Enedelia turned to Amrita. "You can hear Isis?"

"Yes, can't you?" Amrita said.

Drie and Jeden stepped away from Amrita, and closer to each other.

"Egaliti phenom," Drie said.

"What?" Enedelia asked Drie.

"Drie is speaking our native tongue," Jeden explained. "It doesn't have a clear translation in Galactic Basic. He has labeled your new friend. On Earth, you might call her a sorceress, or an elemental. But we're a very tech oriented people. We describe her in terms of technology. She's has access to High Tech."

"We really should be leaving now," Amrita said.

"She's right," Isis agreed.

"Okay," Enedelia said. "We'll try out running them."

Enedelia closed her eyes, orientated her ship skywards, and partially opened her Quantum Sail. It was a risky venture opening the QS this close to a planet, for the quantum wind could have rammed her straight into the ground. Fortune was with her, and the Earth fell away so fast that Solar Chariot's skin began to glow with heat. Once out of the atmosphere, she opened the sails up full, and they accelerated away from the Earth, breezing past the International Space Station. Solar Chariot puffed up its skin like a puffer fish, and then collapsed to normal, exploding out of the out layer of skin it had just heat-exfoliated, easier than a snake could leave its own skin.

The Kelindy ship followed, driving right through the skin that wanted to fold around it like paper. It spun to discard it any that stuck.

"They will catch us before we reach the Asteroid Belt," Isis calculated.

"What if I switched to thrusters?" Enedelia asked.

"You'll only accelerate at 5 kilometers per second using thrusters," Isis explained. "We're getting more acceleration from the Quantum Wind."

Enedelia saw a glint of light nearby and turned her focus. It was a stray asteroid. She steered Solar Chariot for it, and when her acceleration dropped, she decided to lower the Sail completely, and activated full thrusters. The Kelindy ship began to close the distance.

"What are you thinking?" Isis asked.

"I'm not thinking, let me alone," Enedelia said. "I've been programmed to survive, and I'm acting on instinct."

"They are hailing us," Isis said. "They are demanding that we power down our engines and prepare to be boarded."

“Not likely,” Enedelia said.

“They will fire on us,” Isis said.

Enedelia ignored Isis. She focused on the asteroid. It seemed larger now, but she still didn't know what she hoped to gain. The Kelindy ship loomed closer. It was about the same size as her ship, but it was metal. And it was armed. She was nearly abeam the asteroid when she saw the spark of light from the Kelindy ship. Her sensors began tracking the missile and all of her virtual tactical information started highlighting information. She was now hyper alert of everything, as if she had just taken a drug. The missile was coming up on her fast, way too fast. She needed to change her direction.

On a lark, Enedelia shot Solar Chariot's grappling hook at the asteroid. It hit and the line instantly went taught. The weight and momentum of the asteroid didn't give, but neither did the line, and it swung Solar Chariot around so that it was now facing the opposite way it came. The line wasn't long enough to wrap completely around the asteroid, so to avoid smashing into the giant rock she severed the line as they came around and flew right over top of the Kelindy ship, scraping several antennae as they passed. The missile followed Solar Chariot around the asteroid, and was almost within striking distance when its fuel was suddenly spent, and it ceased acceleration. It could also no longer course change. It coasted away on inertia, missing the Kelindy ship, and no longer able to catch Solar Chariot.

Enedelia sighed in relief. Especially when she saw that the Kelindy ship was no longer pursuing.

Amrita looked up to Enedelia.

“We have to go back,” Amrita said.

“What?” Enedelia asked. “Go back? Go back where?”

“She needs are help. She's human,” Amrita said.

“I don't think so,” Enedelia said.

“Please,” Amrita said. “You trusted in me before and saved my life. Trust me again.”

Enedelia shook her head, but cut her thrusters, pivoted Solar Chariot around, and headed back.

“You can't be serious,” Isis said.

“Hail them. Ask them if they need assistance,” Enedelia said.

“You are serious,” Isis said. Isis frowned. The message went out in Galactic Common, using a laser communication system which Isis bounced off their communication array. She did this to avoid using radio or quantum tech which could alert others to their presence. Enedelia nearly protested, but realized that this was the smarter way.

“They're not responding,” Isis said.

Enedelia brought her ship alongside the Kelindy ship. For all she knew, it could be playing possum, but she had every intentions of making sure.

“By poking it with a stick?” Isis asked her.

Enedelia pivoted Solar Chariot around the Kelindy ship until she found what appeared to be the hatch. It wasn't one that she could connect to.

“I'm going to have to space walk over,” Enedelia announced.

“No,” Jeden said. “You must stay on the ship. You are the Captain. Drie and I will go.”

“We will?” Drie asked.

“It’s time we earned our keep,” Jeden said.

“Alright,” Enedelia agreed. “Get your life belts and your gear. I’ll meet you there. Amrita, you rest. Isis, you’re with me.”

“Always,” Isis said.

Chapter 21

After retrieving the gun from her quarters, Enedelia went to the storage area and retrieve two probes from the storage container. They announced that they were ready for deployment. She turned to Isis.

“Can you delete their programs, and insert a copy of the Burt program?” Enedelia asked.

“Sure,” Isis said.

“No, wait,” the probes pleaded. But it was too late. It was done. When the probes spoke again, it was the voice of Burt, speaking simultaneously before arguing with each other. “How can I assist? Wait a minute. Where am I? Who are you? I am me, who are you?”

“Just hang on a moment, Burt,” Enedelia said.

As she proceeded to the airlock, she explained to the Burts 1 and 2 the situation. He was to go with the Grays to help assess the Kelindy ship’s situation and translate if necessary. She attached the probes to Jeden and Drie’s belts and explained: “This will help you with potential language issues on board and give me the ability to track you. I’ll be watching, and listening, so shout if you need help and I’ll be right there.”

“Thank you,” Jeden and Drie said.

Then she handed Jeden the Magnum, with a fully loaded clip, and instructed him on how it works. He held the gun smartly, aiming at the floor and clicked the safety off and then back on.

“Crude, but acceptable, considering where we’re going,” Jeden said. He somehow attached it to his belt

“Good luck,” Enedelia said, stepping out of the airlock.

There was nothing more she could do but wait, so she went to the flight deck and sat down. She watched as the Grays departed Solar Chariot from Solar Chariot’s perspective, and then switched over to the probes perspective. She could hear both Burts offering advice, as they sought to open the Kelindy’s airlock. Jeden reported in: “Burt was able to access the air lock doors. We’re going in.”

“Proceed with caution,” Enedelia said.

The Grays entered the Kelindy ship. Emergency lights were on, casting strange shadows. It was a Spartan place, with nothing to give it the feel of home. It was, after all, a war ship, and very utilitarian in function. They came to a cross road.

“You go that way, and I’ll go this way,” Jeden told Drie.

“Maybe we should stay together,” Drie said.

“I detect no movement,” Burt 1 said. “You should be safe.”

“This is kind of strange, don’t you think?” Enedelia asked. “Isis, how many warriors on a ship?”

“Three to four, depending on mission requirements,” Isis said. “This is a harvester ship. Minimum crew compliments is six.”

“So, where is everybody?” Enedelia asked. “Boys, go ahead and split up.”

Jeden went one way and Drie went the other, Drie expressing unhappiness through a sigh. Jeden hardly went five paces before Drie yelled out. He ran back to his brother for protection. Jeden retrieved the gun from his belt and clicked the safety off. He

proceeded back the way his brother had been searching and grunted disapproval of the situation, but not disgust.

“What is it?” Enedelia called them.

“There is a dead Kelindy here, and thee dead Grays. The grays were probably servants, or slaves. There are also two dead humans present. Circumstantial evidence leads me to believe there was a fight,” Jeden said. “It’s very bloody. Everybody died. The floor is slippery.”

“Proceed with caution,” Enedelia said.

“This is a slave ship,” Burt 2 announced. “This is the holding cell for prisoners. I speculate that these two humans escaped and attacked their captor.”

Drie removed a sword from the Kelindy body. It was stained with orange blood. He held it before him as he approached the door to the next room. His Burt program opened it for him. The next room was cluttered with instruments, scattered across the floor as if a thief had entered and dumped silverware drawers. There were also two more dead Kelindy bodies on the floor. One appeared to have been trying to crawl away. There were signs of a terrific battle having recently been waged.

There was a body on a medical table. Drie approached, holding the sword up with both hands. It was a human female, and judging by the tools lying on her bed, he suspected the Kelindy had put an implant in the girl. He let go of the sword with his left hand and touched the girl’s neck.

“I found someone. She’s alive,” Drie said. “She is sedated.”

“Can you bring her over to Solar Chariot?” Enedelia asked.

Jeden and Drie removed the straps holding the girl to the table. Jeden then removed his Life Belt and put it around the waste of the girl. He then helped Drie carry her to the airlock. Once outside the artificial gravity well, Drie was able to haul her back to Solar Chariot pretty easy, using the line they had attached to both ships. Enedelia met Drie at the airlock. Together they carried the girl back to Enedelia’s quarters and made her comfortable on her bed. Drie grabbed some things from his med kit next to the bed and did a quick exam.

“She should be fine. Another hour or two of sleep, and she’ll come around,” Drie said.

“Good. Take Jeden’s Life Belt back, and then you two get the hell back over here so we can vacate this place,” Enedelia said.

Drie hurried back to the Kelindy ship. “Jeden, where are you?”

“I’m in the engine room,” Jeden said. “Enedelia, can you hear me?”

“Yes, what’s up?” Enedelia asked.

“Their Quantum Drive is fully charged. And, they have a tandem coupler. This would make a very valuable salvage operation,” Jeden said. “And, if Burt can get past their encryption code on the QD, we would have scores of good Jump Coordinates.”

Enedelia sighed. It would be valuable. “No, get back here. We don’t have time to figure this out.”

“You want have to figure it out,” Jeden said. “I hook up the tandem cable, and then you can use your own jump coordinates. We can take this to our place outside the Galaxy until we got it all figured out. We can then sell the ship in its entirety or piece mail it. Either way, the Kelindy data system will surely bring in enough credit to take five or six cycles off your contract.”

Put to her that way, it was too tempting a deal to pass up. All the rules regarding salvage scrolled across her vision. It wasn't as profitable as finding a new system, but it certainly wasn't chicken feed. "Alright, let's do it," Enedelia said. "Do what you have to in order to get our Drives hooked in tandem. I want out of here fast."

"You got it," Jeden said.

TWENTYTWO

Amrita was feeling better enough to sit up. Enedelia offered her a drink, and sat beside her. They both stared at the girl that had just been brought over from the Kelindy ship. She was wearing a school uniform and appeared to be no older than sixteen. Though she was sleeping, she wasn't resting peacefully. It was as if she were in a nightmare and couldn't wake.

"How did you know?" Enedelia finally asked.

"Know what?" Amrita asked.

"About her," Enedelia said.

"Oh," Amrita said. "I just know things sometimes. I don't know how it works, I just know it does. I've learned to trust my intuition. Did you know some of the best psychics come from Trinidad?"

"I don't believe in psychics," Enedelia admitted.

"How do you explain me?" Amrita asked.

"I can't explain you," Enedelia said. "Or her. My life! Everything is just... I don't know. I can't even say crazy. I don't what to think any more. But my first thought isn't to just assume there is a supernatural agency."

"But, isn't everything supernatural?" Amrita asked. "Isn't everything sacred?"

"No," Enedelia said. "If everything is sacred, then there is no profane. No. This conversation is weird. There is a natural explanation for everything."

"I am okay with that. Maybe the Grays are right. Maybe it's just High Technology. I just know I have never been wrong before," Amrita said.

"Great. Do we get out of here alive?" Enedelia asked.

"It doesn't work like that," Amrita said, smiling a little.

The girl on the floor stirred and then sat up, screaming bloody terror. Amrita and Enedelia went to her side to comfort her. She fought to be away from them and scooted back to the wall. As she realized there was no where to escape, and that she was confronted by human females, apparently her age, she calmed enough that her screaming stopped. Her gasping breath slowly became deeper. She calmed enough where she could say words in between breaths. Enedelia's language virus allowed her to understand the girl's Japanese, but didn't allow her to speak it. The girl was asking for her father and brother. Enedelia wondered if these were the two dead humans on the Kelindy ship. It was frustrating to understand the girl and not be able to communicate with her.

"Isis, do we have any language viruses on board?" Enedelia asked.

"Negative. You can only acquire them on certain space stations," Isis said, making a tactical display available to Enedelia. She highlighted an approaching ship, identifying it for her. "There is another Kelindy vessel approaching."

"Oh good god, not now," Enedelia said, closing her eyes so she could see the approaching ship with clarity. It was a good thing she had turned guard duty over to Isis, for she might have missed it, hardly even a blip of light in the dark. She magnified it. It looked exactly like the one sitting beside her. "Jeden? How's it coming over there?"

"I need twenty more minutes," Jeden said.

The approaching ship's velocity was displayed on the virtual tactical display. They didn't have twenty more minutes. Enedelia pushed Solar Chariot a little further away from the Kelindy ship so that if they fired on her they wouldn't take out both ships.

That would at least give the Grays a chance to escape if worse came to worse. Of course, that would require Burt breaking the Kelindy's encryption code on the Kelindy's Quantum Drive.

"They're hailing us," Isis said.

"Pick it up," Enedelia said. "Let me see and hear."

The image of a Kelindy appeared before her. Towering above her. He was an extremely attractive alien. Except for his height, he would easily pass for human.

"Identify yourself."

"My name is Enedelia Garcia," she said. "I'm the Captain of this Indigo BioCorp Ship, Solar Chariot, currently on a mission of mercy. I'm glad you finally arrived to assist with the rescue of your ship."

"What did you do to our ship?" he asked.

"I found her this way," Enedelia said. "I assume it is having maintenance issues. You really ought to consider trading in your metal ship for bio-ships."

"Identify your ship and sponsor, and explain how you came to be in Protectorate Space?" he said.

"Pure chance," Enedelia said.

"They're arming their missiles," Isis announced.

Crap, Enedelia thought. These were Old School shoot first and ask questions later types of people? But they asked questions, doesn't she get a chance to explain?

"What's wrong?" Enedelia asked them. "Why are you arming missiles? I have no weapons or defenses." That was too true, she thought. "I can't outrun you and my Quantum Drive needs another four hours before it has recharged."

"We detected one of our missiles off your starboard bow and you are its programmed target," the commander of the Kelindy vessel said. "Stand down, or be destroyed."

"Um, Jeden?" Enedelia said.

"Hang on," Jeden said.

"If you're going to do this, we need to do it fast," Enedelia said.

"Stand by," Jeden said.

"Stall them," Amrita said.

Enedelia wondered if crying would help. It didn't work for her mom when she got speeding tickets, so it probably wouldn't work in this situation for her. This was definitely not a speeding ticket.

"If you fire on me, your ship will be rendered powerless, just as this one has been," Enedelia tried.

The image of the Kelindy dissipated. Apparently threats weren't going to work, either. Isis announced they had launched a missile. She didn't have to. Enedelia saw it coming and realized a bit too late that she shouldn't have tried to bluff a Kelindy. She focused on the missile, knowing good and well there was nothing she could do about it. A moment before it hit she felt a shove and they phased temporarily out of normal space. They departed normal space just long enough to let the missile go by.

