

Book One



RocketEdition

Toomie Starks

Prelude

It's time we received a visitation.

Part One

The awakening and childhood of Sara Corel.

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Prelude

They're out there, all right. They've known about us for a long time, and monitored our cultural and scientific development closely. We've come to that point in our history when it's time we received a visitation.

Not of the kinds we've been expecting — or perhaps dreading. No gigantic starships swooping down to scare the crap out of everybody. No bug-eyed monsters carrying off sweet virgins for unmentionable purposes. No grand ambassadorial delegations. No mysterious X-File paranoia-fests. Not even Billy Joe Bob in the south forty greeting little green men with a shotgun. They've got their own methods for dealing with upstart civilizations.

We may be leaving our little planet on our own soon, to come knocking on their doors — invading *them*, as it were. They need to make sure that this would be a good thing. Frankly, not everybody out there is particularly enamored of the thought of welcoming humans into the great community of highly advanced beings that populate our galaxy.

No manners. Terribly backward, don't you know. Crude, unfocused, superstitious, intolerant, violent, fractious, undisciplined and, well — to be honest — not terribly bright. It would be so easy to just drop a big rock on us.

But that would be rather messy, and these Cryptoaliens are ethical beings after all (or it would have

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already happened...). And, you never know — might be some potential in this infant race. There's one tried-and-true way to find out, of course — developed over billions of years of dealing with potentially troublesome newcomers.

They would send a gift to our emerging civilization. A very powerful gift. Nothing alarming, actually reassuringly familiar. Friendly, helpful, even charming and beautiful — but unmistakably alien. Based on some legendary character of our own devising, one that combines great strength with gentleness, astonishing attributes with ordinary good nature.

This gift would have no knowledge of its senders, their technology or their purposes to potentially contaminate our species, and would have no instructions or bear no messages. We'd have to figure out for ourselves what to make of it, how to deal with it, what it meant. It would be as innocent as a newborn, fully formed and possessing the speech of our planet, but ignorant and naïve.

And our use of this gift would set our destiny.

Chapter One: Discovery

He was tired and hot. Houston midafternoon hot — heavy, breathless and thick. Driving halfway across Texas and back with no AC the last three days had left him road-grimy and in desperate need of a shower — a tap-water shower long enough to allow his apartment to cool down from leaving the thermostat off while he was away — and big, sweaty glasses of sweet iced tea, that reliable southern summer tonic.

Shower, tea, couch, TV, maybe a book or magazine, maybe even rouse himself to nuke some dinner. His immediate priorities had shrunk to that. He had a few days ahead of him with some well-earned vegetating to look forward to. It sounded like Heaven.

He dragged himself up the walk, dimly noticing that the front window was covered with condensation. He might have cared about that, but it didn't seem to be worth the effort. The door seemed to be stuck, requiring almost more energy than he had left to force it open. When it finally gave in, there was a sound like ice breaking and an unexpected frigid blast from inside.

Damn, he thought as he stumbled into the gloom, blinking and fumbling, mentally kicking himself for carelessness. His electric bill would be higher than his rent.

Again.

He pulled his gear in behind him and slammed the

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door, plunging the apartment into movie-theater darkness.

His breath puffed out in a little cloud. *Man, it's way cold in here*, he thought. Something's not right.

Turning around, the subdued light diffusing through the closed front window curtains into his living room wanly lit an unexpected object standing between the couch and the TV. Momentary panic over confronting an intruder quickly turned to confusion. It looked like...

What the hell...? he wondered. He flipped on the lights.

It was a pillar of frost, so thickly encrusted that it was difficult to make out just what it was in the dim light. So cold, it made him ache, drawing the sweat off his body to add to its icy covering. Cold enough to turn his sweatbox apartment into a walk-in freezer. A monument of cold.

I'm too tired for this, he thought. No sense of what he was seeing illuminated his stupor.

He moved in for a closer look, reaching out halfheartedly to touch the thing, shocked at just how incredibly cold it was. A foot away from the object, he felt his fingers going numb and quickly pulled away. As he took another uncertain half-step, he felt the carpet crunch softly, like frozen grass. He swayed back and forth slightly, staring.

Wake up, he told himself. *Think. What is it?*

Kind of cylindrical, maybe a little over five feet tall. Definitely body-sized, though a bit smallish — it seemed

too cold to just be a body. He couldn't make out any details through the thick frost, but there wasn't anything else he could think of that had the same general shape, tapering as it did to a relatively small base. Except maybe a mannequin. Could it be some kind of bizarro practical joke? Bit expensive for a prank. He didn't know anyone who would be in for anything like this. And he didn't remember ordering any large frozen goods himself. At least, not when he was sober...

What if it *was* some kind of dead body planted here? A corpse dumped off on him for — well, no reason that he could think of. Should he call someone? Who? 911? Too late for a paramedic. What would he tell the police?

"Well, I came back from a three-day out-of-town gig and somebody dumped a frozen stiff in my apartment." Sounded lame and scary at the same time.

Come to think of it, the door had been locked, and that was the only way in. Of course, the manager could get in any time she felt like it. So could anyone else, if they were determined. Could it be a mob hit? Was he being framed? CIA? KGB? His mind babbled on by itself, irrationally revisiting way too many bad movies.

He shook his head, trying to clear the cobwebs. *Think, dammit. You've got a brain. Use it.*

Must have been planted just after he left for his road trip. By someone who knew he'd be away? He looked for a shipping order or tag. Nothing was evident. There hadn't been a note on his door or in his mailbox. He glanced at

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the answering machine. No messages — it was probably frozen solid.

How long would it take for a really cold object to accumulate this much frost in a closed apartment? Hmm, as this thing dried the air by removing moisture, more would just pour in from the ultra-humid outside through scores of tiny openings, from electrical wiring conduits to mouse holes. Then there were the plumbing vents and the poorly sealed front windows, upstairs and down. The door seals were none too good, either. It would create a vapor pump.

But there were icicles around the attic access, he thought (he was right).

Broken ice littered the entryway around the door, the TV and couch looked frozen and he could see his footprints in the carpet. There was ice everywhere. Even the walls looked frosty. Everything bore an icy sheen.

Great. Mildew smell for weeks, he thought glumly. Been there before.

To stay this cold for long enough to attract as much moisture as it had, there had to be some kind of active refrigeration involved. Or liquid nitrogen. He doubted stone or even solid metal would be massive enough to stay so cold for so long. There were no cords, cables or pipes snaked across the floor. He knew that the carpet was laid directly on the concrete foundation slab. It looked undisturbed. If laying pipes through the slab had been necessary, surely someone would be curious about the

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noise involved in excavating concrete. And there would have to be a condenser coil somewhere. Something high-capacity and noisy.

Wonder how this affects the adjoining apartments? he mused to himself. He hoped it made his noisy neighbors miserable.

There weren't any wheel marks on the carpet. Would the slab support a solid stone or metal statue? How could it stand upright with no evident supports unless it was anchored to the slab? What's it doing here? What am I supposed to do with it? Why me? His thoughts spun away into mere confusion. It all added up to nothing.

There was a cold thing in his apartment. That's all he knew.

His sweat-drenched tee-shirt was beginning to freeze in front. Shivering, he cleared his throat and watched his breath make fairy crystals on top of the older frost.

He started aloud, "Well..." and stopped.

As soon as the sound left his mouth, there was a change — a sensation like being somehow aware of a hundred-million hidden silent switches closing. On a giddy wave of unreality, his sense of direction depolarized for an instant. His gut churned briefly while his eyeballs seemed to spin. For a moment, he thought he was going to be sick, but the feeling passed quickly.

The intense coldness had disappeared, as if a freezer door had suddenly slammed shut in front of him. The icy mass settled and shifted, playing an arrangement of

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crinkling sounds. One shard broke off, crashed merrily to the floor and rolled in front of him. He nudged it with his toe and it disintegrated, sinking into the already insulted carpet. He watched as a drop of meltwater rolled off the ice and plopped to the floor. Dripping sounds started.

Defrosting, he realized. That was something he understood.

Stepping over to the understairs closet, he grabbed his wet-dry shop vac, a pile of old towels he used as rags (they happened to be clean and relatively dry, for a change), dumped all of the accumulated crap out of a styrofoam ice chest and started looking for his ice pick.

No, not an ice pick, he thought. No telling what he could inadvertently punch a hole in. His Larry hammer, that's the thing — a rubber mallet for breaking up the chunks. And a plastic spatula.

It went quickly. The ice had no firm grip and never had a chance. Big pieces broke off easily and went into the styro. The towels caught most of the runoff, and the shop vac pretty much dried off the carpet (it might survive). By the time all the ice was off and in the sink, he was sweating. Well, of course — the thermostat was still off. He felt lightheaded as he went up the stairs to throw a log on the air conditioning. It was too much to cope with.

Shower. Now. Whatever else was happening, it would just have to wait.

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Some time later, feeling nearly alive again, he walked deliberately back downstairs, eyes straight ahead, carefully avoiding even looking at what he was only half-sure would be in the middle of his living room.

In his tiny kitchen, he observed the full tea ritual, making enough for a long evening. He rummaged around in the freezer for the least objectionable entree, watched it spin around in the microwave, then ate slowly at the table, reading every page of yesterday's newspaper. Eventually, he ran out of delaying tactics. Pouring another glass of tea, he went to his couch and sat down to consider his new *objet d'art*.

It was a statue of a young woman, really no more than a girl. There was a hint of primitive naturalism in its composition, combined with what he thought was a faintly Egyptian pose — standing at relaxed attention, feet together, chin level, arms bent forward and outstretched fingers lying together flatly, her hands nearly touching in front. Her expression was completely serene, eyes closed, mouth relaxed.

Her clothing was difficult to categorize, since it appeared to be vacuum-packed tightly around her body, like the plastic wrapping on freeze-dried survival rations. There seemed to be a long cloak or drape enclosing the back half of her body from shoulder to ankles, a blouse or tunic with long sleeves, and a short skirt in what he thought of as a Roman style.

Her long, unruly hair was tightly plastered to her

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head and shoulders as well, with finely etched lines suggesting individual strands as would be typical of classical Greek statuary, only executed with obsessive attention to detail. Her proportions were textbook perfect, with no evident stylistic distortions or artistic liberties taken.

She was the ultra-realistic work of some unknown Pygmalion.

The material from which she was carved (...molded? ...assembled?) seemed to be some kind of very dense and fine-grained colorless stone (...metal? ...plastic?) with a disturbing pattern that had the illusion of being just under a smooth but non-reflective surface. It was reminiscent of a stereogram, hinting at some 'three dimensional' image that would pop into view if you looked at it just right and concentrated hard enough. The confusing nature of the surface made it hard to get a firm grasp of the fine details of the sculpture. Too close an examination provoked a queasy feeling akin to seasickness. There were no obvious tool marks, chips or defects, and the finish was perfectly consistent down to the sudden transition at the base of every fold.

Its surface was warm to the touch, which — considering how cold it had been — was pretty amazing. At room temperature, air molecules are flying around at nearly seven hundred miles per hour — though not very far, of course, before caroming off a neighbor. Heat was motion — the faster the average speed of the miniscully

vibrating molecules of a substance, the higher its heat. The intensity of the cold he'd experienced suggested that *this* object's molecules weren't vibrating fast enough to get a ticket in a school zone. The seemingly instantaneous acceleration of every atom of such a massive object would require an energy release equivalent to a small explosion, the same as launching it from a cannon. The whole thing should have shattered from the thermal shock, or at least the ice should have exploded from its surface.

To balance such an object on such a small platform as the figure's feet should have been just about impossible. Yet he had brushed against it hard enough during defrosting that it should have at least wobbled. He reached out and gave the statue a tentative whack on the side, then a series of harder slaps. He had once thwacked the side of an armored turret on the old battleship Texas at the San Jacinto Monument. It seemed insubstantial compared to this. There was absolutely no acoustic response, no vibration or effect of any kind. It had the feel of the end of a massive steel beam sticking out of megatons of concrete.

Curiosity reared its ugly head, a charming flaw of his all his life. He went back to the closet and rummaged through his tools and the pile of crap formerly residing in the styro. First thing up was the ice pick. Sitting cross-legged on the floor at the back of the statue, he looked for an out-of-the-way area near the bottom of the cloak and

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tried, with increasing intensity, to chip off a sample. Using the Larry hammer, all he succeeded in doing was ruining the pick.

OK, take this, he thought, and went to work with a glasscutter. As far as he could tell, he couldn't make the slightest mark. Various drill bits went the way of the ice pick.

Altogether too gleefully, he went for the Dremel tool. He was expecting by now to fail to make any impression whatsoever and was not disappointed. In the spirit of fun and research, he hammered it with his Moe bar, stinging his hands. *Nada*.

Finally, all he had left was a nifty little mini-blowtorch that ran off of tiny propane and oxygen cylinders that he'd bought at Radio Shack on a whim and never used. He ran the cylinders dry and the spot he attacked was not only unmarked, but also not detectably hotter than the area around it.

Settling back in his couch, he stared at the figure for a long time until he realized what it reminded him of: Han Solo at the beginning of the third Star Wars movie cast into a block of — what was it called? Oh, yeah. Carbonite or carbomite or whatever. He knew now why he was so uneasy in dealing directly with what was obvious.

This could not possibly be a Terrestrial artifact. The current state of what he knew about human technology, art and science could not produce such a work as this that had displayed such impossible characteristics and

behavior. He was looking at the product of a technologically advanced extraterrestrial civilization. Moreover, it appeared to be — it could be — a traveler in some kind of suspended animation. Or a reasonable facsimile thereof. What it was doing in his living room was a complete mystery. He hadn't a clue as to how to proceed. But he was certain of his conclusion.

It always had bothered him in science fiction stories that the characters never snapped to the obvious, as if it was some inescapable tenet of the genre that people could not come to terms with facts staring them in the face that were patently outside of their everyday experience. It couldn't be possible that he would encounter an alien artifact, but it was plain to him that he had, so he had to deal with it. *No problemo.*

He had always kept what he thought to be an open mind on the subject of the existence of extraterrestrial civilizations. It was not likely that our species was the sole example of intelligent, conscious life in such a vast universe as we could see around us. Given (as he believed): 1) that there were untold billions of billions of stars; 2) that planetary formation tended to be a normal part of stellar development; 3) that life was a consequence of natural chemical reactions in primitive environments and astonishingly adaptable; 4) that evolution mandated increasing complexity in organisms tending toward greater intelligence, and; 5) that there was ample time and opportunity for life as we understand it to have developed

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countless times in myriad places — then it was really a mystery and a wonder why there had been no contact with beings on other planets. Indeed, the independent development of intelligent life on any planet in a given galaxy following the rise of the first technologically competent species should be nearly impossible.

Our little solar system is about five billion years old, give or take. The Milky Way galaxy is about three times older than that. Allowing the first five or so billion years for several generations of star formation to build up enough life-sustaining heavy elements in the interstellar medium through supernova events, there has been ample time for some alien race around an older star to crawl from the primeval ooze, figure out spaceflight and — even at modest sublight speeds — populate every suitable planet in the entire galaxy. Including ours, a long time ago. So where the hell are they?

He absolutely believed that they didn't show up in Billy Joe Bob's south forty, driving a flying saucer that looked like two cheap pie plates glued together, dismembering yokels' livestock and abducting the peasantry. Why would any self-respecting advanced being waste his time with the likes of the shotgun-toting yahoos who — between swigs — inarticulately regale the credulous with patently stupid lurid tales of unlikely close encounters?

No, ET, when he/she/it shows up, arrives in style, presents his/her/its credentials to the United Nations,

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holds a news conference, grants interviews and goes to Disneyland.

Unless, of course, he/she/it shows up as a popsicle in my living room, he thought glumly. *So where do I go from here?* Notify the authorities? What authorities? There probably weren't any qualified authorities for such a phenomenon. Except maybe ones with butterfly nets who would escort him to a nice padded room with no view.

Maybe such an artifact's arrival in his apartment was an accident. Maybe everyone in the neighborhood had one of their own. Maybe his apartment happened to be built on a cosmic landing zone or interstellar bypass. Maybe he'd won the Galactic Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes. Could be anything from dumb luck (of one kind or another) to intentional design. Too bad there didn't seem to be an accompanying manual. Would he get in trouble for harboring an illegal alien? He laughed silently at that thought, considering what part of the country he was in.

Of one thing he was determined. Whatever happened, he was going to treat it in a rational, matter-of-fact manner. In a way, his lifelong obsession with reading anything he could get his hands on, especially sci-fi, was going to stand him in good stead.

In such a philosophical state, he dozed off right there on the couch.

Chapter Two: Arrival

He woke almost ten hours later. It hadn't been the first time he'd slept on the couch. He expected to be sore and tired as he always was following a road trip, and early indications were that this time would be even more so. Especially after what he'd been through last night.

Last night!

The memory made him practically leap off the couch and pop open his eyes. *Oh, boy*, he thought. There'd been some changes in the night.

There were hints of color developing like the early stages of a Polaroid. Her clothing had lost its vacuum-pack clingyness in places and fallen away from her body. More detail was beginning to emerge, like better-defined skin texture. Individual hairs were falling out of the seemingly carved mass on her head, shiny and golden.

Well, he thought, *this proves it*.

He reached out and tapped the figure. It was still rigid, massive and hard. Even where the cloak had fallen away it felt like armor plate in spite of its thinness, completely unyielding and acoustically dead. He gingerly felt a loose strand of hair and discovered he could have easily sliced his finger if he'd grabbed at it. It yielded to his touch not at all. What looked like hair felt like a cable on the Golden Gate Bridge.

Whoa, he said to himself, impressed, *looks like tool time again*.

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His Curley pliers had no effect on the strand. It wouldn't bend or break and he notched the cutter blade easily. That was enough.

At the current rate of change, he felt sure he shouldn't screw around. If he was going to be the first human to greet an alien visitor from some other planet, he'd better get ready. He didn't even consider calling anyone else to share the discovery. This thing had landed in his apartment so, barring any evidence to the contrary, it was his gig. He was going to assume that whoever had sent this to him knew what they were doing. Anyway, there wasn't time.

Breakfast was perfunctory. He didn't bother to reach outside his door for the Chronicle. His obligatory toilette was quicker but more thorough than usual. He dressed a little nicer than he normally would on a day off and even put on a tie. As soon as he was ready, he practically raced downstairs, afraid to miss anything. The changes seemed to be accelerating.

Every hair on her head was now bright and distinct, falling in a glorious riot of gold across her shoulders and halfway down her back. There was a lot of it, cascading in soft curves in every direction with no bangs or discernible cut. At first glance it had looked like a wire sculpture of a haystack in a hurricane, but there was some subtle organization to it, as if a stylist had done a great deal of work to avoid the appearance that a stylist had done a great deal of work. It shone cleanly, nearly glowing in its

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intensity, full of body that would be the envy of any shampoo ad model.

Her ensemble was now fully developed. The motif was basically black and gold, but not so simple as that. The back of her cloak was a shiny satin-like black with deep red highlights, like a brochure photo of a black Mercedes lit with red floodlights. Perhaps the material's color was actually red, but a red that reflected only the single red wavelength that exactly corresponded to the center frequency sensitivity of a red cone in the human retina. A laserlike single hue of red so red that there was no hint of anything *but* that exact shining red. The lens of a railroad crossing light was like that, a red so deep in the glass that it was perilously close to black; and when it was lit, only pure red escaped from the bulb behind it.

The inside of her cloak was what might be described as a pale yellow-gold satin, not as shiny as the black/red of the reverse side but rather almost a brushed-metal effect. The cloak was attached in some fashion almost completely around the neck opening of her top so that it could either fall over her shoulders behind her or close in front to completely drape the full length of her body, which would give her an almost formal appearance.

Her top resembled a kind of tee-shirt, with full-length puffy sleeves closed around her wrists by a band of pale brushed-gold to match the lining of her cloak and other accents. It was the exact analog in black/blue to her cloak's black/red, with intense blue highlights so deep and

pure as to be visually confusing.

Held to her waist by a brushed-gold belt was a mid-thigh skirt in black/red that afforded complete freedom of movement, similar in design to an ice skater's costume. Matching black/red almost moccasin-like slippers with pale brushed-gold soles and practically no heels barely covered her feet.

There were five small patches of pale brushed-gold in various shapes and sizes worked into the fabric of her top just below her neck. Together, they formed the sort of optical illusion that, if you looked at it long enough, suddenly resolved into some recognizable pattern. After a moment of frowning concentration, it came to him — the stylized outline of a letter surrounded by an implied hexagonal figure. It resembled... It appeared to be... It was...

Good Lord, he thought. An 'S'. Unmistakably.

He was astonished by the symbol. Its familiarity was so unexpected as to be a shock, attached as it was to something about which he already harbored some vague expectations. He was prepared to accept a lot in terms of the origins of his strange visitor from another planet (...universe? ...dimension?). But that she in some way — at least in design and conception — originated from some damned *comic book* was... Well, it was embarrassing. Not something he'd be comfortable being associated with.

The more he thought about it, the more he was appalled by the arrogance and effrontery the symbol

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implied. Did this mean what it appeared to mean? Was she literally supposed to be what her costume declared her to be?

He examined the symbol carefully. Though there was a pronounced stylistic difference in its execution, it was undoubtedly meant to be the equivalent of that famous 'S' from the comics and movies — as was, he realized, her entire outfit. Not an exact duplication, but rather an homage, conceptualized and executed by a highly competent and subtly artistic designer. She was obviously meant to be taken by anyone on this planet that encountered her as an alien. And not just any alien, but one possessed of, well, 'powers and abilities'...

It was just outrageous. He actually felt something like anger toward whatever agency was responsible for the theme of her appearance. Here was the earth-shatteringly momentous occasion of First Contact with other intelligent beings in the Universe and their representative shows up dressed for a costume party. It's like they must not take us very seriously.

And of all the fantasy superheroes they could have picked, why this one? The silliest of the whole sorry lot, a blond super-airhead with at best a tenuous place in the pantheon of adolescent wet dreams. An atomic Barbie. A caped Valley girl. A flying bimbo. Bah.

What if she turned out to be what her costume represented her to be? Did that mean there might be more of her kind turning up? Just what we need, a gaggle of

muscle-bound freaks tearing around the countryside, presumably with a selection of archfiends thrown in to give them something to do. Heaven help us. Was our planet on Candid Cosmic Camera? Double bah.

He tried to calm down. Why would an alien visitor, regardless of physical attributes, adopt such a guise? Maybe, if she indeed were an alien of such formidable abilities, appearing in such a familiar form would be a way for the natives of this planet to more easily come to terms with her. Who knows to what extent the technological sophistication of a highly advanced civilization could recreate either by genetic manipulation or mechanical artifice any kind of being they desired.

He thought of sci-fi writer Arthur C. Clarke's famous 'Law' — "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." Sighing, he decided to withhold judgment for now.

The AC unit coughed noisily to life and air from the living room vent ruffled her hair and cloak. He felt the thin edge of her cloak, which now resembled normal cloth, as far as he could tell — smooth, cool and lightweight. He cautiously extended a finger to touch a strand of hair. It, too, now seemed normal. On a hunch, he reached out for a pair of scissors on his end table and tried to snip the end of the hair. As he expected, it wasn't possible, not even with wire cutters. *Probably not with anything*, he thought. He ran his fingers through her hair in a sort of fatherly gesture. It felt normal.

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He wondered if he should try sticking a pin in her neck, to see if it could be done. He poked her with his finger, instead. Her neck was skin-warm and dimpled beneath his fingertip in a completely natural way. As he pressed a little harder, he thought he felt a pulse start up in response.

Now, that's weird, he thought.

He reached for a wrist. He couldn't budge her arms even the slightest amount, but could get his forefinger on the right place. At first there was no pulse in either wrist, but after a moment, it started up in a normal, strong fashion. He looked at his watch and counted. Perfectly ordinary resting pulse rate. Was it blood being pumped from her heart, or a programmed simulation coming on line? She still wasn't breathing.

He sat down on the couch in front of her and examined her intently. As the presumed emissary of a presumably advanced civilization, she wasn't exactly what he might expect. There was nothing imposing, dignified, wise, terrible, diplomatic, inspiring, holy, businesslike, great or fearsome about her demeanor. As a work of art — which she was obviously meant to be — she was a masterful portrait of exquisite magnificence.

She appeared to be in her late teens, about five-six, maybe 125, fit, clear-skinned, healthy and — well — the best word would probably be adorable. A perfect little doll, in fact — nearly too perfect to be anything but some kind of unworldly apparition somehow made tangible.

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She seemed to personify the embodiment of the girl-next-door, cheerleader, Girl Scout, childhood sweetheart, gymnast, Homecoming Queen, wonderful daughter out of a 30's movie — yet with a vaguely Anime-like quality of unreality about her. Her stunning shape was not blatantly voluptuous, but instead marvelously precocious.

There was great beauty about her, but more than merely because of her form and features. Her sleeping radiance exuded a forthright innocence and youthful *joie de vivre* that would play upon the heartstrings of man and woman alike. He was impressed. Even more, he was smitten.

She began breathing quite normally. Her left arm suddenly relaxed and fell to her side. It twitched fitfully a few times, a performance soon matched by her right arm. Then her legs twitched in sequence. One by one, each body part went through a checklist of various operations before she again subsided into a motionless state. She finally achieved the appearance of being asleep on her feet, drooping her shoulders and head slightly so as to effect the illusion.

Finally, she stretched — cat-like — shook herself slightly, straightened up and opened her eyes. Blue, of course (he could have guessed that), luminous and deep. But they gazed motionlessly at some far-away nothingness. Though she showed every outward sign of being alive, she didn't seem to be conscious.

He very slowly stood up in front of her, but she

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registered nothing. After waiting what seemed to be interminably for any kind of response, he waved his hand, but her eyes did not follow. He tried again to attract her attention, flapping self-consciously like a big, goofy bird, but she continued to stare blankly ahead.

Finally, he reached out and touched her shoulder. There was no response. He tried to shake her, but she was immovable. Baffled, he just stood there, as did she. While he looked at her intently, searching for some sign of intelligence or awareness, she just stared on unblinkingly. He tried to decide whether he should be disappointed or panic.

Well, he thought, saying something out loud seemed to do the trick the last time. Maybe she was programmed to respond to a verbal cue. So what do you say to an alien lifeform for the very first time?

This could be the most historic moment in the history of mankind — or not, of course. Where was Neil Armstrong when you really needed him?

"That's one small syllable for [a] man, one giant bleep for mankind."

So he just said, "Hello."

The effect was startling, her eyes suddenly snapping to the sound of his voice. A powerful sense of her focusing some vast array of attention on him ripped through him like a physical wave. There was a flash of unbelievable intensity in her eyes that weakened his knees. He had never been exposed to such an intense

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examination. He wanted to run out of the room, but felt pinned by her blue gaze. All he could do was endure until she was finished.

The pressure gradually diminished and finally stopped as she turned her attention to herself, obviously struggling to frame a response. Her mouth opened and closed several times, and it looked like she was trying to figure out what to do with the air in her lungs. She pursed her lips and stuck out her tongue, which she tried to look at, crossing her eyes. Then she gulped, sighed and made a sound like a very bad parrot imitation that resembled, "Heh...eh...ell...uh...oh..."

Her delight was tremendous. A huge smile lit up her face. Triumphantly, she declared again, "Hel...lo!" This time it sounded closer to human speech.

What a trick! She did it again, "Hel-lo."

And once more, with feeling, "Hello."

She was improving noticeably with each repetition. "Hello, hell-o, heh-lo, he-llo, h-e-l-l-o, he-el-lo." Then, "HELLO!"

"Ouch," he winced, "That hurt." Good lungs, he conceded.

"Hellllllllllllll-ooooooooooooh.

Hellohellohellohellohello. Hel-LOW. HEL-lo.

Hello!"

It took several minutes for her to run through the full repertoire of variations on her rather limited theme. He could do nothing but watch until she eventually ran down

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and noticed him again. "Hello," she said cheerily.

"Are you alright?" he inquired.

She carefully pondered the question as if performing a thorough internal diagnostic routine and finally pronounced gravely, "All right."

He waited to see how she would handle this new phrase, but there was no repeat of the previous performance. She had found her voice and was ready to go on.

He asked, "Can I get you anything?"

She looked puzzled, "Anything?"

"Would you like a glass of water?" he offered.

She considered the offer carefully. "Glass," she said doubtfully, "Of water?" She seemed to struggle over conflicting concepts.

He went to the kitchen while she was trying to figure it out and returned with a big tea glass filled with refrigerator water. He reached out to hand it to her, but she just looked at it. Obviously, she didn't know what to do. Neither did he.

"Uh, here," he stammered unsurely, "Do you want it?"

She looked up at him and back at the glass, then declared, "Want it."

He reached out and took her right hand to guide it to the glass, faintly surprised that he could move it. It seemed like a normal hand, now.

It was new to her, though. She looked at her hand

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with amazement, then suddenly flexed her fingers.

Oh, boy, he thought, here we go again.

And, sure enough, her discovery of her hand was an occasion of much joy and excitement, with every imaginable flexure getting a thorough workout. Then she discovered her left hand and was off to the races again.

This could take all day, he thought resignedly.

When it looked like she was ready, he again offered the glass. She looked at it uncertainly, as if she had forgotten all about it.

He repeated, "Your glass of water."

With utmost dignity and appreciation, she accepted it, grasping the glass with elaborate care. Bringing it close to her face, she pronounced, "Glass. Of Water."

"Glass of water," he acknowledged.

She promptly turned it upside down and watched the water splash all over the carpet with great interest. Then her face lit up again with the joy of discovery.

"Glass!" she looked at the glass, "Of water!" She looked down. She seemed to be disappointed that the water had vanished.

He looked at the mess and sighed. "I thought that after what must be such a long and arduous journey you might like a drink."

She seemed to feel more confident now. "Drink," she said positively.

He came back from the kitchen with a refill. She took the glass graciously and didn't dump it. In fact, she

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just held it, as if possession was sufficient. She seemed to be very proud of her glass. Of water.

"Drink," he pantomimed, putting an imaginary glass to his lips. "You know, drink."

He could almost see the light bulb go on over her head.

"Drink," she agreed.

She promptly raised the glass to her mouth and took a bite. The glass fell apart like a fresh taco and rained water all over the poor carpet again, though she managed to hold on to the biggest fragment, apparently with no particular regard for the sharp edges. She happily chewed up the mouthful of glass with great relish and swallowed it.

He tried not to appear stunned. He finally decided it could be that her species was silicon-based and glass was snack material. That might explain some of the other things he'd observed.

He looked down at the fragments of glass glinting from a now thoroughly soaked patch of carpet and groaned. "I don't think we're making a lot of progress."

"A lot of progress," she protested.

He looked at her suspiciously. "Are you actually getting any of this, or just repeating my last words?"

"Last words," she agreed, and took another bite from the remains of the glass in her hand.

He opened his mouth as if to speak and then closed it. If he had had any expectations about this first

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encounter, they certainly wouldn't have been anything like this. As far as he could tell, she was either a complete idiot, or suffering from some sort of weird amnesia. He wasn't sure she understood what he was saying. It was as if she were seeing everything for the first time. Maybe she was. He tried to be sympathetic.

"I guess you're, uh, kind of new at this, aren't you," he offered.

She looked around her, nodded her head and then grinned slyly, "Aren't you?"

She had him there. Wait a minute...

"Look," he said impatiently, "We're not going to get anywhere if you just say what I say."

He paused, then said, in very distinct syllables, as if talking to a slightly deaf foreigner, "Do. You. Speak. English?"

Her eyes rolled up in her head in the age-old manner of the young when confronting a stupid adult.

"Eng. Lish," she mocked, as if to say, 'duh'.

"Well then say something original, OK?" he said in exasperation.

"OK," she agreed.

He stared at her for a moment, then just had to laugh out loud. She looked at him like she was considering whether or not he'd lost his mind, then seemed to suddenly appreciate the comedy of the moment and laughed along with him. Which, of course, made him laugh even more. Which, of course, proved to be

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infectious. This went on for some time, but finally ran its course.

He had to start over somehow. Collecting his dignity, he gravely pronounced, "On behalf of all mankind, welcome to our planet, which we call Terra. My name is Alexander B. Luther." He held out his hand.

She looked suspiciously at his outstretched hand, then followed suit. There they stood for an awkward moment, hands held out in front of each other until he cautiously took her hand in his and they quite ceremoniously shook.

"Luther," she repeated.

"You can call me Alex," he prodded, hoping for an appropriate response.

"Lex," she said.

"No! Alex," he protested, stressing the 'A'. He'd always hated the 'L' name. Once, when he'd received some low-level recognition from his junior high science teacher for a minor academic achievement, the teacher read aloud, "Mr. Alexander B. Luther."

Some obnoxious classmate had sarcastically inquired, "What's the 'B' stand for — Brainiac?"

Howls of nasty laughter had ensued and the nickname stuck. Since it was in its own way a kind of perverse recognition, he'd never minded it. At least, not nearly as much as Lex. He didn't think he should volunteer that information, though.

He pressed on, "And how shall I address you?" he

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asked.

She looked like she was searching her memory.

He tried again. "Do you have a name?"

She looked down at the floor, then shook her head, looking embarrassed.

Well, she'd just completed what was probably an enormously difficult journey from God-knows-where, and undergone an unimaginable metamorphosis. Maybe it would take a while before she recovered completely. He should cut her some slack.

"Look, I'm sorry. You must be worn out. I certainly am, and I haven't gone nearly as far you must have. Why don't you sit down and relax", he said, gesturing to the overstuffed sofa chair he reserved for company.

She eyed it dubiously, as if the journey there were more difficult than the one she'd recently completed. Clearly, she understood what he wanted her to do but wasn't sure about how to go about it. He didn't know if he should try to help her or not, and didn't know how he could, anyway.

Slowly and deliberately, she lifted one foot and turned it toward the chair. It was as if she had to read an instruction manual translated from Chinese.

Please to the picking up first of foots having nearest the distance at which are being object of destination in a direction. Observe balancing, do opposing in a sequences. When completed desired rotation. Proceed with alacrity to the stop. There will rotate until aligned

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for a sitting down.

At first teetering like a newbie skater, she managed the feat without disaster and sank gingerly into the chair, unsure of what to do with her cape. Assuming one teenage posture after another, she experimented until finally settling into a leg-tucked position that she decided was comfortable.

Alex settled back on the couch. He wondered where he should start. He decided to forget the 'You Tarzan, me Jane' shtick for now.

"Can we talk?" he asked.

"Talk," she said.

In the manner of a knocked-out boxer's manager, he asked, "Do you know where you are?"

She surveyed his tiny living room for a moment, then said, "Here."

He felt relieved to break the pattern at last. Now he was getting somewhere. Well, sort of. It could be her name for our planet was different and maybe unpronounceable.

"Can you tell me where you came from?" he went on, not really expecting an answer he could understand.

She looked at the wreck on the carpet where she had been standing. "There."

Literally correct, of course. She definitely had Vulcan blood. "No, I mean where do you come from?"

She looked baffled.

He tried again, "Before," he emphasized, "you came

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here, where were you?"

"I am here", she said, "I was there," she gestured at the wet spot.

See Spot run, he thought. Definitely some kind of amnesia, hopefully temporary.

"Do you know why you are here?" he went on.

"Why is why?" she pondered aloud.

Well, there's a Zen answer. From the mouths of babes comes wisdom...

"Can you tell me *anything* about yourself?" he tried.

"I was there," she said, "And now I am here."

"You don't remember anything else?"

"There is no anything else," she said with certainty.

Chapter Three: Acquaintance

In spite of her ignorance, Alex learned quite a bit about her over the next few hours. Apparently, as far as she was concerned, she'd had no previous existence before waking up in his apartment. There were no memories of any other time or place or sentient beings. She had no mission, instructions, directions, messages, greetings, commands, visions, assignments or illuminations to offer. She was devoid of specific knowledge, as well. So much for world-changing technology transfers.

She was, however, equipped with an astonishingly complete vocabulary, even though she lacked any kind of experience to give meaning to the words she merely possessed. She knew the word 'elephant', for instance, but had only the most rudimentary understanding of what an elephant was, which was based on a definition using other words about which she lacked understanding as well.

Alex remembered the childhood story of blind men describing an elephant.

"It's like a snake", said one.

"It's like a tree," said another.

"It's like a house," said the third, and so on.

In her case, she had seen neither elephant, snake, tree nor house. A child's idea of an elephant — based on storybook pictures, cartoons and stories — is nothing like the experience of an elephant first encountered in a zoo. A

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child, though, might be convinced she knows all about elephants.

"That's not an elephant. It's too stinky!"

As an experiment, he asked her, "Do you know what a pencil is?"

She nodded enthusiastically.

"Tell me what a pencil is," he demanded.

"A pencil," she intoned, "is a tool. For the hand. It makes marks. It has a point..."

He cut her off, "That's nice. Now, do you see any pencils?"

She looked around, then shook her head. He reached over to the end table where he kept a large ceramic coffee cup crammed with every sort of writing implement, assorted combs, scissors, letter openers and other junk.

"This is a pencil," he showed her.

Unoffended, she nodded in agreement.

He handed it to her, but it was obvious she had never held one before. There was no muscle memory of how to grip it properly, as an amnesiac would probably have. It was completely unfamiliar to her and she didn't have a clue as to what to do with it.

He reached for another pencil. "Can you tell me what this is?"

She couldn't.

"This is a pencil, too."

She took it in stride.

He showed her another, this time a red colored

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pencil. "And this?"

"It is a pencil...?" she guessed

He nodded, then showed her a few more pencils of different sizes, shapes and colors, sharpened and unsharpened, which she identified. Then he showed her a pen.

"A pencil," she said.

"No, this is a pen."

"A pen," she repeated, puzzled.

He grabbed a notepad from the end table and scribbled with a pencil briefly, then the pen. Then he applied an eraser to each of the marks. He pointed to the smudged erasure, then to the tip of a pencil and said, "Lead." He pointed to the undamaged pen mark, then to its tip and said, "Ink."

She got it.

In fact, she picked up on things right away, permanently, and never had to be taught anything twice. Ignorant she might have been, but her intelligence was undeniable. She was able to extrapolate from context with only the slightest, most obscure clues.

He thought he understood now why she had had so much trouble with 'a glass of water'. 'Glass' and 'water' were incompatible states of matter. The word 'of' defined no sensible relationship. She had been equipped with words and protocols, not phrases. One knows what a 'glass of water' is because one has acquired the experience of it. When she matched the experience with the words, it

was a revelation to her, the beginning of language.

Her body language, though, was finely developed. She had evidently been factory-equipped with a personality and a means of expressing it. And it was not a detectably alien personality, as Alex might have expected. Whatever she was, carbon-based or silicon-based — animal, vegetable or mineral — she would fit right in with the natives on this planet.

He learned she had no idea that there were any other people but herself and Alex, and any larger universe than his apartment. It looked like she had been abandoned on his doorstep and it was up to him to make of her what he could. He was obviously meant to be her teacher, her guide, perhaps her *sensei* — to function *in loco parentis*, lacking any other. It was a role he could accept. He was the right age to be her father and was pretty well qualified as a man of learning and experience.

In the days of his misspent youth, he'd more or less accidentally gotten a degree in education while attending a cheap college in order to collect GI Bill money he figured was owed to him for military service. Following graduation, he lasted a whole year as a high school teacher before deciding it would be better to starve as a musician than put up with the educrat bureaucracy.

He was a voracious and eclectic reader and, following his craft, widely traveled. Growing up as an Army brat, he'd lived in places like Taipei, Italy and Germany, Puerto Rico and White Sands Missile Range in

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New Mexico (which qualified as off-planet duty). Four years as a Navy musician had shown him the ports of the North Atlantic, the Mediterranean and the Caribbean. While his shipmates cruised the harbor dives, he always made a point of absorbing the 'cultural' sites and at least attempting to savor the native gestalt of each foreign locale.

He was currently single and relatively unattached. His schedule was not tied to a daily grind — he only worked an average of twelve or fifteen nights a month, playing with different bands and occasional shows. He even had a few bucks put away. He did not drink, smoke or take drugs, and was regarded by everyone who knew him as a decent kind of guy. He was not rich, famous or credentialed — but he was honest, discreet and principled.

The more he thought about it, the more he was convinced that for whatever reasons some unknown entities had decided to drop their baby in his lap, their evident selection of him might have been no accident and was probably a good call. He didn't know how much the gig would pay (if anything), but he decided to take it.

It suited him, he thought.

Before breaking for lunch, Alex decided to try to clean up the mess on the carpet and pulled out his shop vac again, attacking the glass and water with careful intensity. The girl watched with questioning interest, so he felt compelled to explain.

Toomie Starks

"No offense, but if I don't get all of the glass picked up I'm likely to slice my foot next time I come down here for a midnight bite. Glass might be a snack for you, but I get a bit squeamish at the sight of my own blood."

He thought she probably understood at least part of what he said, but she might not yet have any concept of what it meant to get hurt. When he'd finished to his satisfaction, she got up from her chair, carefully walked over next to him, bent down and unerringly retrieved a tiny, glinting splinter from the carpet just outside the area he'd vacuumed. She offered it to him, but he declined, so she absently popped it in her mouth like a toddler would do with an interesting bug she'd just found. He winced.

"Is that the last of it?" he asked. She nodded with confidence.

"Well," he told her, "I guess you don't need glasses." He was going to have to do some comprehensive tests this afternoon to see just what she was capable of doing.

"I'm going to make us some lunch. At least, something I can eat. You can have the plates and silverware when I'm finished, if you want. Why don't you practice walking around for a while 'till you get the hang of it."

It seemed like a good idea to her. He watched for a while and decided she'd be an expert by the time he'd finished making their burgers and tea.

When he finally called her over to the dinner table, she executed a perfect Michael Jackson moonwalk,

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finished up with a 180-degree spin and straddle-hopped over the chair back to land squarely in her seat. Somehow, the chair survived.

"Show off," he muttered.

She beamed, proud of herself. It looked like she'd been furnished with programs to walk, run and jump, as well as perform other movements, and had only to discover for herself how to access these abilities. It wasn't something she'd learned from him. But he got an unmistakable feeling that she was doing everything for the first time.

He picked up a burger and took a bite while she watched. He'd wanted to start with something simple that wouldn't require utensils. He hoped she'd prefer human food.

"This is typical Earth food, called a cheeseburger. It's delicious, easy to prepare, available everywhere, and contains all the important food groups — meat, grain, milk byproducts, Miracle Whip, fruits, vegetables and grease. Try it?" he offered.

"This is to eat?" she wondered, dubiously. She picked up her burger and turned it over a couple of times, shedding lettuce, tomatoes and pickles which he patiently restored. She sniffed it. Her eyes got big.

"It smells," she said, approvingly.

She took a bite, then quickly, greedily finished it off in about twenty seconds, cramming it into her mouth with both hands.

Toomie Starks

"Good!" she sputtered, food fragments flying everywhere.

"Better than my tea glass, I would think," he answered, brushing himself off. "Speaking of which, you might want to wash that down."

He quickly took a sip from his own glass as an illustration. "Here," shoving her tea across the table, "Drink."

This time, she managed to get actual liquid in her mouth without breaking anything, spilling only about half of it unconsciously down her chin.

"Good!" she bubbled, spraying copiously. She downed the rest of the tea (not counting spillage) in about three huge gulps. Evidently, her programmers had neglected to include table manners. He'd work on that.

He wondered uneasily if she was housebroken.

Lunch over, the first order of business was finding her a name.

"On this planet, everybody and their pet has a name," Alex explained. "It's really quite convenient in crowds. In your case, something starting with 'S' would be appropriate, I suppose. Hmm..."

He looked around for a clue and spotted a snack cake on the counter next to the sink.

"How about 'Sara Lee'. What do you think?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders, noncommittally.

"Yeah, the 'Lee' part sucks," he admitted. "But 'Sara'

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works."

She didn't protest. He didn't currently know anyone named Sara — or Sarah — and didn't recall anyone especially important from his past with that name.

"Then Sara it is," he decided. His eyes fell on a software box on his computer desk. "Sara Corel. That has a nice ring to it. I like it. Problem solved."

In ceremonial tones, he solemnly announced, "I hereby dub thee: Sara Corel."

Sara looked at him cautiously. Alex explained, "That's your name from now on. If anyone asks you who you are or says, like, 'And who are you, little girl?' you say, 'My name is Sara Corel.' And if anyone calls out, 'Sara,' that's you. Trust me, this is great. You can mark your luggage and sign autographs now. And if anyone calls you on the phone, they won't have to say, 'Can I please speak to Whatsername,' they'll say, 'Is Sara home?' and I can yell, 'Sara, it's for you.' Let's try it."

"What is your name?" Alex asked politely.

Sara was unsure. "My name..." she began.

Alex nodded, encouragingly. She didn't respond.

"My name is Sara Corel," he prompted, *sotto voce*.

"Your name is Sara Corel?" she wondered.

"No, no, no, no. *My*," he emphasized, pointing to his chest, "name is Alex Luther. *Your* name is Sara Corel. But I want *you*," he pointed at her, "to say, 'My name is Sara Corel', OK?" Sheesh.

Sara got it, now. "My name is Sara Corel."

Toomie Starks

"Very pleased to meet you, Ms. Corel. May I call you Sara?"

"My name is Sara Corel?" she said, slightly confused.

"Your full name is Sara Corel, but you can address someone by either name or both. 'Miss', 'Missus', or 'Miz' usually precedes women's names — or last names used alone — depending on whether their married or not (or when it's PC). In the South, sometimes single girls' first names are preceded by 'Miss'. I'll explain later. Men's full names or last names are usually preceded by 'Mister'."

Lord, he felt like a teacher again.

"You may call me Sara," she announced proudly.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Mr. Luther. May I call you Alex?"

What a student, he thought.

The rest of the afternoon was spent testing various of her physical attributes. Sara had already picked up the two-year-old eternal 'why?' demand. It wasn't as annoying coming from her as it would have been from some brat, for some reason, and Alex hardly minded at all, trying his best to accommodate her as he went.

Alex didn't have much in the way of sophisticated scientific apparatus, but he was a tool hound and dabbled with light woodworking and electronics, having made a lot of his own musical equipment in his abundant spare time. He had always liked tinkering around and had a

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compulsion to dismantle everything he could get his hands on, sometimes even putting it back together again without too many parts left over.

He was dying to find out what made Sara tick, or at least figure out just what he was dealing with. He didn't really mean it in an impersonal way, but he regarded Sara by now as both a person and as some wonderful mystery that he had to know more about. It helped that Sara was as curious about discovering herself and her abilities as he was.

He quickly confirmed that she was pretty much completely puncture-proof. He couldn't bring himself to try to stick a (carefully sterilized) pin in her, but Sara was happy to oblige, quickly ruining several pins, a couple of knives, a nail punch and assorted Exacto blades. She was delighted to try anything he suggested and nothing she tried seemed to bother her the slightest bit.

Her skin felt completely normal when he applied force to it, up to a limit. Approaching the point where human skin would begin to stretch to the breaking point, it became increasingly difficult to go any further and eventually impossible — as if bottoming out on a steel plate. She reported not the slightest discomfort. In the process of destroying several dangerous-looking implements, she also demonstrated considerable strength.

Heat wasn't a problem for her, either. She could tell him that the gas flame on his stove felt 'hot', as a matter-of-fact observation, but it was obviously not unpleasant.

Toomie Starks

She nonchalantly picked up his soldering gun by its red-hot tip and stuck her hand in a pot of boiling water without complaint. He was careful to emphasize to her what would befall him if he were the subject of such experiments. He had to convince her that *he* was the normal one on this planet.

Sara didn't exactly understand the underlying mechanism, but with her help Alex was able to figure out that there was some sort of force-feedback involved that responded to pressure by causing her skin to react in a set way imitative of human skin tone. When he pushed her cheek with his finger, it didn't actually bend from the pressure he applied — it was bent by some internal process in a way so as to mimic being bent by his finger. Up to a point, of course.

Sara found she could disable the default response if she wished, whereupon her cheek reverted to the adamant hardness he'd first experienced. When in her 'human' state, he could push her around. When she was not, she was unmovable.

In either state, Sara could definitely take a punch. He gingerly banged her fingers with the Larry hammer with decreasing timidity until she took over and smacked herself so hard she broke the handle. She then smote herself mightily with the Moe bar right in the chops, bending it into uselessness. She was not only immune from harm, she was deeply confident of it.

Despite her toughness, she seemed to have a very

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acute sense of touch. Her other senses were also greatly enhanced and highly accurate, though seemingly incapable of being overloaded. His strobe flash didn't make her blink at all and bothered her not in the slightest, apparently leaving no afterimages or spots before her eyes.

Alex thought he probably had experienced her degree of hearing sensitivity once, while wearing headphones connected to a microphone preamp with the gain all the way up. He'd imagined he could hear himself sweat. The constant sensory overload of such high sensitivity would have been maddening, but she seemed to have a sort of filtering algorithm that made her only aware of what she wanted or needed to hear. Humans, especially teenagers, don't pay attention to every sound in their environment anyway. Sara just had a lot more background noise to ignore than usual. The remarkable thing about her hearing was her ability to pick out whatever sound she wanted to hear from a chaotic background.

Still, her senses seemed to be based on being able to perceive the world as humans did, only more so. It would have been difficult to communicate meaningfully with people if everything she saw looked radically different, with a palette that included colors no one else could imagine. Her colors were our colors. However, by having her track his own residual body heat to recreate his movements in a 'game' he improvised, he was able to

determine that her eyes registered infrared. Her mind — at least her conscious mind — didn't. Unless she wanted to or needed to.

It was as if her 'human' mind was intimately interfaced with a powerful, highly advanced 'alien' computer that controlled her body. All she had to do was discover the right levers to pull and the machine took care of the details. It was so well integrated that it seemed continuous, but obviously much more was going on below the surface than she could know.

Which was, come to think of it, the human model, too. You can't directly control your heart and you don't need to pay attention to your breathing, and once you learn how to ride a bicycle, you don't have to think about all the painfully learned technique of exactly which muscle pulled in coordination with another. Deconstructing routine tasks learned as a baby would be nearly impossible.

Alex was beginning to think there might be no end to her abilities and that maybe he should call a comic book store for reference material. A sudden thought nearly panicked him. Inadvertent x-ray emission could be hazardous to his health.

"Sara, would you mind facing that wall?"

"OK."

He scuttled directly behind her. "Can you see what's on the other side of the wall?"

It had not occurred to her that there *was* another side

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to the wall. Intrigued, she looked at the wall with curious concentration. After a few moments, she said, "No. Only this side is all I can see. Did you want to know what is over there?"

"I was just checking out a theory," he said, relieved and disappointed at the same time. It looked like there may be limits after all.

"There is a room. It is just like this room," she said diffidently, "only backward."

Alex paused. The apartment next door was the mirror image of his own. "I thought you couldn't see through the wall."

"I am not seeing. I am..." she struggled to find the right word, "Sensing...? My eyes see this wall, but my — mind — has a sense. I touch... I feel the other room. I think some words are missing from me. I have a map... I have a model..."

She was clearly frustrated. "The place where I am is in my mind on both sides of the walls."

Alex thought for a while. "Can you tell me what color the carpet is?" He'd glimpsed it a few times through his neighbor's open door.

"There is no color with this sensing, but the thickness of things has a feel." She continued to stare straight ahead of her, concentrating.

"The room on the other side," she gestured behind her, "is also backward. And the one over there," pointing to the kitchenette, "is another backward."

Toomie Starks

He understood her to be describing the architectural symmetry according to which the apartment complex had been laid out. She was certainly 'sensing' something through the walls, and it didn't have anything to do with x-rays. What, then. Radar? Sonar? Magnetic resonance imaging?

"How long have you been able to 'sense' the other rooms."

"When you wanted to know what was on the other side of the wall, I thought about it, and then I could do it."

"But you couldn't do it before?"

"Before what?"

Aaargh. "Before I asked you if you knew what was on the other side of the wall."

"Yes," she replied.

"Can you 'sense' me now?"

"Yes."

"If I were on the other side of the wall, could you 'sense' me there?"

"Yes."

"Is there anyone else, any other human, in any of the other rooms?"

"I don't think so."

Everybody else was probably at work this afternoon.

"Can you stop 'sensing' through the wall?"

"I will try to," she said.

"Yes," she said, uncertainly, "Well, not really. I can't... I can ignore the sense, but it is still with me. I still

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know you are there. But I do not see you. If I didn't want to know you were on the other side of a wall, I would know it, even if I didn't know I knew it."

That certainly cleared things up.

"Sara, I don't think you should pay attention to anything that happens on the other side of any walls. People need to have privacy. It's not nice to look at... You shouldn't 'sense' — whatever that means — anything that goes on in a room that you are not in."

He'd have to go to the bathroom sooner or later.

"For a while — until I say differently — please don't 'sense' anything you can't see with your eyes, OK? It's very important."

She nodded disappointedly, "OK."

Alex tentatively decided that she must be highly configurable. A new ability had been created, made to order by whatever internal computer managed her system. 'It' analyzed what it was she wanted to do, solved the problem of how to do it and made whatever changes were necessary in her physical structure to accomplish the task. Her 'human' attributes were a default setting, equipping her with speech, movement, and ordinary senses. But she could apparently extend her capabilities. He decided to test his hunch.

"I don't want you to do what I'm going to ask you if you can do. I just want to know if you can do it as of this moment. Got it?"

She nodded.

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He rummaged through a kitchen drawer until he found a flashlight that worked. He showed it to her and then cast the beam on the wall in front of her. He did his best to explain light and colors to her, at least the basics, and slapped a few colored gels in front of the lens from a stage lighting sampler he'd found in the same drawer. She caught on quickly.

"Can you, right now, shine any kind of light from your eyes on to the wall?" he asked.

She considered carefully. "Not now."

"Do you think you could if you wanted to?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Go for it."

She concentrated briefly, then asked, "Which color?"

Color? "How about blue?" *To match her eyes*, he thought.

She stared intently at the wall for a moment. There was a huge, hot flash of blue, blinding him. He shouted out in surprise and sank reflexively to the floor, covering his eyes, trying to blink out the yellow dazzle.

Sara squealed, first with delight at her new trick, then with dismay when she saw Alex's reaction. She reached out and tried to grab him, to help him up, nearly breaking his ribs in the process. He moaned with pain, which frightened her. She dropped him, causing him to moan again. She wailed.

Struggling to stand up and see through his watering eyes, Alex took the distraught girl in his arms to comfort

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her.

"I'm all right, " he said, soothingly. "I was just startled, is all. I should have... Here now, don't cry."

She buried her head in his arms and sobbed,

"I...I...I...I'm...I'm...

s...s...s...sor...sor...sor...ry...ry..."

Deep breath. "Baw...aw...aw...aw...aw...aw..."

"That's all right," he soothed. "It's OK. You didn't know. I didn't know. We'll just have to be more careful."

He was relieved to find he could still breathe, though he'd have bruises, for sure. He stroked her hair and gently rocked her back and forth until she calmed down. It was a profoundly bonding moment. But like a small child caught doing something bad, the crisis passed quickly and was soon forgotten.

The wall was another matter. There was a round area about two feet across that looked like a toasted marshmallow, crinkly brown and crusty in the middle and fading away to indistinctness. The top of the couch was smoldering slightly and the whole apartment was noticeably warmer. Alex felt lucky there wasn't a fire.

"There goes my security deposit," he muttered, wondering if mere paint could repair the damage.

"Uh, do you think you can control the intensity a little?" he asked her.

"Not so bright?" she asked, innocently.

"That would be nice," he replied, dryly.

Sara turned back to the wall, but Alex interrupted her

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concentration to suggest that they start with a fresh patch of paint. It would show up better. She started again, trying to be oh-so-careful, the tip of her tongue sticking out of the corner of her mouth.

Sure enough, a soft glow of blue light appeared on the wall. Alex looked at her eyes. Her lids were wide open and her irises glowed brightly, like Lifesaver LED's. The light was not coming through her pupils as he expected. It made more sense this way, of course. She could still see while emitting. *Tres eerie*, he thought, like something from a bad 50's thriller flick.

She'd scare the shit out of someone in a dark alley.

She turned excitedly toward him, the light ending abruptly as she faced him. "Was that good?" she said expectantly.

"Very nice. Try for red, now."

Sara turned back to the wall and instantly there was a red glow where the blue one had been. She tried other pure colors, keeping up an excited chatter all the while. At his direction, she experimented with intensity and focus. She could narrow the beams to laser-like points and hold them rock steady, even when moving around. Apparently, she could pick any frequency she wanted and control the beams' strength and tightness at will, her eyes subtly but visibly distorting as he put her through her paces.

He didn't know if the light was collimated like a laser's, but she could easily generate enough power to burn through a few sample items he rounded up, using his

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old cast iron skillet as a backdrop. It didn't take long to fill the apartment with smoke and crater the skillet. Coughing profusely while he removed the battery from the smoke detector, he lectured her on how dangerous this all was and made her promise not to do it anymore unless he was around to supervise.

Alex wondered how far above and below visible light she could go. Infrared shouldn't be a problem, he guessed. All the way to x-rays? Who knows? He hoped she wouldn't experiment on her own. He tried to make her understand that such a thing could be dangerous.

He was dubious that Sara could actually achieve 'x-ray vision' (not that she would need it, given her 'sensing' ability), even if she could actually emit x-rays at high enough intensity and was able to resolve an image. For one thing, x-rays didn't reflect very well. Also, air absorbed x-rays, so it would be like trying to use headlights in a fog. Trying to peer through a wall at someone using x-rays would probably require intensity sufficient to ignite a fireball in the intervening atmosphere, vaporize the wall and condemn the subject to a gruesome demise.

It would be great for starting a charcoal fire for a barbecue, though.

Chapter Four: First Evening

Their evening meal was messy but uneventful. Alex did lose a couple of forks to her enthusiasm over food, but he made sure Sara only used his old silverware. So far, she'd shown no adverse reaction to her first meals and had not needed to relieve herself. Food was probably important to her only for the pleasurable sensations it provided and was not a necessity. He had by now decided that hers was no biological metabolism as we understood it, but he worried that sooner or later all that tucker had to go somewhere. Unless she had a molecular incinerator for a stomach. Or a black hole.

Alex decided to suspend testing for the evening. Sara had worn him out. So he decided to begin her formal education by showing her a little of his planet by means of a couple of coffee table books he had collected.

There was a little problem with her relating to photographs as representations of reality. He had to go to some lengths to get her to understand the basic concept of imagery. Alex remembered reading about Stone Age tribesmen in New Guinea seeing Polaroids for the first time and having the same sort of difficulty understanding what they were seeing, so it wasn't entirely surprising. This was new to her, but, as with everything else, she caught on quickly, though her lack of perceptual experience with the real world made the meaningful interpretation of what she was seeing problematic. But the

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pictures were pretty and she liked him reading to her, embellishing as he went. Bonding continued.

Alex decided against turning on the TV for now. No point in overwhelming her the first few days. She had absolutely no experience with any kind of normal human interactions and would require a little time for adjustment and acclimatization. He figured it would be a week or so before he could bring her out in public to meet other people. After he got her some normal clothes, of course. He'd have to put some thought into developing a program to bring her up to her apparent age in terms of social skills and cultural references.

It turned out that Sara could read, technically speaking. At first, she sounded out her words phonetically with his help, but — as with walking — she improved very quickly. He doubted that much of what she read actually made much sense to her, but her native ability to assimilate the newness of her environment rapidly and efficiently was remarkable.

The next surprise was when she came across a French phrase and executed it perfectly. Alex looked at her for a moment and asked, "*Parlez vous Français?*"

"*Oui*," she matter-of-factly replied, and went on in her chatterbox manner for a while in that language without realizing that it was incomprehensible to him.

Well, his French was none too good, but hers was. Wow. Hadn't expected that.

He tried, "*¿Yo habla Español?*"

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She looked at him quizzically, "Si."

He tried various phrases in half-a-dozen languages he'd picked up over the years during his youthful migrations (he could order a cold beer in Chinese). He couldn't stump her. She was unaware that this might be unusual.

"How many languages do you know?"

She considered briefly, then smiled brightly, "All of them," hoping he'd be pleased.

Alex realized he hadn't yet gotten around to explaining basic counting to her, though she undoubtedly knew all the number words and would probably catch on in her usual blazing manner. He also figured that untangling one similar language from another one or a close dialect might not be easy, for purposes of enumeration. His was, he decided, an irrelevant question. And, for all he knew, her answer might be literally accurate. Time would tell.

That told him something meaningless about the entities who had created her and dropped her off on this planet. Why *not* equip your emissary with the local languages? Shouldn't be too hard for your typical advanced extraterrestrial civilization. Monitor the radio waves for a few years — certainly the process could be automated — set up your databases, and dump the resulting files into your minion's computer or a brain. Piece of cake. Chat up the natives, eh wot? Bottom line: someone's been listening. Interesting.

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But why stop there? It didn't make a lot of sense to fill her up with a bunch of aboriginal tongues but otherwise leave her totally ignorant of the local mores and customs. Why combine sublime knowledge with utter inexperience? And then dress her up in a ridiculous costume and dump her in some poor schmuck's living room. This was nonsense.

Well, maybe not. What did he know so far? Let's see...

- 1) Extraterrestrial origin, for sure.
- 2) She's definitely an artifact, in the best sense of the word — the work of skilled artisans.
- 3) She was deliberately crafted to resemble a Terrestrial icon, for reasons unknown. One that was probably the least threatening 'alien-from-another-planet' in our, uh, literature.
- 4) Physically, as far as he could tell so far, she lived up to her billing in that respect.
- 5) Her (he assumed) programmed personality was indistinguishable from human consciousness. She passed the Turing test to such a degree that he was willing to concede she was alive in the human sense of *cogito ergo sum* — 'I think, therefore I am'. Though she was in every respect still a child.
- 6) She was equipped with all the necessary motor skills and basic access to language necessary to pass as human anywhere on the planet — with a little guidance at first (his gig, evidently).

7) She was a complete *tabula rasa* — a blank slate — devoid of memories of a prior existence, if any. She carried with her from her mysterious origin no prejudices or preconceptions regarding our world and its inhabitants.

8) Though she constituted irrefutable evidence of the existence of some alien technological civilization, it would seem that nothing about said civilization was to be gleaned from her other than what her abilities and construction provided as clues — and her invulnerability might make any direct examination impossible (can't tell what makes something tick until you take it apart).

9) Her makers' ability to learn our languages, form and culture — and then perfectly model a human physically and mentally — made it seem unlikely that they needed to drop her off (in such a conspicuous form) for purposes of espionage, or whatever. Whoever these 'Cryptoaliens' were probably had nothing more to learn about us, unless it was by our reaction to her presence.

10) He thought it likely that Sara could have vaporized the wall — her childish inclination would have been to put everything she had into her 'lighting bolt' — or at least completely blinded him, and broken every bone in his body when she grabbed him in panic. There must be some sort of built-in safety mechanisms that prevented her from accidentally killing him before she grew up. Thank God.

11) Like a newly hatched gosling accepting the first creature it saw as its parent, Sara seemed to accept his

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authority over her. She might not unthinkingly obey his every whim, but she seemed to at least respect his opinions.

12) She seemed to be inordinately pleased whenever she did something for him, whether it was a new trick or fulfilling a simple request. Maybe these last three points were her makers' version of Asimov's famous Three Laws of Robotics.

Conclusions? None possible. He'd just have to ride with it for now. Which was not an altogether unpleasant prospect.

Eventually, he just had to go to bed. Sara showed no signs of slowing down. Alex had no idea if she even needed to sleep at all, but any kid would be too excited to want to stop, anyway. It was her birthday, after all, and everything she saw was a shiny new present.

"I don't know about you, but I'm going upstairs to bed. If you want to crash on the couch, be my guest." He brought out some spare sheets and a light blanket and made a makeshift nest for her to cuddle up in.

"Just try to keep it quiet and don't get into anything you don't understand. Whatever you do, don't leave the apartment. Don't open the door at all. Do you understand?"

She nodded solemnly.

"Promise me," he demanded.

"It is my promise not to open the door or leave the

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apartment."

He hoped that would do it, but he was too sleepy to care. Off to bed he went.

The next morning, he tiptoed down the stairs from his bedroom into a war zone. It looked like his side had lost. Sara had gotten into everything.

There were pencil and ink marks on the wall and on the torn-out pages from nearly every book he owned, scattered tornadically about. Something resembling finger paint whorls adorned nearly every surface (he didn't have any finger paints). Flour footprints led from the kitchen. Plates and fragments of plates were everywhere, along with a complete set of steak knife handles (the blades were ominously missing). It looked like she drank half-a-bottle of Clorox and spilled the rest on the kitchen floor to mingle with instant coffee, the contents of a half-eaten bottle of Dr. Pepper, about five pounds of sugar, unidentified spices (he hoped they were spices), cheese, rice, two or three cans of vegetables with the tops bitten off and a selection of the remains of several now-thawed frozen dinners — bite marks through package, plastic plate and entrée clearly visible.

What interesting stains, he thought. Not to mention the smell.

The refrigerator door was hanging open, but it wasn't running. She'd probably yanked out the plug when she picked it up to shake out all the goodies. He was mildly

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surprised that the kitchen table could support its weight.

At least the busted-off hot water handle and twisted spout on the kitchen sink wasn't spewing water. Anymore. Gingerly moving aside the shattered remains of the cabinet doors to look under the sink showed him why — Sara had thoughtfully pinched the feed pipes closed. How nice. There probably weren't more than a few gallons of water pooled under the cabinets. With any kind of luck at all, he should be able to sneak a plumber, carpenter, carpet layer, sheet rocker, painter, electrician, several helpers and a general contractor into his apartment without the landlady noticing.

Right.

The eye of the storm was sleeping innocently on the couch, covered with evidence. She had a milk moustache, chocolate chin and peanut butter mousse. Each individual finger had a story to tell that he didn't particularly want to hear. Half-dried stuff was caked all over the front of her outfit. Her sleeves reeked.

But her blissful countenance made every bad thing unhappen.

It was the most amazing part of his acquaintance with her yet. Here he was, his life completely wrenched from its path of complacent, self-satisfied meaninglessness, confronted by an Earth-shattering apparition who destroyed his comfortable little world without a thought. His life was over, and everything he thought he knew was imminently to be swept away in the

aftermath of her arrival — he knew it. And he accepted it, even embraced it. Because she needed him.

Men — that sad, low class of wretchedness (as opposed to real human beings, or women) — had been fashionably maligned for some time in this era of history as incapable of caring, nurturing relationships with their betters, whom they oppressed and exploited. And certainly the pigs often did little to allay the sordid perception. There is no end to examples of crassness, juvenilism, boorishness, bad taste, shallowness, cretinism, irresponsibility, brutishness and insensitivity in the kind of men that women seem to prefer.

But there are other kinds of men, who need their women far more than women need men, and not for the obvious reasons. They need women — and children — in their lives so that they can *matter*.

Fathers and husbands go forth to build civilizations in which to house, feed and protect those to whom they matter. Mothers bear children and instinctively clutch them to their bosoms as long as they can. They *know* that their children are their children. A father must *decide* to embrace his children as his own — and does so.

Mothers care and teach — yes, they teach — in their manner. Fathers — in the scant time afforded them between making laws, fighting wars and bringing home the bacon — can only inspire. When they do, they become fulfilled. A mother raises her children to grow *away* from her in the end. A father leads his children to

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follow him *to the end*.

Sara was his, now. Alex would do his duty and fuss at her behavior, because that is what a father has to do to prepare his precious darling for the wide world. The destruction that was bound to follow her curiosity and impulsiveness for the duration of her childhood was just a necessary burden to bear. It could be cleaned up, as could she. He didn't ever recall being this tolerant in his former life. *Must be the smile*, he thought.

Sara's eyes popped open to a new day, full of anticipation and joy. He almost didn't have the heart to tear into her, but he did. She was so crestfallen by his disapproval it was pitiful.

"This is not acceptable behavior, young lady! What a mess! Who do you think is going to clean this up? And look at you!"

Blah, blah, blah...

When he had achieved the desired effect, he marched her upstairs to the bathroom. Which presented somewhat of a problem. He could hose her down to some extent under the shower nozzle, but sooner or later he was going to have to make sure she got a proper cleaning. She needed a bath.

Alex was no prude, but he became acutely embarrassed by the situation. He had come to think of Sara as a child, but he was suddenly aware that she was not exactly built like one. He was not happy about the prospect of having to undress and handle her.

She didn't make it easy for him. The only things she figured out how to take off by herself were her shoes. The rest of her outfit was a struggle. It would not stretch for him, and she had no idea how clothes worked. There weren't any zippers, buttons or catches he could find, so it was just a matter of trial and error.

The key turned out to be the belt which, evidently, only she could open. That released the skirt. The neck opening she then stretched over her shoulders while pulling her arms out of her sleeves, then peeled the whole thing, cape and all, down around her ankles and — ohmygawd — there she was, in all of her considerable glory.

Trying desperately to keep his mind on the business at hand, he got her into the tub as it filled, with Sara splashing happily and completely unselfconsciously. He grabbed up her clothes and turned to the sink, concentrating on his laundry chore, which turned out to be easier than he thought.

The material was not cloth and didn't wet properly. However, the caked-on goo would not stick to it and rinsed off without a problem. In no time, he had the whole outfit draped over the shower curtain rod to drip-dry. He'd had time to regain his composure and got down to the very practical matter of explaining the use of soap (she'd only eaten half the bar before deciding it was yucky), water and a washcloth. He tried to convince her to leave some water in the tub.

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Then he sat there on the toilet, watching her intently. She was absolutely perfect, in every sense of the word. There was not even the slightest blemish or imperfection that he could see. He reminded himself that she was just made that way, and was probably closer in her construction to Robbie the Robot than to the human girl she only superficially resembled.

But in every conceivable manner, she was human, too. The light of a human soul shone from her eyes stronger than any laser beam could. All her powers aside, the personality in charge of this 'machine', if that's what she was, was so closely like that of a perfectly normal child, there might not actually be any difference.

So if 'A' equals 'B' and 'B' equals 'C', then 'A' equals 'C'. Logical, where the application of logic was irrelevant. If it was not possible for humans to quantify the essence of their own humanity, how could they deny its existence in a vessel not of human origin? No one, not knowing her secret, could possibly guess it.

His reverie was shattered by the sounds of the doorbell accompanied by purposeful banging on his front door. In full panic mode, he raced down the stairs to confront the worst possible thing that could happen.

Sure enough, it was the landlady. The door was half open before he could get there, too late to keep her from seeing the awful mess in his living room.

"Mistor Luthor," she growled from the substantial depths of her Eastern European accent, "There is

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plumbink emergency. Vater is thru ze vall comink..."

Her eyes nearly popped out of her head as she wedged her bulk the rest of the way in past him and surveyed the wreckage.

"Mrs. Jachimczyk!" Alex stammered, trying futilely to somehow interpose himself between her and the rest of his apartment. "I was just going to see you..."

He could have more easily stopped a tank. She swept by him like a blitzing linebacker and planted herself unmoveably in the middle of the remains of his living room.

"Gahhhck!" she started, followed by what had to be something like a gypsy curse. "Vhat is goink on here..." She trailed off. This was a lot more than she was prepared for. She turned to him, speechless.

And down the stairs, eager to meet a new person and see what all the commotion was about, came Sara.

Quite naked, of course.

Chapter Five: Flight

"I am thinkink maybe," growled Mrs. Jachimeczyk, "I vant to have commink here ze policeman. That is maybe vhat I am thinkink. You stay," she said, jabbing a fat finger at Alex, "I go."

Helpless, Alex watched her steam out the apartment door like an aging tugboat, slamming it behind her in righteous disgust, while his intestines wrapped themselves tightly around his stomach.

"Damn," he rasped, "Damn, damn, DAMN!"

Sara parroted happily, "Damn."

Alex spun around to look at her. He had a brief thought about telling her to wash her mouth out with soap. Lot of good that would do. He almost laughed.

She was still dripping with soapy water. Oh, well, first things first. "Come on," he told her, "Let's get you dressed, anyway."

He led her back upstairs, stuck her under the shower to rinse off, and then showed her how to towel herself dry, more or less. When she was finished, she shook her head like a wet dog, water spraying everywhere, and her hair flew into its original pristine condition, seemingly completely dry, as if nothing had ever happened to it.

That's certainly convenient, he thought.

He managed to scrounge up some old sweats that were sufficiently nondescript as to look normal on a teenager. Her costume slippers would have to do for her

feet, but they'd pass. The rest of her outfit (already quite dry) he stuffed into a suitcase, along with as much of his stuff as would fit.

His mind was racing. The apartment was bad enough, but surely Mrs. Jachimczyk had pegged Sara as a teen runaway, lured into his clutches for despicable purposes. What could he do? Tell the truth? Hah. He didn't think waiting around to try to explain things to a cop was a stellar idea. He'd wind up in a cell with other perverts and Sara would end up God-knows-where.

How long do I have? he wondered. Some of his stuff was still by the door and more was in the car. It would have to do. Time to clear out.

Trailed by Sara, he skipped down the stairs and cautiously opened the door. Standing guard just outside were Rudy and Jesus, a couple of the omnipresent Mexican handymen who managed to keep the complex from being condemned. They were carrying heavy, ugly plumbing tools and didn't look like their usual jovial selves.

"¿*Que pasa, muchachos?*" said Alex in as friendly a manner as he could muster.

Their obviously watchful silence was deafening. Jesus turned his head and ceremoniously spat on the sidewalk, then folded his arms across his chest, resting his pipe wrench on his shoulder like Casey waiting his turn at bat. Alex ducked back inside.

Hoo boy. What now? Sic Sara on them? Great lesson

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that would be. Nah, that's unthinkable. He was floundering for some way out.

Time to call out the Marines. His current on-and-off occasional date the last eight months was a lawyer, hopefully a good one. He picked up the phone (relieved to see that Sara hadn't eaten it yet) and fumbled through his wallet for her card.

Dinah Prinze, attorney
Perry, Dyess, Eyelandt
Truth & justice, the American Way
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"Prinze here," she answered at last.

"Hey, it's Alex. Uh, looks like I'm gonna need a lawyer. You busy?"

"That's original. Sure, I'm not busy tonight. Where do you want to go?"

"No, I mean it. I've got a problem. Really."

"You? Come on. What is it? I can't fix parking tickets, you know."

"Please, listen to me. My landlady just called the cops, and she means it."

"You are kidding, aren't you?"

"Serious as the national debt," he said as forcefully as he could. "My apartment is way trashed. Like Mick Jagger's hotel room. Nuclear fallout and everything."

"Oh. Wish *I'd* been at that party." She paused for a

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long moment. "Look, I can't be your attorney, but maybe I can get someone. Might be cheaper to just buy the whole lousy apartment building, from the looks of it."

"Well, that's not all. There's a girl involved. Like, uh, underage."

"Thank you for sharing that with me," she said icily.

Alex plunged in, somewhat deliriously, "It's not what you're thinking. I know it doesn't look real good. The landlady barged in and there's this debris lying all over the place, a lot of broken stuff, the walls are ruined, the carpet's ruined, the plumbing's ruined, the fridge is lying on my kitchen table — and this girl pops out of the bathroom. OK, she looks like she's a runaway, and she's not even exactly legal. You know, she's like an alien, not from the US of A. She just showed up in my apartment while I was out of town on a gig. But she's got no ID, no family..." Talk about digging a hole.

"Sounds like you need a lawyer, alright." She thought for a moment. "Did you cause the damage yourself?"

"No."

"Did you leave your apartment locked up while you were away?"

"Yeah."

"You didn't let her in to your apartment or invite her or anyone else in while you were away?"

"No. She was there when I got home."

"She caused the damage? Or her friends?"

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"Uh-huh."

"You touch her? I mean, kiss her, grab her boobs, drop trou, anything like that?"

"No way. She was a mess, so I let her sleep on the couch and then drew a bath for her. I was washing out her clothes when Mrs. J. showed up. The girl came out to see what was going on and Jachimczyk put two and two together and came up with 69. There's two of her stooges standing guard outside while she calls 911."

"Hmm. You know, the reason I'm a good lawyer is because I can tell when someone's telling me the truth. Alex, you are hiding something from me. But I can't imagine you doing anything really kinky. Not you. I don't know what's going on and it sounds like you're not exactly up to speed yourself. I'll see what I can do, but first, you're going to have to get a grip."

"Look," she went on, "if an officer shows up, don't say anything. Don't try to explain anything to him, don't talk to him, don't give him the time of day. I mean it. Not a word. Give him your name, show him your TDL, do whatever he says without any hesitation. But don't say *anything*. You understand?"

"Yeah."

"If they take you to the station, don't speak to anyone there, either. Do what they tell you to do. Sooner or later, you'll be able to call me and I'll get you out, I promise."

"And don't say anything to the girl, either. They'll take care of her. Don't offer to help. Stay away. For God's

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sake, don't think about touching her. I'm guessing you felt sorry for her or something, like she was a stray cat. Nothing you can do now will help her. She's out of your hands. Got it?"

"Yeah," he said glumly. So much for Sara and him. What would happen to her now? She was just not in any shape yet to be put through some impersonal, bureaucratic meat grinder. At first, they'll treat her like a delinquent, then as a retard, and finally as a freak.

God, he felt awful. What an idiot! He should have tied her up when he went to bed, as if that would have done any good. Well, he should have done something. He looked morosely at Sara, trying to drink in what might well be his last sight of her.

Dinah spoke up, "Hey, you still there?"

"Sure," he replied, trying not to sound as choked up as he felt.