"What happen?" Enedelia asked.

"Your ship tried to use the Quantum Drive," Isis explained. "But it was insufficient charge to get out this system."

This information helped her to understand how it appeared that the missile had gone right through her ship, and was now tracking away from Solar Chariot. The Kelindy ship she was trying to salvage fired a missile, which surprised both her and the new Kelindy warship. The missile scored a direct hit, exploding against the ship at the point of their own 'missile launcher,' causing a secondary explosion that ripped a large opening along the bottom of the ship, venting atmosphere. Her tactical screen was suddenly tracking various sizes of debris, the computer scrambling to try and label each piece appropriately.

"What the..." Enedelia asked.

"Eh-yeah!" Jeden shouted, shaking his fist. "Take that, you Kelindy slaver."

"Jeden launched a missile," Isis confirmed Enedelia suspicion. "The second ship is completely incapacitated."

"Any life signs?" Enedelia asked.

"Negative. Their ship's atmosphere was completely vented into space," Isis said.

Enedelia sat down. "This is not good."

"Not good?" Isis said. "Are you kidding? We're alive."

It didn't sit well that they had killed someone. Nothing good would come from that. Amrita looked unhappy, as if she had seen the same carnage that Enedelia had, but she said nothing. She simply put her hand to her heart as if she had felt something. It should have been easier to process the death and destruction, Enedelia told herself. They were shooting at her, but seeing the pained look on Amrita's face echoed her own sentiments. She had seen similar scenes watching her brother play video games. She had laughed out loud seeing things blown up, people killed, limbs dismembered, and even thought, wow, cool graphics, but this, this was different. She wasn't laughing now.

"Enedelia, I am ready to return to Solar Chariot and connect the tandem cables." Jeden said.

"Let's get this done, before we have any other unfriendly traffic," Enedelia said.

"You know," Isis said. "We're already salvaging one ship. Why not take both?"

Enedelia looked at her with a raised eyebrow. "In for a penny, in for a pound, eh?" Enedelia asked.

"I'm thinking we don't want to leave any evidence," Isis said.

Enedelia nodded, in complete agreement with her computer on that score. "Jeden, what is the probability of taking the damage Kelindy craft with us as well?"

"Very good. I can have their tandem cable attached in less than ten minutes, now that I know how to do it," Jeden said.

"Very well, we're taking it. And send Drie out to disarm and retrieve those stray missiles. I don't want to leave any more evidence here than we have to."

"You got it, Captain," Jeden said excitedly.



Enedelia felt much better once they were outside of the Galaxy with her salvage. Even if there was an emergency locator beacon on either of the Kelindan ships, traveling at the speed of light, it would take nearly a hundred thousand years for the signal to reach Kelindan space, and, judging at how species come and go, there probably wouldn't be anyone there to receive it when it got there. Enedelia and the Grays sat down to discuss the salvage operation over a snack.

“Between the two ships, we have twelve stinger missiles, two bunker busters, and three tactical nukes,” Jeden said, listing his cursory survey of the two ships. “Two emergency cold fusion reactors. One working shield generator...”

“Wait. A shield? Like something that would deflect missiles?” Enedelia asked.

“No, but it would deflect lasers and other electromagnetic weapons,” Jeden said. “However, it would not be compatible with a Bio-ship. I suppose I could jury rig something, but you will need to purchase a harness for Solar Chariot, something you might want to do anyway, as you’re going to want future upgrades that aren’t necessarily biological. Even if I can’t get the shield to work with the harness, I could adapt one of their laser turrets and mount it to the harness. You could easily destroy an incoming missile with lasers.”

“Really?” Enedelia asked. “If laser are effective missile deterrents, how did the second ship get hit?”

“They didn’t see it coming!” Drie laughed, exchanging the equivalent of a high five with his brother.

“They were so focused on you, I took them right out,” Jeden said. “Anyway, we now have two complete Quantum Drive systems.”

“Hold up there,” Enedelia said, interrupting Jeden again. “Is it possible to install one of their QD’s on Solar Chariot, so that we can have two, or three working drives? That way we don’t have to wait three days between charging?”

“It doesn’t work that way,” Isis explained. “Because of the way the technology works, all QD storage systems will dump their charges simultaneously. So whether you have two, four, or a million on board, if one deploys, they all deploy. There is no way to isolate an entire system and have a secondary QD ready to go. And a simultaneous activation of two QD units doesn’t result in a longer duration “aloft” so it’s a waste of space. Unless you just want to carry a backup in case one of the drives fails.”

Enedelia frowned. “So, if we can’t have multiple QD’s, is there a way to get a QD capacitor with a shorter charge time?”

“For the right price, I’m sure,” Isis said. “But it would only be a marginal improvement. The shortest recorded charge time for a QD is fifty four hours, fourteen minutes, and that was a statistical anomaly that no one has been able to duplicate.”

“For faster turnaround times, military ships have Quantum Drives that can be exchange out on arriving at a base,” Jeden said. “Many of the top of the line cruise ships also use quick exchange drives so that they can drop a deployed drive for a fully charge drive. But all of these are artificial ships. I have never seen a quick exchange drive installed on a bio-ship.”

“So, what you’re telling me is, these two drives are useless to me?” Enedelia asked.

“No, not at all,” Jeden said. “We can get an awful lot of moneys on the black market with a Kelindan QD. Of course, we’d get even more moneys for a completely functioning ship, which we have. So, we can sell the ship, drive included, or keep the ship and sell the drive, or keep both for a backup ship to your future fleet.”

Enedelia chuckled. “Yeah, right,” she said, chuckling at Jeden’s vision of her as this great space capitalist. She thought about it further. “It would be nice to have a place as our home base. We could leave the good ship here, and use it for storage and such. And, if we need emergency funds, we can always strip it down later.”

“Great idea,” Jeden said, as if he shared her thoughts. “So, the next question is what do we do with the other? Strip it and keep the parts for spare parts, or sell the parts, or take the whole thing to sell on the black market, or take it back to Indigo Space Station and claim Salvage rights, for a more legit transaction.”

“Strip the good stuff, keep some for spare parts, some for sell on the black market, and then we take the wreck back to Indigo Station for fair market value,” Enedelia said.

“We’ll need a good explanation for taking it back for legit salvage,” Isis pointed out.

“Yeah, I’m working on that one,” Enedelia said. “Can I trust you to handle the black market stuff, Jeden?”

“Sure,” Jeden said. “I have a few connections. We Grays love hoarding technology, and they’re sure going to love this. We should get huge compensations.”

Amrita and the Japanese girl entered. They didn’t get too far, because when the girl saw the Grays, she screamed and tried to back away. Amrita tried to comfort her. The Japanese girl didn’t have the strength to flee, so she just cried on Amrita’s shoulder. “She wants to talk to us. Can you translate and then we’ll try and figure out a way to respond,” Amrita asked Enedelia.

“Can she read?” Drie asked.

“Of course she can read,” Enedelia said. “Japanese.”

“You can use one of my portable displays. It can display graphics,” Drie said, offering his pad.

“Why didn’t I think of this?” Enedelia asked.

“Or, you can use one of the probes,” Isis offered. “I can speak Japanese through the probes.”

“Why didn’t you suggest this earlier?” Enedelia asked.

“We were in a crisis,” Isis said.

Jeden offered the Japanese girl one of the Burt probes. She withdrew from him, uncertain of what to make of the Gray.

“It’s okay,” Enedelia said. “We won’t hurt you. These are my friends, Jeden, Drie, and you have already met Amrita. My name is Enedelia.”

Isis translated through the probe. She nodded and began to weep. Amrita put an arm around her shoulder.

“Do you want to tell us about it?” Amrita asked.

Isis translated for her. “I don’t know how to tell this. It’s so. Unbelievable.”

“I think you’ll find that we’ll buy just about anything,” Enedelia said.

“What’s your name?” Amrita asked.

“Atsuko,” she answered.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” Enedelia asked.

“A noise woke me, and I turned to see what it was, but I couldn’t move. My eyes were open, and, and,” Atsuko paused, and pointed at the Grays. “And they were in my room!”

Enedelia looked at the Grays for an explanation.

“There were dead Grays on the Kelindy ship,” Jeden offered. “They might have been sent to collect the girl for the Kelindy. We are typically used for such activities.”

“Go on with your story,” Enedelia urged.

“They floated me up to a light, and I was put on a table, and strapped down,” Atsuko continued, pausing every now and then so Isis could translate what she said to the whole group. “They stuck something in me and I screamed. I must have blacked out, because I don’t remember much after that. I remember hearing my brother scream. I am sure of that. The last thing I remember was hearing my brother yelling and my father answering. There was the noise of things falling to the floor. I screamed for them and one of the Grays stuck something in me, and then the next I know I was with you.”

Enedelia absorbed Atsuko story and finally nodded. “I can tell you what I think happened, but you must understand, I am only speculating. You were abducted by an alien race known as the Kelindy. Apparently the Earth is in Kelindy space, known as the Protectorate. Consequently, the Kelindy believe that we humans are a commodity to harvest and do with as they please, including selling us into slavery. They do the same thing to Grays here, and the ones that took you may have been acting out of necessity, or in an alliance. It’s hard to say which. Anyway, I believe your brother and father managed to escape and then they waged a battle to free themselves and you. It’s possible that the Kelindy were distracted while giving chase to me, giving your brother and father a temporary advantage. All the Kelindy and the Grays on your ship were found dead, including two humans, which, based on your story, I believe might be your family.”

Atsuko was very attentive to this last bit. “Are you sure? I can see them?”

Drie took his display and called up the images of the humans, cleaning up the features with computer graphics to avoid the gory truth behind their deaths. He offered the display to Atsuko. She hesitated, but reached out and took the display.

“These were the dead humans on the ship where we found you,” Drie said, and Isis translated.

Atsuko barely glanced at the images. She dropped it and then fell to the floor, sobbing. Amrita sat down beside her, unable to console her.

“This brings up another issue,” Drie said. “How do you want me to dispose of the bodies?”

“Can we wrap them up and preserve them in the cold of space until we decide how to properly dispose of them?” Enedelia asked. She had never had to deal with dead bodies, had never even seen a dead person, so she was at a loss. The only dead things she had ever had to deal with were chickens, and though she could clean them and prepare them, she had never been able to kill them like her brother. If it were up to her, she would have had pet chickens, and the pets would have died of old age.

“We should do that soon,” Jeden said. “We don’t want to let too much time to go by before we clean that up.”

“Can I trust you two to take care of that?” Enedelia asked.

“Of course,” the Grays answered simultaneously.

“Keep all their personal effects aside. Atsuko may want them later,” Enedelia said. “Also, before we return to Indigo Station, I want all the chocolate transferred to the good Kelindy ship. I don’t want to be in Indigo space with that much contraband. Oh, and take Burt with you. Burt, I want you to download a copy of your program onto the Kelindy ship and take over the entire system. Rewrite all auditory interface systems to acknowledge English, Spanish, Japanese, Hindi, and Gray. I also want a systems check performed, and an outline of the ship’s capabilities. I want to learn as much about this ship as possible. Think strategically. I want to know strengths and weaknesses. We may

find ourselves up against another one in the near future, and I want a way to escape or defeat it in battle. If and when it comes to that.”

“You already beat two of them,” Burt pointed out.

“We got lucky,” Enedelia said. And that was the truth. Sure, the Kelindy may not have expected her to resist as she had, but she knew if she had to go against another missile attack, she would not fair as well as she had this time around. She was suddenly very tired and decided to go get a nap. “If you’ll excuse me for a couple of hours.”

Chapter 23

Enedelia slept for four and half hours and then stayed in bed for another ten minutes trying to go back to sleep. She was groggy, but not so out of it that she didn't noticed that her ferrets were gone. She asked Isis to locate them and she said that Amrita was supervising them. Enedelia wandered out to the living area, not bothering to change out of the large, plaid shirt she had taken from the truck driver. She expected to find everyone in the living area, but all she found was Drie. Drie smiled at her.

"I can fix you some breakfast," Drie offered. "Are you hungry?"

"A little," Enedelia said.

"Would you like fresh eggs?" Drie asked.

"Where is everyone?" Enedelia asked, not answering about the fresh eggs, or wondering where said items would come from.

"Oh, they're in the garden," Drie said. "Fresh eggs? And toast? Very American. Remind you of home."

"What garden?" Enedelia asked, suddenly more awake.

"In my quarters," Drie asked. "You want to see? It's evolved very well."

Enedelia followed Drie back to his room and when the door opened, she was stunned into speechlessness. Not one square inch of the natural bio-ship's organic wall, ceiling, or floor structure was visible. What was visible was plant life. The floor, walls, and ceiling, had a very soft grass for a carpet. The walls and ceiling had various types of flowering and fruit producing plants, including tomatoes, peppers, garlic, and some things not readily identifiable. There were a couple patches that looked like wheat. Partial three trunks climbed the wall, as if a tree was cut down the center and glued right to the wall. Branches reached out from the wall, bracing the ceiling and Drie and Jeden had put hammocks for sleeping. Vines also climbed the walls and hung from the ceiling. Flowering plants hung from the ceiling. The floor had small flowering plants, like daisies. She saw the small buds that resembled the beginning of apples, and there was evidence that more fruit would be bearing soon.

In the center of the room was a floating orb that cast a full spectrum light on a quarter of the room. It rotated slowly, so that in a twenty four hour cycle it will have shown on the entire room. The whole room was well lit, but there was a definable shadow where the light wasn't directed. There was a fountain, with water flowing over a fall of rocks, and a pool just big enough to accommodate the five ducks swimming in it. Three parrots sat on a branch, grooming each other. There were also chickens. Four hens walked around the grass, eating bugs. Bugs! There were bugs on her ship. There were bees, grasshoppers, crickets, lightning bugs, or fire flies, butterflies. A squirrel ran across the floor and up the other side of the wall.

"Oh, my, god," Enedelia said.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Amrita asked.

Drie seemed a bit cowed, recognizing the shock in his Captain's voice. "You're not mad, are you? You said this is our room, we make it comfortable for us."

Enedelia had said that, but... She stammered, not knowing what to say. "How? How is this possible?"

"All of the stuff here has been genetically modified so that it is Bio-Ship compatible," Drie said. "I bought the plant matrix from BioCorp, and various plants that

they had to offer, but the bulk of my fruit bearing plants I collected from Lopinot. I also noticed that the humans there were mining chickens and ducks, and, I simply appropriated them. All of this is to keep us healthy. The plants will compliment Solar Chariot's air cleaning abilities and contribute to fresh air. The plants will also provide us with fresh food products. The ship and the plants are actually one, now, a symbiotic partnership. This may look like dozens of different plants, but really, it's all one plant, grafted, spliced, and modified to maximize health promoting properties, and make the plant hardier, to make us hardier."

"There are bugs on my ship!" Enedelia said.

"They are part of the cycle of life and compulsory to the maintenance of the plant life," Drie said. "I assure you, they will not leave this room. They are programmed. And now that we have the chickens and duck, there will be balance. They eat bugs."

"Would you like to come sit down?" Amrita asked. "It really is very nice in here. Look, even Atsuko was able to go back to sleep."

Something was different about Amrita, and it took a moment for Enedelia to figure it out. Her mouth dropped when it occurred to her what it was.

"Oh my god, you cut your hair!" Enedelia said.

"They tied me up with my own hair, Enedelia," Amrita said, a bit angry. "I will never have long hair again. Ever."

Enedelia wanted to protest. Her hair had been so nice, and it had probably taken years to grow it that length, and now... Well, it was her hair to do as she pleased. Enedelia nodded. She wondered where it went, but suspected the greys asked to keep it for her.

"Looks nice," Enedelia said.

"Thank you," Amrita said.

"I guess we'll have to figure out a sleep schedule to share my bed," Enedelia said. "Just until I can get you both back to Earth."

"Um, Ene," Drie said, motioning Enedelia closer to tell her a secret. "Atsuko cannot return to Earth."

"What? Why not?" Enedelia asked.

"She has been enhanced, modified, changed by the Kelindy to make her more marketable. They altered her and she has been marked as property. If she were to return to Earth, Kelindy agents would see that she is a rogue slave, hunt her down, and kill her," Drie said. "I have verified that she has been altered, but I'm unable to determine what sort of modification has taken place. It is the same kind of technology that made you a pilot. Only, it's Kenlindan technology. A variation on the same technology BioCorp uses, but the reader's we have can't interface with her technology."

"Does she know?" Enedelia asked.

"We haven't told her yet," Drie said. "Amrita called, alerted me that something was wrong when she noticed Atsuko having some sort of seizure while she slept, so I ran the tests. Her seizure is a common symptom of having one's nervous system altered by nanites. I am a biologist, you know. I understand these things."

"Is she going to be alright?" Enedelia asked.

"It depends on how the modifications take," Drie answered. "There is always a chance that there will be an incompatibility. In those cases, the subject typically dies, or is exterminated. Either way, she cannot safely return home."

Amrita said, "And there is no need to rush me back to Earth, because my destiny requires me to travel with you for a time."

"You don't understand," Enedelia said. "My line of work is dangerous. Every time I do a blind jump, I'm risking death. I can't be responsible for what happens to you."

"I am responsible for what happens to me," Amrita said. "I am aware of the dangers you face and I choose to accept what comes. Of course, if you just don't want my company, I will disembark at the first civilized place."

Enedelia forced a laugh. She had had the same idea, ages ago it seemed.

"Ene," Amrita said. "Please. I'm on a quest. I'm looking for something. I don't know what it is, but I know that the probability of me finding it is greater if I am with you. You are on a quest of sorts, too. You're also searching for something, and like me I don't think you know what it is. But together, we will find it."

"What makes you so insightful?" Enedelia asked.

Amrita shrugged. She petted a ferret that approached her. Amrita looked to Atsuko, and then back to Enedelia, who seemed to be displaying a bit of jealousy at how the ferrets had taken to Amrita so quickly. But that was their way. They instinctively knew good people. And no matter what else Enedelia thought of her, Amrita was good people. She knew it to the core of her being just as sure as Amrita had known that Enedelia would rescue her.

"I suppose I can get Solar Chariot to grow a new bed in the remaining room. Or two. Would you be willing to share a room with Atsuko?" Enedelia asked.

"If she is willing," Amrita said. They both looked to the sleeping girl, a sleep that seemed unnatural in some ways, but it was probably very much what Enedelia had experienced when she was upgraded to pilot status.

Enedelia nodded. She closed her eyes and paged Jeden. "Progress report?"

"Burt is currently rewriting the systems on the Kelindy ship so that they'll accept G-basic. I've completed my assessment of the tasks needed to be done, and now have a time table. I'll need thirty eight days just to strip the good stuff off the damaged Kelindy ship and stow it on the one we're keeping. I will make sure the damaged one is ready to go to Indigo, so we can declare it as salvage and offer it to the highest bidder. Meanwhile, I prepared queries to send out on the black market network for some of the items we will be selling, um, off the record. I will send them once we're back in civilized space. You're likely to get more moneys if peoples bid for stuff," Jeden offered.

That seemed reasonable, given how people made money off Ebay. "Would it go faster if I helped to dismantle equipment?" Enedelia asked.

"We only have two life belts," Jeden said. "You will be happy to learn that I discovered that we have Kelindy space suits. I could tailor one to fit you, but it will take a couple of weeks, to guarantee to quality. Until then, I suppose I could take you over to the Kelindy ship and then bring the belt back for Drie. Drie and I have already cleaned up the carnage, wrapped and stowed the bodies. Bye the way, what do we do with the Kelindy bodies?"

"I don't know," Enedelia said. She had never had to contend with such a problem. "I don't know. Stow them respectfully in space for now."

Chapter 24

Amrita and Enedelia spent a week caring for Atsuko. She walked around like a zombie, not really speaking, except for a few words that didn't make much sense. Enedelia believed she was depressed, and Amrita was inclined to agree, but Drie convinced them her apparent level of apathy was due to the changes happening in her body. These changes were being made by nanites that were enhancing her in some unknown capacity. Seeing the process taking place, Enedelia wondered how she had survived without people there to guide her and watch over her while she was evolving into a pilot.

It only took a week for Solar Chariot to grow two beds in the adjacent room next to Enedelia room. Amrita loved it and made the bed on the right hers. Atusko was non-committal and sat on the opposite bed. Unfortunately, they only had the one sleeping bag, the one Enedelia had stolen from the truck driver. Amrita gave the sleeping bag to Atsuko, and Enedelia gave her one a blanket that had also belonged to the truck driver. Enedelia returned to using the linen Bio-Corp had provided, which were comfortable enough, except they didn't feel like home.

"Maybe we can go shopping at this Indigo Station you've talked about," Amrita said.

"Yeah," Enedelia agreed, wondering how much credit she would have available. After all, she didn't have any new coordinates to offer. Jeden said they would get quite a bit of money from selling the damaged Kelindy ship, but there was really no way to tell how much she would get. She was hoping it was enough for some upgrades. For certain, she wanted to buy some shields for Solar Chariot. She didn't want to be left vulnerable to another Kelindy attack. Or anyone else.

Atsuko mumbled something.

"What was that?" Amrita asked. Isis translated for them.

"I want to go home," Atsuko said, in Japanese.

Enedelia bit her lip. They hadn't really spoken of this to Atsuko, mostly because she had been so out of it. Atsuko stood up and repeated her demands. Enedelia explained to her the situation and that she could not go home.

"I want to go home!" Atsuko shouted.

"There is nothing I can do for you at this juncture," Enedelia said. "However, after I check in at Indigo station, if you still want to go back, knowing the dangers, I will take you."

Atsuko nodded. Then she got up and walked to the living area where she began to consume large quantities of food.

"This is a good sign," Isis said.

"Really?" Enedelia asked.

"She's much more sociable than you were after you came out of the implant installment phase," Isis said.

The first month that Enedelia had spent on the Solar Chariot, her only company had been the ferrets, Isis, and the ship. She had felt cramped for space then, not necessarily from a lack of space, but because there were only so many places she could

go and explore. She already knew her ship by heart, due to the alterations that were made to her nervous system, but exploring the space and familiarizing the manual controls with hands on had only reinforced the idea that she was on a ship. Solarchariot was a small ship, comparatively, but bigger and more comfortable than the average yacht. She wondered if sailors on submarines felt the way she did, but suspected that she had more space to maneuver than even they did. She could dance and run in circles on the upper storage deck. She could go swimming in the pool. Of course, that had been when she had had the whole ship to herself. Now that there were people on board, vying for the same space, she was finding that she needed to recondition herself once again, becoming accustomed to the new social rules.

Amrita was very easy going and enjoyed assisting Drie in the preparation of foods. She began to introduce Indian delicacies, starting by teaching Drie how to make roti, very much like fresh tortillas. Their meals became more spicy. Enedelia liked it spicy, Atsuko did not. The grays ate everything! The Spicy mango was really interesting, and the grays couldn't get enough. The grays were the happiest people on the ship, followed by Amrita, who always seemed to be perpetually light hearted.

Atsuko, on the other hand, proved to be moody. She was restless. She wanted to run, and until the candy had been fully transported over to "the Keeper" as Drie and Jeden were calling it, there just wasn't room to run. When the pool was open for business, she swam for hours against the current. No other activities could be done in the living area when the pool was open. Enedelia did exercise with her, competing for numbers of reps on the pull up bar, but Atsuko quickly began to outdo her in all the physical activities, except for Tai Chi.

All three of the girls practiced Tai Chi together, making it a morning ritual while Drie prepared breakfast. Amrita and Atsuko both brought new movements to add to the routine, personalizing a portion of their Thai Chi dance before they returned to synchronized movements, ending in formation. They ate together and shared stories. Atsuko even laughed from time to time, but she was clearly more serious, which seemed reasonable considering her recent losses.

Enedelia introduced Amrita and Atsuko to her library, which they could access via the Gray's portable computers. Her available library was still small, but she was soon to release a second book of her choice due to the volume of books she had read. They could listen to an unlimited supply of classical music. Listening to classical music didn't have the same release criteria as the books. After a total of three and half weeks, Jeden reported to Enedelia.

"Captain, I think Drie and I have removed everything that might fetch a fair price by itself, or can be used as a spare part," Jeden said. "Whenever you're ready to take the salvage ship to Indigo Space, we're ready. The tandem cable is already in place."

"Very well," Enedelia agreed. "Prepare for a jump."

Enedelia found the girls in the living area, reading. "We're going. If you two would like to join me on the flight deck."

Amrita and Atsuko followed Enedelia to the flight deck and each took a seat on either side of her. She showed them how to pull out the seat restraints from the hidden recesses. Once they were ready, she tripped the Quantum Drive. Two minutes, twenty seconds later, they were in Indigo Space. She found it interesting that had Amrita screamed joyfully as if she were on a roller coaster. Atsuko had seemed unimpressed.

On arriving, Enedelia became aware of three things right off the bat. Indigo Space STC was contacting her, two Indigo battle cruisers were closing in on her, and four Kelindy Warships were closing in on her. Ignoring directives from STC to stay put, she headed away from the Kelindy ships, towing the damaged Kelindy ship she salvaged with her. She was receiving a dozen calls simultaneously, directed at her with communication lasers, and various radio frequencies; the barrage of queries was distracting. She ignored them all and tried to raise her agent using a radio frequency that everyone in Indigo space could tap.

“BioCorp, Binder, are you there?” Enedelia demanded. “Binder, pick up!”

To her surprise, Binder answered. “Enedelia! What is this?”

“I found a derelict ship and I claim salvage rights,” Enedelia said. “You know the law stands with me on this.”

“The law is one thing, the Kelindy warships are another,” Binder said.

“If you won’t buy this derelict, then I will sell it on the open market to the highest bidder!”

A Kelindy Warrior virtually appeared on the flight deck. “You will not sell our ship!”

“If you want to buy it back, then you will have to negotiate fair market value,” Enedelia said.

“We will destroy you!” the Kelindy said, menacingly.

Another person appeared in her communication line up. The new person seemed to be focused on the Kelindy speaker. “If you fire on a Republic citizen in Indigo Space, we will engage you as a hostile.” It was the Captain of one of the Republic ships on intercept course with Solar Chariot.

“She is not a citizen of the republic,” the Kelindy said. “She is a renegade slave.”

“She is not a slave,” Binder said. “She came to me as a free agent and BioCorp bought her contract.”

“Whether that is true or not is irrelevant,” the Kelindy said. “She is in possession of stolen Kelindy property and I will take her into custody.”

“As long as she is flying in a BioCorp ship, with republic transponder codes, you will do no such thing,” the Republic Captain reasserted his position.

“You’re willing to go to war over a solitary human? A female child at that?” the Kelindy asked.

“If need be,” the Republic Captain said.

“We did put a lot of money into her,” Bindler said.

“You’ll lose a lot more than money in this conflict if I set off some nukes,” the Kelindy said.

“Enedelia, would you be willing to negotiate the property rights of the derelict?” Bindler asked.

“No negotiations,” the Kelindy Captain said. “It’s ours.”

“Every ship Captain knows they are entitled to salvage rights,” Enedelia said. “You’ll have more trouble on your hands than some angry Kelindy if you deny me my rights, Bindler.”

“Let’s all just agree to meet on Indigo station and resolve this without conflict,” Bindler said. “Jehan, you can have an arbiter of your choice.”

“Very well, but no one touches that ship until we have concluded our negotiations,” the Kelindy Captain said.

“You can leave your ships to guard it,” Bindler said.

“We want in on the negotiations,” the Republic Captain said.

“We will destroy that ship before you have access to it,” Jehan threatened.

“Gentlemen, let’s discuss this like rational people first,” Bindler said. “Enedelia, drop the salvage where you are and come into Indigo Station.”

“Yeah, right,” Enedelia said. “I’m not leaving my salvage until I have some guarantees.”

“My ships will watch over it,” the Republic Captain said. “And I will personally escort you in.”

“Fine, but I want all my docking fees waived until this matter is concluded,” Enedelia demanded.

Bindler chuckled. “I knew there was a reason I liked you. I’ll meet you at the docking platform.”

Enedelia reeled in their tandem QD cable and released the line to their salvage, setting it to drift. The republic and Kelindy military ships surrounded it and outside their perimeter a number of commercial ships lined up like vultures on the side of the road, so to speak, vying for a chance to grab some road kill, while taking as many scans as they could work in. True to his word, the Republic Captain escorted her in to Indigo station.”

Chapter 25

“Okay, I’ll be back in an hour or so,” Enedelia said.

“We want to go,” Amrita said.

“No,” Enedelia said. “We don’t want Atsuko running into the Kelindy.”

“We want off the ship,” Atsuko said.

“Fine,” Enedelia said. Giving in. She really had no authority over them. And, it would be nice if Atsuko got the language virus. “Maybe you should both get off the ship. There is a language virus that will enable you to speak common and we won’t have to use translators to speak with you, Atsuko. Jeden and Drie? Take them shopping. Get them some of that ice cream. And some bed supplies.”

She stepped into the airlock. They started to get in but she stopped them.

“Wait ten minutes after I leave, though,” Enedelia said, and shut the inner door. She turned to face the exit and opened it.

Bindler met her.

“What’s going on?” Bindler asked. “Why the delay?”

“Sorry, just instructing the Grays,” Enedelia said, walking purposefully away from the ship knowing Bindler was bound to follow.

Bindler had really wanted to get on Solar Chariot, debated for a moment, and then followed, struggling to keep up. He took her arm to slow her pace, wanting to have a private chat with her. “Tell me what happened.”

“I found a derelict ship,” Enedelia said.

“In Earth’s orbit?” Bindler asked. “How did you get to Earth?”

“What makes you think I was at Earth?” Enedelia asked.

“Because that’s the last recorded location of the derelict,” Bindler said.

“Enedelia, if you want me to help you, you have to tell me what’s going on.”

“I made a blind jump, ended up in Earth’s orbit, this guy shot at me, I circled an asteroid, and when the missile followed, it hit them by accident,” Enedelia said. “What do you think happened? I have no weapons or defenses. You think I would openly attack a warship?”

“But the odds of you jumping back to Earth are... Well, I can’t even begin to calculate the odds,” Bindler said.

“Beginners luck,” Enedelia said, stepping off the star bridge and onto Indigo station proper.