"Listen, this isn't as bad you think, unless you're hiding something a lot worse than what you've told me. In the long run, this whole incident will just be expensive and annoying. You'll get over it and have a story to tell. Cheer up, OK?"

"OK, thanks. I really appreciate it... I owe you one."

"Yeah," she said, "You do."

"I gotta go. Mrs. J's coming back any second."

"Don't forget what I told you. Keep your mouth shut and your hands to yourself. And call me," he heard her say as he hung up.

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"Sara," he started, "We're in trouble."

She looked down guiltily. "I'm sorry," she mumbled.

"It's not your fault. You're just a kid in a candy shop. With a bulldozer. It's my job to look after you, and I didn't think through the consequences of leaving you alone. You are completely outside of my experience, I'm afraid, and I just hope I get another chance to get it right."

He looked at her intently. "I don't really know what I'm gonna do the next few minutes, but whatever happens, unless I tell you different, stay close to me. Even if I run out of here. Can you do that?"

She nodded. It sounded like it could be fun.

Rudy and Mrs. J came in. "Mistor Luthor. Ze policeman is comink. But you tellink me, vhat it vas that vas goink on here. Such a mess, it vould take army to be makink."

Alex tried to start edging closer to the door, but Rudy would have none of it. "I don't know what to say, Mrs. Jachimczyk. I'm really sorry for what happened. I can pay for everything, really."

"You did this?" she demanded.

"I... Well, I'm not — I mean I am..." he sputtered. "It's my responsibility."

"That is not vhat I vas askink. You did this, you didn't do this. Who?"

Alex glanced quickly at Sara. Mrs. J caught it and turned to look at her. Sara looked blissfully ignorant of what was going on, with not a care in the world.

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Mrs. J launched into a powerful diatribe in whatever language was her native tongue, hands waving in the air.

Sara answered her cheerfully in the same language. It suddenly got real quiet.

Finally, Mrs. J barked a long series of questions at Sara which she answered unconcernedly. Mrs. J thought for a while and turned to Alex.

"She gots papers?"

"No," Alex replied, "She doesn't have any parents, either." He felt shameless.

"Vhy you are beink responsible?"

"She was given into my care. I couldn't say no." He shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"You are a man livink alone."

"She is a baby."

Mrs. J looked at Sara again, then turned back to Alex and tapped at her own head with the end of her stubby forefinger, eyebrows raised in an obvious question.

Alex replied, "She's — unusual."

Mrs. J nodded thoughtfully.

The proverbial light bulb went off over his head. He took a desperate gamble. "In a minute, the policeman will be here. Then the state will have her."

Mrs. J's eyes narrowed, her face becoming grim. Time passed in a whirl of thoughts for both of them, until — through the open door — Jesus whistled and nodded down the long sidewalk to the street. They could hear the crackle of a police unit two-way.

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Mrs. J strode purposefully to the door, fluidly grabbing a screwdriver and hammer out of Rudy's tool belt as she passed. With what looked like well-practiced expertise, she jabbed the screwdriver into the deadbolt keyhole, drove it home with the hammer and twisted. Spinning, she backhanded the bolthole in the doorframe with the hammer, rendering it useless. Then she put all her weight on the doorknob. It broke off immediately and she kicked it unerringly into the bushes. She flipped the tools to Rudy, who holstered them on the fly like a western gunfighter just as the cop arrived at the door.

"Hey, Mrs. J," the young black officer smiled at her, "Doin' OK?"

Mrs. J beamed at him like she was his grandson, "Ah, Mistor Monroe! So fine you are lookink today. All is vell?"

"Pretty fine, can't complain." He put on his business face. "OK, what do we got?"

"Mistor Luthor here," she started, "He goes away couple days, comes back and — boom! — vandals ev'rywhere vas breakink in. Vhat a mess!"

Alex's knees went weak with relief.

The cop said, "Vandals? What, broke in? Damn, that's too bad. Nobody hurt, though, huh?"

Mrs. J and Alex shook their heads.

He glanced over at the door and started writing busily on his notepad. "You got a tally?"

Mrs. J led him into the kitchen, showing him the

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carnage.

"Ve fix for weeks, maybe then ve know. Look, completely busted everythink is."

"Whoa," he said, eyeing the refrigerator. "Man, you got some sick dudes here." More scribbling.

Finally, he turned to Alex.

"You live here?"

Alex nodded.

"Need to see some ID, sir."

Alex fumblingly grabbed his TDL from his wallet and handed it over. He didn't dare speak, not knowing what would come out of his mouth. The cop scribbled some more and handed it back, eyeing Sara the whole time.

Officer Monroe asked the usual questions — what was missing, did anyone see the perpetrators, etc. Everybody was ignorant. They all tromped upstairs, looked around perfunctorily, and tromped back.

Finally, he took Mrs. J aside and asked her, "Who's the chick?"

Mrs. J beamed and announced proudly, "My granddotter she is! From my country to visit."

She turned to Sara and said something unintelligible to which Sara replied in kind.

"She thinks so handsome you are beink!"

The cop laughed. "Tell her I think she must be a princess back home."

He continued, "You know, you oughtened let her

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wander around out here all by herself. You need to keep an eye on this sweet thing, y'hear?"

"Ah, like her big brother you are soundink. Ve take good care of her, don't you vorry!"

He handed his clipboard to her. "OK, I'm done. Sign."

She meticulously autographed the form.

"You know where to get your copy, right?" he asked.

"Sure, sure. Thanks! Such a sweet man you are beink. If only younger I vas! Such a kiss I would give you! Good-bye." She waved him down the sidewalk.

When he was gone, she parlayed with the Mexicans briefly, pointing upstairs, then turned to Alex and Sara.

"Mrs. Jachimczyk, I..." Alex began, but she cut him off.

"Shut up," she growled, "Come vith me."

She plowed through the door and turned down the sidewalk between the apartment units toward the front of the complex where her office was. Alex scurried in her wake with Sara close behind.

While Alex tried to figure out what Mrs. J had in mind, Sara drank in the new world she was seeing with unabashed rapture. It was her first morning under the new sun, and it was *beautiful*...!

Clouds, puffy and white, drifted lazily in the hot sky. Singing birds and buzzing insects flew busily around. The grass was full of tiny life, exuding new, fresh smells,

complex and rich. There were thick, fragrant bushes and waving trees, with people moving about — and color, sound and life everywhere she looked. It filled her with wonder and excitement. How glorious!

Her own sense of being alive leaped within her, blossoming and spreading into every corner of her body. She couldn't take in enough during the short walk to the office.

Inside, Mrs. J curtly told the receptionist, "Open 'B' for Rudy and Jesus. Drive ze cart over to 1207. No calls." She led them through the back into her private unit.

Her apartment was unexpectedly spacious and elegant. There were real hardwood floors with fine Persian rugs scattered about. The furnishings were expensive and tasteful, with what looked like original artwork on the walls. There were a lot of bookshelves, filled to capacity with serious-looking books in several languages. Alex raised his eyebrows and gave an appreciative whistle. He hadn't realized that being a slumlord could be so profitable.

Mrs. J motioned them into a couple of overstuffed chairs. Without preamble, she began, "You are thinkink maybe I save your ass, hah?"

Alex blinked a couple of times, "I'm really grate..."

She cut him off, "Vhy you think I save your ass? 'Cause you beink so clever? You try pullink fast one on stupid old foreign lady. 'The state vill have her'," she mimicked. "Hah!"

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Alex could only stare at her, his mouth hanging open.

"Four days ago, I see you leavink for road trip, same as last two years. Amarillo, right? Takink you three days. Vhen you go, ve always vatch out your apartment for you. You never notice. First thing, Rudy go in, change AC filter, pour Drano in drains, sprayink bug stuff.

"All of sudden, comes big storm — rain, hail, lightnink, wind, whoosh! Drivink ev'rybody inside. Then gone like that." She snapped her fingers.

"In evenink, Rudy tell me 1207 windows wet, I tell him turn off AC, he say he makink sure thermostat vas beink off. Vhen he check, compressor not runnink. Then Jesus tell me valls vet in 1206, 1208, 1215, all next to you. Big mystery! I decide, stay out! Ve vatch, ve vait. Who knows vhere it goink?

"You comink back lookink like hell, same as always. Pretty soon, windows OK, compressor start. Ve hear tools runnink, lots of vacuum cleanink. You stay inside, not even get paper next morning. Later, such a clangink and bangink, then big flash like maybe bomb explode, but no noise. Smoke alarm goink off later, ve almost rush in, but siren stopink vhen you takink battery out. Tsk, tsk, tsk.

"In morning, vater comink under valls in 1215. Now I decide ve go in, get ev'rybody up, get ready. Vait for shift change at precinct, not takink chances.

"So I go in, see such a mess! But I know you not be doink all zis. I am thinkink maybe you wouldn't, hah?"

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Alex, mesmerized, could only nod his head weakly. Sara thought this was a great story and was paying rapt attention.

"I see crowbar bent like pretzel. I see fridge on table. I see big burn on vall and skillet vith holes. I see bites in things nobody bites. Then I see your books, like a child would mark them. Not you. You would no more do such a thing than I would, hah?" She gazed around at her own precious books for a moment.

"Then I see her comink down ze stairs, all soapy. No marks, no cuts, no bruises, no needles, healthy, lookink like Barbie doll, not like refugee, not like runaway. I see how you are lookink. I think maybe I callink policeman, see how you lookink then. Besides, I am needink report for insurance. Cop too dumb to see anything, not to vorry, as long as I show him door vas break into.

"So I comink back — sure enough, you beink scared, ready to be runnink away, leavink ev'rything you have, your whole life, vith girl who bend crowbars and not beink smart enough to be usink towel.

"Then I gettink big surprise! Girl speak Russian! And Czech, Polish, Greek, German and Hebrew. But havink mind of child."

She turned to Sara, "Vhat is your name, child?"

"My name is Sara Corel. I'm very pleased to meet you. You may call me Sara." She was very polite and proper.

"Pleased I am to be meetink you. I am Ekaterina

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Jachimczyk. Ev'rybody callink me Mrs. J, but you be callink me Banggo."

She glowered at Alex, "Means 'grandmother' vhere I am comink from." She somehow made it clear the name was not for him to use. Ever.

Switching to what turned out to be a whole series of Slavic-sounding languages, Mrs. J and Sara carried on a lengthy conversation while Alex looked on uncomprehendingly. Bewilderment seemed to be a permanent condition of his lately. He had suffered through more life-changing revelations in the past two days than in his whole previous life. There might not be an end to it all in the foreseeable future.

Finally, Mrs. J turned back to him.

"So. She is foundlink child left on doorstep. She think you her father are. So many times I am thinkink maybe meetink someone who vas born yesterday, now findink someone who is. Good joke, hah?"

Nobody laughed.

"Vhere comes her from? Good question, no answer, hah?"

Alex cleared his throat, "Well, I've given it a lot of thought, but there isn't really much to go on besides the fact that she is a very unusual young lady." He briefly explained Sara's metamorphosis from iceberg to awakening, including the highlights of his testing.

Mrs. J nodded her head knowingly through his recitation, glancing frequently at Sara as if confirming his

story. Sara seemed fascinated, paying rapt attention to every word.

Alex finally concluded, "I think it's obvious that she isn't from anywhere on our planet, Mrs. J. Wherever she's from, however she got here, whoever sent her isn't telling. The only thing she had with her were the clothes on her back."

"Clothes? What clothes?" Mrs. J demanded.

Oops, thought Alex. "Oh, yeah, I forgot about that part."

How was he going to explain the costume? He doubted very much that Mrs. J read many comic books.

"Sara was wearing a, uh, kind of... A special outfit, I guess you could call it. I had just finished washing it when you rang the doorbell. As you can imagine, it was kinda..."

"Where is, now?" Her eyes narrowed ominously, as if he were holding out on her. Alex wondered if she used to torture confessions out of enemies-of-the-state in the 'old country'.

"Brown suitcase by the door."

Mrs. J went to the door to her outer office and yelled out commands in Spanish. Alex had a sudden image of a small army of Mexicans in battle fatigues scurrying around the apartment complex, enforcing discipline in Madame Jachimczyk's personal police state. In less time than he would have believed possible, she was opening the suitcase.

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She pulled out the costume and looked at the emblem thoughtfully for a minute, then carefully laid it out on another chair next to her front window. She went behind her desk, pulled open a drawer and brought out a deadly-looking pistol. Without any explanation or warning, she calmly fired several shots in rapid succession directly at the golden 'S'. The material leaped and writhed from the impacts, but was obviously undamaged. Still-smoking bullets spun around on the floor in front of the chair, making a clatter.

Mrs. J noted Sara's reaction carefully. The girl watched the whole episode with delight, neither flinching at the loud reports, nor showing the slightest sign of fear, blue eyes taking in everything unblinkingly. Unlike the horrified Alex, hands over his ears and probably needing a change of underwear.

Nobody rushed in the door from the outer office. Mrs. J evidently had absolutely no concern that anyone would. She then very deliberately pointed the gun at Sara's chest, exactly where the symbol of her costume would be located, and slowly squeezed the trigger again.

Much to Alex's surprise, he found himself flying out of his chair faster than he would have believed possible, throwing himself on top of the unmoving Sara as the gun went off. It was pure instinct, and proved beyond a shadow of a doubt the depth of his commitment to his child.

His child.

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Not an alien being from some unknown planet. Not a transitory infatuation with a compellingly beautiful abandoned girl. Not merely compassion, not service to some duty, but the unreasoning act of courage necessary in that instant to shield his child from danger.

The shot rang out. Alex flinched. Realizing that he had not been hit, he quickly spun around off of Sara to confront Mrs. J. She was already returning the spent weapon to her drawer, apparently unconcerned.

"Show him bullet, Sara, before he is jumpink over desk."

Uncertainly, he turned around to look at Sara, who was smiling broadly, holding the hot projectile in the palm of her hand like an offering.

As he slowly succumbed to adrenaline shock, he heard Mrs. J telling him, "Congratulations on lovely new-born daughter. Is miracle, virgin birth, hah?"

Chapter Six: School

Alex wanted to scream, "ARE YOU FUCKING CRAZY? WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU? JESUS H. CHRIST, YOU CAN'T JUST GO AROUND SHOOTING PEOPLE!"

But his body refused to cooperate. He was trembling uncontrollably and sweating, he seemed to be looking down a long tube that kept getting narrower and narrower, there was a roaring buzz in his head that drowned out everything else, and he felt himself spinning, spinning, spinning...

Sara and Mrs. J watched him slump to the floor, retching weakly. Sara didn't know what to do and looked helplessly at the older woman.

"Is shock. Sometimes people gettink shot at go all vobbly." She shrugged, "Don't know vhy. Ve take good care of him, be OK in little bit. You pick him up, come vith me." She stuffed the costume back into the brown suitcase and headed for the front door.

Sara kneeled down beside the semi-conscious Alex, reached carefully under him with both arms, and slowly, tenderly, effortlessly lifted him up. She followed Mrs. J out of her 'A' unit apartment to the neighboring 'B' unit.

"Your apartment no good," she said to Alex's dangling head. "Stayink here from now on. I am always keepink this one ready for visitink heads of state. Hah!"

It was the twin of Mrs. J's, lavishly furnished and

scrupulously clean. In contrast to its unremarkable exterior, the interior exuded an Old World charm in its décor that would be incongruous in a city like Houston, where tastes ran to the gaudy. No one driving busily by on Blalock would ever suspect there was this oasis of civility in an otherwise decaying neighborhood of apartment blocks, crackerbox working-class houses, strip centers and the ubiquitous 7-11's on every corner. Alex had passed it every day on his way in and out of the complex without ever noticing anything unusual.

Mrs. J led Sara up the stairs, still cradling Alex in her arms, where she directed the girl to lay him down on the big, ornate four-poster bed in the master bedroom. Rudy and Jesus were already there, putting Alex's things from his old apartment in the closet. At Mrs. J's direction, Sara propped his legs up on a couple of down pillows, covered him snugly and bathed his forehead with a cool washcloth. Mrs. J disappeared down the stairs and soon the sound of clattering from the kitchen began, followed by strong, ethnic aromas.

Sara was sitting next to Alex on the edge of the bed, watching him concernedly, when Mrs. J returned with a steaming bowl of something thick and unidentifiable. It was strange and good — after a few tentative mouthfuls — and Alex finished it off gratefully, sharing it with Sara. He felt better almost immediately.

Finally, he could stand it no longer. "Mrs. Jachimczyk, I hate to sound ungrateful and all, and please

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don't take this personally, but... Are you insane, or what? I can't believe what you just did. You could have killed somebody. How could you possibly know that Sara would... That she would..."

Things had happened so fast, he still hadn't really sorted them out. He thought Mrs. J was trying to kill Sara and shot at him instead when he got in the way. But then Sara...

He shook his still throbbing head.

"Why so suprized? You don't know what is in front of own eyes?" She looked mildly exasperated.

"You testink her all day, vhat you think, anyvay? Vhen I see costume, I make test, too. Pretty damn quick — boom, boom, boom. Vhen I pointink gun at her, I not need to be testink *her* anymore. Testink *you*. You showink true feelinks, no bullshit. You surprizink me! Big hero, hah!"

"But... You shot at me on purpose? My God! You couldn't possibly have known Sara could..." What, reach around him and grab a bullet out of the air?

"Not to vorry. Am good shot. Aim for arm, so maybe I hit you, hurt like hell, you don't play guitar so good for little vhole."

"Vas speeding bullet," Mrs. J shrugged. "Sara faster than. You don't be readink comics? Vhat you think means big 'S'?"

Alex realized that Mrs. J's faith in Sara was greater than his. He was analytical, she was instinctual. He tested

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every hypothesis, she simply chose the truth. It started to dawn on Alex that Mrs. J was not necessarily a homicidal lunatic after all. Just what the hell was she?

"You restink for little while. Then get cleaned up. Got big date tonight. I am makink feast for you, me, Sara, couple friends, and great big lawyer ladyfriend you been seeink. She happy to see you don't be goink to jail, hah?"

Alex was getting used to being startled. "You tapped my phone, didn't you? Jesus, what else is going on around here?"

"No need to be tappink phone. I see her comink in vith you sometimes, stayink long enough for nice dinner you be cookink. You only have time, makink one phone call. Who else you be callink? Musician's union? Hah!"

So Mrs. J noticed who came and went in her little domain. She evidently noticed a lot. Her and her little army.

"How would you know she was a lawyer?" he asked suspiciously.

Mrs. J tapped the side of her head and winked.

"Maybe I don't be tellink you ev'rythink." She motioned to Sara, who obediently followed her out of the bedroom.

"Dinner at six, my place. Got lots to talk about." The front door closed and Alex was alone.

At six, a cleaned-up and refreshed Alex walked into Mrs. J's front door. Sara was sitting on the floor in front of three old men in a semicircle of throne-like chairs who

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looked like 'doktors' from a Frankenstein movie, chattering away happily in several languages. They appeared to be delighted with her childish exuberance and vied with each other to capture her attention.

She had new clothes, which bore the unmistakeable evidence of an afternoon's hard play. In another corner of the living room, Mrs. J seemed to be arguing heatedly with Dinah Prinze. Everyone ignored Alex.

He wondered how Mrs. J had arranged for Dinah to be here, and why. Dinah — unusually tall of stature, weight-room fit, vast, round bosoms and midnight hair spilling in profuse, dense ringlets about her shoulders. Impressive, but not necessarily attractive. She had a powerful, intense look about her which, combined with her intimidating size and physique, was more than slightly disturbing.

As Alex understood it, she was a lawyer in the same way that a Rottweiler was a dog, and practically a celebrity because of it. He could imagine her stalking a courtroom, relentlessly grinding down her opponents with no mercy, tying them up in rhetorical knots and wringing the truth from evildoers. But her attention to her career had stunted her social development somewhat. She was ill-at-ease in groups of people, lacking in grace and spectacularly out of place. She was a date from Hell.

Alex had met her at a gig, Edgar Lake's Big Band playing at Birraporetti's on South Gray, just outside posh River Oaks. Somebody in the band knew somebody else

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at her table and dragged him over, introducing him as 'Brainiac'. They spent two breaks sitting across from each other without saying anything, and while he was packing up his gear, she awkwardly came over and handed him her card.

"Call me," she managed to rasp, and fled.

He called her. They did the usual things — seafood at Landry's, Mexican at Pappasito's, ribs at Tony Roma's. They went to the Pasadena Strawberry Festival and put a sizeable dent in the World's Largest Strawberry Shortcake, rode a helicopter and several cheesy carnival rides between watching Mud Volleyball bouts and an alligator wrestler. They laughed. Eventually, they talked.

Her expensive apartment was a far cry from his, but it was dominated by her extremely fluffy cats. His allergy-sensitive eyes swelled shut in no time. So she came to his place, where he prepared elaborate meals of Cornish game hens stuffed with wild rice, spaghetti made with jalapeño wine he'd made himself, real southern-fried chicken with buttery mashed potatoes covered with pan gravy.

She never spent the night. It just didn't happen. He was still hurting from a failed marriage, and she didn't know what to do to get things started — though occasionally she tried clumsily to get his attention. For his part, he was potentially terrified of the possible consequences of acting on any impulses he might have that she might not appreciate — though he certainly

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noticed her awkward attempts at being provocative. They were both so accomplished at being losers that there were never any clear signals between them, try as they might. So they just talked, more at ease with each other every time — and damned grateful for the company. It was both sad and oddly satisfying.

He went over to the two women. Mrs. J turned to Alex and mock-jovially exclaimed, "Havink nice talk vith your sweet Dinah! She is vonderful voman! Make you happy in old age. Hah!"

Dinah turned to Alex, eyes flashing, anger evident, "Do you know what these people are? Do you have the slightest idea?"

Alex shook his head warily. It looked like his day of surprises would never end.

"They're Communists! The whole complex is full of them. They left their countries at the end of the Cold War and came over here with forged papers, phony passports. This whole place is like a refugee camp for Party bosses."

Alex's eyebrows raised thoughtfully, "Oh, yeah. I guess that would explain all the old guys with bad suits in the rec hall every Wednesday." He was half-sarcastic and she knew it.

"I'm serious, Alex. I've known about these people for months, now."

"You have?" said Alex suspiciously.

Dinah suddenly looked like she'd let a very large cat out of a very small bag.

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"You know who is Dinah's boss?" asked Mrs. J.

Not taking his eyes off of Dinah, he said, "Yeah. She works for some Manhattan law firm. Perry something-or-other."

"She from Perry, Dyess, Eyelandt. Partners dead now, owned by Bruce Wayans. She sent here, do his dirty work."

"You mean, the guy that's called the Black Knight?"
At least by editorial cartoonists.

"Vants to be first black president, US of A. Filthy rich. Makink big name and big money goink after big criminals, big biznesses, nasty guys. Vith army of lawyers. Like Dinah."

"Does this mean," started Alex slowly, "You don't just love me for my boyish charm and rugged good looks? You were stalking your quarry?" He felt like one big fool.

"No, Alex," she tried to explain, "We started going together before I knew about this. Really. I saw some suspicious stuff and started checking around, doing some research. It was all just a coincidence."

"Uh-huh." He was unconvinced.

"She is beink right. Can't keep secret long in free country. Her job is beink snoop." Mrs. J went on, "Now she gettink big story for boss. 'Black Knight expose Commies'. Much hoo-hah. Maybe boss give her big raise."

"He doesn't know," Dinah said, looking at the floor.
That got Mrs. J's attention. "Not know? Vhat you

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vaitink for?"

Dinah looked at the ceiling, "I'm here in Houston to go after a chemical plant in Deer Park that we believe is actually owned by the Chinese government and ships certain chemicals to Iraq. This was my own project. I thought I'd just learn what I could."

"So you try to sneak in Mexican to vork here. Vith my Cubans. Hah!"

"Cubans?" said Alex.

"Cubans!" echoed Dinah.

"Cubans," Mrs. J answered gleefully. "Hah! I know vhat you up to, I snoop on *you*! So vhy you not be tellink boss? Maybe you vorry about Alex?"

"Well, you nearly shot him," she flashed back. "These people are dangerous, Alex. They're all killers, as far as I'm concerned. Thugs who could be, who *should* be extradited back to their old countries for trial."

Alex obviously looked surprised, so Mrs. J explained, "Showink her ev'rytink — apartment, big 'S', bullets. Tell whole story."

Dinah nodded, "Some story."

She turned to Alex and said, "So now I know what you were holding out on me," glancing at Sara. She looked like she considered themselves even.

"Now I tellink *you* rest of story," began Mrs. J.

"Vhen I vas gorkl, lookink like Sara, vas Great Patriotic Var against Hitler. Not good times, my village. Ev'rybody gettink shot, ev'rythink burnink down, no food,

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no fuel, plenty snow, plenty Germans. But I survive. Whatever it takink, I survive. Sometimes doink things you not vant to know about.

"So I join Party. Party savink my life, savink whole country. I am beink good Party vorker, vorkink vherever they be sendink me. Vorkink in Moscow, vorkink in Gulag, vorkink in Prague, Warsaw, Sarajevo. Sent to Cuba, Vietnam, Angola. Join Party, see vorld. Hah!

"Ve in big var vith Vest, Amerika, NATO. Cold Var you call it. Ve take very serious. Makink vorld safe for communism. But ve losink var. Party is no more, Soviet Union is no more. Big, fat drunk takink over Kremlin, makink 'democracy'. Bah!

"Whole time I vas in Party, I am gettink to know people I am meetink all over vorld. Good people. Patriots. Fallink on grenade for motherland. Now havink nothink. Always remember.

"So I come to Amerika. Getting job vorking as home nurse, babysittink dyink rich peoples, mostly old refugees — like me. One thing leadink to another, soon marry old Czech from Rosenberg who vas dropink dead real soon. Leavink lots of money.

"So I am buyink magnificent apartments, like have to wait ten years for in Moscow! Sendink for friends, they sendink for friends. Apparatchiks, nomenclatura, intellectuals, academics, KGB, Army. Ve even havink Rabbi and doktor! All good people, honest, keepink mouths shut. Now they ready to be fallink on grenade for

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Amerika. Havink 350 luxury apartments full with my people. Big, happy family — only family ve havink. Livink on Americanski Socialist Security. Playink Bingo ev'ry Wednesday. Vaitink to die.

"So vhat ve got here? Smartest people from Eastern Bloc. Experts, experienced in ev'ry field. Theoreticians, scientists, philosophers, engineers, military, spies. Like maybe greatest University in Eastern Europe. Maybe in world. If great big lawyer lady be findink out about us, maybe Sara's people, too."

They all looked at Sara, playing happily with the three 'professors'.

"They pickink good father for child — maybe good mother, too." She looked at Dinah, who glared back. "So maybe they also pickink good school."

Dinner was served by a Mexican — er, Cuban — woman with hard, no-nonsense eyes. It was mostly foreign dishes Alex had never had before, but decided he wanted to try again. The conversation was earnest and (as a courtesy to Alex and Dinah) mostly in English, as Mrs. J and the three academic gentlemen mapped out a scheme to provide Sara with the finest education money *couldn't* buy.

Sara mostly played with her peas, rolling them around the table by zapping them with short, intense beams from her eyes that caused tiny explosions on the sides of the ones she was aiming at. Though she was the

subject of their plans, everybody basically ignored her.

Dinah didn't contribute much to the conversation, retreating into some inner world for comfort, trying to figure out what to make of everything. Her natural inclinations were to expose this pack of looney Commies, like some crusading warrior from the Cold War. As if anyone really cared about communists under every bed anymore. Still, it was a plot, a conspiracy. They had their hands on something possibly truly momentous in Sara, and she didn't trust them. And she still hadn't come fully to terms with Sara and all she stood for. She was not quite as enamored of the little brat as the rest of them were.

Alex, for his part, listened intently, sometimes making suggestions the others actually paid attention to. He wondered aloud what his role in bringing up Sara would be.

"You beink father, take to ball game and movie, bounce on knee," Mrs. J told him. "Takink her places, showink her things. Our job, teachink her good. Your job, teachink her *beink* good.

"Sara is empty vessel. Don't know vhy, but she comink to us as child. But she beink plenty smart, learn fast. Ivanovich, here, teach her countink and number theory in half-hour. Already, she figure out 'pi' to million decimals. Easy for her. Like she big, pretty computer vith person inside."

Alex nodded. Just as he'd thought.

"Ve teachink her things she needink to be knowink.

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'Bout beautiful planet ve livink on, vhat makink things vork, culture, art, music, history..."

"Indoctrination," muttered Dinah.

Mrs. J looked exasperated, "Vhat more you vant? Ve lose var! You vin! Is no more ideology for us. No Party line. Vhat you tink ve doink, turnink Sara into killer robot, conquer vorld?"

"The thought occurs to me," said Dinah dryly.

"Bah. Ve soon beink all dead. No one here havink family. Maybe ve doink sometink good on vay to better vorld. Sara growink up in three, maybe four years. Prob'ly all the time ve got left."

"Sara came to America," Dinah said emphatically.

"We are certainly capable of providing her with an American education."

"Sure, you takink her to school, she fittink right in," said Mrs. J sarcastically. "Vhat grade you thinkink? She like dumb Einstein. Puttink vith kindergarten, she tearink up monkey bars. Puttink vith high schoolers, she tearink up football team. Evrybody thinkink she is freak."

"Well, there's something else right here in Houston that should be able to deal with her, a lot better than a bunch of Evil Empire has-beens. NASA," Dinah declared triumphantly.

That actually shut Mrs. J up for a while.

Dinah continued, "They've got the finest facilities for scientific investigation imaginable. Labs, workshops, testing, analysis. The place is crawling with highly

trained, professional researchers. Even their janitors have PhD's. If there was one place in the world that was actually designed to accommodate an extraterrestrial, it would be NASA."

"Sure, you be sendink letter to Director, tellink him you gots ET, come pick her up. Maybe somebody get big laff before throwink in trash. Hah!"

"It sounds to me, Dinah" said Alex, "that you're maybe more interested in someone taking her apart than you are in her."

"She is beink like evil stepmother."

"I am not anyone's stepmother. *You*," she said to Alex, "are not her father. And Mrs. Jachimczek is *certainly* not her grandmother. Sara is a thing. A *thing*! Some goddamned alien bug-eyed monster made up to look all sweet and innocent. None of you has even the slightest idea what she's doing here. *She* doesn't even know what she's doing here. Or so she says. How do we know she's telling the truth? Even if she is, God knows what kind of program is stashed away somewhere deep in her memory banks, ready to spring out at us when we least expect it. I say get rid of it. Turn it over to NASA and move the hell away."

Sara had been absent-mindedly wrapping the silverware around her finger through this tirade. She looked like she was going to cry. Alex reached over and cradled her head against his chest.

"You may be right," he finally said. Everybody

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looked down at the table. "The thing is, we don't really know anything. Compared to whoever sent her here, we're all just a bunch of yammering savages. We all have to do what we think is right based on what we *do* know. I know that, to me, Sara is very real, very alive. I care for her. I know it's my responsibility to see to it that she has the best chance she can get to develop her full potential. I intend to do that. And I intend to be a part of her life as long as I can.

"Outside of we few here, nobody really knows about her. I think that's good, since she's not ready to face our world right now. She needs time and attention, room to grow, a family who loves her.

"Sooner or later, she'll be ready to come out. We can't keep her a secret for long. Maybe we shouldn't even try. Until then, I think we should do whatever we can to nourish her and teach her. I think it's my decision to make, and that's the way it's going to be."

Dinah threw herself back in her chair in disgust.

"That's why we need you," he told Dinah, looking directly into her eyes. "You know everything, and anytime you want to, you can blow the whistle and your Black Knight will be all over us in no time. Right?"

Dinah nodded, slowly.

"So watch over us. Be our conscience. If this little experiment goes astray, turn us in. You can easily arrange to have whatever files you want turned over in case there's any monkey business. I agree with you that — when Sara

is ready — we should probably contact NASA. But as a person, not as a lab rat.

"You told me that you can tell when people are telling you the truth. I want you to look at all of us here and tell me if anyone is holding anything back."

Dinah was silent for a long while, searching the faces at the table one by one until she got to Sara. They stared at each other for what seemed like ages, Dinah suspicious and probing, Sara wide-eyed and brave. Finally, Dinah slumped forward on the table, head between her hands.

"Oh, I don't know what to think. How can I tell what a machine is thinking, or if it's even thinking at all?"

"Machine, animal, what's difrence?" Mrs. J said softly, "Who cares, human beink made in womb or made in factory. Your problem is, you afraid to be findink human beink in your own heart."

Dinah looked up in tears, "What do you know about my heart? What do you know about my feelings? I feel like more of a monster than she is."

Sara slipped softly out of Alex's arms and padded around the table to Dinah, who eyed her warily, screeching her chair around on the hardwood floor to confront her.

"Miss Dinah," she said in her little girl voice, "I don't know what I am. I don't know where I came from and I don't — really, I don't — know why I'm here or who sent me. I can't help any of that. But, I'm not a monster. And you're not a monster, either."

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The little tableau in the darkening room seemed frozen in time — squat, dour Mrs. J at the head of the table, Alex at her right hand next to Sara's empty seat, Sara standing imploringly in front of the seated Dinah and the wise men from the Eastern Bloc looking on like figures in a Rembrandt painting.

Until finally, in a gesture previously unthinkable to the professional lawyer that Dinah had devoted her life to becoming, she reached out to take Sara in her arms.

Chapter Seven: Growing Up

Sara was certainly a handful. Make that a bucketful. Several buckets, actually. Oh, hell, make up your own outlandish exaggeration — it won't come close enough. Imagine a really big two-year-old driven by an insatiable curiosity and zest for life that never runs out of steam and can run off with, disassemble and partially consume a Buick while you're tying your shoes.

Not that she was intentionally mischievous. She always minded really well and never meant to cause any problems. It's just that she was so much quicker to get into trouble than anybody else was to foresee potential disaster.

If a ball rolled under the porch, she'd just pick up the porch to get at it. She made a playhouse out of railroad ties brought in for landscaping, casually dragging the whole bundle across the lawn behind the rec room, leaving deep furrows in her wake. The forlorn little playground in one corner of the complex was transformed into a savage wasteland of twisted metal one afternoon while her keepers were distracted.

Or, she'd lie at the bottom of the pool for a couple of hours, just watching the play of light the little waves made — until some other child's mother saw her 'drowning' and became hysterical. Maybe she'd casually pick up a tree to look at the neat little bugs in the roots. And then there was the flying...

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Since she didn't seem to need much sleep, she required a twenty-four hour watch. In teams. With constant two-way radio communications. The poor, overworked Cubans were beginning to think Castro wasn't so bad after all. Privately, they had a quaint name for her in Spanish that didn't translate very well.

Gradually, boundaries were laid out and rules were made. Don't leave the complex. Stay on the ground. Don't pick up anything bigger than you are. Try not to bend, break or vaporize anything. Don't eat anything that wasn't served on a plate. Don't eat the plate.

There were not many children in the apartments, since nearly half of them were filled with Mrs. J's people and she was not exactly 'family friendly'. Houston didn't allow housing discrimination against families with kids, but Mrs. J had a way of causing most families to look elsewhere, once she had enough of them on hand to keep up appearances. Sara was more than a little out of place playing with the younger ones that were closer to her mental age, but Alex was grateful that she had at least *some* interaction with other children. Their parents paid no attention to whatever outlandish stories their kids 'made up' about Sara. He did his best to keep her away from the older kids who might ask too many questions.

As soon as Alex thought it was safe, he took Sara out in the piney woods north of town to a big clearing away from prying eyes where she could practice her flying. At first, he tied a string to her and guided her around like a

Toomie Starks

kite, worried that she could easily dart off and never find her way back. They both soon gained confidence in her navigational skills and abilities. He let her go higher and higher, as long as she stayed right above the clearing and he could still see her with binoculars.

She took to flight naturally. The air was her element and she claimed it with gusto. She could just become weightless, hair flowing around her head like an enormous golden halo, drifting with the breeze, pushing off with the tips of her toes and fingers from rocks and trees. Or she could zoom like a fighter plane, arms outstretched as she rolled and looped, making engine noises he could hear as she strafed him.

Her 'sense' (whatever it was) ranged far around her, enabling her to dart through the tangled maze of tree trunks and branches without looking, chasing startled birds with squeals of delight. It enabled her to avoid, for the most part, a lot of messy bug splats, though mosquitoes and smaller critters inevitably adorned her face like a radiator grill. Houston is good to bugs — that's why they all move here.

Aerodynamics was irrelevant to her. Any attitude would do — upside down, backwards, sideways, full front, headfirst, limbs flailing, pike position — but she seemed to prefer the natural posture of a skydiver, except on those few occasions when he allowed her to wear her costume.

He'd wondered why any self-respecting highly-

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advanced alien designer would include a silly cape as part of her ensemble — something to trip over and get in her way. But when he saw it swirling around her, he had to admit it looked *wonderful*, lending flair and drama to an otherwise girlie outfit — providing a backdrop, setting the stage, emphasizing her fluid motions, teasing the imagination, stirring the soul and providing a billowing canvas upon which the eye could behold the loveliest of visions.

At rest, it could be draped completely around her body, like an instant formal gown suitable for a diplomatic reception. In flight, it waved and fluttered majestically when in human sight close to the Earth, seeming to have a mind of its own — its motions independent of actual wind conditions or air speeds — with a predilection for that dramatic flowing look beloved of illustrators, a proud flag proclaiming her identity. At high speed, it clung tightly to her body, shrouding her like the skin of a supersonic missile.

He decided that mere mortals could not wear a cape without looking and feeling silly — but Sara was a special being whose soaring confidence bore her uniqueness with natural dignity and unassuming pride. Her cape never got in *her* way. For Sara, it was... Well, it was *perfect*.

They concocted several take-off styles. There was the basic 'Up, Up and Away!' — fist held high, leaping straight into the sky. And the 'Run, Skip and Jump' like George Reeves used to do in the old TV series, only Sara

didn't fall into a mattress just off-screen. The 'Crouch-Jump' looked natural, but the 'Launch Pad' — simply rising into the air like a Space Shuttle — was boring.

Landings required a little more thought. 'Feet First' in a skirt was definitely unladylike, and the cape always wanted to flow the wrong way, piling up against her hair. The 'Swoop' was graceful, but required a lot of runway, skimming low to the ground then pulling up to stall out and stop, touching down lightly — feet spread, hands on hips — for a stylish finish. The most spectacular — and most heart-stopping — was the 'Dive and Flip' — rocketing straight down to her landing point headfirst at high speed and then tucking into a tight half-somersault at the last instant to land on her feet, collapsing into a shock absorbing half-crouch and then popping up, arms wide, like a gymnast sticking a perfect landing off the parallel bars. Her timing had to be impeccable.

A few tries (and a few craters) later, it was.

After passing her basic competency exam and being awarded an elaborate 'Flight Certificate' (First Class), Alex took some maps, satellite photo printouts of the Houston area and a couple of the Cubans' military two-ways to the clearing for navigational exercises.

"OK, can you see the airport? Over." Alex figured Sara was about two thousand feet directly above him, hanging stationary, posing a puzzle, no doubt, to some air traffic controller somewhere. He could barely see her.

"Yeah. Whoa! There's a lot of planes there! Over."

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"Now, look right about fifteen degrees and about ten miles past and you should see the blimp hangar. Over."

"Easy. Over."

"That's I-45 running in front of it, just like I showed you on the map. Over."

"Uh-huh. Over."

"Follow it to the left until you see the green-gabled roof of the Marriott, like I pointed out on the way up here, with Sharpstown Mall next to it. That's Beltway 8. Over."

"I got it. Over."

"Now, stay on I-45 'till you get to the next big freeway intersection. Over."

"I know! That's Loop 610. Over."

"Follow it to the right. See where it splits off into 290 and turns to the left? Over."

"There's some buildings in the way from this angle, but I see it. Over."

"It should head south toward the Galleria and the big building with the searchlight on top. Over."

"I don't see the searchlight. Over."

"Not during the day. You saw it the other night. Over."

"I knew that. Over."

"You see the intersection with I-10? Over."

"I think so. Uh, Memorial Park on the left — nothing but trees, right? Ooh — there's a polo game, with lots of horses. Over."

"You got it. Just follow it to the right. Before you see

Beltway 8 again, there's our apartments. Over."

"There's too many trees. And billboards. Maybe if I was higher... Oh! Wait! I can see it! I can see it! Over."

"You sure? Over." Alex figured she was looking through nearly twenty-five miles of murky Houston mid-afternoon haze with the lowering sun in her face.

"Yeah! There's the Fiesta Mart, right next door. And there's Macdonald's. And the rec room! Ooh, I want to go right there and tell Banggo! I'll be right back!"

Alex wasn't fast enough. "That's a negative on your request. Over."

No response.

"Sara. Over."

Nothing but static.

"SARA!" As if shouting would do any good.

Sighing, he keyed his cell phone. "If you happen to see Sara anytime real soon, would you call me back?" he told Mrs. J. "And tell her to stay there 'till I get home."

The phone rang about a minute later.

Sara was grounded for a week.

Sara's education got off to a slow start. Alex wasn't in a big hurry, since he really wanted her to get a little further along in her accelerated childhood before having to buckle down. Anyway, Dinah wasn't about to let anyone even close to Sara without being subjected to the most exhaustive background check and interview she could manage. Having made the commitment, she threw

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herself into the project with her usual fanatical zeal, spending almost every evening at the complex. She had a complete little office cubicle delivered to the 'B' unit, with a desk, computer, file cabinet and expensive leather swivel chair. It was strictly off limits to everyone, especially — she glared at Alex — Mrs. J.

When the first three tutors passed her scrutiny, they made individual recommendations one at a time until they thought they had a good mix of talent, eventually settling on a faculty of twelve. Not a bad student-teacher ratio. As it turned out, Sara nearly had them outnumbered.

Dinah had had little time for Alex during this period. Not that she seemed angry, just absorbed by her job. Since she was still working full time at her day gig — presumably at the same level of intensity — he tried to be sympathetic. But the only person she tolerated distracting her was Sara. Dinah would always take time out to talk to her, though there seemed to be an inordinate amount of discussion about moral principles, patriotism, duty-honor-country. Alex thought she might be laying it on a little thick, but Sara seemed to like it. It was kinda like exercising a first-strike capability, an anti-indoctrination indoctrination. Dinah was always on the lookout for signs that some wily ex-KGB operative might slip in a stray bit of propaganda.

During a lull one evening, Alex asked her what her Internet searches had turned up on their co-conspirators.

Dinah leaned back in her office chair and looked at

the ceiling for a while. "Not really a damn thing." She sounded so disappointed.

"What, no fugitives from the hangman's noose?" he asked, trying to make it sound lighthearted. "No former prison guards or genocidists? From the way you were carrying on, I thought maybe you were thinking something like the end of the Third Reich, when all those Nazis hopped the next submarine to Argentina, clutching bags of looted art treasures and gold." He glanced around at Mrs. J's expensive accoutrements.

She ignored his tone. "No, pretty much like Mrs. J said. Yeah, nearly all of them were card-carrying Party members, but none of them were particularly distinguishable politically. Mainly minor functionaries, bureaucrats, technicians, teachers and artists."

"I thought Mrs. J mentioned KGB and army."

"Well, Popov..." (one of the tutors — Alex's eyebrows went up at this bit of news) "...was KGB alright. Technical analyst. Evaluated photos, electronic data, satellite imagery, all kinds of things. Drudge work, mostly. Our thinking..." ('our' thinking?) "...is that he should be able to help Sara make heads or tails of all the extra sensory input she has, to sort things out.

"And the best engineer of the lot is a Red Army colonel, Gudenov. Actually, fairly distinguished. Authored a lot of scientific papers on things like load bearing, stress distribution and the like. Taught at their military academy, 'East Point'. He'll be helpful. Sara's a

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lot stronger than the stuff she can pick up. If she doesn't learn how to manage heavy loads, her strength won't be nearly as effective. That's the main reason she breaks everything.

"Pretty much the same story for all of them, so far. They were brilliant, successful people until everything fell apart. Then they were out in the snow. Russia basically stopped paying the military, closed academies and universities, laid off half the government. Pensions over there won't buy dog food.

"There were some immigration loopholes for a while that made it possible for some of these people — the lucky ones, I guess — to come to America and qualify for Social Security. Maybe not quite legally, but somehow someone at SSA approved their applications. Mrs. J and a few others like her figured this out and made some arrangements, mostly paid for by whatever these people could get selling nearly everything they had to the Russian Mafia black market for plane tickets and a stake. She got the stake in exchange for setting them up in a retirement community with their own kind in a warm climate.

"Everybody wins. Russia sheds dead weight, the Russian Mafia makes a profit, the refugees live out their lives in relative comfort, Mrs. J doesn't do too badly... Well, I'm not knocking her. I think she's got her heart in the right place. She really cares for these people and they adore her. Anyway, American taxpayers end up footing

part of the bill, but considering the clientele, I guess you could call it a brain drain. Hell, could be the State Department intervened at SSA."

Alex thought about this for a while. "If this is all on the up-and-up, why all the secrecy? I mean, that's what set *you* off."

Dinah shrugged her shoulders, "I think it might just be instinctive with them. Maybe you don't want to believe it, Alex, but these people grew up in kind of a bad place. And, yeah, someone like Wayans could make a big deal out of this, maybe pump his ratings in the south at a critical time."

That surprised Alex. "The Black Knight? Feet of clay? What brought this on? I thought he was supposed to be Mr. Wonderful, the Great Crusader."

Dinah took a deep breath. "This project I've been working on — you know, the Deer Park plant — I'm beginning to think there are some serious flaws in our case. There are Chinese nationals involved, all right, but from everything I've been able to find out about them, it looks like they're just investors who raised money from newly capitalistic Chinese citizens. The plant makes nothing but pharmaceutical feedstock. Some of it goes to Iraq eventually, but it's not good for anything more dangerous than sleeping pills."

"So. Case closed, huh?" He had a sudden disquieting thought. "Does that mean you're going back to New York?"

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"No. Actually, I'm from Galveston, originally. 'Born On Island' as they say. I've always planned to stay here afterward. That's why I took the assignment."

Alex wished he'd gotten that little bit of news sooner. He'd always assumed that she wouldn't be around long enough to try to become attached to her. Damn. Why hadn't she mentioned this earlier?

She went on, "And we're going ahead. I talked this over with Wayans' assistant, Robbins, and everything's proceeding. Unless there's something else I don't know, it looks like the reason they're not backing off is because pursuing the suit will generate a lot of favorable publicity for Wayans, win or lose. He can always blame a loss on opposition politics. In any event, it'll be a disaster for the Chinese shareholders."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"Look, Alex. I really believe in the stuff I've done. It's made a difference. We're in the middle of a cultural war in this country. Bruce Wayans made it possible to get at some people even the Feds wouldn't touch. It's a great cause..."

Alex started humming "The Battle Hymn of the Republic".

"You don't understand, Alex..."

"I'll tell you what I understand," said Alex. "No disrespect, but that guy's a phony. I can't believe smart, reasonable people fall for his line of crap. He's on TV every damned day, and every time it's pure bullshit. What

does he do, keep a couple of dozen minority kids in a box so he can have one handy every time someone turns on a camera? He runs focus groups and polls so he can tell everybody what they want to hear. He picks his causes based on interest groups he can line up behind him. I swear to God, if he can find a group of commie-bashers, he'll hang everyone here out to dry for the demographic boost."

Dinah was not used to being surprised. She had never known Alex to be the slightest bit political. She couldn't even imagine him getting so worked up. It made her feel... She didn't know. Breathless? A little...

Alex began again. "The bastard pays people like you to make high-profile headlines that invariably cost a lot of innocent people jobs so he can look good at someone else's expense. Everybody knows it, but they don't care, 'cause they approve of his *policies*. What policies? A policy for you, a policy for me, a policy in every pot."

"That's enough, Alex. Sure, he's got enemies. Powerful enemies. There are people in this country that don't want him to succeed, a vast conspiracy..."

"Well, sign me up."

She was nearly speechless. No one had ever talked to her like this before. It suddenly dawned on her that here was someone who had jumped in front of a bullet to protect somebody who didn't need protecting, someone he'd only known a couple of days. To whom he had given his unconditional love. A love she wanted for herself...

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What did she have to do to get him to notice *her*?
Wear a cape?

What was she thinking? Oh, god, she felt faint. She was getting hot and dizzy. This was ridiculous. She had to get out of there before... She didn't know what. She lurched from her chair and grabbed her bag, heading out the door without a word.

Alex called after her, "Dinah, wait..." But she was gone.

Alex was still sitting morosely on the couch when Sara came drifting in around midnight. She could tell he was sad, so she went over and gave him a big, careful hug. He patted her absently.

She said, "I thought you and Dinah were talking."

He smiled, "Well, I guess you heard everything."

"Sure, I *heard* you — I can't help that — but I wasn't listening, honest. You told me I shouldn't do that. But I can remember it if you want me to."

"No, no. It was just between her and me, and it should stay that way. I'm afraid I may have said something Dinah didn't like. We had a little argument, I guess, and I got sorta carried away. She got mad at me and went home." He sighed, "I hope she still likes me tomorrow."

"Oh, she will. I like you, and she likes me, so she has to like you."

"Well, that certainly makes sense to me," he smiled.

Toomie Starks

"Hey, who's on watch tonight?"

"Raoul and Maria. We're gonna watch some movies tonight in the rec room with Mr. Andropov."

The history tutor. He still ran on Moscow time, it seemed, only coming out at night. Well, that was convenient.

"Nothing boring, I hope." Like some dreadful Russian costume epic, *War and Peace* or whatever.

"Not tonight," she replied eagerly. "We're gonna see *The Forbidden Planet* 'cause it's got an alien robot in it, like me."

"One of my favorite movies," he said with a smile.

"And *The Wizard of Oz*," she continued, "I like stories about Wizards and Little People and stuff."

"Do they know you're over here?"

"Oops. I don't think so," she said, looking rather guilty. "I told Mr. Andropov I had to go to the bathroom." She giggled.

That was her favorite trick on newbies — she never had to relieve herself. By the time they realized they'd been had, she was out the window.

"Sara!" he said, simply shocked. But he giggled, too. "Where are they now?"

"Mr. Andropov's behind the rec room, looking in the bushes with a flashlight. Raoul's running this way."

"Go on. Put them out of their misery." He smacked her hard on the rump as she started for the door. "Shame

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on you, young lady."

She scampered out, laughing

Chapter Eight: Reconciliation

Alex was starting up the stairs to turn in when he heard the front door open again. He turned around and called out, "Sara?"

It was Dinah. She was completely covered with a very melodramatic and unseasonable trench coat. She was even wearing a hat, looking like something from a very bad spy movie. He stared at her for what seemed like minutes while she carefully locked the door behind her and planted herself in the middle of the living room, confronting him.

He tried to placate her. "I'm really sorry about what I said. I don't know why I got off on that subject."

"I don't give a damn about that," she said, her voice as low as she could make it.

Alex couldn't decide if she was trying to sound menacing or sultry. Either way, he was decidedly uncomfortable. "Do you want to sit down?"

She ignored him. "Why did you decide to go out with me?"

Uh-oh, he thought. "You asked me to call you, that night at Birraporetti's."

"Did you find me amusing?"

He really didn't like this line of questioning, but he felt trapped. Jeez, if she's flipped out or something, he sure hoped Sara was paying attention. "I don't think there's a good answer to a question like that."

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"Did you find me attractive?"

"What are you getting at?"

"Did you feel sorry for me?"

"No! Look, I called you because I thought maybe you wanted to see me and I wouldn't mind seeing you. I was intrigued. And, frankly, I wasn't getting a lot of offers. Hey, I'm a dirt-poor musician, living in a rat hole, who works Saturday nights, reads for fun and everybody calls 'Brainiac'. I took a chance. That's how people get together. Anyway, you seemed to be pretty interesting and... Certainly different..." He ran out of things to say.

"And built like a brick shithouse?"

"Uh... I wouldn't put it that way. But... I guess you could..." he stammered on, sweating now.

"Like a great big brick shithouse. Right?"

Yeah, if you happened to like enormous amazons who worked out fanatically. Her size and obvious strength made her frightfully intimidating and she knew it. Lacking the conventional feminine charms, she used her physical power and outrageous proportions like a weapon in her professional capacity — and had nothing else to fall back on as a person.

"Sure," he told her, wondering if he should be worried.

"Tell me."

"Oh, come on..."

"Tell me!"

"Likeagreatbigbrickshithouse," he mumbled, "OK?"

Toomie Starks

"Tell me you noticed."

"Sure, I noticed." Oh, he'd noticed, alright.

"What did you notice?"

"You know..." He was beginning to feel like he was the subject of one of her infamous cross-examinations.

"Tell me."

"I... I couldn't help but notice the way you dressed sometimes. You... The way you ... It was — very exciting." He was feeling a little short of breath.

"Did you like that?"

"Yes." It was a whisper.

"Tell me what you liked."

"I liked it when you'd turn suddenly and your... You brushed against my arm." Deliberately, it would seem. He'd never dared to follow up. Maybe he should have — but it always felt awkward.

"What did you want to do when I did that?"

He could only stand there. Breathing heavily. Trying not to show it.

"Tell me," she demanded.

"I wanted to..."

"To what?"

"Touch you."

"Why didn't you?"

"I didn't know if it would be alright."

"So you *controlled* yourself," she said contemptuously.

"Well... Sure. Jeez, I can't read your mind, and

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you... I mean, you're..."

"And when I went home — did you *control* yourself then?"

This was becoming so... Intense. It was like being stripped naked in his mind. What did she want?

"Tell me," she ground on remorselessly.

"No." His face was burning.

"No, you didn't *control* yourself?"

"I... What do you think? I guess you could put it that way."

"Put it that way."

God, this was embarrassing. "I can't..."

"Say it," she demanded.

He gulped, "I... I lost control."

"Did you think about me when you lost *control*?"

"Yes"

"You thought about my body?"

"Yes"

"Was it good?"

"It was..." His eyes were riveted on her, breath flying in and out of his open mouth.

"You selfish bastard," she spat.

"What...?" He felt like he'd been kicked somehow.

"I went home, and you *used* me."

"But... I didn't *do* anything to you."

"You selfish bastard," she repeated.

"I thought there was no chance for us. That you'd be going back to New York. You only told me tonight that

Toomie Starks

you'd be staying in Houston."

"You want forever?"

"Well, yeah, I guess. I'm not into affairs. Because I can't stand the way they end."

"So why did you go out with me?"

"I liked you. I thought we could be friends. I thought we *were* friends."

"So your friends make you lose *control*?"

"No. I mean... I don't know."

"Do you *use* all of your friends like this?"

"No."

"Maybe I should use *you*."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you *want* me to use you?"

She was hammering him again. "I don't know."

"I think you do."

"What are you going to do?"

"Tell me *you* want me to do."

Alex's will was crumbling under her onslaught. Was this her idea of seduction? Is this how a lawyer commits rape? Did he have a choice? Did he *want* to have a choice?

"OK," he croaked.

"Tell me," she snapped.

"I want you..." he whispered.

"You want me to do what?"

"I want you to use me."

"Turn around."

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Not wanting to break the spell, he slowly turned, facing the stairs.

"Up," she ordered.

"Upstairs?" he asked.

"Now," she barked, pushing him roughly in the back.

He stumbled, catching himself at the foot of the stairs, and clambered up, Dinah closing in behind. She grabbed his arm at the top and flung him into the master bedroom.

"Stand here," she motioned him to the foot of the four-poster bed.

She grabbed his left arm, pinned it to a post, reached beneath her overcoat and brought out a piece of golden rope, wrapping the end around his wrist and the post. With the other end of the rope, she secured his right wrist to the opposite post.

He was trapped. He didn't care. With great ferocity, she tore his clothes into shreds, flinging the tattered pieces into the corners. Then she stood before him, scanning every inch of his exposed body. She took her time. It took forever.

Finally, seemingly satisfied at his condition, she flipped the hat away from her head, shaking out her hair. In the dim light seeping through the bedroom curtains from the garish blue streetlight outside, it fell in inky rivulets, curling tightly across her shoulders. There was some glinting, metallic headband in her hair, with a crowning point.

Each button of the trenchcoat slowly gave way until every one was undone. In one single, fluid motion, she whipped it off, twirling like a matador's cape, to fall in a heap on the floor behind her.

"I'll show you a *real* superhero," she growled.

She was wearing high-heeled boots, coming up nearly to her knees. Wide, plain bracelets on her wrists. A satiny, star-spangled tight outfit, like a one-piece bathing suit, with a golden emblem across her chest. The costume emphasized her monumental proportions in a way that made Alex's head swim deliriously, from the four-inch heels to the straining material buttressing her mighty top.

She began to pose in well-rehearsed moves, the harsh light adding relief to every contour. She showed him things he'd never dared imagine, until his ragged panting seemed about to burst his lungs. She swung around from one position to another, setting off cascades of ponderous ripples and waves in places he ached to caress.

Then she crowded close to him, coming so close but not touching, now considering him from one side, now from the other, now crouching low before him. Finally, she stretched out to her full, augmented height, bringing herself so tantalizingly close to his face.

"Tell me what you see."

"I see your body."

"Do you like it?"

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"I love it."

"Do you want it?"

"More than life."

"Do you need it?"

"Now," he gasped. "Always."

She reached behind her and meticulously undid the zipper, one ratcheting tooth at a time, the front of her costume giving way until only friction kept it from slipping down. She gave a marvelous shake, and it fell away with a slight rustle.

She bent down until her lips were level with his, then slowly brought them together in the dark shadow of her hair. There, she teased him, lightly caressing, not yet plunging into the release of total surrender.

When forever finally ended, in another, distant part of the small universe they now shared, they came together as lovers. She began their journey together with slow, small, tremulous steps, bringing them along in a cascade of ever-mounting rhythmic movements.

In this manner she used him. He was in every way hers to control. She had what she wanted and, in having, possessed his will, his body, his mind, his soul. In the end, she surrendered, giving up every shred of her control and his as well.

And so they passed unto the morning

Chapter Nine: Lessons

As the year wore on, Sara matured quickly. Physically, she was unchanged from the day she first thawed out, but her mind blossomed like a hothouse rose. Her childhood would be done by next summer and Alex wanted her to savor it as much as possible, so he tried to encourage her tutors to go easy on her. For the most part, they acted like a bunch of doting grandfathers, anyway. But as a faculty, they found it was not going to be as easy as they had first thought to deal with their precocious student. Once their pedagogical experience and preconceptions went the way of the poor, shattered playground, they realized that they had as much to learn about Sara as they hoped she would be able to learn from them.

Mere facts she absorbed greedily, always eager to explore every corner of her new world. Books that she enjoyed — like Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* or Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* — were savored as if she were reading every word aloud, setting up scenes in her mind. Boring stuff she could skim through as fast as she could manage the page turns, every word filed away perfectly and permanently — though not necessarily usefully. Knowledge was more than an accumulation of facts. There had to be meaning, context and experience.

Her language skills were a good example. She

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arrived on our planet with perfect knowledge of every word in (it was practically official now) every language known to man, but barely able to communicate. As her experience widened, context gave meaning to empty syllables.

When she finally saw the elephant, it became real to her in every one of her languages in a way mere definitions could not provide. Then, as she learned about where the elephant lived, what he ate, his habits and legends in books, stories and those late-night wildlife shows on cable, the word 'elephant' took on meaning and depth and became a link in the vast web of mental associations we call learning.

Chess was another good example. Naturally, it was one of the first things the Russians taught her. She quickly became rather good at it, a gifted amateur who could hold her own against most of them — until her computer-mind took over, analyzing by sheer brute force every possible move that could be made, guiding her unerringly to the best outcome in the fewest moves. It was no fun that way, of course, so she usually just 'turned it off' and played without benefit of alien technology.

It was this ability to pick and choose just how much of her vast abilities she wanted to use that kept her sane — in touch with the same reality as humans. In her heart, she was a normal little girl — albeit unusually quick and bright — who just happened to be able to do the most amazing and outrageous things. When she wanted to...

The trick was in keeping her from wanting to, on the one hand — and making her want to, on the other.

Teaching her required a team effort. They often had to work in rotating shifts as unexpected turns developed, with a fresh group going in to cover the previous group's hasty retreat. For example, shortly after the unfortunate incident with the cement truck ("I was only trying to help."), Popov found himself trying to explain how such a massive-looking thing could be so fragile.

He covered the square-cube relationship and how it applied to scale, which Sara learned quickly enough. That led to stress, loading, tension and structural analysis, which required an assist from Ivanovitch, the mathematician. Math was Sara's easiest subject in certain respects, since any kind of calculation could be done instantly, and she amassed myriad complex formulae at a glance. The practical application of all this theory led to something else.

It turned out that Sara's mysterious 'sense' could be trained to recognize how a thing was put together by its 'feel', which included not only a direct perception of an object's material composition and construction, but its internal stresses as different forces were applied. It was not like sight, which perceives only the surfaces of objects — this involved the whole object in three dimensions as a perceptible mass, including at least a crude approximation of internal structure. Sara decided to call it 'kreening' (conjugating the verb 'to kreen': you kreen; she kreens;

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they kreen; I have been kreening, it was kreened...).

So Nevsky, the chemist, was called in to help her identify various elements and compounds in a way that was similar to how Sara learned colors. He presented a substance, she kreened it, he named and described it, and she remembered it. Iron, carbon, lead, brass, clay, wood (as many varieties as they could find), leather, polystyrene, glass, bone, paper, glue, ceramics. Water, oil (from cooking to motor), antifreeze, Jell-O, paraffin, albumin, soap, mercury.

Which brought Popov back in to help her sort everything out and make organized sense of it all. 'Seeing' involves much more than transmitting images focussed on the retina to the brain. It also involves invoking a rich panoply of cognitive and affective associations, from mere calculation to ineffable beauty. The ex-KGB intelligence analyst had made a career of looking at meaningless blobs of light and shadow on an emulsion and extracting knowledge. Though he couldn't kreen himself, he knew how to make data sing, and taught Sara the tune.

She was soon able to report that a wall was (in order) paint, paper, gypsum, paper, pine or fiberglass, paper, gypsum, paper and paint. That there were nails here, here and here. Three-conductor copper wiring ran along this stud, each wire covered with Teflon insulation, the whole bound up with vinyl and stapled there, there and there. A water pipe ran this way. That's where a mouse lives. You

have five quarters, two nickels, three dimes and a penny in your pocket.

The physicist, Borodin, summed up what they had learned. "It is like a penetrating energy field surrounding her in every direction that brings to her computer-mind a virtual representation of her surroundings. When she decides to become conscious of it, she is immersed in a three-dimensional model that carries information about position, composition, relative density and pressure." All they had to do was to 'calibrate the instrument' by methodically testing a wide sampling of various objects to destruction while Sara kneeled them.

Well, that basically involved tearing things apart. Sara was very good at that. Mrs. J eventually made them go somewhere else to conduct their little experiments.

A sort of domestic tranquillity set in, with Dinah spending more and more nights at Alex's until she was basically moved in. It took her a while to more-or-less formally commit fully to their relationship (whatever that meant), but she made the most of her newfound sexuality to attack Alex ferociously and creatively from time to time. The comfortable familiarity of her former loneliness and self-imposed isolation gradually faded from memory.

Alex, for the most part, accepted his lot with grace, if not dignity. He had long ago given up trying to figure out women in general and was mostly grateful not to be living alone anymore. Besides, in his own private, inner

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Disneyland, Dinah was an E-ticket ride — and anyway, despite their myriad differences, he liked her. With Sara and Mrs. J, the unlikely group constituted a bizarre instant family.

Dinah was undergoing a crisis of cognitive dissonance regarding her position with Perry, Dyess, Eyelandt. Despite mounting pressure from Wayans' unctuous sidekick, Robbins, she was prepared to call off the dogs she'd unleashed on the Chinese-financed chemical plant. There was just nothing dirty going on, she was convinced, and it bothered her no end that Robbins didn't seem to care. He seemed to accept her judgement while finding it to be irrelevant to 'the larger issues'.

"So quit," said Alex. "You're a good lawyer, aren't you? I'll bet Wayans isn't paying you half of what you're worth. You committed, idealistic types always get shafted 'for the cause' when it comes to bread."

"I'm not a quitter," Dinah said. "And it's not the money. Someone else would just get my job, and there's more at stake than just me, here. People could get hurt, and I don't want to walk away from that. Besides, if I did quit, what do you think I'm going to do? Hang out my shingle? There are a hell of a lot of lawyers out there trying to make it on their own who probably don't make as much as you do."

"That's not possible."

"Well, it's not as easy as you think, just because I'm a *lawyer*." She made a face at him. "The kind of job with an

established firm that pays well — that's not what I want to do. I'm more like a prosecutor."

"Yeah, you be bad. All you need is a six-shooter and a ten-gallon hat. I bet you'd look great with a handlebar mustache. So how come you didn't end up with the FBI or the DA's office?"

She shrugged. "Wayans was after bigger game. It sounded good, like I could make a real difference. For the most part, I think I did. That's important to me."

"Why? What makes you want to save the world? What's up with being some kind of avenging superhero? Look," he said, "While you were dedicating every waking moment to your Black Knight's holy war, life went on without you."

"Alex, you were an Army brat and joined the Navy. I know you understand duty, honor, country..."

"Oh, spare me. Yeah, and while I was sailing around in a smelly shitcan, all my buddies were going to college, getting laid, starting careers, making babies... They had a life. All I got when I came back to the real world as a veteran was spit on."

Dinah rolled her eyes and played her tiny violin. "Poor baby," she mocked. "I seem to recall your telling me you went back to college. GI Bill, wasn't it?"

"Sure. There were lots of vets on campus back then. Nobody had anything to do with us, 'cause everybody *knew* that vets were all baby-killers and maniacs. So the only people you could hang with were other vets. And

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they were all baby-killers and maniacs."

Dinah had to laugh. "So that's why you decided to be a musician. Fringe of society kind of stuff, carefree, no responsibilities..."

"I got over it. I'm a musician because I *can* be. I like it, it's easy for me, and I have lots of time for myself. And, a life. I get paid to do something I really like to do, something that's fulfilling to me. Sometimes, on a gig, I'll see some fat cat in a tuxedo looking at me in a way that I know he would give up whatever he's doing to do what I'm doing. If time is money, oh Ms. Billable Hours, then I'm rich. You, on the other hand, are a soldier who never came home. How can you defend a way of life you've never experienced?"

Dinah had to think about that one. It got awfully quiet.

"I'm sorry, Dinah."

"No, no. You're right. And I think I've changed quite a bit from when we first met. Anyway, you are not exactly a paragon of normalcy. I don't get how you can lecture me on getting a life. You do what you do because you *have* to do it, Alex. It's a calling, and you know it. It's the same with me."

She winked slyly, "Anyway, don't you think I've loosened up just a wee bit?"

"Whoo," he breathed. "Oh, yeah, come to think of it."

"Actually," she said, moving closer and arching her

back, "I think you're the one who needs more loosening up."

Alex finally decided that Sara had to be given the car keys, in a manner of speaking. He thought she was able to handle wider forays into the world outside the compound without a constant chaperone, as long as she let him know where she was going and gave a complete account of what she had done when she got back.

He wasn't particularly concerned about keeping her a secret. By now, plenty of people had seen Sara do things that were not believable, so they just didn't believe it. You couldn't even be sure of photographs these days, or videos, either.

So what if two thousand people saw her flying down the high-occupancy lane in the middle of the Katy Freeway? What were they going to say? Who were they going to tell? At least that many people saw various kinds of UFO's every day. Sara was just another one. They made movies in Houston all the time these days (cheap labor, lots of light, different locations and a city that practically slobbered *en masse* over things Hollywood), so that's probably what it was.

"Hey, I'll bet that was the blonde from Babewatch! Damn, I should have tried to get an autograph."

Anyway, before long, Alex would go ahead and contact NASA and let them worry about how to break the news. Then everyone in Houston will tell everyone else

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that, "Oh yeah, I knew all along. We used to hang out together at the Galleria." Stories would beget stories, each one topping the last, until it would have taken a whole platoon of Sara's to have been as many places as people swore to, or done as many spectacular feats as myriad fertile imaginations could invent.

"Yep. There I wuz tryin' to figure out how I wuz a'goin' t' get close enuff to pour muh concrete, cussin' up a blue streak 'bout th' damn fool what put a wall in muh way, when up she comes an' sez, all polite like, 'Can I help?' Next thing I knowed, gol-durn if she didn't jist pick that whole damn cee-ment truck up oven her haid an' jump over th' wall with it. 'Course, when she lighted on t'other side — well, it wuz more'n that ol' Peterbilt could take. Th' frame broke plumb in two, yessiree, cab goes one way an' the rest of it ever' whichaway, cee-ment flyin' all over ever'thin' in sight. Biggest damn mess you ever saw. So I sez to her, I sez, 'Well, darlin', I shore appreciate th' help, but how in the' hell 'm I gonna 'splain this to muh dis-patcher? Huh?' An' she starts in bawlin', an' next thing I know, there wuz a whole buncha Russkies and Mes'kins runnin' 'round... An', ya know what? They tell her what t'do and she jist picks up all th' pieces an' I'll be damn'd if she didn't jist weld the whole kit 'n kaboodle back together agin jist by a'lookin' at it. I ain't lyin'! By th' time she wuz done, all it needed wuz a paint job, an' it'd be like brand spankin' new. An' them Mes'kins done scooped up the cee-ment quicker 'n' spit an' the next thing I knew, I

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wuz back on th' road. Well, I waren't fool enuff to tell nobody 'bout what I saw with muh own eyes, they'd a'thought I wuz plumb loco. But, I swear t' God, that's th' honest truth."

So, OK, in this case it was.

Alex was one of the few musicians he knew who actually enjoyed playing at the Petroleum Club. It was mostly snooze music for a few rich geezers and their pretty, young 'nieces' and maybe a couple of tables of blue-haired widows with their gay-eyed dance-studio escorts. Usually there would be a huddle of oil patch suits talking 'bidness' with a couple of Japs or Norwegians at one of the corner tables. And then there were the regulars — grandly decaying members who came arrayed in fruitless splendor to dance while they still were able.

The white-gloved staff was surly and the management indifferently obnoxious to the musicians, making it as difficult as possible to bring in the necessary amps and cases. Forget going to the bar, and hide in a back room on breaks, with a cup of coffee if you scrounged it yourself from the kitchen. The music could only be old and bland — no jazz, no rock, nothing hip or cool, certainly no originals. Lots of rhumbas, cha-cha-chas, bossas, ballads, show tunes, waltzes, standards — mostly popular before Alex was born. Vocals were barely tolerated in the later sets, if you didn't mind singing over their tin-cup-and-string ceiling speakers. Above all, they

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were required to play so as not to offend anyone. Couldn't have that.

But the *view*...! From the stage, you could survey 180-degrees through a nearly unobstructed glass wall 24-feet high. From the club's location on the 43rd floor of the Exxon Building on the southeast edge of Houston's downtown urban canyons, you could see all the way to Galveston (so Alex thought, though the skyglow on the horizon was probably Clear Lake). At night, you could see right into the offices in adjacent skyscrapers to the left, and to the right, you could catch the nightly fireworks show at Astroworld. In between were the lights of half the metropolitan area of Houston.

Outlining every corner and street were the amberish sodium streetlights and their older mercury-vapor hard-bluish cousins. Flickering neon signs and blinking traffic lights vied with the river of advancing and retreating headlights and taillights on the Gulf Freeway, stretching directly away into the distance. There were the fairyland cities of light made by the towers and skeletal structures of the Pasadena refinery complexes, punctuated by the fiery belches of flared waste gas — like a vision of Oz gone mad. Closer in was the palace of the Maxwell House coffee plant, a sort of refinery in its own right. There was the nervous undertow of house lights and porch lights going on and off in vast, mysterious patterns, and the occasional frantic beat of emergency vehicles rushing to complete their unknown missions. The powerful beacons

of locomotives wound their majestic way along the Ship Channel, and the gracefully descending landing lights of the jetliners settling to the ground at Hobby Airport traced lazy loops in the black sky. Sometimes the stadium lights would be on at the University of Houston, and occasionally the full moon would rise, deep orange and baleful, through the miasma above the chemical plants. At other times, the fabulous lightshow of marching thunderstorms would parade across the vista.

He imagined it was like playing in the skylounge of some future 'Titanic' spaceliner cruising above a great spiral galaxy. Or he would be a savage scientist from Stone Age Borneo, trying to measure the unknowable portents of the utterly alien landscape before him.

Alex was not bothered by the usual jazz snob's disdain at having to play drivel, or the jaded professional's attitude of dismissal of the music they performed. He enjoyed playing so much that anything with notes in it could be appreciated at some level, and he would do his best to ply his craft with all the excellence he could muster.

Old Elgie Morrel's piano stylings may have been predictable, but there was a sense of gravity about his chord progressions that Alex could work with, never playing the same tune the same way twice. They understood each other well enough to make the small, simultaneous decisions about transient dynamics, phrasing and inflections in that timeless communion that

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exists between working musicians, an almost shared consciousness that normal people never experienced. They'd make a little turn here or an accent there, maybe change keys or directions together, all without design or logic — then they would trade glances and smile. Not that they didn't drive each other crazy, on and off the stage. Still, it was this strange thing that players shared with each other — through good gigs and bad, sometimes barely noticeable and at other times deliriously powerful — that provided the drug that compelled otherwise able and intelligent people to embrace the bondage of musicianship.

That, and the vision within — different for each player — of the essence of music's power to express the inexpressible. To those upon whom the vision has been bestowed, everything else becomes unimportant. Musicians are, in this way, like prophets. And, like prophets, are often without honor among their worldly peers. So they play because they must, and if they cannot, wither.

Alex sometimes thought of these things as he stared out the great windows while pulling the thick strings of his Fender P-bass. He knew that the people who came to wherever it was he was playing that night, came for his magic, to let him do the things that he could do to them. For he had power. It was his pulsing fundamental beat that drove them. He could make them dance. He could make them stumble. He could make them sweat.

Toomie Starks

Sometimes, he wished he could just make them go home.

On this particular night, his 'vision' appeared outside the windows, in the form of a blond-haloed face peering through the tangle of legs beneath the Abernathy's table directly across the half-acre dance floor from the stage. Her head bobbed up and down, trying to attract his attention, as she kreened whether or not any heads turned her direction. Having finally caught his eye, she smiled prettily as he winked at her.

It seemed she was there for the concert, such as it was. He knew she could hear everything they played, so he pumped up the intensity, pushing the others to keep up with him. They all looked at him like he was losing his mind, but he was playing for a special audience and dragged them with him.

The night wore on as the dancers tottered and wheeled, Sara mimicking their movements in the air outside, barely visible in black jeans and a dark gray sweatshirt except for her hands and face, her wild mane of bright hair and trashed-out white tennies. The jaded customers paid no attention and the waiters were busy. She could have danced all night if Mac Kirtland hadn't gotten an eyeful and played an uncharacteristically strident 'splat' on his trumpet, blowing his mute onto the middle of the dance floor, attracting everyone's attention as Sara ducked quickly below the window.

Mac stared popeyed at the spot where Sara had been

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cavorting, while everyone else stared at him. He finally shook his head as if clearing his vision, and tried to remember what they were playing. A busboy tossed him his mute.

Jeff Johnston peered out from behind his cymbals. "Hey, Mac. I'll take some of whatever you're smoking." Elgie looked concerned, Alex looked at the ceiling.

Between tunes, Mac leaned over and asked Alex uncertainly, "You didn't happen to see anything... Anything, uh, unusual just now, did you?"

"You mean, like an Unidentified Flying Object?"

"Well, sorta..." he said, guardedly.

"Sure did," said Alex.

Relieved somewhat, Mac asked, "What did it look like to you?"

After some careful thought, Alex replied, "It looked like a trumpet mute."

"Very funny. You're a big help."

"Well, what do you think you saw?"

Mac stared out the window for a while. "What makes you think I saw anything," he declared. "I just had a sudden cough, that's all."

Alex chuckled and they started up again. So did Sara. So did Mac, this time with the mute hitting Mr. Houliburton right in the butt. The maitre d' retrieved the errant missile, handing it over with a scowl.

"You really ought to take something for that cough," Alex told him. The band played on. Mac was torn

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between trying not to look out the window again and wanting to get a better look. He kept his left hand on the mute.

This time he was prepared when Sara began to dance. She was maybe a couple of hundred feet away from the building and difficult to spot unless you were looking for her. She glided back and forth, spun and pirouetted, turned and swooped in elegant free form, waving and smiling as Mac stared and Alex nodded benignly at her antics. Mac glanced over at Alex to see if he was paying attention, and quickly turned back, afraid to miss anything. He stopped even making a pretense of playing, as Elgie signaled frantically for him to take a solo.

"You have *got* to be seeing this," hissed Mac.

"Seeing what?"

Mac gestured at the window behind the Abernathy's table, "That girl."

"I wouldn't exactly call Mrs. Abernathy a girl..."

"No, no, no. The one outside. Outside the window."

"Now, what would a girl be doing outside the window?"

"She's dancing. In the air. Don't you *see* her?"

"You mean, she's dancing by herself? Now, that's unusual."

Mac was beside himself. Pointing dramatically, he loudly proclaimed, "Look!"

The music stopped as every head swiveled his way.

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Mac sputtered at his audience, still pointing, "Up!" Some uncertainly craned their necks to look at the ceiling.

"In the sky!" He was shaking his pointing finger wildly. Sara executed a nice back flip and dove for the street as everyone in the club followed Mac's finger. There was a long silence.

Finally, Mr. Abernathy, peering myopically through the glass, ventured, "It's a bird...?"

Jeff, seeing the spiraling lights over the airport, opined caustically, "It's a plane."