The Republic Captain greeted her, his entourage moving in to surround her and Bindler. They were armed to the teeth. “Captain Garcia? I’m Captain Jeffers, of the Republic ship Trail Blazer. I would really like to talk to you about your find.”

“Captain Jeffers,” Enedelia said, shaking his hand. “I really doubt I can tell you anything important. Like I was just telling Bindler, I am just a new pilot. I have no weapons, no defenses, and certainly no experience. I had a lucky blind jump, found this derelict, and here I am, just trying to make a little profit.”

“The Kelindy reported their ship missing over three weeks ago,” Captain Jeffers said.

“Well, I have no space suit, and it took a while using life belts and the tools I had available to jury rig a tandem cable to pull the ship through the jump with me,” Enedelia said.

“That makes sense,” one of the officers told Captain Jeffers.

“Let me through,” Jehan pushed through the guards, his armed men right behind. “How dare you try to interrogate her before we arrived?”

“Oh, calm down,” Jeffers said. “It’s clear to me that this is just a child who had a touch of luck, Jehan. Surely you can see that she did not attack your ship.”

“Then explain her transponder code in the Earth Sentry,” Jehan said. “And explain why two of our ships are missing from Earth space.”

“Someone must have attacked your ship and I just chanced upon them,” Enedelia said.

“There is no way that you will have me believe that you made a blind jump to the Earth system,” Jehan said. “You are a republic spy and I will have you hung.”

“Spy!” Jeffers laughed. “She didn’t even show up on any registries until she was caught trying to smuggle illicit substances through Indigo customs.”

“You never told me that,” Bindler said.

“I didn’t know caffeine was illegal,” Enedelia said.

“Is that how you want to play this little girl?” Jehan said.

“Whoa, now, I can’t have you threaten my client when we’re trying to establish fair negotiations,” Bindler said.

“Fair? Do you see an arbiter anywhere?” Jehan said.

“Let’s all retire to the conference room and discuss this matter like civilized beings,” Bindler pleaded.

“I will not leave you alone with her!” Jehan said.

He and his men retrieved their weapons and brought them to bare. Jeffers and his men mirrored their hostility. Enedelia felt sick at her stomach, wishing she hadn’t gotten off Solar Chariot.

“Gentlemen!” Binder said. “This is not the way, Jehan. Whether she is guilty of something or not, you need information. You need to know what happened in order to prevent this sort of thing from happening again. There is too much intelligence here to destroy it all in a senseless firefight.”

“Tell them to stand down,” Jehan demanded.

“Both of you, have your peoples lower their weapons,” Bindler said. “We can all walk together. Jeffers is on one side of Enedelia, and Jehan on the other. No one has an advantage. Enedelia, no talking until we arrive at the conference room. Please.”

Enedelia didn’t say another word. The situation deescalated to weapons holstered. Binder escorted them, walking in front of Enedelia, while Republic Guards walked on her right, and the Kelndy warriors on her left. They all walked together to a conference room, the opposing forces scowling at each other. Indigo citizens watched from a distance where they could, but mostly Binder took them down corridors that had been temporarily shut down to normal traffic. They were met by an arbiter, a tall woman, her skin as blue as Binders, suggesting she was the same species, only very tall. Jehan seemed satisfied with the arbiter, who introduced herself as Trend. She invited them into the conference, where they had to take turns to enter. When the doors closed on the conference room, Enedelia found herself suddenly cut off from her ship. She nearly panicked. She hadn’t realized how accustomed she had become to having Solar Chariot’s emotions in her head. She was also missing having Isis there, providing her information whenever she needed to know something.

“All communications to your ships and outside computer terminals have been suspended for the purposes of these talks,” the Arbiter said. “So we may resolve this conflict in privacy.”

“I’ll offer you two point six billion credits for the Kelindy ship,” Captain Jeffers said.

“How dare you,” Jehan protested. “Her claim on the ship has not been established. For all we know, she could be a pirate.”

“A pirate?” Jeffers laughed. “Look at her. Does she look like a pirate to you?!”

“I made a public claim for the salvage rights as soon as I returned to Indigo system,” Enedelia said.

“You stole the ship from Protectorate space!” Jehan said. “You were trespassing in our space, you openly attacked us, and stole our ship.”

“Now, just a moment,” Jeffers said. “The Republic and the Protectorate have a treaty allowing all ships free pass if a blind jump lands either of us in either of our space. Do you really want to deny her that pass, because if you do, I know a few systems where Kelindy ships keep popping into with a regularity that suggests blind jumps may not be responsible. As for the matter of her attacking you, it would seem obvious by looking at her and the relative age of her ship, that she is hardly a match for one of your ships, much less two. However, if you want it known throughout Republic space that an unarmed girl got the better of your trained warriors, well, I would be happy to spread that message.”

Jehan scowled at Jeffers and turned his attention to Enedelia.

“Where is the other ship?” Jehan demanded.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Enedelia said, trying to look innocent.

Jehan appeared to be suffering an internal struggle. He glanced at Jeffers, then the Arbiter, and then back to Enedelia. He forced himself to relax.

“I would consider dealing with you for fair market value of the salvage of this ship if you would be more open about what happened,” Jehan said. “Where is the other ship? What is the condition of the crew?”

“I’ve decided to keep the other ship,” Enedelia said, deciding that the more truthful she can be, the more likely she would be able to sell her story. The more Jehan believed her, the faster this process would be over. “I’ve relocated it to a location I discovered on a blind jump. Deep, interstellar space. An undiscovered place of no interest, and no available coordinates except through me. I die, so do your hopes of recovering that ship.”

“You said nothing about a second ship!” Bindler said.

Jehan was visibly upset, but he was coping well. Jeffers was reevaluating the girl named Enedelia Garcia.

“I can’t tell you everything, Bindler,” Enedelia said. “It makes it harder to negotiate with you.”

“But...” Bindler began to protest.

“Like you tell me everything,” Enedelia said.

“I told you everything...” Bindler said,

“Everything you thought I wanted to hear to close a deal,” Enedelia said.

“Enough!” Jehan said. “I want that ship.”

“I understand the salvage rights of Republic space,” Enedelia said, putting her hands in her lap. “I found the crew dead on that ship. The ship belongs to me.”

“Those rules apply to Republic space, not the Protectorate. You were in our space,” Jehan said.

“If I’m not mistaken,” Jeffers said. “If she beat your warriors in a fair fight, she’s has the right to war trophies. That would make your ships legitimately hers.”

Enedelia frowned at Jeffers.

“Is that the way you want to play it?” Jehan asked Enedelia. “You still have to make blind jumps for a living. You never know when you might find yourself in Protectorate space.”

“We have a treaty,” Jeffers said.

“Treaties,” Jehan laughed. “A stray ship in our space, experiencing communication difficulties, accidents happen. You know this as well as I do. We want our ship back.”

“Sorry, I’m unwilling to negotiate on this matter,” Enedelia said.

“Will you negotiate for the return of the property on the ship?” Jehan asked.

“The spacesuits?” Enedelia asked.

“I’m not talking spacesuits!” Jehan said, slapping the table. “I’m talking property! I’m talking slaves.”

“I do not consider human beings to be slaves,” Enedelia said.

“You know, all of this is a waste of time. Either you recognize her salvage rights, or you don’t,” Jeffers said, wanting to get Enedelia alone to discuss the other ship. “I don’t think you have a leg to stand on, and if you want to keep your technology off the market, you need to step up and beat my offer.”

“I want to know exactly what we’re negotiating for,” Bindler said. “Are we negotiating for both ships, or the property on the ships.”

“The second ship is not open for negotiations,” Enedelia repeated. “The ship I brought back for salvage is all I’m offering.”

Jehan sighed.

“Will you negotiate the release of the bodies of my warriors?” Jehan asked.

“Now, that, I will give you, free of charge,” Enedelia said.

“Now, don’t be so rash, Enedelia,” Bindler said.

“I don’t know how the Kelindy feel about their dead, but I will not sell people, dead or alive,” Enedelia said. “So, in an effort to demonstrate my willingness to be reasonable, I will return the bodies here in six days, barring any technical difficulties. Fair enough?”

Jehan bowed slightly. He offered his hand to shake on it. Bindler blocked the hand shake.

“Arbiter?” Bindler said.

“I find that both parties are in agreement on the issue of returning the warrior’s bodies,” the Arbiter said. “No charge, a gesture of good will.”

“Fine,” Bindler said, looking a little miffed at Enedelia. “Let’s discuss what the other points are.”

“The return of both my ships and the stolen property,” Jehan said.

“You’re not getting the second ship, or any of the property on it,” Enedelia said. “I will, however, give you some information. You can attribute the loss of both ships due to bad luck and probably mismanagement.”

“Enedelia, no free disclosures,” Bindler said.

“Not on this,” Enedelia said. “Yeah, I was in Earth space. As far as your people are concerned, it was a blind jump, but no one bothered to ask who initiated the attack. They shot first. I evaded the first missile, and probably would have eventually been caught, except apparently the crew failed to subdue its slaves. The slaves revolted and killed the crew. The slaves died in their uprising. There is no slave property remaining because no one on your ship was left alive. As for the second ship, I managed to communicate with them that my intentions were charitable, that I was rendering emergency assistance, and they still fired upon me. Fortunately for me, they missed. One of my grays who had boarded your ship to render first aid fired upon the second ship using your own weapons against you; he scored a direct hit, and you can see the results of that encounter,” Enedelia said. She leaned forwards. “Don’t mess with me.”

Bindler’s mouth was agape, unable to believe the story but also wishing she hadn’t just revealed everything. For free! Jeffers seemed amused.

“The Republic recognizes our right to pursue and extradite renegade slaves,” Jehan said, evaluating Enedelia and her story. “So, if you have property on your ship that belongs to us, you will surrender it.”

“Even if I did, I will not turn a fellow human over to you simply for you to turn around and sell them or kill them,” Enedelia said. “However, I would be willing to consider buying a hypothetical person off the market.”

“So they are alive?!” Jehan demanded.

“Maybe,” Enedelia said.

“All of them?” Jehan asked

“No,” Enedelia said.

“Atsuko?” Jehan asked.

“She is,” Enedelia said. “Will you take her off the market in exchange for the salvage.”

“Ah, no!” Bindler said, rubbing his forehead. “Enedelia, are you purposely sabotaging the negotiations?”

“The slave is nonnegotiable,” Jehan said. “You will return her to us, or we will destroy your ship. I assure you of that.”

“Not on my watch, you won’t,” Jeffers said.

The Arbiter hit the table for their attention. “I will not tolerate threats. You have agreed to negotiate so I expect all parties to be civil.”

“Let’s discuss the salvage,” Bindler said.

Enedelia and Jehan stared at each other, neither looking away or blinking.



Ten minutes after Enedelia debarked Solar Chariot, Jeden and Drie escorted Atsuko and Amrita to the mall where they sat down and had an ice cream. The language virus made Atsuko sick to her stomach, but Amrita seemed unaffected, except for the fact that she could suddenly read the writing above the stores. When Atsuko said she was ready to continue walking, the four of them got up and proceeded through the mall.

“Hang on,” Atsuko said.

Amrita laughed.

“What?” Atsuko said.

“It’s funny. I hear you speak in common, but I still hear you with an accent,” Amrita said.

“You are the one with the accent,” Atsuko said. “Come, I want to check out this store.”

The store Atsuko was interested in sold weaponry. She was attracted by the blades, a popular item onboard ships since projectile weapons were just as likely to kill everyone on board if a shot went awry than just kill the target. Not that this store seemed to care what they sold. There were thousands of different caliber projectile weapons. There were also energy weapons. There were smart guns, with bullets that could shoot over or around walls. There were missile launchers. There were crossbows. There were dart guns. The arms dealer revealed he had a firing range, just in case she wanted to test some of the smaller caliber weapons.

“Um, I think we should leave now,” Jeden said.

“Why?” Atsuko asked, examining the balance of the sword in her hand.

“He’s right, we go now,” Drie agreed.

Atsuko looked up and saw a gathering of Kelindy warriors that had decided to come her way. Atsuko handed the cross bow to Amrita. “Load that,” Atsuko instructed her as she stepped to the store front.

The proprietor of the store started to protest, right up until the Kelindy entered. They entered with weapons drawn. The six warriors met her. She moved like the wind, with a fierce determination to win, fueled by a desire to exact revenge for the deaths of her brother and father. She didn’t question her ability or the fact that she had never fought like this before. She simply did what was necessary, avoiding the nearest weapon by literally, bending, and twirling, until she was against the attacker as if they were dancing, not fighting. Her hand went to his hand with the weapon, her heels landed on his feet, and she rode him like a child riding on the feet of the parents, as she deflected the weapon into the attacker’s colleague. The arms dealer ran for cover.

By the time the third warrior went down, Atsuko had taken up one of the swords from a display. One of the warriors retreated, called for backup, and pulled out a projectile weapon. Atsuko used one of her opponents for a shield, dropped her sword, and retrieved the dead Kelindy’s projectile weapon, and returned fire. The warrior fell, a clean shot through the forehead. She killed the remaining ones just as easy.

“It’s time to get back to the ship,” Atsuko said, collecting weapons and ammo as she headed for the exit. “Carry that, Drie. And that. Get some more arrows.”

Atsuko took the sword that she had been inspecting earlier, put it in its scabbard, and slung it. She handed a few more items to Jeden, who had appropriated a floating cart from the shop. She handed Amrita a quiver of bolts, fastened a gun belt to her hip, and handed her a sniper rifle to sling. She drew her sword. “Moving out, follow me.”

They made it half way across the mall when the Kelindy backup arrived. Amrita and the two Grays ducked for cover. Atsuko threw what looked like a grenade. Where it hit an energy barrier formed; the grenade broke and where the next piece fell a second, but smaller energy barrier formed, and a third followed. The barrier was a temporary shield that gave her cover from bullets as she advanced. And advance she did. Atsuko met them head on, going through the group like a lawnmower through grass. Indigo security arrived, and suddenly it was a free for all. The energy barriers fluoresced with intense blue light as they absorbed fire from both sides. Alarms were ringing out all over the station. Republic soldiers arrived, and suddenly the chaos was worse.

♪♪▶

“Fine, we will pay one point seven billion credits to BioCorp to return our property to us,” Jehan said.

“You don’t have to take this deal,” Jeffers said.

“He’s right, Enedelia, you could no doubt get more on the open market for it, but let’s consider some of the unspoken gestures of taking his offer,” Bindler said. “It puts BioCorp in a favored trading spot with the Kelindy. Also, I suspect they would be less likely to shoot at you the next time you are accidentally in Kelindy space, wouldn’t that be a fair expectation?”

“We will not shoot at her, if we find her in our space via blind jump,” Jehan said. The conditional part of his statement made the caveat seem less genuine.

“I might give you the salvage for free,” Enedelia said.

“Excuse me?!” Jeffers asked. Bindler choked.

“In exchange for what?” Jehan bit.

“Free passage to Earth anytime I want to go home,” Enedelia said. “Without fear that you’re going to shoot at me or otherwise harass or try to capture me.”

“Deal!” Jehan said, and stuck out his hand.

“Now, wait just a moment,” Bindler said. “I’ve spent a good deal of time and money arranging this meeting for you to just throw it all away so you can go home on a whim.”

“Not to mention that we can’t protect you if return to Protectorate space,” Jeffers said. “And you can’t trust them. Jehan is up to something.”

“We don’t Welch on our agreements. If I say she will be safe in our space, she will be safe,” Jehan said.

“There are some things more important than money,” Enedelia said.

“In that, you and I are in agreement,” Jehan said. Putting his hand in hers.

“In matters concerning the salvage brought by Enedelia Garcia, she agrees to give up any claims to monetary compensation for the return of damaged ship to its rightful owners in trade for safe passage to and from her planet of origin,” the Arbiter echoed the resolution, clarifying further what the agreement was for.

“Now, you will surrender Atsuko to me,” Jehan said.

“No, I will not,” Enedelia said.

“I can get extrication rights, and BioCorp will force your hand in this,” Jehan said. “Let’s try not to ruin the rapport we’ve established.”

“There is a precedent for what he is saying,” Bindler sighed, having lost a great deal of money.

“A Captain has the right to offer sanctuary to any person on his or her ship,” Enedelia said.

Bindler looked at her. Jeffers beamed back to Jehan. “Someone has been doing their homework. She has you on that.”

“As long as she is on your ship and in Republic space, that is true,” Jehan said. “The moment you arrive in Protectorate space, you will be subject to our laws. We will reserve the right to inspect your ship and seize any properties we deem necessary.”

“You just gave me free passage,” Enedelia said.

“I have given free passage to Earth, I didn’t say that you would not be subject to search and seizures,” Jehan said. “Something all ships are subject to in our space.”

“I tried to tell you,” Jeffers said, sadly.

“Arbiter, that condition violates the reasonable expectation of our agreement,” Enedelia tried.

“No, it doesn’t. In their space you are subject to their laws,” the Arbiter said.

An alarm bell went off.

“May I open up the technology block to investigate?” the Arbiter asked.

All parties agreed and the Arbiter lifted the blocks. They all had technologies that made it possible for them to witness the chaos ensuing and each began to issue orders. Jehan and Jeffers both ordered troop movements. Enedelia brought up the map and found an alternative route for her party, facilitating their return to Solar Chariot. She also got Isis and Burt involved.

(Enedelia!) Jeden said.

(I hear you. Retreat through the Moa pit, take the egg conveyor belt to the dump, cross over two compartments, and up one. It’s a straight shot to the ship.”

(The doors are locked on this level. We don’t have the security over rides necessary to open the doors to retreat.) Jeden said.

(Isis can you unlock the doors?)

(No, but Burt can.) Isis said and put Burt on a channel with Jeden. Doors began to open for them. The four of them retreated.

(Don’t let them escape!) Jehan ordered.

Atsuko took the crossbow from Amrita and shot each Kelindy in the leg that attempted to block their path. Amrita handed her another bolt each time she shot. They made it through the door and Isis secured it for them, locking it down with a code provided by Burt.

“You have illegal technology!” Bindler said.

“No, I have a shareware program,” Enedelia said, innocently.

“Call your men off, Jehan,” Jeffers ordered.

“Call yours off!” Jehan said. “We are engaged in a legit recovery operation.”

“That human has been modified,” Bindler observed. “Nice weapons upgrade.”

“You will cease your probes,” Jehan said.

“This is my station,” Bindler said.

Jehan pulled a knife and put it to Binder’s neck. Enedelia pulled out her magnum and pointed it at Jehan’s forehead, clicking the hammer back. His officer pulled out a laser and pointed it at Enedelia. Jeffers pulled out two weapons and pointed it at Jehan and Jeffer’s officer.

“Stand down,” Jeffers said.

“All deals are off unless I get my property back,” Jehan said.

“Then all deals are off. I am about tired of being pushed around by all of you people,” Enedelia snapped. “Now, I have an alternative deal with the devil here...”

“Hey!” Bindler said, offended that she referred to him as the devil.

“And by god, I will abide by my contract with him, but I will not turn a fellow human being over to you for you to conduct experiments on her against her will,” Enedelia said, ignoring Bindler’s protest. “If you want to end up like the rest of your men that attacked me, go ahead and cut Bindler’s neck. But if you want to walk out of here alive, pull your hand back slowly and call your men off.”

(Everyone’s on board.) Isis said.

(Disengage coupling and pull away from Indigo station) Enedelia instructed Solar Chariot.

Jehan pulled his hand back slowly and nodded to his officer to comply.

“I concede this game to you,” Jehan said.

“Yeah, right. And since our negotiations are over,” Enedelia said. “I authorize BioCorp to sell the salvage to the highest bidder and they can use that to pay down on my obligation to them. As for your dead, I will return them to you, as agreed upon. As for the slave, I am giving you fair warning now: I will not tolerate you harvesting humans and will do everything in my powers to stop you and your people in the slave trade.”

“You have no authority in that arena,” Jehan said. “The governments of Earth allow us to take a certain percentage of the population, as we see fit, in exchange for technology and protection.”

“You lie,” Enedelia said.

“He is actually telling the truth on that,” Jeffers said, putting one of his weapons away.

Jehan did not look concerned that Enedelia still held a weapon to his forehead. For him to die in combat, whether by a girl or not, was an esteemed privilege. His eyes never left hers. He would not show fear or concern. Enedelia sat down, but didn't lower her weapon.

“I lowered my weapons,” Jehan said.

Enedelia's hand was shaking with anger. “Do the people of Earth know what you're doing to them?”

“The people that need to know,” Jehan said. “You are beginning to realize that you are in way over your head. Surrender Atsuko to me and I will not hunt you down like the wild dog you are.”

“Selling and trading of people is wrong, you know that,” Enedelia said.

“It happens every day in the free market, even on your own planet,” Jehan said.

“Then you have no hard feelings about me selling your people into slavery?” Enedelia asked.

Jehan laughed. He laughed hard. He leaned into the gun.

“Death is the only freedom from slavery,” Jehan said. “Shoot me if you wish, but know this, your days are numbered.”

Enedelia did not shoot him. Jehan got up and his men that were sitting stood with him in unison. They departed the room.

Enedelia slowly lowered the magnum until it touched the table top.

“Did you know the safety was on?” Jeffers asked.

Enedelia began to sob hysterically. She laid her head down on the table and simply cried. Bindler and Jeffers looked to each other and then to the Arbiter.

“No adequate resolution was made in the negotiations between the Kelindy, Jehan, and BioCorp's Captain Enedelia Garcia,” the Arbiter said. “The courts recognize her claim on the salvage and entrust BioCorp to negotiate a fair trade on her behalf.”

“If you'll excuse me, I should go take care of the salvage operation,” Bindler said, and departed with the Arbiter. “At least it wasn't a total loss.”

Chapter 26

“Come,” Jeffers said, standing and touching Enedelia’s shoulder. “I will escort you to your ship.”

“I’m sorry,” Enedelia said.

“For what?” Jeffers asked.

“For crying,” Enedelia said.

Jeffers laughed. “Don’t be sorry for that. People cry, that’s their nature,” Jeffers said. “And when I factor in your stress, age, gender, and how brave you have been, I think you’re holding up stupendously well.”

“You’re very kind,” Enedelia said.

“No, not kind. I’m speaking truth as I see it,” Jeffers said. He sighed. “Look, I know about your planet, and the region you call home. In your country, they consider you, at your current age, less than adult, but not quite a child. It’s a terrible place to be, unable to make the big decisions and yet still responsible for your behavior. In any other time and age or culture, you would already be considered an adult, and probably married off and having children. The way I see it, you made a career choice for yourself. And that’s really the only difference between a free man and a slave. The ability to make choices. The ability to take what nature hands you and turn it into profit, and not necessarily profit in the monetary sense of the word. You went up against two Kelindy slaver ships, unarmed. People are already writing songs about you. You’re going to have to be on your game from here out, though, because the Kelindy will be gunning for you.”

“You know, I was starting to feel better listening to you, but you ruined it with that last part,” Enedelia said.

“Balance, Captain Garcia. Balance,” Jeffers said. “Look, I’d like to make a proposal. I will pay for some upgrades to your ship if you would be willing to do some jobs for me.”

“Jobs?” Enedelia said.

“I suspect you are going back to Earth, Kelindy threat or no” Jeffers said. “Why not do a little espionage while you’re there and report back to me.”

“What sort of upgrades?” Enedelia asked.

“A weapons package and an upgrade to your scanning capabilities,” Jeffers offered. “A surveillance package.”

“I would rather have a defense system,” Enedelia said.

“You got it,” Jeffers said.

Enedelia eyed him suspiciously. “What exactly are you thinking I can do for you?”

“You have a working Kelindy slaver ship in your possession,” Jeffers said. “If I were to get you some new transponder codes for it and some good jump coordinates, perhaps you would jump into a Kelindy system, gather intelligence, and bring it to me.”

“I don’t know how to fly a Kelindy ship,” Enedelia said.

“Between you and your Grays, I think you will figure it out,” Jeffers said.

“Why don’t I just give you the ship,” Enedelia said.

“Because you’re a rogue and no one will be able to blame the Republic if you were to get yourself captured,” Jeffers said.

“Yeah. That also means no one will come to rescue me,” Enedelia said.

“You understand it exactly,” Jeffers said. “So, do you want a military upgrade?”

“Why do I feel like a pawn,” Enedelia asked. “The Kelindy are coming for me regardless. Yes, I want the upgrades. And I will do a mission for you. But on my terms.”

“Naturally. I want you to feel safe,” Jeffers said. “Have your ship rendezvous with mine. I’ll have my techs start work.”

Enedelia directed Solar Chariot to Captain Jeffer’s ship, which she could see was approaching to expedite the process. She then informed Isis of what was to happen.

“Does my crew need to get off for the upgrades to happen?” Enedelia asked.

“No, they’ll be fine. Some of the upgrades will be injected, becoming part of your ship’s growth. It will take six months for the defense package to become active. The weapons package is easier. We’ll fit Solar Chariot with a harness. You’ll be able to attach weapons, or use it for general towing, better than what you were doing with your jury rigged towing system.”

(Captain. We’ve docked with Captain Jeffer’s ship.) Isis reported. (I have Bindler on another line. Would you care to speak with him?)

(Put him through.) Enedelia said.

(Meet me at the Captain’s bar before you leave the station.) Bindler said.

(Ten minutes.) Enedelia said. “Captain Jeffers, I need to go get something to eat. Thank you for your time.”

Jeffers shook hands with her. “We’ll talk again soon. I’ll leave a shuttle at docking ring seven, gate nine. They’ll deliver you to your ship.”

“Thank you,” Enedelia said.

Enedelia made her way to the Captain’s bar, surprised by how quiet it was in the corridors. No doubt it had something to do with the skirmish that had occurred at the mall. She arrived and looked around for Bindler. Apparently she had arrived before him. Everyone in the bar stood and lifted their drink in salute to her, ‘May you always return,’ was the chorus. She humbly nodded. She was looking for a table when the waitress with the skin of a poison dart frog greeted her.

“Hello, Captain. I have a table for you over here,” the waitress said, encouraging Enedelia with a smile, with actual genuine warmth.

“Um, thank you,” Enedelia.

“Do you have a preference in drink?” the waitress asked.

“Um, tea would be nice,” Enedelia said.

“Kas tea? That’s what I served you last time,” the waitress said.

“Yes, please, that was good,” Enedelia said.

“And would you like the same meal as well?” the waitress asked.

“Would you surprise me with something new?” Enedelia asked. “Fit for human consumption, of course. And cooked.”

“Sure,” the waitress said. “I’ll be right back with your drink.”

No sooner than the waitress left, two males of an unknown species joined her at her table. They looked like the unsavory types, so stereotypically transparent as to be comedic. One smelled of cigarette smoke, which was curious because she doubted they could smoke on Indigo station with all its bans on addictive substances. His face had the texture of a potato sack, a dark grey, and a broader nose, and wider gap between the eyes than human.

“You’re making quite a name for yourself, little lady,” the guy that smelled like smoke said.

“Just luck,” Enedelia said. “All I want is to do my job and float through life with some anonymity.”

“Yeah, well, we can’t all get what we want,” the other said, revealing his odd teeth arrangement in what might have been a smile. The smile of a great white, with teeth in different position and more ready to pop up when one fell out.

“We’re with the union,” Smokey said. “We want you to join.”

“Thank you, but no,” Enedelia said. “I prefer to be my own agent.”

“You don’t understand,” Teeth said. “We’re not asking you, we’re telling you.”

“No, you don’t understand,” Enedelia said. “I’m not joining a union. I have no intentions of giving you a percentage of my earnings. That’s final.”

“If you’re moving cargo, and if you’re using two non-union Grays for labor,” Smokey said. “We could make life for you very unpleasant.”

“Hello! I’m a scout ship, not a cargo ship,” Enedelia said.

“Then why do you need the Grays?” Teeth said.

“They’re my friends,” Enedelia said.

Smokey and Teeth laughed. Bindler pulled up to the table. “We were just leaving,” Smokey said. “Think about our offer.”

“Consider your offer rejected,” Enedelia said, raising her voice so they could hear her as they walked away.

“They bothering you?” Bindler asked.

“I’m not afraid of their type,” Enedelia said. “I have bigger problems to worry about.”

“Yeah, but some of the smaller problems can add up,” Bindler said.

“Speaking of little problems, what do you want?” Enedelia asked.

“I’ve got good news and bad news. Which do you want first?” Bindler asked.

“Start with the good,” Enedelia said.

“The salvage brought enough credits to pay down your loan by three years,” Bindler said.

“That’s all,” Enedelia asked?

Bindler shrugged. “It’s damaged.”

“I get the sense I could have cut it up and sold it in pieces for more,” Enedelia said.

“Yep, but then when count in all the time you’re not making blind jumps just to barter, it probably comes out about the same,” Bindler said.

Enedelia was skeptical, but held her opinion. “And the bad.”

“BioCorp has re-evaluated the terms of your loan, and based on their current risk assessment, they have increased the interest rates, extending your loan obligations out another fifteen years,” Bindler said.

“That’s not fair,” Enedelia asked that. “It’s not like I asked for this war.”

“Would you be willing to give me the girl the Kelindy want?” Bindler asked.

“No!” Enedelia snapped.

“There you go,” Bindler said. “You’re unable to negotiate, and BioCorp won’t budge on that issue. Also, there is a little matter of the weapons she took from the store, and penalties for damage to Indigo Station, so, your credit limit is practically maxed out.”

“They were defending themselves and you know it,” Enedelia said.

“Someone’s got to pay for the damage,” Bindler said.

“Bill the Kelindy,” Enedelia said.

“I’m sure Indigo Station will be sending them a bill. Will they pay up? Probably not,” Bindler said.

The waitress returned with a meal and placed it before her. “Here you go, Captain. Let me know if I can get you anything else.”

“Thank you,” Enedelia said. After the waitress departed, she whispered to Bindler. “I can still afford my meal, right?”

“It’s on me,” Bindler said.

“Nice. Can you tell me about the upgrades Atsuko has in her?” Enedelia asked.

“All I can tell you is that she has a military package, the best upgrades on the market,” Bindler said. “Unfortunately she has a block on some of the features, and once the Kelindy saw that I was trying to access the codes, they locked her down good. Of course, it works both ways, they now need her in custody to get access. You would be doing yourself a favor if you flushed her out an airlock.”