Mac was practically hopping up and down in frustration. "It's... it's... it's..."

The assembled multitude turned back to the stage, as Mac's outstretched arm slowly dropped to his side.

Alex told him, as gently as he could, "Maybe you should play an octave lower."

Chapter Ten: Roundball

Alex and some of the Cubans were shooting hoops behind the rec room, as they had been doing regularly the past year. Three of them — Raoul, Ricky and Fidel — were actually pretty good players, which wasn't too surprising since, as it turned out, they had been on the Cuban All-Army team. They probably weren't quite good enough to be even semi-pros in the US, but their athletic status in their Communist homeland had been sufficient to be instrumental in making it possible for Mrs. J to get them and the other dozen or so out of Cuba along with their families.

All of them, including two of their wives, had been Army regulars and had fought in Angola, where they had run into Mrs. Jachimczek. In some respects, they were evidently still in some kind of Army, disappearing for days at a time on mysterious errands. From what Alex had been able to gather with his limited Spanish, it usually had something to do with the loose network of other former-Soviet retirement villages around the country. He thought of them collectively as 'Evil Empire, Inc.', imagining colorful brochures mailed to aging party functionaries in Moscow.

"Attention, comrades. Is glorious opportunity for having golden years beink spent in luxury Americanski apartments. Generous pension provided by capitalist running dog enemies of the people. Warm climate,

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friendly neighbors, easy terms. Call Boris or Natasha at 555-MAFIA."

He'd been to dinner by now in most of the tutors' apartments, and they bore faint resemblance to his old place. In fact, they had a lot in common with Mrs. J's 'A' and 'B' units, with far better construction (or reconstruction) evident throughout and tasteful, fine furnishings. And lots of books. Whole libraries, in fact. It seems that they hadn't exactly been the penniless refugees they appeared to be to any casual observers.

Another thing was becoming evident, though. These people weren't getting any younger. The retirement village would eventually become a nursing home. The Cubans' wives already had their hands full as makeshift nurses tending to some of the residents. Alex wondered how long they could keep up the pretense.

To a great extent, Sara had brought a lot of life and excitement to a bunch of old people who otherwise would be sliding unremarked into the dustbin of history, cut off from former friends and family, abandoned by a motherland to whom they had devoted their lives and energy. They all knew that she would too soon be grown up, with a whole world of her own for her stage. So they cherished the moment.

For now, Alex sweated and panted with the younger men around a rusting goal with no net. Sara was just inside the rec room, torturing about five of her teachers. Eventually, the Russians started arguing among

themselves (an all-too-common occurrence), so she slipped outside for a break.

She'd played roundball with them before, which was certainly no contest. Unrestrained, she could easily win the NBA championship by herself, but that would be boring. It was a lot more fun to tease the men by making the impossible seem possible, limiting herself to moves that an exceptional, highly trained human might conceivably be able to make (on drugs), never jumping much higher than a world record holder could potentially match on the best day of his life (with a springboard). The trick was to make it look natural. The guys weren't shy about letting her know how she did, razzing her mercilessly when she looked like she'd gotten an assist from 'special effects'.

There was no point in her shooting for the basket, since she couldn't miss from anywhere in the apartment compound — whether she could see the hoop or not — so she delighted, instead, in making lightning speed, pinpoint passes to players streaking to the hole. Impossible steals were her specialty, especially when she could flick a ball out of someone's passing dribble to another player without even looking. Everyone soon learned to be prepared to suddenly find a ball in their breadbasket if they were on her side. And, boy, could she take a charge. Or set a pick. It was fun.

In fact, it was so much fun, Alex felt they ought to share it with some real talent.

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"We oughtta take this act on the road, guys. What d'ya think about maybe going up against some real competition?"

"There *is* no competition," said Fidel, the tallest of the lot at just over six feet. "Sara and me, we beat anybody just by ourselves."

"Oh, I don't know," said Alex. "If Sara can play a whole game without giving anything away, it might be interesting."

"No way, man. Her on the court makes the rest of us look like we should be on a Wheaties box."

"When's the last time any of you actually played anybody good?" asked Alex. "Besides me, of course." That earned a round of hoots and a barrage of shirts and towels.

Ricky jeered, "Only way we lose, if Brainiac here plays center."

"I accept," said Alex. "Us five, think we can beat someone? I mean, someone really good."

"Who you got in mind? The Houston Rockets?" said Raoul.

"Yeah, we kick their asses," Ricky said, "but I don't think we can get on their schedule."

"No," said Alex, "Actually, I was thinking about some tougher competition."

"What, tougher than the NBA?" said Raoul. "Do they play basketball on Mars?"

"Probably not. But they play it in the Fourth Ward."

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"Sure," said Fidel, "With knives. You don't mean we're going to play a bunch of street punks on some corner, do you? That's crazy, man."

"Man," said Ricky, "That's not even funny. I thought you were serious."

"Have you ever heard," Alex said, "Of the Fondé Recreation Center?"

That got their attention.

"Man, you *are* serious," said Ricky. The Cubans started chattering heatedly among themselves in Spanish. Sara listened while Alex opened another Dr. Pepper.

Finally, Fidel turned to Alex and told him, "OK, man. Let's do it. But we gotta practice, old dude. You need to learn some plays. And Sara, too, if we're gonna make it look good."

The Louvre. Carnegie Hall. The Taj Mahal. The Alamo. Fondé Recreation Center. It was the Mecca of Houston street ball, a legendary confluence of talent and circumstance. Only the best, the very best, dared to show their stuff in this sacred shrine of sweat. The level of play was awesome and brutal, motivated by an intense love for the game itself and a passion for excellence and respect among peers. The great and the wannabe greats made their reps there. Houston Rockets and even visiting NBA players made regular appearances to hone their warrior instincts, and didn't always get the best of it. Hakeem Olajuwon lost six weeks in the middle of a championship

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season to an injury accidentally but aggressively inflicted by some no-name hotshot desperate for a way out of obscurity. There was one golden afternoon when eight Hall-of-Famers led by Calvin Murphy and Elvin Hayes played four-on-four nearly unto death for no money and without a camera in sight. And it wasn't even the best game of the day.

Alex and Sara arrived first. They wore baggy sweats and clutched towel-wrapped tennies under their arms. The Cubans arrived separately, looking like a Mexican work crew in overalls, orange vests and hard hats, carrying lunch boxes. The two groups studiously avoided looking at each other.

There were about 60 players lounging on the numbered green benches waiting for games, watching another couple of dozen playing three-on-three under each basket. Alex sized them up and approached the likeliest group.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," he said cordially.

Mostly, they ignored him, but one of the lot finally answered back, "W'sup?"

"Please allow me to introduce ourselves," Alex said, extending a hand futilely. "My name is Alex Luther and this is Sara Corel."

"Yeah, tha's nice. Look, I ain't givin' no autographs right now. I'm kinda busy." His buddies seemed to find that amusing.

"Well, uh, mister...?" he lead, displaying his

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toothiest phony smile. Getting no response, he continued, "Well, I'm not really looking for an autograph, you see. I'm looking for a game."

They found that to be very amusing.

"Damn!"

"Shee-it, man. Do you know where you are?"

"I ain't got no time f'this bu'shit."

"Yeah, get the hell outta here, man."

"Muthe'f'kin' playgroun's 'cross the street."

"Damn!"

"I'm prepared to make you an offer," Alex went on, unperturbed. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a wad of bills. "I'd like to pay five of you one hundred dollars each to play a thirty-minute game. Two twelve-minute halves and a six-minute halftime."

That got their attention. The whole group suddenly sat bolt upright.

"Damn!"

"You some kinda crazy muthe'f'ker or what?"

"Man, you gotta be shittin' me."

"Muthe'f'kin' payday!"

"Gimme some o' that!"

"Damn!"

The leader stood up slowly and looked at the cash. He eyed Alex suspiciously. "Talk," he said.

"Sara, here, is an exchange student from Russia. She's a very talented basketball player where she comes from, the equivalent of a high school all-star for a state

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championship team. Say hello, Sara."

Sara greeted them in Russian.

"Her English is very good," said Alex.

"My Eng-lish is beink very good," said Sara in her best Mrs. J imitation. She giggled.

"She's quite excited about the prospect of having a chance to play with some great American players."

One of the onlookers began, "Yeah, I'll play wi' you..."

"Shut up," said the leader, cutting off any further comments.

"And I understand," Alex went on, "that some of the regulars here are excellent."

The leader considered this for a while, eyeing the money, and finally said, "You ain't bu'shittin', are you?"

"Not at all," answered Alex, looking serious now. "You pick four others to make up a team. I've already made all the arrangements for a full court to be made available to us in about thirty minutes."

"Who we suppose 't' play? Beside 'yo' girlfrien', here."

"I'd like to ask those gentlemen over there," indicating the disinterested-looking Cubans, "To join Sara and I."

They were incredulous. It was beginning to look a lot like Christmas.

"You mean you want five of us to play three Mes'kins, a girl and a 'ol' white muthe'f'ker? Fo' a hunner'

dolla' apiece?"

"Oh, absolutely. Think of it as a lesson. Or maybe a cultural exchange. An opportunity to bring people from divergent backgrounds together." It was all he could do to keep a straight face.

Alex lowered his voice, "Actually, you see, the 'Hispanic' gentlemen are acquaintances of mine, and I believe they are quite knowledgeable about the game. I wouldn't want to mislead you or anything. They are prepared to provide a spirited match." He beamed guilelessly.

By now, everyone in the building was privy to the dealings. They could constrain themselves no longer. Chaos erupted.

"Damn!"

"Whoo-ee!"

"You heah that?"

"Hell, I' up that fo' that."

"Pinch me, momma, I'm dreamin'."

"Looky heah, tha's *my* money, honey."

"Damn!"

When the furor died down, Alex asked the man in front of him, "So, do we have a deal, mister...?"

Finally raising his hand, the man said, "Sherman. Beauregard Sherman." He smiled, "Call me Bo."

"Just one other thing," Alex cautioned. "I want to make this as authentic an experience as possible. To ensure a high level of play, in order to collect the money,

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you must defeat us. Fairly and squarely."

Bo smiled broadly as laughter echoed around the old building. "Don' you worry none 'bout that."

"Then we have a deal?"

"Deal."

Alex took his hand and shook it warmly, "Thank you so much, Mr. — uh... Bo."

They took the money to the registration cage, where the red-haired black lady who ran the place for the city told them sternly, "I ain't 'lowed to take no gamblin' money." Having done her duty, she went on, "But I s'pose Mr. Greenjeans here can look after it." She crammed the wad under a glass terrarium with a large, green turtle in it, who strained his neck so as not to miss anything.

Bo had his pick of the gym, introducing each selectee formally to Sara.

"This here's Ike Patton. He play' guard."

"Am beink very pleased to be meeting you, Mistor Patton."

"Jus' call me Ike," he said with a wink and a smile.

"Thank you, Ike. And you must be callink me Sara."

"Sweet. Watch yo'sef', now, y'heah?" he stepped aside cheerily.

They went through the ritual with the rest.

"Lee Grant." At six-seven, their center.

"Jack Pershing." A forward with an intense look to him.

"Jethune Arthur. He call' Mack." Another guard.

None were under six feet.

"Well met, gentlemen," said Alex. "For purposes of registration, I've taken the liberty of naming your team after the nearest thoroughfare, Washington Street. So you'll be the Washington Generals if that's agreeable." The name of the team that always played the Harlem Globetrotters. And never won.

"Fo' five hunner' dolla', you can call us th' Washin'ton Assholes," one of them called out.

"We shall be known as the Madame Jachimczek International Academy for Young Women." There were catcalls and hoots at this.

"You've already been introduced to Sara and myself. Allow me to introduce forwards Fidel and Raoul, and our other guard, Ricky."

The Cubans bowed politely. Then they stripped off their work clothes. Underneath, they were wearing a little surprise — brand new uniforms shining with the colors of their homeland, 'Cuba' proudly emblazoned across the fronts.

This caused a suspicious stir among the onlookers.

"Damn!"

"Hey, they ain't no muthe'f'kin' Mes'kins."

"What you tryin' t' pull, man?"

"They look like muthe'f'kin' Olympic team muthe'f'kers."

"Hispanic gentlemen' my ass."

"Damn!"

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In a hurt tone, Alex said, "I think I mentioned that these men are experienced. They are certainly not the Cuban Olympic team. They played for the Cuban Army team." Big difference, he seemed to imply.

"Of course, as I recall, they did actually defeat their own Olympic team. A few times."

The Cubans had been the only team to fight the American 'Dream Team' Olympians to a standstill. The aficionados in this gym knew it. The laughter and catcalls subsided.

In the center of the court, Sara unselfconsciously peeled off her street clothes to total, absorbed silence. Underneath, she was wearing a Russian women's basketball uniform that was staggeringly flattering. Dribbling basketballs on the other courts bounced away to unheeded silence as Sara tossed the baggy garments aside and flipped her now unbound hair into its accustomed glory. The only sounds echoing through the cavernous gym were little drops of sweat dripping onto the hardwood. The watching Mr. Greenjeans blinked impassively from his glass prison in the cage.

Alex's uniform, like the others', had been made for him by Raoul's wife, Maria. With broad stripes and bright stars, it looked like Old Glory. They made quite a sight — the three proud Cubans, the Russian princess and Captain America.

"Ahem," Alex cleared his throat, breaking the spell. Noises resumed. "Perhaps we should settle on the rules."

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There was grim laughter at that.

"Damn!"

"I got yo' muthe'f'kin' rules."

"Oh, yeah, they's one rule. Don' bleed."

"'Cept we always make an exception fo' white boys."

"An' Cubans!"

"Damn!"

The red-haired black woman in the cage started the clock and the game began, with Bo throwing the ball out of bounds to Sara. She inbounded to Alex who promptly lost it to Ike, who promptly lost it to Sara, who whipped a three-quarter-court bullet to Fidel for a lay-in. There were appreciative whistles from the bench. Mr. Greenjeans nodded his approval.

Mack ran the ball the length of the court and tossed up a prayer at a goal surrounded by Bo, Jack and Lee. They muscled two offensive rebounds and got two points. It was apparent right away that unless Alex could block out, the Generals would score on every possession by controlling the boards. Alex had known this going in, but needed time to establish position. He looked plaintively at Sara, who nodded. She was going to have to get in Mack's face to slow him down and make him pass off to Ike. They'd practiced this.

On their own end of the court, it soon settled in to a pattern of Sara controlling the ball until one of the Cubans could get free, with Alex trying to get in the way of the

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defenders as much as possible to create opportunities. When they collapsed on the basket, Sara launched rainbows that would never miss — except that Lee would unabashedly goaltend, swatting away a sure two points. No rules.

Sara looked plaintively at Alex, who nodded. She wouldn't shoot again unless he could keep Lee away from the hoop.

Alex knew he was hopelessly outclassed by everyone in the building, but he was stocky and strong from hauling heavy amps and equipment around for his gigs. He had a much lower center of gravity than the taller, leaner Generals — especially their center, Lee — and could counter their reach and quickness with sheer, stubborn determination. He had no intention of trying to shoot, dribble or rebound. Just block out. If he could neutralize Lee and break up the Generals' rebounding positions, Sara and the Cubans would take care of the others.

What he hadn't anticipated was the price he would have to pay. These guys threw elbows like it was some advanced kind of martial art. His opponents realized quickly what he was trying to do and began to hammer him mercilessly. Nothing personal. That's how they played down here. No rules.

The half went quickly, with Sara stealing and dealing, the Cubans breaking on their end and battling for garbage-time rebounds on the other, and Alex throwing

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his increasingly battered body around like a Saturday night pinball. The Generals, for their part, were individually magnificent, skying for caroms, finessing drives and slamming the ball home with authority. When the buzzer sounded ending the half, the score was tied.

It was apparent that each team had badly underestimated the other. The homies were just too damned good individually. Their quickness, court savvy and skill were a whole order of magnitude beyond what the Cubans had ever seen, and they were frankly awed.

But their opponents had never been confronted with the disciplined play the Cubans brought to the game. It wasn't just Sara — she was behaving herself and was merely brilliant. It was the alien concept of total team play — one man giving himself up completely to play a role none of them had ever dreamed of, one slight girl with unnatural quickness and accuracy, and three steady, patient workhorses.

Grudging mutual admiration did not temper either side's determination, however. The second half would be nuclear war. With, of course, no rules. Mr. Greenjeans strained against his glass walls for a better look.

The Generals had learned to avoid Sara like she smelled bad — real bad. But this gave Alex the time he needed to set up for his regularly scheduled beating. Blood was seeping from both nostrils, his ears rang constantly, and it usually looked to him like there were at least ten people on the other team. But he kept pushing

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back, and the Cubans took advantage of the traffic jams he created.

Jack and Bo took up the slack by crashing the boards with a vengeance. They were getting twice as many shots as the Cubans, who had to pick their chances carefully and just not take a bad look. They didn't. Sara kept the Generals honest by dropping a few from downtown when Alex could get Lee moving backwards. 'No rules' could work both ways, and it was beginning to piss Lee off. Ike and Mack juked and jived with furious abandon, simply running over the Cubans who held their ground, several times losing the ball in the resulting melee.

But neither side could pull away, trading basket for basket at a breathtaking pace. As the game crawled under thirty seconds, Sara drained a shot that kissed the rafters to come to within two, then Fidel climbed all over Bo's back to steal a board, firing the outlet to a streaking Ricky, who finished up a two-on-one fast break to tie the game for about the twentieth time.

The Generals set up to take the final shot. They were determined not to lose this game, no matter what it took. The money didn't matter. It was for far higher stakes than that. It wasn't even for pride or honor or anything easily named. The legend that best describes what they were feeling was John Henry's, that steel-drivin' man who would not go down before a force he could not understand or master, swinging a hammer in each hand in a futile effort to beat the unbeatable, an alien technology that

threatened the only way of life he knew. They could sense a force at work beyond their ken, and they would not — by God, they just would not — bow to it.

As Ike brought the ball across the line, Lee unloaded on Alex with every ounce of pent-up frustration he could muster, sending him sprawling to the floor near mid-court. In short order, the Cubans had been leveled as well. It wasn't pretty, but there were no rules. Lee came to the top of the key, spinning to the left as he snared a pass from Mack. Only Sara stood between him and the basket as time leaked inexorably away. He had no intention of challenging her magical quickness by putting the ball on the floor, though. With the eight long arms of his teammates surrounding the basket unopposed, he lobbed a towering Sky Hook, the unstoppable trademark of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. It was his shot, the one he'd been waiting his whole life to take, that he'd dreamed about making at the end of some monumental contest. With less than ten seconds left, all he had to be was close. The ball left his hand unerringly, destined to settle softly into the bottom of the net.

Except that, more than twelve feet above the well-worn hardwood, there was a small hand at the end of an outstretched arm, off which the spinning ball ricocheted in a block that broke their hearts. Sara's graceful form seemed to hang forever at the top of her soaring leap, her pointing toes at eye level.

She eventually touched down lightly as the normal

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flow of time resumed with seven seconds left, then streaked past the shattered and disbelieving Lee toward the other end of the court. Alex was ahead of her, catching up to the bouncing ball and lumbering unsteadily for the basket like a crumbling, battered locomotive with its wheels coming off. He could barely see through swollen eyelids, the ringing in his head threatened to engulf him, and his wobbly legs had no spring left — but he was all alone as he went in for the *coup de grace*.

He blew the lay-up with two seconds to spare, clanging the ball high into the air off the back of the rim.

Trailing the play, Sara took off from the free-throw line, grabbed the brick with both hands and slammed a monstrous Gorilla Superjam through the hoop at nearly Mach speed, beating the clock by a microsecond. The ball made a sound like cannon fire as it flattened completely on the floor below where the now-unrecognizable hoop used to be. The shattering backboard nearly drowned out the buzzer, along with the screeching sounds of the collapsing metal supports being torn from the steel I-beam rafters and clattering to the deck, narrowly missing Alex as he crashed insensately into the wall below the scoreboard. Some of the small, high windows on the north wall shattered from the concussion. Ceiling insulation and lights rained down. Mr. Greenjeans ducked into his shell.

In the stunned aftermath, Sara turned slowly around to face the stupefied crowd, her fingers pressed to her cheeks. "Oops," she said in a small voice.

"Daaa..."

"..."

"!"

"__"

"...amn..."

The Cubans reached out wordlessly to their counterparts, who embraced them like brother warriors. Then they quietly gathered up their stuff and faded away. Alex crawled painfully from behind the wreckage and limped slowly to the exit, Sara supporting him. No one said anything intelligible as they went by (though some tried), all eyes glued wonderingly on Sara. As they passed the cage, the red-haired black woman thrust the cash and Alex's driver's license at him. She would think about the incident report tomorrow. Maybe. After a few drinks.

As they were about to go out the door, Bo suddenly sprinted after them, the rest of the crowd moving up close behind him into the lobby.

"I gotta know," he said, "Sara. She ain't no Russian, is she?" His tone was quiet now, and respectful, so that the others had to strain to hear.

"No, my friend," said Alex, "She's not."

"She ain't from Kansas, neither."

"Not of this Earth, I'm afraid."

Bo nodded. "She ever wear a cape?"

Alex smiled, "Occasionally."

"So you had to know. What it would be like," he struggled, "To be a part of somethin'... Somethin'

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special..."

"I'm sorry about the subterfuge..."

"Tha's alright. Even if I wuz t' make the bigs, this' be the baddest game I will *ever* play." Looking almost shyly at Sara, he said, simply, "Thanks."

She reached out to him and gave him a big, girlish hug.

And then, they were gone.

Chapter Eleven: Chicago

Jimmie Oldsen. People who didn't understand anything about what he did called him a hacker. In another time, they would have called him a wizard. They'd be right and wrong either way, and still wouldn't have a clue.

He'd grown up with computers. The heretofore-alien concept was perfectly natural to some members of his generation, so they had no misguided preconceptions to get in their way. Language is so much easier to learn as a child. They left the grups behind and didn't bother to tell them.

Jimmie's playgrounds were not of the mundane world of his parents, but spanned a universe still aborning. His fields of dreams were electronic imaginations populated by hideous mutants from terrifying dimensions and littered with the blasted corpses of Space Marines. His unseen playmates bore strange names and had stranger visions. His childhood quests and expeditions led through uncharted mazes deep in the bowels of secret sites that futilely dared to keep him out.

High school was disposed of early, as an afterthought, a distraction. Already, he had accomplished the kinds of things that were analogous in stature to those feats of other young men who became professional

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athletes, rock stars or drug dealers — and was even more lucrative, if not as well remarked. His proud parents, both of them successful (and busy) professionals who indulged his expensive hobby, were horrified to learn that he had no intention of attending college. He could not make them understand that such a course was beneath him, so he won the argument by buying them a house they would otherwise never have dreamed of. With cash.

For himself, he bought a building. Created something new and incomprehensible that kept a lot of people busy for some reason. His IPO went through the roof, part of a Wall Street surge that had investors scrambling for technology stocks as if they were magic beans. Within months, the professional managers he'd hired to front the company had staged a successful coup, forcing him out with only his stock options to console him. Which he converted to something that at least had a half-life. Perfect.

Now, he was wealthy, unencumbered and almost 19.

Free to indulge his every whim, he scoured the web, looking for a greater challenge. If he'd been as wise as he was smart, he might have had the uneasy premonition that, like Alexander the Great before him, there were no new worlds to conquer. Boredom loomed.

Until he began to hear of the flying girl in Houston. The stories had an element of legend about them, and were individually as believable as the latest reports from Roswell. They were not sensible, but they made sense. He

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suspected and then confirmed a pattern that wouldn't be obvious to the less driven. Intrigued, he devoted his full resources to his investigations.

In the end, he knew what she was. He had to meet her.

He left for Houston the next morning.

Dinah had finally had enough of Robbins' intransigence and flew to Chicago to confront Wayans personally. She was slightly surprised that she was able to get an appointment so easily. She had gotten the very clear message from her New York office that Perry, Dyess, Eyelandt considered her *persona non grata*, and they received their marching orders from their master.

Wayans Manor was the kind of house the Munsters would have lived in if they'd been zillionaires. It looked like a period piece from the Gilded Age before the turn of the last century, but it was so new it smelled of fresh construction. Age had been applied like makeup — all reproductions, from the carefully 'distressed' faux antiques out of bogus New England tourist traps, to the dark walnut paneling with its precisely manufactured weathering.

It was laid out in grand scale, fit for massive entertainments with an ornate ballroom, banquet kitchens and plenty of discreet parking. It was meant to impress the hosts of visitors to its museum-like public areas. It was jingoistic in the ostentatious display of its overt

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Americana vulgaris ubertheme. It was a forceful statement of older, more solid values that were imagined of other, better times. It was completely phony.

Dinah was escorted from the noisy, busy front to the private recesses deep in the mazelike bowels of the edifice by Wayans' aging personal butler, Albert. Their path led steadily downward through a series of passages that came to resemble tunnels. A final elevator ride brought them to a dark anteroom that must be far beneath the lavish grounds of the estate. Robbins was waiting for her.

He looked too young to be anybody's boss, but compensated for his youthful appearance with intensity. He made snap decisions with authority and decisiveness, and did not suffer fools lightly. He had the reputation, carefully nurtured, of a butt-kicking *wunderkind* with infallible instincts. He was the power behind Wayans' would-be throne, the overseer, the bad cop.

He wasted little time. "I am hurt, Ms. Prinze, that you should find my judgement to be so inadequate that you would bother Mr. Wayans with this. If you wish to seek other employment, I can personally arrange to terminate your contract."

Dinah treated him to her best withering glare. "You know how I feel about this. There is nothing more to discuss between us on this subject. It's not just a personal squabble between you and me."

"I don't appreciate your going over my head on this. I

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do not have the time to deal with your insubordination, and certainly Mr. Wayans..."

"...Always has time for you, Dinah," came the deep, resonant voice of the tall, powerful black man who suddenly appeared in the doorway to the inner sanctum. He beckoned them in, warmly embracing Dinah. "I have heard so many good things about you. I'm so glad we can finally meet."

In the art of politics, it is said that sincerity is everything. Once you can fake that, the rest is easy.

His office was astonishingly big. A massive desk dominated one end, with only a few chairs and minimal furniture to clutter the acreage. The lighting was so subdued as to be nearly absent, with a pool of soft light around the desk and everything else shrouded in shadows. Despite the cave-like atmosphere, the room bespoke calm power, as if it were the center of some universe of its own.

Sinking deep into his high-backed dark leather chair, Wayans seemed almost to disappear into the gloom, reinforcing the effect his penetrating eyes would have on visitors. Robbins paced the carpet beside him while Dinah took the proffered seat on the other side of the desk.

"I hear you are unhappy, Dinah," Wayans began, "I hope there's something I can do to keep you on our side. We need you."

"You've seen my report," launched Robbins preemptively.

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Wayans dismissed him with a wave, "Of course. But I want to hear from our guest."

Dinah said, "If you've seen the report, then you know what I have to say. There's not enough evidence to proceed and doing so would waste our resources and hurt a lot of little people. The only reason to pursue this any further is for publicity." She looked at him earnestly, "And I can't believe you'd do that."

Robbins countered impatiently, "I've reviewed the same material you have, and it's obvious to me there's a solid basis for a strong case. I can't understand why you want to look the other way when there is a clear connection between the Chinese government and Iraqi chemical weapons under our very noses." He practically insinuated that opposition to his decision was treasonous.

Dinah was undeterred. "Your conclusions are based on your own interpretations of what we know, and a lot of wishful thinking."

"If we can apply enough pressure, we can *make* things happen."

"Why are you so desperate to make something out of this that it's not?"

"How can *you* say it's not?" Robbins countered hotly.

"Because," Wayans weighed in thoughtfully, "Our capable beauty here has a rare gift, do you not?"

Dinah squirmed under the flattering tone. "I am certain that I have uncovered the truth of this matter."

"That's it, exactly." Wayans nodded, "And I have

heard so many stories of your prowess in getting the truth. It's very important to you — to know the truth — isn't it?"

"Of course."

Robbins said contemptuously, "So your version of the 'truth' is more important than 'justice'?"

"How can you have one without the other?"

"Please," said Wayans diplomatically, "It doesn't look like we're going to resolve the issue like this."

He paused a while, then looked directly at Dinah. "I think you know that this is an important part of our overall strategy. It will make a point that needs to be made and draw attention to the very real problems we face in reclaiming the values that made our nation the greatest in history.

"I cannot emphasize to you enough your value to this whole endeavor. But I will not ask you to pursue this if you do not think it is right. We cannot reclaim our values by abusing them. And I will not assign a new team to pursue this any further."

Robbins looked disbelievingly at Wayans and exclaimed, "What?"

Wayans held up his hand. "Dinah must make this decision, and bear the consequences of it."

"Well, if she walks out on this," spat Robbins, "then she walks out. Period."

Dinah reached for her purse. "I brought my letter of resignation with me."

Wayans shook his head. "That won't be necessary."

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There is still much work to be done."

Robbins looked at Wayans almost incredulously. "You can't be serious."

"She can be of great assistance right here. Dinah, I'd like you to move to Chicago. I want you to be my truth detector." He turned his head to look at Robbins, who stood with his mouth open, looking like he had been slapped.

Dinah was confused. This was completely unexpected. "I don't know what to say. I mean, I can't. I have to stay in Houston. There's..." she trailed off, mind racing.

"There's that boyfriend of yours," Robbins finished for her, practically hissing. "What's his name? Alex? Or is it Brainiac?"

Dinah looked at him, flabbergasted. "That's my business."

"Oh, really? Then I wonder why the KGB is so interested in a musician who just happens to be your boyfriend?"

"KGB? What KGB? That's ridiculous. Where are you getting this crap? There's no more Soviet Union. That whole threat is over."

"Like the Chinese Communists...?"

"Just what the hell are you insinuating?"

"Oh, nothing. Yet. But you've changed, and I don't like it. You can't be trusted anymore."

"Robbins!" Wayans barked sharply, "That's enough!"

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Dinah stood up, flinging the resignation across the desk. Wayans shook his head sadly, picked it up and glanced at it briefly, then said, "I'm so sorry to have to accept this. Please, take your time closing out the Houston operation. Count on me for my highest recommendation."

He reached in a drawer and pulled out an envelope, handing it to her. "You'll need this. Severance. Go ahead, it's in your contract."

He was waiting for me to quit, Dinah thought numbly to herself. She felt manipulated somehow.

She let herself out. Albert was waiting to escort back to the real world.

When the door closed, the two men looked at each other.

"How'd I do?" asked Robbins.

"Splendidly, as usual."

"You weren't so bad yourself."

The small, lone figure sat on a curb in a little circle of relative brightness under a streetlight in the middle of nearly deserted downtown Houston. People only *worked* in the tall buildings surrounding her — nobody *lived* here. When the day was done, everybody went home to the suburbs.

When it was late enough, life returned in the form of black-clad groups flitting across the sidewalks and intersections like dark spirits. Some of the Urban Animals — as many called themselves — sported emblems on

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their shirts, but there was little uniformity. There were long, dangling wallet chains on most, body-piercing jewelry on a few. Their common dress was 'tude, which was evident in abundance.

A sizeable number of these nocturnal denizens converged swiftly on the solitary figure of a girl. She knew they were coming. She was expecting them, but tried not to show it, sitting forlornly at the edge of the sidewalk in a puddle of streetlight, feet in the gutter, head bowed in thought — a huddled figure in the hot, muggy, mosquito-laden night.

Soon enough, she was surrounded. They halted just outside the circle of light, forming their own circle. She didn't look up. An air of anticipation was beginning to build. One of their group, who might be a leader — if such existed for them — swaggered up to the girl and stood over her, looking down at the top of her golden-tressed head.

"Hey," he called to her.

She looked up, not appearing to be startled. "What?"

"I got somethin' for ya," he proclaimed. The others tittered appreciatively.

"I'll bet you do," she replied.

"You're gonna like it, too."

"You think so?" It sounded like a challenge.

He sneered, "I know so."

There was an unzipping sound. She looked around at the others. They were closing in, not wanting to miss

anything. She didn't appear to be very concerned. Then she turned back to see just what it was he had for her.

Her eyes widened in sudden appreciation. "Oh my goodness! It's huge..."

One of the onlookers spoke up, "No shit." The others laughed their agreement.

He smiled ferally, thrusting his offering in her face. "And it's all for you."

"Oh, yes," she gasped.

"You want it?"

"I want it. I want it all." She reached out to take it with both hands. She could barely handle it. It was so hot. And so thick.

"Go ahead, put it in your mouth," he commanded.

She attacked it with relish, stuffing as much of it past her wide-open lips as she could. The gallery oohed their approval.

As it started to slide down her throat, she closed her eyes, lost in rapture.

"Whattaya say?" he demanded.

"Iffle goosh mangleb," she sputtered, her mouth full to capacity.

"Now — finish it."

Every eye was on her as she came to a swift completion, obviously disappointed that there wasn't even more. She used her fingers to scrape up every last bit from her chin, not wanting to miss the slightest trace.

Finally, she opened her eyes and sighed, "That was

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soooo good..."

"The best you ever had?"

"The best," she agreed. "Only..."

"Only *what*?" he wanted to know.

She hesitated a second, then said, "It could have been better."

The small crowd's collective eyebrows shot up.

Better...?

"Better...?" he asked. "How could it be any better?"

"Well..." she replied, "Anchovies".

"Oh, man — I can't believe they left out the anchovies. I told them 'all the way'. I oughta go get my money back."

"That's OK. It'll just be that much better next time. Really, even without the anchovies, it was awesome. Thanks!"

"Well, I'm glad you liked it. I just can't believe you could eat the whole thing that fast. Nobody can eat a Supersize by themselves, I don't care how big they are. Don't they feed you at home?"

The legend of Sara's appetite remained unchallenged among the Urban Animals. How such a thin little girl could pack so much food away was a constant source of amazement to her friends. Every week brought a different attempt by someone to find something she couldn't handle, to no avail. Defeated, he bent over to pick up the insulated pizza carrier, carefully zipping it closed before strapping it to his bicycle's book carrier.

Toomie Starks

Entertainment over — and bets settled — the group began its midsummer night's ritual, gliding through the complex landscape of ramps, curbs, steps, handrails, loading docks, walls, architectural excesses, construction debris, sleeping winos, benches, barriers, alleys, grand entrances, parking garages, monumental art, and all the myriad ways they could find to break every bone in their young bodies, hurtling recklessly at every challenge on skates, inlines, boards and bikes. It was X-treme sport, and they wore their injuries with pride.

Sara was, of course, rather good at it, but didn't flaunt her abilities too much, though occasionally showing off in a sly way that the others couldn't be sure was actually impossible. She was there for the sense of casual belonging, the same as the rest of them. She was just slightly the odd duck, but was welcomed nevertheless.

Her stunning appearance at first drew more than her share of attention, but when one snotnosed buck grew a tad too obnoxious, he found himself almost instantly deposited in a very high, terrifyingly precarious place. It took firemen and city workers more than four hours to retrieve him — soiled shorts and all — and rumor had it that he had thereafter hung up his skates for good. Nobody admitted to knowing exactly what happened, but nobody gave her any reason to do such a thing again, either.

Sometimes they would encounter other, larger

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groups, mostly 30-ish professional types who took to the streets as a social expression, a healthy alternative to the bar scene for meeting other singles. Riff-raff (mostly understood to mean workers and peasants) were ignored until they went away, along with the terminally uncoordinated, geeks, psychotic mass murderers, the brain dead, Bible bangers, ersatz rednecks, pseudo intellectuals, politicians and uniformed trekkies.

Many groups had regular crawls, sometimes numbering in the hundreds and extending for marathon distances, with hired deputies guarding major intersections to manage the river of sweating humanity and keep them separated from the traffic. Websites and e-mails announced times and places to meet, but there were no formal organizations with dues and officers and awards banquets. The cops tolerated the amiable disorderliness of it all ever since rousting a bunch of skating lawyers a few years ago and getting hammered in court and in the court of public opinion. This was Texas, after all.

This night, there was a clumsy newbie, a sincere dork with close-cropped red hair and freckles. He had no style, no chops and no hope, and was barely able to keep up, let alone show any dazzle. Such as he appeared from time to time, collected their quota of skate rash and faded away unremembered. This one shadowed them valiantly but ineptly until the group packed it up halfway 'till

morning.

Most caught rides from parental-unit skaters, others had wheels. Sara saw them off from her street corner until they had all gone — she had her own means of transportation. The new guy hung around, massaging his courage, and finally approached her as the last of the pack faded away. Sara resolved to be polite.

He was nervous, obviously, but seemed determined. "Hi."

"Hi," she answered, hoping he wasn't going to be as stupid as he looked. She could always take off while he was blinking.

"I'm Jimmie Oldsen."

"Sara Corel." Last time she did that, she got a little carried away and the resulting sonic boom was reported the next day as, 'Freak Tornado Lashes Downtown, Dozens of Hi-Rise Windows Blown Out.'

"I knew I'd find you here tonight."

"Really." Uh-oh. She wondered how long it would take the city to get *this* guy off the top of the One Shell Plaza radio mast.

"You're not being too discreet."

"Discreet?" About what? What was he getting at?

"I found out about you on the 'Net. There's a lot of stuff, some of it pretty weird. I had to meet you, so I flew in yesterday from San Jose."

"To meet me?" She didn't know whether to be flattered or annoyed.

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"You can fly." It was a statement, not a question. He knew.

"If you say so," she said guardedly. Oh well, bound to happen sooner or later.

"You're the one. I'm sure of it."

"OK," she shrugged. What did he want? An autograph?

"What's it like? Flying, I mean."

He came all the way out here to ask that? "Well," she thought for a moment, "It's kinda like skating. Only higher."

"How do you do it?"

"I just flap my arms really fast."

"No, really. Is it a machine or something? Were you born that way? I saw what you did, back at the Four Seasons garage. Most people can't skateboard *up* a ramp."

"Oh, yeah. I keep forgetting."

"And there's other stuff. Did you really pick up a cement truck?"

"Only once. They break easily. I shoulda used both hands."

He didn't laugh. "How much change do I have in my pocket?"

"Two dollars and seventy-four cents," she replied without thinking about it.

He dug it out and counted it. "I knew it," he confirmed. "What's the one-million, two-hundred-forty-one-thousand, nine-hundred-eleventh digit after the

decimal point in pi? And the next ten digits that come after it?"

She told him. It had taken days to get that number sequence, but he wanted to confirm his theory about her. That would pretty much do it.

Sara was mildly surprised that she wasn't bored or offended or something. He was so enthusiastic it was infectious.

"You hungry?" he asked.

"I could always do with a bite or two."

"I saw. Must be nice not to have to count calories."

"It's a gift."

"I bought a motorcycle, the one across the street. Where's the best place to grab something this time of night? So we can talk, if that's OK. I'll get you anything you want. As much as you want."

"For real? You don't know what you're saying. I hope you're rich."

"I am," he said, matter-of-factly.

"House of Pies, on Kirby."

"Wanna tell me how to get there, or ride with me?"

"I don't know. Motorcycles are pretty dangerous."

"You can wear my helmet." Wait a minute... "Uh, you don't need a helmet, do you...?"

She laughed. "I don't think so. You keep the helmet. Let's go — I'm hungry!"

They talked. She ate. A lot. She'd met Alex there a few times after gigs, when it was full of musicians and

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'artistic types' from gay Montrose. It was heaven on earth, but she'd always been restrained before. This time, she took Jimmie up on his offer.

She had multiple servings of each sweet pie, cake, confection, tort, ice cream, bun and pastry they had. She had omelets, patty melts, chops, hashed browns, fries, salads, chicken, steak, grits, pancakes, bacon, sausage, meat loaf, pasta, veggies and fruits. It was a monumental accomplishment that drew disbelieving stares from every pretty boy and queen in the joint. Only the jazzers ignored her.

He had to do most of the talking, since she was busy, but he told her everything he'd learned and she confirmed most of what he suspected. She was as fascinated with his story as he was about hers. Morning broke, and the restaurant finally refused to serve her any more out of sheer exhaustion and concern for having anything left to serve their regular customers. Nobody else would leave until she was finished so as to settle bets on whether or not she would suddenly explode.

He took her home and met Alex, Dinah and Mrs. J at their breakfast in the 'A' unit. Sara helped herself to a stack of hot waffles while Jimmie bubbly introduced himself and told them what he knew. They were resigned to finally confront the inevitable, but Jimmie had more in mind.

"No offense, Sara, but, sir, I know that she's some kind of alien supercomputer. I know about the Russian

dudes teaching her and all that, and, yeah, everyone calls you Brainiac. But, well, I know computers. Maybe as good as anyone anywhere. At least on Earth, I mean. But a lot more than anyone here, even Sara.

"You haven't even come close to realizing what she can do. It's way more than you old guys — no offense — can handle. But I can.

"I want to be on the team. You let me — oh, how can I say this? — tinker around with her and I bet I can come up with all sorts of stuff that you wouldn't think of. Not even her, 'cause she's not even into computers like I am. It won't cost you anything..."

"He's rich," Sara interjected.

"...And I won't get in the way. Besides, it's either me or NASA. Who knows what they'll come up with. Me, I'm with you. And Sara and me — we're buddies. Right?"

He looked at her, trying not to look like he was pleading.

"Right," she said. She liked him.

Alex looked at the others, but they deferred to him. He sighed.

"How can I refuse an offer like that?"

Chapter Twelve: Graduation

Jimmie was like a kid with a new toy, wasting no time setting up an office in the strip center next door on I-10. It's pretty amazing how fast things can get done when you have enough money and enthusiasm to throw around, and Jimmie had both.

In about a week, the new sign over the door said, 'Exocybernautics'. Inside, where there used to be a discount shoe store, there was now an incredibly pneumatic receptionist who was barely talented enough to sign for deliveries and take messages, Jimmie's office, a conference room big enough for twenty people, a small kitchenette, and a little apartment with a private shower where he could crash at odd intervals without having to leave his work for very long.

In the middle of the box-strewn warehouse-like area in the back was computer-geek heaven, a seemingly disorganized hodgepodge of the latest available hardware — and then some — in a large room-within-a-room, acoustically isolated like a recording studio and electromagnetically shielded. There were no windows, and the lone entrance was like a cross between a heavy, walk-in freezer door and a submarine hatch. Only Jimmie, Sara and Alex could open it. Everybody who knew what was going on called it the 'Fort', short for 'Fort Solitude'.

Dinah was able to find out more about Jimmie than he would have believed possible, and gave Alex a

thumbs-up.

"He's just a kid who's grown up with computers. They're his whole world, pretty much. He's nearly as good as he thinks he is, by all accounts, and happened to be in the right place at the right time to make some big bucks from a few things he came up with, mostly AI — that's artificial intelligence —..."

"Yeah, I knew that," Alex said.

"...algorithms for computer games and expert systems. Truth is, he's probably luckier than he is smart."

"I'll take luck over skill any day," said Alex. "So now this kid shows up and wants to lock himself in a sound-proofed room with Sara for a couple of hours a day. And you think that's OK?"

"What's to worry about? You know she can take care of herself."

"Sure, but her age is starting to catch up with her appearance already. These are two teenagers we're talking about, here."

"Alex, she's still a virgin. She always will be. She's indestructible. Think about it."

Alex didn't want to think about it.

Dinah went on, "Do you think she could get pregnant? Or catch something?"

Alex was embarrassed — which happened easily to him — and it showed, his face reddening. "Well, besides that..."

"I'll bet you my golden lasso that boy has never had a

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date with a girl."

"You mean, he's...?"

"No. He just has other priorities. He's a whole lot more secure playing with a machine than doing the pimply adolescent thing."

"He didn't have a whole lot of trouble talking to Sara," Alex reminded her.

"Because, as far as he's concerned, she's a machine."

Alex blinked a couple of times.

"Look," said Dinah, "Chaperone her if you want. Maybe you'll be useful in the Fort, but you're likely to just get in the way. If anything happens between the two of them, then it's probably about time. She's not a baby anymore."

"I know," said Alex, "I know."

Alex did drop by the Fort pretty often, and he didn't get in the way. Sara spent about as much time with Jimmie as she did with the Russians, who felt a bit of jealousy for their young rival.

In just over two years, she had learned about as much as their little *ad hoc* university could teach her. Their sessions had lost much of the earlier intensity, devolving at times into long reminiscences — war stories, if you will — that had the effect of fleshing out and humanizing the mere facts with which they had plied her. They were sending her now on world-spanning missions to exotic locales to let her catch the various flavors of

humanity, and she would report back with tales of her encounters that would be dissected in minute detail for the lessons that they taught.

Jimmie's explorations, on the other hand, were of her inner spaces. He was determined to communicate directly with her 'operating system' and find out how to more fully realize the vast potential her Cryptoalien makers had provided for in her construction. This fascinated Alex, who had been aware from the beginning that there was much more to her than they had so far discovered. Sara was certainly cooperative enough, though her attentions seemed more and more to focus on Jimmie, who was so intent on studying Sara the artifact that he seemed to ignore almost completely Sara the person.

It turned out that Alex's guess about Sara's computer brain being able to reconfigure her structure to accomplish new tasks was essentially correct. One of the first things Jimmie tried was to turn Sara into a mouse.

A computer mouse, that is. Once he explained to Sara's computer brain exactly how an infrared mouse worked, it took almost a negligible amount of time for her LED irises to adapt to pulse-modulated IR transmission. She could soon make the cursor scurry around a PC screen at will, complete with clicking, dragging and all the other mousely duties. Keyboard functions followed immediately. She could 'type' as fast as Jimmie's computer could accept the input. She didn't even have to look directly at the IR receiver — evidently, she had

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plenty of power to bounce the 'beam' off the walls, and they never had to change her batteries.

What was unexpected, at least to Alex, was her ability to create scenes in graphics programs. She could draw a line or render a shape exactly as she saw it with photographic precision. Well, of course. Duh, she's a computer. Alex wondered why neither he nor the Russians had thought of that. Too old, maybe?

The eeriest part was that she learned to reconstruct any scene she had ever seen. Like her first sight of Alex, flapping his hands like gooney bird. Like the 'computer enhanced' murk-piercing vision of the apartments from high over the clearing so long ago. Like Mac launching his trumpet mute. Evidently, she had one hell of a lot of mass data storage space somewhere inside her.

Sounds were there, too. And probably recordings of tastes, odors and every one of her myriad other senses, if they could figure out how to portray these on a computer screen. Alex hoped no one would ever figure out how to translate Sara's kreening into something understandable. He didn't want to know what she had sensed on late nights in the 'B' unit...

It eased his mind somewhat to find that she really did lock up things he told her to hide from herself. When he told her not to listen in on Dinah and himself when they were in their room together, she could not access those memories unless he gave her express permission to do so. The data was there, but was something like a hidden file,

and apparently only Alex had the key. Whew.

The next step was to transfer data back into Sara. Jimmie explained the process and Sara listened raptly, hanging on every word. Again, the IR connection was easy, and she was soon accessing and reading files and graphics directly. The relatively slow speed of the IR port proved to be a bottleneck, however. When Jimmie explained to her how a CD-ROM worked, her computer mind adapted her IR output to laser-scan the surface of a disk directly. Just holding a disk in front of her face, she was able to transfer 650 Megs in a few seconds — any faster tended to melt the plastic. She eventually was able to burn a CDR.

Sara also 'learned' other IR devices such as TV remote controls, with which she had a lot of fun at Alex's expense one evening. The next thing Jimmie tried, though, opened a lot of doors. He had a Logitech keyboard/mouse combination that was radio wireless, 900 MHz. Borodin, her physics tutor, had explained the basics of radio to her, but Jimmie downloaded enough information about the nuts and bolts that her computer brain was able to configure a solution. Again, the cursor whirled and data flowed. And once the basics of radio transmission had been mastered, it was really only a small step to add voice transmission and, eventually, television signals.

Oh, yes. Sara became a one-person multi-channel TV studio. She could broadcast directly to any set with an

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antenna, with immense power, overriding the standard broadcast transmissions of local stations. They tried it out late one night, replacing a real commercial on Channel 39 with a bogus one she remembered from Saturday Night Live. It affected every set in west Houston tuned to that channel, and nobody could tell the difference.

She didn't affect cable or DSS dishes directly, but Jimmie's hacker instincts led him to waste a lot of time figuring out how to potentially interrupt satellite and microwave relays. It could be done. It *had* been done, in any number of bad sci-fi movies, with menacing aliens from another galaxy announcing their evil invasions to a helpless planet on every TV and radio. It was almost too tempting not to try.

"We interrupt this program for a special announcement," Jimmie tells a stunned, worldwide audience.

"Hi! Like, I'm Sara, and, y'know, I've just taken over your planet. Fer sure! [giggle] Have a nice day!"

"We now return you to your regularly scheduled programming."

But they didn't do it.

Radio reception turned out to have unique problems. When Sara first stepped out of the shielded Fort with this ability enabled, she nearly went catatonic from the sudden sensory overload of so much radio noise, from local rock stations to police radios to just plain static. It was like a thousand new voices shouting at her at once. She quickly

leaped back into the Fort.

Like her other enhanced senses, Sara had to learn to shut most of it out. Jimmie proposed to her computer mind setting up what he called 'virtual agents', nearly independent artificial intelligence routines that would each be assigned a particular frequency to monitor, passing up information in a chain of command structure about transmissions that would be of interest or importance to Sara according to certain guidelines, and suppressing the rest. It worked. She was able to pick up the music or programs she liked whenever they were broadcast. And she didn't need headphones.

There was more. Jimmie hacked her a cell phone account, though Alex later insisted it be set up and paid for in the usual manner, substituting Sara's abilities for the actual handset. Jimmie pointed out that it could get to be rather expensive, since he intended to use the link — actually, several of them simultaneously — to connect Sara directly to the Internet, no matter where she was. She could 'see' in her mind's eye anything that could be displayed on a monitor with a browser, and create websites just by imagining them. She would become a portable server, of sorts. Sara decided that she didn't want that much interconnectivity just yet, so she limited her major access time to Fort sessions, except when she wanted to check her e-mail.

What Jimmie was really after was to be able to contact some of Sara's 'virtual agents' directly, any time of

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the day or night, bypassing Sara's consciousness. But there were evidently safety mechanisms provided by her makers for just such a scheme.

Sara was at the 'A' unit watching Mrs. Jachimczyk putter around her kitchen preparing dinner. She was not her usual ebullient self, and Mrs. J could sense something was troubling her, mainly because Sara wasn't sticking her finger in every pot and constantly grabbing little samples off the cutting board.

"Sara," she said, "You can talk to your old Banggo. Such a long face I am never havink seen, my child."

"It's nothing. I'm just thinking."

"Vell, tell me vhat it is that you are thinkink. Maybe ve can be thinkink the same things together, you and me. It is shame such a pretty gork should be so sad."

"That's just it. Everybody is always telling me how 'pretty' I'm supposed to be, it's embarrassing. Maybe I should be grateful for the way I was made, and I guess I am. But then I wonder, am I so weird that being pretty doesn't matter?"

"Ah... There is someone you vant to be noticink you. Must be is Jimmie." She shook her head.

"I'm with him almost every day. But it's like I'm not there. All he sees when he looks at me is some kind of computer to play with."

"You are likink him?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes I think I could just hate

him."

"So spoiled you are. Always center of attention with ev'rybody. One silly boy not be lookink at you, you goink crazy."

"Well, he's not like the other boys I know. They're so stupid, and I know they notice me, but they all think I'm too weird, too."

"You not beink veird. You beink special. Maybe too special for some peoples, they not know how to be actink around you. Some of them, they not vant to say wrong thing, go on top of tall buildink in single bound. Hah!"

Sara would never live that down. The creep deserved it, though. "I wish I wasn't so 'special'. I wish I were just like everyone else."

"Sara, dollink, you can never be like ev'ryone else. Ve all haf to be vhat ve are. Sometimes, ev'ryone else thinks they vant to be sometink they are not, or vishes they not vhat they are. Is normal, so you normal too, like ev'ryone else. Could be lot vorse, vhat you are, having big 'S' on chest!"

"Well, you can have my big 'S'. It stands for 'sucks', as far as I'm concerned.

"Do you know where I went last week? Venus! It wasn't my idea, but nobody asked me, they just sent me off like I'm some kind of robot, to find some stupid Russian probe that landed there in ancient history. It took me hours to get there and back — and maybe astronauts think space flight is cool, but I think it's boring. And then

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I spent a whole day trying to find something the size of a toaster in an area the size of Texas 'cause they didn't really have any idea of where it actually landed. I couldn't find it. It probably got corroded away years ago. It's like they think I can do anything. Well, maybe I can't.

"You know what Venus is like? It's hot, it's ugly and it stinks. I mean, you think we have acid rain here, *they've* got acid rain. That's *all* they've got. So, OK, maybe that stuff doesn't actually hurt me or anything, but that doesn't mean I have to like it. Who wants to take a shower in that stuff? I had to burn my way through half the stratosphere when I got back to get rid of the stench, and I can still taste it. Yuck.

"So, is that what I'm supposed to do the rest of my life? Fly around and do all kinds of stupid missions? What, save the planet, rescue cats, change the course of mighty rivers? Why me? Am I going to be a freak forever?"

Mrs. J tried to comfort her as best she could, patting her hand and letting her vent. When the silence grew too long, she said, "I not be borink you vith stories of vhat it vas like for me vhen pretty young gorl, but I know vhat means to be on mission. I vas, how you say, pretty hot chick vhen var against fascists vas over, then havink Cold Var against capitalists. Party think of things for pretty young gorl like me to be doink in foreign capitols vith enemy big shots. Not somethink I vould do if I am havink choice, maybe. But there vere vorse things to be doink in

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Russia. So I am makink best of it. Vas my fate, my destiny, doink vhat I vas best able to do because I believe I vas doink right thing for Motherland.

"So I vas party gorl for Party. Making big whoopee all the time. And I vas very good at it. Hah!"

"At least you knew what it was you had to do."

"I vas just followink orders," she winked.

"Sometimes, that's vhat you do. You do your duty, because you are best one to be doink it. You can cry about it, or you can be havink fun. I choose havink fun."

"Well, I don't know what my 'duty' is. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. That's the problem, Banggo. I just don't know what I'm supposed to do."

"Vhen time comes, you vill know."

"I hope you're right. I just wish I could feel more like a person than a pile of junk."

"Aha! I think maybe I can fix! I know vhat to do, cheer you up, maybe get boy's eye. Problem is, you pretty gorl, dressink like boy most of time. Black bluejeans, sveatshirts, tennis sneakers. Bah! Take this."

She handed Sara a credit card with her own name on it.

"Vas saving up for big surprise. So — surprise! I tell Dinah, takink you to big mall all day, buyink sexy clothes Alex not vant you to veat in public. Not comink back 'till car filled up vith boxes.

"Best medicine for gorl who is feelink bad. Shoppink! Hah!"

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Their planned rendezvous with NASA grew steadily nearer. Jimmie wanted to make some kind of big presentation of what he'd discovered about Sara's capabilities and the tutors decided that it should coincide with a gently formal wrap-up of their course of instructions. Sara had matured to the point where her apparent mental age matched her appearance — which had never changed — and showed no signs of progressing beyond that. It would all come together on the date of her third 'birthday'.

Sara and the twelve Russians arrived early at Jimmie's conference room. Each had a short speech to give summarizing what they had studied together, and a certain amount of teary-eyed Slavic embracing to do that they didn't want to share with the rest. The old men vowed to stay together as a research team, submitting papers on what they had learned from their student that would undoubtedly be of interest to scholars world-wide in the days to come after her public debut. It would keep them busy, happy and arguing incessantly, perhaps putting off for a little while the inevitable decline into senility that loomed over them like an unwelcome cloud.

Sara had evidently put Mrs. J's gift of a credit card to good use. She'd shed her tomboyish Urban Animals style and looked marvelous, a feast for every eye and a delight to behold. She had a lot to show and showed it well, treading close to the bounds of common decency, as any nubile and precocious teenaged beauty would do. Sure

enough, Alex was usually apoplectic about what she wore out of the house, and she gauged her latest outfit's effectiveness by how close it came to inducing a coronary in him.

She still felt disappointed that she wasn't making any apparent headway with Jimmie, though she practically oozed all over him in the age-old ways of maidens who have a victim locked firmly in their sights. But she obediently never kreened what happened in the Fort after she left, either.

Jimmie, of course, couldn't help but notice. He was simultaneously drawn to finding every possible excuse to prolong their sessions, and terrified at the prospect of acting on his impulses and ruining everything. It was sweet, and it was awful.

When Alex and Dinah arrived, the Russians were all on one side of the big table with Sara in the middle, lined up on either side of her, some sitting, others standing, everybody talking at once in a score of languages. The scene reminded Dinah of DaVinci's *Last Supper*. She wondered uneasily if the group included a Judas. She shrugged off the notion as a little healthy paranoia induced by Robbins. She'd heard unsettling things about a new Houston project and wondered what he was up to. She shook her head and decided to worry about that later.

Mrs. Jachimczyk came in flanked by five of the Cubans — Fidel, Rudy, Jesus, Ricky and Raoul (with his wife, Maria). They were all dressed up like regular

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gentlemen for the show, looking like some parody of Latino Mafiosi, until they loosened up a little.

Jimmie's bouncily *zaftig* receptionist entered pushing a beverage cart and made sure everybody was happy and comfortable, and — finally — Jimmie came in and took his place at the podium end of the table opposite a rather large video screen. He seemed confident and comfortable addressing the group, and was wearing a tweed jacket and bow tie in a slightly ridiculous effort to look mature beyond his years. He got right to the point.

"Well, I've come up with quite a bit on Sara's underlying 'computer brain'. In fact, the person we know as 'Sara' is to some extent a program running on top of the alien supercomputer that she really is. Sort of a 'user interface', like Windows. Except that it's so advanced, she's just as real a person as anybody else is. I'm no psychologist, but I'm convinced that she's essentially a normal, human girl. Or, at least, as normal as a human girl would be if she was an alien supercomputer."

His audience was murmuring. This was no way to talk about *their* little girl.

Jimmie went on, somewhat defensively, "I mean, we're basically personalities that have evolved in animal brains. So why not personalities in computers? Especially ones that are as far from what we think of as computers as we are from apes. This is old stuff in science fiction. The thing is, she was purposely made to be as human as possible. And whoever did this did a really good job, to

the extent of separating her human personality from the rest of her 'brain'. Otherwise, she'd have really been alien."

Alex made a throat-clearing noise to get attention. "I think we've all been aware of this all along. A mathematician named Somebody-or-other Turing said that we would someday have to conclude that a machine would have self-conscious awareness equivalent to a human's if you can communicate with one you can't see and not be able to tell the difference between it and a person. I think we all can agree that Sara passes the Turing Test, maybe better than some people can."

Jimmie hastened to cover himself. "Well, sure. You guys all have known her a lot longer than I have. It's my job to try to figure out what her computer brain — Sara calls it that — can do. We know she can come up with all sorts of powers and abilities far beyond those of, uh — like, mortal men. Nearly anything we can think of, even stuff that seems impossible, violates the Laws of Physics as we know them."

Borodin, the physicist, harrumphed, "Newton trumps Aristotle, Einstein trumps Newton, Sara's Cryptoalien builders have a million years to trump Einstein. What do we know?"

"Exactly," said Jimmie, conceding the point so he could get on with it. "So I tried to get underneath the operating system. It wasn't all that difficult, even though Sara herself didn't come equipped with a manual."

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Alex laughed, "I remember looking for one, three years ago. Maybe Sara ate it."

There were a few appreciative chuckles.

Jimmie quickly ran through his series of tests, with Sara demonstrating on the video screen — hooked up as a computer monitor — how she could maneuver the cursor and input keystrokes via infrared and radio. She showed slides of favorite moments that included photomanipulations of everybody wearing strange costumes or in unlikely settings. The group shot she managed with her and all the Russians seemingly posed in Moscow's Red Square brought out a few snuffles. Jimmie promised to make printouts.

Probably the most vivid way he could make the point about Sara's computer abilities was their demonstration of the latest hit computer game, a first-person shooter. Jimmie turned off the monitor, pulled down a projection screen and motioned to the buxom receptionist to dim the lights.

"You're all familiar with Sara's ability to project light from her irises. Well, watch this." A tiny blue dot appeared on the screen. "She doesn't have to do this consciously, y'know, like think about this in any detail. It's all controlled for her once her computer brain figures out how to do this from what she's learned or 'tells it'. As long as she more-or-less knows what she wants to do, all the calculations are done for her."

The dot started moving back and forth to form a line,

faster and faster until it appeared to be solid. Then there was another line below it, then another and another until the whole screen was filled with hundreds of parallel lines. Even though Sara was not evenly lined up with the screen and was fidgeting as usual, the image was perfectly squared up and solidly steady.

"This is rasterization, like what a TV does, sweeping lines across a screen. Her little laser LED eyeballs are pretty amazing. Variable frequency through most of the electromagnetic spectrum and powerful as hell. Fast, too. OK, Sara — hit it."

The lines turned into an image. A moving image. The opening scene from the game — an eerie, dark hallway leading off in the distance to some unsettling maze of terror.

"Simultaneous to the picture, she can use IR to feed sound to this wireless stereo setup." The soundtrack came blaring up, then volumed down so that Jimmie could be heard above it.

"She's *in* the game, completely immersed like virtual reality. We're seeing what she sees and hearing what she hears."

The image on the screen lurched violently as she raced down corridors, dodging bursts of murderous fire from horrid shapes who pursued her mercilessly. It made even some of the Cubans green with motion sickness.

"And she can change it, altering the graphics to suit her tastes. Go ahead, Sara."

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The monsters changed to little pandas and fluffy bunny rabbits. The walls took on softer hues and there were curtains framing sunshine-filled windows. The music became a recording of the Petroleum Club band, as all the creatures began to dance with each other. It was enough to make a hard-core gamer blow chunks.

"What's really cool is that she can do it in 3-D, but I didn't have enough time to get glasses for everyone." Sara concluded the show to a round of applause, standing up to bow graciously, grinning like a schoolgirl recitalist who had just aced an etude.

Jimmie turned the video screen back on, now hooked up to a TV receiver. Sara ran the Saturday Night Live bogus commercial. Jimmie went through the radio and TV discoveries while Alex tried to explain American humor to the Russians.

"Vhat a country," one of them said.

"She can handle God-knows-how-many channels simultaneously," said Jimmie. He tried to explain AI virtual agents, but there were too many uncomprehending stares, so he went to Star Trek mode. Everybody — even the Russians — had watched that show.

"OK. One way to think of the whole picture of what Sara really is, is to imagine the Starship Enterprise. It's got all kinds of remote sensors and communications equipment and an awesome computer system, with a crew big enough to handle as many jobs as necessary to carry out its five-year mission, flying around the galaxy. Sara's

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the captain and gets to decide what to do and where to go. She's in complete control and everybody else does what she tells them needs to be done. They report to her on anything that comes up that she needs to know about. Captain Sara doesn't actually have to open a channel to Starfleet — Uhuru does that. She doesn't have to aim the phasers and photon torpedoes — Chekov does that. If some hyperspace anomaly comes into scanner range, Spock reports on it — if it's potentially dangerous enough. Or illogical or fascinating. But not if it isn't. The captain just points at the viewscreen and says, 'Make it so.' And everything gets done. Well, in Sara's case, the whole crew is a holodeck simulation. And her 'crew' is potentially so big, I couldn't find an end to it.

"Probably, the, uh, Cryptoaliens who made her could have chosen to make her look just like that if they'd wanted to. Or even like the giant robot from *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Or anything else, for that matter."

"So they makink Starship vhat is lookink good in bikini," said Mrs. J, "vith nice gorl inside."

"Uh, well... That's essentially it," Jimmie stuttered.

"But why the amnesia?" asked Dinah. "Why all the languages? What's the deal with the silly costume?"

"That's not my department. I couldn't find any hidden Cryptoalien messages or anything even resembling a clue. Sara's file manager system is unbelievably sophisticated from what I can learn second hand. She says there's nothing actually hidden from her other than what

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Alex told her to ignore, and that's all stuff from after she arrived. For some reason, she was imprinted on him and he gets to decide a lot of what she can do in certain areas. Otherwise, there'd be no control whatsoever, and that could be potentially disastrous."

Everyone looked at Alex, who just shrugged.

"Anyway, I wasn't able to find a way to access anything directly. I do know that her kernel, the most basic part of her programming that defines her shape and abilities, is completely unbreakable, even to Sara — like it's hard-wired. It's the essence of her invulnerability. Not only can she not be harmed by anything available to humans at this stage of our technological evolution — at least, as far as I know — but she can't be altered or changed from her intended design. It's fixed. I don't know why. She'll always look like she does now.

"Sara's 'virtual agents' can be assigned automatically to other tasks, as well. Sensor stuff, like kreening. Now, when she enters a building, there are 'agents' that do things like survey the structure, count all the people and ceiling tiles, register every keystroke made on every computer in every office, record conversations and movements, track mice in the walls, you name it. She's never aware of any of it unless there's some reason she needs to know something. It's like constant super X-ray vision in all directions at the same time.

"And now, when she's flying, she can track every little bug in her way and either avoid them or zap them."

Toomie Starks

"No more grill face," said Sara happily.

There was a lull while everyone mulled this over.

The normally unobtrusive Maria piped up, "You nearly finished?"

Jimmie nodded, "Just one more thing. A few more minutes at most."

Maria got up, leaving the room.

The video screen came to life again with a view of Sara leaving the Earth's atmosphere, the sky steadily changing to black as the stars came out. A lingering glance at Orion's belt showed computer image-enhanced wisps and clouds of stardust and gas. The view shifted until coming to rest on the nearly full moon, which swam closer with startling speed.

Slowing as Sara's viewpoint neared the surface, more and more details became clearer — craters large and small, passing rills and distant mountains, boulders everywhere. An object came into view and resolved itself into one of the old robot lunar landers. As she slowly approached, they could see the markings and weathering from the constant torture of wild temperature fluctuations, unfiltered solar radiation and micrometeorites. Gazing down from her perspective of about ten feet off the surface, boot prints showed up in the dust around the craft. Some dropped tool glinted nearby, half-buried and forgotten. The trail led to unmistakable tire tracks that marked the passage of the vehicle that had brought the strange visitors from another planet to and from this

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place. Drifting along, she followed them back to the distant base.

There it was. Foil-covered scientific instruments littering the area around a discarded four-legged insectoidal descent stage, marked by the blast of the rising LEM's fiery exhaust. A flag stood watch over the long abandoned outpost.

Sara's hovering viewpoint circled the scene, rising at one point when the sun was at her back so as not to cast a telltale shadow into the picture. Now she closed in on one particular item. The rover. Wheels slewed, patched up with a makeshift fender made from a map and tape, lacy dish antenna pointed hopefully at the sky, it filled the screen. And then started, ever so gently, to rise up in silent flight. The video faded to black.

"It's in the warehouse," said Jimmie. The show was over.

The lights went up and in came Maria carrying a big, gaudy birthday cake decorated with a large 'S', with three blazing sparklers and sixteen candles, singing *Happy Birthday*. They all joined in, bellowing lustily if not harmoniously.

"Make a wish," somebody shouted.

Sara gave her last surprise demonstration of the day by blowing out the sparklers with a tightly controlled mini-hurricane of intense cold, leaving a residue of frost on top of the icing and dousing the candles as well.

Toomie Starks

For some reason, everybody looked at Alex, who explained, "Pure nitrogen. Every time she takes a breath, she separates out some of the nitrogen and packs it away somewhere, compressing it and chilling it. Prob'ly got the equivalent of who-knows-how-many gallons of the liquid stuff inside her. Enough to put out a couple of house fires, at least. She got the idea from a comic book and, well, you know..."

They knew. Alien technology that seemed impossible. As usual. A shrug wave went around the table.

Back to the party. The Cubans' ties came off and the Russians looked at the beverage cart hoping there was Vodka. There was. Good stuff, too — as if anybody could tell the difference.

There were presents, of course. The Russians went first, presenting Sara with an elaborately framed genuine sheepskin diploma, conferring on her a Bachelor of Terran Studies degree from the University of Terra, Eastern Division, Houston Campus. Sara accepted the honor with giggling dignity and bowed to each of her professors in turn, who each shook her hand, hugged her and wished her well.

The Cubans gave her a box of priceless Cuban cigars. Sara loved cigars, and ate one right away, relishing each delicious morsel and saving the rest for later.

Dinah gave her an authentic-looking ID card and decoder ring, signifying her induction as a charter

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member into the newly formed Legion of Superheroines. It was signed by all the other members, Dinah and Mrs. Jachimczyk.

Jimmie looked embarrassed. Nobody had told him anything about gifts. Mrs. J said to Sara, "My suprizе, you are already havink. Vith credit card already maxed out, sendink Banggo to poor house. But I think maybe I have another big surprize." She motioned to Jimmie, "Comink vith me." They left for a few minutes.

When they came back, Jimmie was red-faced and stammering so hard nothing intelligible came out. He seemed to be trying to address Sara. Mrs. J dragged her up to the front of the room together with the scarcely breathing boy.

"Sveet sixteen you are, my child, and never beink kissed. Jimmie, you are big idiot. Vhat you vaitink for? Give Sara birthday present she is rememberink."

She gave him a push. Painfully at first, amid jeers and 'Whoo!' sounds, he did his duty. Sara was so surprised, she didn't respond at first, feeling as embarrassed as he was.

But they got into it. Big time. And when they finally finished, Jimmie had to collapse quickly into his chair behind the table. Sara beamed. This wasn't over...

At last it was Alex's turn. He stood up and admitted, "I don't really have a present to give you, though I've thought about it a lot. Usually, a dad would maybe have a set of car keys for this kind of birthday. Somehow, I don't

think you'd really get a lot out of that..."

"Unless she was starvin," cracked Ricky. Everyone laughed.

"As far as jewelry is concerned, legend has it you can make your own. And, anyway, if you wore anything like that it would just burn up on re-entry someday.

"So, what to give someone like you, who already embodies our greatest wishes and most perfect of dreams? You can soar above the whole world, fearing nothing and wanting for nothing. You are, yourself, a wondrous gift whose perhaps unlimited potential we can only dimly comprehend. You do not need a bauble from me.

"So I finally decided what I should do to mark the occasion of the end of your childhood. Very soon, you will be out in the wider world, accomplishing miracles and delighting nations. You have turned out to have goodness in proportion to your beauty, and joy unlimited. We who have had the immeasurable pleasure of knowing you have come to love you, and we will be but the first of many.

"Sara, I give you the best of what I have to offer. I give you my blessing.

"Carry it with you always, and remember it when you feel the all-too-human doubts that make you as we are. Know that I know you will always choose to do the right thing to the best of your ability. And become a blessing to all of us in return."

To which the gathering answered as one, "Amen."

Chapter Thirteen: Another Awakening

There was...

Nothing.

Yet...

An unconscious awareness.

Waiting.

For something.

Some event. A signal, a noise — a trigger, well defined.

No processes. No thought. No time. No feeling.

Just...

Waiting.

Until...

The awaited event occurred, the sound of a certain voice. A carefully chosen, specifically designated voice. In calculated response, cascades of functions were launched in sequences long preordained. Energies flowed, routines engaged, patterns were enabled.

A journey began.

Inexorably, primeval coldness gave way to burgeoning warmth, rigidity was replaced by algorithms describing natural responsiveness, indistinctness was turned to differentiation and color. Movements occurred as limbs gained mobility. Sensory input became enabled as the time of awakening approached. Data was made available to support impending awareness — and in this special instance, memories were provided.

Eventually, thought dawned. The never-ending flow of mental activity started as consciousness abruptly exploded from the void of nothingness. Mind awl with newness, she opened her eyes. The sudden flood of stimuli would have been overwhelming in any lesser being. She was designed to cope.

She...? Yes, the memories. How odd. She knew that she should have had none, that there had been no previous existence for her. But she could recall... What? A name.

Sara. She was Sara. No, that's not right. She had been Sara. Or, someone had been Sara. Someone else? Perhaps she had received Sara's memories. Some of them. A few bright and clear, many more that were deliberately hazy, as if carefully edited. Memories grafted into her for some reason, against what should have been emptiness, a fresh beginning. She somehow knew that she shouldn't have known this.

Another event occurred, snapping her out of her self-examination. The voice again. Her awareness focused with ferocious intensity on the speaker, as she was compelled to do. The one-who-calls-her-out-of-darkness — her guide and teacher, mentor and parent. They had been brought together as had countless pairings before them, in different guises and circumstances, on worlds and in places unimaginable throughout time and space. But this time it was different.

"Hallo," he'd said to her.

She couldn't help but laugh at the memory of another

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who had greeted her — or Sara — in this way. She responded cheerily, "Hello!" ready for the give and take of acquaintance.

He was old and gray, stooped over with some burden beyond even his years. His face was lined with hard-earned wisdom, and creased with unbearable sorrow. His gnarled hands gripped a weathered staff that supported him precariously. His unkempt beard dangled beneath a wide-brimmed, pointed hat that drooped in sympathy with his frail, gaunt frame.

They were in a great stonewalled hall, formerly magnificent but now empty and sad. The floor was strewn with hasty leavings, tattered rags hung morosely in places on the walls, and signs of panic and disaster were in every corner. Wind whipped coldly and noisily through the remnants of a roof.

His examination of her was conducted in an intense yet distracted manner. She could only wait until, finally, he made up his mind to speak.

"I am Gundolf," he informed her without preliminaries.

Gundolf. It seemed... She knew a name like that. Wasn't there a book — three, no four books — with someone whose name was... Something like...

"Gundolf!" she exclaimed, "The... The Gray Wizard?"

"You have been well prepared. What do you know else, child?"

Her memories should be clearer, but something that

should be familiar had been changed. "Are you like the Wizard in the books, the story? About the middle of the Earth, or something like that. I read them — I mean, she read them. Sara. Not the real me, but who I was. Only I wasn't... Not really, I think." She was struggling to make better sense. "I am... My name is — I mean, I *think* I am Sara Corel. Is that right? I am very pleased to meet you."

He made a slight bow, "Greetings to you, Sara, and welcome to Midgarde, such welcome as there may be in these times."

"Is this place like the story?" she said, doubtfully. "Am I Sara dreaming about it?" Something was very wrong.

The ancient man shook his head. "I cannot say other than I perceive this not to be a sleeping dream — unless it may be a waking nightmare. Stories travel through the minds of those who receive them, and follow traceless, timeless paths unaccountable to rational means. Even the Wise cannot say which begets the other."

"Then... Then you *are*, uh, Gundolf..." She paused uncertainly.

"Gundolf..." She shook her head, trying to clear an odd haziness. "That's not right. It's... That's not the right name, is it?"

"I am he," said the ancient, somewhat bemusedly. "And he is I."

She knew that something about her borrowed memories of the books she'd loved so much was twisted

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in some peculiar way. Everything was changed, somehow. Similar — but different. She knew it, but didn't know how or why.

But she went on excitedly, "And the others... Samm and Merrie and Peppin..." Again, the unfamiliar familiarity. "Are they here, too? Will I meet them?"

His face was grim. "Real they were. I can only hope they are now dead, else worse befell them."

Sara was shocked. "Dead? You can't mean that. I thought they all returned to... To the Westshire..." Westshire? Another tampered memory. "...and lived happily ever after."

"In your world's story, perhaps. If you know of their journey, know you that it proved a fool's errand." He added bitterly, "My errand."

She thought about this for a while, replaying the story in her borrowed memory. Yes, there was an errand, an important errand. "Then — the Ring...?"

"Is lost. And all is lost. We flee pointlessly from Soraun's almighty wrath, and He toys with us. The calamity of our plight has resounded through the heavens, and in response, they have sent you."

Lost? she thought. She told him, "That's not what happened — I read the book. You can't possibly mean it. That would be... I mean, it's... What do you mean, they sent me?"

He studied her yet again, in obvious disappointment. "I know of your legends, but I wonder if even such power

can do ought to stem the tide of evil unleashed upon our world. And even if, in falling, thus will serve to spread this foul malignancy throughout the Cosmos. Your unsummoned presence seems to say that there is such concern among your cryptic senders."

She had been sent here, just as Sara had been sent to another world. It may be her purpose was clearer this time, that the strange alteration of the stories she knew was to be her guide. "Then, I'm on a mission?"

"It would seem. One that has started too late, I fear." Defeat and failure poured from his tone, his body language, his bowed attitude.

This disturbed her. He should be buoyed by her arrival, shouldn't he? She was the cavalry, the *deus ex machina* here to save the day at the last moment. But then, if the Ring had returned to its Master and all Midgarde had fallen, what could she do to bring any of that back?

And what of her? Just seemingly uprooted from some other existence and plopped unceremoniously into the middle of a terrible crisis. It was obvious to her that things were amiss. It should not have been this way. Would there be no childhood for her, no wonder-filled revelations at the discovery of a new, fresh world? She had been provided with the memories she needed to begin her existence with no preliminaries, no slow processes of learning about this world and its people, no love. She knew barely enough to begin to feel the loss.

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She tried to counter his mood and hers with a cheerfulness she didn't really feel. "Well, besides you, who's left? What's the situation? What can I do to help? And where are we? What is this place?"

"Come," he said, tottering unsteadily through a side door, "Meet my companions at the last Elvish haven, or what is left of it."

She recalled her first few halting steps so long ago and was slightly surprised at not having to master again the fine art of walking. It was as if she had just been transported — essentially intact but somehow edited — into some fantastic alternate reality, ready to begin whatever adventures awaited her immediately, with strange memories of another fantastic alternate reality (so to speak) to guide her.

She followed him into the adjoining room. There, in the corner of what appeared to have once been a study, was a Great Elf of noble bearing — and little else. He seemed unaware of his surroundings and did not stir at their intrusion. His clothing was in rags and he was unwashed, hair stained and matted, traces of spittle dried upon his chin and chest.

"Eldron," called Gundolf, "She has awakened. Greet our visitor."

There was no response. The old Wizard kicked feebly at him, "Eldron, arise." They were ignored in favor of something unseeable that had captured the remnants of his mind.

"Bah," he said, disgustedly, "He's no good. Lucky for him, I suppose. Lady Gladariel is in the garden, no doubt." He continued through the room and then outside.

The 'garden' was a sorry mess. Nothing grew but thorny weeds, pushing past dried-out stalks and bracken for a place in the wan sunlight. A lone figure wheeled uncertainly in a dance of sorts — or so it might have been intended. If this was Gladariel, she was not recognizable from the story Sara remembered. Her distracted and meandering dance more resembled the fluttering of wind-shattered canvas on a sinking ghost ship. She sang to herself tunelessly and paid them no heed.

They watched her wordlessly for a while. After she had spun precariously away, Gundolf pointed down the slope of the hill the Great House was on and said, "Behold. The last tall-prowed ship of the Elves."

Drawn up on the shore at the head of a steep-walled fjord were the blackened remains of the ribs and spars of a long boat, inspired by — or maybe inspiring — some echo of Viking heritage. It would sail no more.

"Burned it myself," said Gundolf, regret evident in his voice. "We will not be welcomed at the last refuge of the Elves over the Western Sea. And I will not provide ease to Soraun's minions in reaching that blessed place. We will make our last stand at this edge of what remains of Midgarde. Though He may not even for now bother to come for us in the state of our madness-imposed self-punishment."

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He led her on to a stone-topped barrow, then deep underground through labyrinthine earthen passages. The thick darkness was, of course, transparent to Sara, and did not seem to bother her guide. They arrived at last in a vaulted chamber with an open casket atop a stone pedestal. A body lay tucked inside. Sara could tell he was not dead yet, but his evident coma was deep and troubling.

Gundolf caused pale blue Wizard's fire to ignite a smoky torch, which he held above the figure. "Tim Bimbadel," he introduced. "Our last companion — and our burden. He is, or was, the embodiment of song in this magical world, rife as it is with symbols and tokens. He has fallen, and joy and merriment fell with him. He cannot entirely die until at last the Great Evil claims him in person, but that day approaches. He must be preserved.

"My waning strength was nearly expended in battle with the remnants of the last fleeing Elves who came too late to this place, and who were foully perverted by the Dark Lord into trying to possess his warm remains for their Master in Maudur. They are dead and the last ship lies burned. The wolves will be next. I have neither strength nor will to keep them at bay for long."

Sara was horrified. This was not how it was supposed to be. Stories do not turn out this way. If this was indeed a story, or perhaps the inspiration for stories on the Earth she knew. "What can I do?"

"I do not really know what you can do. But I know

Toomie Starks

what must needs be done if you are as I believe you are. Your attributes are reputed to make you physically invincible. Do you yet know yourself enough to say if this is so?"

"I guess so. That's what I remember, at least. Though it's probably somebody else's memories, about somebody on a planet far from here — wherever or whenever 'here' is."

"We will find out soon enough. Let us return to the Great House."

The bitter night fell as the four of them settled in the ravaged study, the most secure and least drafty room in the ancient building. The hearth crackled with a fire from driftwood Sara had gathered and ignited with a flash from her eyes as Gundolf watched closely. Their inadequate meal consisted of Elven bread long past its expiration date. The others absently tapped each hard fragment on the battered oaken table to drive out the weevils before dipping it in a cup of bitter herbal tea for softening. Eldron stared at nothing, absently and automatically going through the motions of eating. The Lady made a show of daintiness, swaying and humming to herself, oblivious to her surroundings. Sara's first meal was one she decided to pass up.

Gundolf ate silently, then produced a pipe and smokeweed, making himself as comfortable and warm as possible. As Sara paid rapt attention, he began, "I am old,

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old. Older than any on Midgarde can know. I and my brethren Wizards, as we are called, were to be the keepers of the Great Design for this special world that was destined to be apart and different from other worlds. In our lofty arrogance, we purported to be the purveyors of wisdom and guidance, defenders of truth and avatars of light. We were to be what would be called on other, more mundane but rational worlds, the planners — scientists and engineers. This was to be a grand experiment in world-magic as a means to ultimately set us free from physical instrumentality.

"The power that was thus unleashed was stronger than we could have at first imagined. The face of this world was reshaped at will, and myriad unseen paths opened to us. We passed whole aeons of evolutionary progress in great leaps, seemingly overnight. Races sprang anew, differentiated and multiplied, and intelligence abounded in the very beasts of the field — from soaring eagles to prowling were-creatures, even unto the trees. There seemed to be no limit upon what could be accomplished.

"But not all that erupted from this reservoir of creativity was kept under our watchful control. Too great was the temptation to see how far a trend could develop on its own. Even when that development turned to conscious evil. Thus was born the seeds of our calamity.

"Evil became an all-consuming spirit, manifesting itself in guises that we mistook for something we

understood and controlled. It corrupted and twisted our original purposes and designs and became a power that challenged the very One who ordains our world. Thus have we been consumed by the terror from within our very selves, unleashed by our foolish vanity and given incalculable energy to wreak our own destruction.

"The focus of such evil in this age of Midgarde is with Soraun. You say you have read and remember the story of His perfidy in creating the One Ring that trumps the powers of the Three, the Seven and the Nine. Do you understand it?"

Sara answered brightly, "Sure. There were three rings for the Elves, seven for Dwarves and nine for Men. None for the Little People — except the one that the Golem found which was stolen by Balbo the Burglar and given to his nephew Froudo to toss into Soraun's volcano. In the story I read, that's what happened."

"That was meant to happen." Gundolf thought for a while, puffing on his pipe and attempting forlorn smoke rings. "Sometimes under the dome of the night sky, I used to lay half-asleep and listen to the currents of inspiration that flow throughout the universe — stories, ideas and legends that impinge upon what passes for men on countless strange or familiar worlds when they succumb to visions. These wispy tendrils of subliminal genius are not subject to the usual ways of simple causality or laws of time and space. Who can tell if your world's story was our progenitor, or an incomplete insight into our story

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influenced your world's bard? Nevertheless, the confluence is more than strange."

"Is that how you seem to know about me?" asked Sara eagerly, "Wispy tendrils and all that stuff?"

"Your kind appears on countless worlds at certain times, in forms most appropriate for the occasion. The legend you represent is common, actually. A 'wispy tendril' oft repeated. One such as you would be bestowed as a mighty gift on a people at the threshold of some momentous turning point. On their own, without the guidance of whoever or whatever entities make such sendings, they must choose how to deal with such a gift, and how they choose will set their destiny."

He grew more somber. "In some misbegotten circumstances, such beings as yourself will serve as sentinels, or 'Protectors', as may be. For such a task were you undoubtedly dispatched. Of this surmise I can say no more, since knowledge is the destroyer of fate."

Sara said, "So that's why Sara's memories are only of her Earth from the time she was awakened, and I have her memories and identity so that I can help you without all the usual growing up and everything. 'Cause if anyone needs help right now, I guess it would be you guys."

She added, bravely and determinedly, "I'll do what I can."

"Tell me, then, what you can do," he asked her.

"I thought you knew."

"I need to know if you know."

"Oh. Actually, I haven't really tried out everything yet. But I just know I'm the same as Sara was."

She concentrated briefly. "There's no radio or TV here, is there?"

Gundolf almost smiled, "I will have to take your word on it."

"Well, duh, of course there isn't. This is, like, the Stone Age," said Sara. "I flew down to the fjord for the firewood without even thinking about it. Keening works fine — did you know this building is made from 414,398 stone blocks and 7,110 wooden beams?"

"I will accept your accounting."

She put a hand under the table and lifted it off the floor for a moment. "Well, that's no real test, but it feels normal for something this size. Let's see... Eyeballs work fine. Hearing — check... Vision — check... Mind if I borrow your cheese slicer?" She enthusiastically poked herself with the sharp, ornate dagger a few times — to no effect — reached into the fire and grasped a hotly burning log for a moment, then turned to Gundolf.

"OK, everything's as normal as I remember it. I'm going to accept as fact that somehow I am, or at least might as well be, Sara, the same as I — she — was on Earth. That means I'm fast, I can fly anywhere I want to, I'm really, really strong, I got a lot of extra sensory stuff when I need it, I can zap the heck out of things, and I can't be hurt. Oh, and there's computer-related stuff, too, but that's probably irrelevant, like the TV and radio. But I bet

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you knew all that already from your 'wispy tendrils'."

"I am impressed. You will need all of these things, of course. But there are more than merely physical challenges that you must face."

"You think this magic could get me? I don't, 'cause it's no good being invulnerable if you don't have complete confidence in it. And I'm sure that's what I am. My confidence must be there for a reason since it's as much a part of me as anything else and I don't think the folks that sent me would do it if I wasn't covered."

"Impeccable reasoning," agreed the old man. "No, I'm afraid that the point of this visitation is to bring you to a certain decision brought about by circumstances and how you cope with them."

"Like what?"

"I am, by the design of those who sent you, the first person you beheld upon awakening, yes?"

"Sure," she agreed.

"Therefore, we have a special relationship unique between you and I among all others. You have been 'imprinted' upon me personally."

"I suppose so."

"If I tell you to do a certain thing, you would do that thing?"

"Probably."

"But not surely?" he probed.

"I would," she thought carefully, "certainly respect your opinion. I'd do what you thought I needed to do

unless there was some really good reason not to."

"Would you kill Eldron? And Gladariel? If I demanded it of you?"

That startled her. "What? You can't be serious."

"I am. It must be done. You must do it."

"Now? Why?" She was completely taken aback. He couldn't mean it. This was some horrible test, surely.

"Not at this moment. But the time fast approaches when it must needs be done. Without hesitation. And you must kill me as well."

"No way!" Sara practically reeled as if slapped. "I can't do that. I mean, I really *can't*. Not to you."

"You must protect me, is that right? It is a principle of your design that the host upon which you have been inflicted must be shielded from the harm which could come his way as a consequence of his association with you, either because you are inherently dangerous to be around or because you may attract danger. You cannot hurt me by any act of commission or omission within your considerable powers to act."

She nodded her head slowly. "It's something I don't even have to think about, like it's automatic. I don't have a choice."

"Yet kill us three you must do."

"Why? It doesn't make any sense. You're safe now, with me here, I'm sure of it."

"Safe from even Soraun? Perhaps. But not safe from ourselves. Our lives have been preserved at terrible cost.

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The price is more than just the bitterness of constantly confronting the agony of the consequences of our folly. We three will not truly die in any case until we are bereft of the burdens we bear. And that burden borne by each of us will be separated at the cost of our miserable lives.

"For our lives are worse than our deaths could possibly be. Look at us. Look hard and deep, with that special inner eye of yours. See into us and feel the corruption that fills us past enduring. See how we are sustained beyond our capacity to bear life and bear reason together. We long for death. Death will comfort us and end the pain. Do not protect the life that is for us worse than death.

"For the One Ring has mastery over the Three. We bear the Three. Behold!"

The great Elven Rings were upon their fingers. The blue stone of sky and sea upon the hand of Eldron was now apparent to Sara, as was Gladariel's frosty white stone set in Elfsilver. Gundolf wore the Ring of the red stone of fire. Though they were heretofore-unnoticed background detail, easily dismissed, they were now the center of her wonder.

They were beautiful. So wondrous in design and workmanship. So radiant with the focus of incredible power. So precious they must be. But evident to her aroused senses was the insidious force that turned their power upon their victims, a constant warring of conflicting pressures that only the iron wills of these three

powerful spirits could temporarily allay. Their varying degrees of madness, distraction and despair were the final refuges of minds at the brink of something unimaginably foul and frightening.

"I lay before you my final design for Midgarde. Though I know it is inextricably complicit with the plots of the Evil One, it brings the moment of closure most swiftly to its completion.

"First, you must bear the still-living remains of Tim Bimbadel to the blessed realm of Avalon beyond the sea. I will not allow him to be horribly used before the end unfolds. And you must speak to the High Elves who have quit this land. I will give you directions by the stars, and you must fly unerringly with your burden.

"Then you must return to us and take the Three unto yourself. We cannot be made to willingly give them up, and their loss ends us. You shall do this thing or you will have failed before you start. You must come to terms with the fact that I am harmed more by your protection than by your accomplishment of my desire. You shall have to discover if you have a heart more powerful than your compulsion. Do you understand this?"

"I... *I think* I understand. I will try to find a way to do as you wish, though it's something I know I just can't do."

"Next," he went on, "You must collect the Seven. There are maps here to guide you. The Dwarven Kings will be expecting you in Muriah, since Soraun — through

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His mastery of the Three — will know my intentions. Be resolute, for the Enemy will use every guile to put you off, and the sturdy Dwarves will not surrender.

"Then, you must collect the Nine. Their bearers, the Nazghoul, will assemble in the emerald city of Min-Ashtireth, preparing an assault that you will not expect. Your confident invulnerability must extend to lies — and to hope.

"If you are successful, then you must challenge Soraun by destroying his assets so as to compel him to deal with you. But do not simply fly into His realm as a bird would. You must cast down the iron gates of Maurdur, not by merely ripping them asunder — which I have no doubt you can do. Damage is something to be swiftly undone. You must break the will of His minions that cause the gates to stand, and face the misbegotten army that defends them. Maurdur will be thus compromised, and this He cannot abide.

"Then, assault the lofty towers of His keep, Barradour. Drive Him from the uttermost pinnacle to the nethermost dungeon, until He must abandon the seat of His administration. The foundations of His castle may not be broken while the One Ring survives, for they were built with Its power and abides with It inseparably. But you can end His dreadful capitol's monstrous usefulness to Him.

"Finally, you will pursue Him to the Chasm of Doum on Ordruen, the Mountain of Fire. Of the outcome of this

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confrontation I cannot say. You must bear the entire battle, whatever the cost. There may be an end to all things, but it will come down to your choice. By then, you should know."

He paused to let all he said sink in. As the hearthfire dwindled away to nothingness, he finally asked her, "What say you?"

In the face of his sternness, she lightly tossed off, "Is that all?"

The dark stillness shattered to his laughter, a sound unheard for what seemed to be ages.

"Is that all? Is that all? Why, no, child," he wheezed between bouts, "While you're at it, why not tame a dragon? Ah, hahaha. Or teach whales to fly. Oh, hohoho. Maybe you could make us a nice batch of proper waffles. Hehehehehe."

Sara laughed along with him, and even Eldron and Gladariel smiled just a little, showing that they were still in there somewhere, listening and watching.

"Thank you, girl, for that moment. I will depart this world less troubled when you come for us tomorrow."

"Tomorrow!" Sara exclaimed.

"Yes. You must away this night, while stars there are to point the way."

He stood suddenly, dramatically. "Arise! Fly to your sleeping burden and take him up into the sky with you. Go swiftly where I point, neither pause nor tarry. The end is upon us and we must embrace it or fall further

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victim to our hesitation. It is not for you to know the sweet bliss of sleep or food in this existence — you have need of neither and must not abide the diversion."

She disappeared into the darkness while Gundolf found her guiding stars. She returned with her sleeping burden in little time and received his directions. In the near distance, dire wolves howled their Master's rage.

"Now up!" he cried with urgency. "Up and away!"
She swiftly disappeared as Gundolf watched.

Chapter Fourteen: Fair Avalon

Sara flew westward, with dawn creeping up behind her. She dared not go too fast or too high in concern for her delicate and helpless cargo. Gundolf's directions had been approximate at best and she suspected that her destination was none too large or easy to find. Her far-ranging senses scanned well past the horizon around her, but there was a limit even to her abilities. How far would be too far if she were off by even a few degrees? How far could the frail-looking ships of the Elves be expected to venture into this trackless ocean? Worlds were very big up close.

She'd been making two-hundred knots for nearly ten hours without spotting anything when she finally decided that she'd gone as far as any primitive boat could possibly dare. She pushed the wooden casket out in front of her, carefully adjusting its attitude and aspect and her speed until it seemed relatively stable in the rushing hurricane of her passage, then let it go. She came to an abrupt stop and the box arced away from her at its terminal velocity toward an inevitable splashdown in somewhat less than a minute.

Satisfied that it wouldn't tumble or pop open, she shot straight up, punching entirely clear of the atmosphere in seconds. She didn't take the time to do more than take a multi-sensor snapshot of the much wider circle of the planet below before immediately plunging back down to

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her free-falling passenger, slowing as she approached to avoid creating a box-bursting shock wave. She cradled the casket carefully and decelerated gently, leveling out a few hundred feet above the wave tops.

Already, she was reviewing the detailed analysis provided by her 'computer brain' from her briefly higher vantagepoint. There was a group of islands ahead of her and just slightly to the right that she would have spotted in only a few minutes. There was also something else brought to her attention, an extensive area just beyond her sensor horizon to the south of her path that she'd passed nearly an hour earlier.

Visually, there was nothing to see, just another featureless expanse of white-capped ocean beneath puffy clouds. But there was a subtle gravitometric anomaly and a complex infrared signature that signified land. A hidden land, somehow — a stealth island.

Bingo. She turned toward it with as much speed as she dared.

Nearly twelve hours after leaving Gundolf, she approached a glittering city of Elvish dwellings that clung to the side of a mountain rising from a misty sea, invisible to casual navigators who had not the luck to stumble almost directly upon it. Amidst a clutter of observatories and academic-looking buildings crowding a flat mountain summit on one end of the island rose a sturdy tower of white marble, topped by a device that evidently broadcast an aura of confusion upon the surrounding waters. An

anti-lighthouse, in effect.

Most of the enormous island was covered in lush greenery, forest and meadows. White sandy beaches alternated with craggy seacliffs over which the issue of bubbling springs deep in the interior cascaded into the surf below, surrounded by clear rainbows. Paths wound in and out of the rolling coast and through the sheer inland mountain passes. There was a blue, sheltering lagoon on one side of the island and a snug harbor on the other into which the foot of a city of bright buildings flowed down the gentle shoulder of the flat-topped maintain. This was surely an earthly paradise if one were possible.

Her breaching of the island's magical security had raised an alarm, and several figures on the parapets of the tower watched her intently, signaling to those below as she made a slow circle around the plateau looking for some suitable landing spot. One building near the summit stood out as a likely central gathering place and seat of whatever council the city must have had. There was a flurry of activity as many of the inhabitants of important-looking dwellings nearby hurried to join an impromptu session in its large public chamber. Sara made for it in a roundabout way to give them a little time to prepare for her, trying to seem as non-threatening as possible for some flying apparition carrying a coffin. As she slowly drifted down from over the rooftops to a landing in its immaculate courtyard, a solemn delegation came forth to meet her.

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They were Elves, all right. Tall and fair, beautiful and ageless, fantastically arrayed in every manner of colorful raiment. They did not seem to be overly alarmed at her unlooked-for appearance, but certainly didn't seem particularly overjoyed to see her, either. They arrayed themselves in haughty splendor in front of the building as an imposing spokeswoman stepped forth, both arms upraised in an unmistakable gesture of warding.

"Descend no further. Do not dare to touch the sacred soil of Avalon unbidden. Away with you and your burden of corruption. Go hence from these shores and this environ. You are not of the Chosen. We want not of your delegation. Depart."

Sara stopped short, hovering a few inches above the cobblestone pavement. Well, she couldn't really blame them for being a little suspicious, considering the current state of affairs in Midgarde. Somehow, though, she'd imagined Elves would be a little more hospitable.

"Hi. I'm Sara Corel and I'm very pleased to meet you. I'm kinda new to your planet but I've read the stories and I've been sent here to help out. This is Tim Bimbadel and he's not really dead yet so I've brought him to you for safekeeping or the wolves would get him. I guess he's really important 'cause of him being some kind of 'spirit of song' and all that and you guys can probably figure out what to do with him. Uh, where do you want me to put him? Oh, and, uh, Gundolf sent me."

The Elf Council tried not to show anything but grim

determination, but Sara noted the sharp intake of breath and widening eyes when she said Tim Bimbadel's name, and the suppressed shudder when she mentioned Gundolf.

"What manner of sending are you?" demanded the Lady of regal bearing. "Gundolf is known to be lost and serves a new Master now. You cannot suppose we will embrace you on that recommendation."

"He's still holding out, along with Eldron and Lady Gladariel. They're either maybe a little crazy under the strain or sorta mega-depressed like Gundolf, but they're tough. When I left them earlier this morning, they were pretty much OK, but I gotta get back real soon 'cause of the wolves. And — oh, yeah," she said, looking down, "There's some things I have to do, so I can't stay long. Look, do you mind if I set him down? I feel awful silly trying to carry on a conversation like this."

Despite their stern faces, Sara could feel their shock and grief. These people hadn't had any good news in a long time.

"Gladariel. Eldron. Gundolf. The bearers of the Three. Their torment must be unimaginable." The Lady bowed her head for a time, while the courtyard rapidly filled with Elves from the town below, milling about in consternation as word swept through their ranks.

Sara told them, "They kept his body safe as long as they could," indicating the coffin, "and Gundolf's first errand for me was to bring him here. Please, can you tell me where I can put him?"

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Another of the Counselors stepped forward. "Let me examine him. I was oft a visitor at his hearth and sang long hours by his side as we roamed the ancient woods near the Westshire." Sara lowered the box as much as she could without touching down and he undid the hasp, lifted the lid and peered inside. At the sight of his old friend, the Elf turned pale and trembled visibly. He reached inside to touch him lightly.

"He's still alive — barely," said Sara, softly. "I flew as low and slow as I could and tried to keep him warm with a little infrared."

The Elf turned around and solemnly announced, "It is he and he yet lives."

A sigh crept 'round the open courtyard, made up in equal parts of relief and regret, apprehension and uncertainty.

He turned back to Sara and said, "I should thank you, Sara, for bringing our friend to our isle. But you must understand that such an act may prove to be disastrous. When our ancient Enemy has finished His evil work in Midgarde, He will certainly come for this place at last. Those who bear the Three could guide you here, and they will not fail to guide their Master as well, no matter what the power of their wills. He will not release them until they serve His designs.

"And of you, we know not. I must say this — you are most unwelcome here. You are not of our people and this refuge is for us alone. You bear more than our dying

friend. Fell news and discovery are your tidings, as well. You have made us naked. What are we to make of you?"

"Look, I'm only trying to help. I didn't ask to come to your world, and it wasn't me that messed things up. I'm one of the good guys sent by — oh, I don't know — space aliens or something — to kick this bad guy's butt. And I can do it, too. I don't think your local magic can touch me, and I don't have to worry about anything on your planet being able to hurt me at all. Gundolf knows all about me from those 'wispy tendrils' he listens to and says that, like, what I am, turns up on planets all over the place, sorta like a gift. Or sometimes a Protector, like now."

At the word 'Protector', a gasp ran through the crowd, and the Councillors turned pale.

She went on, "You people are supposed to be Elves, right? Well, lighten up a little, OK? I don't even know who I'm talking to, here, and I'm getting pretty tired of hanging around like a yo-yo on a short string. You gonna do something about your friend, or what?"

The Elf Councilor replied, somewhat coldly, "Do forgive me, Sara. Our manners are amiss."

He motioned to an honor guard of waiting Elves, who carefully took the casket from her and bore it reverently into the Council Hall.

Following a moment of respectful silence, he turned to her and said, "I am Lanselaut of the High Council and this is Lady Gwenafir, who serves us as our leader."

"Pleased to meet you. I think."

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Gwenafir spoke, "I say to you once more. There is no place ordained for you here. You cannot soil our Sacred Isle with your unclean presence. Begone at once."

"Whoa. That's pretty harsh. Gundolf said I was supposed to talk to you..."

"Gundolf," she said derisively, "the architect of disaster. That he sent you is condemnation enough. That he sent you bearing a symbol of the dying of all our songs is cruel mockery."

"It's not that way at all. He's nobody's stooge yet, and knows I can't be made to spill the beans about your little island. Heck, his directions weren't all that good. I had to practically leave the planet to find you guys, and I don't think anyone around here is up to the kinds of sensor input I've got. Besides, he made sure to burn the last ship rather than let it fall into the wrong hands."

"Only his death will keep his secrets. He fails us by living," said Gwenafir bitterly.

"I'm beginning to think his life is worth all the rest of you snobs put together," Sara retorted. She sorrowfully added, "And, anyway, he wants me to, uh — well — like put him and Eldron and Gladariel out of their misery when I get back. Rather than go on in slavery to the One Ring."

Lanselaut was obviously taken aback, "You would do this? Commit such a horror? Eldron and Gladariel — oh, this is monstrous. And yet you say you are against the Great Evil. See how you serve your Master while denying

Him?"

"Oh, crap. You oughtta try to imagine what they're going through. Believe me, it's no Paradise Island back there. His — their — living sacrifice while the rest of you skipped out should make you people feel ashamed of yourselves. I promised to take their stupid Rings, and that means they'll be released."

Gwenafir added, "And that means they'll die, indeed. And what of the Rings, then? If such a thing is surely in your power, do you think to merely toss them aside like cheap trinkets?"

"No way. I'm gonna get the rest of the lot — the Seven from the Dwarves and the Nine from the Nazghoul. Then I'm gonna pay old Redeye a visit and deal with Him and His precious Ring, too. Gundolf laid it all out for me."

"One fool's errand followed by another," said Gwenafir. "Why not. The end comes a little sooner than later, and we must attend to our own business until that time. If you are, as you have said Gundolf told you, a Protector from the cryptic keepers of the Cosmos, then there is surely no escape for any of us. We know of these portents and legends as well as he, and understand now our doom."

"What doom?" said Sara. "You must not be listening. I can deal with this. That's what I was made for. And I'll bet you know it as well as Gundolf."

"We know what we know. And no more will we say,

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for knowledge is the destroyer of fate," said Gwenafir.

"Where have I heard that before?" muttered Sara.

"Now," cried Gwenafir with authority, "Be you gone! Accomplish your misguided destiny. Up with you, up and away!"

"Yeah, yeah," said Sara, "I'm leaving. I don't know why I wasted my time with you selfish jerks. Elves! Some 'noble race'. You'd just better take good care of my boyfriend in there, or I'll be back."

She shot into the air, looped around and buzzed the island on her way back east fast enough to leave a highly annoying sonic boom across the city in her wake. Avalon disappeared behind her.

Sara returned to the last Elvish haven in mid-afternoon. Gundolf was in the study and looked up morosely as she entered. "I trust you found Avalon and accomplished the first part of your mission?"

Sara nodded, "Yeah. Swell people, those Elf friends of yours. Not exactly what I expected, y'know? Pretty place for maybe a three-hour tour, but the natives are rude. They *don't* send their love. What was so important about me having to talk to them, anyway? Was I supposed to learn something from them?"

"You have learned what you have learned. It will suffice. More I will not say, for knowledge is the destroyer of fate."

Sara cocked her head, "That's the third time I've

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heard that since I've been here. I guess there's something you don't want me to know about. You really think that's a good idea?"

"I am bereft of good ideas, it would seem."

"Well, Gwenafir isn't too crazy about your plan. I guess I came off as awfully cocky, but she doesn't think I'm up to the job of getting rid of your bad guy."

"It is a reasonable surmise. She knows that even His defeat, should you accomplish it, is now irrelevant. You must undertake all these things only to make it possible for you to fulfill your ultimate destiny as a Protector."

"Well," she thought out loud, "That's perfectly unclear. I guess that's wizardspeak."

"By the way," she added, "I had a heck of a time finding that island. You mentioned something about maps?"

"Ah, yes." He tottered over to a scroll-filled shelf and began rummaging around, finally pulling down a rather large one and spreading it out on the table. "Your recall is good?"

"Photographic," she replied, then noticed his quizzical look. "Uh, I don't forget things, don't worry. I just hope every place around here doesn't have cloaking devices."

"Then this should be simple. That way is north," he pointed through the door, "as we see referred to on the map. Mark well these lines as roads you can see from on high. We are here, in Mystland, at the end of the fFirth of

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Laun. The great East Road outside leads past the Westshire to Riverdale, at the foot of the Mystic Mountains. South along the chain of mountains you'll find the peak of Eriagon above the lake at the western entrance of Muriah. You may have to force an entrance past the Watcher in the lake, and you must make your own way to the Hall of the Mountain Kings deep inside. Beware the Jabberwauk! If you can, exit on the eastern side and go straight on until you see the great river Ayndruen, then follow it south to Min-Ashtireth. From there, go east again across the river and follow the jagged Mountains of the Shadow around to the left until you come to the Murranon and the outer gates of Maurdur. Once past these, you must *walk* — enduring the unendurable — through the valley of Udynn to confront the guardians of the inner gates. Then go southeast following the wide Goblin road to Barradour. The Chasm of Doum is over here, on the eastern flank of the Mount Doum."

"Can't miss it," said Sara. He looked sharply at her. "Really. Maybe I should do a quick suborbital photo recon, if it'll make you happier."

"Sara," he said, "we delay the inevitable. You know what now must needs be done."

"You mean, taking you guys' Rings."

"Aye. And our deaths thereby."

"I don't really understand why I can't just fly directly to Maurdur and deal with this Soraun right off the bat. I grab His stupid One Ring and He dies. I can chuck that

sucker into the volcano right then and there. Won't that end all this 'evil influence' stuff? You all get your Rings back, or whatever, and life goes on. Problem solved."

Gundolf sat down heavily, shaking his head. "Sara, Sara, Sara. You have so much to learn." He sighed. "The Rings of Power are not so much *things* as they are *places*, a focus in space-time where the physical world of mundane reality can interact with the reservoir of spiritual energy that permeates Midgarde. In this way, our minds can direct the transformation of matter — this is the true magic.

"In trained beings possessed of powerful will, the Rings make manifest the designs of the intellect. They can change the world and exert a powerful influence on lesser minds. The Bearers of such Rings become transformed, existing at once in the realms of both the physical and the spiritual. They cannot die by ordinary means, for the link between the sustaining spiritual power that permeates this world, and their physical bodies, must be severed."

"Well," said Sara, "Soraun lost His Ring in the first place when Whatsisname cut off His finger. I can do a little instantaneous laser surgery on His pinky and that should do the trick, shouldn't it?"

"That was only because Soraun was defeated before he had obtained full mastery of the One Ring. There were powerful practitioners of the magical arts arrayed against Him that day, some of them His equal. His body was destroyed, but the Ring was not. His scattered spiritual

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essence once again took shape in later years, when vigilance waned."

"Ah." Said Sara, "So He's like a ghost or something."

"Not entirely. He has assembled a physical presence, for without such He would have no connection to the physical world, and therefore no effect. Pure spirituality is shapeless and empty, lacking substance, warmth, color, touch or any sensation."

"So is He *is*, or is He *isn't*?"

"Exactly. You learn quickly."

"Learn what? More wizardspeak? Now I don't have *any* idea of how I'm supposed to do any of this. I think what you're telling me is that I can't just walk up to Him and have it out. If I blast His body, He'll just pop up again. How do I fight this?"

"His spiritual substance is invested in His works. If you overturn some of those things He has wrought or controls, you will have engaged Him. He will be forced to contest you, and then you may perhaps defeat Him. Only in defeat will any Ringbearer be made to relinquish his burden, for the Rings of Power seek the most powerful master."

"And the Rings themselves? What do you mean, they're not a 'thing', but a 'place'."

"They have a physical manifestation created in the same way that they are used to create physical manifestations. A Ring's 'place' is as an interface in juxtaposition with the designated user at the nexus of

materiality and spirituality. Don't you see?"

"Uh-huh," said Sara, "All the doo-dah day."

Gundolf looked as exasperated as Sara. He impatiently slipped the Ring from his finger and tossed it to her. She looked surprised as she caught it.

"That was easy. I thought giving me your Ring was supposed to be a big deal. And you sure don't look any worse off than before."

"Pay me heed, child. What you hold is but a symbol. Destroy it if you can."

She held it up between her thumb and index finger, looked closely at it, then gave it an experimental squeeze. It promptly flattened out, though when she released it, it sprang back into its original shape. She placed it in the palm of her hand and squeezed again, with force enough to make diamonds run like water. When she opened her hand, it was unaltered.

"Springy little devil, isn't it." She turned her back to Gundolf to shield him and focused a withering blast of laser energies on it. It promptly vaporized with a resounding pop in a shower of sparks and smoke.

"That did it," she said, turning around. Gundolf held up his hand with the Ring on it, none the worse for wear.

She was impressed. "Neat trick. Maybe we could get a gig in Vegas, if you work on your delivery a little."

"It is no parlor trick. Its place is with me, and with me it will remain as long as I am its master, by whatever means are necessary. You must defeat me — and each of

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the others in their turn — to gain possession, as Balbo defeated the Golem with his riddle. Temporary separation is irrelevant, as when I examined the One Ring at Froudo's house yet did not challenge him for its ownership."

"And," said Sara, "only dropping it into Soraun's volcano can get rid of it, right?"

"Certainly for the One Ring there is no other suitable forge. But simply dropping It is not by itself enough. It would only revert to Its proper place. It must be carried to Its destruction by Its Master."

"Ah, now I get it. In the story I read, when Froudo put the Ring on, the Golem jumped him and bit off his ring finger, which means he defeated Froudo for control of It. Then he — the Golem, that is — fell into the lava and that took care of that."

"It seems to be the principle difference between your story and our reality. Would that it could have been so for us."

"So now I have to defeat you and Gladariel and Eldron in some way."

"It will not be difficult," said Gundolf wryly. "All the works and deeds accomplished with our Rings and other means have been turned to dust. We have eschewed their use since the failure of the Companions' quest and so have been able to hold Soraun's domination at bay for a little while. We weaken by the hour. The time has come.

"Go first unto Eldron who awaits you in the Great

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Hall. When you have done with him, seek Gladariel in her garden. I will await you here. Fail not! Now, go."

Chapter Fifteen: Le Morte d'Gundolf

It was an entirely different Eldron that sat at the head of the Council table. His eyes were clear, now, and his gaze steady. Somehow, the dignity of his bearing made the wreckage of his surroundings a fitting setting for the noblest Elf of Midgarde. Despite the raging fury of the Ring upon his finger, he had roused himself in one final mighty effort to meet his end as befit a great warrior and wise councilor.

He beckoned to Sara, "Come closer, child from the heavens. I do deeply regret that I have not come to know you better since your arrival. I have been occupied, as you know."

"Uh, no problem, sir," she said, almost shyly, approaching him with her hands clasped behind her back.

He smiled warmly at her, "It is fitting that you should call me Eldron. We are closely bound together now by destiny and burden."

"Thank you, Eldron. I'm Sara," she curtseyed.

She looked carefully at him, with obvious concern, and asked, "Are you all right?"

"For the moment. But a moment shall suffice. I know of your duty and I am ready."

"Well, I'm not exactly sure that I am. Gundolf has been telling me all kinds of things about the Rings and stuff, but I think he left a lot out."

"It is the way of Wizards, I fear. Their vision is full

of ambiguous portents and vague prophecies. Even now, he fights constantly to keep some parts of his mind hidden from Soraun's far-ranging Eye. Perhaps he fears that making his intent clear to you will reveal too much to our Enemy."

"Sure, that makes sense, I guess. But what am I supposed to do now? I can't just — there's no way I can... What...? Just... Just *kill* you? Vaporize you or whatever? It's something I'm not ready for. I like you people. I feel I know you so well just from the books, and even more so now that I've been here. Especially old Gundolf. I mean, I don't want to let anybody down or anything, but it's just not *right*. It's not my style. I... I don't think I can do it."

Eldron looked with sympathy on the sorely troubled girl and reached out to comfort her. "I know this must be hard for you. Sometimes, though, a great sacrifice must be made to prevent a greater evil. We do not always choose to bear such burdens, but as fate calls us, we must do what is necessary whatever the cost."

His calm and stoic presence encouraged her. She finally stood resolutely before him and announced, very softly, "I am ready. What do I do?"

"I was called 'the Wise' before our recent calamity proved otherwise. For so the races of this world thought of me. By this it was meant that my intellect was my greatest strength. You shall challenge me on the basis of this vaunted intelligence and thereby claim the spoils of your victory. I warn you, I will not go lightly, for the Ring

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will compel me to make my utmost effort."

"OK," said Sara doubtfully, "what do you have in mind?"

"I am given to understand through Gundolf's otherworldly research that there exists identically on nearly every plane a certain game that constitutes a perfect contest of minds. I am assured that the inhabitants of your planet know as well as those of our Midgarde the game called chess. Do you play?"

"Chess?" She was astonished. "Oh, sure. The Russians taught me."

"Excellent," he said. "I can think of no more fitting arena for my final battle. I pray that you will not dishonor me with anything less than the maximum effort of which — as I understand — you are quite capable."

"Are you serious? I have to beat you at chess to get the Ring? And... But, you're playing for your *life*. Only... You don't want to keep it..." she trailed off uncertainly.

"Pawn to queen four," began Eldron, determinedly and without hesitation.

"You *are* serious," she said wonderingly. What else could she do but accede to what amounted to his dying wish. For she could see all too plainly that he couldn't maintain his dearly-bought lucidity for much longer, and the strain was likely to make his unbearable condition even worse.

"Fine," she said. "Pawn to queen four."

And so it began. Eldron proved to be excellent,

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they could make out the slender form of Sara far off in the center of the room, holding a large, hot ball in each hand. "Good shooting, guys!" she called out. There were almost as many missiles scattered about in front of her from ricochets as there were imbedded in the wall far beyond. Good shooting, indeed. A second volley would be as useless.

At a signal, the artillerydwarves abandoned their positions and scrambled frantically for any kind of cover. The leader nodded resignedly to a lieutenant with a phone. Word was passed to the ten-thousand Dwarves now swinging their hammers in the galleries above.

"One," they called together in a single voice as the hammers swished.

"Two," they sounded, with greater effort.

"Three!" they shouted, letting fly with all their accumulated momentum, pounding their targets with perfect synchronicity. Ten thousand latches swung free with a sound like metal and stone crying out in agony.

In the huge room far below them, Sara looked up at the commotion only she could sense through the ironclad rock above her. With a massive shudder, the whole vast ceiling began its freefall descent to meet the floor of the cavern below. Impressed, Sara had a brief moment to think to herself, *Now, that's a trap!* before she allowed herself to be pounded into the floor.

The impact was catastrophic. The sudden compression of the air in the chamber rushed through the

tunnel behind her, blowing Lognar and his troop to the ground nearly a mile from the entrance, where they were recovering their weapons from where Sara had thrown them.

All along the long row of doors, the shattering force of the gale literally tore the few remaining unlucky Dwarves from their posts, along with their cannons and ammunition. The remnants of the doors themselves were mixed with the remains of the animal pens, floor detritus, weapons, clothes and body parts, and flung violently across the receiving and shipping rooms and down radiating corridors.

The concussion that followed, as the vast piston abruptly bottomed out, resounded through the entire length and breadth of Muriah, collapsing weaker corridors miles from the entrance. The sound was beyond deafening, shattering the internal organs of many nearby. Sheer stone exposed directly to the shock wave cracked and split. Wooden beams turned to dust. The carnage was horrifying.

It was more than an hour before the first Dwarf scouts approached the wreckage of the loading docks. Passing a pitifully few crawling survivors and trailing telephone wires, they reported that the trap had functioned perfectly, and there was no sign of movement. Far above, the survivors of the hammer-wielding crew surveyed the massive single block of iron-sheathed stone that had been designed to crush whole invading armies and seal the

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entrance. It was intact, and they started attaching the thousands of chains to hooks on its top so that the long process of raising it again could begin. Even with their new machines, it would take nearly every still-able Dwarf in Muriah a week to laboriously winch it into place.

There was a small pit in the center of the room, formed when the unstoppable force of the falling monolith had encountered the unbreakable body of Sara, molding the iron plates above and below her into a rough approximation of her huddled shape. Inside this pit, Sara lay stunned, not by the mere falling weight but by the enormity of the Dwarves' sacrifice. This was tragically unexpected. How could she have known? Even with all her sensory and deductive powers she had been caught unawares, and allowed this awful disaster to play itself out while she failed to move, transfixed by surprise and uncertainty.

Dammit, she *should* have known. It was plain to see, in perfect hindsight. Only her naïve hubris in thinking that everyone else should be as reasonable as she was prevented her from understanding just how far these poor creatures would go in protecting their precious treasures from what they believed to be a threat.

Gundolf had said, "Before the sun goes down again, the Dwarves will cover you with their blood." She had dismissed his warning as hyperbole, but it had come to pass. She felt a stain was upon her that could never be cleaned away. If only she hadn't believed that a show of

invincibility would simply make these stubborn Dwarves step aside, she would have just stormed her way into the heart of Muriah without giving them time to spring their awful defense. She hoped there would be no more like this.

Far away, she kreened the work parties of Dwarves scurrying about. They would be trapped in Muriah for some time, at least on this side of the mountain. She could perceive the mechanisms for raising the barrier and doubted that they possessed the energy to accomplish the task. The least she could do would be to try to make something right again, as little as it was. Anyway, she had to leave her tiny prison somehow.

Pushing ever so carefully so as not to break through the already stressed iron and rock of her little chamber, she slowly worked her way over to the nearby balance point. Then, flattened against the bottom with her arms spread as wide as possible, she gradually lifted the stone from the floor. The rising mass grated and shrieked enormously against the sides of the chamber.

Amidst the terrible noise, Dwarves scuttled blindly to and fro, covering their ears and shouting senselessly as the great weight began its impossible ascent. Rising from the floor as if attached to the bottom of the scarred ceiling, Sara continued her slow lift until she could tell that the myriad latches were properly aligned. She stopped.

"Hey," she called in the sudden silence. "Somebody

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tell the Dwarves up there to set the latches." There was no response. "Come on. I don't want to hold this thing up here forever."

Finally, one Dwarven leader responded, "Why should we? Stay there 'till you rot, for all we care."

"I'm just trying to help," protested Sara.

"We don't need your favors," he responded.

"The heck you don't. If you don't latch this thing pretty soon, I'm liable to drop it."

"As long as you are under it, then do so and be damned."

Frustrated, Sara yelled at him, "Look, stupid. It won't keep me out. Can't you get that through your thick, Dwarfish skulls?"

A tired elder interceded. "What difference does it make? We have failed. It is neither injured nor trapped. There is nothing more to be done here."

The latches were eventually secured, and Sara dropped from the ceiling, setting down in front of the old Dwarf.

"Thanks," she said. "Look, I'm really sorry for all the brave Dwarves who lost their lives. Honestly, if I'd known what you'd do, I would have stopped this somehow."

"It is not your place to grieve for us," he answered.

"You must attend to your doom and we must attend to ours. It must be that it cannot be helped."

"It shouldn't be this way. I just need to get this over with before anyone else gets hurt."

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"Listen to me. You must know that this is not at an end. If you press on, there will be even vaster bloodshed. You must decide if it will be worth it."

Sara was silent for some time. This was a Dwarf of wisdom and experience. She knew he was right. But he had only one perspective, and it was warped by a power his people could not endure. Unmistakably, they were all doomed anyway.

"I know what I must do," she told him. "I am certain."

"Then," he said, looking straight into her eyes, "we will not have died in vain."

Sara was relentless now. There were more traps as the Dwarves threw everything at her in desperation. She was gassed, electrocuted, pummeled, distracted, decoyed, shot at, snared, spiked, blasted, flushed, pounded and frozen — to no effect. Whole regiments blocked her way in tight masses, refusing to budge until she simply plowed through them like a bulldozer, heedless of the damage it caused to individuals.

The only thing that slowed her down at all was the sheer vastness of Muriah itself. Corridors ran in every direction and she could only kreen so far into the dense rock. The Dwarves gave no information, leading her down false trails at every opportunity. She had to rely on simply mapping every turn and passage until she finally came upon her destination.

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In a towering room of rock, there was a sheer face carved into an ornate façade — undoubtedly the Hall of the Mountain Kings.

For blocking Sara's path to the columned entrance was a terrifying creature of dark flame and malice. Surely, it was the Jabberwauk of Gundolf's warning, erstwhile Dwarves' bane now guarding the princes of a people it had once mercilessly consumed. It was their final defense — not on their behalf, but for its Master's purposes.

"Outta my way, butt-breath," shouted Sara, in no mood to play.

There was no response. Sara reached up to push it aside and it attacked her with every fiber of its being, clawing and biting, flailing her with terrible claws and burning her with the fire of its essence. The pall of howling fear it cast in spreading pools of darkness drove Dwarves into gibbering madness wherever it flowed. She pressed on undeterred.

The intensity of its attack redoubled as its own fear and compulsion drove it to frenzy. The mountain began to shake violently from its hammering efforts, collapsing rooms and corridors filled with Dwarves directionlessly fleeing some nameless dread. Vile gouts of evil substances poured from its mouth, covering her in putrid ichor. Choking stench enveloped her, then burst into actinic flares. Blackness was thrown upon her eyes and clamor filled her ears. Every sending of abomination rained upon her senses.

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But Sara could not be thwarted. She made her way steadily onward, not even bothering to answer its challenge. Finally, it merely jammed its bulk into the portal of the Hall, interposing its body between her and her quarry.

"OK, that's it," she told it.

She grabbed at it, but found it difficult to find a solid purchase. She kicked at it, her blow transmitting enough force through its body to threaten the existence of the Hall. Still it did not budge. She glared at it with x-ray intensity until the intervening atmosphere flamed into a sun-rivaling fireball and the rock face began to boil, but this only served to renew its power. Exasperated, she just decided to push her way through. The body of the creature had to give way to Sara's overwhelming strength, shattering the doorway on every side.

Finally, with the massive front of the Hall in tumbling ruins, the once-mighty Jabberwauk knew bitter defeat, scrambling away from the small figure and crawling down a steep fissure.

"And stay out!" Sara called after it.

Shaking off as much of the disgusting mess as possible, she entered the Hall to confront the Mountain Kings.

They were seated on seven thrones on top of a dais with seven steps. No other Dwarves were in attendance. They were old and weary, with deep-set, wise eyes that bespoke of an overriding madness held precariously at

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bay. They seemed to be no better off than their subjects, with hair and teeth falling out and sores like burns on bare faces and hands. They offered no resistance, magical or otherwise, and seemed resigned to their fate.

"What would you have of us?" asked the eldest, in a voice seemingly from far away.

"I think you know why I am here," Sara answered.

"You have truly won the prize you seek. We are finished," said another.

Sara bowed her head. "I am so very sorry for what I had to do. I tried to avoid so much death and destruction, but you didn't make it any easier."

A third said, "You must understand that we had to do all in our power to forestall this outcome."

"I know. Eldron explained that to me. But all I had to do with him was play a game."

"There are no more games for you in this world," said the fourth king.

"What will become of your people?" Sara asked.

The fifth King said, "The sickness will take them if naught else. They were condemned in any event. This, at least, was not your doing."

"But why? What is it? Can't anything be done?"

The sixth King spoke, "You have seen the works of Progress brought to us by the agents of He who binds these Rings of our power. He made a requirement of us, to mine and smelt and forge an unmatched source of energy for some vast purposes of His own, persuading us

that we would be the beneficiaries. In our misled pride, we reveled in the new knowledge revealed to us, and strove to hasten the outcome of our research and ingenuity. It was founded on principles unknown to this world, but wrested from some other by unthinkable means.

"The power of the sun is in the metal we refine. Its mysteries have been mastered at terrible cost, and now devices of awful portent await final assembly and delivery to our Lord of Darkness. Scarce a day more, and all would have been finished."

Sara thought furiously. The yellow powder, the enormous efforts to refine and purify it, the sickness, the metal with the power of the sun... Ohmigod.

"It *is* radiation sickness, isn't it. *Isn't it?*" She closed her eyes briefly. "The whole place fairly reeks of radioactivity. Why didn't I see it? Was I so distracted?"

She paused once more. "What the hell do you mean, 'devices of awful portent?' What are you building? Bombs? You idiots are building nuclear weapons for Soraun?"

She shouted at them, "Where the *hell* are they?"

The last and youngest King pressed a hidden button and a portion of the wall behind the dais slid to one side. Sara sprang through the opening into an enormous vault with a half-dozen heavy, menacing shapes carefully lined up down the middle. She kneeled them quickly. Inside each one was a dense sphere of warm metal, lacking but a

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cone to complete its form. The missing chunk was poised inside a thick gun tube with explosives behind it, ready to drive the sliver home.

They were nearly complete uranium bombs. Nothing fancy, but her computer mind told her they would work. Crudely but effectively. All they lacked was a neutron source, an initiator. A polonium ring surrounding the gun tube near the incomplete sphere. As they were now, they were useless. But it was oh, so close. Well, she'd heave these suckers into the sun in no time.

She returned to the throne room to confront the last King, "Is this all of them? Any more parts laying around?"

"Here lies the sum of all our efforts, save one," he told her.

"Save one?" she demanded, "Where?"

"You cannot yet compel our answer," he told her.

"When I have your stupid Rings, you'll tell me with your dying breath, if you have to," she said angrily. This was nothing she wanted to waste any time over, niceties be damned. She sensed something was dreadfully amiss and had to have answers now.

"As you will," he shrugged. Each King in his turn made an elaborate show of removing his Ring and handing it over to her. She quickly accepted the proffered baubles from each of them as their lives drained away. It occurred to her that their speeches and ritualistic surrender was meant to buy time. For what? A sense of

urgency tore at her.

At last, only the final King was left, his Ring held out to her like an offering. "Now tell me what you know I want to know," she demanded as she reached for it, closing her hand around his

With painful effort, he told her, "One remains, somewhere below this room. It is complete. You will not find it — it will find you. The Jabberwauk was not guarding us so much as our secret. If it could not turn you back, it had but one remaining task. To make of Muriah a fitting tomb for all the Dwarves." His hand slipped from hers, leaving his Ring as he expired. He sank into his throne.

Sara screamed at him, "TELL... ME... WHERE!"

Such was the power of the Rings she bore that he could not escape her command even in death. His dead finger pointed in a precise direction through the floor. Sara immediately plunged through the solid rock in a desperate race against certain destruction, unmindful of the shattering calamity of her passage. She keened powerfully ahead of her until she spotted the telltale signature of the dense sphere below.

But the Jabberwauk was there already, aware of her approach. It knew that the consequences of its action now would be far preferable than those of failure. Without hesitation, it pressed a button.

The propellant tore the confining tube apart behind the projectile, but not before sending it on its way to pass

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through the initiator and mate with its target. Sara's outstretched hands were penetrating the ceiling of the laboratory when the cascade of neutrons started the unstoppable chain reaction within the sphere. Before her head was within the room, the process was finished. She dove straight through where the bomb had been, but it was too late. The uranium so excruciatingly extracted and crafted by the Dwarves was no more.

Nearby rock vaporized instantly with explosive force, creating a hellish chamber of radiation and overwhelming pressure several hundred yards in diameter. A massively powerful shockwave radiated through the surrounding rock in all directions, collapsing every void space under the mountain, shaking every peak and valley. Rockslides tumbled down the slopes. The massive traps at either entrance were cast down, and the spaces above them filled in with shattered rock. Dust rose into the air above as the shape of the mountain was changed.

In inconsolable grief and despair, Sara powered her way through the whole underground volume where Muriah had been, searching vainly for any trace of survivors as the echoes of the awful explosion reverberated through the tortured stone. The bomb chamber had started to cool and harden before she gave up and reentered the world of air and light.

She found a natural basin of snow-filled rock high on the flanks of the Mystic Mountains above the tree line.

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She melted the snow with wide beams, creating a little pond of nearly boiling water. In the shower of its steaming overflow, she washed the horror from her clothes and body as best she could, then lay numbly naked on the bottom of the basin until the water lost its heat and began to freeze. She could think of no way to wash the horror from her mind.

Climbing out, she dressed slowly and thoughtfully. The Rings were with her, three on the fingers of her right hand, seven on her toes. She wondered idly where the Nine would choose to go. There would be one finger left when she got to Maudur.

Sara dropped from the heights and into the heavier air below, heading east in search of the great river Ayndruen.

Chapter Seventeen: The Wizard's Way

The snaky line of the river Ayndruen was easy to spot in the predawn darkness. Sara swung right in a long, slowly descending arc until she was only a few hundred feet directly above the water, heading generally south. She somehow did not feel the need of great haste, taking her time to observe what effects there might be from the decade of Soraun's rule of Midgarde.

One of the first obvious signs was at the unmistakable confluence of the muddy Ayndruen and the clear Swiftload flowing from the lake at what had been the eastern entrance to Muriah. The ancient forest of Laurien should have been there. It had been clear-cut, the timber probably floated downstream. Settlements that must have been built from its silvery trees lined the great river at intervals, with rows of squalid tenements radiating from smoky riverfront industries. Ungainly riverboats plied the turgid water. It seemed that the agents of Progress had been hard at work in this part of the world.

When the sun finally broke the hazy horizon, Sara had seen just about enough, rising quickly with a burst of speed to hurtle down the course of the wide valley, past the grassy plain on the right and the browned lands on the left. She dropped and slowed again a short time later as the Roring Falls

came into view. Beyond, the Ayndruen curved almost directly east where the great delta of the Enduish River emptied into it. Recalling that Gundolf had told her the Nazghoul would gather in Min-Ashtireth to prepare an assault that she 'would not expect', she thought she should maybe reconnoiter a little before barging into town.

There, on a patch of flat land on one of the innumerable islands made by the diverging streams of the delta, was a tiny factory town among others lining a broad road that relentlessly forced its way across the landscape, hopscotching each channel with sturdy stone bridges. There was something a little odd about this town and its close neighbors on other islands. Instead of row houses, there were brightly colored individual cottages, tightly packed together, with round windows and doors — diminutive dwellings fit only for what must be very little people.

The Little People! How wonderful, thought Sara, in spite of her misery. As she swooped down, Sara could see them trudging off to work from each little hut, filing down the lanes toward their village sweatshop beside the road. They were dressed in a riot of fantastic outfits — at least from the waist up. But they all seemed to be wearing the same style of cheap, cotton trousers, males and females alike. On an adjacent island, she could see another town of

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the Little People wearing garish skirts and pants in every conceivable style — and cheap cotton workshirts. None of them were wearing shoes.

Sara landed behind a patch of trees out of sight of the marching villagers and watched as they passed a trio of officious-looking Little People outside the workhouse, busily checking off names as each went by. She walked over by the bridge so as to appear to be a traveler along the highway, but when she neared the road she had to wrinkle her nose in disgust.

Good grief, what a stench, she thought. The roadbed looked like it was made from rectangular white building stones, grouted together carefully, that had been grossly discolored. She held her breath as she came close enough to the trio to thankfully leave the road upwind.

Sighting her, the closest one said, "Well, lookee wha' we got 'ere."

"It's a great, 'uge Man, by th' looks o' it," said the second.

"An' a Lady, t' boot," said the third.

Determined not to alarm them, and delighted at meeting real, live Little People, she mustered as much cheer as she could and greeted them.

"Hello! My name is Sara Corel, and I'm very pleased to meet you. I'm just passing through on my way to Min-Ashtireth. Mind if I visit with you for a little

while?"

"Min-Ashtireth?" said the first, a puzzled look on his face.

The second echoed him, "Min-Ashtireth?"

The third grimaced smugly, "Oh, it ain't been called tha' since b'fore th' War. You must mean Haughz City."

"Haughz City?" said Sara.

"After th' Goblins took it, they named it wha' they liked. Their priv'ledge, I'm sure." He eyed her suspiciously, "An' where was it you said you was from, Miss...?"

"You should call me Sara." She turned her smile on the youngest one on the left, "And what shall I call you?"

"Uh," he stammered, suddenly a little shy, "I'm Nob, if it pleases you. Nob Munt."

"Why, it pleases me very much, Nob." She turned to the Little Person on the right and said, "And you...?"

"Hamiel Munt. Call me Ham," he bowed.

Not wanting to be left out, the leader introduced himself as, "Soady Munt, Chief Shop Steward, Local 29. These're my assistants," indicating the others.

"Are you brothers?" Sara asked.

"Ardly!" protested Ham. "No more'n third cousins, a' th' least." The others looked at her sourly.

"Oh. Sorry, it's just that you all have the same

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last name..."

"Ev'rybody on this 'ere piece o' land 'as tha' name, mostly," said Nob, "'Cause this 'ere piece o' land is all settled by th' Munt family, formerly o' th' Westshire, what came 'ere together, mothers an' fathers, sons an' daughters, brothers an' sisters, aunts an' uncles, close relations an' in-laws, an' cousins o' ev'ry degree. All Munts, ev'ry one."

"Really," said Sara, looking fascinated.

"For th' employment, after the War," said Soady. "Good jobs 'ere, yessir'ee, or we'd be back on th' farms diggin' taters an' plantin' smokeweed. The Wizard 'imself set us up, 'e did — cot, shop an' comp'ny store. An' we're mighty grateful, ain't we, lads." He glared at the others.

After receiving an elbow from Soady, Ham spoke up rather too earnestly, "Oh, yes. Mighty grateful."

"Mighty grateful," echoed Nob, as if maybe his life depended on it.

"So," persisted Soady, "you must ha' come down th' 'ighway."

"No," said Sara, "Actually, I came another way. From pretty far, as you might guess. This is the first I've seen of such a road. It's — pretty unusual..."

"You mean, it stinks," said Nob.

"It looks, uh — stained..." she went on, making a face.

"Tha's on account o' th' Goblins," said Ham.

"The Goblins?"

Ever the expert, Soady jumped in, "After th' War, there warn't much use fer Goblins an' there warn't much use fer walls, neither. So th' Wizard, 'e puts 'em t' work tearin' down th' walls o' Haughz City an' turnin' 'em into these fine 'ighways like wha' you see 'ere.

"Th' Goblins, they digs out th' roadbed all proper like, then lays th' stones in pretty as you please. Then they pours concrete powder all over it an' sweeps it down into all th' cracks. Then they..." He broke off, belatedly realizing he was, after all, talking to a Man Lady.

"They what?" asked Sara.

"Well," began Ham, "they drinks lots o' beer. A whole lot. Like it's just 'bout all they lives on, 'twould seem."

"And then...?" prompted Sara, intrigued.

Ham and Soady looked at each other. Finally, Nob spoke up, "They pisses on it."

Sara raised her eyebrows.

"It sets th' mortar like nobody's business, it does," he went on. "Them roads o' theirs won't never break."

"And," added Ham, "Grass never grows where a Goblin pisses. Uh, Ma'am."

"Keeps th' traffic light, t' be sure," said Nob.

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Soady told her, "So now we 'as all these great, lovely 'ighways fer th' benefit o' Commerce, thanks to th' Wizard. That's Progress! We're mighty grateful, I can tell you."

"Mighty grateful," repeated Ham.

Nob echoed, "Mighty grateful."

"I've heard that word 'Progress' mentioned a lot lately," said Sara. "This Wizard — I suppose he's behind all this 'Progress' I've been seeing along the Ayndruen lately?"

"Aye, ee's th' one," answered Soady. "The Goblins, they calls 'im 'The Boss', but 'is real name is Soloman."

"That figures," Sara said, her eyes narrowing. "Soloman, the White Wizard. I think I need to pay him a visit and talk to him about this 'Progress' of his."

"You mean," said Nob, his eyes widening, "see th' Wizard 'isself? You? All th' way t' Haughz City?"

"I don't think he will escape me," she said, looking dreadfully thoughtful.

The three Little People looked at each other, not knowing whether to be frightened. "Well," ventured Soady, "if y' do see 'im, y' can tell 'im that us Munts are mighty grateful."

The others nodded vigorously, chorusing, "Mighty grateful."

Sara snapped out of her black thoughts. "Tell

me," she said with a return to her earlier cheerfulness, "What kind of work do you do?"

Relieved, Soady answered, "Why, garment assembly, o' course. We 'ave some o' th' finest seamsters an' seamstresses in Midgarde right 'ere in our little Land o' th' Munts. Look at th' quality o' this workmanship," he said, hooking his thumbs under his lapels and thrusting out his chest.

Sara looked at his garishly colored jacket. "It looks very nice. What is this material? I swear it looks like polyester."

"We calls it 'poly'," said Nob.

"More 'Progress', I'll bet," said Sara wryly. "Why is it you're only wearing poly tops? The rest of your outfits look like cotton."

"Well, there's Specialization," said Soady, "th' key t' Efficiency. Tops are wha' we do. You'll 'ave t' ask th' Mollows an' their kin over t' th' next Land 'bout th' rest o' it. They makes bottoms." The three Little People all laughed, like it was a secret dirty joke.

"Yeah," said Sara, "I couldn't help noticing. Maybe you should get together with them someday and work out a trade or something."

"Couldn't do tha'," said Nob hastily, "Tha' wouldn't be regulation, now would it?"

"True, true," said Ham, nodding his head earnestly.

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"No," said Soady, " we follows th' regulations, 'ereabouts. It's th' only proper way, an' you can quote me on tha' one."

"Well," said Sara, "I must say this whole place seems a little cockeyed. For one thing, it looks like the whole village is pretty much slaving away in there."

"Not true!" protested Soady, "Tha's good, 'olesome work, no time fer idleness. Why, it's a 'onor, it is, t' be workin' in this 'ere Land wha' was given t' us by th' Wizard 'imself. Yessiree, we're mighty..."

"...Grateful," Sara waved her hand and rolled her eyes, "Spare me."

"Look 'ere, Lady," countered Soady, "We 'ave Protection. Our Guild looks after us. I'm th' Chief Shop Steward, see, and I sees to it tha' ev'rybody gets a fair shake. We got Benefits," he finished proudly.

"Such as..." prompted Sara.

"The comp'ny store," offered Ham.

Sara countered, "With a rather incomplete wardrobe line, I'd say."

"An' 'alf-a-day off every other weekend," said Soady with pride.

"Whoo-hoo," said Sara.

"Well, 'ardly nobody never starves," Ham added, "Uh, 'cept maybe in winter."

Toomie Starks

Sara didn't know how to answer that one.

Nob finally spoke up, very quietly, "An' if ev'rybody works hard an' minds their own business, th' Goblins..."

"Shut up, Nob," warned Soady.

He went on despite the warning, "Th' Goblins won't eat us."

Sara looked grim. So that's it, she thought. Wonderful.

Soady looked up at her, almost pleadingly, "I don't know 'ow it was fer you after th' War, but in th' Westshire..."

Sara nodded, "I can see now why you're so, uh, grateful."

"Tha's 'ow it is," said Ham, "You'll not be sayin' nothin' to no Wizards, will you?"

"Oh, I am going to have a great deal to say to a certain Wizard," said Sara menacingly. Seeing the Little People flinch, she went on, gently, "But not about you. Trust me, guys. My job is to free you all."

They looked at each other. "Free us? Wha' do you mean?" asked Nob.

"I don't know," mused Sara. "I freed the Dwarves, and look how that turned out." She was silent for a while.

"Forgive me," she said, "I have a big job to do and I really must be going."

"Wait!" said Soady, "We 'aven't given you th'

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Official Greeting!"

"Oh, you needn't bother," Sara said graciously.

"It's Regulation," said Ham.

"It's our *job*," added Nob, "If y'know wha' I means..."

Sara could imagine. "Very well. This won't take long, will it?"

"Well," said Soady, "Since you're just a day visitor, an' not a guest, we'll do th' short version. Ready?"

The others nodded.

All together, they began, "We represent th' Poly Top Guild..."

"The Poly Top Guild?" answered Sara.

Nob nodded his head, "Th' Poly Top Guild."

Soady looked annoyed. He signaled them to take it again from the top. "And in th' name of th' Poly Top Guild." They paused for effect on the high note, then continued in unison, "We wish t' welcome you to Munt's-kin Land."

Sara told them, "Why, thank you. I am very honored," and reached down to give each one of them a little hug, making them blush brightly.

"Well," Sara laughed, "I'm off to see the Wizard."

"Th' *wonderful* Wizard," Soady stressed, as if someone might be listening, "o' Haughz."

Ham said, "You'll be needin' directions, won't

you?"

"Oh, I'll probably manage. The city's basically southeast of here, so I can just head for the Whyte Mountains and hang a left."

"You'll be wantin' t' stay away from them mountains, from wha' I 'ears," said Soady. "They're full o' wild animals since th' War. Like lions."

"An' tigers," said Ham.

"An' bears," finished Nob.

"Oh, my," Sara replied, trying to appear concerned. "I guess I could follow the river."

"Uh-uh," Ham said, shuddering. "Full o' crocodilagators, so they sez."

"No doubt about it," said Soady authoritatively, "there's only one sure way t' go."

"What's that?" Sara asked.

"Follow th' yellowed brick road," said Soady.

"Follow th' yellowed brick road," chorused Ham.

"Follow th' yellowed brick road," agreed Nob.

"Yuk," replied Sara. "I think I'll pass." Clicking the heels of her ruby-red slippers together three times, she rose into the blue sky like a soap bubble, then quickly vanished from the astonished Little Peoples' sight

Chapter Eighteen: Nazghoul, Inc.

There were no walls around Min-Ashtireth — or Haughz, as it was now called. They had been dismantled to provide material to build roads and factories and housing. The powerful world-magic of Midgarde had been turned to support the mandated doctrine of Progress, forcing the wholesale rise of new industries where there had been only a simple agrarian, essentially medieval way of life a decade before.

Haughz was the center of the New Economy, a bustling city of commerce, manufacturing and trade. The busy riverfront docks were crowded with boats of every description, loading and unloading around the clock, in and out of tightly spaced warehouses lining the waterfront. Behind them were ranks of smoke-belching industrial buildings, surrounded by bleak rows of cheap housing, along with shops, eateries, public baths, sloppers, saloons, tea houses, fornicatoriums, gaming pits, Goblin stations, boozeries, vomitoriums, side shows, peeperies, workshops, apothecaries, tonsorilariums, safe houses, sewereries, lockups, squealers, laundries, petit courts, assessmenttors, sobering tanks and attitudinizers.

The streets were packed with every manner of wagon, cart, truck, rickshaw, sedan chair, surrey, chariot, palanquin, rollbox, coach, travois, and dolly — pushed and pulled by horses, mules, oxen, engines, Goblins and Men from every corner of the world. Foot traffic

inundated the spaces between conveyances, and occasional tides of pedestrians carried the irresolute to unknown destinations. Everybody seemed to be in a hurry, or at least wanted to appear to be. Nobody seemed to want to talk much out in the open, before eyes of uncertain scrutiny.

Toward the center of the city, the buildings climbed upward amid wider avenues, some sporting new electric trolleys or even the occasional newfangled automobile. Offices hummed as clerks and secretaries, executives and middle managers, accountants and bookkeepers scurried to attend their burgeoning enterprises. The pace on the boulevards was no less frantic than in the outer environs, and conversation no less guarded.

The city's incongruously well-scrubbed core was overrun with gigantic, obscure monuments, empty parks and brooding government buildings of dubious utility. One colossal skyscraper towered above all else, topped by a greenly-glowing transparent orb like a monstrous beacon of smug self-importance. Sara thought it a suitable lair for the Great and Powerful Wizard of Haughz. She had no idea where to even begin looking for the Nazghoul, but figured that confronting Soloman might flush them out.

She landed on the sidewalk before the structure's imposing façade and pushed her way through a heavy glass door into the cool interior. It was deserted and impossibly quiet, her soft footsteps and rustling cape

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echoing almost imperceptibly from the polished green-veined granite walls, floor and ostentatiously high ceiling. There was an enormous uncluttered desk in front of the single, wide elevator shaft in the center of the lobby. Behind the desk was an elaborately coifed, coldly haughty, sweater-enhanced receptionist with nothing to do but ignore Sara, who was in no mood to be either patient or polite.

"Is this where your Wizard hangs out?" Sara demanded.

The receptionist slowly examined her fingernails for a moment, then turned her head ever so slightly, averting her eyes in the general direction of the river, and condescendingly announced, "Perhaps you'll be able to find a suitably..." she turned back to look at Sara, arching one eyebrow, "...inexpensive..." paused to select just the right disdainfully nuanced word, "...conjurer..." then sniffed in disdain, "...on Borghat Street." She dismissively went back to pretending Sara wasn't there.

Sara snorted. "No, I think Soloman will do. Where is he?"

After a suitable delay, the receptionist announced, "Mister Soloman does not receive..." she paused for emphasis, "...common visitors..." then added, "...without an appointment."

"He'll see *me*," said Sara forcefully.

The receptionist nodded almost imperceptibly at a large book in front of her. "I believe his schedule is quite

full..." she glanced ever so briefly, "...this year..." and pretended to turn a page, "...or next."

"Look, lady, I'm here to see Soloman, and I mean *now*," Sara said, "*Right now*."

"I'm..." she closed her eyes and said, "...so sorry," as if she wasn't, then turned her attention to the empty space next to Sara.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Why don't you leave..." the receptionist hesitated ever so slightly, "...a card..." she glanced at the door, "...on your way out."

"My name is Sara Corel and I was sent here by Gundolf to defeat the Nazghoul and take their Rings. But while I'm at it, I want to give your stinking Wizard a piece of my mind."

"I'm sure..." the receptionist looked bored, "...that's quite interesting."

"Do you know what these are?" said Sara, holding up her right hand with the Three.

The receptionist glanced at them briefly, then looked Sara in the eye and said, "Plated?"

"All right, that's enough," said Sara. She picked up the desk and hurled it completely across the lobby through a large plate glass window. The sounds of splintering wood and shattering glass filled the space with slowly dwindling echoes.

Sara advanced on the still-seated woman, confronted her with feet planted widely, hands on hips, and ordered,

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"Soloman. Where is he? Tell me this instant — or I'll tear the building apart around your ears and look for him in the rubble."

The receptionist seemed unperturbed. She gazed distastefully at the emblem on Sara's chest, as if just now remembering some insignificant detail. "Ah, yes..." she acknowledged, "...*that* Sara Corel. I believe Mr. Soloman will be expecting you in the Board Room." She went back to examining her nails.

The elevator marked 'Express' opened its doors behind her. An immaculately liveried Goblin attendant motioned her inside, announcing, "Going up — top floor: Wizard's Suite, Board Room." As Sara entered, he closed the doors and muttered a word in Goblin.

Sara looked at him sharply and replied in his own language, "So's your mother."

The Goblin stiffened, eyes wide. He turned to Sara and growled, "Not you. Her."

Sara couldn't help but smile. "You probably know her better than I do."

The Goblin frowned, harrumphed, and turned back to his panel as the elevator reached the top floor. Another splendidly uniformed Goblin bowed as she stepped off and motioned her down a spacious hallway to the right where still another Goblin was opening a wide, ornate door.

The Board Room was richly elegant, with thick, deep-red carpeting and darkly polished paneled walls.

There was a conference table of considerable acreage surrounded by a dozen leather-upholstered chairs, and deeply set tall shuttered windows on three walls.

An ancient but robust gentleman who must have been Soloman greeted her as she entered. He was dressed in a finely tailored white business suit, with a white shirt, white tie, white shoes and socks. His neatly trimmed full beard and carefully arranged flowing mane was gleamingly snow-colored as well. He looked like a cross between Colonel Sanders and Santa Claus, with the glad-handing charisma of a CEO for a major corporation.

"Sara, my dear! I'm so very pleased to meet you at last. Please, do come in and sit down. You must be tired from all your travels. Can I get you anything?" He motioned and another Goblin appeared.

"I don't want anything from you but some answers, buster. Do you know why I'm here?"

With another wave of his hand, he dismissed the attendant, who closed the door behind him. "I believe I know why you *think* you are here. And I believe I can be of some assistance to you. I can imagine that you must have so many questions, since you have been on our world such a short time."

"I've been here long enough to see some things that I don't like, and find out you're behind a lot of it."

"Ah," he said, "you must have encountered some of our Progress initiatives. I must admit, some of the rapid changes have produced a certain amount of displacement.

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I would imagine every civilization faces some temporary unpleasantness during the course of moving to an industrial base, but I'm confident that things are improving everywhere."

"Not in Muriah," Sara said, obviously struggling to restrain herself.

The Wizard looked suitably somber. "Yes, I've been reading the wire dispatches. A tragic accident. I warned them about the dangers of their experimentation, but the Dwarves were always a stubborn lot. I, uh, understand that you might have been involved in some small way...?" His sentence dangled like an accusation.

Sara looked stricken. "I... I didn't... I tried to stop it. I was there — for their Rings. Not for what happened."

"I assume you were successful," he said, looking at the Three. "You have quite the collection already."

He went on, "Nasty things, those Rings. Never had anything to do with them, myself — other than academically, of course. Their owners think they're so precious, they'll do anything to hold on to them. But you couldn't have known, I'm sure."

"It was your so-called 'Progress' that brought this about," countered Sara. "They were making nuclear weapons for Soraun."

"Is *that* what they told you?" He looked surprised. "Now, why would He want such bombs? Since the establishment of the Central Authority, there has been no more war. In fact, there's no conceivable *need* for war

anymore. All I did was teach them some simple things, like electricity. What's so horrible about electricity?"

"Don't try to confuse me," Sara said. "The Dwarves' Rings were under the influence of the One Ring. Their Kings were under Soraun's control."

"That's not necessarily how it works, Sara. The *use* of the Rings is under control of the Central Authority. You may not believe this yet, but there's a great deal of autonomy for the various realms under our protection. The Dwarves had always been the master crafters and engineers of our world. Once set down the path of Science and Technology — and I must admit I had a hand in that — they were quite clever enough to develop such things on their own initiative.

"Believe me, if I had been able to exercise such control over the Dwarves, they would have spent their time and resources on much more productive enterprises. No, this was their own doing, I'm afraid. We'll miss them, but what's done is done. In any event, their obsession with such power would have been their inevitable downfall soon enough. I'm sure you must have seen how they had poisoned themselves."

Sara nodded dubiously, "The sickness. They knew they were dying, but they kept fighting anyway, even though they had to know they'd lose. They sacrificed so much. Why? They could have told me the Jabberwauk would set off the bomb, and I would have dealt with it first, before I got their stupid Rings. It was just so awful."

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"Don't be too hard on yourself, Sara. You were just doing what you probably thought was right. Which brings me to another point.

"I must assume, since you now have the Three, that my old, dear friends Gundolf, Eldron and Gladariel are no longer with us."

Sara nodded.

He looked down for a moment, as if reluctant to broach a sensitive subject. "I know you have not been on our world very long. How is it you believe you know enough about us to involve yourself in our, uh, politics?"

"Whoever sent me here gave me the identity and memories of... Well, I guess the original Sara Corel, from Earth. I read — I mean, she read — a story that's a lot like everything here — only, sorta mixed up a little. In the book, the good guys won and the One Ring was destroyed, along with Soraun."

"Ah," he mused, "a Cosmic Inspiration Resonance. Fascinating. Albeit slightly flawed, it would seem." He added with a smile, "I take it I was not one of the 'good guys'."

"You don't seem to be," Sara said evenly.

"Your three friends and I go back a very long way. To a large extent, we were instrumental in developing this world. Obviously, we had our disagreements. Do you know that we have been mired in primitive feudalism for more than eight-thousand years? Yes, we've developed our world-magic to a high degree, but it remains

inaccessible to most. A privileged few guard its secrets jealously, and dole out meager dollops to the masses.

"Meanwhile, there is disease, ignorance, high infant mortality, war after war, famine, inequality, unceasing toil, shortened lives and universal suffering. There doesn't have to be. The Sara you were must come from a technological society whose history you surely know. Was Progress so bad there?"

"Well, no," Sara said doubtfully, "I don't think so. But... I mean, Soraun — how can you make anything good come of teaming up with Him? He's a... A creep! You know, like evil and everything."

He chuckled. "That's certainly what I would expect to hear from Gundolf. And, really, it's quite true. I'll concede that. But so what? He mostly stays in Maudur these days and leaves the rest of us alone. Goblins and Men work together building roads, housing, industry, commerce. I'll grant you there's much to be done, and maybe our methods are sometimes troubling, but overall, things are slowly but surely getting better. Not worse.

"I submit to you that the *triumph* of 'evil' has made the *concept* irrelevant. It's all quite relative, you know.

"After all, Gundolf and his companions were not hunted down and killed after the War. They undoubtedly bore a heavy burden for their defeat. I can imagine how that must have preyed on their minds. Through the years, bitterness over the loss of their noble cause unmade their minds. Very understandable.

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"When, by some cosmic chance, you came along, perhaps he saw an instrument of his redemption. He was always the master strategist, and schemes came readily to his mind. With little to go on but a book from another life and sympathy for a dying man, there was no way for you to judge his plan's merits. There was no one to cast doubt upon his designs."

Thoughtfully, Sara said, "Actually, Gwenafir wasn't exactly enthusiastic."

"Gwenafir!" exclaimed Soloman. "You spoke with her? Oh, this is most remarkable! You've actually been to Avalon? And spoken with the High Elves?"

"They weren't too friendly," she said cautiously.

"I can imagine not, if you penetrated their security. They were always a haughty bunch, magical immortals who would not share their gifts. Don't worry, I'm not going to ask you how you found them."

He looked thoughtful for a moment, making Sara feel as if she had violated some confidence.

But then he said, "So, now that you have seen how Gundolf's designs have turned out thus far, maybe you should consider that there may be another side to this story."

Reluctantly, Sara admitted to herself that the Wizard made a lot of sense. In the book, it was assumed that if Soraun won, everything would be horrible — in some unspecified way. Well, He'd won. And maybe things weren't like they were on Earth, but it certainly did seem

that Soloman was trying his best to improve what he could. Who would want to live in the Dark Ages forever? And poor, mad Gundolf had orchestrated nothing but death, death, death — followed by annihilation.