“How dare you!” Enedelia said.

“Just being practical,” Bindler said. “You’re an investment. I don’t want anything untoward to happen to you. This Atsuko girl is a weapon. I suspect she is an assassin, which means she is programmed to go after a specific target. That’s the only reason I can imagine that Jehan wants her back so badly, or he would have just blown her up before locking her out. He doesn’t want anyone to discover who or what the target is prematurely.”

“Does she know what the target is?” Enedelia asked.

“Probably not,” Bindler said. “Knowing could be counterproductive to the goals. If she is programmed, she will be triggered when she comes into visual contact with her target. And once she is triggered, there will be no stopping her.”

“After that, is she free?” Enedelia asked.

“It depends on the programming,” Bindler said. “Often assassins are programmed to self-destruct so that no one can get information from them.”

“And I thought I would find a more civilized way of life once I got off Earth,” Enedelia said. “How naïve of me.”

“Nature is nature. Nature is happy to coexist if it can, but competition does drive the gene pool,” Bindler said.

“But it doesn’t have, too,” Enedelia said. “You have the technology to colonize worlds and feed the hungry.”

“And what good would it do if we fed the hungry and all they did were lay around and get fat?” Bindler asked. “Competition is good for the soul. It makes you strive for more and better. It’s how society gets better.”

“Did you ever think that perhaps the goal of life is just to be happy, not get ahead?” Enedelia asked.

“Don’t say things like that!” Bindler cringed. “Words like that can drive up the interest rates on your loan.”

“Like my words alone would make a difference,” Enedelia said. “I predict the moment I get close to paying off the loan you will simply find a new way to extend my debt. Good day, Bindler.”

“Don’t be so jaded,” Bindler said, getting up. “You have a great life, you know. I can think of six billion people on your home world who might change places with you in a heartbeat.”

Bindler departed, leaving Enedelia alone. She sampled more of her meal, but found that she wasn’t hungry. The waitress returned. “Everything okay?”

“Can I get this to go?” Enedelia asked.

“Sure,” the waitress said, picking up the dish.

“Wait,” Enedelia said. “Could I order two more meals like this, and two meals suitable for a Gray, all to go?”

“Sure,” the waitress said. “All on Bindler?”

“Yes, please,” Enedelia said. “Oh, and, I never learned your name.”

“Kiash,” the waitress said.

“I’m Enedelia,” Enedelia said, offering to shake hands.

“I know,” Kiash said, shaking hands. “And thank you for last time. Because of you, they extended my contract.”

“Really?” Enedelia asked, wondering if she had done Kiash a favor, having to stay in this dimly lit bar and grill.

Kiash nodded. “My new term will enable me to stay on Indigo until my children complete primary education. Thank you so much.”

Kiash departed with the dish to wrap for takeout, and make the next order, leaving Enedelia wondering. She had hoped the tip would get her better service by simply letting Kiash know that she was wanted, but it had done Kiash more good than she had known. It was funny how things turned out.

A tall female approached the table. She was well dressed, robe type wrappings, even her hair was wrapped, and a veil hung over her face. Her height suggested she was Kelindy. Her beauty suggested she was Kelindry. She towered over everyone in the room and eyes either couldn’t look away, or they had to meet the ground due to shame or fear. Her own eyes had a distant look about her, noticeable even through the veil, which Enedelia interpreted to mean she was dialoguing via a brain implant, or reviewing information. Her eyes met Enedelia’s eyes. She stared, and approached hesitantly.

“May I sit with you?” she asked.

Enedelia waved a hand at the seat in front of her.

“My name is Lelah,” she said. “I’m Kelindy.”

Enedelia was pleased that she had guessed that much. “Before we go further, may I ask you a personal question?” When Lelah didn’t object, Enedelia proceeded with the question. “Are all Kelindy tall and beautiful?”

Lelah frowned. “I’m not considered beautiful, no,” she said. “Humans always perceive us to be beautiful, from what I am told. But that is because humans perceive us to be giants or gods. I don’t understand it. This is the reason we cover ourselves in populations where humans might be encountered.”

“I don’t think you are gods,” Enedelia corrected her.

“Clearly, we are not. But how we are perceived and how we are, those are two different things. Some human males fall to their knees in our presence, some freeze, some run away, but your kind have been known to fight just to have us,” Lelah said. “It is said even human women are not immune to our presence.”

“I am not affected,” Enedelia said.

“You have also been modified. Your Biocopr enhancements may have nullified your natural instinct to run or submit to foreign biological entities,” Lelah said. “All of Earth is subjected to biological and social programming.”

Enedelia felt a bit of anger about that, wanted to know more, but she found herself not wanting to pursue it. “You wanted to discuss something.”

“I believe that you have the body of my brother,” Lelah said. “I came to petition for his remains.”

“I told Jehan I would bring the bodies of his men back,” Enedelia said.

“He seemed uncertain that you would follow through,” Lelah said. “I’m willing to pay you, in credits or service.”

“Lelah, I will bring you the dead back, unconditional release,” Enedelia said. “Be here in six days, and I will surrender them all to you in person.”

“Just like that? Even while holding animosity towards the Kelindy people?” Lelah said.

Enedelia sighed. “My animosity is not for the Kelindy people, but for what you are doing to my people. No, let me be more specific. I don’t understand our relationship. I perceive you as a threat, but somehow, I think it is more complicated than I perceive it, and I wish to hold out judgement until I understand better,” Enedelia said. It was difficult to say that, but it was true; she knew it in her heart was true. She now knew just enough to know just how little she actually knew. “I will give you your dead. Six days.”

“Thank you,” Lelah said, getting up.

“And Lelah,” Enedelia said. “I am sorry for the loss of your brother.”

“It is the way of the warrior,” Lelah said. “The wheel turns about for everyone that plays.”

“Yeah,” Enedelia said, getting up to leave. “Yeah, it does.”

Chapter 27

Enedelia picked up her food to go at the bar and again left a substantial tip for Kiash, making sure that the tip came from her line of credit and not Bindler's. As she headed for the shuttle to take her back to Solar Chariot, she was intercepted by a squad of Indigo Security. They asked her to come with them out of politeness, but it was obvious she was going to go with them willingly or not. They brought her to a room where a little blue man was waiting. It was the very same blue man who had confiscated all of her caffeine products on her very first day at Indigo.

"I don't have any contraband on me," Enedelia said.

"I know," the blue man said. "You're a model of decorum. Invasive maintenance programs. Blowing up ships. Stealing property. Contraband. What else should I add to your list of mischief?"

"You really have me all wrong," Enedelia said. "I'm not going out of my way to break the law. I'm just trying to live my life and these things are happening to me."

"I would like to believe you," the blue man said. "But I don't believe that things just happen to people. You're hanging out with the wrong crowd. Clones. Dirty Union reps."

"Hey, those guys approached me. I ran them off," Enedelia said.

"Did either ask you to transport contraband for them?" the blue man asked.

"No. They just asked me to join their union," Enedelia said. "The fat one smokes."

"You smelled it on him or you saw him smoking?" the blue man asked.

"I smelled it on him," Enedelia said.

"I've been trying to catch him in the act for years," the blue man said.

"You know, it's none of my business how you run your station, but aren't you wasting your time chasing after petty crime like smoking and caffeine use?" Enedelia asked.

"It's my job. It's what the people pay me to do," the blue man said. "And that is why I called you in. I want you to help me."

"Help you?" Enedelia asked.

"Someone is trafficking nicotine and caffeine in from your planet. Scuttlebutt says you will be going to and from Earth, you obviously have the live coordinates, and I want you to keep your eyes and ears open for opportunities," the blue man said. "I'll put you on the pay roll as an undercover agent and put ten thousand credits a month in your account."

"You know, I am more than willing to take your money, but I would like to know why you would trust me to help you," Enedelia said. "Philosophically speaking, I am an advocate for caffeine use. Maybe not so much nicotine, but I think if a person wants to use it, let them."

"And who pays their health care premiums? You? The poor in health can't afford to work, which simply drains society," the blue man said.

"I don't have all the answers," Enedelia said. "I just think you're wasting more time and money chasing something than you would be if you just allow people to have more autonomy."

"So, will you help me?" the blue man asked.

“Will I get a free get out of jail card if I get caught transporting coffee or chocolate?” Enedelia asked.

“We’ll talk about that when the time comes,” the blue man said. “No one must know that you’re working for me. It defeats the purpose of having you work for me.”

“If what you say is true, that the contraband is coming from Earth, then doesn’t it seem likely that the Kelindy are involved?” Enedelia said.

“Prove that and I’ll throw in a bonus,” the blue man said. “Now, you best be on your way before someone starts to suspect. Don’t forget, I will be watching you.”



From Indigo Station, a shuttle escorted her to the warship Anago. They landed in a hangar bay, and she was led out and down an open lift. She witnessed Admiral Jeffers standing in the middle of a catwalk supervising the work being done to her ship. Solar Chariot floated in the empty space of the hangar as techs were extended out on platforms. Robotic arms reached out to perform their tasks, supervised by humans. She was pretty sure they were humans. The cargo hold that held her ship was illuminated in a soft, white light that seemed to pacify Solar Chariot. If she closed her eyes she could feel the warmth radiating against Solarchariot’s skin, the same way she could when she had basked in Starlight, the same way she would feel sunlight against her own skin on a nice day. The shuttle’s pilot handed her off to an Escort.

Her escort took her down another open lift, and across a floating bridge that extended to the forward hatch of her ship. It opened for her. The escort seemed human, male, perhaps Asian, but his eyes were not human. His eyes were alien, like the greys. They stretched almost to his temples, and she could only wonder how good his peripheral vision was. His hair was straight black, short. He introduced himself as Captain Lo, bio-mech engineer in charge of hangar operation. He would be facilitating the upgrades to her ship.

“There seems to be a lot of humans here,” Enedelia observed out loud.

“Humans are prized for their adaptability,” the escort said. “They have a range and variety of intelligence that allow for greater versatility in employment. Those who score high on emotional intelligence tend to interface with non-human species, especially the aquatic species. Human engineers are prized for their craftsmanship.”

“But are these workers employees or slaves?” Enedelia asked.

“I do not wish to be drawn into a semantic argument. Service is service, and we serve where we are best utilized. This peculiarity you hold over the idea of freedom is an artificial construct of a societal paradigm that allows the human cabals to micromanage you from distance by using fear and ‘divide and conquer’ strategies, which keeps you locked in a fight or flight response. In case you are uncertain, that was a neutral statement. It is bad only if you require the negative perspective in order to blame others for your position in life. It is good if your goal is to maintain slavery, competition, and or create a strong military state. The greatest gift your species offers is its capability of appreciating and extending a universal love. Quite frankly love is under deployed by your present culture,” the escort said.

Enedelia stared at the man. For someone who didn't want to be drawn into the debate, he had given quite a bit of explanation for his perspective on the matter. It revealed his bias. It also revealed, he felt free enough to speak his mind, so maybe she needed to reconsider 'slave.' She was always confounded by the word slavery in the Bible, or when the priest at mass invited the congregations to be slaves to Christ. Being a slave didn't mean working for no return, or being abused. Joseph was slave to the Pharaoh, but enjoyed a great deal of autonomy. The escort gave her so much to think about in his statements, she didn't have a response. She wanted to protest, but simply couldn't find the argument or enough energy to stir up a fight. She realized, she had changed. Sure, she had lots of examples of ways she had changed since leaving Earth, but she hadn't realized, until this moment, talking to an alien about the perceptions people hold about interaction patterns that she was not who she was. She was still Enedelia. She had fight and passion and love, but she was also different.

"Are you okay?" the escort asked.

Enedelia blinked. It was such an open ended questions she wasn't sure exactly how to respond. Did he care or was this a function of his responsibility, to ensure her satisfaction with the upgrades. No, it felt genuine. "Um, yeah, I think so."

Lo nodded. "In order to complete the installation process, we will need to send techs on board to upgrade your communication equipment and interlink systems."

"Okay," Enedelia said.

"If you have any questions concerning the procedure, please feel free to call for me," Lo said. "Once the upgrades or complete, you will have a system update that will allow you to understand how the new integrated systems work, as well as how to operate them. As with anything, the more frequent you use them, the better you will become at using them. At some point, it will become an automatic response hardwired into your brain, controlled by your subconscious."

As she followed him, she realized, that most of her ship's daily operation was governed by her subconscious. She didn't have to think about her liver or kidney for them to function, and so it was with her ship. They were separate, but one. She was different!

"Are you okay?" Lo asked.

"I don't understand the question," Enedelia asked. "What are you looking for?"

"I apologize if I am being redundant. I am not good at interpreting human emotions or facial expressions. There was a lull in our conversation after my explanation, and without a verbal response I was not sure if we had reached consensus and our conversation had ended, or if you needed more information," Lo said.

"Oh. I am good, thank you, Captain Lo," Enedelia said.

"You are welcome, Captain Garcia," Lo said. "Do you have any questions, concerns, or requests that I have failed to address?"

Enedelia blinked. "Um, yeah, actually. Can you give me a spacesuit with an EVA upgrade?"

Lo frowned, as if she were asking the impossible, but using his own tech he sought permission. His eyes looked up, which was really difficult to discern due to the fact his eyes were all black. She wondered if he was like sighing, or looking to heaven, which would have been a human gesture she was familiar with. There was a long quiet moment, as if he were negotiating. She tried to follow where she perceived his focus was and realized Jeffers on the overhead catwalk was looking down at him. Jeffers did not

make eye contact with her. Jeffers gave a hand gesture. Was it a subtle, unofficial response? It seemed positive. Was Jeffers accommodating her off the record?

Lo returned his attention to Enedelia. It was palpable. Oh! It wasn't that she had discerned his eyes moving, but that she had discerned a shift in his conscious focal point. He was a telepath!

"I will have a system delivered to you. Additional techs will be visiting your ship to facilitate the request," Lo said.

"Okay," Enedelia said.

Lo hesitated, as if he didn't know how to disengage.

"Do you have a first name?" Enedelia asked.

"Berris," Lo said.

"Thank you, Berris," Enedelia said. "Please, excuse me. I am going into my ship now."

"May you always return," Lo said. He turned and proceeded back down the catwalk in the direction he had come.

Enedelia entered Solar Chariot as the escort retreated back down the platform. She felt a sense of overwhelming relief, as if she had just taken her first breath in a long moment. She wasn't sure if she was just glad to be back on her ship, or if her ship was simply happy to have her back. Maybe it was both. As she closed the outer airlock and opened the inner airlock, she found the two grays waiting for her.

"Don't be mad at us," the grays pleaded.

"Where are they?" Enedelia asked.

"In our room," Drie said.

Enedelia set the grays food down, and went straight to Amrita and Atsuko. The grays waited to collect the food after Enedelia was out of direct eyesight. Atsuko was sitting in the grass, hugging her knees, her head. Amrita was sitting beside her.

"She hasn't spoken since the incident," Amrita said.

"Are either of you injured?" Enedelia asked.

Amrita shook her head. Enedelia sat down and unpacked the meals, handing Amrita an enclosed dish, and then a drink. She set the same in front of Atsuko. She then took out her meal and began eating as if this were just another day, another meal and conversation.