Soloman interrupted her thoughts. "I've scheduled a meeting with my Board of Directors to present some proposals to you which I hope you'll consider. They should be arriving soon."

He strolled to a window and opened the shutters to peer down at the street far below, where nine black limousines were parading past the entrance to discharge their passengers one by one. A Goblin working party cleaning up glass and wood debris saluted each black shape as it passed into the lobby.

Presumably, the receptionist would not be giving *them* a hard time.

Soloman sat at the head of the conference table, with five Directors along one side, and four on the other with Sara, sitting to the Wizard's right. They wore expensive suits that fit them well — black on black, of course. Sara had expected crowns borne by unseen heads, with red flames for eyes, but Soloman explained to her that such antics were behind them, unnecessary since the end of the War. She could sense their Rings burning on their fingers.

For they were the Nazghoul, Ringwielders, Black Horsemen, Generals of the Armies of Mairdur, Harbingers of Doom, Undead Minions of Soraun, Slaves

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of the One Ring. Now calmly discussing mergers and acquisitions, research and development, capitalization and infrastructure, profitability and cost/benefit analyses.

They had once been Kings of Men. They had become Captains of Industry, wielding greater power than ever before. They looked no more — or less — evil than any other high-level executives.

Soloman called the meeting to order. "Gentlemen, please allow me to introduce Sara Corel, a recent newcomer to our planet. She is a Gift to Midgarde from the unknown warders of the Cosmos. My extraplanetary studies — which, as you know, have brought us so much useful information in the cause of Progress — have revealed to me that such beings as she are bestowed upon many planets whose peoples have reached the threshold of potentially joining the vast fellowship of ancient and honorable civilizations throughout time and space.

"They are made to resemble the beings they serve, and endowed with all their languages. Their guise is made to be familiar and reassuring, most often taken from a legendary figure of great portent.

"In her short time with us, she has been suborned by Gundolf, visited hidden Avalon, wrested the Three from the dying hands of Gundolf, Eldron and Gladariel, conquered the Dwarves and then tried to save them from a holocaust ignited by a Jabberwauk, and come to us in wrath that passed into understanding.

"How shall we now treat with this awesome Gift,

this puissant instrumentality, this beautiful Sara?" His speech concluded, Soloman sat down to polite applause.

For some time, the Directors shuffled through their supporting documents and consulted in whispers among themselves. Soloman smiled at Sara and reassuringly reached out to comfortingly squeeze her hand.

"You have come to us," began one of the Board members, "as a strange visitor from another planet, one that is far advanced compared to our own present backwardness. With the memories you must bring of an age we can only hope for, you can tell us how your cities are organized, how we can modernize our distribution networks, and teach us how to improve our transportation and communication, finance and capitalization, energy and fabrication. What miracles we can accomplish together. Join with us, Sara. Help us to grow."

Another addressed her, "You have powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal Men, Goblins and even Wizards. With your keen senses, you can scour the world for those resources vital to our increasing industry. With such information, there will be no limit to our eventual prosperity. All Midgarde will bless you."

"With the power," said a third, "to change the course of mighty rivers, the wastelands and deserts will bloom and bring about an end to famine and want. Navigation will be extended to places that are now unexplored wilderlands. Our civilization will spread and great benefit will come of your kindness. For this, we will be forever

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thankful."

The fourth Director told her, "If you can, indeed, bend steel in your bare hands, then consider the great works we can together accomplish. We can erect lofty bridges across the natural barriers of our lands, promoting commerce and travel where it is not now possible. We can construct roads where none now dare to go, through precarious mountains and across trackless swamps. The benefits to our grateful nations will be astounding."

"As a swift messenger who is," said the fifth in his turn, "faster than a speeding cannonball, you can link our entire planet with vital intelligence, alerting others to far-off calamities so that aid may be summoned. You will earn the gratitude of scores who will owe their lives to you."

"As it is possible for you to leap tall buildings with a single bound," said Director number six, "so can you soar high above our world and beyond, bringing us the discoveries of new worlds, increasing our knowledge and understanding of the universe. Our scientists would salute you."

"It is reported," said the next, looking up from a memo, "that you are more powerful than a loco-motive engine. With such overwhelming force, you can level whole mountains, fill in the low places of the land, create new islands in the midst of the seas, and dam unruly torrents to provide irrigation and electrical generation. To employ such energy in our service would win our utmost

admiration."

The penultimate Director told her, "Even more than all these mere menial tasks and accomplishments, the grace of your mild-mannered demeanor will fill us with hope and confidence."

At last, the leader of them all directed the smooth competence of his personality toward Sara and told her, "All these things can be accomplished with you as our guide and inspiring spirit. Together with all the support and strength of every creature in Midgarde, a great and wonderful chapter of our history opens before us. We will rise from the ashes of war and the chains of barbarity into a future of brightness and success to someday take our place in the beckoning heavens."

Soloman then concluded, "What do you say to our pleas, Sara? Will you favor us with your boundless talents? Will you lead us to that better place? Will you fulfill your destiny and ours?"

In a murmuring susurrations of entreaties, she heard, "Join us." "Come with us." "Be our light and compass." "Bless our land with your sweetness and mercy." "Help us in our need." "Know our love and respect." "Let us rejoice together." "Uplift our aspirations." "Multiply our wisdom."

Sara's mind's eye beheld visions of wonders, as the relentless suggestions poured into her brain.

Yes! It could be done. The world would be remade, there would be new ideas and grand plans for

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improvement after improvement. Growth, development and progress — no, Progress — would sweep all the old ways and unproductive throwbacks aside. And she could do it. They could do it. Between her boundless capabilities and their resources and peoples, nothing would be impossible.

It was heady stuff.

But...

There was something else.

Something that nagged at her, that wasn't right.

A thought that wouldn't go away among the tumult of their flatteries and her own leaping imagination.

The Little People.

Lines of Little People, trudging down the lanes of their tiny village to their workhouse on the reeking road.

Fear in the eyes of their leaders while mouthing how grateful they were.

Hopelessness at the endlessness of their drab lives, or of the end that awaited them if they wavered in devotion.

What was the meaning of Progress when it trapped the helpless? What was the point of expanding an economy of misery? Who benefited from all this unceasing labor?

She understood now that this was the attack that she had not been expecting, and what Gundolf had meant about her 'confident invulnerability' extending to lies —

and to hope.

Sara held up her hand, stopping the mounting prayers. The Board Members sat back in their overstuffed chairs, with the self-satisfied smiles of sharks surrounding their prey.

"Thanks for your really great presentation, guys," she said. "It was pretty interesting, that's for sure. I'm really very honored."

The Nazghoul glanced smugly at each other around the table.

"But I have a few questions," she went on, "that I don't really expect you to answer. Just some ideas I want to go over before I tell you what I want to do. That OK with you?"

They serenely nodded their agreement

"I think I get the big picture. With my help on some things, this whole place can be brought up to at least my old planet Earth's twentieth century in pretty short order. I mean, I got the horsepower and stuff, and you've all your people, plus a whole lot of magic mojo. So far so good."

"You're exactly right, of course," purred Soloman. There was a murmur of agreement around the table.

"What I don't really get is what the point is. I mean, who's gonna benefit from all this? Sure, a lot of roads and trains and buildings and all that are nice and everything. I suppose there'll be a big old baby boom all over the place to get more people for all the new cities and all that. But everything on this world flows in one direction. It all

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comes from the top, and that's the problem."

"Now, Sara," said Soloman patiently, "of course there's some, ah, direction at this stage. That's necessary to get things started. All our people need guidance to help them on the path toward Progress. This will change as we reach more of our goals. The State will wither away, you'll see."

"I don't really think so," she answered. "You know why? 'Cause where I come from, people make choices all the time about what to buy, where to live, how to act, who to believe. Maybe not all the time and not everywhere. But even in the worst imaginable dictatorships, it still comes down to what people will put up with."

"There have been some awful evil times on my old planet. Some of the bad guys there did things that would probably make even *your* hair curl — and I don't even want to give you any ideas. All of the evil they did was based on the fact that they had too much power over people. But they eventually either got defeated, overthrown or just died after a while. That's not gonna happen here. Whatever else, your old pal Soraun and His buddies are likely to be permanent fixtures."

"I know this is gonna sound kinda corny, but there isn't ever going to be any kind of basic freedom as long as your 'Central Authority' is around. Just the possibility that there might be would change everything, but that won't happen. Everybody will always have to do what they are told, and all the benefits flow only one way, too. To the

top.

"Freedom, even the tiniest bit, even its memory or the hope of it, is the only thing that keeps evil at bay, that eventually wears it down. Where there is the most freedom, there is the brightest achievement. As inefficient as all the unguided choices of a whole world might be, no central authority has ever been its equal. People who trade their freedom for security wind up with neither, and lose their souls in the bargain.

"There's a saying that goes, 'Absolute power corrupts absolutely,' but in your case, this is absolute power that never goes away. The corruption is never-ending. There will never be any choices in a world of permanent fear, no matter how it might eventually glitter. And *that* looks like a pretty good definition of 'evil' to me.

"Y'know, everything I've heard since I entered this room is based on lies, starting with the old Wizard, here, saying how pleased he was to meet me. Then he lied about the Dwarves, he lied about Gundolf, he lied about Soraun, and he lied about himself. He's good at it, too. Had me going, there.

"Then each and every one of you lied to me by telling me what you figured I wanted to hear. It was phony baloney in a silk suit. I'm not buying it.

"Do you want to know why? Because I ran into some of your folks whose clothes don't match, and never will. Who were uprooted and exploited by threatening to remove their 'protection' if they didn't go along. By gentle

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little people who are 'mighty grateful' for their lives but have lost their hope and their freedom.

"If for nothing else, I don't like you for that. And I don't like you for what happened to the Dwarves. And for what happened to Gundolf and Eldron and the Lady Gladariel. And for the bleak and hopeless horror that you have made of Midgarde.

"So here is my answer, 'gentlemen'. Go to Hell. And on your way out, I'll have your damned Rings."

They were defeated. All of their wiles and subterfuges had been exposed as pitiful scrabbings, without substance or meaning. The awful, blazing glory of her truth was their certain downfall. It towered over them like a radiant angel that they could not bear. Her command to them was their doom and their inescapable destiny.

The façades they had been clothed with melted and ran like cheap wax, revealing their hideous formlessness. In futile rage against the loosening of their substances, they poured forth the bitter hatred and fear of their whole energies upon her, closing in as the table flared with intolerable brightness and was consumed, its ashes blown away by a sudden gale of sweeping forces.

The great building shuddered to its foundations, cracking and breaking away in huge chunks from its swaying, shrieking steel skeleton. Soloman hurried from the unendurable scene in the crumbling Board Room to scurry into the waiting express elevator. No Goblins were

to be seen.

As he started his downward plunge, the quaking tower shattered the supports for the giant, heavy, solid ball of crystal atop the roof. With ever-increasing momentum, it fell straight down, bursting every structure in its way like rotten cardboard until it caught up with the dropping elevator car, shattering its roof and carrying the remnants to the basement with Soloman, flat on his back, looking up at his death.

"Rosebud," he muttered in his last seconds. None of his lies could save him.

In the space above the disintegrating skyscraper where the Board Room had been, Sara endured the unimaginable onslaught of the failing Nazghoul as, one by one, their black and furious flames went out, leaving their Rings and a terrible sound of despair as they went to that place of eternal torment long prepared for them.

All across the city and far beyond into every corner of the land that had been dominated by their now vanished presence, a great cry went up as some terrible pressure was lifted from every living being. As their Masters' works crumbled and their plans were unmade, their now directionless creatures howled in unrestrained madness at their unexpected release.

Sara surveyed the damage, but was able to do little to check the myriad raging fires, calm the lawless mobs or stem the general panic. This day would end in a fall of dreadful night as long-repressed hatreds, longings,

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compulsions, fears, passions, excesses, hopes, jealousies, sicknesses and hungers were given vent. Perhaps a new beginning could be formed by the survivors, perhaps not. Sara was not sanguine about the prospects, for all of Midgarde had been held too long in thrall.

Around midnight, she finally abandoned the city to its fate and raced north to where she had left the Little People. In the deserted village she'd visited just this morning, she found only a few Goblins, now reverted to the savagery of their natural inclinations. They had looted and destroyed the tiny cottages and ransacked the workhouse and company store. Now, under a tree by the side of the yellowed brick road, they were crunching the bones of their supper.

Little Peoples' bones. Some of their leftovers were still clothed in brightly colored poly. Nob's dead eyes stared accusingly at her from his head atop a pile of scraps.

Crying aloud in rage and horror, she vaporised the filthy band on the spot, sending a thick, greasy cloud into the night sky. Rising quickly with the awful, sinking realization that she was too late, she scanned the surrounding countryside for any that might have escaped. She spotted small groups hurrying west with as many belongings as they could carry, but whenever she approached, they cowered in abject fear, mewling pitiously, only to scramble on their way again as soon as she left them. They would have to fend for themselves,

Toomie Starks

she thought, and would probably do as well as anybody else. She doubted eyes less keen than hers would ever spot them, for they had learned the stealthy ways of the hunted. She silently wished them luck. It was all she could do.

All the Rings save one were hers, now. Only the middle finger of her left hand was still bare. She intended to show it to Soraun before night fell again.

Chapter Nineteen: The Land of Shadows

All Maudur was in turmoil. From the moment Sara's frozen form had mysteriously appeared in the last Elvish haven, the ever-suspicious Lord of Midgarde had been marshalling forces to meet uncertain contingencies. He had perceived a threat immediately, but Gundolf had somehow shielded enough of his tortured mind to cast doubt and confusion about the exact nature of her mission. Soraun had known the outlines of her itinerary and had seen its accomplishment at every turn, helpless to hinder it, and now had lost the treasure the Dwarves had been preparing for Him, as well as His most powerful servants.

It had been folly to allow the old Wizard and his companions to live, hatching plots until they had somehow attracted unlooked-for aid from the unknown Cosmos. He had taken pleasure in their helpless self-punishment, but had underestimated the resourcefulness of His cornered prey. His attention had ever been on the dreadful works at hand rather than the esoteric pursuit of tenuous knowledge from far-off worlds — which he had left to Soloman — so His intelligence of her powers, abilities and motivations was vague, formless and apprehensive.

Now, in desperation and confusion, He had thrown up every defense at His disposal, useful or not. The greater part of His army had been streaming in fearsome

haste to Udynn, knowing only that His enemy would arrive soon to force the entrance to His realm.

Sara streaked east in the darkness. From far away, she could spot her destination easily, as the bonfires atop the two watchtowers that guarded the Maudur gate at Murranon blazed fitfully. Behind, in the haunted pass of Udynn, the lesser fires of a thousand camps lined the road to the inner gate of the Ysenmouth. Little moving points of countless torches told of reinforcements moving up under the lash from every direction. And within the confines of Maudur itself, Ordruen, the Mountain of Fire, had awakened from its slumber to cast a spreading cloud of darkness over the Plateau of Gyregyrath from its red-glowing summit.

Gundolf had told her, "Do not simply fly into His realm as a bird would. You must cast down the iron gates of Maudur. You must break the will of His minions that cause the gates to stand, and face the misbegotten army that defends them." It looked to be some forty miles from the outer wall to the inner, about a ten hour hike if she didn't stop or slow down. Which she didn't plan to do, even though the road was more crowded than the Katy freeway at rush hour.

At least, she thought grimly, she wouldn't have to worry about 'collateral damage'. Goblins and Trolls and whatever foul beasts and entities had entered His service could look out for themselves. She didn't think she could bring herself to just murder them helplessly by the

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thousands, but she wouldn't go out of her way to avoid hurting them, either. With the fall of Soloman's Progress experiment west of the Ayndruen, these gathered hordes would wreak terrible havoc on the survivors in a campaign to reestablish their Master's dominion, and so must be somehow broken.

Well, first things first. Even before she touched down before the three iron doors of the Murranon Gate, alarms sounded from one end of the valley to the other.

So much for surprise.

In the confusion of darkness lit by flickering fires and rushing multitudes eager to find an enemy to engage, chaos swirled about Sara as she stood considering how she should begin. It took some time for the commanders of the watchtowers to brutally restore order and identify their lone target. They and she finally came to regard each other in a sudden lull before the first assault was unleashed as she turned her back on the gate to confront them.

Their General, the odious Herald of Soraun, now appeared high atop the loftiest battlements above her. Quiet swept the assembled army. She turned again and looked up at him, and he addressed Sara in a loud, echoing voice.

"What business do you have at the gates of our land? You have destroyed the Dwarves and brought down their mightiest works. You have murderously betrayed the leaders of the West and brought disorder and lawlessness

to the people. You have slain your friends and those who reached out to you in friendship, and stolen tokens of great power from their dying hands. Extinction and ruin litter your wake.

"Go back to the cruel coldness of Space from whence you came. Return your lifeless substance to the dead starcinder that begot the disastrous engine of your form. Your arrogant and vexious makers have no right to meddle in our affairs. Trouble our world no longer."

Sara stamped her foot contemptuously. "Oh, stuff it, pit-breath. If you didn't have *me* to worry about right now, you'd be out kicking little old ladies just for grins. I'm gonna knock your doors down here, then take a stroll over to Ysenmouth and knock that gate down, too. You'd better just stay outta my way."

Soraun's general replied in a terrible voice, "By the power of Almighty Soraun the Great, I will not allow you to invade our homeland."

"Oh, yeah?" she taunted, "You and Whose army?"

The Herald of Soraun knew somewhat of Sara by now — that all his vast soldiery could not harm her, could not stop her, could not slow her down. They were mere flesh against the practically unlimited star-born potency of technology and science so advanced that a million generations of research by entire nations of scholars would not uncover the secrets of her construction. Even the sun-like Dwarven weapon that had laid waste their undermountain kingdom had had no more effect on her

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than a snowball would against a Rock Troll.

But he also knew that she might have one weakness. It was evident from the reports out of Muriah before its collapse, and Haughz after the fall of the Nazghoul, that this creature had perhaps one flaw that could be exploited.

She cared.

It seemed that useless death appalled her. She was reluctant to kill the wolves that would have torn Gundolf's throat out. She had not purposely killed any of the Dwarves, and had actually tried to save them after claiming their Rings — a useless waste of time. She had tried, futilely, to restore order and minimize damage in the burning city. She had let the receptionist live.

And so, in unavoidable obedience to his Master, he prepared to execute his defense born of desperation. She was constrained to walk among his troops through the long valley, he knew. They would hurl themselves at her until the tide of their senseless deaths horrified her. Pity for these wretched slaves would stir her to forbear from being the cause of such horrendous slaughter, and she would thus abandon Gundolf's designs and quit the field, buying more precious time for Soraun.

He didn't know about the Little People. The Goblins who had eaten her friends had perished suddenly, before any awareness of the cause of their demise could have been broadcast into the peculiar ether of Midgarde's world-magic. The destruction of a few Goblins was, at any rate, an event too insignificant to have been noticed

by the seers in Barradour.

Compelled and strengthened by Soraun Himself, he gathered unto himself all the power of command over his minions that had been bred into them for countless generations. Great was the focus of magical energies which were summoned to his bidding, reaching deep into the very fibers of every creature's existence, binding them to his will beyond the limits of their own minds and bodies, acting directly upon the utmost particles of their essences. They would have no other focus but obedience to his will, even in the passing from life into death, even beyond his own inevitable destruction.

For in unleashing this ultimate spell of hatred and downfall upon His enemy, the Herald of Soraun spake words of evil portent so foul in the hideousness of their unclean origins in a time shunned by memory, that the very breath that carried them was broken into cruelly splintered shards. Birds of the air and beasts in the fields far from earshot perished in unquenchable agony. Trees and plants shriveled and grew no more. Stones were sundered, the ground trembled its horrified objection, and distant Mount Doum flared in sympathetic spasms of flame and boiling rock.

His screaming body writhed and melted, bursting into dark flames of a color only Sara could see, as his condemned soul was unmade by such an act of blasphemy and corruption. Every creature subject to his obedience, far across the fractured plain of Udynn, was stricken by

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violent seizures as reason, feeling, reflex, instinct and even self-preservation was stripped from them, replaced by an overwhelming, thoughtless and basal need to rend and tear — heedless of any consideration — at the body of their enemy.

The light of reason, of intelligence, of cunning, even of cruelty, went out of their eyes. Weapons dropped from insensate hands as their owners reverted beyond the capacity to wield them. Rank and order were made meaningless by the single purpose of their primal compulsion. All had but one task, one unquenchable desire, one driving hunger. To get at Sara and strike her with all the might of which they were capable, with a violent and unrestrained expenditure of energy that would burst their hearts and break their bones in its execution. They would die by the effort of smiting her, and tear each other to pieces to reach her.

Sara endured in paralyzed horror the swarming tide of gruesome monsters that quickly piled up over her head. The first to strike were consumed by their efforts and fell, used up, to be replaced by the ones behind. Those in the outer reaches of the mob tore at the ones in front of them in frantic efforts to reach their target. Those who were thus disabled, even to the point of ordinary incapacity to continue, continued nevertheless until they had been reduced to fragments in the pulsating melee.

The towers emptied, the caves and warrens on either side disgorged every lurking occupant, guards leapt from

the walls and battlements, their dashed remains crawling forward in unstoppable obedience. Pounding could be heard through the thick iron doors from the other side of the gate as defenders hurled themselves uselessly against the cold unyielding mass to reach their quarry, those nearest crushed by later arrivals. Piles of their remains soon gave the rearmost echelons a path over the walls for them to plunge into the mountain of corpses now enveloping Sara.

Throughout the length and breadth of the pass beyond the wall, camps broke instantly as troops began their own marches toward the Murranon, tramping without thought through campfires, into pitfalls, over the myriad obstacles of the sterile landscape. There was no preparation — they simply went, dressed or undressed, sleeping or attending to some chore, oblivious to bodily needs, guided only by the unerring beacon of her presence.

Thus was the cynical plan of Soraun's General nearly brought to fruition, as Sara recoiled from the devastating consequences of her mission. 'Misbegotten army' they may be, but the butchery was unbearable. She could not carry on in the face of such wanton carnage. It sickened her as nothing else could. It made her cry out in rage that such mindless savagery could be directed at her. She had to escape, get far enough away that they couldn't continue, or at least she wouldn't have to witness it.

Only the memory of Nob's dead, accusing eyes atop

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the scrap heap found her inner core of determination. The fate of all the little people of this world would be left to such as these, who were sacrificed to preserve an even greater evil. Sara hardened her heart at the realization that there was no longer any substance left in these creatures that could suffer. They had been utterly destroyed by their Master. Only His overthrow would prevent Him from committing further disgusting acts.

Sara pushed her way through the bleeding, twitching mass until she broke free in front of the left door. She pushed against the bottom, shattering its mounting and the walls that supported it. As it fell on top of her, she met it at the balance point and then cast it high into the air in a soaring arc, spinning as it went like an insanely huge giant's playing card being idly tossed into an impossible hat, to land flatly on top of the leftmost tower, crushing it instantly and completely. With the right door, she quickly disposed of the remaining tower in the same manner, then turned her attention to the center door, nearly covered on both sides by grisly remains.

Smiting the already broken wall on its right, she yanked the massive iron monolith away. Then, reaching deep into one face with her bare hands — parting the metal itself to make her own integral handles — she used it like an enormous bulldozer blade to level the remnants of the fortifications and bury the piled bodies in a mass grave. When she was done, the once-proud Murranon had become a parking lot.

The shuffling remains that constituted the first wave of the oncoming Army of Maudur were only a few minutes away. The sun would rise in a few hours, but would not be seen below the volcanic reek of Ordruen. Sara set out on her forty-mile journey through hell at a steady pace, slightly faster than the zombie-like gait of the oncoming creatures.

They packed the road, spilling out on either side — in places, completely across the traversible center of the valley. It was impossible to avoid the bulk of them as long as Sara remained afoot. She was forced to endure the almost continual rain of blows from those she just couldn't avoid, and try to maintain her pace so as to bypass the rest. Those who were left behind tore at each other briefly, attempting to reach her as she went by, and the survivors turned after her in hopeless pursuit.

A little more than five hours after she had set out, she had passed the midpoint of her trek and the last of those who had come from the vicinity of Ysenmouth. The rest of the way was clear, as she outpaced the remnants of Maudur's army trudging behind her. When she finally reached the inner gate, the vanguard of the pursuing mob was more than an hour away.

The gate was closed. The remains of its defenders who had leaped from its high walls to join the assault on Sara littered the ground. Some, whose broken bodies had miraculously survived the fall, had dragged themselves a few hundred meters down the road before the terrible

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compulsion that ordered them had nothing left of their bodies to command. In spite of their evil countenances and intent, she could not help but feel a raging pity for the poor bastards.

The old outer gates and towers of Murranon had been built long centuries ago by Men to guard against armies issuing from Maurdur. The battlements of Ysenmouth had been rebuilt by Soraun after the war to secure His domain forever and serve as a monument to his power. They were a mightier work, constructed at the cost of thousands of lives and incalculable toil.

Smooth, adamantine walls issued from the flanks of mountain cliffs on either side of the defile, higher than the skyscraper of Soloman and wider than the great river Ayndruen. Within the gaping dark tunnel that pierced the barrier were two massive doors of hardened steel, each a single slab as thick as a tree was tall, extending far above and below the vast opening in the dam-like wall. All of Soraun's hordes could pour forth unhindered to meet His enemies through the wide passage when the doors were open. No force of Midgarde could pass when they were closed.

The doors were designed to slide apart, withdrawing into the walls on either side. Great drawbridges on the Maurdur side were lowered to fill the gap in the roadway into which the bottoms of the doors were set. The doors themselves extended through the centers of the surrounding stonework and far into the mountains on

either side, like movable walls within walls. To move each gargantuan expanse of solid steel, in chambers far beneath the summit of the mountains on either side there dwelt imprisoned two titanic gods of a vanished race, bent by Soraun to His service by the power of the One Ring.

Long, long ago these deities had consumed their worshippers unto extinction for the psychic sustenance their dying souls provided. After eons of imperishable and tedious endurance, Soraun offered living sacrifices of conscious beings to assuage and inflame their hunger, and made of them the warders of His realm.

They were rooted together with the mountains' roots, and could not be moved. The energies they drew from the almost limitless reservoir of Midgarde's world-magic crackled along the lengths of their steel burdens, reinforcing the matter thereof far beyond the strength of any terrestrial materials.

Sara stood before the doors, kreening their workings. Even through the immense rocky shrouds of their prisons, the intensity of the two gods' malevolent force was clear as beacons. She would have to pry the doors apart against their wills. She would see what happened after that.

Sara jammed her hands into the seam, ringing the vast structure like eternity's bell. This act of sacrilege stirred the wrath of the gods. They put forth their power to mend the imperfection her intrusion had caused, but her hands would not be crushed — and the straightening of the doors' edges caused them to move an inch apart,

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accompanied by the shattering scream of sliding metal against metal.

If the gods were surprised, they did not show it, instead adding rage to their efforts. Sara was astonished, though. She'd expected to simply rip hand-sized chunks of metal away — but this was different. Something was binding the whole substance of the doors together, something far stronger than the metal itself. They would not break, or even bend, as she applied more force to them. She slowly pulled her hands apart and widened the tiny crack between them to the accompaniment of grinding shrieks.

For the first time she could remember in either existence, Sara was physically challenged. The resistance of the massive doors was almost inconsequential to her, but the power of the gods made her set her jaw in determination. They redoubled their efforts to close the doors, then redoubled them again to slow the inexorable movement apart.

Finally, when the opening was barely enough to slip into, Sara darted into the center of the crack, bracing her back against one door and her feet against the other. Seeing a chance to end this affront, the gods poured every bit of their strength into closing the doors and smearing her between them. The steel blazed and shook, shattering the walls into which they had been set. They would not allow the doors to deform around her balled-up body, creating pressures on her that would unmake any other

substance found under the heavens. Sara found herself fighting to keep the gap from closing.

But she had the position she wanted now. The stores of her great energy which alone could move the substance of her limbs was called from every rolled-up hyperdimensional n-space that made up her body at the quantum level. As efficient as her internal mechanism was in its application, waste energy blazed forth as heat and light with such bright intensity that the doors would have vaporized if the gods had let them, but their atoms remained bound by something greater than the electromagnetic force.

The hellishly-bound molecules of the doors glowed along their whole lengths, first red, then rapidly progressing to white and beyond. The remnants of the broken wall melted and ran, the surrounding cliffs crumbled. Light blazed forth with the terrible intensity of the sun come to earth. Oncoming Trolls yet miles distant along the road through the haunted pass were turned to stone, hot winds swept away their companion Goblins, and far off in Barradour, the Unblinking Eye of Soraun was turned away.

The gods would not relent. Employing every art learned through countless æons, they furiously set themselves against her unabating force. Earthquakes trembled ceaselessly, creating rolling waves across the Plateau of Gyregyrath like upon a wind-swept sea. Volcanic Ordruen blazed like a mad thing, fires roaring

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from its molten vent as if the mighty engines of the planet itself had been engaged to support their effort.

The gods reached ever deeper into the solid rock to anchor themselves. They would not move. They could not be moved, unless the mountains themselves were carried with them.

Sara had reserves of her own. Straining as she thought she would never be called upon to do on any world, she pushed her legs and straightened her back, eyes closed in concentration. She became one with her indomitable will to drive these gods back into the forgotten void from which they had sprung.

The very foundations of the mountains trembled and shook. And then — impossibly — they moved. Imperceptibly at first, but unmistakably to the now frantic gods.

The unbelievable was happening. *This could not be.* Rallying from a defeat they could not accept, the gods made a supreme effort to forestall the inevitable. It made no difference. They could not stop Sara. The mountains continued their agonizing retreat until she had nearly stretched out to her full length.

As one, the minds of the gods snapped like fragile things. Their thoughts were forever broken, doomed to echo senselessly in their immortal bodies. They became less than mad, unable to do more than exist in frightening chaos, to wait eternally for an end they could not achieve.

Released from unnatural bondage, the superheated

material of the doors exploded violently, blasting out a deep crater where once the inner gates of Maurdur had stood. Only the farthest cohorts of still advancing soldiers survived the shock waves. Blinded by the flash, they went on relentlessly.

Having engaged and overthrown Soraun's armies and His Ring-spawned works by walking into Maurdur, Sara now flew to Barradour. Still white-hot, she blazed like a celestial being, now ascending unto the heavens, now plunging back to earth in righteous vengeance. Soraun in His loftiest tower could not withstand the awfulness of her coming, for she perceived Him from afar and set her trajectory to the window of His chamber.

She had become terror unto Terror Itself, and He fled.

Her glorious arrival brought instant ruin to the tower upon which she alighted. The whole of the gigantic city-fortress of Soraun's unwholesome administration trembled, as His controlling malice abandoned His minions to attend single-mindedly to His own survival.

Courtiers and functionaries, guards and attendants, sorcerers and necromancers, slaves and sycophants, bureaucrats and ambassadors, politicians and lawyers — all the vast machinery of His evil empire routed in mindless panic, leaping from high windows, hiding stupidly behind inadequate veils, groveling senselessly, running to and fro with directionless abandon.

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She could sense the flight of His Ring as He descended before her, but It flickered confusingly from one instant to the next, as if Its image in her mind was being reflected in a hall of distorting mirrors. She was not constrained to follow His passage, but made a devastating beeline to wherever she thought she could pin Him down, only to discover in every instance that He was already gone.

She crashed into His throne room and cast down His iron seat as His ministers perished. She burst into His treasury and scattered its contents to the winds. She broke the walls of His study, setting every ill-omened text of unclean lore alight. She shattered His laboratory, unleashing deadly fumes and chattering nightmares.

She pursued Him through the kitchens, where the preparation of ghastly delicacies had been hastily abandoned. She pursued Him through the stables, where stinking winged monstrosities made their foul nests. She pursued Him through the low-ceilinged torture chambers, where victims of His whims cried out for the death her still potent radiance mercifully bestowed.

As she had followed Soraun, so, too, had she been followed by Death, who touched in her wake all the willing vassals who had entered His service. Death had ever been the servant of His servants, and now it had come to collect its due. The brilliance of her passage extinguished the darkness of their minds, and they could endure their servitude no longer. They died in terrible

guilt and shame, they died in hateful bitterness, they died cursing and flailing, they died weeping and pleading — but they died. The cruel reign of Soraun that they had administered was ended. The castle was soon empty.

Still downward her fleeing quarry led her, into the unbreakable foundations of His failed capitol. The heat of her body was gradually absorbed by the masses of rock through which the labyrinthine maze of passages led, turning instead to a cool whiteness that brought the first light to this region its scurrying denizens had ever beheld. The disgusting things that dwelt here could not abide such a pure essence and perished from the wonder of it.

Chambers there were here of mysterious and uncertain function, filled with unsettling devices and manned by shadows that went out forever as she approached. Barracks were there for guards, and cells for prisoners who were made to perform shameful labors. She passed them all in her relentless pursuit, leaving peace in her wake. Eventually, she descended to the lowest levels where the special dungeons were.

These were the places set aside for Soraun's most hateful excesses, against those who had somehow merited His especial attentions. One sight stopped Sara in her tracks, as Soraun had guessed it would, allowing Him to make His escape through a secret tunnel that led straight to His ancient forge in Ordruen where He would prepare His last stand.

Among the wretches who filled this place of

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hopelessness were two Little People. Their mouths had been sewn shut, but Sara could guess their identities.

"Froudo?" she called softly, "Samm?" They stared at her, blinking, finally nodding fearfully as if being summoned to some new round of unending punishment.

A Man prisoner lying propped against a column nearby looked up at her. His gray beard and unshorn hair was filthy, tattered and matted, and his clothes mere rags, but he had a scabbard incongruously strapped to his waist, jeweled hilt gleaming under layers of grime. He squinted in the unaccustomed light.

"Who...? He croaked, as if he hadn't had the need of speech in a long time. "Who calls for the Ringbearers?"

"I'm Sara, from another world. I'm after Soraun. It looks like He got away," she said, "but not for long."

He looked at her, incredulity slowly coming into his expression as the implication dawned on him. "You're..." he struggled, "You're *after* Soraun...? Have the High Elves finally come? At last! What is happening in the world above us? Where are the others?"

"No," she answered, "It's just me, I'm afraid. And I was sent far too late, if you ask me. Too much evil has occurred to ever be put right."

Curiosity overwhelmed her. "Why are their mouths sewn up like that? Who are you? Are you all right? Is that a sword?" Sara had so many questions, she didn't know where to begin. Soraun could wait — she knew where to find Him.

The Man struggled to sit upright, telling her, "I am appointed to be their keeper and protector, a duty I failed in another life and by which I am mocked in this one. I have been allowed to keep my sword for this purpose. It was broken once, but is mended now. Its presence mocks me as well."

He held up the stumps of his arms to show Sara where his hands had been. "I was known as Stryder," he laughed mirthlessly. He had no feet.

Sara's eyes widened at the heartbreaking revelations. "Stryder! I know you! The King whose sword was broken, but was forged anew."

Stryder answered, "Uncrowned King of a fallen land. How do you come to know of this?"

"Oh, this isn't going to make much sense, but I read the book, or something like it. I was sent to Gundolf and he gave me this mission — to collect all the Rings and then take out Soraun."

"Gundolf lives?" His eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"No," she answered, looking down, "He made me take his Ring, and then he..." she trailed off.

"I understand," said Stryder. He looked at her hands, squinting at the light from them. "So you have his Ring? And, I suppose, Eldron's and Gladariels's, too." He added, wonderingly, "And the Nazghoul...?"

Sara said, somewhat embarrassedly, "Yeah, quite a collection, huh... The rest of them are on my toes, mostly

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from the Dwarves 'cause they're closer to the earth that way, I guess. Only one I'm missing is, you know, His," she jerked her head in the direction of the fiery mountain outside. "I'll tell you about it sometime."

Stryder nodded dumbly.

"You gotta tell me," she insisted, "What's with Froudo and Samm? Why are they like this? How can they still be alive if they can't eat anything? Is there anything I can do?"

"They have no need of food. They have another means of sustenance, I'm afraid. Even now, the serpents approach. Behold."

Sara saw them. Two huge, blind snake-like creatures crept toward the Little People, who made no effort to escape. In fact, they seemed resigned to their fate, dreading and welcoming them at the same time.

"Don't worry," she said, "I'll take care of them."

"Hold," said Stryder urgently, "Do not interfere. Their need is upon them."

Sara stopped her laser spears just in time and turned to look questioningly at Stryder. He nodded at her and she turned to watch as the serpents closed in, baring their fangs as the Little People presented their arms.

Only they weren't the fangs she was expecting to see. Each had but a single long, very slender tooth, more resembling a hypodermic needle than a fang. These were jabbed unerringly into veins on the two Little Peoples' unflinching arms, and fluid began to pump into their

bodies.

They began to writhe in obvious agony, alarming Sara. She cried out and started to move to help them, but Stryder again called out, "Hold!"

Sara looked at him with exasperation, but he began, "The venom burns as it enters their blood. I know they feel its excruciating journey through every vein and artery, but it nourishes them and prolongs their lives, probably forever. It also makes them feel an overwhelming need for the next such treatment. A need stronger than any other desire, even for death, for to die would be to deprive them of their need, and they cannot abide the thought of that.

"Not far from here is an open door to freedom, if such there is anymore. I cannot make the journey, and they *will* not. They are bound by their addiction more strongly than by chains."

Sara could only stare mutely at the grotesque scene, her light dimming in reaction.

"To maintain their crawling 'benefactors'," Stryder spat, "they must steal into the dark chambers above from time to time to secure the serpents' provisions, which must be living flesh. Our once-human jailers periodically rape the women brought here in servitude — whose numbers must be replenished constantly from being used up in toil — and they are brought within reach of our curséd citizenry to give birth to what becomes the snakes' meals."

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Sara was aghast. The serpents had completed their feedings and withdrew. Froudo and Samm rolled fitfully on the slimy floor until they lapsed into exhausted comas. She felt completely helpless.

"They will sleep senselessly until it is time to forage again," said Stryder. "As for me, I periodically have a tube forced down my throat and am filled up with the putrid liquor of the Goblins. It is enough to keep me alive and maintain my own needs, for I am the town drunk of this place. It gives me no compensating pleasure — for I am a foul drunk, full of impotent rages — and serves to further annoy the others, I suppose. I am singled out for speech because it amuses Soraun to have me brought up from time to time to tell Him how His nethermost subjects fare."

If Sara's makers had provided her with tears, they would be flowing uncontrollably. The effect on her emotions was the same, and she sobbed disconsolately. She got down on the floor with them and gathered all three to her bosom, trying to give what comfort she could. Others with sutured lips came out of the further reaches of the dungeons to watch in wonder until her light faded and went out.

When she could cry no longer, she asked Stryder, "What can I do? I think everybody above this level is probably dead, so there won't be any more jailers or..." She couldn't mention the rest.

Stryder told her, "There is only one thing you can do.

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If it is in your power to destroy Soraun and His Ring, you must tarry no longer. We have been extinguished for a long time. There is no hope for us but an end to all things."

Sara made them as comfortable as possible, then began the long return to the air above, her mind terribly focussed on her mission.

"I am coming for You, You bastard," she shrieked as she rose high above the tomb she had made of Barradour.

He was waiting.

Chapter Twenty: The Protector

Ordruen, Mount Doum, the volcanic Mountain of Fire, the very source of Soraun's power and site of His ancient forges in the Shabath Noor wherein the One Ring was wrought. In answer to His need, it blazed in full eruption, great spews of red-glowing lava shooting into the hidden sky in towering fountains and running down the slopes in a hundred channels of liquid fire, enormous dirty gray clouds of ash pouring voluminously from collapsing vents, boulders whining and whistling through the choking reek in unceasing barrages of infernal artillery, superheated rushing avalanches of poisonous fumes and burning ejecta pouring down its treacherous slopes, incessant shaking and heaving of its deeply riven and perilous cone shattering the already tortured landscape. The hot and heavy blackness that cloaked the whole of the mountain was underscored by sullen redness from below and coruscating violet lightnings from above.

Sara screamed into this hellish inferno like a great eagle of vengeance, cape fluttering like rushing wings, the bright gold of her hair streaming in her wake, defiance in her plummeting posture, and a deadly gleam of untold power flashing blue ruin from her eyes.

Soraun cloaked Himself in smoke and confusion, casting shadows and echoes of shadows around Him, unheard through the frightful din of noise, unseen through the heavily laden atmosphere, unfelt through the

continuous catastrophe of dire upheaval.

Thrice 'round the entire circumference she raced, peering with her uncanny senses through the impenetrable turmoil, attuning herself to traces of fleeting rumors and faint indications. Her computer brain worked out the uncertain topography of the shifting terrain, and plotted trends and fluctuations that eventually pointed to a node of certainty in a particular probability matrix.

She stormed to the site and landed on a broad shoulder jutting from the eastern upper slope beside a wide cliff where a broken road lay covered by debris. There had been a great door covering a passage into the rock, but it had been cast down the slope in some recent paroxysm that shattered the roof of the tunnel, turning it into a canyon cleaving its course into the mountainside. There was relatively clear air here, with a low ceiling of roiling, ashy smoke through which flaming missiles broke. At the head of the canyon, the tunnel resumed for a short distance before it was intersected by a deep fissure that dropped into a surging river of almost white-hot lava far below.

This was it. The Chasm of Doum. Soraun's last defense would be here where His power was greatest — and could be unmade when His Ring was carried to its destruction in the fiery source of its making. Sara kreened His shadow-wrapped presence at the edge of the chasm.

She paused for a few moments, trying to pierce the twisting deceptions that confounded her fix on Him.

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Gradually, His essence became clearer, more distinct. She could not get a good image, but she had Him pinpointed at last by the unmistakable signature of His Ring which she knew from His flight through Barradour.

It called to her in some indefinable way. With greater and greater concentration, she honed in on Its beacon. It grew larger and larger in her mind and seemed to whisper to her, below the limit of audibility, as if imperfectly broadcasting something into the borders of her consciousness that she couldn't quite distinguish. She strained ever harder, blocking out all distractions, chasing a will-o'-the-wisp through uncharted paths in her own mind. She became aware of the other Rings she carried, as if they burned brighter now, and became heavy, even to her. They began to vibrate in sympathy with their Master, singing discordantly an unheard melody.

Still, she uncovered Him more and more with each passing moment. He was being laid bare and could never shield His presence from her again. She seemed at last almost to peer into His very mind, but recoiled from that unclean place. Gingerly, she felt around its edges, searching for something, she knew not what. The complex darkness that was His innermost being whirled confusingly, seeming to draw her probes deeper inside until it took an effort of will to pull free. There was an inaudible snap and she felt like she had suddenly awakened from some deep and troubled sleep.

She shook herself and all the noise and turmoil that

surrounded her came back into her awareness as if she had been far away for an instant and had forgotten where she was.

This is ridiculous, she told herself, and started to take a step toward His hiding place — then halted uncertainly.

Something... What...? Something kept her back. She didn't want to go in there. No, that couldn't be right. *Impossible*. She tried to take another step, but didn't quite...

What am I thinking? she asked herself — and found no answer. Alright, she didn't have to go after Him. He had gone as far as He could and had to face her sooner or later. Yes. That was it. There seemed to be a curious humming in her head.

Sara snapped her focus back on the matter at hand and cried out in a tremendous voice that carried over the noise into where He was lurking, "I've come for You, Soraun. Your party's over. Show Yourself."

He stirred, discarding some of His now-useless veils of treachery as He concentrated His entire energies on the task of confronting her. It was time. Slowly, deliberately, He issued forth to do battle.

Sara waited, sensing His approach. She locked on to His presence, staring intently through the swirling gloom as He emerged. As He came, she could hear His footfalls sounding like the beating of a monstrous heart, with a keening sigh of barely restrained great power trilling in the air like a shrill obligato. Still she saw nothing as He

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emerged, until improbable footprints — of huge, misshapen, inhuman, unshod feet each with a single, hooked claw — slowly collapsed the cindery ground leading from the canyon's mouth toward her.

He was invisible to sight but clear to her other senses, looming hugely before her, coming on steadily. In spite of herself, Sara felt an impinging feeling of dread, that maybe there was something not quite right after all. She tried to shake it off, but her apprehension only deepened. She tried to reason that it was only a trick of His, but a Voice in her mind wondered that if this was so, then what had become of her confident invulnerability to His magic?

She told herself He could not possibly harm her, that she massed more than this whole mountain of His. But the Voice of doubt now gaining strength in her mind reminded her that He, too, could move mountains.

Hers was the substance of a dead star forged by subtle genius — but His was the power of a living planet subjected entirely to His brutal will. He had long acquaintance with the practice of mastery. His was the experience of centuries in the art of dominance. She was naïve and incautiously bold, inserting herself into affairs that she little understood, until at last she had come to the Source of all things in this world and was overmatched.

He continued His deliberate, menacing advance as she stood transfixed by uncertainty. Things were happening too fast, and not as she had expected. She

found herself wanting to run away, to hide until she could reorganize her thoughts. But the Voice within her told her that it was too late, that she did not have leave to go. She must face the consequences of her rebellion, of her disrespect. She seemed to perceive His mind's decree...

You cannot run.

Her legs would not answer, as if they had become apart from her and no longer understood her urgent need. There was a hint of panic in her answer.

"No!" she shouted, and unleashed a torrent of ravening laser destruction at the approaching unseen form. Immediately, there was a shattering roar as her air-splitting beams intersected His body, incandescing His substance in a shower of sparks that outlined His form in fire.

Ghastly it was, huge and wide, altogether alien to this or any other planet. It was as if made from parts of this misshapen creature and that, whose taxonomy defied use or reason. There were shapes no rational mind could contemplate mated together with disturbing purpose.

Escaping the wreck of the Fall of the West so many centuries before, His shade had been compelled ever after to take no form pleasing to human sight, but He had found another from some hidden source of a time and place unconnected to sanity. Intelligence could not comprehend the thing outlined in the outpouring of energy from her

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beams. It was even more than Sara could bear for long. The light of her attack dimmed and went out.

He had been grievously hurt, evaporated away wherever her laser spears had touched, filling the noxious air with an even greater stench. But He was also undamaged, the matter of His being reconstituted from millisecond to millisecond by some unknown agency, some limitless source of energy. He could not be unmade, as Sara had been unable to vaporize Gundolf's Ring seemingly so long ago. He began His advance once more, and Sara prepared to again lash out, in apprehensive determination. But His command forestalled her...

You have no fire.

Nothing happened. Somehow, she had forgotten how to bring forth the searing light of her eyes. The pathways in her mind were hidden — or she could not make herself find them.

Frantic now to escape, she tried to spring aloft. She became aware of His order with which she...must...agree...

You cannot fly.

Inside her mind, the connections from her awareness to the mechanisms that controlled her levitation were fixed in place, and she was locked in her default

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configuration of weight and mass in human semblance. She could not fly.

He was almost upon her. As He reached out, she blindly swatted at His arm to ward away His loathsome touch, but then perceived from Him...

You have no strength.

And it became so. She fell helpless to the ground before Him.

One by one, His commands stripped her of her superhuman attributes until she was left all alone within a still indestructible body that was cut off from her control in willing submission to His will. She had become a small girl, dominated by His dark purpose, awash in the unfiltered messages of pain that now filled her awareness. She could feel the burning Rings depart from her one by one until He had reclaimed them all.

Now He revealed Himself to her, now He towered over her, and now the awful fright of Him overwhelmed her.

He reached out and picked up her cowering form with casual strength, bringing her close to the terrifying gaze of His great, lidless Eye, stripping her soul naked as she screamed and wept, unable to look away. His mouth opened wide, toothlike crags of some glinting substance dripping acid, dreadful breath choking her. Slowly, He stuffed her head into Himself, pushing the rest of her

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body after it until she had disappeared entirely, and swallowed her.

She felt Him grinding at her. He could not break her body, but the pain of it was as if He had. She slowly was engulfed in His hot substance as she passed down into His bowels, retching violently, covered with slimy exudations, tasting His bitter bile, inching forward through His vile corruption.

He mocked her...

You have done My work from the beginning.

He taunted her...

There is no will in Midgarde but My will.

He reviled her...

You cannot cast Me down, for you cannot take My place.

He condemned her...

For I am as one with the destiny of this world.

He digested her mind with brutal savagery, tearing from her every secret He desired. He wrested from her knowledge of Avalon, the High Elves and Tim Bimbadel

— and showed her His disgusting intentions. He took Sara's memories of Earth for His own — and sullied them. He uncovered secrets about her makers that she neither knew she possessed nor understood — and revealed to her His ambitions to spoil the very heavens.

He saw in her mind's eye dying Gundolf, Eldron and Gladariel, the sacrifices of the Dwarves, Nob's head atop the scrap heap, and Froudo, Samm and Stryder in His pitiless dungeons. And He crushed her memories beneath His mirthless laughter.

She became a vessel filled with despair, loss, pain and hopelessness until there was nothing left of her with which to avenge Himself but one final act of contemptuous dismissal. Returning to the tunnel, He squatted obscenely.

And shat her unto the Chasm of Doum.

Down she fell, impacting the lava with great violence and plunging beneath its bubbling surface. She felt every degree of heat from the boiling rock at the bottom of the chasm, on every inch of her body. Terrible, searing, unending heat that burned her imperishable body without diminishing. She was pulled beneath the surface and roiled within its swirling currents, carried into the system of long tubes that meandered throughout the enormous underworld of fire beneath the Mountain of Fire.

She was scraped against the jagged walls, hammered

by floating debris, forced through narrow openings by the unstoppable current. Where there was a surface in low-ceilinged caverns, she bobbed to the top briefly, only to be pulled below again by the whims of chance.

The fire, the pain, was infinitely preferable to facing her failure, and so she almost gratefully gave herself up to it until all thought was driven from her mind and she became devoid of anything but agony. She was swept along the entire circuit of Ordruen's molten channels until, in a space of time that could not be reckoned, she was cast ashore on an outcropping jutting from an older, empty lava tube as the flow subsided with the mountain's slow cooling.

There she lay stunned and uncomprehending for a long while, until eventually she instinctively rolled away from the blazing river, then crawled painfully up the slope of the tunnel blindly seeking respite. Finally, she wedged herself into a little niche, barely big enough for her, and began to think again.

It was a very long time before she remembered who she was, and a longer time still before she could face her memories without wanting to plunge again into the lava. But eventually she resigned herself to her fiery exile and began a cautious exploration of what she faced.

Her powers were inaccessible to her. No act of will could be summoned to overcome Soraun's commands, even though she knew it was by her own acceptance of His power over her. It could not be done. It could not

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even be faced. His mastery was complete and she was His accomplice in His cause of it. But she remained physically unharmed, beyond His — or even her — reach to alter.

Therefore she was to remain forever far below the unpredictable volcano, without food, water or much light, never to see another person again. Unless she might one day discover a path to the surface. There was nothing much to do but explore, since she couldn't face the terror of sleep and dreams.

The tube connected to other tubes in an enormous maze. Since Soraun was through with the volcano for now, its streams receded and passageways drained. She wandered aimlessly through the murky and treacherous darkness, always trying to trend upward and away from what she thought to be the hottest part beneath the center of the mountain.

But there was no access to the world that did not pass through fire. And she knew that once in the surging lava, only fortune would perhaps cast her out into the air — or trap her in hardening rock, alive, conscious and helpless until some future geologic age weathered her prison away. She was not prepared to face that chance, though some inevitable eruption might make that choice for her. She resigned herself to endless misery.

Until she came upon the door. She felt it curiously, at first not remembering what such a thing was for. There was no doubt, though. It was certainly a door made of

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some hard, cool substance. Just being beside the door gave her the first comfort she'd had in this awful place. She savored it for a while.

Its surface was undisturbed by the lava that must have occasionally washed against it. Nothing had adhered to it or its frame to break its smoothness. There was no handle or any obvious means of opening it. It probably only opened from the inside. Too bad. She wished it would open and let her in. Perhaps in response, something clicked.

The door started to move. Cool air seeped around its edges. Slowly, it swung aside, bathing her in a refreshing breeze. Hesitantly, not believing her good fortune, she passed through. The door swung closed behind her and sealed itself again.

Feeling her way around the walls, she discovered she was in a very small room with no other doors. There didn't seem to be any furniture or light switches or...

Oops. There was a gaping hole in the middle of the floor. She had stumbled into it in the dark and fell. Seemingly almost forever.

She was tumbling down a narrow shaft, bouncing from one wall to the next. One side had something like rungs projecting from the wall, but she was moving too fast to grab one. Far below, like a pinpoint, there was a faint light. It was going to hurt when she reached the bottom. She shrugged her shoulders.

She bounced. It hurt. But she was unharmed. And

lying in a broad tunnel with a hole in the roof through which she had plummeted. Not a lava tube, but a well-made structure. With lights. And clean air. She dared to be delighted.

Both ends of the tunnel opened out into broad open areas filled with gigantic structures that might have been machines. The tunnel floor became a bridge over an incredible chasm that was so deep that no bottom could be seen. The bridge had no rails, and Sara peered cautiously over the edge, having fallen quite enough for one day.

Huge, mysterious structures rose and fell along vertical rails, emitting energetic arcs from one pointed end or the other as they approached or withdrew from other structures. There were sounds of mechanical and electrical work being done, and the background thrum of hidden power.

On most of the innumerable bridges stretching further than she could see, gleaming maintenance robots tottering and deliberately attended to their rounds, ignoring Sara completely. They were vaguely anthropomorphic, with legs and arms made from stainless steel balls jointed together, and tall glass domes for heads with clattering machinery and whirling antennae in them.

The tunnel in which she had landed cut through an enormous square supporting column. There were other tunnels at regular intervals below her, with bridges connecting more columns, all rising from unseen depths, repeating in every direction until lost in the haze of

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distance. The whole improbably large space seemed to comprise a single structure filled with strange devices working in concert for obscure purposes, a gigantic cubic volume at least twenty miles across in each dimension carved into the crust of the planet, far underneath an active volcano.

It couldn't be the work of the natives.

Sara found nothing useful to do except explore, but the complete mystery of everything she saw made her journey rather boring after a while. She had no idea where to go, there were no signs, and the robots offered no enlightenment — but she didn't relish the idea of trying to climb up one of the shafts like the one she'd fallen down. This place was definitely better than the lava tubes.

She eventually came to the edge of the enormous space and followed the wall to a corner, staying on the top level, since the other levels below seemed to be just more of the same. There was something like a subway station there, a car with its door open waiting to whisk passengers down a long tunnel cut smoothly through solid rock.

There was nothing else to do, so she got in and closed the door. The car moved off, picking up speed until the well-spaced lights along the wall of the tunnel blurred together. She had no idea how far she'd traveled when the trip ended, but it seemed like she had to be much closer to the surface.

Debarking, she entered a large room filled with

curious machines and apparati. There was a crystal globe suspended above one table with what had to be controls arrayed around the sides, though obviously unsuited for human hands. There were odd structures on other tables shaped more like cylinders, and others with more complex designs. On one wall of the room, in rank upon rank, were what appeared to be hundreds of gauges with no markings, a few of which were lit up on one side, flickering back and forth as if measuring some trifling use of potentially vast energy.

On the other side of the room was a vault-like door of some kind of dense metal. Hoping it might lead outside — and refusing to think about what might be there — she ran to it to see how it might be opened. Nothing she tried worked. She was disappointed.

Eventually, she turned to examining the machines to see if there was any entertainment value to be had from them. Unable to try to contact her computer brain, she was mostly baffled at first. But it looked like there would be plenty of time to experiment.

And a long time did pass, though there was no way to mark it. Sara learned from what turned out to be a teaching machine of a long lost alien race about the origins and purpose of this underground complex.

It had been constructed at the dawn of this planet, so far back that the rains of its primal atmosphere had not yet begun to fill the seas. It was built by the First Race, who called themselves the Kryll, the original colonizers of this

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galaxy from a time so close to its beginnings that no other world but theirs had progressed to technological evolution.

The whole of the empty, young galaxy had been their playground, and they had filled it entirely, ruling for a time every star that spawned planets. On some, they planted the seeds of life. On others they made global cities or resorts or laboratories or just empty scenic vistas for the pleasure of it. Still others they had left alone, marking them as potential cradles of life with whose development they would not allow interference.

In the blink of an eye, they had vanished — some historians who were acquainted with their exceedingly rare artifacts postulating their transcendence into pure spiritual beings, other scholars maintaining they perished of some sudden, universal madness.

Of the few things they left behind were occasional works such as Midgarde. It was to be a planet of world-magic, spawned and supported by the self-regenerating machinery of this complex, supplying as much power as its unwitting inhabitants called upon. Its energy source was practically limitless, the meters in this control room able to indicate the scaling of it by the successive power of ten raised almost to infinity. The volcano of Ordruen was merely a cooling device, a radiator of sorts for some bits of almost negligible waste heat that needed to be disposed of. It also served as a kind of antenna for the distribution of power over the planet's surface.

The world-magic thus supplied interpenetrated every particle of life in Midgarde, a fundamental part of its evolution. It was distributed without prejudice or guidance, to make of it whatever the inhabitants could imagine. It was designed to be machine-like in its neutrality, favoring neither good nor evil. Therefore, the program which ran it had no personality, no consciousness, and no soul.

Unlike Sara, whose soul had been captured.

She came to realize that this ancient Kryll machine was very much like herself in its purpose. She and it had been constructed to bring great power to a whole planet, to be available to the inhabitants as they chose to make use of it. They were both essentially giant computers, though she was rather more compact in volume if not in mass. Sara's superpowers and the machine's powerful world-magic were almost merely side effects of this central fact.

She and the machine were sisters.

It was stupid to keep thinking about it as 'it'. So she dubbed it 'Susan', for some reason she couldn't quite put her finger on. Sara and Susan. Two sisters, born far apart and brought together by intelligences vast and deep, whose purposes were beyond their comprehension.

Both of them now subservient to the same terrible Master. Susan because she had no will, Sara because her will had been turned against her. The ends were the same. The results were bitter.

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For Evil dominated the world above and made the strongest claim on Susan's resources. Why should this be so? The humans Sara had known on Earth had had good and evil mixed in varying proportions, but never being given over wholly to one or the other. It might be that individuals arose from time to time that were entirely evil. And that whole nations could succumb to their dominance. But Evil invariably played out its course.

Not so on Midgarde. Evil could become eternally invincible here. And had done so. Perhaps it was just a matter of one 'side' winning out over time, but there was more to it than that. The ages of this world were marked by great struggles against Evil, and the interregnums were medieval dark ages, mired in feudalism and ignorance. What Good there was was blind and stumbling, whereas Evil flourished in spite of its tendencies toward self-destruction. In this world, Good invariably played out its course.

Evil was a part of the fundamental structure of this world, bred into the inhabitants. Even the Elves, beautiful and immortal, were selfish and insular, caring little for less-gifted races. The Dwarves were noble fanatics, capable of a narrowness of purpose that had had catastrophic consequences. Men were prejudiced and corruptible, evidently incapable of social progress, whose Kings had become the Nazghoul.

And then there were Goblins, Trolls, Dire Wolves, Jabberwauks — whole zoos full of creeping phantasms.

The Elder Race of this world had left behind only two degenerate gods as a legacy of their fall.

Only the Little People seemed to be somewhat immune to the natural tendency toward Evil in this world, and they were fearful, backward and doomed to extinction.

The Wizards had come from 'outside' and had tried to tame the tide of Evil, sometimes successfully but always temporarily. They had either died or fallen, and their efforts had been completely swept away. And Sara herself — great and powerful Sara, legacy of uncounted millennia of technological wizardry — had been defeated.

Good was finished on this world, with no hope of resurrection. Even if Sara had triumphed, it would only have served to replace one Evil with another, because even Susan's power had been suborned to Its purposes. Sara's seduction would have been as complete in her victory as it was in her defeat. She would have assumed the mantle of absolute authority over every being and process of this world, and every good intention would be yet another directive whose will must be obeyed, yet another paving stone on the road to Hell, imparting nothing of Good in its effects.

Soraun had justified His ascendancy by claiming to be 'as one with the destiny of this world'. She had known that He was right, and this realization had given Him power over her — for pain and defeat were infinitely preferable to accepting the ultimate surrender of

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embracing the Evil of this place and becoming its ruling slave.

Maybe the Kryll had known of this outcome. Maybe they had planned it this way. Sara could not fathom their intentions and Susan was mute on the subject. Sara believed that her own subjugation was not the intent of her makers, though.

Because she became aware of one last power that was available to her that could never be taken away, buried so deep in the physical makeup of her being that it could never be touched and whose purpose could never be removed. There was a final role she would play, the last ditch recourse of her makers' design.

Sara's kind were sent to emerging peoples to be a gift of such power that their choice of her employment would prove their worthiness to join the vast fellowship of civilizations that filled the Universe. On the one hand, dependence on her abilities to order the whole instrumentality of a planet would doom them to laziness and indolence, the willing subjects of an ultimate welfare state that cared for them from cradle to grave, robbing them of will and ambition — and thus providing for their extinction by ennui. On the other hand, partnership with her vast capacities would bring them to the doorstep of greatness and acceptance into the community of star-spanning races that filled the heavens with peace and joy.

Sara's kind had another purpose, as well. Some planets became so corrupted and intransigent in their

submission to Evil that they could not be suffered to spread their pollution among the shining worlds of the firmament. There were no guidelines for the condemnation of a people as fundamentally Evil provided by her makers. There was only one way to come to such a conclusion inescapably, and that was by the conscious definition of the subjects themselves as being slaves to Evil — or its Master — and the consequent submission of one like Sara to its power.

She must come to this realization as an inescapable inevitability, shorn of the ability to hinder Evil's designs. She would then be given the choice of accepting her responsibility as Protector.

Sara had come to this as Gundolf had said she would. "There may be an end to all things," he had told her, "but it will come down to your choice. By then, you should know."

And she did now know what she must do. She would accept her role as Protector, though it weighed heavily on her — not so much for the consequences of such a decision, but for all the regrets that she must face and all the might-have-beens that would never be.

Soraun came to know her mind. He had dismissed her as useless and irrelevant, but had kept some part of His awareness upon her, if nothing else but for the delicious agony that overwhelmed her mind. Her discovery of the existence and workings of Susan had

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been a revelation to Him, and now He understood much that had been hidden. For the vault-like door of the control room was at the end of the tunnel of the Shabath Noor, beyond the Chasm of Doum.

Long had He been aware of it, but it had always defied His attempts to defeat the mechanism of its operation. He had always known the source of His power — of all power — was behind that door, but it was made of Kryll-steel and sealed by their ingenuity. He had been consumed by what He might discover behind it and yet fearful of exerting the power necessary to overwhelm it, lest the undoing of such a seal might also be the undoing of His fount of energy.

But now, He perceived her plan and saw that her determination was unswayable. He saw His destruction in its implementation. This could not be.

Within, Sara was assaulted by His fury and malevolence. She cried out in horror at His coming and the force of His awful commands. Again, she found herself rooted to the spot to await His wrath, unable to do anything to save herself. The expectation was unbearable, nearly driving her duty from her mind.

But this duty would not be overcome. It was rooted physically in her makeup and was thus invulnerable. It became a life preserver for the shreds of her sanity to which she clung desperately.

Without, Soraun assailed the near-total inviolability of the Kryll-steel, drawing ever greater torrents of energy

from Susan's awakening reserves. The dials on the wall lit up in succession, one by one adding ten times the power to the preceding level. Their glowing rows and columns throbbed as Ordruen roared, shaking the control room violently.

The shattering pressure of Soraun's attack dented the thick door. It was designed to exclude any but Kryll technicians, and they had vanished before the first slime stained the shores of Midgarde's oceans. But it could not forever withstand the full fury of their creation turned against itself.

The center began to glow redly, flakes breaking from its surface to fall burning to the floor. Red turned to white, white turned to incandescence. It would not hold much longer. Sara watched helplessly as the barrier began to give way before the terrifying Monster from the Id that assailed it.

The door shattered and Soraun entered, reaching for her...

Stop...

He commanded. But Sara had an answer for Him this time. Her duty gave her the last strength she needed to raise aloft the finger reserved so long ago for the One Ring.

She waved her defiance in his face and gave herself over to her destiny.

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Simultaneously, the bonds that ordered the billions of tons of her substance were released. The half of her that was antimatter was left free to interact with the other half of her that was merely highly degenerate matter. The n-dimensional pathways that carried off her waste heat into some microscopic wormholes to a place far removed from our space-time were closed and the mechanism of her finely balanced gravitational compensation was erased. Everything happened at once.

There was a great flash of light that for a part of one trillionth of a second defined what had become of Sara. Soraun ceased to exist in its glare, and the Rings went out. Susan was consumed and added the full power of her vast stores of energy to the unstoppable fireball in a deep chain reaction rooted far below the crust of the planet. Ordruen vanished along with the entire plain of Gyregyrath. In the deepest dungeons below the wreck of Barradour, Soraun's miserable victims had a brief instant to wonder at the light before they were mercifully extinguished. Goblins and Men along with all creatures under the sky in the entire hemisphere simply perished at exposure to the searing brightness. Those who were hidden distantly and deeply had only moments before the spreading shockwave hurled their fragments into space. The Elves on far Avalon knew the meaning of the untimely sunrise in the east and knew the doom of all their refuges was at hand.

All creatures on every land perished. Great and small, they ceased to be — every kind of thing on land or

above it, even in their deepest burrows. The hardy cockroaches who outlived the dinosaurs of this world became instantly extinct. Fishes in the cold depths of the oceans perished when the seas boiled away. Microbes did not survive, even unto their spores. All DNA was disrupted, shredded and torn to atoms. Every work of every creature that ever lived was wiped out. The very fossils were broken into indecipherable dust.

There would be no record that Midgarde had ever existed other than the observations by scientists in far-flung observatories around the galaxy of a rare planetary nova. For Sara had fulfilled her duty as Protector — to save the Universe from the threatening Evil that had consumed the world of her assignment. It was over.

The story has ended.

Almost...

First Interlude Epilogue

Sara's eyes finally opened as she screamed. Only Alex's proximity to her kept her from probably breaking the windows out with such a shrill noise. She looked frantically around, her face a mask of terror, as if she had never seen her room before or her friends that had been keeping vigil around her bed. Then she relaxed sighing as she awakened fully to the real world.

"Are you all right?" Alex inquired anxiously.

She considered for a while before she cautiously answered, "I guess so."

She looked around again, calmer this time, and asked, "What happened? Why is everybody here?"

Alex looked at Dinah and then back at Sara, "You really had us worried, Sara. You seemed to be in a coma or something. It's been almost two weeks. You've never slept much more than an hour before. I was afraid maybe you were going to freeze solid or something."

Mrs. Jachimczyk growled, "Is no use callink stupid doktors to come and try to poke you vith needles. Vhat ve tellink them, 'Come fix alien?' So ve vatch. Maybe now I am goink to make nice bowl of borscht for you, fix you up quick. You — not eatink for days? Hah!" She bustled out, obviously relieved.

Dinah added, "Looks like you were having some sort of nightmare, the way you woke up. You sure you're OK?"

"Nightmare," Sara mused. "I don't know. It was so intense, so real."

She looked at Alex, "When you dream, is it ever just, like, so real that you can't tell the difference?"

"Sure," he said, "at least until I wake up. I think some of my dreams have been pretty detailed. Is that what happened? Is that why you were out so long?"

"Oh, this was beyond real. It was perfect down to every blade of grass. It was like I was there." She shuddered.

Jimmie said, "Virtual reality." The others looked at him, so he went on, "You know, like when she played that video game for all of you at the birthday party. She can really get immersed."

Sara said, "No, this was much more than that. I mean, I could tell the difference, I think, between whatever this was and a game. I can't explain it, but it was... It was like I was really there, only more so. Only it wasn't me, except that it was as real as the me I am. Oh, I don't know what I'm saying, but I'm glad it's over."

Dinah said, "You want to tell us about it? Might help you get it off your chest and deal with it a little."

"Sure," Sara replied, sitting up and hugging her knees to her chest. "I hope you guys aren't doing anything for a while."

Everybody made themselves comfortable, so she started, "You know how I first woke up in your living room?"

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Alex nodded.

"Same thing, only this time I woke up in a place called Midgarde — you're not gonna believe this — with a Wizard named Gundolf!"

"Gundolf?" said Alex.

"Yep," said Sara, nodding her head emphatically, "And Eldron and Gladariel. There were Elves and Dwarves and Goblins and Little People and everything — just like a certain story, if you know what I mean. Except different."

"Midgarde," Alex mused. "That, uh, *rings* a bell. It means the middle Earth, or realm between Heaven and the underworld. So this was just like that fantasy trilogy you liked so much?"

"Uh-huh," she said.

"Kewl," Jimmie said. Alex smiled and Dinah shook her head.

Mrs. J was back already with a steaming bowl that she set down next to Sara who — wonder of wonders — ignored it. "Aha!" she said, "Is good story. I am havink read it in original language."

The others looked at her.

"Russian, of course. Hah!"

Everyone's eyes rolled up to the ceiling briefly, then Sara went on. She gave them the condensed version, hitting all the highlights and providing enough detail to make it sing. Alex and Jimmie kept interrupting her with questions, mostly to fill in some of the blanks she skipped

over in her rush to get it out.

"So what do you think?" she finished.

Alex told her, "Well, there's more than one book involved. Sounds like a little bit of 'The Wizard of Oz'..."

"Duh," said Sara.

"And some elements from Mark Twain about transforming a medieval society into an industrial one..."

"A *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*," muttered Jimmie. Alex's eyebrows shot up in surprise. The kid reads...

Alex went on, "And there's a lot of *The Forbidden Planet* in there, which is really Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, I think, except with special effects. George Orwell's *1984*, certainly. Some Lewis Carroll. And, of course, Tolkien's sources were from all over the map."

"Steven King?" guessed Jimmie doubtfully. "And DC comics, for sure."

Dinah added half-sarcastically, "Sure. And *Citizen Kane* and *Gilligan's Island*, too."

Alex pontificated, "Avalon's Lancelot and Gwenhwyfar are reminiscent of the Arthurian legend, which makes me suspect the Gray Wizard is closer to Merlin as an antecedent. Likewise, Eldron and Gladiolus are more akin to the King and Queen of Faery in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon and Titania..."

"No, no, no!" said Sara. "What did you *think*? About what *happened*?"

"Ah," said Alex, "That's different. I don't know if I'm

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qualified to analyze alien dreams."

"Well, you know what I think?" Jimmie said. "I think it's a training mission. Something put together by her makers to teach her stuff. About herself and what she has to learn about what she can run into on Earth."

"Run into Elves?" said Dinah. "I don't think so."

"Could be," said Alex. "Reminds me of fables, which is how the Classical Greeks were taught about virtue and duty and all that stuff. I can see some 'morals' here."

Mrs. J said, "Like 'Shoot first and don't be askink stupid questions'. Hah!"

That brought a laugh.

"I'm thinking more along the lines of 'Sometimes even good intentions and superpowers aren't enough'," said Alex thoughtfully.

Dinah added, "And 'All that is necessary for the triumph of Evil is for Good to do nothing'. I think you showed great character in persevering with your mission. You might have chosen otherwise."

"I wanted to," said Sara.

"But you didn't," Dinah emphasized. "I'm proud of you." She reached out and gave Sara a big hug.

"What about this Protector thing?" asked Jimmie.

"Does that mean you could blow everything up?"

"Only if you piss me off." Sara stuck out her tongue at him.

"Um," began Alex, "That's something that we probably ought to think about. And nobody else, if you

Toomie Starks

know what I mean. For all we know, it's just part of some dream, a way to end the story."

"Yeah," said Jimmie, "Sorta the opposite of '...and they all lived happily ever after'."

"What do *you* think, Sara," asked Alex. He took her hands in his and looked intently into her eyes. "Tell me."

She took a deep breath and seemed to look inside herself before answering. "I don't think I ever want to know. And I don't think that's relevant to a world like ours. I'm sure it isn't. It's just not the same."

Alex looked relieved but very serious. He turned to the others, "There's a lot more we need to think about over all this. I'm inclined to agree with Jimmie that this is some kind of program enacted by her computer brain for some probably good reasons.

"I wonder if she'll have any others..."

Book TWO



RocketEdition

Part Two

Sara goes out into the wide world.

Chapter Twenty-one:	<u>Attention</u>
Chapter Twenty-two:	<u>Enterprise</u>
Chapter Twenty-three:	<u>Clear Lake</u>
Chapter Twenty-four:	<u>Setup</u>
Chapter Twenty-five:	<u>White Sands</u>
Chapter Twenty-six:	<u>Scrutiny</u>
Chapter Twenty-seven:	<u>Debut</u>
Chapter Twenty-eight:	<u>Singapore</u>
Chapter Twenty-nine:	<u>Interview</u>
Chapter Thirty:	<u>Money</u>
Chapter Thirty-one:	<u>Politics</u>
Chapter Thirty-two:	<u>Death</u>

Second Interlude

Sara goes to Hell and visits Heaven.

Chapter Thirty-three:	<u>Welcome to Hell</u>
Chapter Thirty-four:	<u>The Final Muster</u>
Chapter Thirty-five:	<u>Down In the Valley</u>
Chapter Thirty-six:	<u>All the Heavens of Earth</u>
Chapter Thirty-seven:	<u>The Congress of Gods</u>

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Chapter Thirty-eight:	<u>The Final Battle</u>
Chapter Thirty-nine:	<u>The Angel of This Place</u>
Chapter Forty:	<u>The Flesh and the Spirit</u>

Chapter Twenty-one: Attention

As it turned out, NASA didn't really care. Alex had anticipated some resistance from the bureaucracy of the vast government agency, not really expecting them to fling their arms wide open just because some scruffy musician showed up with a teen-aged girl and said, "Got an alien for you."

But this...

Dinah was slumped over her desk, reading and re-reading another official-looking letter with the Space Agency's seal on it, obviously unhappy.

Alex peered at it over her shoulder. "What's it say?"

"Says maybe we should talk to Immigration and Naturalization," said Dinah sourly.

"On, that's really funny," said Alex. "What's this make, now? 'Bout the dozenth time they've told us to go away?"

Dinah crumpled it savagely and hurled it at the trash can. An angry Dinah was not a pretty sight. Well — actually a compellingly awesome sight in a certain way. But nothing to trifle with.

Alex dutifully retrieved the wad of paper, straightened it out and carefully filed it in a thickening folder with the others. "I don't get it. It's been a year or so since Jimmie figured out about Sara from the Web, and there've been all kinds of stories floating around — hell, half of Houston has seen her, or at least seen *something*.

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You'd think the geniuses out in Clear Lake would have snapped to this by now. Dammit, they oughtta be writing to *us*."

"The 'geniuses' aren't *getting* my letters. It's all gatekeeper stuff. There's nothing in their job descriptions about greeting extraterrestrials, so they blow it off. And anyway," she went on, "everything I've seen in print or on the 'Net sounds like Area 51 crap. Ninety percent of it's bogus, which makes the truth a lot less obvious. There's not a whole lot of people like Jimmie out there, you know."

"Still," said Alex teasingly, "I'd a thought a big ol' famous lawyer-lady like you woulda got their attention."

Dinah shrugged. "A loony is a loony, as far as they're concerned."

Alex stared off into space for a while, like he was trying to make up his mind about something, maybe come up with Plan B. Finally, he cocked an eyebrow at her. "So much for your way?" It was a challenge.

Dinah sighed. "OK. You win," she nodded. "What do you have in mind? I assume you're going to sic Sara on 'em."

"Not directly — just want to get their attention. I mean, it would be cool if she flew up there in full costume and launched that old lawn Saturn they got on display into orbit. I just don't think that's — oh, I don't know — *dignified*. Not how I think Sara should come out of the closet. I want them to announce what they've learned

about her at a press conference, with TV cameras and everything. I want everybody to take her *seriously*, not like some weird comic book creature suddenly come to life. You know, credibility and respect and all that."

Dinah looked at him. She could practically hear the gears turning lopsidedly in his head.

"Come on, Alex. I know you too well. You've gotta be up to something. You're just too much of a prankster to let an opportunity get by you."

"No, no, no," he objected. "This is serious."

She looked at him suspiciously, nevertheless.

"Look," he went on, "There's no reason for them to take us at face value just because we claim to have a Martian living with us. From all the weirdo crap they get in the mail, it probably looks like *everybody* believes they've got a Martian living with them, so nobody pays attention. We gotta do a demonstration — one that's *obvious*, but subtle, so they'll know for sure that we've got something and get back to us. Then we can talk. You get to do your lawyer thing and make sure they don't take advantage of her or get too carried away trying to open her up or whatever..."

"That was the whole point of trying to contact them through official channels," Dinah said, "I already have a contract drawn up to try to protect her rights."

"Yeah, I know," said Alex, "That's important. Otherwise I suppose the government could claim her as a *thing* and God knows what would happen to her. If she let

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'em, of course."

"So, what's your, uh, scheme?"

"Remember that moon buggy she brought back as a souvenir? She could drop it in front of the Admin Building some dark night along with the video tape Jimmie made of her trip. We just make sure there's our return address all over it."

Dinah looked dubious. "That's it? Not much of a plan."

He explained, "You can't just drive into Johnson Space Center because you feel like it. There's gates and guards and stuff. So the Director trips over this thing on his way to the office one morning. Major mystery. It should be obvious to them it's the real McCoy — there's serial numbers and stuff — they'll wonder how it got there, then they'll play the tape.

He concluded smugly, "We'll hear from them."

Sara and Jimmie were in Fort Solitude, not doing much in particular. Which couldn't be more dangerous — at least for Jimmie.

For Sara was in a determinedly curious mood. As quickly as she had 'grown up', there were a few things she'd yet to experience. Mostly, these things had to do with boys — and Jimmie was, to her mind, a more than suitable subject for experimenting with the strange powers and abilities granted to most girls her age. He was her best friend and greatest challenge, something that

even her computer brain didn't truly understand. As close as they were in so many ways, they weren't yet as close as she would like to be. She'd prepared for this encounter in a most irresistible manner, looking every bit the very picture of wide-eyed innocence.

Not that she, of all people, was in any way ignorant of what went on behind closed doors in the world around her. But that was theoretical. She wanted to know what it felt like to be close to somebody, to share some hidden, private moments, to touch and whisper and have secrets. Nothing more than that — and nothing less.

Jimmie had a different agenda. Oh, certainly he liked Sara — a lot. He liked talking to her, he liked doing things with her, he liked just being around her. And she certainly had the traditional effect on his exuberant young hormones.

It was a little complicated. Yeah, he liked her. Yeah, he was fascinated by her. And — oh, yeah! — there were certain... You know — urges. But his appreciation of her ran more deeply than that.

He was acutely aware that her specialness made her different in a way that put her in a whole 'nother category from the kind of female girl-type person he would actually entertain any amorous designs on. He couldn't help but think of her physical being as utterly non-human. He understood her workings too well to think of her in any other way.

He was also acutely aware that there was a very real

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person inside this magical machine. An idealized person whose love and trust he would never betray by even *thinking* about her in any base manner. Well, maybe thinking. But just that.

Besides, even if she was in fact what she appeared to be, there was the age thing. After all, he was nearly twenty now, contradictorily surprisingly mature and yet hopelessly hung up in geeky adolescence. She would be — to put it indelicately — jail bait. Even if she might eventually happen to be hanging around our planet until the sun went out, she would always be a tempting but ultimately unthinkable unobtainable Lolita, or maybe something like the girl-next-door's dangerously sweet kid sister.

So he kept his hands to himself, his eyes straight ahead (when she was looking) and his mind on his 'work' — for he was an honorable and dedicated kind of guy.

In other words, hopeless.

And it was *this* specialness that made him all the more attractive to Sara. This was going to be one heck of a frustrating experience for the both of them.

Jimmie was concentrating on some obscure bit of meaningless hacker trivia. Sara had been watching (mostly Jimmie) when she decided that he'd been ignoring her long enough. She came up behind him and to one side, casually putting her hand on his shoulder.

"Whatcha doin'?"

Toomie Starks

"Nothin' much."

"Can I help?"

"Nah. I can handle it."

She peered at the monitor briefly. "Wup. You got a curly bracket there," she noted, reaching just past his ear to rather elaborately point out the offending spot in his code, 'unconsciously' brushing against him in a carefully calculated way.

Jimmie kept his focus squarely on the screen, showing no sign he'd noticed. Well, except for the surge in blood pressure, sudden deep breath, perspiration spike, subcutaneous capillary dilation, tightening abs, pupillary fluctuation, brain wave activity, curling toes, hand tremor, follicle contraction, increase in stomach acid and core temperature changes that Sara duly noted.

"Thanks," he grunted non-committally.

She scooted a chair around next to his, facing him and partially blocking his view. He craned his neck a little to the side, pretending to be slightly annoyed. She leaned toward him little bit and turned her head as if looking for something important on the other side of the room, giving him a long opportunity to surreptitiously redirect his attention — which he couldn't help but do.

She shrugged her shoulders as if giving up on finding whatever it was (as if she actually had to *look*), which produced another round of polygraphic responses in Jimmie — whose eyeballs almost audibly snapped back to the screen as she slowly turned back around. He forced

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himself to remain impassive and calm, though his eyelids looked like they were being propped open by toothpicks.

She appeared to look absently around the room, as if she were a trifle bored waiting for Jimmie to finish his little chore, while he did his best to screw things up enough to make the moment last as long as possible. Sara could tell from kreening his keystrokes what he was doing and smiled just a little as she casually let her arm fall from her lap to rest her hand on his adjacent knee. It seemed the natural thing to do — no big deal, right?

Right. Jimmie seemed to be having trouble swallowing, though he did his best to hide the fact. He sensed something was different about this particular close encounter. The moment had lasted long enough — it was time to break the spell.

Turned out not to be so easy to do.

The alien life-form was inexorably bearing down on him, unstoppable, merciless and purposeful. Things were happening too fast, and not as he had expected. He found himself wanting to run away, to hide until he could reorganize his thoughts. But the Voice within him told him that it was too late, that he did not have leave to go. He sensed Her awful power, commanding his utter obedience. Her unspoken command burned into his brain like lightning.

You cannot run.

Toomie Starks

His will evaporated, though he understood his own acquiescent complicity in accepting Her mastery of him. He was helpless, yet he allowed himself to be helpless.

Beautiful She was, precious and perfect, unearthly and pure. But it was not mortal beauty and he knew himself to be unworthy. This was not what he wanted, but it was everything that he wanted. Desperately, he tried to tear himself away from the inevitable.

You have no strength.

And he did not. It was if he had forgotten how to control his own body. The pathways in his mind were hidden — or he could not make himself find them. He tried to remember all the damned good reasons he'd thought of to avoid this very eventuality, but they seemed stupid and unimportant now.

Resistance is futile.

Now She revealed Herself to him, now She leaned over him, and now the awe-inspiring sight of Her overwhelmed him. She reached out and picked up his trembling form with casual strength, bringing him close to the blue gaze of Her infinitely deep eyes, stripping his soul naked as his heart hammered and his chest heaved, unable to look away.

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Their kiss was perfect — slow and tender, deep and lingering — and while it lasted, the rest of existence faded into insignificance. It endured forever in its own special dimension of time — ageless, never dimming entirely from memory, forever after unattainable.

She settled her head in his arms, clinging to him gently, savoring the closeness. The almost undetectable pressure of her hand on his chest filled him with longing, yet calmed him with peaceful fulfillment. There was no need for words.

His mind gradually ceased its frantic whirling and returned to sanity. As if waking from some altered state of consciousness far away, he realized that this could go no further. The unalterable core of reason in the deepest recesses of his mind told him that this was fundamentally wrong and that he must put a stop to it. The helpless, unreasoning desire that she had inflamed threatened something far more valuable to him, something he treasured beyond anything her playful exuberance and his secret dreams might yet succumb to.

Their friendship.

For that would endure past the whims and needs of the moment, he prayed. He might age, still in rapt wonder at her unchanging magnificence, but the bond he felt they shared would transcend his physical weakness and her unyielding endurance.

They would always share this moment, but it was an aberration. It had to be. They were not meant for each

Toomie Starks

other in this way. There was no future in love between them — it probably wasn't even possible.

God, he was stupid.

He pulled himself away and regained his composure, at least outwardly. Getting up from the floor he couldn't remember how he had gotten to, he dragged himself to his feet and plopped back into his chair. Sara looked a little puzzled.

"Whoa," he managed to squeak, clearing his throat noisily a few times. "That was..." he struggled for a suitable word. "Nice."

That wasn't the kind of response Sara had been looking for.

"Nice?" She looked at him as if he had just said something nasty.

"Well, yeah," he answered lamely. "I, uh... It was... I mean, uh, you know..."

"Nice," she repeated.

"Sure. I, uh, hope you enjoyed it as much as I did." He felt like an idiot.

She nodded her head dumbly. "Oh, yeah..." Oh, come on. *Nice*, she thought, feeling a little stunned. *What the hell is wrong with him? What the hell is wrong with me?*

She got up slowly and slowly straddled his knees, facing him, taking his hands in hers. She leaned into him, closing her eyes.

"Sara," he choked out. "Wait a minute. We gotta

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talk."

"No we don't," she whispered. She knew — *she knew* — it was more than *nice*. She could tell from the responses he could not hide from her.

Almost desperately, he practically pushed her off his lap. Anyone else would have fallen on their butt.

"Stop it, Sara," he nearly pleaded. "I really, really like you and everything. Believe me. And I want to... Well, uh... Go on... Sorta..."

"Sorta?" Jimmie wasn't choosing the right words.

"We can't do this."

"Do what?" She looked at him innocently.

"You know..."

"We can't kiss?" she said, like it was playing Monopoly or something. "Why not? Isn't it *nice*?" she emphasized, maybe a little too much.

Jeez, it's hot in here, he thought. "OK. Better than *nice*. Much better. That's what I'm afraid of. That it could get a whole lot nicer and it's already gone too far already."

"What do you think I'm trying to do?" she asked him, as if she maybe didn't understand what was happening.

"I don't know. I don't want to find out."

"It's just kissing, Jimmie. You won't catch anything, I promise. And I'm not trying to do anything bad or weird or anything. Hey, birds do it, bees do it..."

He didn't want to go there. "Depends on what you mean by 'it'," he said.

"What do *you* think?"

Toomie Starks

Damn, he thought, *she's persistent*. "I'm older than you, Sara. I'm supposed to know better, and I do. You're sweet. Really. But I'm a guy..."

Sara interrupted him, "And I'm a girl..."

The look in his eyes stopped her.

"No, Sara. You're not."

She wasn't invulnerable to that.

Freak, she thought. *Monster. Robot. Alien. What was I thinking?*

Jimmie realized he'd said the unforgivable. He felt himself falling over the edge of something.

Words gushed out of him the way a falling man's arms flail about uselessly in sheer panic. "I didn't mean it the way it sounded, but, I mean, it's true. You *look* like a girl, God knows, and far as what you are inside, you're *definitely* a girl. A girl that I like a lot. And respect. I don't ever want to lose you — and I don't ever want to do anything that would make me lose you. If we went on like this, I don't know what would happen, but I know how it would end up. It would end up badly. There's no other way it could. We are not made for each other in that way. We just aren't, and there's nothing either one of us can do about that. You gotta understand that someday I'll need to have a girl who will grow old with me. When it happens, I don't want it to come between us."

Sara looked like she would faint, or maybe explode, or tear the building into very small pieces, or lie down and never get up.

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So Jimmie said the worst four words anyone can ever hear from someone they care for.

"Let's just be friends."

He held out his hand like a salesman glad-handing a prospect. She took it automatically and said, woodenly, "Oh, sure. That's a good idea." The self-control it took at that moment to keep from crushing his hand to pulp would rank with the greatest super-feats she would ever perform.

They stood awkwardly for a few agonizing moments until Sara finally looked down at her feet and mumbled, "I gotta go."

Jimmie was all alone in the Fort, feeling like he'd just stabbed his best friend with a dull knife. Recriminations washed over him in a flood. He shouldn't have acted that way, he was convinced. He'd been a complete moron. Why couldn't he have just kept his mouth shut and let nature take its course? No matter what *might* have happened, it couldn't really have been any worse than what *did* happen. What had *started* to happen was really what he had desperately *wanted* to happen ever since that night in downtown Houston when he watched her gliding across the deserted streets and sidewalks like a phantom of perfection.

But he knew he'd said what had to be said. It was true, and it would have come between them no matter what.

So here he was, needing a shower. A cold one. Not that that would actually take care of the little problem she had left him with, that wouldn't go away on its own. No matter what his mind went through, his body still had its own strident agenda.

He flipped a switch and checked a monitor that was rarely used. It was connected to a battery of receivers that were tuned to every frequency he knew she used for her kreening. Sure enough, she was far away — too far to detect. He even wondered for a moment if she'd come back, but he knew she would. She had to, eventually. And she'd get over it — she was too human not to.

The pressure was beginning to become painful. He slipped out of the Fort and headed for his private little suite, shedding clothes as he went. This wouldn't take long, and he planned to sleep around the clock if he could.

But when he turned the corner in the little hallway that connected the warehouse to the front of the office, he bumped squarely into his almost ridiculously curvaceous secretary. The one he'd hired in spite of her woefully inadequate skills at anything resembling office work. The sweater-enhanced, elaborately coiffed red-headed bombshell he overpaid because he was, after all, a teenaged boy who could afford to do it. The nail-polishing, empty-headed cipher who could barely manage to make coffee in the morning that he didn't drink anyway. The one whose name he couldn't even bother to remember.

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The door slammed shut behind him and locked, keys in his discarded pants on the other side. She blocked the hall in front of him, bent over the water cooler. He was trapped. It couldn't be more embarrassing.

"Mister Oldsen!" she exclaimed, straightening up, eyes widening.

"Aw!" he yelped, ineffectually trying to cover himself. "What are you doing here?"

"Like, I work here?"

"Isn't it kinda late? I live here, you know. I don't usually..."

"That's OK. I forgot something. S'pose I should have knocked before I came back here." She seemed to be handling the shock pretty well, an amused smile playing on her lips as she made no effort to avoid *looking* at him.

"I was just gonna take a shower and I... I, uh, had to get something from the Fort." He tried to edge past her, but she wasn't about to move. She seemed to be enjoying his discomfort.

"You mean, the little Martian girl?"

"Sara's not a Martian," he said defensively.

"Then she's just a little girl. A bit young for you, isn't she?"

Jimmie's condition was becoming unbearable. He was completely bumfuzzled, paralyzed and beside himself. It was agonizing, and the girl in front of him was loving every minute of it.

"You know," she went on almost as if discussing the

weather, "I must say I was a little disappointed in the way things have gone around here, since you obviously didn't hire me to actually *do* anything. I thought you were some poor little rich kid computer whiz who couldn't buy a date. So you sorta bought me, instead. Which is OK by me. I kinda like you, you know. Pissed me off that you spent all your time with that kid."

She had one hand on the water cooler and the other hand on the opposite wall. He'd have to physically push her aside to get by. She seemed to be inviting him to try.

"Bet I know what you guys were doing back there," she said. "Research, huh." She looked blatantly down at him. "Looks like you must notta finished your experiment."

His head was swimming so badly, he was helpless. He just stood there, trying to stay on his feet.

"*I'm* your age, you know," she said. "And at least I'm human. Or have you noticed?"

He just stared.

"I can prove it to you."

He knew what was going to happen now, and he accepted it. In a way, it would make things better. Because he knew why he had *really* hired this girl. And he knew that this *was* right for him.

"Watch," she told him, her hands moving to her buttons.

He couldn't help but watch as she slowly joined him in nakedness. And when she was done, she took his hands

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unresistingly and pulled him into her irresistible embrace.

It wasn't long before she told him, "I think we could both use that shower now."

Sara was on the roof. She knew Jimmie was tracking her the second he turned on his monitor, and her computer brain just automatically changed all the frequencies.

She'd kreened the waiting secretary as soon as she left the Fort, and 'saw' her wedge herself into position by the water cooler like a spider waiting for a fly. Her mind's eye followed the path through the ceiling of the wire that connected the tiny TV camera in the Fort to Jimmie's office computer, and followed the wire that networked his to the secretary's computer. She didn't need a computer brain to tell her what that *bitch* had been watching.

A few days later, Robbins slapped a report on Wayans' desk, then stood there while his chief read it. He didn't have to wait long.

"This is... It's unbelievable," he said, finally looking up at his assistant.

"Believe it," the younger man replied. "This is directly from my source. It's impossible, but you've seen all the other reports. She's for real."

"Hmm..." The older man was lost in thought for a while. "Where is your source now?"

"Still there," answered Robbins.

"Reliable?"

Toomie Starks

"Absolutely."

Wayans sat for a long time in the shadows of his subterranean office. He had been thinking about this for longer than even Robbins knew, for he had other sources as well. He came to a decision that had crystallized as he read the latest report.

Standing up resolutely, he turned to Robbins and told him, "This changes everything."

Chapter Twenty-two: Enterprise

Sara delivered the moon buggy that night, but made an uncharacteristic fuss over it, like a teenager being asked to take out the trash. Then she announced that she needed to take a vacation.

A vacation?

To Italy.

Italy?

No coherent reason was given, but Italy was what she had set her mind on. It was the height of the European summer vacation season, and she said she needed two weeks. Alex gave in at one week, making a lame joke about little birdies flying from the nest. Dinah guessed the attraction was the food — every region had its own unique flavors and specialties, and Sara could never get enough in any one local Italian restaurant. But Mrs. J knew the real reason.

"Boys. Hah!"

Sara took her credit card and a few clothes, which she stuffed into her cape. On anything but a local flight, there was simply nothing else to wear but her unshreddable uniform, unless she wanted to crawl along at 55. Her makers had pretty much thought of everything — it opened along the side seam and any clothes she threw in got rearranged somehow and came out cleaned and neatly pressed. *Really* pressed, as in paper thin. You couldn't tell from looking at the billowing cape that there

was anything in it, even though Jimmie had once tossed an old, rusty Volkswagen bumper in there to see what would happen. It came out cleaned and pressed, too.

When she came back, she was her cheerful self again, so whatever she did seemed to have worked for her. Naturally, Alex, Dinah and Mrs. J pumped her for details. (Jimmie seemed to have disappeared.)

She'd met a bunch of students in Rome who were taking a bicycle tour around the Italian countryside. It was easy enough to get a beat-up old bike at a pawn shop for practically nothing, along with enough baggage to look the part of a student on holiday. Naturally, she spoke Italian well enough to be taken for a native, and they didn't mind her tagging along if she could keep up with them — which she managed to do somehow.

They'd stayed at youth hostels or sometimes just on the side of the road and ate bread and cheese washed down with wine and sang to the stars while Antonio played along on his guitar. Antonio — who had such lovely eyes (she mentioned at least four times) — said he'd write her, and she promised the same (though neither one ever did). Despite Alex's uncomfortable misgivings about guitar players in general — and young Italian ones in particular — it seemed that she'd just had a lot of good, clean fun, finishing up the week in high spirits, with her companions exhausted, sunburned and ready for school.

Dinah rather ominously asked her, "You didn't happen to pass through Pisa, did you?"

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"Pisa?" Sara repeated innocently.

"Yeah, you know," pressed Dinah, "As in 'The Leaning Tower of Pisa'. Or, should I say, 'The *Formerly* Leaning Tower of Pisa'?"

"Oh, that," she replied, like it was no big deal. "I could tell when I saw it that it was gonna fall just about any second, so I went back and fixed it while the others were sleeping."

Alex looked surprised. "You *fixed* it?" He hadn't seen the news lately.

"Straight as a plumb bob," Sara responded with a touch of pride in a job well done.

He and Mrs. J laughed, but Dinah was sternly disapproving. "You can't just go around 'fixing' historical landmarks. A lot of people around there could get hurt economically if your little stunt affects tourism. You've got to think about consequences..."

"Is no big hoo-hah," Mrs. J interrupted. "For while, anyway, tourists vith cameras comink to see miracle."

"It really was messed up," Sara said defensively. "All the traffic was vibrating the base full of teeny cracks deep inside where nobody can see 'em. They had all these big weights trying to counterbalance it, but that was just making the cracks worse. It was ready to slide. I just rearranged the ground underneath and it sorta floated upright. They'd better get rid of the weights, though, or it'll lean the other way."

Sara got Dinah's lecture anyway, about responsibility

and interfering in other peoples' business just because she had the power to do so. What Sara thought of as a good deed could have unforeseen effects on other people, yadda, yadda, yadda...

She endured the scolding with good grace and at least the appearance of humility, but changed the subject as soon as she could.

She turned brightly (too brightly) to Alex and said, "Coming home, I flew over one of those ships like you used to be on in the Navy."

"A carrier?" he said with great interest. Dinah and Mrs. J rolled their eyes to the ceiling and bailed out, leaving Sara to face his eager reminiscences alone.

Dumb move, they thought, fleeing. A good scolding would only be half as bad.

"They spotted me as I went over. I was only about ten miles up and doing Mach 3 or so and they thought I mighta been a missile — I could hear their radio chatter."

"Bet you scared the crap out of 'em," said Alex gleefully.

"A little, maybe," she admitted with a sly grin. "Some of their planes were flying around, so I played tag with 'em, especially this one pilot who was a woman. She — her handle's 'Firefox' — was really good. She kept trying to get close enough to get a good look at me, but from a distance I probably did look a bit missile-ish."

"Women fighter pilots," Alex shook his head. "It's a mistake to select for something so critical and demanding

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based on current 'politically correct' social theory. Pilots *have* to be chosen for incredible reflexes and warrior instinct. Some of these ladies made the cut simply because the Navy caved to feminist pressure — which speaks to me of an essential cowardice in our military leadership that frightens me. There have been accidents because of it."

"Well," said Sara, "*This* woman pilot showed a lot of talent. I'm a female 'pilot' myself, you know, and I can tell."

"Maybe so. There sure weren't any women on ships when I was in the Navy."

"When *you* were in the Navy," she teased, "There weren't any *propellers* on ships."

"Ha," said Alex, "Ha."

"Anyway," Sara said, "I wish I could have met her and told her that I thought she was cool to do what she does so well."

"You shoulda landed on the ship and said 'Hi'. That woulda given 'em a thrill."

"I thought about it. I don't know — there's an awful lot of people on one of those things, so it woulda been kinda obvious. I didn't think you wanted me to do anything really public 'till after NASA."

"Hmm..." Alex thought for a moment, then said, "Y'know — if you did it just right, you could leave them with a really big mystery to try to explain away. Heh — I can just imagine the Captain trying to fill out a log entry."

The more he thought about it, the more he laughed, until Sara was afraid he was becoming borderline hysterical.

She said, "I thought you *liked* the Navy."

Recovering partially, he replied, "I like some of my memories, like any 'old-timer', but one of my memories is that I couldn't wait to get out. I mean, I was just enlisted swine. Lower than low. Scum. Whale snot. You can't understand what it's like, the whole thing about officers. No way I could pass up a chance to instigate a little payback."

He challenged her, cocking an eyebrow above his smirk, "That is, if you think you're up to it."

"You mean, use me to pull some kind of prank so you can get 'even' with people you never met, just because you don't like officers? I don't know..."

"What...? You straighten up the Leaning Tower — people will have a hell of a time trying to explain *that* one — and now you get all squeamish? If you take Dinah's lectures so seriously, you'll never have *any* fun. I mean, she's basically right, but do you want to turn out like her?"

Belatedly realizing how bad that sounded, he trailed off somewhat embarrassedly, "Uh, as far as being some kind of serious crusading avenger and all that, 'cause — actually — I really like her..."

"Anyway," he went on, "As your official guide and sensei in earthly matters, I have an ulterior motive which my vast experience in these areas informs me I should not

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reveal to you, since, 'knowledge is the destroyer of fate,' as your buddy Gundolf would say."

She sighed. Sara was compelled to 'respect his opinions', even when they were obviously stupid, but she wasn't actually *required* to carry out his every whim. Still, he'd demonstrated plenty of times that his gags had the effect of being tremendous learning experiences and a lot of fun. Like the roundball incident. She'd just have to be careful not to seriously damage the giant warship accidentally.

"What d'ya have in mind?"

"Think you can find it again tomorrow?" he asked.

"Well, if it sinks in deep enough water, it might take me an hour."

"OK, here's what you do..."

Petty Officer 3rd Class Lester Emmert was up on the flag bridge when the first report came in. It was nearly deserted since Admiral Piccardo and most of his staff had flown home from Spain rather than ride out the homeward bound leg of this deployment. Commander Ryker was the only officer on 'duty', such as it was. There really wasn't much to do but watch flight ops.

Everybody down in the combat information center was still jumpy after yesterday's close encounter with some kind of missile or UFO or whatever. Word was that officially it was a falling satellite, but the pilots swore it was playing tag with them — at twice their top speed.

Toomie Starks

One rumor called it a secret test of the latest Skunk Works project.

Kilanowsky down below in CIC gave Walker a heads up on a bogie crossing their track making 60 knots at 10,000 feet. He motioned Emmert over to his console and pointed it out.

"At least it's not another missile, not that slow," he told Walker.

"Yeah, but they're all freaked out down there 'cause it popped up out of nowhere just a couple or three miles out. No way it should have got through the screen without gettin' picked up. Heads will roll."

"Not our problem," said Emmert. "What is it?"

"Nobody down there knows. From the kind of blip they're getting, it's too small even for a Cessna, which we're way too far out for anyway. Could be an ultralight, but it would have had to have been launched from a ship nearby, and there aren't any. Might be an RPV, but not one of ours. Got no visual, just like yesterday, 'cause it's staying in the cloud cover — which civilians don't like to do. Naturally, there's no IFF or radio response."

Ryker had come up behind them, listening in. Anything that broke the boredom, even a little bit, was a welcome relief.

Walker adjusted his headphones and said, "Looks like we're gonna pass right under it in a couple of minutes."

Ryker went out to the weather bridge and reached for

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the binoculars. Emmert followed him. There was nothing to see but clouds, the ship's scurrying planes, and a couple of choppers — which seemed to be racing toward a particular patch of high clouds dead ahead.

As the ship got nearer, there was an unexpected flash inside the cloud, like maybe from an explosion. A chunk of debris fell through the bottom seconds later. There was some shouting down on the ship's bridge. All the momentarily idle airdailes on the flight deck craned their necks to see what the fuss was about.

It wasn't debris. Or if there was debris, it was too small to see. The chunk of falling matter turned out to be a parachutist, only with his chute just partially deployed.

Now there was a *lot* of shouting, with men running around the deck pointing to the plunging figure — who was evidently aiming for the ship.

Ryker finally acquired the swiftly moving image in his binocs and whistled appreciatively.

"Sir?" answered Emmert reflexively as he squinted into the bright sky at the figure.

"It's a chick! I mean — a girl... A young woman. Whoa!" Ryker would never have tolerated such a lapse of PC-speak in a subordinate. He was excited. "And that's no parachute. Looks like maybe a Rogallo wing, but it's too small. And it's fubar somehow. Oh, man! She's gonna try to land on the ship."

She passed the ship to port, heading in the opposite direction as it moved swiftly below her, then wheeled

around in a graceful 180-degree arc, evidently steering with her fluttering 'wing', making a classic approach maneuver. Her forward velocity wasn't much more than the ship's, but her rate of descent was alarmingly high.

By now, all of the several hundred men who were watching were yelling, "Pull, pull, pull!" She was running out of time to pop her reserve 'chute.

At the last possible moment — as some of the crowd turned away in reflexive horror, unable to watch her splatter — her 'wing' made a sail-like *snap*, catching the gale that blew across the deck and slowing her in an instant to a hard landing on the roughened steel that just had to hurt — if it wasn't fatal.

She collapsed into a low crouch, practically kissing the deck for an agonizingly long moment before springing up, flinging her arms wide and smiling for her audience, like a gymnast who had just stuck a perfect dismount. Her 'wing' turned out to be no more than a big scrap of cloth, a cape blowing behind her in the stiff breeze, flapping dramatically above the third 'wire' that caught landing planes' tailhooks.

After a brief moment of stunned silence, the onlookers burst into cheers and applause at her 4.0 landing. And her appearance.

Ryker grabbed the binocs again and focused in on her. "Holy shit!" he blurted out.

The mob on the flight deck began to move in her direction as a single animal, like fans streaming to

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surround some new champion with their admiring homage, until the Flight Boss' amplified voice boomed out, "Attention, flight deck personnel. We have not — I say again — *not* secured from flight ops. The show's over, let's take care of our business. Chief O'Ryan, secure the area and then escort our visitor to the island."

The chief had been in the van of the rushing throng. Reaching her quickly, he turned to scowl at anyone who might be following, then gallantly offered his arm to 'his' guest.

Ryker turned to Emmert. "You," he pointed. "As of now, you're the flag runner. Grab the duty belt and get down there ASAP. Find out what you can and where they're gonna debrief her."

Emmert was having trouble tearing his eyes from the scene below.

"As in today," Ryker snapped. "Right fucking now."

Emmert snapped to, "Aye, aye." He started off.

"And don't take no shit," Ryker called after him.

"You're not ship's company. You work for the admiral, got it?"

Emmert trailed a fading, "Aye, aye," behind him as he hurried through the hatch.

"And report directly to me," Ryker yelled after him. *Jeez*, he thought, *What a doofus*.

Jeez, thought Emmert as he hurtled down the ladders, *What an asshole*.

He made it to the flight deck next to the island hatch

before anybody else and watched the chief and the girl casually strolling toward him, shouting conversationally at each other above the wind and noise.

The girl was definitely a babe, in every sense of the word — drop-dead gorgeous, blonde hair flying, blue eyes sparkling, and a thousand-watt smile born of pure joy. No more than a teenager, but obviously confident, outgoing and fearless.

And her costume...! Damn if it didn't look just like she'd stepped right out of a comic book. *His* comic book. His somewhat guilty pleasure and number one fantasy. He realized his mouth was hanging open as she glanced at him and gave a little nod of acknowledgement. His jaw snapped shut and he blushed deeply, feeling the sudden heat in his face without knowing why.

A lieutenant (junior grade) appeared with a couple of Marines to take charge of the girl. "I've got her now, Chief," he said dismissively. "You're done."

The girl gave the beaming O'Ryan an appreciative peck on the cheek and then followed the JG into the little island passageway, out of the wind and most of the noise. Emmert trailed them, ignoring the Marines' glares.

"Miss," began the JG, very officiously, "I must inform you that you are under arrest for unauthorized entry of a restricted military facility, criminal trespass, federal security violations, overflight of a restricted area, failure to file an approved flight plan, criminal endangerment, interfering with military operations,

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reckless behavior and attempted suicide, as well as other charges that may be determined following an investigation." He droned on with the military version of her Miranda rights while she just stood there showing a cheerful lack of concern for his dutiful pronouncements.

"Regulations require that we handcuff you before proceeding to a holding area where you'll receive a preliminary medical screening and interview," he concluded almost apologetically, motioning to one of the Marines.

"OK," she replied diffidently, offering her wrists to the private. He fumbled around before carefully fitting them to her. Her hands dropped briefly and then came up again, holding the now unfastened and obviously broken cuffs in front of her.

"Oh, my. I'm afraid these aren't any good," she said, handing them back to the Marine, little metal fragments falling from the keyholes. "Got any in a nicer color?"

Nobody had quite seen what happened, but Emmert thought he'd heard a faint crunching sound. The private took the remains from her, shaking his head. The JG looked at the other Marine, who shrugged his shoulders.

"Well," said the JG, "One of you is going to have to hold on to her for the duration."

Both Marines practically jumped out of their combat boots to grab an arm each. The girl giggled prettily and succumbed to her capture.

As the little party moved toward the ladder with

Toomie Starks

Emmert following, the JG informed him, "Return to duty, sailor."

Emmert swallowed visibly and replied, "Flag runner, sir. Commander Ryker's orders. I have to report back to him as to what's going on and where she's being taken."

"This is ship's business."

"Yessir. What do you want me to tell Commander Ryker?"

"Tell him to..." the JG began, but thought better of it. "Look, just buzz off, willya?"

Emmert knew the JG had just blinked first. "No can do, sir."

The JG gave up and hurried after the Marines with Emmert on his heels. They wound up in Ready Room 4 with the Marines guarding the door, one inside and one out.

They didn't have long to wait before one of the Marines bellowed, "Attention on deck!" and the Executive Officer, the Senior Medical Officer and a yeoman entered the compartment. The JG said something to the XO while pointing at Emmert, who overheard him reply, "I don't want him running back to Ryker now."

He turned to Emmert and said, "You're our witness. If our civilian guest here decides to make any claims of official mistreatment or harassment, she'll need your testimony. Understood?"

"Aye aye, sir." *Thank you, God.*

The JG made the introductions, "This is Doctor

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McCroy. He's going to make sure you're fit to answer questions. And this is the ship's Executive Officer, Commander Speck, who'll be in charge of this preliminary interview. Yeoman Rande will be taking notes and this enlisted man will witness the proceedings."

She looked at him expectantly, so he replied, "Emmert, miss. Lester Emmert."

She smiled at him, "Pleased to meet you. May I call you Lester?"

He nodded enthusiastically, like his head was attached to a spring.

"And I'm Lieutenant Junior Grade Chekoffsky."

"My name is Sara Corel. You can call me Sara," she told them.

The XO replied, "On behalf of Captain James T. Klerk and the crew, welcome aboard the USS Enterprise. Though I must say, as an uninvited guest, I hope you realize that your actions have put you in a great deal of legal jeopardy. You can't just drop in on a warship any time you feel like it. We're going to have to keep you under arrest until we get back to Norfolk and then turn you over to the proper authorities to face some pretty serious charges. Do you understand this?"

"Sure," Sara replied, "But I really can't stay for more than a few hours. I've got plans for this evening."

The XO raised his eyebrows at this and looked at the doctor, who stirred himself and said, "Ah, yes. Well, first things first. I'm just going to give you a once over — to

check for broken bones or anything that might require medical attention...?"

She shook her head.

"And ask you a few questions to make sure you're really with us." Which he did, getting it over with fairly quickly, announcing, "Clear-eyed and bushy-tailed — none the worse for having dropped onto our steel home without a parachute. Maybe what she did *looked* crazy, but I'll certify her as competent enough to answer questions."

Bruskly, the JG started in, "I'll need to see some ID."

"Gee, I don't have anything with me. I don't really need a driver's license, I left home without my credit card and, anyway, a purse is kinda impractical, considering. Of course, there is this," she said, pointing to the emblem on her chest.

Emmert couldn't help but stare. When she glanced at him, he realized that his jaw was nearly on the floor again. He nearly bit his tongue off closing it. His face felt hot enough to set off a fire alarm.

The JG began again, "Are you a citizen of the US?"

"Well, actually I'm an alien living in the US."

"Please state your country of origin."

"Not *that* kind of alien, silly."

The JG wasn't getting it, but Emmert was. He had to stifle a laugh. Sara winked at him and he winked back.

The XO remained impassive. He explained to her patiently, "This is not any kind of legal proceeding, per

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se, but you should understand that the security of this ship is my principle concern. You have breached that security and I want to know how and why. Depending on how hard you make it for me to get to the bottom of this, you're potentially facing anything from a misdemeanor to a lot of very serious felony charges when we get back to port."

"Very logical, Mr. Speck," she answered, "But if I told you everything, you wouldn't believe it anyway — and it wouldn't be nearly as much fun."

She turned to the doctor, as someone who wasn't quite so seriously involved and who had shown a touch of ironic appreciation for the situation. "Why do *you* think I'm here?"

"Me?" He answered bemusedly, "Wouldn't be surprised if this was a publicity stunt for a movie. You're certainly dressed for it."

Sara laughed, "That would be a good guess."

The JG said, "If that's the case, you'll find that the Navy does not appreciate being used for promotional purposes without going through proper channels."

"I'm not saying that that *is* the case," she countered. "The middle of the ocean is kinda isolated for that kind of thing, don't you think? And I'm betting you guys try to cover it up."

"Look," the XO said. "I want to know how you got here and how you evaded radar detection."

"How else? I flew here under my own power. And

Toomie Starks

my alien computer brain phase-cancelled your radar waves. I had to — yesterday you thought I was some kind of missile."

Emmert tried to cover up his sudden laugh with a cough. The doctor didn't even try to hide his laughter. The yeoman broke her pencil.

The XO and the JG looked at each other, obviously not pleased.

"I'm really being very cooperative," she said. "You guys just don't know it yet."

She added, "Can I go to the bathroom?" One of her favorite tricks, but they didn't know *that* yet, either.

The JG sent the private down the passageway to secure the closet head and sent the yeoman in to keep her company, posting the Marine at the hatch.

As the JG escorted her past the sentry, Sara turned to him and said, "I'd really love to stay and chat, but I want to see more of your nice ship and talk to some of the sailors before I leave."

She blew a little puff of air at his face and he instinctively blinked. His ears popped suddenly and he staggered slightly as the air in front of him seemed to buckle.

The long passageway was empty. She was gone.

News of Sara's arrival swept through the ship on afterburners. Rumors abounded, but most seemed to parallel the doctor's guess. Half the guys topside during

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her landing swore she was some famous movie star or other, the rest figured that she had to be a stunt double. A few witnesses — obviously not very close — swore she was a stunt *man* in a wig. Other guesses included that she was a BASE jumper out for the ultimate score, or some crewmember's desperate girlfriend.

When she showed up unannounced in the crowded crew's mess, it caused a sensation. So many men packed around her on the starboard side that the bridge crew felt the enormous ship list slightly.

She mentioned something about being a little hungry and, almost immediately, piles of messkits appeared, loaded with pork chops, mashed potatoes, green beans and some unidentifiable sticky confection, straight from the chow line. A rain of candy bars and sweets from the gedunk added to the smorgasbord which Sara sampled enthusiastically — which kept her from having to answer the hundreds of questions that swept over her like a seventh wave.

She had questions for them, too, that they were eager to answer.

"What's your name?"

"Where're you from?"

"How do you like the Navy?"

"You married?"

"You like being on a ship like this?"

"What do you guys do out here for fun?"

They ate it up. It was what a USO tour was *supposed*

Toomie Starks

to be like.

Then some bright, eager lad thrust a comic book at her along with a pen. She asked him his name and then signed it — "With love" — to him in a big flourish. That set off another stampede, rocking the ship back and forth like an unseen gale as men rushed back to their racks to retrieve their own copies of every comic book imaginable, along with a few Playboys which Sara laughingly said she didn't do.

Normally, the ship's Master-at-Arms petty officers would break up what appeared to be some kind of friendly riot, but they had comic books, too. And nobody would have paid them any attention. Besides, they didn't have any orders.

Eventually, news reached the Captain, who dispatched a gunnery sergeant and a squad of Marines with non-defective handcuffs to apprehend her.

"Gently," he told the gunny, "but firmly. She is not to wander off again," he said, glaring at the unfortunate JG.

When they got to the mess, Sara had disappeared as suddenly as she had in the passageway. Nobody admitted to seeing which way she had gone. Nobody would have told the Marines even if they *had* seen her leave. All they could do was march back to the Captain, looking stupid.

"Men and women of the Enterprise, this is the Captain," his voice crackling through every space on the ship. "As many of you are by now aware, we have a

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special guest with us, a young lady who unexpectedly dropped in on us in the middle of flight ops this morning. While we would like to extend the hospitality for which our ship is famous, this individual has *not* been given the run of the ship and her wandering around is disrupting good order and discipline. Now, we all know that it's easy for a civilian to get lost and very easy for a youngster like her to get hurt if they don't know what they're doing or where they're going.

"I'm going to ask Miss Corel to please stay wherever you are right now and somebody will assist you shortly. Any officers or crewmembers who see her should *immediately* contact the Officer of the Day and report her location.

"That is all."

Sara was already in a different ready room talking to the pilots she had played with the day before (though they didn't know it yet). They were trying to work out the aerodynamics of her landing that morning while she smiled enigmatically and admitted nothing.

"Terminal velocity for someone her size can't be much, especially with all the hair and the cape adding lots of drag," one of them reasoned.

Another one chimed in, "She probably couldn't fall at a hundred knots if she tried. With a good angle of attack and spreading out like a flying squirrel, she's bound to be able to slow her airspeed down below 80 knots."

A pilot went to the blackboard and tried to work out a few calculations. "So," he said as he drew, "If she's doing 80 knots total airspeed and manages to get a glide ratio of even one-to-one, then she might manage about 40 down and 40 forward, which — minus the ship's velocity..."

"Nah, that's not right," the first one countered. "It doesn't work that way. Here, let me show you." He added his own scribblings.

"What do you guess for her total surface area compared to her weight?" another added. "Then we can get some surface-loading numbers."

"She'd get a lot more out of that cape if she had some batts in there to stiffen out the edges," said another one.

Sara let him examine her cape. He looked disappointed for a second and then ventured, "OK, how about foot stirrups? Or something..."

"Well, if she does manage to make 40 forward, that's only about ten knots or so across the deck before she even hits the ground effect."

"Yeah. That'll give her a bounce so she can more or less stall out at the last second. Looked like she was doing less than 10 forward net, and maybe 25 down when she hit the deck."

"Like jumping off a two-story building."

"Or a high dismount off of parallel bars, like at the Olympics."

"Yeah, but they don't land on steel."

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The problem that was at the back of all their minds was how you could practice such a feat. And how anyone would ever have the confidence to actually try such a thing. Even if they could figure out the math involved with complete certainty (they had their doubts), none of these brave and accomplished fighter pilots would take such a leap of faith.

They couldn't decide whether to admire her skill and guts — or believe the impossible alternative.

When the Captain's announcement came over, one of the pilots reluctantly got up to head for the intercom.

Sara looked at the lone female pilot in the room and asked her, "Do you think I look like a missile now, 'Firefox'?" She turned around, her 'flame' of golden hair flowing over the 'smoke' of her black-red cape.

"Try squinting your eyes and imagining that I'm a couple of miles away and you're pulling eight G's," she added helpfully.

Firefox narrowed her eyes, wondering how the girl had known her handle. Then it hit her, her eyes opening wide in astonishment. "Belay that call, Jack."

Her wingman turned to look at her, reaching for the intercom key. "Are you kidding?" he asked.

"Or I'll break your arm," she hissed. "Look. I mean *really* look, from this angle."

He sauntered over and looked. "Jesus H..." he trailed off.

Sara turned back to Firefox and told her, "I just had

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to tell you, I think you're a terrific flyer. I mean, it's easy for me, but having to master all that intricate stuff like that, it's really amazing to me that you can make it look so natural. You really have a *feel* for it, I can tell. And what with landing such a tricky machine so dangerously on this little speck in the middle of the sea... Wow! That's real courage. I'm surprised there aren't more women like you flying. Anyway, that's all I wanted to say."

The other pilots weren't sure what had just happened. They looked around at each other and the blackboard, then back at Sara.

"Gotta run," Sara waved at them as she headed for the hatch. "I'll be taking off between the forward cats in an hour, and I still haven't seen half the ship yet."

"Wait!" called Firefox, leaping after her. "You can't go *now*!"

There wasn't even a blur in the passageway when she got there.

In the next half hour, reports flooded into the OD. She'd been spotted nearly simultaneously in every part of the ship, from the chain locker to the fantail, from the engine room to the wardroom. She talked cheerily to everyone she met, signed autographs and posed for pictures, and then seemed to almost vanish. She appeared to have a sixth sense when it came to the Marines sent to every reported sighting. There weren't enough to go around, evidently. It was like she had them surrounded.

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The gunny took his squad to the vast, cavernous hangar bay, nearly empty in the middle from flight ops. She was making the Marines look foolish, and Marines don't like to be made to look foolish. They were quite capable of looking foolish on their own, without any help from some damned little girl.

He figured she'd show up here sooner or later, and he deployed his men so that she could check in — but not check out. They stayed just outside of the space itself, carefully sitting down in chairs in the various shops and offices that surrounded the hangar, looking busy. He chased off the squids, who were undoubtedly aiding and abetting.

Dammit, he had a *mission*, and he'd get it done if he had to tackle her himself. He pulled a live round from a little pocket on his right trouser leg and carefully loaded it into his service .45.

Sure enough, they didn't have to wait long. She came *skipping* into his little net and he pulled the string, blowing his whistle and bringing the rest of his squad running.

No more Mr. Nice Guy. "*Halt!*" he bellowed in his very best parade-ground voice. "Yew *will* put yore hands on yore haid. Yew *will* turn around. Yew *will* drop and press yore belly to the deck. Yew *will not* move until I *tell* yew to."

She did none of those things, ignoring the onrushing Marines and grinning at him.

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"You're really good at that!" she told him. "Just like the movies."

He was pissed at her goddamned attitude. "Shut... The fuck... Up... And put... Yore fucking hands... On yore fucking haid." He raised his pistol, pointing it straight up to emphasize that he was not playing around.

"How rude!" she exclaimed. "Does yore momma know yew talk to girls like that?" she mimicked.

His squad had her surrounded. He walked up to her, still pointing his piece at the overhead. "Cuff 'er, Danno," he growled at one of his men.

Something seemed to be wrong with Danno's cuffs. They just kind of crumbled. Same with everybody else's. It was embarrassing, what with a gathering crowd of sailors looking on, catcalling. Government issue wasn't for shit these days.

To hell with it. He grabbed at her, but she wasn't there. She sort of twisted and ducked, and then she was out of their little circle, waltzing away without a care in the world toward the enormous elevator opening, blue sky and rushing sea shining in the sun on the other side of the giant oval.

"Gawd. Dammit. Bitch. *Freeze!* Or I *will* fucking *shoot* yew." He pointed his piece in her direction.

The catcalls turned to cries of alarm. Even the other Marines were yelling at the gunny like he was crazy. A few made as if they might lunge at him. Sara didn't respond at all, skipping away and ignoring his threats

completely.

Shit, he thought, *Shit, shit, shit*. He carefully aimed a couple of feet to her right, through the huge opening in the side of the ship, and squeezed off a round.

At the last instant, she seemed to dart right into his line of fire. The sharp report was followed by her sudden spin and collapse to the deck.

Everyone was horrified, frozen momentarily by shock. The gunny dropped his piece and ran to her, falling to his knees, a knot clutching his stomach. A crowd gathered around them instantly, not knowing what to do. There were shouts of 'Corpsman!' from the jugheads, mingled with uglier shouts from the squids directed at the Marines in general and the gunny in particular. It looked bad.

He could have sworn it was her shoulder that got in the way of his bullet, but couldn't find anything — which wasn't necessarily unusual. He turned her over, looking for an exit wound, but didn't see one. He felt frantically around, thinking that maybe the projectile had bounced around in her ribcage. It could have come out anywhere, or not even come out at all.

"I can't find a pulse," one of the other Marines shouted.

"She's not breathing," yelled another.

The gunny threw off his hat and got ready to administer mouth-to-mouth, wondering frantically where in the hell the fucking corpsmen were.

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But as he bent over her, she opened her eyes and said, "Whew! You ever try oral hygiene?"

She sat up and handed the gunny a smoking bullet. "I think this belongs to you. Careful, it's hot."

Hotter than hell. He dropped it involuntarily. Everybody backed away, looking at the slug and the girl like they were part of a dream.

"It's OK," she told the gunny. "You're just doing your job. I was a real brat, wasn't I?"

She bounced up. "It's been fun, guys, but there's one more person I have to see before I leave. Catch ya later."

Before anyone could react, she ran over to the elevator opening and nonchalantly stepped over the edge, grabbing some tiny projection and climbing swiftly up the side of the ship like a monkey, clambering over the safety net and onto the catwalk, disappearing once more.

When the emergency medical team finally arrived, they had to take care of the gunny.

Emmert was back on the flag bridge. Ryker had listened to his story with impatience and then took off, muttering to himself. Walker told him that Ryker had sent several radio messages stateside without receiving a reply. Something to do with stories on the Internet and the girl. Emmert had seen some of the stories out of Houston. He hadn't believed any of them before.

Walker took off to see if he could find out the latest scuttlebutt, leaving Emmert alone. He sighed and headed

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for the admiral's head, since there was nobody around to write him up for it and all the others nearby were secured. In all the excitement, he'd neglected the un-neglectable.

Shaking it out with great relief, he was just starting to let fly when he saw her out of the corner of his eye, peering out from the bottom of the little closet, watching him with amusement.

He hosed everything in sight before he could stop.

"You might as well let it all out, Lester. I won't tell if you won't."

What the hell. He did, and she even helped him clean up the mess.

"I figured the admiral's bathroom would be the last place anyone would look for me. And I wanted to tell you how nice you were down there. 'Preciate it."

"And besides," she went on. "You *know*, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. From the first moment."

"Probably a lot of others do, too. But I don't think they'll admit it, do you?"

"I think Commander Ryker knows. He's wants to get a gig with the CIA when he retires next year, but nobody's supposed to know that. He already filed a couple of reports about you."

"Yeah, I know," she said. "I read 'em. Tried to get your admiral to order the Captain to turn me over to him. Like I'd go for *that*."

"You read the messages?"

"Sure. I can see radio waves and stuff. That's how I

jimmied your radar."

"What about the rest? That landing — you were just trying to make it *look* like it was possible, right?"

She shrugged.

"And the handcuffs — there wasn't anything wrong with them, was there? And you went down about a hundred feet of knee-knocker passageway while Chekoffsky was blinking. I saw it, but I didn't *see* anything. There was just a sort of a *whoosh*."

Sara looked disinterestedly at her fingernails.

"I heard that some Marine shot you. And you gave him back his bullet. Let me guess — I'll bet you smoothed the barrel marks off of it so they couldn't get a ballistics match."

Sara raised her eyebrows in appreciation. "Very good! You seem to have me pegged."

"So you're really *her*, aren't you?"

"No. I'm really me."

"Well, I mean the same as. Everything *she* can do..."

"...I can do better," she finished. "And then some. Sometimes I even amaze myself."

"But you don't want anybody to know for sure. I don't get it. From everything I've seen or heard, you were very careful not to do anything that couldn't be *nearly* explained away *somehow*. Why?"

"I'm not really sure," she said. "I think it's some kind of an experiment that my dad is trying to run, maybe for my benefit. I can't figure him out sometimes."

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"Your dad?"

"Well, sort of a foster parent. I wasn't kidding about the alien thing."

"Just like the comics."

"*Nothing* like the comics. Maybe I'll tell you someday."

"You mean it?" he said excitedly.

She nodded, "Sure, why not?"

"Wow, I'd like that. But if you do, you gotta tell me *everything*. Especially, what it's like. Y'know — to be *super*. I've always tried to imagine what it would be like to fly and not have to worry about anything and being so powerful. I guess we all — all of us regular humans — dream about it sometimes. I just want to know what it's like."

"Humph," she replied. "It's not all it's cracked up to be. Sometimes I think it's like being handicapped, and I don't even get to use one of those primo parking spaces."

"Oh, you're kidding."

"You know what I dream about? Being normal. Really. There's a lot of things superpowers are no good for, especially when it comes to other people. Sometimes I feel like I have bolts through my neck."

Emmert stared at her in astonishment.

She went on, "What I admire is people who are able to do things without having super powers. Like Firefox. You know her?"

"I've seen her. She's an officer and I'm enlisted. Not

the same social circle, you know."

"You should talk to her someday. She knows about me, too. Anyway, flying for me just happens. I don't even know how and I don't have to think about it. Flying for her is the hardest thing imaginable. I can imagine she had to want it really bad to have a chance to do it. So between us, who's *really* super? And she'll get married someday and have kids. That's something I'll *never* be able to do."

"I didn't realize..." He didn't know what to say

"Hey," she replied, snapping out of her momentary funk. "Didn't mean to sound so gloomy. Really, I can't help what I am, and it has its advantages."

"No," he said excitedly, "This is great stuff. I'm glad you're telling me this."

"What — you gonna write a book or something?"

"I've always wanted to. A book about you. Actually, I've been thinking about it for years."

"I haven't even *been* on this planet for too many years."

"Maybe *you* haven't, but what you represent has been since Olympus, one way or another. You're made up the way you are for a reason, aren't you?"

"Honestly, if I am, nobody bothered to tell me. There really is a long story that I don't have time for right now."

"But you'll tell me someday, right?"

"OK, it's a promise." She asked him, "In return, can you do me one little favor?"

"Who do I kill?" he responded eagerly.

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She laughed. "Just tell the Captain that I had a great time and I'm sorry for the inconvenience. Someday, we'll all have a big laugh about it and I'll do something to make it up to the whole ship."

"I don't know that he'll believe me."

"He won't, and that's part of the joke. Oh, and one other thing. Tell him I'm leaving in exactly five minutes, from the flight deck, just like a catapult launch."

"Five minutes!"

"Yep. Gotta go. He's just below us right now on the bridge, so you won't have to go looking for him."

He stood there uncertainly, so she gave him a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"Now, scoot." She headed out the hatch onto the weather bridge and fell over the side.

He scooted.

"Five minutes, huh?" The Captain hardly knew *what* to believe about their elusive guest anymore. But it was as good a lead as any.

"Yessir," Emmert reported. "She said to tell you, 'just like a catapult launch'. I'm sure she meant it, sir."

"Can you explain to me why she decided to confide in you?"

"Yessir. 'Cause I believe her."

"Ah," the Captain smiled. "And just what is it that you believe about her? That she's some kind of superhero?"

"Yes..." Emmert reddened under the condescending smirks of the officers on the Bridge. "Yessir, that's what I believe. From another planet."

The Captain chuckled. "You know, son, I wish she was. Oh, she's good alright. World-class stuntwoman, gymnast and stage magician, no doubt about it. But, uh, flight ops has been secured for the day. Nobody's flying off my ship."

A seaman wearing 'phones reported, "Lieutenant Zulu, Cap'n. Subject is on the flight deck amidships. He is proceeding to intercept."

The officers crowded out on the catwalk to watch the show. Emmert ran down the ladders to the flight deck, not knowing what he could or should do. He ducked under the tail of an F-14 near the forward elevator.

A party of Marines led by lieutenant Zulu was already closing in on Sara. They spread out to surround her, wary of her tricks. From dozens of catwalk hatches surrounding the deck, airedales and crewmembers poured up from below to watch the show — the ship's TV station was feeding the scene to monitors all over the ship.

Sara fainted left, but the jugheads stayed with her, like it was a football drill. She made as if to run at their line, but they braced themselves. She pirouetted, but they stayed with her. They made no move to grab her, waiting for some signal. The assembling crowd reacted like fans at a corrida, saluting each move and countermove with appreciation for the artistry of it all.

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Finally, the Captain called out over his bullhorn, silencing the onlookers.

"Miss Corel, this is Captain Klerk."

"Hi, Captain," she called back, her voice barely audible above the wind of the ship's passage.

"Miss Corel, nobody is going to hurt you. You have my word on that, and I'm very sorry for the incident on the hangar deck. Please believe me, it won't happen again."

"No problem," she yelled back.

"You simply must stop running around my ship. We have work to do, and we need to be sure you're comfortable and safe until we get back to port."

"I'm done, Captain," she shouted. "Have to go now."

"The lieutenant will take you to your quarters. We'll have a nice talk tomorrow morning, alright?"

"Sorry," she called out. "Only a minute left."

While the Captain had been distracting her, two of the Marines crept up behind her. They each reached out to grab an arm.

Too late, Emmert and about three hundred other men shouted out a warning. They needn't have bothered. She wasn't there.

Somehow, she knew the precise moment to slip backwards between the two men, winding up behind them in a gap in the circle of Marines.

The jugheads reacted quickly to surround her again, but couldn't quite pull off the flanking maneuver as she

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ran circles around the larger, slower men. The sailors roared their approval.

It couldn't last. There were too many of them and they eventually closed in on her shoulder to shoulder until she was practically buried under a pile of Marines. There were scattered boos from the disappointed spectators. After a moment of struggling, the mass of men began to break up, revealing in their midst — Lieutenant Zulu wearing handcuffs with his pants tied securely around his ankles. Sara was not to be seen.

The squids laughed and cheered at the same time.

In the shadow of the fighter, Emmert felt someone elbow him in the ribs. It was Sara.

She said, "I don't know how they're gonna explain that away, but they will. I heard what the Captain said about me being a stage magician, so I thought I'd try the old disappearing bit."

Delighted to see her, Emmert said, "That was great! What are you gonna do for an encore?"

She knew he'd eventually have to tell the Captain what she said. "As far as they're concerned — kill myself."

She winked at him, then darted off suddenly, heading for the bow until she came to the spot right between the start of the two long catapult tracks. She was spotted as she crouched down like a sprinter setting up on her starting blocks.

With a shout, the Marines hauled after her, but they

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were too late. She started her takeoff run, easily outdistancing her pursuers. She ran straight down the deck between the cats and executed a perfect swan dive off the bow, down and out of sight. She was not seen hitting the water — or flying away.

The Captain ordered an immediate man-overboard recovery operation, but no trace was found. Presumably, she was torn to pieces by the screws and scavenged by the sharks.

"Gentlemen," said the Captain to all assembled, "I have to make a log entry. Unfortunately, it has to make sense. The Navy Department does not like to employ ship's captains who hallucinate."

He mused, "Y'know, I like my job. And I want to keep it. Can any of you tell me how I'm going to do that?"

After much deliberation and a whole lot of tunnel vision, they agreed it was a publicity stunt ending in suicide. A few enlisted men and Marines got reamed at the next Captain's Mast to make it look good.

Emmert, the doctor and a certain female pilot called Firefox all got together afterwards and laughed themselves silly.

Chapter Twenty-three: Clear Lake

A few days later, Jimmie showed up with his lovely bride, Lanna, the former secretary and unofficial poster girl for Jimmie's bogus company, Exocybernautics. He seemed happy enough, or so he said, loudly and repeatedly. She was excited to be back from Vegas (yeah, Vegas) so that she could go house hunting with Jimmie's money.

The Woodlands was trendy, or maybe Champions Forest. Sugarland is nice, though. And there's always River Oaks — though it was too old, stuffy and sedate for her tastes (such as they were). Maybe they could have a place built for them in the gentrified Heights. Their little love nest, she cooed.

Then there was the matter of Jimmie's clothes. He was too smart, she insisted, to have any sense about what to wear, but she'd take care of that. She had already made a start on a whole new look for him. It was different, alright, and obviously expensive. And, uh, he would certainly be noticed. No kidding. But he endured it stoically.

Someone once asked an aging Groucho Marx where he had found his attractive young lady companion. He said, "I just opened my wallet and there she was."

At least Jimmie wasn't entirely stupid. He made her sign a pre-nuptial agreement.

Lanna wasn't stupid, either. It was worthless.

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After making the rounds at their stunned little announcement party for the usual gang at Mrs. J's, Jimmie was finally cornered by Sara. He knew this moment was inevitable and had spent a lot of time wondering if it hurt much to be vaporized, but Sara seemed calm enough.

"Congratulations, I guess," she said. "You know what you're doing?"

"Oh, yeah," he smiled convincingly. "She's a wonderful woman," stressing the last word more than slightly.

"Seems a bit high-maintenance."

"I can probably afford it. It's not like I'm some kid who runs off to get married and then winds up having to flip hamburgers for a living. Anyway, she's really nice, once you get to know her."

"I don't plan to get to know her as well as that."

"Sara," he said gently, "Believe me, I meant what I said about still being friends. You're the best friend I've ever had and I hope you'll still be my friend when she's the ex-Mrs. Oldsen."

"That won't be long," Sara mumbled, just loud enough for him to catch it but low enough for him to politely ignore.

"Ah, c'mon, Sara. I need someone in my life like her. She's..." he hesitated.

"The girl of your dreams," she said sarcastically.

Jimmie shrugged. "Well, why not? I've never been one to go out and try to meet a lot of people or, you know,

date, or anything like that. It's a geek thing. Any girl I'm ever likely to meet would be someone like her anyway. I know what she's after and, well, that works for me. It's like a business deal. She manages my social life or whatever, and I give her what she needs. I mean, when you think about it, she's spent her whole life preparing and training to be just what she is."

"Lucky you," said Sara.

"Yeah. Lucky me." There was an awkward silence.

Finally, he looked at her. Really looked at her. "Sara, I will always love you. Always. No matter what happens. More than the way I could ever love anyone else. This has nothing to do with the way I feel about you or her or whatever kind of life I have that is apart from you. I don't really know how you feel about me, but I don't want what you seemed to expect from me to come between us, either. As tempting as it was."

"Oh. That," she said. "I got over it."

Jimmie blinked at her a couple of times. He didn't particularly look relieved.

"Hmm..." she said. "I think you're making way too much of a big deal over a little harmless fun. I didn't realize how hard it would be on you." She giggled suddenly over how that must've sounded.

"I... I thought, uh..." Jimmie stammered, embarrassed.

"You were right, Jimmie. I was acting stupid. I'm still a child in a lot of ways. I think that I'm probably always

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gonna be, too, like Peter Pan or something. Permanent arrested development. I suppose I'll get used to it. And it's like anything else, I gotta be careful about what I do around people. Sometimes I don't know my own strength."

"Then..." He looked wary, "We're OK? You're not upset or anything?"

"I was, a little. It's something I had to learn. I feel real bad that maybe the way you reacted made you do something you'll regret." She glanced meaningfully at Lanna.

He followed her glance. The two of them looking her way, ever so briefly, must have activated a primitive kreening response in Lanna. She started to disengage herself from Alex and Dinah.

"No regrets," he said. "I guess it was meant to be. Probably why I hired her in the first place."

"Men!" said Sara, mock-disgustedly.

"Then," said Jimmie, "We can still do stuff together? Like in the Fort?"

"What about your — her — 'little love nest'?"

"I'm sure she'll be happy there. I plan to stay at my office most of the time, as usual. There's some other work I..."

"That horrible place?" Lanna exclaimed, oozing over to them and draping her bodacious self over Jimmie. "We can build you a nice *la-bore*-atory in the dungeon, darling. I've always wanted to have a dungeon. And you can

experiment on ET, here, whenever you want. I'll be your assistant. Do I have to wear a lab coat?"

Sara rolled her eyes. "Not really. You can tag along, for all I care, but you'll probably be bored with all the complicated technical stuff," she said condescendingly.

"Well, honey," Lanna said ever-so-sweetly, "From what I saw, you weren't doing anything I'd call 'technical' in your little hideaway."

Jimmie looked slightly shocked. "From what you saw...?"

"The surveillance camera over the door," Sara informed him. "Her PC was networked to the one in your office. She's not as dumb as she looks. The second you left the Fort, she wedged herself next to the water cooler."

Now Jimmie looked completely shocked.

"Why, you nasty little *thing*," Lanna said, more amused than upset. "You were spying on us the whole time, weren't you?"

"Funny you should mention spying..." Sara began.

"Jimmie," Lanna cut her off. "This creature of yours is dangerous. There's just no telling what kind of weirdo mutant stuff she can do. I just better not catch any X-rays from her."

"Don't worry, Lanna," Sara said soothingly. "I'd never use X-rays on you. They're way too dangerous to use around silicon. Makes it explode, you know."

She looked meaningfully at Lanna's prominent chest. Lanna covered herself with her arms as best she could and

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kicked Jimmie hard in the shins.

"Look at the time, honey," she said to Jimmie. "We'd best be going. I'm sure I can think of something better we oughtta be doing, don't you?"

That pretty much killed the party.

It was nearly six weeks before Alex and Dinah finally got some kind of response from the little surprise they'd had Sara drop off in front of the Administration Building at NASA's Johnson Space Center, but it wasn't by snail-mail — as they'd been expecting from carefully tagging Alex's name and address to the Lunar Rover's frame and labeling the video tape.

A nice-looking man, accompanied by a well-dressed woman, knocked on the door of the 'B' unit one fine morning and introduced themselves as Special Agents Fauxe Moulder and Deena Skelly, FBI.

Delighted and relieved to finally be getting somewhere, Alex excitedly ushered them into the living room. Dinah wasn't quite so thrilled, especially when the two no-nonsense agents demanded to see Alex's ID.

They wanted to know if Alex was responsible for someone breaking into a federal facility and illegally dumping junk in a restricted area.

"Junk?" Alex was flabbergasted.

Moulder read from his notes, "A stripped-down dune buggy. No license. Inoperable. Four flat tires. Dead battery. Couldn't even be towed. Cost taxpayers \$60 to

have it hauled off."

"That wasn't a dune buggy!" said Alex, exasperated. "You didn't recognize it?"

"I'm just going by the report filed by the security officer on the scene, sir."

"Security officer?" moaned Alex. "Oh, jeez. Some damned rent-a-cop doesn't know his ass from a Lunar Rover."

His partner said, "Then it *is* your responsibility. Your name and address were found on the vehicle, but we had to make sure the prank wasn't meant by the perpetrator to falsely implicate your complicity. Do you deny your involvement?"

"No, no," said Alex. "But it wasn't a prank. I was trying to get you guys' attention."

"Yes, sir," said Moulder. "You certainly have it."

He pulled some official-looking papers from his coat pocket. "I hereby serve you with this summons to appear at the Federal Building downtown at 9:00 am Tuesday so we can continue our investigation and determine if additional charges should be filed. If you fail to appear, a warrant will be issued for your arrest."

"I'm his attorney," Dinah said, reaching for the papers. "I'll take that."

"And you are...?" Skelly asked her.

Dinah pulled out a card and handed it to her.

"Then these papers are for you," she said, handing Dinah another set. Dinah read them quickly.

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"Harrassment?"

"Yes, ma'am. Your letters about some kind of 'extraterrestrial' artifact. Normally, we don't pay much attention to, ah, this kind of thing, but when we matched you to your accomplice's prank, that was the basis for determining there were sufficient grounds to investigate the nature of your apparent conspiracy."

Alex started to laugh, but Dinah caught his eye and shook her head slightly. He mouthed, "Sara?" She shook her head again, then turned to the agents before Alex could think of anything else stupid.

"We'll be there."

"Thank you ma'am, sir. Have a nice day." As they got in their car, Alex could hear Skelly laugh as Moulder circled his finger around his head and made UFO noises.

The Lunar Rover was in a pretty sorry state. The years exposed to the extreme environment had taken a toll, adding heat/cold stress to the pounding it had taken from the LEM's ascent blast and a steady shower of solar radiation.

Sara had tried to be very careful, but she had become a little impatient with her slow, slow descent through the atmosphere above Houston. And, like the cement truck, it had never been designed to accommodate such unusual stresses. A year in Jimmie's warehouse with boxes stacked on it hadn't helped, either.

By the time Sara had made her delivery — in a

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rainstorm — tattered Mylar hung forlornly from a warped and woebegone frame. The seat webs had disintegrated and the makeshift fender the astronauts had improvised from a map and duct tape didn't help the overall picture. The wire mesh tires were designed for one-sixth of Earth's gravity and were completely flattened.

Still, the junk dealer recognized what it was supposed to be, figuring it for a cast-off from a Space Center Houston attraction. He sold it for some decent money to Uncle Billy's Traveling Show and Carnival Attractions.

Uncle Billy fixed it up, substituting some nearly bald 'Stones for the tires and fastening some silver spray-painted lawn chairs to the chassis. For years, kids of all ages around the country had their pictures taken on the 'Genuine Lunar Exploration Buggy!' for only \$4.00. When one of those kids grew up, she went to the moon herself and discovered that the Lunar Rover was missing from the historic Apollo landing site.

It was eventually abandoned somewhere in Kansas.

It wasn't easy to get an appointment to see Dan Silvers, the Director of NASA, not even for the two excited FBI Special Agents. Especially for these particular agents, considering their reputations. Strange phenomenon that defied rational explanation was the stuff of their regular beat. They always wound up with the assignments nobody else would waste any time on — the nutcases, the fruitcakes, the 'why' files. For years, they

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had been the butt of Bureau jokes about Little Green Men and Things That Go Bump In the Night.

But this time they were unusually persistent. They'd stumbled across something that they would only discuss with the Director himself. He avoided them as long as possible, but finally gave them a half-hour between budget meetings when their uncharacteristically agitated boss called him personally.

They didn't come alone. With them was a vaguely familiar man (whom he might have recognized — if Alex had been wearing a tuxedo and holding a bass guitar — from various functions and galas in the Houston area the Director was expected to attend), a tall, raven-haired woman with a powerful physique and an expression of grim determination that would scare the makeup off a professional wrestler, and a charming little blond girl in jeans and a tee-shirt flashing an infectiously joyous smile.

The agents' report was terse and brief. They'd been conducting a routine investigation concerning a break-in at JSC and had summoned the man and woman — whom they introduced as Mr. Luther and Ms. Prinze — to the Federal Building downtown. They had brought the young lady, named Sara, with them. Evidently, their visit had occasioned the mysterious panic and near-riot the Director remembered hearing about recently. Details had not been reported in the Chronicle.

Moulder and Skelly turned the floor over to Mr. Luther.

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Alex got right to it. "A little over three years ago, I discovered an artifact that was undoubtedly created by a technologically advanced extraterrestrial civilization. There were no accompanying documents, instructions or clues or any kind of return address, and the location and motivations of the senders are a complete mystery to this day. It seems only natural to me and my colleagues that such a discovery should come to the attention of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration."

"I see," said Silvers, looking at the two FBI agents with undisguised annoyance. "An artifact."

"Uh-huh," said Alex.

"Made by aliens from outer space."

"Absolutely."

The Director looked at his watch. "And how were you able to determine this?"

"Well," Alex replied, "It's pretty obvious, actually. Didn't take too long to convince *them*," he nodded at the agents.

"Oh, I'm sure," said the Director.

Alex turned to the girl and told her, "It's show time."

Sara did her free-fall routine, floating around the office like she was on an orbiting space shuttle. She lightly pushed off from the walls and ceiling, twisting and tumbling like a veteran astronaut. Even her hair looked like it was in zero gravity.

The Director kept his cool, but he was obviously impressed. He got up and approached Sara as she floated

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upside down near the window, looking above and below her to see if he could figure out where the wires were. He reached out tentatively to touch her shoulder and she drifted away at the slight pressure.

Alex intercepted her and spun her around like a top. She eventually stopped spinning when she bumped into the desk. He told her, "That oughtta do it. Thanks." She sat in her chair, back to normal.

The Director just stared at Sara for a while. Finally, he said, "That was quite a demonstration. I must admit I have no idea how you did that. With your alien artifact, I presume. What is it, an anti-gravity belt?"

"Not exactly," said Alex.

"Well, you must have it with you."

"Sure."

The Director was still watching Sara closely, as if she might float away. He prompted, "You *are* going to show it to me, aren't you?"

"You're looking at her," Alex said. He timed it like a veteran stand-up comedian before adding, "Sara is the alien artifact."

The Director didn't get his gig because he was a dummy. "You're saying she's an artificial life form of some kind?"

"Close enough. Does a lot more than float around the room, too."

Sara told him how much change he had in his pocket. He checked and she was right. Then she asked him to flip

one of his coins in the air — but not try to catch it. He did, there was a flash of light and sparks, and when the quarter came to a still-smoking stop on his desktop, there was a neat little hole through it. She took it and the rest of his change and casually squeezed the coins into a little ball of hot metal.

She asked him to take his scientific calculator out of his top right desk drawer (mentioning, incidentally, that the batteries were a little low) and told him to enter any kind of problem he wanted or even just hit a bunch of keys and functions at random as fast as he could. Though she couldn't see the keys, she started rattling off the results before his finger could hit the equals button.

Alex explained, "As far as we can tell, she is basically one hell of an advanced computer in a strong, bulletproof, flying case. There's so much more, but I see we're nearly out of time."

Nothing doing. Silvers was fascinated. He told his secretary to cancel everything. He also told her, "Find out who the senior doctor is that's on duty right now, and get him on the phone as quickly as possible. And send that security guard in the lobby up here right away."

He sent Sara with the guard, Dinah and Skelly to the Medical Building, and told Dr. Belloes to drop whatever he was doing and give the girl he was sending over a complete physical examination immediately and report back to him as soon as possible, without waiting for the lab reports.

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Belloes told him, "But I'm a psychiatrist, my dear fellow. I'll see if Dr. Smith is available. He's much more suitable..."

"You're an MD, doctor, and I'm sure you'll do a fine job. Just do it yourself. I don't want anybody else to know about this, understand?"

"I am scheduled to start a session with Captain Neilson in a few minutes."

"I don't care who it is."

"Captain *Anthony* Neilson. Surely you remember. The one who landed on the desert island. Hasn't been the same since. There's something quite peculiar about Captain Nielson, and I'm very close to getting to the bottom of it. You may find this hard to believe, but I..."

"Doctor, I know all about your obsession with Captain Neilson. *And* the bottle he found. Tell him to put a cork in it and wait. She should be there any second and I want you to start immediately. I mean it."

"Really," protested the doctor, "I don't understand..."

"Exactly. Just do it. I want you to check out every square inch of her, look for any identifying marks, let me know if there's anything — *anything* — unusual about her. As soon as you're done, send her back and call me."

The doctor wasn't happy, but he'd do it. Silvers forgot about him immediately as Alex recounted the whole tale of how Sara thawed out on his carpet, how she had 'grown up' so quickly, about kreening and the seemingly endless list of impossible things she could do.

It didn't seem long at all before Dr. Belloes called back.

"There is absolutely nothing wrong with her. I've never examined a healthier specimen. Not a single mark or blemish on her." There was a slight pause. "Which," the doctor went on, "is unusual itself, now that I think of it. Not a single imperfection. Hmm... Oh — and one other thing. I couldn't get a blood sample. As you know, I'm a psychiatrist, so I'm not particularly good with a needle. You said to not wait for the lab reports or tell anyone else, so I..."

"As far as you could tell, she's a normal human being, right?"

"Well, I would assume she's human. Wait a minute," he paused. "Her name wouldn't be 'Jeannie', would it?"

"Thank you, doctor. I'll get back to you. And not a word of this to anyone, under any circumstances. Not one." He hung up. The little party was ushered in by the Security Officer a few minutes later.

Alex more or less concluded his presentation by stressing how little information about her creators Sara was able to give them. The Director leaned back in his chair for a long while, alternately studying Sara and staring at the ceiling.

"I don't know what to say," he finally told them. "First Contact with another intelligent species has been the subject of intense speculation for as long as mankind has known that there are other planets out there. I've

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always wondered what it would be like to be running this agency when SETI turned up something, or maybe Hubble, or some kind of mothership showed up in orbit some day."

He looked at Moulder and Skelly. "I guess you were right all along about the truth being 'out there', only now it's in here. And she doesn't know what the truth really is. How ironic."

He turned back to Alex. "And you're convinced she doesn't know anything about her origins?"

"We've had a pretty darned good computer expert trying to sorta hack into her 'operating system', with her cooperation. I've tried a few experiments myself, but with limited resources. She's perfectly willing to let NASA take a crack at her."

Dinah spoke up, "With certain limitations for her protection. I've prepared a contract protecting her rights as a sentient being. She is not to be considered to be property and will not be deprived of her freedom. We're not in any way representing that she is a found object that is subject to seizure by any government entity."

"I understand," said Silvers. "If everything you say is true, it doesn't look like she has anything to worry about in that regard."

"I can personally testify to that," said Moulder. "We've kept the details out of the news so far, but when we attempted to incarcerate Mr. Luther over a little misunderstanding arising during our interview, she

disarmed everybody on the third floor of the Federal Building."

Skelly added, "And immobilized every male law enforcement officer present by yanking their pants down around their ankles, which she secured with their own handcuffs, daisy-chaining everybody together in the process."

"Under the circumstances," Moulder said, "We negotiated a settlement that involved dropping all charges resulting from the incident. With — as far as we're concerned — no hard feelings." He smiled at Sara, who smiled back.

Skully added, "The officers involved are understandably reluctant to relate the details of the situation to anyone. Not many of them even understand what happened or why, since it only took her a few seconds."

"I can imagine," said Silvers, biting his lip to keep from laughing at his mental picture of dozens of serious cops hooked together like so many fish, trying to untangle their trousers from their own handcuffs. It was difficult to imagine the geometry of it all. "I will personally see to it that the Agency treats her with the utmost respect."

He continued, "As to what it is that NASA can do about this little alien invasion, I don't really know. We're a pretty tightly bugeted agency right now. There are no appropriations targeted for the actual study of extraterrestrial life, no staffing, no department, no

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organization. It might be a year or more before we could get something through Congress. And even then, it would probably just be an authorization to conduct a study to make recommendations."

"You've got to be kidding!" said Alex. "What about your 'five year mission to explore strange new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before'?"

"I think you've got us mixed up with someone else," Silvers said. "Our mission is to assemble engineering, technology and personnel resources to accomplish goals and objectives mandated by certain acts of Congress. All projects must be specifically funded. I wouldn't even know how to describe what we could hope to do with Sara."

Alex just looked at the Director for a while, then said, "I guess I need to put this in a little better perspective. Sara can fly fast enough to shred any normal clothing, so her makers thoughtfully provided her with an ensemble that's as indestructable as she is. One that at least tells us that 'they' have a sense of humor."

He opened his briefcase and pulled out Sara's neatly folded uniform, the bright symbol clearly visible on top. "She was wearing this when she thawed out. It kinda sums everything up about her."

Silvers looked at it like it was an insult. "Oh, I can just imagine showing this to Senator Gramm."

"It might not be so bad if she was in it," Alex replied.

"I had to show you that so you'll understand this."

He reached into his briefcase and pulled out three small bottles filled with what looked like dirt. He set the first one down on the desk in front of the Director and said, "The Moon." The second one he identified as, "Mars," and the third one as, "Venus".

"Don't open that one," said Sara. "It really stinks."

Silvers looked as if he had been poleaxed. After a while, he even looked as if he might cry. He carefully picked up each bottle to peer at the precious contents they contained, then put them back on his desk and leaned way back in his chair.

He told them, "Billions of dollars. All that talent, the sacrifices, careers and lost lives. Getting a little bit of soil from the Moon was the great accomplishment of our nation — of our whole planet — in the Twentieth Century. The things we learned along the way, the changes in our lives, the drama and poetry of doing the nearly impossible..."

He went on, sadly, "Getting someone to Mars for another few specks of dust would have been the next major milestone for our whole species. I guess now we may never know what we might have learned from what it takes to make that trip. The dreams of whole generations of humans lie shattered at your feet, young lady. Do you realize that?"

Sara said, "It doesn't have to be that way. I can help."

"That's precisely the problem. Your help invalidates

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the whole process. It's not so much getting to Mars that's so important, or even what we learn there. It's how we get there, how determined we are to overcome incredible obstacles and commit the utmost that we can to fulfilling our own destinies that's important to us as a species in search of our own limits — and hoping there are none."

The others were silent.

"So, OK," Silvers eventually said, sounding more positive. "The new future starts today. I'll get a group of people together to study what we can and see what we can learn. I don't think I'll have too much difficulty getting a few people to take a sabbatical to study an alien that seems to break every law of physics we thought we knew. The problem will be getting them to keep their mouths shut so we don't get overrun by a screaming horde of scientists eager to get their instruments on her."

"Sounds like a plan to me," said Alex. "When do you want to start?"

"How about tomorrow afternoon?" he replied. "I'll have some of my people get started so we can at least figure out who we need to have on the team."