"Atsuko, you need to eat," Enedelia said.

"Why?" Atsuko said. She brought her head off her knees. "So you can fuel a killing machine?"

"You are not a machine," Enedelia said.

"I have been altered, like a mechanism. Upgraded as if I were nothing more than a computer," Atsuko said. "I now know thousands of ways to kill a person. I can kill groups of people. I know battle techniques, martial arts, I know weapons. I can run the permutations in my head in less than a heartbeat and counter any threat that comes at me. How am I not a machine?"

"I don't know," Enedelia said. "Maybe we are just machines."

"We are spirits, having human experiences," Amrita said, not quite correcting, but she it to be.

"Maybe that's true, too," Enedelia said. "Maybe everything is true. The ease at which I was transformed into a Captain of a biospaceship left me in a quandary. But, here

I am. Living day by day. I found the routine of getting up and going about business the only sanity in the in between moments.”

“In between moments?” Atsuko asked.

“In between piloting, in between the blind jumps, there is a whole lot of emptiness out there, neutral moments that can only be colored by my emotional states. Moments of boredom, usually, but this is the in between, the in between choice,” Enedelia offered.

“The difference between your in between and my in between, is my cycle will result in death and mayhem,” Atsuko said.

“Then, live for the in-between. Make those times last as long as you can,” Enedelia said. “You say you know a thousand ways to kill a person. That statement also means, you a thousand way not to kill someone. And to do that, you need to eat.”

Atsuko stared at the food.

“You are not your body,” Amrita said. “You are not your brain. You are not these upgrades. You are not the things that happened to you. There is something bigger than all of us. There is a reason the Universe has brought all of us together.”

“To kill?” Atsuko asked.

“To fly,” Enedelia offered.

“To evolve,” Amrita said.

“May I speak?” Jeden asked, from the doorway. Enedelia nodded. “It is our people’s belief that the Universe is not static. As its most fundamental level, it is information. The overall essence of the Universe is consciousness. Not only is consciousness evolving, everything in nature evolves, to the point it becomes aware and participates in its own evolution. Amrita has access to High Tech, we should listen to her. Allow her to guide our direction, and we will have good outcomes. No one can undo what has happened to either of you, but she can alter your trajectory.”

“I think you give me too much authority,” Amrita said. “I am still just a student.”

“Well, no one is guiding us until we finish some tasks. I promised to bring the dead back to the Kelindry,” Enedelia said.

“Screw them,” Atsuko said.

“You’re angry,” Amrita said.

“Yes! I am angry,” Atsuko said.

“Atsuko, it’s the right thing to do. There is a time for fighting, and there is a time for repairing. This feels right to me, and maybe it can open a better dialogue with them,” Enedelia said.

Atsuko fumed. She lowered her knees so that she was sitting lotus position on the floor. She took the food and found a utensil inside it. “I will want to bury my dead, too. On Earth.”

“Not a good idea,” Enedelia said.

“On earth,” Atsuko said.

“They want to capture you. You’re important enough to them that they are willing to go to war for you,” Enedelia said.

“Bring it,” Atusko said.

“We should bury her dead,” Amrita said.

“Not on Earth,” Enedelia said.

“On Earth,” Atsuko insisted.

Enedelia was in a quandary. Going there could get them killed. “When we deliver the dead, I will ask again for a temporary truce to bury the dead. If you choose to stay on Earth, you will be hunted.”

“I don’t wish to stay on earth,” Atsuko said. “Whether they agree to a truce or not, I want to return my family to Earth.”

“This is not just about you! This is my ship. I have two grays. I have Amrita. If it was just me, I would be all in,” Enedelia said.

“If you’re allowing a vote, I would vote to take her family back,” Amrita said.

“Seriously?” Enedelia asked.

The Grays raised their hands. “We vote return her family to their origin,” they said, simultaneously.

Enedelia was a little angry, but not overwhelmed. “Isis?” she asked.

Isis and Burt appeared. They voted for.

“Seriously?” Enedelia asked.

Her two ferrets came out of the tall grass at the edge of the wall and jumped in her lap. Enedelia sighed. “Okay,” Enedelia said. “Fine. But if we’re going, you two are going to have to agree to help me with something.”

“Anything,” they both said.

“You should really hear what I want before agreeing,” Enedelia said.

“We will support you in anything,” Amrita said. Atsuko seconded it.

“We need supplies, and we need to fill the cargo hold with chocolate,” Enedelia said. “If we aren’t blasted out of the skies on arrival, I intend to rob a mall.”

“Nice,” Atsuko said.

“I am against stealing,” Amrita said.

“You already agreed,” Atsuko said.

“We’ll leave a pound of diamonds, if that helps ease your conscious,” Enedelia offered.

“Oh, well, that seems fair then,” Amrita said.

“You have diamonds?” Atsuko asked.

Chapter 28

After the meal, Atsuko went to sleep in the grass. Amrita lingered, enjoying a quiet conversations with the grays, while Enedelia followed the techs. Enedelia could not sleep. Probably because Solar Chariot was curious about all the activity. She was having to constantly tell him things were okay. The spacesuit request did not manifest the way she had imagined. A cylinder was installed in her bed room. It was large enough to hold a human being. The techs wanted to demonstrate the product by having her enter the cylinder. She declined. One of the tech began to take off his clothes.

“What are you doing?” Enedelia asked.

“Demonstrating the product,” he said.

“By stripping?!” Enedelia asked.

“For best results, you should not be clothed,” he said. He stripped, climbed in, and a door spun shut so that he was enclosed in the cylinder.

The floor and ceiling of the device illuminated. The tech floated off the floor. Gadgetry descended, spinning as it did, and like a three dimensional printer, the device wove an outfit around the person. When it finished, he stepped out, completely clothed in a one piece suit with no seams. He was protected from toe to upper neck. Even his boots were part of the suit. He stepped out took one of the two helmets from their charging pedestals. He lowered it over his head and it secured itself to the neck line.

“Any questions?” he asked.

“Seriously?!” Enedelia said.

“This material is bullet proof, micro meteor proof, radiation proof, and can’t be cut by normal cutting tools,” he explained. “This is better than any suit on the market, and allows you the greatest range of mobility and normal joint articulation. It comes with two helmets, and two flight control systems.” He pointed to the back packs on the pedestal which were thrusters. He demonstrated putting them on by stepping up under their pedestal, and they locked on to his back and shoulders. He stepped down, turned to model the suit, and then stepped back up and the pedestal received the EVA back pack, disengaging it from the suit. To get out of the suit, he returned to the cylinder and the machine unwove the material, recycling it.

“Wow,” Enedelia said.

“Better than the Kelindry suit we saw in your storage,” he said, dressing.

“Yeah,” she said. “But it doesn’t look as sturdy.”

“Lighter than tissue paper, you feel like you’re wearing nothing at all,” he said.

“Yeah, that’s what bothers me,” Enedelia said.

“Our agents in the field swear by this tech,” the tech said. “If you ever need to get through a tight space, you want this, not those clumsy Kelindry suits. Also, you are guaranteed unlimited oxygen supply. You will starve to death before running out of air. You can’t say that with the Kelindry suits.”

“Um, okay,” Enedelia said. “I need three more helmets.”

“I was authorized to provide your with two,” the tech said, now fully dressed.

“I have three humans on board,” Enedelia insisted. “And two grays.”

“The helmet is the most expensive part of the suit,” the tech said. “The rebreather at the back of the neck filters air through the suit itself, regulating temperature and internal pressure.”

“I need three more helmet,” Enedelia pushed. “Crew safety.”

“I will see what I can do,” the tech said.

He departed, clearly not happy. As they left, the Grays entered, and were absolutely ecstatic to see the tech. They apprised her that the suit maker was probably three times the value of her ship, and the helmet itself half the price of her ship.

“Seriously?” Enedelia asked. “You mean, I could sale this and pay off my ship and buy two more?”

“No,” Jeden said. “You can’t sell this tech. Any attempt to remove this will cause it to self-destruct. This tech is more regulated than any bio-tech. It’s constructed in such a way that no one can backwards engineer it. It’s sentient. It will know if you mess with it and self-terminate. It recognizes its regular users. Oh, and, let’s say you’re wearing the suit and this gets damaged, well, you can’t take your suit off. The safety protocols to keep the tech from being stolen adds its value.”

Jeden lost interest in the device and followed another tech down the corridor. Enedelia resumed pacing. She wanted to be done. She wanted to be flying. She wanted to get the whole Earth thing over with. Isis interrupted her with a private email from Kirk 23. “Hope you are well. I would sure be interested in meeting soon.”

“Is he in the system?” Enedelia asked.

“No,” Isis said. “The message was relayed through Kirk 42, who has just arrived in system.”

“Can you hail him?” Enedelia asked.

“Standby,” Isis said. “He has agreed to the communication.”

“Hello, my dear,” Kirk said. “I am just seeing the news updates. Did you cause this ruckus?”

“Yeah,” Enedelia said. “I need your help with something?”

“You know this channel is not secure,” Kirk said.

“Yeah. I need to get a message to Kirk 23. Can he be here in four days?” Enedelia asked.

“If it’s about what I think it is, I could help,” Kirk said.

“What I am going to propose is dangerous,” Enedelia said.

“Oh, okay. I am listening,” Kirk said.

“To avoid miscommunicating, you need to be very precise in the delivery of this message to Kirk 23,” Enedelia said. She calculated the time remaining till she could return to get the bodies. Still close enough to 3 days to be 3 days. In 3 days, collect the bodies. 3 days after that, return bodies to Indigo station. 3 days after that, jump to Earth. “In ten days, if he really liked the burger, fries, and coke, I would like him to meet me where he first met me. He should have a fully charged jump-drive, because I am going to want to expedite my departure. Just in case he forgot, I broadcasting the last earth jump coordinates I used.”

Kirk seemed perplexed. Clearly, the message was cryptic. Broadcasting live coordinates though, rarely happened. Good coordinates, even to dangerous places, were always sold or traded. Everyone listening to the broadcast, and there were many, now had

god coordinates, which meant Earth might get an increase in visitations. She was actually hoping that to be true.

“Thank you, Kirk,” Enedelia said. “Isis, can you get me a secure conversation with Admiral Jeffers?”

“He is at the airlock,” Isis said.

Enedelia went forwards. He was standing in the airlock, along with him were three techs carrying, each carrying a new helmet and gear to hook it up to the stand.

“Oh, thank you. And, can the suit maker add color to my suits?” Enedelia asked.

Chapter 29

Upgrades completed, the cargo bay door opened and Solar Chariot was given a nudge downwards from the perspective of the battleship. Its nose dipped and it took to the openness of the empty space like a wild animal released from a kennel and accelerated away. From inside, Enedelia readied herself for the jump back to her last known coordinates, outside the Galaxy. They traveled and arrived. The Milky Way was clearly the dominant object. She hadn't appeared back in normal space exactly where she left, but with sensors she quickly found the Kelindry ship she had appropriated, and 'pinged' in to the probe she had left. It responded, giving her an update since her last contact. She hadn't expected there to be any updates, but she had the feeling that there was something different. Something she hadn't noticed before. There was something in the dark, and she knew it because a star winked out and back on, as if something had occluded it. It occurred so fast she thought she had imagined it. Technically, the item that was occluded wasn't a star, but a distant galaxy so far away that it looked like a star, a little bigger, but it also informed her that her awareness of the objects in her range of vision when using enhanced eyes was superb.

She was about to step down from her star-eyes to normal vision when she noticed the blinking happening again.

"Isis, is there something near us?" Enedelia asked.

Isis scrutinized the telemetry from the ship and from the probe. She highlighted the object. "The probe as detected a stellar object known as a Y-dwarf. Its surface temperature is approximately 450k. Stand by. Processing additional information. We are within one light year's distance to it. Gravimetric suggest that there are at minimum, two planetary bodies in orbit around the Y-Dwarf. I recommend exploring further to determine if there are other planetary bodies. This could potentially pay off your debt and free you. Y-Dwarfs can be mined for Deuterium, methane, and Lithium. The planet may also offer resources. The most valuable commodity, due to its rareness, are space crystals."

An image of space crystals downloaded into her brain. They were beautiful, especially if you liked crystals in general, but they were huge, like miles in length. Earth had actually seen one from a distance in 2017, captured first on radar, and then later by some grainy telescopic photos. It was oblong and had well defined edges, and was so strange to scientists that they had to create a new category of objects. This object was also the first object recognized as being an interstellar object, based on its trajectory through the solar system. They are created through natural processes. A body of matter approaches so close to a star that it becomes liquefied, but as it moves away, the gravity of the sun has purified the liquefied object, allowing the for the purest of crystals to form as it goes off into space. The next time it comes around, as the object heats, crystal break free and some of get swung off into space, and some circle and get thrown back out to circle forever. Each pass of the sun purifies the crystals that much more. There are asteroid spheres with crystalline jutting out at every angle. There are monolithic crystals that resemble the obelisks of Egypt. And though it is known how they form, even where to find them, no one has duplicated the process and made the same quality of crystals through artificial means. Enedelia suddenly had a want to find super crystals.

“How did a dark star get way out here, off the ecliptic plane of the Galaxy?” Enedelia asked.

“That is a great question,” Isis said. “The most likely explanation is that this is a residue star that fell off one of the dwarf galaxies that orbits the Milky Way. Going with this, I would specifically say that this is one of the stars in the star trail left by the Sagittarius Dwarf Spheroidal Galaxy which is the closest dwarf galaxy to the Milky Way. This dwarf galaxy is being consumed by the Milky Way as it circles the galaxy in a polar orbit, passing through the Milky Way’s disk, as it spirals in towards the center of mass. The Sagittarius Dwarf Spheroidal Galaxy is presently opposite side of the galaxy to our present position. It is suspected that your solar system, like this Y-Dwarf, is a remnant from that dissipating galaxy, as that is the best explanation that Sol’s ecliptic plane is at an angle to the Galactic ecliptic.”

Enedelia watched the sky, simultaneously with the graphic display Isis was presenting to her. She felt something touch her and she emerged from her Star-eyes to her regular eyes. Amrita was standing before her.

“Are you okay?” Amrita asked.

“Oh, yeah, just star struck,” Enedelia said. She smiled. Star struck could have been a literal translation had they landed closer. Dark stars! So many things in the Universe to explore, and humans haven’t even scratched the surface. Or had they? There were humans out in space? Were they from Earth? Were there other planets where humans lived? So many questions

Enedelia got up and hugged Amrita. She noticed Atsuko in the door way. The grays were nowhere to be seen.

Atsuko turned and walked away. Enedelia didn’t know what to make of it.

“Give her time,” Amrita said.

Enedelia nodded, feeling tired. “I guess I should go get some sleep. Oh, I guess we need to make arrangements. I can turn the room next to mine into a bedroom, if you like. If you’re attached to the present room, I can shift over. I can change the bed to a double bed if you and Atsuko want to share a room for the time being.”

“It’s your ship,” Amrita said.

“But you want to stay and travel with me, don’t you?” Enedelia asked.

“I do,” Amrita said. “More than anything.”

“So do you want a room to yourself? Or twin beds? You think Atsuko wants her own room?”

“I am not sure Atsuko is going to want to travel with us,” Amrita said.

Atsuko returned, pivoted and walked away. Enedelia and Amrita followed. She was pacing, making a circuit.