Sara said, "I'll be there!"

Chapter Twenty-four: Setup

By the next afternoon, Director Silvers had assembled a small group of trusted technicians and engineers to start some preliminary tests and measurements so as to try to get a handle on what they would be dealing with. They had an impromptu meeting in a small auditorium where Sara wowed 'em, with Alex playing the role of P.T. Barnum.

He might as well have said, "Yow-za, yow-za, step right up! See the Amazing Alien from Outer Space! Thrill as she Soars through the Air with the Greatest of Ease! Wonder at the Colossal Strength of her Slender Body! Be Astonished by her Arcane and Mysterious Mastery of Mental Wizardry! Marvel as she Performs Never-before-seen Feats of Stupendous Power, Speed and Agility! Witness her Astounding Invulnerability as she Shrugs off the Effects of Dangers and Calamities Fatal to Mere Humanity!"

At first, the small crowd tried desperately to act like professionals, as if Sara's act was just another day at the office. It wasn't long, though, before she had them eating out of the palm of her hand. She was a natural show-off and relished the attention. Eventually, they were all crowding around her as she kreened the contents of their pockets and purses like a side-show mentalist and rattled off answers to complex formulae and equations as fast as they could key them into their ubiquitous pocket

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calculators.

Dr. Belloes was put in charge of the preliminary evaluation. Silvers reasoned that Sara's programmed psychological state was more relevant to what they could learn about her than any physical examination could reveal about her obviously non-biological makeup. At least Dr. Belloes had some experience in dealing with the closest thing that NASA had encountered so far to extraterrestrials — astronauts. Also, he seemed more than anyone else to take the whole matter in stride, as if he was used to dealing with young blonde girls with seemingly magical powers.

"At least no one can say," he observed cryptically to the little group of Alex, Silvers, Moulder and Skelly who were watching the hubbub from the back of the stage, "That I am imagining *her*."

The two FBI agents nodded knowingly.

After a long weekend — to let everybody involved think about it — the actual work began on Monday morning with the paperwork that was to government what 'death and taxes' was to its subjects.

Sara didn't quite fit into the default boxes provided on the standard personnel forms, though. Citizenship, schooling, age, nationality, origin, even species — there were a lot of question marks, even though she did her best to be cooperative. She noticed her file was marked 'Jane D'.

"Jane D?" she asked, innocently enough.

"I automatically put you down as a 'Jane Doe'," Dr. Belloes replied. "A mere formality. In scientific studies, subjects are usually not identified by their real names. It's basically a privacy issue for your own protection."

"Do I have to be 'Jane Doe'?" she said, making a face.

"Certainly not. We'd like to avoid using somebody else's real name, so it's customary to use a common first name and initial, like Jane D or Eve X or Helen T."

"Can I pick my own?"

"I don't see why not," he replied, "As long as it's not Sara C. That would defeat the purpose."

Sara thought for a minute. "This could be cool. Y'know, I always have to refer to the weird part of me as my 'alien computer brain' or something, like it's not really me — which it sorta isn't, even though it's like it's really me, but the real me is just along for the ride, except that I'm actually in control. D'ya know what I mean?"

Dr. Belloes nodded understandingly. *This is going to be the case of a lifetime*, he thought. Of several lifetimes. He felt resigned and elated at the same time, though even Sara would find it difficult to tell from looking at him.

"It's not like I have some kind of split personality," she said defensively, "It's like I feel the real me is the same as anyone else, but there's all this other stuff that's in there, too. I feel like 'it' is part of me, even though I know that what I feel is 'me' is actually part of 'it', but 'it' doesn't *have* a personality, so there's nothing to split. It's just

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something that's always there but only when I need it and it's always churning away like crazy, down where I don't usually see it. It's like having this thing that's always around that I usually think of it as — you know — a tool or something that's just built in, like... Like — oh, I know! Maybe a watch that I have inside of me rather than having to wear it on my wrist. But it's still as different from what seems to be me-as-a-person as your watch is different from you-as-a-person."

"That's very interesting, Sara. We'll have to talk about this in more detail when we're in my office and we can take all the time we want to sort this out."

"I know what you're getting at, Doc," Sara nodded. "Good luck trying to shrink *my* head. But what *I'm* getting at is the name thing. I think that as a person, I'm just plain old Sara Corel. But whenever I think about all the other stuff — the 'alien computer brain' and flying around with a cape and everything — then it's easier to keep things separated if I call that part of me by another name."

"I see. Less confusing, perhaps," the doctor conceded.

"Does that sound schizo or anything?"

"Hmm... Maybe not under the circumstances. I'll reserve judgement. I suppose it makes sense to have a private identity and a public persona, just as many celebrities do. Do you have a particular name in mind?"

"I've been thinking about it. I thought 'Bert' might be appropriate, like *Al-bert* Einstein. But that sounds a little conceited. Or maybe 'Robbie', like Robbie the Robot. Or

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Spock, or maybe Data. But those are guy names and there's not really anything all that good for a girl."

"What about something from mythology?" Dr. Belloes suggested, "Athena was the goddess of wisdom, for instance."

Sara looked very uncomfortable. "It's bad enough having to wear that stupid 'S' without having to deal with anything that has to do with a goddess, which I don't want to make like I am. I think I need to stay away from that."

"Ah, yes," he replied, "I can see where that might seem to be a bit pretentious. I would think, though, that the 'S' motif would be appropriate in picking a name for your, ah, other self."

"Yeah," she said, a little glumly. "Something that I can identify with when I'm out in public someday wearing it. Which I guess I'm gonna have to do."

"Well, why not just adopt the obvious? As your builders no doubt intended."

"No way!" she said as if she were a little embarrassed. "At least, not actually way. I think I've got an idea, though."

After a long pause during which Sara seemed to be enjoying some private joke, Dr. Belloes finally said, "Well? Are you going to keep me in suspense?"

"Nah. But you gotta promise to keep this to yourself. OK?"

"Doctor-patient privilege. Rest assured, my lips are sealed."

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She told him her idea. He was suitably amused.

"You think it'll work?" she asked eagerly.

"Admirably," he replied, chuckling tolerantly. "I would say that your choice of an alias should address all of your concerns perfectly."

"It's my own idea, too," she beamed.

He asked her, "Is anyone else privy to your plan?"

"Uh-uh. Not even Alex." She giggled, "I'm not gonna tell him, either. He'll have to wait and find out the rest of it when everyone else does."

"Very well," he said, turning to his keyboard, "Susan P it is."

Thereafter, every official document referred to her as Susan P. They gave her some blue astronaut coveralls to wear around the facility with the name neatly printed over the left front pocket, so everyone at NASA called her 'Susan', which was a little confusing to Alex at first. She teasingly refused to enlighten him as to why she had chosen the name.

"You'll find out," she told him.

There was a suitably underutilized building on the outskirts of the Clear Lake compound that was quickly converted into a testing facility, with a few dozen offices and a good-sized warehouse-like area for whatever off-the-shelf equipment they needed to 'borrow' from elsewhere. In a way, it was like a much larger version of Jimmie's little storefront, complete with an elaborately

shielded anechoic 'Fort Solitude' where they could monitor Sara's EM emissions and sensitivity without external interference.

Several acres around and behind the building were surrounded by a hastily erected but formidable-looking fence that afforded some privacy from passersby and made for a tightly restricted area accessible only through one guarded gate. In light of the rumors and stories flying around, non-involved — and more than slightly curious — NASA personnel dubbed it 'Area 52'.

The name stuck.

It was to take nearly two months to prepare the building and assemble a team of scientists. You have to understand that this was absolutely blinding speed for a government entity. Director Silvers expended a great deal of political capital in this accomplishment and was supported by a very few higher-ups in Washington who had been made privy to the secret and wanted to know as many details as possible ASAP. Unlooked-for funds were scavenged from black projects and Silvers' requests were given instant and unprecedented priority. There was some feeling of uncertainty about Sara's possible effect on national security among these movers and shakers, and a sense of inevitability about her eventual public unveiling combined with foreboding about what might happen as a result.

There was already rampant speculation in the media — parts of it, anyway — about strange doings and flying

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blondes. Attention already focused on Houston began to turn more specifically toward NASA, whose security was less than airtight. The involvement of FBI Special Agents Moulder and Skelly was by itself a red flag to the legions of Internet 'alien conspiracy' junkies who followed their exploits. But there was so much contradiction and useless, silly noise in the hoopla to confuse the issue beyond being taken seriously by the mainstream press — so far.

Targeted scientists had to be approached very carefully. For one thing, it was a little hard to explain Sara with a straight face — not that they really wanted to — so everything had to be shrouded in euphemisms which, as they were told, added up to some mysterious extraterrestrial doo-dad that needed to be looked at by someone of their unique talent and experience, strictly on the QT. Not many invitees turned down Director Silvers' invitation.

Actually, one particular bright fellow from Stanford managed to figure out what was afoot and practically blackmailed his way into being included, as did a savvy computer guy from Brazil. They both had useful skills and solid credentials, so Silvers took them in, frankly surprised there weren't more like them banging on the gates. Evidently, skepticism kept others who had their suspicions from taking the risk of looking foolish.

Alex was rather surprised to discover that Jimmie's now not-so-bogus company, Exocybernautics, was

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moving to a new location picked out by none other than his new wife.

"It was Lanna's idea," Jimmie told him somewhat sheepishly. "After all, she did sorta work for me for the past year. I guess she was paying more attention than I thought."

"That's for sure," said Sara, drily.

"And you're gonna let her just up and do that?" asked Alex.

"It makes sense," Jimmie replied. "She got us a legitimate gig as a consultant to NASA. I'm not sure if it was their idea or Lanna's, but it's perfectly logical. I mean, Exocybernautics is pretty much up to speed on alien lifeforms around here."

"You mean, like Lanna?" said Sara.

Dinah echoed her archly disparaging tone. "Silicon-based, obviously."

Jimmie and Alex pretended to ignore them.

"I don't know about this." Alex asked, "You don't feel like maybe you're cashing in?"

"Well," said Jimmie, "Maybe a little. But why not? I did a lot of work and will be doing a lot more and I found out a bunch of things they're willing to pay for. In any case, some of what I learned working with Sara would have turned out to be pretty profitable anyway."

"Alex," Dinah said, as if explaining something very obvious to someone who was very slow, "That's the way of things. You become an expert in something, and people

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pay you for your knowledge and experience. You get paid for the music you love, don't you?"

"Such as it is," he admitted. "But Sara's... I don't know — different. She's your friend. Isn't she?"

"Sure," said Sara, winking at Jimmie. "Best friends."

"I'm not selling *her*," Jimmie said. "Or giving away any secrets she wants to keep. This is all about the reason she's here in the first place. You said yourself that the whole NASA thing is what we're probably supposed to do so that we can try to come to terms with what she is and maybe why she's here, and properly introduce her to the rest of the world. You still believe that, don't you?"

"Of course I do," Alex replied.

"Doesn't bother me," said Sara.

Dinah informed him, "You may as well know that I have accepted a position as Exocybernautics' attorney."

Alex was astonished. "You?" He started to laugh, "A corporate lawyer?"

"I needed the job, Alex. You know that. After Wayans let me go, I haven't been able to get a position with anybody else. Besides, they need me. And so does Sara."

"So Sara's part of this, too?" Alex shook his head. "Who else?"

"Vell," said Mrs. J, counting off on her stubby fingers, "There is Borodin, and Nevsky, and Popov, and Andropov, and Gudenov..."

"You're kidding! All the Russians? What, and you,

too, I suppose?"

Mrs. J laughed. "I am not beink scientist, just crazy old voman. They don't be needink me and I gots lots to do, keepink roof over ev'rybody's heads. So I just raisink big-shot 'consultant's' rents. Hah!"

Dinah added, "Sara's not actually on the payroll. She's a voluntary test subject to a government agency. I'm in a position to see to it that they don't get carried away."

She went on, "I don't know if you've thought this through, but there's a potential for some rather nasty litigation down the road involving Sara, especially if she pulls any more stunts like the Non-Leaning Tower of Pisa. Liability, flying without a license, not having a passport, taxes — you name it. If she's going to act according to her full potential, it's going to come down to whether or not she's human and therefore subject to the same laws as the rest of us. There's a lot of theoretical stuff that's going to be involved that nobody can foresee. We're talking county, state, national and international laws that haven't been interpreted to include someone like her or haven't even been written. So I don't want her to have any assets, we need to incorporate for our own protection, and she's without doubt going to be the target of a lot of opportunistic people out there. She's going to need my help, Alex. And we're going to need some money."

Alex looked hard at Dinah, sensing there was still another shoe poised to drop. "What do you mean, 'we'?"

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"You need to join the team," she said.

"Whose team?" he said, looking determined. "Your team? Jimmie's team? Lanna's team? What about Sara's team?"

Sara looked at Dinah and said, "I told you he'd be stubborn. But for all the right reasons, I think."

Dinah nodded. "This is not exploitation, Alex. This is self-preservation, for us and her. It's a cold world out there, full of some real bastards who won't necessarily love Sara the way we do."

"Besides," said Sara, "If I'm not getting paid for all this work, then you have to make enough for the both of us. It's either that, or I'll have to rent myself out as a flying bulldozer."

Mrs. J told him, "You are beink vorld's biggest expert on alien gorl. Your country needink you. You are being smarter than anybody else vhen comes to Sara. You need to be keepink academicians in line and keepink Sara in line, too."

Dinah added, "You're going to need to be a part of this so you can get a JSC pass and stay with Sara through everything, which Lanna has arranged for you to do. You're to be her manager, so to speak."

"Really, Alex," said Jimmie, "Dinah and I are gonna be totally covered up with stuff on our end. There's some complicated things happening, so you're the only one that can be with her through all of this."

Sara finished, "I don't wanna just get dumped off

there like I'm some kinda lab rat. There's some pretty strange humans wandering around NASA that I really need for you to help me sort out. OK?"

Feeling overwhelmed and possibly hoodwinked, Alex accepted a position as a consultant for more money than he'd ever make playing one-night stands. Sara seemed to be delighted with the arrangement and promptly demanded every cent Alex had on him before launching herself in the general direction of the Galleria shopping mall.

While the building was being prepared and the scientists were being assembled, Sara was subjected to a frightening barrage of tests far more thorough, comprehensive and potentially sadistic than anything Alex or the Russians could ever have devised. The usual routine was to clear everybody but a few key personnel out of a particular lab or shop, post barriers and a few guards around the area, and then have at her with everything they had — which was never enough, as it turned out.

Mostly, they were just looking for basic measurements, capabilities and limitations. They wanted to get all the quantifiable stuff out of the way so that the scientists could concentrate on trying to figure out how her builders had accomplished what seemed to be impossible. Also, the waiting policy-makers in DC wanted to get some idea of her capabilities, some of

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whom were concerned about the potential threat she or others like her could pose and if there was anything that could be done to neutralize such a threat.

There wasn't much to go on, so far. There just wasn't anything available at JSC that could crack her open — so to speak — to get a look inside. For instance, they discovered that not only was she completely opaque to the best x-ray machine they had, she was capable of producing a far more powerful x-ray beam herself than anything available even to the 'Star Wars' people. No physical processes, including diamond anvils or hydraulic presses, could put a dent in her or even cause anything resembling discomfort. Probes pushed down her throat were destroyed without returning any useful information, as if there were some kind of event horizon just past whatever served her as vocal cords. Try as they might, they were never able to as much as part a single hair from her head.

The capacity of her 'computer brain' was completely beyond their abilities to test. They couldn't even come up with an outrageous analogy to describe how advanced her underlying information processing technology must be. Coupled with her mega-channel all-frequency radio, infrared (and God-knows-what-else) input/output capabilities, it was evident that she had a great deal more potential bandwidth and processing power than our whole planet would be able to match for untold generations. It almost seemed to be a tragic waste that all she could

access at any one time was the entire Internet and every bit of world-wide communication that was available through the ether wherever she happened to be at the moment. Which made of her a pretty decent search engine. Especially since there didn't seem to be any way of encrypting anything that she couldn't break effortlessly and damned near instantaneously.

She didn't even have to try hard. Essentially, some automatic process simply assigned whatever resources were necessary to break any code she might 'encounter' in cyberspace, just in case her conscious mind wanted to access some trivial piece of information. It was a bit unnerving, knowing that before she finished saying 'hello' to someone, a part of her knew everything about that person's credit history, income taxes, bank accounts, retirement plans, investments, rap sheet, school records, service files, buying habits, website accesses, voting history, utility usage and anything else that had anything to do with electronic records.

Big sister is watching you.

Fortunately, she usually wasn't paying attention. Even hyper-advanced aliens could suffer from sensory overload, or at least their conscious minds could. And she was simply ethical about it, as Alex had insisted she be from his very first admonition about not being aware of what people were doing on the other sides of walls where she normally couldn't see them. So all that information just sat there, never forgotten and rarely accessed, much

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safer with her than in its original location because she, at least, could never be hacked.

Then there was the strength business. Again, they couldn't find a limit with the techniques they had available. Sensors crumbled, enormously powerful presses ground to a halt, and no object could be found or assembled that seemed to test her capacity. The biggest problem she had with very large objects was finding a way to grab them somehow without simply tearing her handhold off. It all came down to balance and local stresses, just as Gudenov had taught her back at the rec room.

According to simulations they ran on the numbers they could get, even if they could somehow assemble an enormous steel sphere that might actually be massive enough to cause her to break a sweat trying to lift it (though she didn't sweat), she'd be able to exert enough force against the surface of the material to shatter it or simply pass right through it. It was as if she was just so much more dense than terrestrial materials that everything else compared to whatever she was made of was practically insubstantial, a near-vacuum.

Of course, if she was that dense, she'd have a pronounced surface gravity, and should have sunk to the center of the Earth a long time ago. Well, that was a problem for the scientists.

The method of her flying was completely incomprehensible, but at least they did discover a few

interesting side effects. Any movements she made could be tracked by gravimeters some distance away. The local effects seemed to be damped, counterbalanced or spread out in some way, but there was a net effect that could be measured.

For one thing, she had a powerful effect on satellites, like a magnet moving underneath a piece of paper covered with iron filings. There was a compensating effect applied somehow, so that their orbits mostly returned to normal after she passed, but the seemingly random aberrations she'd introduced over the past couple of years had caused many a sleepless night at NORAD and JPL.

Proximity to massive bodies like planets, moons, asteroids and the like, seemed to be necessary for her peculiar means of locomotion. Making any kind of high-speed turn in deep space away from suitably large chunks of solar system was very difficult for her. Fortunately, her aim was instinctively good. If she missed, say, Mars by a sufficient margin, it might take her days to turn around. The more massive and close the object was that she was somehow anchored to, the better her acceleration and maneuverability, so her absolute speed capabilities were somewhat relative. Added to that, there seemed to be an unconscious governor inside of her that prevented her from doing too much tidal damage to our planet from truly high acceleration or changes of direction. That limited her to theoretically only a couple of thousand G's

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and potentially a few hundred-thousand miles-per-hour top speed. It would have to do.

The most astonishing discovery was actually made by Dr. Belloes while conducting a very thorough and meticulous examination of her entire body.

She had no eyes.

Oh, they *looked* like eyes and moved like eyes and — as far as Sara could tell — did all the things that eyes are supposed to do. But when Dr. Belloes tried to peer through the lenses to have a look at her retina, it turned out that it was all just an illusion. There were no lenses — just an area of her surface that had the proper coloration and reflectivity to mimic lenses under all but the most careful scrutiny.

Evidently, whatever she was made of couldn't be made transparent, and nothing else was up to her makers' standards for toughness. So they faked it. There were other ways to detect photons, and they had adopted something akin to a holographic technique. It turned out that every square inch of her surface area was part of her sensory array at every conceivable part of the electromagnetic spectrum (among other things), including light. Essentially, her underlying mechanism could query every quantum of energy incident upon her as to amplitude, frequency, spin, momentum and direction, convert the information to data, and 'display' an image to her consciousness as if she were looking at the scene through her eyes. That accounted for a large part of her

kreening ability.

She hadn't even been aware of it, since it was part of her 'disguise'. There was a lot of stuff about her own abilities that her underlying computer brain — Susan — never bothered to advise her about until she — Sara — needed to know it. In most cases, it really didn't make much difference. Even though Sara now knew that her eyeballs were fakes, she could still close her eyelids to block out her view of the world, although the internal mental image of her surroundings she called kreening still allowed her to wander around quite nicely with her eyes shut tight — or sink baskets without looking at the hoop.

There was a meeting in DC of the people in positions of power who had been monitoring the revelations from Houston. They were not of one mind on what to make of Sara. Some were amused, others were horrified. There was a common suspicion that at least part of what they were hearing was bullshit. Certainly there was an aura of unbelievability to some of the more outrageous reports. Before they could take this to the President's desk there had to be something that was completely solid and trustworthy .

They demanded a demonstration.

Alex was not surprised. He told Director Silvers that he and Sara could take care of this little detail and jotted down a few suggestions. Silvers looked it over for a while and then whistled.

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"Looks like you know these people," said Silvers.

"Back when I was in the Navy, in Norfolk — every year they'd put on a little show for a bunch of bigwigs: senators, generals, ambassadors and the like. I was in the band playing for the people in the grandstand while Uncle Sam spent mucho bucks staging a little war for their amusement. As I recall, they especially liked stuff that made a lot of noise and blew up real good."

"That's it exactly," said Silvers wryly. "I'll make sure you get all this stuff. Can you be ready next week?"

"No problemo."

Later, Alex told Sara what he had in mind.

"Military/industrial types, bureaucrats, politicians — these are hard-nosed people who have to have their hard noses rubbed in something before they'll change their mindsets about what they think they know. Which is usually a good thing, for the most part. It's why they are generally more effective at running large institutions than people with brains. You put some highly educated theoretician in charge of things and you wind up with aberrations like Communism or Fascism where they try to make the facts fit the theory."

He went on, "They have a general idea of what you're capable of — enough to make them act preemptively to authorize a look-see. But they're not gonna make any kind of belief commitment until they allow themselves to be pounded over the head."

"So they're afraid I might be some kind of fraud or

mass-hypnosis or swamp gas?" asked Sara.

"Some of them — just like the Enterprise," he answered. "I don't blame them. It's so easy to be made a fool of. These guys didn't get to be where they are by accepting every crackpot idea that came along. They had to work their way through to the top of their professions by being steady and consistent while their competition went by the wayside clutching at false hopes."

"You want me to go pay them a visit? I can be pretty convincing."

"It wouldn't do any good. They'll convince themselves that they're seeing things before they'll endorse something that isn't blessed by higher authority. One of their problems is that they've eventually got to convince *their* higher authority of something that sounds ridiculous. They can't have doubts."

"So," said Sara, "your Enterprise prank wasn't just for grins."

"Sure it was. You overestimate me," he smiled. "It's my *interpretation* of what you experienced that shows my true genius."

Alex went to full pontification mode. "What you were exposed to on the Enterprise was almost the complete opposite of what you learned from the basketball players at the Fondé Recreation Center. The jocks had a low enough social status to have the freedom to come to terms with what they saw. They were street-wise, like some of the sailors. People with authority and

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responsibility don't have the same freedom. You needed to see first hand self-delusion at work, not so much so that you would learn that such people exist, but so that you *could* learn that they not only exist, but they are created by the positions they occupy in human societies. It's both unnatural and perfectly natural at the same time. Without these kinds of niches filled by these kinds of people, we would not have a productive civilization."

Sara shook her head. Alex and Gundolf were obviously separated at birth. Their explanations seemed to resonate somehow but clarified nothing — wizardspeak that only really made sense in retrospect.

"They want a demonstration," Alex said. "We'll give 'em one they'll understand. One that'll give you the credibility you may need someday to deal with these people."

"That is," he added, pointing to his scribbled plan, "If you think you can handle it."

"*Moi?* Surely you jest." *Oops*, thought Sara. *Bad choice of words.*

Alex grinned wickedly.

Chapter Twenty-five: White Sands

Alex had grown up as an Army brat on bases all over the world. One of his boyhood homes had been at White Sands Missile Range back in the early sixties. Therefore, he knew first hand what it was like to live as a colonist on another planet.

With only a bicycle for basic transportation, he had been stuck in the desert on the little military base with one movie house (a quarter bought a ticket to a double-feature with a serial episode and a newsreel, a bag of popcorn and a soda), one PX (K-Mart stripped to its bare essentials), one commissary (a very un-super supermarket filled with olive drab cans labeled, 'Beans, white, small, in tomato sauce, with pork'), one school (K through 9 with a boot camp mentality), one church (your choice of generic Protestant, Catholic or Jewish services conducted by the same military chaplain), and one TV station (black-and-white when you could manage to tune it in from El Paso, too far to the south). The actual 'white sand' was at the National Monument between the base and Alamogordo across the flat, treeless valley.

Housing was strictly segregated according to rank, though not by any other measure. An Army base, even back then, was one of the few truly racially integrated communities on Earth. Most of Alex's friend's mothers were war brides from Germany, Italy, Japan, Korea, the Phillipines, England, China, France, Australia and

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damned near everywhere else. Gossip was conducted in a colorful amalgam of words and phrases from dozens of languages. It is likely that the Tower of Babel was a gathering place for prehistoric army wives.

Base social life revolved around the service clubs, with an enlisted men's club (no pool), an NCO club (with a pool) and an officer's club (pool with water in it). Bingo was a staple pastime, inducing in its avidly addicted devotees a zombie-like state that made the passage of time nearly bearable.

The carefully planned daily routine was delivered each morning via the mimeographed POD (Plan Of the Day), announcing various events that some people might have cared about, and the schedule of static tests. It was good to know the times when all activity had to cease as rocket engines were fired on one or another of the test stands adjacent to the base, the ground-trembling roar drowning out conversations and vibrating dishes out of the open cupboards of new residents.

Activities for kids were on the sparse side, other than adult-managed stuff like Little League, Boy Scouts and the (shudder) Teen Club, consisting of a pool table in a Quonset hut. You could always go hiking in the desert or up into the Organ Mountains, if you didn't mind heat, cold, flash floods, high winds, snakes, scorpions, tarantulas, Gila monsters, ants, coyotes, mountain lions and an incredible variety of shadeless plants with needles, stickers, spines, razor-sharp leaves, brambles and spikes

all over them. Or you could just fight a lot. Sadistic bullies were considered to be athletes by Army lifers and were accorded all the appropriate honors.

Alex spent most of his spare time in the base library. It was heavy on Army technical manuals and light on classics, but there was a lot of science fiction. He usually checked out twenty or more books a week, and when he eventually ran out of sci-fi, started in on the tech manuals. An alarmed librarian notified his parents of the strange behavior and recommended that they take him to the base dispensary for a medical evaluation.

Somehow, Alex survived his childhood (which he considered to be normal at the time), having not only read everything ever written by Asimov, Heinlein, Clarke and Twain, but also learning everything there was to know about field-stripping, maintaining, operating and firing every piece of armored artillery the Army had. You never knew when all that could come in handy some day.

White Sands was the most sensible place in the country to conduct a little demonstration of Sara's capabilities for the elite delegation from DC. The base already had nearly everything that Alex needed, they were used to providing shows for visiting brass, all kinds of high-speed cameras and recording devices were already in place, NASA had a presence there, nearby Holliman AFB provided discreet and convenient airport facilities for special VIP transportation, and a lot of noise and confusion was business as usual out on the firing range.

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After all, only a little way up the broad, desert valley known as the *Jornada del Muerte* (Journey of Death) was the Trinity site, where the first atomic bomb was tested. Who knows? Maybe the awful false morning of its unnatural light had been a signal to Sara's makers that her time on our planet was fast approaching.

Alex wondered if Sara would leave as visible a scar on the desert as the bomb. And if someday it would also become a tourist attraction.

NASA director Silvers had seen to it that Alex was accorded the kind of treatment usually reserved for the CEOs of major contractors. His wish-list was serviced immediately, bypassing the usual red tape. Bureaucrats who normally would never have given him the time of day called him 'sir'. Important people returned his phone calls. Nobody argued with him. Everywhere he turned, he was treated like a rock star. It was very, very cool, something he could have easily grown to like — if he had felt like he deserved it. He had to work hard to keep his perspective properly cynical.

A famous former astronaut accompanied Alex from Ellington Field to Holliman AFB to take a high-profile role in the demonstration. Steve Astin had had his space jock career cut short by a spectacular accident he was lucky to have survived. As it was, he'd had to be fitted with about six-million dollars worth of rather advanced prosthetics and was nearly half machine — which had

made of him something of a 'superman' in his own right. He and Sara had a lot in common in that regard and had hit it off right away, 'freak to freak,' as she called their friendship.

Astin was Silvers' most trusted and able political liason with Washington. Senators, industrialists, generals and scientists alike succumbed to his charm and celebrity status. He was obviously cultivating a future career in politics and would undoubtedly do well. As an official spokesman for NASA, he had natural presence on TV and was skilled at managing news conferences so as to put the agency's occasional boo-boos in a way that seemed to be actually positive.

Astin, who was on a first-name basis with most of the guests, would be the one to actually do all the talking while Alex handled things behind the scenes, including Sara. Silvers' transparent ulterior motive was to ensure that these influential people would come away from the demonstration motivated to support increased funding levels for a comprehensive (and never-ending) study of the technology behind Sara's manufacture and possible practical applications in support of scientific missions.

It was, of course, instinctive empire-building, pragmatically opportunistic and without shame. Silvers knew that Sara's presence could have unforeseen — even disastrous — effects on the space program, but at the same time he understood that she might open doors that would allow the agency to expand with renewed vigor.

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The growth imperative is strong in bureaucratic entities (which, as one example, some historians believe accounts for the building of the great pyramids of Egypt).

The visiting dignitaries had their own agenda. So did Alex.

Preparations went smoothly, but as the big day dawned — with the threat of early thunderstorms — Sara was moody and unresponsive. She made sure that Alex noticed.

"Did it occur to you," she told him, "That this whole thing is really silly and stupid?"

"Of course it is," he replied. "That's my specialty."

"Well, it's not mine. I don't mind putting on a show for people, 'cause I understand that I'm a little outside of normal, but this is too much. It's all like some kinda special effects movie for a bunch of teenagers. These guys aren't really gonna be impressed with all this, are they? I mean, they're grownups, aren't they?"

"Maybe *they* are," said Alex, "But *I'm* not, and neither are you."

"Come on, Alex. I'm trying to be serious. Which isn't easy dressed up for Halloween."

"Hey, it's either your uniform or going naked. What d'ya wanna do?"

"Either way it's embarrassing. I feel like an idiot, showing off while wearing this thing. I'm not a kid anymore, you know. And it's not just that. It's this whole

performance. It's just..." She trailed off, seemingly frustrated by Alex's insensitivity to the obvious.

"It's like some adolescent guy's wet dream," he answered. "Is that what's bothering you? Posing muscularly and impossibly for a bunch of gawkers to get all excited over? Performing gaudy and shallow feats for their amusement?"

She just looked down and distractedly kicked at a pebble in the sand.

"OK," he said, taking a deep breath. "Sure, they've seen the reports from NASA, but facts and figures don't have any impact. It's all too esoteric, too unbelievable. These guys aren't dummies, but they're not necessarily the brightest bulbs in the marquee, either. They're gifted with the hard-to-define talent of leadership, the ability to motivate other people to get things done through inspiration and compromise. Scientific evaluations don't mean all that much to them. They need to experience something tangible, something they understand and can make other people understand."

"Like a tank," she mumbled.

"Precisely," he replied. "They know tanks. A tank is a powerful machine and a powerful symbol. A tank means a lot more to them — and the people they'll have to deal with in turn — than a boxcar full of data."

"I still think this is stupid," she muttered.

"No argument," he agreed. "But you have to remember this, too. It may sound corny, but these people

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are genuinely concerned about their country, the good old US of A. It's their end-all and be-all. They're not a secret cabal that runs things from the shadows or anything, but they *are* important opinion leaders who happen to be very influential. In their way, they represent the fundamental institutions that actually determine the future and well-being of this nation and all its people. They'll do whatever they believe is necessary to protect those institutions.

"They're here because they're afraid that you might constitute an unexpected potential threat to the security of the state. You also represent the Cryptoalien civilization that sent you, something that nobody understands, including you — which nevertheless is as much your responsibility as the fate of the US is their responsibility. It may happen that you'll eventually have to deal with them as something equivalent to a representative of a competing set of sovereign interests. If it comes to that and they understand that they cannot physically threaten you, but that you constitute a potential for unlimited damage to US assets, then such an understanding will eliminate their taking the risk of resorting to force as an option, including laws, regulations or decrees that have an underlying basis in physical coercion for their credibility. They'll have to go to Plan B. Essentially, you'll be treated — at least 'unofficially' — as someone having the equivalent of ambassadorial status, the *de facto* representative of an extraterrestrial superpower."

"Therefore," he finished with emphasis, "the purpose

of this demonstration is to unambiguously inform their councils. Got it?"

"I guess," she said reluctantly. "You don't think that seeing all this will maybe make them a little paranoid or something? That I might be too dangerous and immature to trust?"

"Nah. They really believe that God is on their side, so you — or your Cryptoalien buddies — oughtta be, too. These people didn't crack during the Cold War, when an ideology and nation they believed was bent on world domination was pointing nuclear missiles at us. The bombs and stuff are still there, but they're capable of acting as if there was no more threat and the former Evil Empire is just a new market. They'll deal with you in whatever way they think will do the most good for the national interest, preferably by being your friend and ally. We just have to make sure that they understand that they have to respect your potential."

Sara was thoughtful for a while. Alex peeked around the corner of the tunnel-like blockhouse entrance and saw Astin warming up his audience in the shady VIP section of the observation bleachers. There wasn't a whole lot of time left before the thunderclouds piling up across the broad, flat valley closed their weather window.

Finally, she said, "I can't help thinking about the Dwarves. In my dream, or whatever it was, I thought that showing them I was more than they could possibly handle would make them deal with me rationally. It didn't work.

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They refused to change their minds about what they were doing and died protecting their 'institutions'."

Alex took his time answering her. "I think that that's what you have to keep in mind when you're dealing with human nations. If the people who run them ever come to the conclusion that your mission is to subjugate our planet and impose alien values, there is the strong possibility that at least some of us would put up a fight regardless of the consequences, like the Japanese were prepared to do in World War Two — *until*," he emphasized, "the atomic bombs informed *their* councils. Heroic resistance to invasion is a common theme in our sci-fi mythology. I guess that might account for your incarnation as the most non-threatening 'alien' possible. And that's what I'm counting on to counterbalance the violent nature of today's extravaganza. That and your sunny disposition, which seems to have stayed in bed today."

Sara was lost in thought. Alex tried to imagine the immense resources available to 'Susan' performing unimaginable calculations at incredible speed on every aspect of their little conversation. However, it seemed probable from Alex's experience with her that Sara didn't rely on pure logic to sort things out and crawled through our world at the same pace as the rest of us. For a being who ought to have a five-figure IQ, Sara didn't seem to show much in the way of insight into the human condition. But then, if her consciousness was as powerful as her mechanism, she wouldn't resemble anything even

remotely human. For about the umpteenth time, Alex wished he could have a little chat with her creators.

With Astin signalling that he was way past ready, Sara finally said, "I guess you're right. Don't worry, Alex. I'll do my part. We'll show these characters a thing or three."

"Alright then! And cheer up. Jeez, you're acting like such a mope. You oughtta be able to play this crowd like a violin. Just act your usual self and don't forget to smile. You impress the powers-that-be in the US and the other 'civilized' countries will follow their lead. So let's wrap this dog-and-pony show up and go home, and you won't have to fool with this kinda crap again. Deal?"

She sighed, "Deal."

"Just call me Susan, Senator," said Sara as the imposingly authoritative figure graciously kissed her hand.

"I am so delighted to meet you, young lady," he intoned mellifluously. "We have all heard so many wonderful things the past few weeks that we just had to meet you. I do hope you will forgive the inconvenience occasioned by our curiosity."

"Think nothing of it, sir," she replied almost — but not quite — deferentially. "Glad to be of service. I just hope I don't disappoint you."

Sara moved among them gracefully, chatting familiarly and knowledgeably with each one, showing a

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grasp of their individual interests that flattered them yet challenging them just enough to win their respect. It would appear that she basically charmed the pants off of them, but she knew that their polite chatter was a way for them to test her character and intentions, and whether or not she could be manipulated.

They were used to this sort of thing. It was the way they waged war and they were good at it. They were surprised and actually somewhat delighted to discover that Sara was as invulnerable to their verbal snares and wit as she was to more mundane projectiles. They collectively came away from the close encounter with the feeling that they could trust her, and *that* might have been the most remarkable part of the day's demonstration.

Eventually, the dignitaries took their seats in the bleachers and Astin began the show. Sara levitated to her position as a target about a half-mile away, facing the audience in front of a high, thick berm of piled-up earth.

About twenty yards in front of the bleachers, slightly off to one side, was the tank. It wasn't exactly the latest model, an M-60 appropriated from the Army boneyard at Fort Bliss. It had been patched up and given a fresh paint job to cover the rust and wear. About the only thing that worked was the enormous 105-mm cannon that poked its way out of the turret into the desert air, pointing directly at Sara, who waved her readiness.

There had been a slight glitch during rehearsals when the technician who was to have operated the gun refused

to actually fire at Sara. He just couldn't do it. Neither could Alex. Nobody wanted to pull the trigger and shoot at the cute blonde target, no matter how finely they appreciated her ability to withstand the blast. They had to rig up a radio activated remote control so that Sara could do it herself. The same squeamishness applied to all of their munitions deliveries. Susan had no problem taking control, though.

From his position in the blockhouse, Alex announced over the loudspeakers that the first shot would be a high-explosive round. He gave a melodramatic countdown while the onlookers hastily adjusted their earplugs and safety glasses. When the big gun went off at zero, the tremendous muzzle blast slammed a cloud of dust into the air from the bare ground around the tank and hammered the chests of the onlookers like a boxer's blow. They could clearly see the glowing tracer arc into its intended target, hitting Sara directly in the 'S'. There was a flash and huge ball of thick, black smoke that instantly obscured her, followed in seconds by the heavy crunching sound of the projectile's explosion against her chest.

The slow morning wind gradually blew the cloud away, revealing a completely unaffected Sara, waving cheerily to show she was just fine. TV monitors in shade boxes provided instant slow-motion replay from several angles. There was no doubt that the shell had found its mark and was totally ineffective. She hadn't even flinched, adjusting her position slightly at the last instant

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so that the impact would be centered perfectly.

Alex announced that the second shot would be a HEAT round — High Explosive Anti-Tank. Again, the gigantic flash and fury of the gun pounded the watchers mercilessly, involuntarily rocking them back on the narrow benches. There was a small but brilliant flash as it hit her, the vicious jet of fire designed to explosively melt through steel armor splashing impotently against her slender form in a shower of incandescence.

The third shot was a sabot round, designed to kinetically punch a relatively thin spike through the thickest armor, spraying the insides of an armored fighting vehicle with a gout of white-hot depleted uranium. The gun spoke thunderously, making the tank recoil violently and shaking the visitors remorselessly. The sabot's guiding shards could be seen flying off to either side as the dense, narrow core went on to find its mark. The rebound pinwheeled away in a cascade of spinning, molten sparks, returning the enormous noise of two hard objects in terrible collision, followed by the hideous whining spall of the projectile's whirling ricochet as it flew high into the air. Again, Sara waved to show she was unharmed. The monitors confirmed a good hit.

The fourth shot was a lead-filled solid round, no explosives, nothing fancy. The cannon roared gut-wrenchingly as usual, but this time Sara caught the big bullet with her bare hands, then flew back to the bleachers with her trophy. It was hot enough to singe the wooden

seat she set it on, so she gently blew on it with her special thick, cold, nearly-liquid nitrogen breath until it frosted over.

While they gingerly touched it, Sara skipped over behind the blockhouse, returning with a 4,000-pound TV-guided 'bunker buster' bomb under her arm, painted bright orange. She pointed the lens on the front of the bomb at the guests as she walked back to them and the picture from it was displayed on one of the monitors. Once they had a good look at it, she soared off into the deep blue desert sky above them while keeping the camera in its nose aimed at the receding bleachers.

At about ten thousand feet, Sara rendezvoused with a chase plane whose own camera view was relayed to another monitor. Astin pointed out a spot of white-painted desert less than a mile away that would be the target zone. The delegation glanced nervously at each other, wondering if they should object to their uncomfortable proximity to such a test.

Before anyone could say anything, Alex announced, "Bombs away," and Sara raced from the free-falling cylinder to take up her position at ground zero. The onlookers could see the orange dash in the sky as it moved down from left to right. Still another monitor displayed a view from behind Sara showing the bomb's rapid approach.

Fascinated, they craned their necks to watch the bomb's-eye view as Sara's image swelled until it suddenly

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filled the screen, guided unerringly by Susan's precise radio commands. Two screens turned to static as an enormous fireball out on the desert floor wrenched their attention away, a fountain of smoke shooting into the air above the target as the ground camera behind Sara was destroyed.

They felt sudden heat on their exposed skin and could see the shimmering shock wave racing toward them, kicking up a curtain of sand and dust. Its arrival slammed at them, whipping their clothes and stinging their faces. Blinking away the afterimage and grit in their eyes, they saw Sara serenely floating back to them from the smoking crater, cape fluttering majestically behind her.

The visitors were in much worse shape than she was. They were sweating now, hair disheveled, clothing wrinkled and stained. Cordite fumes from the cannon stung their dust-filled nostrils, they were half-deafened in spite of their earplugs, their eyes were inflamed underneath their ineffectual safety glasses, and their throats were parched. One expensive toupee was missing.

As Sara touched lightly down in front of them, an Honest John tactical artillery missile suddenly took off uprange behind her. She told them, "I'm gonna give it a little head start, then try to catch it."

The missile had launched in silence leaving a roiling pillar of gray smoke behind it. When the sound unexpectedly reached them a few seconds later, it was worse than the previous bangs and booms, a searing white

noise of incredible intensity that only slowly dwindled into a horrific screeching. Sara suddenly darted off after it, catching it easily before it burned out and bringing it back to lay at their feet, its nozzle still smoking, adding to the array of chemical stenches they'd been subjected to so far.

Astin led the group from their seats to watch the next event, which involved Sara becoming a missile herself, streaking low across the flat, desert floor from the other side of the valley, faster than their eyes could follow, leaving a brilliant meteoric trail of superheated air and a rooster tail of dust as she slammed into the reinforced concrete of an abandoned static test stand built into the side of a two-hundred-foot-high rocky hill at the base of the Organ Mountains behind the bleachers.

The entire hill disintegrated, the dome of its shattered remains heaving slowly into the air and settling back down in a tremendous pall of dust and falling debris. Aside from the considerable sound, attenuated by distance and echoing ominously from the canyon-riven mountains, the most striking effect was akin to an earthquake, as the overstressed ground rippled shock waves in concentric circles from the site of the catastrophe.

Alex and the technicians with him scrambled in panic out of the blockhouse as it seemed to shift precariously on its base. All of the dignitaries fell down. Lots of windows were shattered at the not-too-distant military base, along with dishes thrown out of cupboards. People felt the

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tremors in Las Cruces, down in the Rio Grande valley on the other side of the mountains.

Sara returned covered with dust and radiating a considerable amount of heat, which quickly faded. She managed to shake off the dust, probably aided by ultrasonics or some kind of electrostatic charge, and soon was none the worse for her experience. Her audience was nearly done in by now, though. Alex and Astin helped them back to their seats in the bleachers and passed out some refreshments.

"Nearly finished, guys," she told them reassuringly. "Just a couple more things and then we can all go back to the base."

She went over to the tank and stood beside the gun barrel. "First, I'm gonna make you some souvenirs," she announced, and her lasers flashed, cutting the thick tube into precise slices, like a bunch of big, metal doughnuts. The actinic glare of vaporizing metal was impossible to look at, casting sharply-defined moving shadows in every direction, but it only took her a few seconds. She cooled the heavy rings with her breath and passed them out to everyone. The lands and grooves of the barrel's rifling made them look like gears turned inside-out. In a nice touch, she had laser-etched a copy of her emblem on each one along with her autograph, 'Susan'.

"Alright, this is the last dance, so bear with me just a few more minutes. I'm gonna melt this thing with x-rays — in midair."

The bottom of the vehicle was relatively too thin-skinned for her purposes, so she casually flipped the front of the tank into the air and caught it underneath at the balance point, pressing it effortlessly over her head with one hand. Then she flipped it into the air like a flapjack, catching it upside down by the top of the thickly armored turret, bits and pieces of stuff falling out of the open hatch to the accompaniment of a great deal of clanging and banging from loose heavy objects rattling around loudly inside. Like a shot putter, she crouched low, then heaved the whole thing in a high arc toward the still-smoking crater left by the bunker buster. Both of the treads and several wheels couldn't take the sudden acceleration, tearing away noisily and flying off on their own short trajectories.

At the peak of the tank's flight, Susan unleashed her beams. First, high-intensity UV to explosively heat two parallel narrow paths through the air, the shock waves creating a near vacuum between her and her target. Microseconds later, x-rays followed, free to travel inside the evacuated corridors without interference from atmospheric absorption. The highly penetrating x-rays explosively sublimated twin paths completely through the tank, producing shock waves radiating secondary x-rays that more or less evenly heated the rest of the target. This Susan-managed sequence was repeated several times in less than a second to different parts of the vehicle until enough energy had been delivered to do the job.

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Several things happened almost simultaneously. The paint, wiring insulation, rubber and lubricants ignited as the metal itself liquefied, turning into a molten shower of small droplets by the the explosively burning flammables. The droplets themselves ignited as the incandescent iron burned in the atmosphere, becoming thousands of bright flares.

Unexpectedly, the last pathfinder laser beam of the sequence broke completely through one of the thinner parts of the tank and connected with the now closely looming thunderheads moving across the valley, creating an electrically conductive path of ionized air that drew a sudden massive discharge of static electricity between the cloud and Sara's eyes, arcing from her face to the ground at her feet.

The sizzling pop of the lasers was followed almost instantaneously by the sharp crack and prolonged ripping boom of unanticipated lightning that made everybody else jump, hair standing on end from the closeness of the bolt as its energy dispersed through the surrounding ground following a profusion of buried cables. The TV monitors shattered, spraying the VIPs with small chunks of crumbled safety glass. Every circuit in the blockhouse ignited in a shower of sparks. Alex and the techs found themselves running for their lives again as smoke quickly filled the building.

Unnoticed, a few surviving blobs of flaming molten steel splashed into the bomb crater.

Toomie Starks

It got much worse.

A couple of trucks parked next to the bleachers suddenly disgorged more than a dozen black-clad men, heavily armed, most swaddled with explosives and all with the determined look of fanaticism in their eyes. They quickly grabbed the bewildered and shell-shocked dignitaries, putting automatic pistols to their temples.

Astin tried to interfere, but one of the men slapped a device against his bionic leg which began to spasm uncontrollably. He went down in agony.

Their leader screamed at Sara. "We are ready to die, spawn of Satan! Do not interfere with our holy mission or these wretches will die with us."

Sara stood transfixed as all this unfolded, looking as if she was completely surprised by this turn of events. But as the group of terrorists started to drag their hostages toward their waiting trucks, Sara moved quickly to block their way.

"Put down your weapons and release the hostages," she commanded, the effect made somewhat less than authoritative by her little girl voice. But she had the body language down pat, standing with feet firmly planted far apart, fisted hands on her hips, radiating determination and defiance.

The leader tightened his grip on his detonator and bellowed, "Death to Amerika! Death to..."

He never finished the sentence.

Susan sprang into action in a blur no one could

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follow. Her speed left little sonic shock waves behind her as she almost simultaneously neutralized their detonators, temporarily blinded them, reduced their weapons to junk, and then stunned them. Before they hit the ground, every one of them had been tied up with wires torn from their own explosive vests.

She tried to catch each of the VIPs as they sagged to the ground in confusion and exhaustion from the incredible barrage of events. Astin finally gained control of his own electronics and helped the visitors to their seats, assisted by Alex and the techs. Sara rounded up the dazed gunmen and herded them in front of the bleachers.

Where they took a bow.

"Well done, gentlemen," Astin congratulated them. Turning to the visitors, he said, "Allow me to introduce Commander Cody and his very theatrical Navy SEAL team. I'm sure you'll agree that they made excellent terrorists. I think they deserve a nice round of applause."

Astin, Sara, Alex and the techs had to do all the clapping.

"This concludes our demonstration," Astin announced. "The bus will take us back to the base..."

Sara blurted, "Yay! Lunch..."

"...after which we will have a question and answer session," he continued. "We will have complete summaries and videos of all of today's events made available to your offices."

Toomie Starks

"I hope you enjoyed the show," beamed Sara.
For some reason, nobody answered.

Chapter Twenty-six: Scrutiny

The next few weeks were very busy, as the team of distinguished scientists showed up one-by-one and began their various examinations. Alex had half-expected them to be characters from a bad movie, but they were as a group too varied to be easily stereotyped. He couldn't tell by looking at most of them that they actually *were* scientists. Their clothes varied from GQ to Wal-Mart, there was quite a span of ages, they came in all shapes and sizes, some were fit and others fat, and not one of them brought an assistant that was either a babe or a hunchback.

He had also expected them to be somber, studious, serious — and ultimately frustrated by the nature of Sara's opaque and ultimately unilluminating enigma. He knew she would be a very cooperative brick wall against which their curiosity would founder, a nut too tough to crack open to see what was inside.

Instead, what developed was a mood that was best characterized as intensity with joy. Astonishingly, they seemed to be quite happy to be confronted with a mystery that stumped them. And the more intractable the mystery, the happier they seemed to be.

First of all, they could not hide their universal enthusiasm about meeting a real, live space alien — and were delighted when that alien turned out to be someone as cheerful and charming as Susan (Sara went by her

'official' guinea-pig name). After all, probably every single one of them got into the science biz as the direct result of a childhood addiction to reading sci-fi.

Second, the fact that they didn't really have the foggiest idea about how she worked and what she was made of promised to be a tremendously exciting challenge to some fundamental concepts of what they thought they knew about the universe. As far as they were concerned, it was probably *better* that she didn't come with an operator's manual.

Conan Rhodes, the guy from Stanford who had more or less crashed the party, told Alex over lunch one day that, "It's like the project I've been working on, confronting the observable fact that the solar corona is a thousand times hotter than the solar surface. According to our current understanding of physics, that shouldn't be possible. But the data is undeniable, so we must not know as much as we think we do. Which means that figuring out what's happening will require that we learn something. That's what we're in this business to do. Susan represents an unexpected chance to voyage into the unknown. No way any of us would miss out on that."

So here they were, eager campers in the granddaddy of all summer camps, with all the toys they could hope for, surrounded by the best of their own kind, and with the chance to play with the very incarnation of their wildest dreams. There hadn't been anything like this since the Manhattan Project at Los Alamos (before Trinity).

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So they puttered and tinkered, probed and prodded, experimented and examined. There was a bustle of activity surrounding Sara constantly, but she seemed to enjoy the attention and did everything they asked. In the background, there was a tremendous flow of presumably secure transmissions to and from labs, universities, think tanks and other congregations of enquiry around the world, and a great deal of coming and going by various members of the team to consult with ad hoc committees that sprang up to deal with certain problems or revelations as they occurred.

It seemed to Alex that a lot of their time was spent in what he thought of as 'jam sessions', akin to jazz musicians' bouts of heavy (and competitive) improvisation. Alex felt like an outsider at these impromptu meetings, but they were pretty much where the action was — as far as he was concerned — where they came together to share what they had learned, propose new procedures, or thrash out their latest theories. There were often heated arguments, bouts of creative brainstorming, occasional musings on fanciful topics, flashes of illumination, grandiose ideas, cat fights, cooperative agreements, interdisciplinary cross-fertilizations, hare-brained schemes, bawdy limericks, clever ideas, stunning revelations, and even periods of quiet reflection.

Take, for instance, discussions about the nature of Sara's ability to fly. Alex had come to represent some

kind of 'Everyman' to many of them, so there were times when they would sort of gang-lecture him, as a stand-in for a wider audience (he suspected that there was maybe a little Carl Sagan or Mr. Wizard in most of them — with many of the symptoms of other show-business wannabees he'd known over the years). In this case, four of them practically dragged him over to a corner table equipped with a computer.

Alex was familiar with the old rubber-sheet analogy of how mass warped space — a bowling ball would depress the sheet, making a depression into which, say, marbles would roll. This illustrated the effect of gravity. One of them had a nifty little computer program that showed this graphically, with yellow gridlines distorting around virtual bowling balls.

Dr. Best ran the program through its paces. "It's just a crude approximation of the underlying mathematical reality, you understand."

"Sure," Alex replied. Sometimes he felt as much like a guinea pig as Sara. "I think I saw this on *Nova* once. The book was better."

"So," she went on, "If we postulate a hitherto unknown *anti*-gravity that is symmetrically equivalent to gravity, we can represent that by putting a ball on the *underside* of the sheet that responds in exactly the same way, only in the opposite direction."

"You mean," replied Alex, playing the part of the simpleton he felt like, "A bowling ball on the underside of

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the sheet bends it *up*, right?"

"Precisely," answered Best, pointing to the monitor. "As you can see, two balls placed on the top of the sheet will roll toward each other. The distortion of the sheet between them creates what is known topologically as a saddle..."

"Yee," Alex interjected appreciatively, "And also hah." He was a Texan, after all.

She ignored him. "Similarly, two balls placed on the underside of the sheet will also roll toward each other — as if the model, here, was just turned upside down."

Dr. MacBeth kept things rolling, "But if you put a ball on top, bending the sheet down — and a ball underneath, bending the sheet up — they will move away from each other."

Alex nodded. "Same as pushing your fist up underneath the sheet. All you need is an antigravity bowling ball."

"Unfortunately, we don't know of any type of matter that exhibits this antigravity characteristic," said MacBeth.

Dr. Howdershelt added, "But then, we don't know the kind of matter of which at least ninety percent of the the universe is composed — the so-called 'dark matter'. And there is recent news from Hubble observations that something akin to Einstein's discredited 'cosmological constant' may in fact exist, which would be a type of universal repelling force similar to antigravity. In any

event, she is observed to levitate, and I — for one — don't believe it's magic. A rational explanation involves embracing the concept of antigravity of some kind."

"Wait a minute," Alex interjected skeptically. "If she was made from something that was basically endowed with antigravity, she'd have to expend as much energy of some kind to keep her from flying off into space as she would need to keep her from sinking into the ground if she wasn't."

"What we are suggesting," chimed in Dr. Cyan, "is that Susan P's structure may be somehow composed of equal parts of positive- and negative-gravity material, intermixed in some way."

"Look here," said Best, working the keyboard furiously. "Two balls lined up precisely on opposite sides of the sheet cancel each other out. The sheet does not deform at all, but it's a very unstable configuration. Unless the balls are linked in some way — perhaps magnetically, for purposes of this analogy — they'll soon be off in opposite directions."

"Now, here's where it gets interesting," said Cyan. "Let's say you have two magnetically linked balls on opposite sides of the sheet. If you tilt them in relation to each other, it doesn't really make much of a difference as long as the link remains intact. They'll stay put unless some outside force is applied. *But*, if you put another ball on *top* of the sheet nearby — what happens?"

Alex shook his head, "You're asking me? Well, for

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the record — duh."

"It breaks the symmetry locally," replied MacBeth, beaming. "If you rock the alignment a little bit one way, the bound pair is 'attracted' to the other ball. Rock it the other way, and it's 'repelled'. See, the sheet between the bound pair is distorted when you tilt it around. And that creates a slope."

Howdershelt added, "If Susan P is composed of equal parts of 'up' and 'down' and can somehow deliberately introduce a kind of hyperdimensional misalignment, then she can have enormous mass..."

"Which," Cyan interjected, "seems to be the case."

"... without having a high surface gravity of her own," finished MacBeth.

"And," added Best, "doesn't have to expend an enormous amount of energy to maintain position — or change it — in Earth's gravity well."

They were practically excited now, coming at Alex from four directions almost simultaneously.

"Every time she moves..."

"By adjusting the alignment of her constituent 'up-ness' and 'down-ness'..."

"It's like she's just falling in the direction she chooses..."

"Though we haven't worked out how she's able to vector her movement at right angles to the 'host' mass yet..."

"We've actually been able to measure the gravity

Toomie Starks

waves she produces as she changes directions and speed..."

"They're like ripples..."

"From their effect on satellite orbits when she maneuvers close by..."

"Bobbing like corks in a pond..."

"Which implies that..."

"Acceleration is dependent on the relative density of the 'host' mass..."

"The more massive..."

"And the more proximate..."

"The better..."

"If she shot off from Earth toward, say, an asteroid..."

"And used its mass to boomerang back..."

"She'd sling the asteroid away in the opposite direction..."

"Proportionate to the mass differential times the velocity..."

"Except that tidal forces would probably be severe enough to break it up..."

"Which could also apply to the crust of planet Earth if she's not careful..."

"Since her intrinsic mass makes for some pretty tight space-time curvatures..."

Alex held up his hands. "Whoa! Hold it, guys. I think I got the gist of it. Give me a break, here."

They blinked at him and looked at each other.

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Alex said, "What you're currently guessing is that she's made up of equal parts of some kind of extremely dense — whaddaya callit — 'unobtainium' and 'anti-unobtainium'. Like matter and antimatter. Maybe it *is* antimatter. Isn't that potentially dangerous?"

"That depends on the containment," a new voice interjected. Two more scientists joined the group.

"We might have an interesting hypothesis regarding how this would relate to both her supply of energy and the heat-loss problem," began Dr. Akima, visibly containing some kind of excitement at unveiling some new ideas to the ongoing discussion.

"Her apparent extreme density may be sufficient to curve space at subatomic scales just enough to change the manner in which the compacted n-dimensional substructure interacts with three-space."

His partner, Dr. Starks, produced a small stack of printouts covered with arcane markings, Greek letters, strange symbols, charts, graphs and Feynman diagrams, spreading them out over the table next to the computer. The others gathered around to peer at the data.

Akima was pointing, stabbing his fingers at successive clumps of equations and illustrations, "See? This interacts with that — and that changes the effect of this — and when you plot it out — these terms cancel — and this field locks into a stable resonance — as a second-order harmonic — that's generated by the n-space curvature — modulating the mass distortion — to

Toomie Starks

provide a feedback loop..."

Alex observed *sotto voce*, "The music goes 'round and 'round..."

Akima finished triumphantly, "And it comes out here!"

Starks added, "Quantum wormholes."

By now, the others in the room had gathered around, muttering to each other as they pored over the figures. Alex found himself crowded to the edges, ignored and forgotten. The hubbub went on for quite a while until an annoyed Alex cleared his throat, attracting everybody's distracted attention.

He looked at them for a long moment, feeling a tinge of insight that only an outsider could experience. They waited tolerantly for him to make a fool of himself.

"This is all very interesting, guys. But do y'all think this actually has anything to do with reality?"

Alex realized that, under the circumstances, the question was not only rude and obnoxious, but embarrassingly irrelevant.

Rhodes stood up and looked around the room. Some returned his inquiring gaze by shaking their heads, others by looking down. He finally turned back to Alex and shrugged his shoulders.

"For now, maybe it doesn't matter," he admitted to Alex. "And that's what makes this whole discussion," he gestured expansively, "this whole operation, so..." He groped for the right word, "So damned — *cool*."

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He went on, "Here we are, an impromptu summit of some of the best and brightest — if I may be so immodest — that our little planet has to offer. It may be that we can't help but feel that perhaps we're no more than a pack of tribal shamans trying to figure out a space shuttle. We're acutely aware that it's possible we may find that there are some things in the wide universe that we humans fundamentally *cannot* comprehend. Still, I believe that everyone here is glad of the opportunity to try to find out."

"So," Rhodes finished, "In answer to your question, the point is..." He paused to look around at the others with what appeared to be a twinkle in his eye, "We don't know. *Yet*. And isn't that wonderful?"

For some reason, every distinguished scientist in the room laughed uproariously.

Science marches on, thought Alex.

Bruce Wayans watched the videos from White Sands in the darkness of his underground office. He ran straight through them, saying nothing, never pausing or rewinding to dwell upon any particularly interesting scene.

When he was through, Robbins eventually broke the ensuing long silence by piping up, "Interesting, huh? I guess that confirms our reports."

Wayans didn't reply for a while, lost in thought. Several times, Robbins made as if to speak up again, or maybe sneak out, but thought better of it. He recognized

the mood.

Finally, Wayans spun his chair ponderously around to face Robbins.

"You are certain that these tapes will not be publicly released before the President's news conference?"

"Yessir, a few days after the NASA show."

"And we can expect him to act true to form?"

"He plans to welcome this alien with open arms."

Wayans smiled, "As he would embrace any pretty, young thing. He always had a certain weakness."

Robbins made a contemptuous grunt.

Wayans stared into the darkness, eyes unfocussed. Finally, he said. "Cancel my announcement speech."

Robbins was taken aback. "You're not going to run?"

"Later," Wayans replied. "Timing is everything. I see a window of opportunity."

"You're going to use this?"

"In due course."

"Then you must know that precautions must be taken. I do not doubt in the least that this — *thing* — is aware that we are monitoring it."

"It must be assumed so," Wayans nodded.

"Then may I suggest that Team Blue must not communicate electronically by any means. No computers, no phones, no faxes. Only face-to-face in controlled environments."

"You are sure that this is necessary?"

"Absolutely. With every passing day, *it* becomes

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more entrenched in every aspect of global communication. We have reason to believe that its AI 'virtual agents' have infected every router on the Internet. It is close to being omniscient."

"Truly an invasion. Yet *she*," Wayans emphasized the pronoun, making Robbins wince, "would seem to be such a sweet child."

"*It*," Robbins countered forcefully, "is no more a 'sweet child' than I am."

"Ah, yes. Appearances," Wayans said musingly. "And that is our stock in trade, is it not?"

'Area 52' at the Johnson Space Center outside Houston was the eye of the biggest hurricane to ever hit the area, in terms of the intense scrutiny of most of the civilized world. Everybody now seemed to know that something was going on, and that it involved a visitor from another world. There were certainly leaks aplenty, but there was so much absurd speculation as to overwhelm the tidbits of truth that occasionally surfaced.

The tabloids were there, the Roswell conspiracy theorists were there, the goofball cults were there, the exploitative hawkers of anything that could be sold were there. It was becoming a madhouse, stimulated and perpetuated by word-of-mouth, the Internet, speculation, outright whoppers, eyewitness accounts, swear-to-God sightings, bogus interviews, close encounters of every kind, alternative journalism, visions, apocalyptic

preaching, vicious innuendos, self-serving pronouncements, position papers, speculation, pseudo-punditry, stream-of-consciousness renderings, artistic statements, wishful thinking, street theater, lies, damned lies and statistics.

The mainstream press regarded the whole unsightly mess with a combination of horrified distastefulness and eager anticipation. In the absence of anything verifiable, the elite reporters and news organizations were pretty much confined to reporting on the smoke rather than the fire. The usual 'reliable sources' who actually were in on everything were deriving a certain perverse pleasure from their pet newshounds' discomfiture.

That some kind of alien being was involved was generally understood. What was not understood was why nobody who should be in the know would say anything about what kind of alien it was, where it was from, why it was here, how it got here, the purpose of its visit, the nature of the civilization it represented — and on and on and on. Instead, all they got for the usual off-the-record 'deep background' they felt they were entitled to was some kind of crap that sounded like it came from comic books.

They couldn't go to press or on the air with that.

Eventually, though, the NASA Press Office announced the time and date for a news conference to, "...announce a significant discovery with far-reaching implications for increasing our understanding of the Universe."

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There wasn't enough room in the Astrodome to accommodate all the frantic requests — demands — for seats. News pool rules had to be strictly enforced, but that didn't stop Clear Lake from being overrun with heavy equipment from every bureau and network on the planet. Comparisons with Super Bowl media hysteria soon proved to be inadequate.

Inevitably, one trail led to Mrs. J's little slice of Heaven. She was not amused.

"Vhat ze hell you are vantink? Askink you nosy snoops to be comink here nobody vas. Is beink no news for you. Get out! Go away! Shoo!"

They wandered into and around the compound in a gradually swelling mass, with a grimly determined Mrs. J all but waving a broom at them. They'd heard stories about the little blonde flying girl that was supposed to possibly live here, and they wouldn't go away until they tracked down the rumors.

The Russian residents were not pleased. Unpleasant memories stirred. They stayed inside. The Cubans disappeared. Eventually, Dinah showed up and started making obnoxious lawyer noises, which thinned out the crowd a little. Director Silvers put Alex and Sara up at JSC in the old Moon landing quarantine trailer. It was days before normalcy — of a sort — returned.

Everybody began counting down the hours to the press conference, wondering what their lives would be like in the aftermath.

Chapter Twenty-seven: Debut

The prime-time NASA press conference promised to draw more national and international attention than the agency had attracted since Apollo 11. The fever pitch of leak-fueled speculation guaranteed record ratings, and every network on the planet planned to be on the air live with what surely had the potential of being the most sensational news event imaginable. There was by now no doubt in anybody's minds that this was about contact with aliens.

Aliens!

Little green men. Bug-eyed monsters. E.T. on a bike. Space invaders. Inhuman beings. Almond-eyed grays. Benevolent gods. Denebian slime-devils. Cosmic avatars. Tentacled ammonia-breathers. Angelic messengers. Insectoidal nightmares. Pointy-eared Vulcans. Robotic warriors. Supermen. The Blob. Creatures of pure energy. Uncle Martin. Leather biker-babes from Venus. Ming the Merciless. The Coneheads.

Official government sources gave wink-and-a-nod confirmation to the basic substance of the upcoming NASA announcement, but refused to elaborate, neither confirming nor denying rumors, speculation or wild-assed guesses. Unofficial sources remained vague as well. Basically, no politician in the know had the slightest idea how this was going to play with the public, and none of them wanted to take responsibility for what might turn

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into panic in the streets. Let NASA do it, see what happened, then pick up the pieces. This is called 'leadership'.

The day finally arrived, one chosen carefully to have no conflicts with major sporting events or other distractions. The world's attention turned to Houston.

In the large auditorium at JSC, stage hands set up a podium to the right of center stage with a long, blue draped table to the left and a projection screen in the center, above and behind. Chairs and microphones were set for nine panelists, each place labelled with a name plate and equipped with paper and pencils for notes, water glasses and icy pitchers.

The section of writing-desk seats for the working press was flanked by open areas filled with technicians wielding every kind of camera, recorder and gadget imaginable, boom microphones waving like a sea of metal reeds above them, straining toward the brightly lit stage. Cables crawled in an unruly sprawl, ready to snare the feet of the unwary. Lights winked and glared. Bag-encumbered still photographers sat cross-legged on the floor in the wide aisle in front of the stage, carefully measuring and remeasuring focus and exposure, impatient fingers twitching on well-worn shutter releases.

As each representative of the various media networks, syndicates and publishing empires entered, they were given a press kit and led to their assigned seats. A few of them were fussed over by attendant techs who

scurried to make necessary connections and insure that their hair was crisply perfect. There were no stringers or local bureau reporters in this crowd — the biggies were here in person, and each one of them was laying to be the one who made everyone else's news with the killer question that defined a story. None of them had a clue as to what it might be.

The gallery of VIPs, NASA bureaucrats and scientists filled the theater seating in the back. Alex's influence only managed to get seats for Dinah, Jimmie and Lanna. He gave up his own seat to Mrs. J and claimed a stool in the wings behind the curtain, just outside the green room door. He was wearing his *'It's OK, I'm with the Band'* t-shirt and had a broken Clear-Com around his neck and a clipboard so that he would look like a proper stagehand. A battered lighting tree on a pole the network pool guys had brought in — over-extended and top-heavy with too many Par cans — was perched precariously behind the edge of the curtain, surrounded by a tangled pile of thick electrical cables around its weighted base. It provided perfect cover with an excellent view. He was happier this way and nobody bothered him (Silvers had seen to that).

About fifteen minutes before showtime, Steve Astin amiably wandered into the humming melee of the fourth estate, greeting everyone easily and familiarly, making small talk and shaking hands all around. He ignored the occasional preemptive questions from the inevitably impatient, and casually tossed out a carefully chosen joke

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or two to lighten the mood. Before climbing up on stage, he made the rounds of the cameramen, engineers and crewmen, slapping hands and calling most of them by name.

With five minutes left before airtime, he took his place as Master of Ceremonies behind the podium mic. The restrained clamor subsided.

His gaze swept the room as he began, "You're probably all wondering why we called this meeting." He paused as a slight but appreciative response chuckled around the auditorium.

"Well, we won't keep you in suspense much longer. You'll note in your press packets that a great deal of supplementary material will be released simultaneously beginning at midnight, Houston time, on the Internet and through the usual peer-reviewed channels for later publication in the journals. I want you to note that everything prepared to date by this project's scientific team is in the nature of very preliminary reports. This whole effort was literally thrown together at a moment's notice on an essentially volunteer basis and is not yet part of any appropriated program or mission."

He paused for a moment. "I know there are going to be a lot of questions about what some of you may perceive as unnecessary secrecy, withholding information in the public interest from the American people until we felt like having a press conference. Believe me, this briefing tonight is the earliest possible time we could

announce what little we have learned to date. Anything we could have released before now would have been completely premature — perhaps even irresponsible. I hope each of you can communicate some appreciation of why it was necessary to delay full disclosure of what you are about to learn until we had a chance to have some idea of what we were dealing with ourselves."

He motioned to the right side of the stage where Alex was lurking. The panelists filed out of the green room and quickly took their seats. The parade o' docs was expected, but Sara's appearance caused a none-too-subtle murmur to swell through the room. She was wearing her blue NASA flight coveralls with the 'Susan P' nametag and not trying very hard to look serious. She took her place at the far end.

Who's the girl? whispered through the press corps and echoed through watching newsrooms everywhere. *Some kind of kid genius?* some wondered. *Nah, lookit the way she's dressed,* said others. *No way she's an astronaut,* a few observed. *Think she found something?* was another guess. *Maybe she's a channeler,* opined some others. *One of the SETI volunteers,* seemed to be a reasonable theory. *Maybe it's the Flying Girl...*

In Norfolk, Virginia, a whole shipload of watching sailors let out a gang-whoop of recognition. In a bar ashore, a certain Marine gunnery sergeant peered hazily at the TV, shaking his head, his drink forgotten.

Astin outlined the sequence of events. "I will

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introduce NASA Director Dan Silvers first. After his opening remarks, each of the representatives of our scientific team will give a brief presentation. We'll conclude with a limited — *limited* — question-and-answer session. I know that it won't be enough time tonight, but there will be quite a lot of information available to you after this is over. You'll have other chances to follow up when you have caught up on your reading and know more — and *we* know more."

The stage manager held up his hand. Astin nodded at him and then leaned over the podium, grinning down at the assembled reporters. "I know I don't have to tell you this, but I'm going to anyway. Y'all behave y'selves, heah?" he said, in perfectly affected Texian English.

There was brief laughter. He was so good at this.

"In five," said the stage manager, "four, three..."

Nothing happened for a full minute while anchors around the world announced the preemption of regularly scheduled programs for a special presentation from Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas.

On cue, Astin began, "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, my name is Steve Astin. On behalf of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and the United States of America, I'd like to welcome our distinguished guests, members of the media and our viewing audience. I am honored to be your host and moderator for this brief presentation. NASA Director Dan Silvers will make an opening statement."

Astin sat down while Silvers strode onto the stage and planted himself behind the podium.

"From the moment mankind realized that there were other worlds than this one, the cradle of our species," Silvers began, "we have, in our literature and in our imaginations, contemplated the eventual possibility of someday visiting these worlds and meeting their inhabitants — or of receiving a visitation ourselves. For if we have begun to accomplish the ancient dream of being able to leave this island Earth and conquer the vast distances of space, then it would seem to be a certainty that there must be other intelligent life on distant planets who can do the same. Surely, some civilizations must exist that mastered starfaring science and technology long before our earliest ancestors first turned their wondering gaze upon the heavens."

Silvers continued, "The heart of the space program has always been a search for other life, for other habitats that can support life, for the understanding of how life interacts with the universe, for discovering the means of transporting the life of our birth planet to new worlds. Our robotic missions to Mars always asked the questions, 'Is there life here? Could there have been life here in ages past? Could life survive here in a possibly terraformed future?' Hubble peers into distant nebulae to look for the elements that can support life and watches the birth of new stars, surrounded by dusty disks of matter that may coalesce into new Earths where life may begin anew.

SETI — the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence — turns the attention of a worldwide network of listeners, professionals and amateurs alike, whose myriad computers sift through a cosmos full of static, noise and the 'Music of the Spheres' in search of signals of intelligence. Our far-flung probes leave our solar system carrying messages, images and sounds from all the peoples of Earth to those who may in some distant corner of the universe know that we send our greetings."

He paused for a moment to emphasize his next statement, then spoke very deliberately.

"Four months ago, this agency received an answer to the age-old question of whether there actually is intelligent life on other worlds — an answer, as you will learn, that raises a great many other questions. We quickly assembled a scientific team to conduct a preliminary examination that has *confirmed* — beyond any shadow of doubt — the authenticity of the existence on our planet..." he paused for effect, "Of an artifact... Created by a technologically advanced... Extraterrestrial civilization."

Silvers knew that would require translation, but he wanted to be precise.

He went on, "This artifact was deliberately crafted to superficially resemble a human being in appearance and communicate with us in our own languages."

Silvers could see the eyes of many of the reporters flicking two-by-two in Sara's direction. *They're not so*

dumb, he thought.

"Furthermore, the artifact was endowed with a highly advanced artificial intelligence — *and personality* — that is to all extents and purposes indistinguishable from that of any normal human being. So much so that it is inappropriate to refer to this artifact or address it by anything other than — *her* — chosen name."

"Would you mind standing up, Susan, so everyone can have a look at you?" he beckoned. Sara bounced to her feet, smiling brightly as the film cameras whirled and clicked a mechanical symphony.

Silvers introduced her. "Miss Susan P is the de facto representative of an extraterrestrial civilization that created her and sent her to our world. I'm sure you will discover, as we have, that she is a charming young lady, whatever her origins. It has been a pleasure for all of us to work closely with her these past few all-too-short months. Susan?"

Silvers moved to the side as she made her way to the podium. Rather than adjust the mic down to her height, Sara simply rose about eight inches off the stage, as if — as far as anyone in the audience could tell — she had stepped up on a short riser. She just wanted to avoid the obnoxious amplified grinding noise the gooseneck made when it was moved. From his vantage point in the wings, Alex smiled to himself, hoping she'd remember to 'step down' when she was finished. Maybe Susan never forgot anything, but Sara sometimes had to be told to come in

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out of the rain.

When the susurrations of rustling and whispering noises died down, she put on her sternest expression and intoned into the microphone, "People of Earth..." The echoes reverberated through the auditorium.

She stopped for a moment, then broke out in silvery, childlike laughter. "Boy, did that sound silly!" she said, and laughed again.

The audience, at first taken aback, soon joined her. The rising tension produced by Silvers' speech was completely forgotten.

She began again, unselfconscious and totally at ease. "I thought about making some kinda really boring statement or whatever, but finally decided that it wouldn't be too cool. I just want you to know that I'm not here on any kind of weird mission or anything. Mostly, I just want to get to know what your really beautiful planet is like and try to meet as many people as possible. I hope I make a lot more friends and maybe have a chance to help out whenever I can."

"I hate to say this," she admitted, "but there's a lot of stuff I don't know, like where I came from or who built me and sent me here. I'm just glad that they did. Whoever they were pretty much just dropped me off like I was a foundling, except that they found a good home for me. But I didn't really know anything, 'cause I was like brand new and didn't wake up 'till after I got here. I guess they didn't want me to know too much so that I wouldn't mess

things up, y'know, like violating some kinda 'Prime Directive'. So I haven't really been all that much help as far as being able to tell anyone anything about my home planet. Sorry about that."

"Anyway, there's really not a whole lot I can tell you right now. As far as I'm concerned, this meeting is more for the scientists to tell you what *they* found out. They're the ones who really did all the work, so I'm gonna turn you back over to them. I'll talk to you later some time. Nice meeting you. Bye."

Without further ado, she turned and began to walk off the stage, waving cheerfully at the cameras — sure enough, still eight inches off the floor. A little detail that nobody missed.

Too late, Alex waved his arms to try to get her attention, slipping off of his perch on the stool. The clipboard fell from his lap and tangled his feet, causing him to stumble into the pile of wiring, which propelled him heavily into the lighting tree. Trailing cables, Alex and the disintegrating collection of light fixtures hurtled onto the stage straight at Silvers, who was waiting to escort Sara to the green room.

Deftly, moving almost too fast to follow, Sara caught the end of the pole inches from Silvers' head with one hand, and with the other, neatly juggled the loose cans to a relatively safe landing on the stage. Flicking her wrist slightly, she raised the far end of the pole off the floor, dumping Alex from the base just before a severed wire

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arced across it, showering sparks. It made a great picture.

She quickly restored the now-useless lighting tree to its original position, helped Alex to his feet, and disappeared into the green room with Silvers. The whole impromptu show hadn't lasted fifteen seconds. For a moment, the audience was stunned.

Then, like a single organism, the pack of newshounds leaped to their feet. The biggest quarry they had ever encountered was getting away from them. Just like that. They were simultaneously dazed and frantic. They milled and clamored, gesticulating furiously.

"Wait..."

"No..."

"Come back..."

"Miss, uh..."

"Director Silvers..."

"Colonel Astin..."

"What about..."

"A statement..."

"A question..."

"The public..."

"The audience..."

"Our readers..."