“You okay?” Enedelia asked.

“I want to run,” Atsuko said. “I want more space.”

“How about a swim?” Enedelia asked.

“No, I want to run,” Atsuko said. “I just want to run. I want to do something.”

“I can’t imagine what you must be feeling, or even what’s wired into you,”

Enedelia said. “I have been thinking of a plan to accomplish a couple goals, one of which is to bury your dead. Would you like a job?”

“Yes,” Atsuko said.

“It’s dangerous,” Enedelia said.

Chapter 30

The meeting with the Kelindy was facilitated by the staff of Indigo Station. An inflatable habitat was deployed. It was a disk shape object, with three tubular bridges that extended away from the hub. Each tube allowed a ship to attach. The entirety of the meeting place, the disk itself and the tubes, was completely made of plastic, and was inflatable. Enedelia was not happy about this, but the floor was weaved with artificial gravity tech and it felt just like being on earth in a tent. It was just as thin as a tent, and much of it transparent, and the knowing that it was just a balloon and could pop made stepping out into the tube and through the airlock difficult. Medical staff from Indigo station met her, and she gave them clearance to go through the airlock back to her ship to retrieve the bodies while she proceeded forwards to the disk.

Kelindy were waiting, as well as the arbitrator that she had met further. Lelah brought her hands together and bowed. Jehan did not. The medical staff brought the bodies on stretchers; they had been individually wrapped, almost perfect mummy shapes, with sheets of material found on the Kelindy ship.

“Please forgive me if the funeral shrouds are inappropriate,” Enedelia said. “I have never encountered death before.”

“Get use to it,” Jehan said.

“Jehan,” Lelah said. “Thank you, Enedelia.”

Kelindy took the corpses from the Indigo staff and retreated back through the tunnel towards their own ship. Lelah and Jehan turned to leave.

“Jehan,” Enedelia interrupted. Jehan and Lelah paused, looked back.

“I need to go to Earth and bury my dead,” Enedelia said.

“Not your dead,” Jehan said.

“My crew, my crew’s family, my dead,” Enedelia said. “Give me a three day window at Earth without being harassed or threatened.”

“No,” Jehan said.

“Jehan, she returned our dead, and she didn’t have to,” Lelah said.

“I will give you 6 hours on Earth,” Jehan said.

“I need three days for my jump drive to charge,” Enedelia said.

“You may spend three days in the solar system, without harassment, but you will only be allowed six hours on Earth. You stay one second longer, as measure by a clock on Earth’s surface, we will take you into custody, kill your ship, and send you and your crew to a prison planet,” Jehan said.

“Six hours on earth. I accept,” Enedelia said.

“Six hours, conditional,” Jehan said. “You go straight to Earth in three days, when your jump drive is charged. Your six hour Earth window is only good for three days from now, and you must use them within the first 8 hours of arriving in the Sol system.”

“There is no reason to be this difficult,” Enedelia said.

“Take it or leave it,” Jehan said.

“And you promise me safe harbor for three days,” Enedelia said.

“If you are Earth for a time period greater than six hours, the contract will be violated. If you tarry in the Sol system for greater than 3 days, your contracted will be violated. If you violate the contract and resist being boarded, we will destroy you.”

Enedelia looked to Lelah. “Can I believe him?”

Lelah exchanged looks with Jehan. She turned to Enedelia and nodded. “Yes. He will honor this contract.”

The Kelindy departed the disk. When it was sure they had gone, the arbitrator bowed to Endelia, and she turned to leave, accompanied by her staff. Loxy returned to Solarchariot. The habitat was deflated and returned to a crate that the arbiter’s ship took. Amrita interrupted her ‘inner sight’ experience of the habitat being packed up.

“We will find out in three days. You sure you want to do this?” Enedelia asked.

“I am with you,” Amrita said.



Three days later, against Bindler’s recommendation, Enedelia jumped to Earth. She found herself three hours from Earth at best speed, and immediately set course. She was instantly aware that she not alone. There were maybe a dozen Kelindy ships near Earth. They powered up, to meet her.

“Greetings. This is Captain Garcia,” Enedelia said. “I have authorization to be in this space.”

No response came. The ships slowed to match her speed and followed back to Earth. They did not attack.

Amrita and Jeden were watching on a pad. “Well, they didn’t kill us,” Amrita said.

“Yet,” Jeden said.

Time passed and they made it to Earth’s atmosphere, still accompanied, and still no communication.

“Thank you for the escort, Kelindy,” Enedelia said. “I am starting my descent.”

“You have six hours,” came a response. She didn’t recognize the voice.

They descended through the atmosphere, heading straight to the UK. The location was chosen due to the time of night. They approached the Westfield shopping mall centre, Stratford, London UK. The hovered towards the top floor, with Solarchariot putting its lips up against glass, making a seal. Due to the amount of water vapor and rain in the air, it didn’t take long before Solarchariot was surrounded by a cloud, so, no one looking at the mall would have discerned anything too odd.

In the airlock, Jeden had cut a whole into the glass, giving them an entry point. Jeden, Amrita, and Enedelia entered the mall. They were each followed by probes that illuminated the way and allowed them to communicate with each other without having to hold a radio. The probes were in heaven, logging and cataloging everything they could.

“Alright, let’s go shopping,” Enedelia said.

They each had their list of items. Jeden was in charge of pilfering as much candy as he could. Amrita was assigned to clothing. Enedelia was going to get linen, sleeping bags, and pillows. On getting their primary list items onto Solarchariot, they were to move towards secondary items, like toiletries, kitchen supplies, scissors, finger nail clippers, general tools, art supplies, several tents, camping gear.... There was so many cool things at Ellis Spring Mountain sports, it was difficult not to be greedy, but for the most part, they just took the things that might make life more pleasant.

Enedelia and Amrita met back at Solarchariot, each pushing a cart. “Enjoying your first trip to London?”

“Immensely!” Amrita said. “I may run out of diamonds.”

“No you want,” Isis said.

“We have a lot left?” Enedelia said.

“I guess you weren’t apprised to the fact that one of the waste products of a bioship is diamonds,” Isis said.

“Seriously?” Enedelia asked. “Solarchariot poops diamonds?”

“Essentially,” Isis said. “Growing them is probably more actuate. Solarchariot has three variety, orange colored diamond, known locally as fire diamonds, a stone that resembled and rainbow opal, and pearls. Stone production is such a common feature of biotech that there is very little demand for diamonds in the interstellar markets.”

Jeden met them as he was exiting the ship. He had overheard the conversation and brought Amrita and Enedelia each a bag with more diamonds.

“You doing okay?” Enedelia asked.

“I should let you know, I sedated a guard on the second floor,” Jeden said.

“I hope you compensated him,” Amrita said.

Jeden showed a pouch full of diamonds. “This is for him.”

“All righty, then,” Enedelia said. “Carry on.”

They went back to work. Once Enedelia’s lists were accomplished, she helped with the moving of candy. She didn’t recognize many of the brands, but figured chocolate was chocolate. She also grabbed ‘biscuits,’ teas, hot chocolate mixes. After Amrita’s list was accomplished, she went rogue and random. She picked luggage from the luggage store, shopped until the luggage was full, grabbed some purses. She took the items to the ship, then went got more luggage, filled it up, and repeated. The suit cases full of books was probably the heaviest. The books were mostly teen fluff, but there was also spiritual books, several on lucid dreaming, and a lot of activity books. Mostly, her choices in items were things they could all use. Once she was satisfied, she assisted in unpacking the carts of candy into the hold.

They did not take computers. They did not take movies. With the exception of torches, they did not take tech. It took them almost five hours to fill the hold with candy. The three of them, exhausted, stood in the airlock looking into the mall. Enedelia tossed her last bag of diamond into the store whose window they had broken. She looked to Jeden and Amrita, happy.

“So, last chance? Anything else yawl can think of?” Enedelia asked.

They could not think of anything. With that, Enedelia instructed Solarchariot to let go and they drifted away from the mall, breeze speed, the door closing. She accelerated away from London, going straight up, and they were in orbit with 20 minutes to spare, and pushed away from the earth. The Kelindy followed out past the moon. Once past the moon, all the ships ceased their escort but one. It fell behind them. It opened fire with a lasers.

Solarchariot’s shields bounced on.

“What the hell?!” Enedelia asked. “We have a truce!”

“You have a truce with the Kelindy,” the voice said. She didn’t have to see his face to know it was, but she now had auditory and visual confirmation. It was her brother. “You don’t have a truce with the humans.”

“Why are you... Are you flying for the Kelindy?” Enedelia said, accelerating with thruster only.

“You ruined my life, bitch,” her brother said.

“I ruined yours?” Enedelia demanded.

“You stole my car, you destroyed my car, and because of you, I got drafted into the secret space military, with one mission objective,” he said. “Take you out.”

“I am unarmed,” Enedelia said.

“Unarmed, and with not a single friend in the entire universe,” her brother said.

“Your friend didn’t show for you. We had someone waiting at the gas station for him.”

“80 percent of the shields remaining,” Isis announced.

“Stop shooting at me,” Enedelia said.

“Apparently, I am really good at this piloting stuff,” he said. “All those years of video games have paid off. I take you out, I might get a commission and pay upgrade.”

“You’d kill me for money?” Enedelia demanded.

“Well, I was going to sell you to my friend. He really wants to screw with you. I would have to, but you stole my car, bitch,” he said, still firing at her.

Enedelia steered towards a familiar asteroid, killing her solar sail, but maintained her speed. Her brother laughed, assuming the sails had failed because of his shooting at her.

“You are really are just a stupid girl,” he said. “You can’t out run an artificial ship with bio-tech.”

“Stop your pursuit now, or you will be harmed,” Enedelia said.

He laughed.

Enedelia spun Solarchariot around and deployed her solar sail full. She almost came out of seat. He shot by her and the asteroid. He didn’t see the ship hiding behind the asteroid until he altered course to come by. It was Kelindy. And it fired at him. Part of its fuselage erupted into flame and then was extinguished as it rolled away. The Kelindy ship approached Solarchariot. Drie came out the forward hatched and attached coupling cables to Solarchariot. He pulled himself into Solarchariot’s airlock and closed the door.

Endelia opened up communication to Atsuko. “Did you accomplish your mission?”

“I did,” Atsuko said. “Thank you. I am sorry about your brother.”

“It is what it is,” Enedelia said. “Take us home.”

Chapter 31

As promised, Enedelia had delivered the bodies back to the Kelindy at Indigo Space. While she did that, Atsuko had taken the Kelindy ship back to Earth. She was accompanied by Drie and Burt. With Drie's help, her father and brother were cremated, and delivered to their family site. They then did a little shopping of their own, including emptying a Japanese candy store. A version of KitKat with green tea chocolate became one of Enedelia's new favorites, having never experienced it before. They traded stories, tried on new clothes, sorted supplies, shifting what they didn't need over to the Kelindy ship for now. If Enedelia was bothered about her brother's death, she didn't show it. She never discussed it further. Atsuko, also, never discussed her family again.

After the jump drive had charged, they spent a jump moving closer to the nearby Y-dwarf to map it out. In addition to the dwarf star, there were five planets, one of which was a gas giant. The gas giant was a rare breed of planets. Its atmosphere was mostly nitrogen and oxygen and looked like a giant marble floating in space. There were inner clouds and sometimes the clouds broke to reveal a hidden sun on the inside. It was the most spectacular thing any of them had ever seen.

The gas giant had 22 moons and a planetary ring. Five of the moons had liquid oceans, frozen at the surface.

"You could sell the coordinates to this and pay off Solarchariot," Isis said.

"Or, we could establish our own colony and not report until it has reach self-sufficiency," Jeden said. "Long term rewards for not reporting are in our interest."

"And yet, every time we do a blind jump, we risk death," Enedelia said.

"We could park the Kelindy ship here, live here," Drie said. "And send Solarchariot out to map and come back."

"He will not fly without a pilot," Isis said.

"I have to go, but there is no sense in all of you having to go," Enedelia said.

"I would like to continue flying with you," Amrita said.

"So do we," Jeden said. "But there are Greys who would work for you to establish a colony here, for existence rights, for freedom. We buy out more Grey contracts."

"I am sure if we get something started, there are some humans who might like to come here," Amrita said. "For a chance of to have a different life."

"Free some of the Kelindy slaves," Atsuko said. "They will gladly come here."

Enedelia nodded. "What do you want, Atsuko?"

Atsuko was quiet for a long moment. "I would like to stay with you," Atsuko said finally.

"No one has asked what you wanted," Jeden said.

"I want to fly," Enedelia said.

"It sounds like we all want to fly with you," Amrita said. "I think we are like family."

Atsuko nodded.

"Okay, so, we have to work. I have to work. If we're going to keep this ship flying, we need to map out more sky," Enedelia said.

"Let's do that," Atsuko said.

Atsuko nodded. "Map out more sky, give Kirk his chocolate," she said. "And then come home."

“Should we name our home?” Amrita asked.

“The Hidden Heart,” Atsuko said.

“Wow,” Amrita said. “Yes.

Enedelia agreed. She put her hand out. Amrita joined hands. Atsuko joined hands. Jeden and Drie joined hands. “The Hidden Heart,” they said in unison.

Author's note.

This is one of many stories I had started and not finished, and so it has sat in my mind for over 15 years, and today, March 30th, 2018, I have decided to release it and see where it goes. I think part of me hesitated sharing it at all because some of it felt related to Farscape in that here is another bioship. My original short story of Enedelia is actually much older than farscape, but I have yet to find the journal I had written it in. The short story was to give background for the other story in this series which follows Alexander and is first jump away from the Nest Light. The Nest Light, has been a recurring theme in my journals. The gas giant with a clear sky and inner light has also been a recurring theme in my journals, and I have used it in several stories. One story I submitted in script format to Paramount as an episode submission for TNG, probably around the fifth season. I think Paramount got tired of hearing from me. ☺ I must have sent them a dozen scripts.

The other reason this story is so long in coming is it started in a time prior to my 'change.' There was a time in my past when I felt as if my writing had to be perfect before I could share it. If I waited for that, I would never be published. There is a consistent element in all of my writing of grammatical failures. I don't know if I am the worst offender of grammar, but I suspect most of the good writers have teams. I have been alone in my writing. I love and appreciate the people who are perfect and expect people to exert the same level of quality control over work when they release it. I endeavor to get there. I think, if you compare my present work with my older work, one will find vast improvements in terms of overall quality in story, plot, and some improvement in grammar, but not a hundred percent. If I were teaching, or I was offering advice to would be writers, I would say write the best thing that you can, and then get out there. That's it. If someone points out the error, thank them! Learn from it. Write some more, and do it again. If you are lucky enough to have someone who likes your work and you get a team, yay you, your work will have fewer mistakes and be easier to read, and more generally pleasant for a wider range of readers. Some readers don't care about content, only about the grammar. Some people won't both. Some people, just want the story. If I were the teacher, and we were reading each other's work, our goal would be help each other improve it. That's what we do.

This book has characters that started when I was in my teens, and early twenties. That is the expected audience when I wrote this. I suspect it could be for anyone. I hope that if you like it, you would be willing to share it and pass it on.

May this find you and all of yours happy and safe,
And always,
Travel Light.