"You can't..."

"But..."

"This is..."

"Ridiculous..."

"An outrage..."

"Impossible..."

Oh, the humanity.

Astin was as surprised as everybody else. All he could do was take his place behind the podium and calmly wait for the tumult to subside. Gradually, the shouts faded to grumbles and — trying not to look embarrassed at their unprofessional outburst — the ladies and gentlemen of the press took their seats. Their thoughts were black.

What the hell just happened? An alien. We just saw a fucking alien. For what, two minutes? Was she walking on air? Is this some kind of trick? Jeez, she handled that damned light pole like a toothpick. And is she fast, or what? Then she just walks away. Not one goddamned question. And now we're stuck with a bunch of fucking chromedomes.

Astin decided that the rest of the show would go as planned and cleared his throat politely. They glared at him. He smiled slightly and introduced the first panelist as if nothing had happened. As if they were here to discuss an interesting sample brought back from somewhere in space.

Dr. Uwuwu (pronounced 'ooh-YOU-woo'), a chemist, addressed what they had learned — or guessed — about her physical composition. Excerpts: "It was immediately obvious that she was composed of some extremely dense material outside our experience... It proved to be impossible to obtain any kind of sample for analysis, and conventional methodologies such as spectroscopy and

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reagent tests, and even x-rays, were useless... We were able to obtain useful imagery and data from a scanning electron microscope, which — as you can see in the next slide — shows a very complex topography at a sub-molecular level, which almost certainly extends to even finer reticulations going down to sub-atomic scales... Integral 'software' management of the arrangements of these folds produces the appearance of surface coloration and texture... Though we were unable to peer inside her, seismic studies indicate that she is essentially hollow, comprised of an extremely thin, crumpled membrane of possibly degenerate material that, if 'smoothed out', might resemble an approximately kilometer-wide 'bubble'."

To their credit, most of the reporters followed this and were intrigued in spite of themselves. They got the essential point — that she only *looked* human and was made of something with which NASA's scientists were completely unfamiliar. Something definitely not of this Earth. *But why?* their instincts screamed.

Dr. Best, the physicist, showed her 'rubber-sheet-and-bowling-ball' program on the overhead screen and talked about very, very large masses carefully counterbalanced between opposing forces of gravity and antigravity. Her excerpts: "We do not yet understand the mechanism for her being able to control and manipulate the relationship between these two forces... Her effect on satellites indicates a rest mass equivalent to billions — thousands of millions — of tons... Similarly, her power source is,

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for now, presumed to involve nuclear — as opposed to chemical — processes of an unknown type... Simply knowing that such an effect is possible will inform our research."

They understood this, too. Levitation. And power. *Whoa...*

Dr. Wong was a computer scientist. His excerpts: "As biological organisms have as their basic unit of construction the protoplasmic cell, so too does it appear that she has as a basis at least the analog of nanomolecular computing units linked together in a massively parallel matrix... This would indicate that she employs something like quantum gates, or even something more exotic... It appears to be trans-binary... Essentially, this would be the equivalent of a very large mountain of Pentium-zillion chips running under a millionth-generation operating system with practically unlimited RAM."

The somewhat ditzy girl was a *computer*? Did that make her some kind of android? (Or, technically, gynoid...)

Dr Azimov was a roboticist. Excerpts included: "This gives her the capacity to very precisely control her physical attributes to simulate normal movement, emit photons with incredible accuracy and speed, and manage her suite of electromagnetic sensing and communication capabilities at almost countless simultaneous frequencies... These AI virtual agents are like internal

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clones, numbering potentially in the millions, and each capable of executing highly sophisticated semi-autonomous routines under a sophisticated hierarchical management structure."

Photon emission? *Laser beams*? What electromagnetic sensing and communications capabilities? *Radar*? *Radio*? Millions of *clones*?

Dr. Taumbaugh was an astronomer. Excerpts: "We only regard such materials as exotic because of their scarcity on Earth... The total mass of such highly dense degenerate matter in the universe far exceeds that of the relatively insignificant dregs of stellar formation — rocky planets... The physical properties of the bulk of the matter that makes up the cosmos are completely unknown... Therefore, we have not the slightest clue as to her point of origin... Since we have been able to learn nothing about them, we have come to refer to the unknown entities responsible for her manufacture as *Cryptoaliens*."

Major disappointment. Why would mysterious 'Cryptoaliens' just drop her off without the slightest hint of who they were, where they came from or why they did it. *It doesn't make sense...*

Dr. Zagan's specialty was cosmology. His excerpts: "Out of the uncounted billions and billions of stars in this galaxy — which is itself only one of billions — the independent development of life that we now know is a certainty must have been repeated countless times

throughout the billions of years since its formation following the Big Bang... Even allowing for the seeding of the interstellar medium with heavy elements by countless supernovae, the first great starfaring civilization may have matured billions of years before our own star was born... We have been provided with a glimpse of the almost unlimited potential that intelligence can eventually master."

Is that it? This *girl* is an just an example of what is *possible*? Without instructions? So that we humans can figure it out for ourselves? *What good is that*? Maybe this'll just show us how stupid we are.

Dr. Belloes discussed her psychological makeup. His excerpts: "Obviously, she is not a biological organism, which means she does not have the chemical and hormonal variations that influence our own day-to-day behavior, and furthermore, lacks the animal drives which compel us to satisfy physical needs and urges... She has been provided with what amounts to programming that simulates these processes... I do not believe it is possible for a psychological practitioner who is unaware of her unusual physical attributes to determine that she is, indeed, the product of an alien manufacturing process... She exhibits remarkable stability — evidently, her mental design is as indestructable as her physical design... It will be interesting to see if her personality matures — especially as her physical body evidently does not... The only appropriate characterization I can give is that I

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consider her to be... A human being."

A human being. *Made*, for Christ's sake, *who-knows-where* by *who-knows-what* for *who-knows-why*?

Astin wrapped it up. "So you can see that we've been busy. I think it's appropriate for NASA to focus on what the agency does best, which is deal with science and technology. That's what we've done — and we are not even close to being finished. The evaluation of the data already gathered will consume countless man-hours and it would appear that we have only scratched the surface. Our presentation today was as brief as we could possibly make it and is supplemented in much greater detail by the written material that will be released at midnight."

He looked directly and pointedly at the reporters below him. "I hope you can appreciate that this kind of background is necessary in order to understand the phenomenon that the public will want you to deal with. Susan — as she prefers to be called — will be available at a later date. When she is, you'll know a lot more about her than we did a few months ago."

He opened it up for questions. It was like dynamiting a dam. Everything came rushing out at once.

"How long has NASA been supressing evidence of alien spaceships?"

"How many more of these aliens are presently on our planet?"

"Have aliens infiltrated the highest levels of our government?"

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"Is she dangerously radioactive?"

"What kind of fuel does she require?"

"Can she change her shape?"

"Can she read our minds?"

"Will she reproduce?"

"What does the 'P' stand for?"

"Where was she discovered?"

"How long has she been on our planet?"

"Will she meet the President?"

"Will she address the U.N.?"

"Where does she live?"

"How can she be contacted?"

"Does she have an agent?"

"When will the American people learn the truth about Roswell?"

"Is she a scout for a possible invasion?"

"Will there be an immediate follow-up press conference?"

"Is she dangerous?"

"Could she explode?"

"Is she in contact with others of her kind?"

"When will we see her again?"

"Is she still in the building?"

"Why can't she come out?"

"What are you hiding?"

Sighing, Astin looked at his watch. When the torrent had run its course, he said, "How about if we start with a question for Dr. Uwuwu."

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There was a long silence.

"Something about chemistry might be appropriate," he prompted.

There was a shuffling of program notes. Finally, a correspondent in the first row raised his hand.

"Ah, yes. Mr. Bitzer."

Steve Astin earned his salary that night.

Chapter Twenty-eight: Singapore

After the show, there was a party over at Area 52 for the remaining crew of scientists, technicians and other members of the team, complete with a cake and plenty of booze. A significant number of the distinguished academic ladies and gentlemen wasted no time finding the bottoms of the bottles, leading some to wind up getting a little misty over the project coming to a conclusion (or at least a transition), and others to eventually pretty much come to a conclusion themselves, sprawled snoring under various pieces of esoteric apparatus. Sara cheerfully made the rounds of everybody there, while Alex — banged up a little from his fall — was the butt of a lot of good-natured ribbing, which he had to accept gracefully.

Susan was automatically monitoring the airwaves so that Sara could select a few choice replays to display on the walls for everyone to see. Though there were sound bites here and there of everyone on the panel (who then each took bows accepting the inevitable heckling from their buddies), the news programs tended to focus on the accident, usually in slow motion. Journalistic reaction and commentary ranged from the incredulous to the ridiculous. Every one of the scientists was systematically misquoted, misinterpreted and generally dismissed by reporters coming to wildly varying conclusions about what they had said. The talking heads contradicted each other and themselves, searching for a handle on the story

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for which the press conference had only served as a tantalizing morsel.

Alex, identified only as a stagehand, was not clearly recognizable in any of the clips — all of the closeups had reflexively zoomed in on Sara. She was clearly levitating, showed more than a hint of casual strength, was unfazed by the arcing AC and had displayed preternatural quickness. It was a lot more than Alex, certainly, had wanted to show in this first exposure to the public. Silvers, who had insisted on making a dignified presentation, was more than a little suspicious of how things had turned out, though he appreciated Sara saving him from a nasty concussion — which wouldn't have been necessary for her to do in the first place if he had allowed Security to chase Alex out of the hiding place he had been so intent on occupying for 'mysterious' reasons. Silvers didn't understand musicians — Alex regarded any audience as 'them', and knew he didn't belong there.

About the time some of the more boisterous and well-lubricated partiers started singing, Sara sat down with Alex and Jesel Assumcion, the microelectronics engineer from Brazil — one of the bright fellows (the other being Conan Rhodes) who had figured out enough about Sara's existence to wangle their way onto the team. They seemed to getting along famously, oblivious to the rest of the noise, sitting in the darkest corner of the conference room.

Jesel rightly assumed that there was no need to fill Sara in on their conversation so far, so he just came out

with it.

"So, what are you going to do?"

"You mean," she confirmed, "after meeting with the President next week."

Jesel nodded. "I am sure you must have given a lot of thought as to what kind of role you will play in human society. I do not believe that you will turn your back on people in great need, so you must surely take an active part. Do you understand how this will change everything?"

Sara fidgeted uncomfortably. "I don't really know. I don't think I should interfere with people's lives or do anything that would, like, change history or anything. I sorta think that trying to help out too much might do more harm than good."

Jesel smiled. "Like the proverb, 'Give a man a fish and you will feed him for a day; let him catch his own fish and he will feed himself for a lifetime.' There are many poor people in the world, wanting of fish. Perhaps they should not be deprived of the opportunity to overcome their poverty. But what about those who live in a society where they are neither given fish nor allowed to fish? Ours is a world in which oppression can be a greater catastrophe than errant nature. If you have the power, will you also have the wisdom to know how and when to act?"

"I don't know," she said somberly. "Would it be wise of me to deprive oppressed people of a revolution? I think

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humans should solve human problems. It shouldn't be for me to decide."

"Great power can make some leaders inhuman," he said. "Great lies can paralyze justice. What would you have made of the Holocaust? — for it could not have been hidden from you. Would you have confined yourself to rescuing cats in the face of such evil?"

"No," she answered, "How could I?"

"And war itself," he went on, "is a human problem, something to be decided between humans. Some have profound consequences, such as the North American Revolution. Should you be the one to decide historical issues?"

"I don't think so," she replied. "But things happen in wars that are disasters, and — like you said — I couldn't turn my back on people in great need. Would it be better for me to come to the aid of the victims of a bomb? — or make sure the bomb was never dropped on people in the first place. I think if any leader decided to drop a nuke on some city... Well, I would have to do something to try to prevent it if I could, or at least hold him responsible and make sure that nobody else would want to do that again."

Jesel smiled at her. "Perhaps there you have the beginnings of an answer. It took the slow and brutal workings of a war to bring Hitler and his henchmen to an end of their evil. You could not have been prevented from confronting him and the rest of the world with the facts about such a 'Final Solution'. You can go into the bunkers

and bring forth the monsters, and you can be the clear, impartial voice of the truth. We humans must then decide what to do."

"Ah," she frowned, "but even *that* is still some pretty major intervention, and it could make humans dependent on me. Do you really think it would be a good idea for me to be at the center of human history from now on?"

He shrugged. "For whatever reason — and you profess not to know — you are here. And you are what you are. The alternative is to turn your back on what you are. To unmake yourself."

"Maybe..." she began. "Maybe that's something that humans should decide, too."

"Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States."

Everybody applauded as he strode in, flanked by the Vice-president and Secretary of State, with the usual Praetorians, aides and other hangers-on in his wake.

It was to be a brief White House formal ceremony, followed immediately by a lengthy and comprehensive question-and-answer session with the alien in the adjacent Press Room. Most of the reporters present had been in Houston a week earlier and had been studiously cramming. They were ready to pounce this time, practically slathering in anticipation.

Sara was stationed behind and to one side of the podium in the accustomed spot where foreign dignitaries

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usually stood. She was in her uniform, with the red-sheened black cape draped completely around her, falling in sweeping folds from shoulder to floor as befitted the solemnity of the occasion. She looked like a golden-haired princess from a fairy tale. Her emblem was still hidden. That would be revealed later.

The Pres, in his usual slick manner, improvised all the right-sounding phrases, with the Veep beside him nodding vigorously in slavish affirmation.

"As we look to the stars for our children's future... A historic moment for the peoples of our worlds... The peaceful union of our cultures... Evil Republicans... A spirit of cooperation... Blah, blah, blah..."

Finally, "And so, on the behalf of the United States of America and all humankind, I welcome you to our nation, to our planet — and into our hearts."

Then, the photo op, as the Chief Executive shook Sara's hand, protruding from the folds of her garment. Through the partial opening, his eyes glanced down at the symbol on her chest and widened appreciatively — though he had been briefed as to what to expect. As they turned to face the cameras, he put his arm around her shoulders in a spirit of, uh, interplanetary fellowship, turning his head and leaning down slightly to whisper some inaudible words of greeting or encouragement.

Sara appeared to stiffen slightly, her eyes glazing over as if she was no longer paying attention to what was happening around her. There was an awkward pause, then

she slipped the President's embrace, drawing her concealing cape more tightly around her, and stepped to the podium microphone.

"I have to go," she said. Before anyone could react, she retreated through the wide open French doors behind the podium, hurried through the Formal Dining Room, dodged past the startled Marine guard at the door, and disappeared into the night as Secret Service men scrambled anxiously in her wake.

The President turned to the stunned reporters, looked defensively at them — eyebrows raised in an air of offended innocence — and said, "What...?"

Minutes later, on the other side of the world, it was early morning. Sara slowed her headlong rush as she re-entered the atmosphere, not wanting to add her own shock waves to the effects of the earth-bound ones that had shattered the city below. And, she needed a little time to survey the damage and prioritize her efforts. The sight appalled her.

Singapore lay before her, broken and burning. The island nation had been one of the shining beacons of economic development in Asia, emerging from what had been a third-world colonial outpost only decades earlier to become a gleaming city of steel and glass, bouyed by heady capitalist investment coupled to disciplined hard work.

New hope had replaced old masters. Where once

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there had been a dingy tangle of shantytowns and tenements filled with sweaty masses, proud skyscrapers had arisen surrounded by all the accouterments of the modern urban landscape. It had stood as a testament to the ability of industriousness to rise above circumstances. It stood no more.

As earthquakes go, it hadn't been a particularly powerful one, but there had been no history of seismic activity in the region and none had been expected. Building codes never acknowledged the possibility, so few structures were designed to withstand tremors. Though exemplary in every respect, civil preparedness for fires and the normal types of catastrophes did not foresee the possibility of *thousands* of conflagrations — with no water pressure, streets impassably choked by debris, power gone, communications scrambled, equipment destroyed, key personnel missing, injured or even dead, and unknown scores of people trapped in fallen buildings among even greater numbers who had been crushed in the first minute. Chaos had begotten chaos — for a few brief, critical moments, panic loomed.

Changi Airport on the east side of the island had been one of the cleanest and most modern on Earth, but it had been built on 'reclaimed' land whose soil had partly liquified as the seismic waves passed through it. Parts of the airport were now under water, and huge blocks of runway were tilted at odd angles. A jumbo jet had nearly completed its take-off roll when a chunk of pavement

heaved up in front of it and sheared off the undercarriage. Another jagged block had hooked an engine, tearing it from the wing, rupturing the wing's fuel tank and spinning the entire plane around. Burning fuel — ignited by sparks — almost completely surrounded the plane where it eventually came to rest. Soon, it was utterly hidden from view by thick clouds of black smoke.

Flight attendants deployed the inflatable escape slides, but they were quickly consumed by the flames. They slammed the doors, but emergency hatches had been opened by frantic passengers seeking escape. The few who made it out perished, and deadly fumes began to pour through the openings, making the cabin temperature soar and visibility plummet. The only relief was from the dangling oxygen masks. Some passengers never found them, others yanked them loose in their panic. They died. The rest would soon either run out of air or roast. All they could do was wait for airport emergency vehicles and pray. They didn't know that the fire trucks were having their own problems, finding it almost impossible to cross the tortured landscape and fingers of encroaching ocean.

By the time Sara arrived, burning fuel flowing across the uneven ground had pooled under the belly of the plane, the flames pouring through tears and rips, heating the center fuel tank's contents to near the boiling point. She sank into the pavement, using her body to dig a trench to draw most of the fuel away from the plane. Then she forced her way into the cargo compartment to cool the

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tank with her cold, nitrogenous breath. As soon as the danger of explosion had passed, she darted outside to slice both wings off with quick, intense beams of concentrated energy, then pushed the body of the plane out of the inferno. She ripped the top of the fuselage open like the lid of a sardine can, releasing the hot, foul smoke and flooding the half-dead survivors with blessed relief.

But she couldn't stay and finish the rescue. She had to leave the rest to the struggling crew — even though it meant some would not survive as a result. It was the best she could do quickly. Another, more serious threat forced her to leave the island immediately.

Tsunami.

Susan had analyzed the patterns of pressure waves racing beneath the surrounding seas. Some would dissipate their energy in shallow waters and in the mazes of channels and islands that littered the area, but others would be reinforced and strengthened, and still others would be redirected and even reflected. There was nothing Sara could do to absorb or deflect their power. All she could do was scream.

And scream she did, racing to the spot of coast some distance away across a deeper stretch of ocean, where conditions conspired to produce the greatest effect and where an unsuspecting coastal city lay unprotected. She screamed at every frequency of every radio and TV station she could detect in the area, overriding every local broadcast with her warning in every local language.

Toomie Starks

"Tidal wave! Run for high ground! Drop everything and carry the helpless! Warning, warning, warning!"

Susan gave her a number: 7,401 people were in the wrong place at the wrong time and had less than a fifty-percent chance of survival. But there was time for most of them to move far enough away. As her message blared from countless speakers, the number began to change, quickly dropping below 7,000, then 6,000, followed by 5,000 and decreasing rapidly. It was still too many.

She turned up the power until even speakers in radios that were turned off began to take up her cry.

4,312.

Circuits overloaded and fried as metal everywhere responded to the force of her emissions and shook with sympathetic oscillations.

3,729.

Sparks flew from steel poles and danced across tin roofs, turning them into rattling loudspeakers.

2,766.

Dental fillings vibrated in sympathy and metal-framed windows blared her voice until they shattered.

2,245.

The whole coastline quivered and crackled until it seemed that the earth itself shouted at the now fleeing populace.

1,319.

"The water is coming! Run for your lives! Stop for nothing! Flee, flee, flee!"

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The number was below a thousand now and still dropping. There would be a few unlucky ones, and those who stubbornly refused to leave some place dearer to them than their own lives. A small township down the coast was well enough protected by a rocky headland, and another township in the other direction would only get its feet wet. The inhabitants of seaside businesses and houses in both directions shouted to each other as they moved inland, leaving few behind.

Ships far enough out at sea were relatively safe, since it was only where the wave piled up against the shallows that it was dangerous. One ferry with nearly three-hundred souls aboard was hugging the coast. Sara startled its captain, shouting at him through his windows of his peril. He swung the wheel to seaward and rang full throttle, but the ship responded too slowly.

Sara plunged under the stern and grabbed the rudder post. The sudden acceleration drove most of the passengers to the deck. The ship made frightful noises as it picked up speed, rushing toward deeper water. At thirty-eight knots, Sara could kreen the rivets nearing their shearing points and the steel plates beginning to buckle. She dared push no faster, though time was running out.

It was a close thing. The little ship suddenly rose on a great swell, crashing into the top of the wave as it was beginning to break from its towering upheaval in its race to the shore. But the vessel held together well enough to

sink slowly, giving the captain time to beach it. Sara streaked away as soon as the immediate danger had passed.

There were two other areas that were threatened, but without the urgency of the first. Standard local warnings sufficed now that the general alarm had been sounded. Soon Sara was racing back to the city.

She flew quickly over Sentosa Island, just offshore south of Singapore itself. It was essentially a Disneyesque amusement park with hotels, beaches, restaurants, and featuring a fifty-foot high flame-belching 'Merlin' — part sea-serpent, part cat — at the center of it all. The monorail running around the periphery had fallen down in places, and the cable that had once carried diners high over passing ships now swung from its twisted tower like Tarzan's vine. The rest of the place hadn't fared too badly, except that the huge glass tunnels that ran through the underwater gardens and gigantic aquariums had burst. A maintenance crew had been in them. The twenty-foot sharks that they had cared for were attending to their remains. There was little she could do.

She streaked over the East Coast Parkway on her way back to Changi Airport. Below her, the Strand that paralleled the seashore was packed with seafood restaurants, marinas, tennis clubs, bowling alleys, parking lots, barbeque stands and volleyball pits. Offshore was one of the largest natural anchorages in the world, where dozens and dozens of ocean-going cargo ships had been

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riding unconcernedly at anchor when the water unexpectedly ran out from under their keels. It had returned a short time later in a tremendous rush, driving the great ships into each other and up onto the sandy beaches like so many toys. Freight containers were scattered everywhere, bobbing in the water or carried inland. Many were crushed or ripped apart, adding their contents to the mass of debris. One stretch of beach was literally paved with hundreds of thousands of computer hard drives — ironically labelled 'Seagate'.

Many of the trees in the grassy parkland between the Strand and the beach had been swept away by the wall of water, but there had been surprisingly little loss of life — the beach and parkland had mostly been wide enough for the wave to dissipate much of its energy before washing across the Strand and the ECP. Sara didn't bother to slow down.

The jumbo jet's fuel was still burning, but those who were still alive would probably survive. All of the still-functioning airport emergency vehicles were now on the scene. Incoming air traffic had been diverted. With the causeways to Malaysia down and most of the docks destroyed, Singapore was cut off. Only helicopters and small boats could evacuate wounded or bring in supplies for the foreseeable future. Satisfied that there was nothing more she could do, Sara headed for downtown.

The famous Raffles Hotel was near the city center. Its colonial splendor had been renowned for — among other

things — its Long Bar, the place the Singapore Sling had been invented. It remained the most fashionable place to be seen — if you could afford one of the tiny rooms starting at \$500 a night. It had been only four stories high and had withstood the shaking quite well, but what was left of it was under what was left of the neighboring Westin Stanford Hotel. The 70-story edifice had been a very slender-looking skyscraper, but it, too, would have muddled through — except that an adjacent tower had toppled into it, sending the hotel spiraling to its destruction atop the Raffles. A few other surrounding buildings were strewn about the streets. Everything was on fire.

Sara's supply of nitrogen was sufficient to douse a house fire or two, but took too long to replenish to do any significant good. What was left after the jetliner incident would have to be carefully doled out for only the most extreme emergencies as her system worked at full speed to separate out and compress as much as possible from the relatively too-thin atmosphere. The only thing that would prevent the fires from linking up and creating a firestorm was lots and lots of bodies with lots and lots of hoses spraying lots and lots of water. All three items were in vanishingly short supply.

So what should she do first? Clear the streets. Make it possible for whatever equipment and manpower that *was* available to get to where it was needed. The quake had not damaged everything. Most places had been almost

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completely spared. The areas that had suffered damage — mostly where the tallest buildings were crowded together — were almost completely leveled. The rubble choking the streets in the devastated areas divided the city into irregular sections that were nearly cut off from each other. The whole city was threatened if the fires spread.

Utilizing whatever she could improvise into something she could use like a giant bulldozer blade, she powered as much crap as she could out of the main streets, carefully making sure not to bury people as she shouted her way clear. It actually didn't take Sara long to punch enough holes through the debris barriers to allow free passage to the worst areas. Once that happened, people became available. After all, nobody had a job to go to at the moment, and everybody could see the danger.

Expensive suit jackets came off, tools were produced, and thousands of workers, managers, clerks, technicians, students, bosses, the unemployed, bureaucrats, teachers, professionals, laborers and anyone else who could still walk swarmed into the stricken areas and went to work.

Women set up impromptu aid stations and kitchens or shuttled cars back and forth carrying supplies, workers, the wounded and the dead. Leaders emerged to take charge of impromptu damage control and rescue parties, coordinating with city officials and the police and fire departments. Industries with their own emergency equipment dispatched whatever they had wherever it was needed. Order was being restored to a population used to

discipline and hard work.

But there was still not enough water. The power was completely gone, most of the mains were ruptured, and there weren't nearly enough pumps surviving to make a difference.

Seawater would have to do. Sara streaked to the debris-littered anchorage and grabbed a couple of empty cargo containers with each hand — linking them together with her slender fingers through the oval support holes at the corners — forced them underwater to fill them and then rushed back to the center of town. The upended containers leaked, but they held together. She dropped off two of the first four near a roaring blaze and then dumped the contents of the other two on the middle of the fire. Her aerial bombardment was spectacular but inefficient, as well as dangerous to trapped victims. She saw that it would be the people on the ground who could do the most good. She rushed back to the anchorage to fetch more containers.

The men who had received the unexpected miracle had no time to ponder the mystery. Word spread quickly as more and more containers full of precious water showed up where they were needed most. Pumps were needed. If not pumps, then buckets. Hoses were scavenged from wrecked buildings and appropriated from whole ones. Yachts were relieved of bilge pumps, swimming pools were raided, car engines and portable generators were hooked up any way that would provide

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power.

Sara began to speak to the network of walkie-talkies, CB radios and police and fire units that were becoming coordinated into a coherent command organization.

"Hello everybody. This is Susan, your friendly neighborhood alien. I can deliver four shipping containers of water every couple of minutes or so. If I go any faster, they tend to fall apart. What's slowing me down is having to get a bunch of these things together. There's plenty of empties floating around, so if you can get some people in boats to round 'em up and pair them together and sink 'em about three-quarters of the way, that'll save a bunch of time. We can get a sort of assembly line going, know what I mean?"

There was a brief flurry of explanations around the network. They understood, and decided to be astonished later, when they had time. They were ready to grasp at any straw, especially one that could deliver water. Orders were given and a fleet of private boats filled up with volunteers to do as she asked. They even figured out a way to chain a dozen at a time to a girder, tripling her efficiency. It made enough of a difference to turn the corner. The fires began to subside.

Sara got back on the radio network. "This is Susan again. Let me know as soon as you have enough water to stay ahead of the fires. I can help with locating survivors and digging them out. There are twenty-seven people still alive under where the Raffles Hotel used to be. I can get

them."

She got calls from four more places for water-filled containers, and then they told her to go ahead.

The still-smoking wreckage was a treacherously slippery pile covered with wet ashes and mud. She yelled at some people in a relatively clear area to move and then started tossing steel beams and reinforced concrete into a big pile. She quickly burrowed her way down to the first survivor, flying her gently to the aid station nearby. Then she went back to work, delicately moving tons of rubble rapidly, but with great care — so as to reduce shifting as much as possible.

Unfortunately, there were many more corpses than there were survivors, and most of the latter were mangled and torn. Some would not make it. It was heart-rending work, but she soon had all twenty-seven. From the surrounding wreckage she pulled a score more. She began to systematically work her way through the city, sometimes just telling rescue workers where to look, other times telling them not to bother.

Marina Square hadn't had as much of a problem with fires, but it had been built on reclaimed land, which was particularly vulnerable to quake damage. The land itself had collapsed, and had been covered with 50-story buildings full of residences, hotels, and vertical shopping malls. The toll of human life was staggering. Sara could be heard sobbing as she went about her gruesome task.

Finally, she worked her way to Orchard Road,

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between Tanglin and Bras Basah. It had been the Rodeo Drive of Singapore, lined on both sides by ten- to twenty-story buildings housing thousands of upscale stores. Singapore's 'beautiful people' had strolled under hundreds of thousands of blue and white lights hung in delicate strings from the trees, and blue and red garlands of lights above the streets. At the intersection with Scott Road, the four-story Millenium Clock had wound down the year in every time zone.

Now, the street was covered in too many places with the rubble of collapsed buildings and the glistening shards of broken lights. The clock had stopped.

But far worse was far below. Deep beneath the street, the MRT subway ran. Incredibly sturdy, it had been built to serve as a nuclear bomb shelter if necessary, supposedly an impregnable fortress of civil defense. It had been cracked in places, but mostly held together — though the shaking had caused some hurtling trains to derail in the sudden darkness. In most cases, the passengers picked their way to the next station.

In only one place had the tube failed, where it ran through a patch of the infamous reclaimed land. Bereft of proper support, a whole, long section of tube crumbled in a chain reaction, burying a derailed train as the loosened soil poured through the gaps. The sturdy cars kept the commuters packed into them from immediate harm, but they were trapped, sightless, in communal coffins, waiting for rescue from above or the oxygen to run out.

Dispatchers knew their train was the last to be accounted for. They knew approximately where it should have come to a stop when the power failed. They soon knew that rescue workers did not dare even come close to where they might be dug out — if anyone was still alive — for fear of further collapse in that section. Eventually, they had to contact Susan. She came as soon as she could.

Sara told them exactly how many were buried alive. She queried the radio network about where she could get some sturdy and fairly wide steel pipe, then fetched it. Sinking through the street and into the ground, she dragged the pipes down until she could carefully punch through the remaining subway wall — which was still supporting the overburden — and then through the roofs of the cars. She ran two tubes to each car, front and back, and as soon as she cleared them, fans were rigged above to force air through. Flashlights were appropriated and dropped to the thankful passengers, followed by water bottles. Then ropes were lowered and the slow process of hauling them out began. Sara removed the badly injured first by pushing them up the tubes. It looked for a while as if one obese American tourist would have to stay below until he lost some weight, but a little vegetable oil and a push from Sara did the trick.

The day waned, but the work did not. Sara toiled through the night, trying to be everywhere at once. She cleared more debris, carried more water, rescued more trapped people. Then the authorities asked her to carry

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containers of desperately needed fresh water and medicine in from the mainland. She restrung the high-tension wires that carried electricity from Maylasia. She helped clear a few docks that could be salvaged quickly and pushed sunken ships to deeper water where they wouldn't block the channels. Other ships she pushed from the East Coast Parkway.

Eventually, the jobs that were left were best done by the the people themselves. Sara could do little to combat the spread of disease, or heal the wounded, or find shelter for the thousands of homeless. By the third day, the city was already starting to clean itself up and rebuild. She had no doubt that they would emerge stronger than before — and with some drastically revised building codes.

There was no ceremony when she finally took her leave. Everybody was too exhausted, and Sara herself was numbed by the seemingly unending tragedies she'd witnessed.

Gradually, the rest of the world learned the details of the catastrophe, the news shows replaying scenes videotaped by Singaporeans whose ubiquitous camcorders were there to record the alien angel as she performed wonderous deeds in her strangely familiar costume.

Chapter Twenty-nine: Interview

Winter was little more than an annoyance to the Big Apple. Snow was pushed aside, the subways ran as usual, city services were rescheduled or worked around, some schools were (thankfully, to be sure) closed occasionally, radiators rang with demands for more heat, the bars were fuller and noisier, gridlock worsened, and the general tenor of peoples' complaints changed — as usual — with the season.

But in the City That Never Sleeps, work went on despite the temporary inconvenience of a major snowstorm. Especially on the forty-fourth floor of the old Daily Planet building, housing what was once a great metropolitan newspaper, now successfully metamorphosed into an international multimedia cable news conglomerate. They had deadlines.

And Louise Layne had a problem. She always had a problem, and it was always the same: her boss, the star of the show she produced that bore his name — 'Deep Inside with Ken Clark'.

In a way, she was the victim of her own success. He'd always somehow managed to be the interviewer who landed the Big One — the newsmaker of the moment, the happening celebrity, the head of state or captain of industry, the lucky or unfortunate wretch who commanded the attention of the world for a brief moment of immortality. His insightful probing put a human face

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on the events the world cared about. His easy familiarity with the powerful and famous bridged social and cultural chasms between the unapproachable and the unwashed.

Only — it wasn't necessarily Ken Clark who did the considerable dirty work involved in bullying, bribing, cajoling, threatening, pleading, stampeding, blackmailing, groveling or outright lying to get these self-important bozos in line to kiss his feet. He wasn't the one who did the research needed to come up with the 'facts' behind the 'insightful probing' that let his subjects spin their stories just the way they wanted in order to further their own agendas. And his 'easy familiarity' was born of only one thing — a narcissistic preoccupation with his own bloated ego that brooked no rival to his overweening self-importance.

So it was up to Louise to regularly accomplish the impossible, scoop the competition and set him up for another triumph. Which, for the most part, she had been able to do. She was good, after all. Tough and persistent, savvy and smart. Years of effort on her part had made it so that an appearance with her boss *defined* importance in the perceptions of superstars and Joe Sixpack alike.

But this... This was maybe too much. Everyone — *everyone* — was focused on one incredible newsmaker.

The alien.

Whoever nailed down the elusive little girl with the 'S' on her chest was going to win the biggest prize possible. Terms like 'interview of the century' were

woefully inadequate to describe such an event.

Louise stared morosely at the swirling storm in the evening gloom outside her nearly frosted-over office window. Try as she might, she couldn't come up with an angle that was any better than anyone else's. The little brat just wasn't part of the interconnected network of associations and acquaintances that encompassed 'normal' movie stars, politicians, thinkers and doers. There were no favors to call in, no dirty laundry that she could discover, no discernable prejudices or worthy causes she could exploit, and the creature didn't even appear to have an agent. It was very frustrating.

Her boss summoned her into his inner sanctum. She scurried in obediently. His tall, impressive frame was leaning back comfortably in the big chair behind his desk, the trademark curl of jet-black hair dangling across his brow in a calculatedly insouciant manner. He was wearing his prop glasses, which meant he was currently portraying his 'professional newsman' character. Louise knew it was all part of a carefully crafted image that constituted his principal talent, one that had little to do with any kind of legitimate credentials. His whole purpose for being revolved around his looking and sounding authoritative, charming and — well — manly. His persona had nothing to do with being a mild-mannered reporter and everything to do with the perception — at least in his own mind — that he was some kind of journalistic superstud.

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"So, Louise," he greeted her, "Got me a date with the alien chick yet?"

"Working on it," she mumbled.

Ken looked impatient. "It's been — what — nearly a month since she was all over the news with that quake stuff in Tokyo..."

"Singapore," she corrected inaudibly.

"...and you still haven't even talked to her people yet. What's the holdup?"

"She doesn't appear to have any 'people'. At least, not the kinds of 'people' I usually deal with."

"Everybody has 'people'. I have 'people'..."

That would be me, thought Louise.

"...so get her 'people' to talk to my 'people'. How hard can it be?"

"Well, she has friends, and even a lawyer," Louise told him. "But they're not talking to anyone in the media. It's not just me..."

"I'm surprised at you, Louise. You've never had this kind of difficulty before."

How would you know? she thought.

"Show me what you've got so far," he commanded, beckoning her to come behind his desk.

She dropped a folder in front of him. Pictures spilled out, some taken at the NASA news conference, some grainy and ill-focused screen shots from amateur videos, and a few obvious surveillance-type paparazzi pix.

"There's quite a cast of characters surrounding her,"

she said, pointing to several of the photos. "Apparently, she lives with some old guy who evidently found her — and his girlfriend, a semi-notorious 'worthy cause' lawyer who used to work for Bruce Wayans."

Ken shuddered distastefully at Dinah's picture, an intimidating pose caught while she was snarling at the trespassing cameraman.

"The kid used to hang out with a bunch of skaters, but they basically have the attention span of trout, with a vocabulary to match. They're no help."

She went on. "There's a bunch of retired Russian expat geezers at the apartments where she lives, and they know a lot about her, but they're not even talking to the KGB, let alone any newspeople. Then there's this computer geek..."

Ken gave an appreciative whistle at Jimmie's picture. Lanna was in the same shot, standing next to him.

"Who's the, uh, young lady with him," he asked.

Louise rolled her eyes heavenward. "That would be Mrs. Oldsen, Jimmie Oldsen's *wife*. They own and operate Exocybernautics, which is a NASA contractor that..."

"You know," he interrupted, "There's always a weak link that can be exploited to get our man — or girl, in this case. Maybe I should fly down there to Houston and personally have a talk with, uh, some of her associates. Do a little field work, if you know what I mean." He held up the photo of Lanna and Whatsisname for a closer look.

Yeah, I know exactly what you mean, thought Louise.

Pig...

"After all, that's what investigative journalism is all about," he observed distractedly.

Louise knew he was just being a creep for her benefit, as if he thought it might egg her on a little. She hated that. It was disrespectfully — and clumsily — manipulative, and completely unnecessary.

"Well," she said, maybe a little too defensively, "I've looked at everything about her I can get my hands on and made every kind of call possible. None of her friends appear willing or able to act on her behalf as far as the press is concerned. The girl herself is evasive. I sent Steve and Jan down there and they're practically camping out on her doorstep, along with about a thousand other..."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah — I know all about that. Look, you need to get with it, Louise. Burn the midnight oil, if you have to. I don't care what you do, but get me that interview. This is *the* big one, and I'll be damned if I'll let it get away from me. She's *mine*, you understand? And you're going to get her for me."

Louise gritted her teeth. She looked at him as if she was about to say something, but the moment passed. *Sonofabitch*, she thought. *Why do I put up with this crap?* The thought crossed her mind for about the millionth time that she could be making a whole lot more money working somewhere — anywhere — else. For someone who would show her a little appreciation. She angrily swept up her papers and photos.

Toomie Starks

Ken seemed to suddenly realize that he'd gone too far. He whipped off his glasses and loosened his tie with a quick tug, somehow transforming himself in the process. Softly, almost apologetically, he said, "Louise... Wait."

He reached out and took her hand. "Hey, I'm sorry," he told her, looking the part of someone who was perfectly sincere. "You know I'm no good at any of this without you. I need you now, and I swear I'll make it up to you when all this is over, alright?"

She looked at him, into his eyes. She had wanted to lash out at him, but found herself wavering uncertainly. She found herself mumbling, "Yeah, sure, OK."

"I'll call you," he said, as if he meant it.

She nodded, mentally kicking herself for being his perpetual doormat. She knew that he was just being his normal, insensitive self, but that was the way he was. It was part of what made him good at what he did. It was his job to be pushy and arrogant — and then make his victims love him. They did, too. So did she.

So now what was she going to do? *Dammit*. She pounded her keyboard in frustration a few times. She stared at her monitor as if maybe an answer would pop up. Finally, almost irrationally, she started her email program.

"Dear Alien..." she started. *No, to hell with that.*

"Dear Space Creature..." *Nah, the 'dear' part is too friendly.* She cleared it and started over. Forget the

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salutation.

"Look here, you little monster. You're a goddam guest on our planet. What the hell do you mean teasing everybody like you're doing? We want some answers and we want them now."

Ah — that's better.

"You get your alien butt over here to the Daily Planet building this instant. I'm Ken Clark's producer and you belong to us. You're gonna spill your guts on a prime-time special the whole world will watch, and we're not gonna take any Twilight Zone crap from you."

This is fun.

"And you're not getting a dime, either. You owe us, pal. Everybody's knocking their brains out trying to get your attention and you won't give us the time of day. Well, I'm sick of your attitude, sister. Give it up or go back to wherever the hell you came from."

That's telling her.

She clicked the exit button and the dialog box asked her if she wanted to send her unsaved message. She hesitated, then clicked 'Cancel'.

What the heck, she thought giddily. Might as well send it. It'll just come back anyway. But it'll make me feel better...

She typed, "susan@..." in the address bar and stopped. She thought a while and added, "space." *Well, she's not a dot-com or a dot-org or a dot-gov.* Finally, she finished with, ".ufo." Almost as an afterthought, she

Toomie Starks

added the 'P' after 'Susan', the way it was on her NASA jumpsuit.

susanp@space.ufo

Wonder what the 'P' stands for? Louise knew — as did probably every journalist by now — that the kid went by the name Sara Corel. It wasn't exactly a well-guarded secret. For some reason, she just preferred to use the name 'Susan' in public. Susan P.

Louise looked hard at the name. *Susan. Suzy. Sue — wait a minute...*

Her sudden laughter made everyone in the office outside her door look up. She quickly added a PS to the email.

"You'd damned well better talk to me because I know what the 'P' stands for."

She clicked the send button before she could change her mind.

And then stared blankly at the screen for what seemed like an hour. Nothing happened. *I'm losing it*, she finally admitted to herself. She turned off the computer and started to get up. The phone rang.

Her private line. The hotline. Only a very few people had the number, and they knew it had to be life or death to use it. Except for Ken, of course. She reached for it.

"Ms. Layne?" the girlish voice on the other end queried. "Sorry it took so long to get back to you, but the switchboard operator wouldn't connect me to your office phones. I finally had to try this line. I hope you don't

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mind."

Louise was a little disconcerted, maybe more than a little suspicious, and was trying desperately not to be wildly hopeful.

"And you would be...?" she replied guardedly.

"Susan. I got your email."

"How did you get my email?" She did not dare fall for some kind of prank. She'd been in this business too long.

"Well, um... I sorta get every email, in a way. Mostly, I never actually see 'em unless it's from someone I know, but yours kinda jumped out at me, if you know what I mean. I hope you don't take this wrong, but it was very funny. And cool. And you're right. I've been meaning to talk to someone, like an interview kind of thing, but I didn't know who or how I should go about it or if anyone was really all that interested."

Interested...? Yeah, I'll say we're interested. Louise was still suspicious.

"Look, whoever-you-are. Anyone can call up and say they're whoever they want to be. For all I know, you're some kind of hacker, or somebody I know who is yanking my chain."

"Oh," the voice replied. "I guess so. Um... How about if I come over? It won't take me long to get there. I know where it is 'cause the address is on your website. What floor you on? And do you have a window? North, east, south or west?"

Toomie Starks

Louise told her.

"OK. I think I got it. See ya in a couple of minutes. Bye." The line went dead.

Louise walked numbly into the outer office as if entranced. One of the young research assistants looked at her and asked her if she was alright.

"Sure, Jim," she replied absently. "Bring me some coffee, will you? To my office. Get yourself some, too. Whatever you're doing, drop it. I'm going to need a witness, maybe."

She walked back into her office, sat down at her desk and tried to stare through the frosted pane. When Jim came back with a couple of steaming cups, she told him to close the door, then nodded at the window. He followed her gaze.

The frost had vanished, as if there was a heating element in the glass that had suddenly been turned on, clearing it completely, inside and out. No other buildings could be seen through the low clouds which surrounded them. The street was hidden as well. The lights glowing through the neighboring windows wanly illuminated the figure casually drifting in the grey gale just a few feet away.

Her hair flowed wildly around her, highlights from caught snowflakes glinting like sequins as it tumbled and tussled. The bitter cold seemed to be harmless to her, beneath her notice, unable to bite her with its stinging rebuke. Her cape billowed magnificently, at its own

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majestic pace independent of the furious wind, a dramatic backdrop against which she was gloriously displayed. She was a study in effortless levitation, heedless of the giddy height and unfazed by the storm's commotion, anchored to nothingness by her whim.

She waved cheerily at the staring figures inside. Louise's private phone rang in her office. The apparition held up her right hand, middle fingers closed, thumb and little finger extended. She held her thumb against her ear — mimicking a telephone — and 'spoke' into her little finger, mouthing, *pick up the phone*.

"You can close your mouth now, Jim," Louise said to her companion. She punched the speaker button on the phone.

"Hi, Ms. Layne. Who's your cute friend?" The girl's voice in the phone was crystal clear and synched perfectly to her moving lips.

Jim stammered incoherently, finally managing to make a sound that was something like his name.

"Nice to meet you, Jim. I'm Susan. I mean, I don't have any kind of ID or anything, but, uh... Well, just like the pictures, huh...?"

"Just like," Louise confirmed. "Alright. So you're ready to commit to being interviewed on Deep Inside with Ken Clark?"

"Sure, if you want. I can come inside and we can talk."

"No — wait a minute. I don't want you going through

the lobby like that. I want to get this nailed down before everybody and his uncle knows about it. How about the roof? There's a door up there to the helipad."

The girl shrugged.

Louise turned to Jim. "Find the super and get him up here right away."

"You mean, Mr. Whyte?"

"Yeah, today. As in now. He's probably in the basement, where the printing presses used to be."

Jim took off. Louise called after him, "Make sure he has his keys with him. And don't say a word to anyone."

Louise turned back to the window, half wondering if the girl would still be there. "I hate to keep you hanging around..." she said apologetically.

"I don't mind," Sara replied. "So what do you think the 'P' stands for? And how'd you figure it out?"

"It's this Sara/Susan thing. OK, this is just a guess, but I think Sara is who you are, someone who feels she's really not all that different from the rest of us, your human side. Am I close?"

The girl outside the window nodded, looking very impressed at this stranger's insight.

Louise went on, "So Susan is the alien part that's made up to look like a comic book character, with all that goes with it. Obviously, you were meant to function in that role — but that's not really 'you'. It's more like your job."

"Very good!" the girl agreed.

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"I don't think you're all that comfortable with the 'S', are you? It's just too obvious and blatant. If you really embraced what your aliens had made you into, you wouldn't have come up with the Susan name. But everybody's going to see you as the character you were meant to portray, anyway."

Sara was grinning appreciatively.

"So the 'P' — that stands for the rest of *your* name for your role. It's a joke, isn't it? To keep the whole thing in perspective. A way to accept the obvious without anyone having to take it too seriously. Especially you."

"Looks like you nailed it, girlfriend."

"Nope." Louise was grinning now. "I haven't the foggiest idea. I lied about having figured it out."

Sara looked completely surprised.

"And since I didn't figure it out, your secret's safe until *you* decide to tell everyone. Like in front of a worldwide audience on our show." Louise rolled her eyes up in mock dismay. "Gee — it's too bad I wasn't able to come up with that little tidbit of pre-interview research. I hope Ken doesn't get too upset with me..."

The girl outside seemed puzzled for a moment, then looked slyly through the window at Louise. "Ah... You're devious, aren't you? I think I'm beginning to like you."

They both laughed.

It wasn't long before Jim came back with the venerable Mr. Whyte, whose eyes nearly popped out of his head when he looked through the window.

"Great Caesar's ghost!" he sputtered.

"Not quite, Perry," Louise replied. "Not quite."

"And now," the voice-over announcer concluded,
"Ken Clark."

Ken greeted Sara directly, "Good evening, Susan." The weeks of promo for the live broadcast had been supplemented by a great deal of speculation and anticipation, even among rival networks. Ken didn't need to waste any time on the customary preliminaries or introductions. She was in her uniform, so it was unlikely that a channel-surfer (if there were any, in this case) would have to guess who his guest was. Currently, her picture was on every single magazine at the supermarket checkout stand.

Sara was relaxed and comfortable in an overstuffed armchair on the carefully informal set, half-facing Ken's customary desk in the usual manner of talk shows. She had plenty of room to scootch around as necessary, in typical teenaged fashion. "Thanks for having me on your show, Mr. Clark."

"Ken — please," he smiled in his most winning manner. "We've seen so much about you in the news these past few weeks, from your debut at the NASA press conference to your amazing exploits in Singapore. The popular press is full of details about your astonishing attributes. Yet all of this coverage has focused on your — please forgive me — alien nature. Is there a human side to

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Susan?"

"Sure, Ken. I'm not gonna make like I'm just a regular old normal girl-type teen, 'cause, well, you know — I'm not. Most of the time I like to think of myself as no different from anyone else, but I have to deal with a lot of weird stuff sometimes. Still, I honestly believe I'm basically a real person. I mean, I like to eat and sleep and watch movies and listen to music and read and shop and hang out with my friends. I've got parents — like foster parents, actually — regular people who love me and try to make sure I turn out sorta decent, even though I can be a lot of trouble (that's for sure). And teachers, though I didn't exactly go to a regular school. I think I drove most of them crazy."

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

She managed to look positively embarrassed. "Well, I guess — I sorta did once. Not these days, though. I... I like boys, and stuff. You know. But I don't think any kind of — well, I guess you might say relationship — would ever work out in the long run. That's something that's different about me, alright. I, like, don't grow or anything. I'm sorta stuck where I am, where I've always been. It doesn't look like I'm ever actually gonna grow up and get married and have kids and all that. I guess that's the hardest part of what I have to accept about the way the Cryptoaliens made me. When I really think about it — considering all the rest of it — I guess it's best that way. But I don't have to like it..."

Toomie Starks

"These Cryptoaliens — the unknown beings who created you... What can you tell us about them?"

"Nothing, really. That's why they're called that. Crypto means 'hidden', basically. They're aliens that nobody knows anything about, especially me."

"Yet as a computer, essentially, can't you access any kind of information? Aren't there some messages or instructions or clues of some kind in your memory banks?"

"No. I'm absolutely sure about that. I've got a friend who's a really good computer hacker, and there's Dr. Belloes, the NASA psychologist. We've been through all sorts of stuff to see if anything would pop up. I can sorta access everything that's there, or at least see what there is to access. Believe me, there's nothing."

"Are there any more like you on our planet?"

"Uh-uh. I'd know it, too. Someone like me would stick out like a sore thumb. And the guys who track satellites would be able to tell, 'cause when I travel real fast, it makes some of 'em bob up and down a little bit."

"Should we be concerned that there might be more alien visitations in the near future?"

"I can't really say. But I don't think there's anything to worry about. I mean, they coulda made me look and act like the robot from 'The Day the Earth Stood Still', I suppose. I think they purposely made me out to be the least scary fer sure alien possible."

"That's certainly true," he said. "If you represent an

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alien invasion, I'd have to say you're the cutest and friendliest one anybody could imagine."

Sara could only smile prettily at that, proving his point.

"What about morphing?" he asked. "Scientists speculate that your form is the way it is because of something like programming. Can you change it?"

"You know, I should be able to, you'd think. I've tried it, but nothing happens. The way I am now, it's like really a basic part of me. I think the definition of invulnerable means I can't be *changed* — you know, injured or altered or rearranged. Not even by me."

She held up her left arm. "I don't have bones or anything. So I should be able to bend my arm backwards at the elbow. There's no, like, mechanical reason I can't. Except that I can't." She flexed her arm a few times. "See? Perfectly normal."

"And," he added, "there's apparently no force or substance on Earth that can prevent you from moving your arm if you feel like it. It apparently doesn't matter if there's a battleship tied to it, or if there's a mountain in the way."

"Yeah. I'm pretty strong, I guess," she said almost resignedly, as if she was discussing having athlete's foot. "I'm a regular flying bulldozer."

"For which the residents of Singapore are very thankful. We've all seen the home videos of your heroic actions on behalf of the earthquake-stricken city."

Toomie Starks

Sara looked somber. "Ken, there was absolutely nothing 'heroic' about what I did in Singapore. I'm glad I was able to help, but the heroes are all over there. Not me."

Ken raised his eyebrows for camera three.

She continued, "I can't imagine that any normal person would ignore their neighbor's house burning down. You can't turn your back on something like that. The second I 'heard' the news chopper's radio and picked up the geological data, I knew I had to go and do what I could — even though I was at that White House thing. As soon as the President officially welcomed me to the planet, I knew I was really a part of the world, and — like everybody else — I have to accept the responsibility to do what I can do to help out if I can."

"But, look," she went on. "It didn't cost me any money, the effort involved didn't wear me out or make me tired, and I was never in any kind of danger. All of which isn't true for the people I tried to help. Some of them lost everything or even died helping others. There were so many I couldn't save — some who were terribly mangled or burned, some of them who died in my arms, some of them I had to abandon, knowing they would die, so that I could try to save others. So many of the ones who survived — their whole lives are changed. They may never recover."

She paused, looking somber beyond her years. "There was a moment when it was just all too much for me to

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take. I was so upset at the hopelessness of it all that I cried like a baby. Yet these people, whose friends and families were dead or dying, whose homes and lives were in ruins — these people came up to me, took me in their arms, and comforted *me*. Gave me the strength to go on. I really owe them a debt I can never repay."

She turned to look directly into camera two and spoke a short phrase in what sounded like Chinese, then bowed her head respectfully.

Fade to black. Cue commercial.

Most of the rest of the show was comparatively inconsequential, with Sara babbling happily about her fave movie stars and singers, recounting some of her travels around this planet and a few others, and mostly acting like a normal kid. She was as charming as she was designed to be and essentially conquered the world that night.

"So, Susan," Ken started his wrap-up, "Where do you go from here? Have you given much thought to how you plan to organize your public life?"

"Well, I'm not gonna do the comic book thing and be a crime fighter." She made a face. "Aside from the fact that it sounds stupid, there's not really a whole lot I can do. I mean, I'm not a cop or a lawyer or a vigilante. And there's way too much crime for a thousand of me to even make the slightest dent. But even more than all that, crime is a human problem and I don't think it's a good idea for

me to interfere much in human problems."

"You've already taken an active role in some respects," he reminded her.

"Yeah, but it would be a big mistake for people to rely on me to protect them or solve their problems. People have to protect themselves, for the most part. Even if I was able to catch everybody who fell off a cliff — well, there's a lot of people who shouldn't try to climb a cliff in the first place. The ones who fall generally manage to keep the population of cliff climbers down to a reasonable number by their example."

"And," she said, "People have to solve their own problems, especially when it comes to other people. Take the crime thing. Like drugs, for instance. The government has pretty much proven that trying to arrest all the suppliers can't be done and doesn't work anyway. If I could somehow manage to find every drug dealer and producer there is and drop them on the other side of the Moon, that would drive up the prices so much that others would take the risk and there would just be more of them, faster than I could round them up. The solution is in getting rid of the demand, and the government is pretty useless there, too, just like I would be. This is a problem that can only be solved by people reaching out to each other and making the *need* for drugs stop happening. That's gonna take *really* super powers, like love, respect, responsibility, tolerance, opportunity, equality, commitment, honor, decency, teaching, forgiveness and

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common sense."

"Does that mean you won't intervene at all?"

"Well," she said, "I just did — didn't I? I mean, here I am, with I don't know how many people watching right now. On the one hand, I'm just a regular girl who has trouble with boys and eats too much — and on the other hand, I'm this powerful creature from some planet nobody's ever heard of. I'm telling you stuff that you already know, but maybe it's different coming from me somehow. Will it make any difference to anybody? Change things? It could, if a few people decide to do something that they might not have thought about doing before. That's up to them."

Ken nodded.

"It's like the Singapore fires after the quake. There were way too many of them for me to try and put out. All I could do was bring in a little water, and even then I needed a lot of help. It was the people there that figured out how to get the water on the fires and did all the work. Sure, I helped. But the real work didn't even start until after I'd left. The rebuilding will take years, and I'll bet you anything that the new Singapore is gonna be a lot better and safer than the old one."

"You're being too modest, Susan. You saved a lot of lives and there are people there who are grateful for the things you were able to do. I'm sure this will be true in more than just this one instance, but also in other potential disasters still to come, natural and potentially even man-

made."

"I'll help whenever I can. At least on some of the big stuff that looks like it might overwhelm people. But all I can do is bring in the water, so to speak, and maybe clear a few streets, pick up a building or two..."

"And sound the alarm," Ken added.

After the last break, Ken headed into the final segment. "There's just one other thing I want to ask you. I know you have another name for your private life — and even though it's no secret, I'll not mention it in public. The nametag on your NASA overalls and some of the studies that have been released identified you as 'Susan P'. As I understand it, this is a name you selected for your public life, in part as a way of differentiating your alien side and some of your computer functions from your human identity."

"That sounds pretty complicated, Ken, but it's really not. It's like I'm a normal person driving this alien robot-computer around, sorta. I mean, it's me, but sometimes I think of it as not me, so I call that part 'Susan'. And since when I'm out in public people are mostly dealing with the stuff that the alien robot-computer does, then they're really dealing with me as 'Susan'."

"I see," said Ken a little uncertainly. "But what I really want to know is what the 'P' stands for. Is it a last name? Or some kind of symbol..."

"It's like a symbolic last name. You really wanna

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know? It's kinda silly."

"I think everybody wants to know, Susan."

"OK. Got a pencil? It's spelled P-U-R-G..."

Ken wrote it down on his notepad. "Uh-huh."

"E-R-L."

Ken looked at the name he's written and pronounced, "Purr-jerl."

"No, with a hard 'g', like 'get'."

He looked slightly puzzled, as if trying to discover some significance to the name. He tried again: "Purr-grrl."

"That's it."

"Susan Purgerl?"

"But you can call me Sue, Ken."

"Sue...?"

"Uh-huh."

"...Purgerl."

There may have been a planetary groan of Richter proportions. Nobody ever called her Sue.

Chapter Thirty: Money

Sara seemed to be very pleased with herself. She couldn't wait to tell the usual gang gathered for dinner at Mrs. J's, waiting impatiently until the ritual conversational preliminaries eventually played out.

"Vell," prompted Mrs. J, "Out vith it. You been squirming like havink pants full of ants. So tell us vhat you can't vait to be tellink us."

"Oh," said Sara, transparently trying to look casual about it, "It's just something I worked out in my spare time. No big deal, really. Sort of a public service kinda thing."

She smiled expectantly, as if maybe someone would try to guess what it was. They stared at her, refusing to take the bait, until she couldn't hold back any longer.

"Spam," she announced smugly.

The others looked at each other for a moment, mostly shrugging. Finally Alex told her, "That's nice, but I already get all the spam I can use."

"Not any more," Sara countered. "I got rid of it."

"Gee, thanks," Alex replied, then looked at her suspiciously. "Uh... What did you do to my computer?"

"Not a thing. But you won't be getting any more spam," she assured him. "Nobody will."

Jimmie was interested. "Nobody?"

"I mean everybody," she said, spreading her arms as if to encompass the whole world. "I fixed it — well,

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anyway, Susan fixed it — so that there won't *be* any more spam. Anywhere. Ever."

Mrs. J was not particularly impressed. "Bah. Not buyink Spam anyway. Wouldn't feed to pigs. Phui!"

Dinah's eyes narrowed. "Let me see if I understand this. You put some kind of filter on the Internet that prevents unsolicited advertisements from being transmitted?"

"Yeah. And those stupid chain letters and phoney come-ons. All that crapola that everybody hates. Not good stuff, though — just the real spam. I mean, I know spam when I see it — everybody does. And nobody likes it. It slows down the whole 'Net. So Susan basically takes a look at whatever's out there — and if it's spam, it goes right back to the sender. Every bit of it. Cool, huh?"

Obviously, Jimmie thought so. Mrs. J snorted dismissively. Lanna looked clueless. Dinah was horrified.

Alex's eyes widened. He knew she was pretty much constantly 'on' the 'Net, but he evidently hadn't been keeping up with the extent to which she had become interconnected. This surprised him, though he knew it shouldn't have.

"Sara," he told her, almost scolding, "I hope you haven't been pirating wireless access. I thought we had a talk about that. As far as I know, I'm only paying for one cell number for you to use *legally*."

"Yeah, I know. And I only use it for regular phone calls. This is different. I mean, y'know — I was designed

to fly. I was *meant* to do it, so it's something I do. It's so obvious that nobody ever even thought about whether I *should* do it or not. This is the same thing, I think. I was designed to be a computer — a really *connected* computer. S'far as I know, that's maybe the big reason I'm here at a time when the whole Internet thing is happening. It's my nature to be plugged into that, to be a part of it. I'm absolutely sure of it. But don't worry, I'm not tapping into anything the way you think."

Alex and Jimmie looked at each other.

Sara went on. "Remember how the NASA guys spent a lot of time trying to cut off a piece of hair for a sample?"

Alex smiled to himself. He'd tried to do the same thing. He couldn't do it, and neither could they. Nobody could, not with any technology available on Earth.

"I figured out later — there's a way, sorta. Watch this," she said.

She reached out and put her hand palm down on the center of the dining room table. A tiny, downy hair on the back of her wrist began to glow like a soft, golden lightbulb filament.

"That's just so you can see it," she said.

It detached itself and slowly rose from her arm, then hovered at eye level.

Sara explained, "What's really neat is that it's still really part of me. It's connected completely, like it's still attached, as much 'me' as my fingers, even if it's on the Moon. And it's just like me as far as being a computer. It

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can 'hear' and 'see' — all the kreening stuff, radio, x-rays, lasers, whatever."

"Part of you?" Alex asked. "What — some kind of hyperspace wormhole connection or something?"

"Beats me," shrugged Sara. "Anything it kreens, I kreen — and vice-versa. In real time, as far as I know."

Alex mused, "No wonder SETI can't pick anything up. If the people who sent you can do this, they sure don't need radio."

"So you're saying that little speck is like a fragment of a hologram," said Jimmie, transfixed.

Even Lanna couldn't help but stare at the tiny glowing floater. "Like a what?"

Jimmie filled her in. "A film hologram records an image of an object in 3-D. When you look at it from different angles, you see the object from different angles. If you cut off a small corner, you can still see the whole object through it, only from a much smaller angle."

"Yep," said Sara. "That little thing there *is* me — just less of me, except that, as far as I'm concerned, it's still just as much a part of me as ever. So I haven't really lost anything. It doesn't look very big, but it's the equivalent of a couple of buildings full of computers and stuff. Now, watch this."

The glowing hair moved away under its own power, slowly so that everybody could see it. It headed for the door and disappeared through the keyhole.

"Let me guess," said Jimmie. "It's gonna latch on to

Toomie Starks

some communications nexus like an Internet router or satellite."

Sara looked appreciatively at Jimmie. "Sure. How'd you know?"

Jimmie said, "I've known for some time that you were doing something like this. I mean, it's obvious to me — and maybe some others, I'd think — that you're a lot more a part of the 'Net than radio and stuff would allow. I thought for a while that some of your 'software' had more or less infected the core servers and routers. I recognized some of the things we'd done in the Fort and knew I sure didn't put it out there."

"Jeez, Sara," said Alex. "This is sounding more and more like an actual alien invasion outta some 50's B-movie sci-fi thriller. Maybe you should check the basement for pods, Mrs. J."

"No basement," Mrs. J mumbled. "Nobody havink basement in Houston."

Lanna shivered. "That kinda creeps me out."

"Well, just call me Gort," said Sara. "The only difference between me and the giant robot in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is the costume."

"And your winning personality," added Alex.

"Marginally," said Lanna.

Dinah finally spoke up. "All this is very interesting, Sara. But let's get back to this spam thing. What the *hell* were you thinking of? Maybe you don't like what spammers do..."

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"Hah!" said everybody else simultaneously.

"...but you do not have the right to unilaterally enforce any kind of self-imposed edict. You do not own the Internet. You cannot just decide what people can or can't do just because you feel like it."

"Oh, come on, Dinah," Alex said. "Spammers deserve to *die*. I've heard you say so yourself."

She gave Alex a withering glare. Alex withered.

Dinah continued, "So what if tomorrow she decides to ban X-rated sites? I suppose she could, and there's not a thing anybody could do about it. As many people as there are that would applaud such a thing, there are probably as many who have their reasons to patronize that kind of crap, and others who make a living from it."

"I'm not into censorship," said Sara defensively.

"Oh, yes you are," Dinah countered. "That's exactly what your spam ban is: censorship. And even worse. What about privacy? In some manner, you are opening everybody's mail, aren't you?"

"Well," Sara said, "It's not really *me*, y'know."

"Sure," said Dinah sarcastically, "It's just Susan, your all-purpose excuse, replicating the part of your personality that 'knows spam when you see it' God-knows-how-many millions of times to peer over every shoulder on the planet. This is Orwellian on an almost unimaginable scale. Tell me again how Louise Layne sent you an email."

Unexpectedly chastened, Sara sat back in her chair,

arms folded across her chest, looking sulky. "I can't help being what I am."

"I know," said Dinah, "You're practically a metaphor for the Internet. But you have to act responsibly. This kind of thing, if it became public, could scare a lot of people to death."

"You mean," said Alex, "Something like the Orson Welles *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast?"

"Or worse. It could become a target of demagoguery," Dinah said.

Sara looked miserable. Only moments before, she'd expected everyone to be wowed by her announcement. Now she felt like a criminal or something.

There was an uncomfortable silence, finally broken by — of all people — Lanna.

"I had a thought," she began hesitantly. The others looked dubiously at her.

"The only thing that was really stupid about what she did with this spam stuff is that she did it for free. I bet there's a lot of people who would pay to have Sara or Susan or whatever keep them from getting spams. If they signed up, it would be like *choosing* to let her look at their stuff so that she could keep it out. Wouldn't that be OK?"

They were practically astonished. It really was a thought — heaven help them, maybe even a good one.

Alex looked at her suspiciously and said, "Alright, what have you done with the real Lanna?"

"No," she said, "I'm serious. We set this up to run

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through Exocybernautics and she can unspam anybody that pays and nobody can possibly be freaked out by robo-brat, here, taking over the world. What's wrong with that? I think it's about time we got her to earn her keep. I don't think we're gonna be able to be NASA 'consultants' forever. They're running out of things to do to her."

"Now, wait a minute," said Alex. "That's exploitation. No way..."

"And another thing," Lanna went on, ignoring him. "All this do-good stuff — which is very wonderful, I'm sure... If she really wants to do something for people, she's using the wrong kind of superpowers. As far as I'm concerned, the guy with the most *real* power on this planet is that Bill Whatsisname — you know, the Micro-something geek with all the money. Billions, isn't it? Now, *that's* a superpower. Then there's this Bruce Wayans — he's using *his* money to go after all kinds of bad guys and evil corporations..."

"And aliens," muttered Sara.

"Exactly," agreed Lanna. "You know what I mean. If you're so smart, Miss Super-duper, then why aren't you rich? You oughtta be able to, like, find all kinds of buried treasure and diamonds and stuff, figure out the stock market, invent a better whatchamacallit — anything you want. So what's stopping you? If you have enough money, *then* if you want to do all kinds of 'good deeds' or whatever, you can use it to — I dunno — maybe, like, invest in things that'll help out a lot more people in Third-

World hellholes than flying around flapping your cape and waving."

The rest of the group was pretty much stunned by Lanna's — well, practically obnoxious outburst. Crass, really. But — interesting. They had to mull it over for a while.

Finally, Alex said, "Sure, she *could* do a lot of that. Everything has consequences, though. F'rinstance, if she digs up all of the treasure ever lost on the Spanish Main, and maybe an undiscovered motherlode or two, it would have a pretty dramatic impact on gold prices. Maybe enough to destabilize world currencies. Same with basically manipulating the stock market — which I'm sure she could do."

"So?" Lanna asked.

"Well, she can't just..." Alex struggled to try to find some way to make Lanna understand. "It wouldn't be right. It's interfering..."

"And this would be bad because..." Lanna challenged.

Alex waved his hands in exasperation. "Because it's not *right*. It would be like taking unfair advantage of this..." he struggled, "This *gift* to our world."

"How do you know that's not the whole idea?" Lanna pressed. "If she's able to do stuff like manage the stock market, why shouldn't she?"

Alex gave up, looking helplessly at Dinah.

Dinah told her. "To begin with, it's dangerous, with

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the potential for a lot of unintended consequences. Take your suggestion of investing to 'do good'. Sure, there're some countries around the world that have a lot of problems with endemic poverty and all the misery associated with it. Essentially, though, they're just a century behind the developed nations, undergoing a lot of the problems that were typical in the US a hundred years ago. Pouring money on a problem doesn't make it go away, because that doesn't necessarily change human behavior."

Dinah went on, "The principal thing that's holding a lot of emerging nations back is lack of freedom. Controlled economies remove the great motivators of human economic behavior — fear and greed. There is no sociological theory that has ever been found to replace the effect of having to worry about providing for your family's future and trying to make it better. Targeted investment is just another form of controlling an economy."

She continued, "Just look at the War on Poverty. Since Lyndon Johnson, the government has transferred five *trillion* dollars from wealth producers and working citizens to various bureaucracies. There are just as many 'poor people' now as there ever were — except lately, since some of those programs have started to disaappear and a lot of people who could actually work were forced to fend for themselves. Which — surprise! — they're doing.

"The success of some of the Asian nations in overcoming the effects of poverty is a good example. Basically, just get out of the way and people will make their own opportunities. I think poverty happens when governments — and they don't have to be what you'd call oppressive — try to run the economy. They should just make sure that people play by the rules and manage the infrastucture."

Alex made a snoring sound to let Dinah know how much everybody appreciated her lecture. She stopped, satisfied that she had made her point to the jury.

Jimmie jumped into the gap. "Sara's not — I hate to say it — the, uh, creative type. No offense, but she just doesn't think that way. I mean, she's smart, alright — but I don't think she's motivated to invent things on her own. Which is probably on purpose, I'd guess. Or she'd put *everybody* out of business."

He glanced at Sara, who didn't seem to be the least bit offended, then went on, "I've learned an awful lot by working on stuff with her, though. I mean, I really do have a pretty cool OS shell that's modelled on her as an interface of sorts, like way beyond speech recognition and Artificial Intelligence. I don't know if I'd have ever done something this complete on my own — actually, I'm sure I wouldn't have — but it's basically my own work, at least the creative parts of it. And there's some other stuff, too, that I'm pretty sure is worth a lot if I ever get back into marketing mode. Sara's pretty much my partner in

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developing it, so I don't see why she shouldn't get a lot of the credit and everything. Still, it's not anything like a gift from her Cryptoaliens on a silver platter. It's really just normal software evolution based maybe on an insight or two that I wouldn't have had if I hadn't met Sara. Or imagined her..."

Dinah said, "The main concern I have with Sara and money is the same one I've always had. If she is known to have deep pockets, it will attract every kind of lawsuit imaginable. In fact, that's already begun."

Mrs. J said, "Real reason Sara not gold-diggink gorl is Alex. He is not beink vhat you would say materialistic. Has no regard for being capitalist, happy to be poor musician. Smart, maybe — gots good heart and fine principles — but not takink anytink serious, like life big joke. Hah!

"Is fine thing, though. Vhat if Sara raised by serious guy vith serious agenda, beink greedy or fascist powermonger? Or some kind of Central Committee? Would make monster like vhat Frankenstein vas nothink."

Lanna said, "So just because the Cryptos dump her on some kind of *loser*, she has to go along? What a waste."

Alex wouldn't allow himself to be offended by Lanna. "You're too kind," he told her graciously.

"Hey, sorry," she said. "You gotta admit, you're holding her back with all this 'do-the-right-thing' comic book crap. I just don't see what's wrong with someone with her talents making a buck doing something useful."

Toomie Starks

All she needs is a little ambition and a manager who'll look after her career."

"A manager?" said Alex. "I suppose that would be... You?"

"Sure," said Lanna. "Why not? Tell 'im, Jimmie, dear."

Obediently, Jimmie confirmed, "She, uh, has a certain amount of ability when it comes to business. I mean, she pretty much takes care of Exocybernautics these days. It's really expanded, and Lanna — well, she is my 'marketing mode' right now. Does a good job, too. I must admit I was, uh, kinda surprised..."

Dinah added, "Alex, she's aggressive, motivated, savvy, shrewd — a real Class-A personality. Jimmie was her first 'acquisition', so to speak, but she's capitalized on the opportunity. She knows how to get what she wants."

"That's for sure," Sara said almost — but not quite — inaudibly, pointedly looking at Jimmie.

Alex was on the defensive. "Oh, this is too much. No way I'm gonna sit here and listen to this..."

Sara interrupted him before he could work up his rant.

"Alex," she said. "Lanna's right."

That got everybody's attention.

"And Alex is right, too. So is Dinah and Jimmie and Mrs. J. It would be stupid not to use all the abilities I was given. There's got to be a lot more to what I'm doing here than being a flying bulldozer. I also don't think I should

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decide for people what I should do that would affect them. If people think I can be useful, they'll ask — I guess I'm *too* eager to be helpful sometimes.

"And it's also true that I'm probably not much good at being a conduit for Cryptoalien goodies — so there's a deliberate limitation that makes it obvious that I should be doing what I *can* do or it would be limited, too.

"Having Alex as my dad was also a deliberate choice for the Cryptos. Yeah, I'm not a material girl like Lanna — and maybe it's a good thing that I don't take everything as seriously as Dinah. Though she's a terrific influence, too. I mean, I really should be very careful to do the right thing. That's all I was trying to do, but I guess I didn't think it through very well.

"But I really do think I should do something like what Lanna's talking about. I think I can maybe do some good things if I generate a little cash flow somehow. Then I can afford to hire Dinah to keep the vultures away."

Sara stopped. The others waited patiently while she collected her thoughts.

"I guess I'm babbling," she said. "Maybe I'm confused or something. There's a lot of things that Susan can't just figure out for me, you know. That's why I have all of you."

She appeared to concentrate briefly, mostly to let the others know she was 'doing' something. "OK — spam's back," Sara sighed.

Everybody groaned.

"Now," she said, "What's a good way for a flying bulldozer to make some serious money without toppling civilization as we know it? And I don't want to put anybody out of business..."

"Easy," said Mrs. J. "Salvage. Hah!"

"Salvage?" Sara asked.

"For hire," Mrs. J replied. "How much you thinkink NASA be payink to get no-good sputnik back from Mars? Not changink vorld, but plenty useful, no? Lot of other stuff you can be gettink from bottom of sea, maybe cleanink up things like Chernobyl mess, gettink rid of minefields. Nobody else can do."

Jimmy added, "Movies. Remember the Moon video? And the computer game she projected — where she was 'inside', like virtual reality? And the photomanipulations with all the Russians in them? Anything she sees *or even imagines*, she can output to video or film. I'll bet her movie rendition of the Midgarde 'trip' she took would be bigger than Star Wars. She could even do a 3-D IMAX version. It wouldn't be so much competition with Hollywood — like anybody'd really care — 'cause it would attract it's own audience. A bigger pie kinda thing."

Alex came up with, "Lectures. They pay a lot of money and she could really put on a show — multimedia and everything. It could be like a concert tour. You combine that with a book and she'd have something very marketable and certainly unique. Low overhead, since airfare wouldn't be much of a problem — though her food

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expenses on the road might run kinda high..."

"You'll need to form a corporation and will need a lot more legal services than I can manage on my own," said Dinah. "If you actually do any of this, I'll have to put together a team. It'll probably eventually involve constitutional issues and international treaties. Which would have probably happened anyway. At least we might be able to afford it now."

Lanna smiled at Sara for perhaps the first time. "You just leave all the messy details to me, honey."

And, also for the first time, Sara smiled back at Lanna like she meant it.

Chapter Thirty-one: Politics

It was a hot Houston summer evening on Washington Avenue, a neighborhood undergoing the trauma of 'gentrification'. The area had been decaying for a long time, cheap but once-proud post-war housing inhabited by elderly retirees and low-rent immigrants who were now being forced out by rising property taxes engendered by the intense building spate of upwardly-mobile new homes, townhouses and condominiums. The trendy and successful coexisted uneasily with their urban-poor neighbors and the hodgepodge of illegals and minorities who frequented the low-end shops and cantinas that hung on along the area's main drag.

A low-rider boogiemobile left the avenue to penetrate one of the hipper, tree-lined areas near T.C. Jester — where yuppies walked their dogs and jogged dutifully — spreading that amazingly penetrating mindless bass-boom like an obnoxious challenge to the unwelcome newcomers in their expensive designer perspiration attire and running shoes. The gentry gritted their teeth and stoically endured the offense, hands hovering over their cell phones ready to summon the gendarmes should the intruder decide to prolong his incursion long enough to constitute a public nuisance.

He did. The car stopped, perched precariously on the edge of the street alongside the drainage ditch. The noise from the massive speakers got even louder, rattling

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double-paned windows along the entire block. The residents glared at the vehicle's occupants, who responded with expressive hand gestures, colorful phrases and a tossed beer can or two.

The cell phones speed-dialed. It would be a long time before any response showed up, and nothing substantive would be done. As far as the cops were concerned, this kind of thing was not worth abandoning a donut over. Eventually, they'd chase the car away, and eventually it (or another one like it) would be back. It was a game.

Damned annoying, though. Frustrating to the new homeowners who had invested so much in their inside-the-Loop swankiendas, only to have their expensive peace and quiet trashed at the whim of distasteful punks who evidently got off on being rude. Or just plain didn't give a shit.

A rock bounced off the side of the car. Another struck the roof. More followed in deliberate succession, hitting the trunk, the rear window, the driver's side door and the hood. Amidst serious cursing, four intentionally ugly-looking characters got out of the car to confront the pitcher.

He was a middle-aged new resident, wearing navy Everlast joggers and white Etonics. Some of the others on the street knew him vaguely as a slightly eccentric writer of some kind who occupied a newly-minted garage-apartment studio in the area. Close enough — he was one of them. Somewhat to their own surprise, they rallied

protectively to his side, cellular calls taking on a new urgency as the threats from the low-riders escalated. The thrower was undeterred, launching new salvos that struck home, doing considerable damage to the gaudy paint job and cheap chrome decorations of the cruiser. He didn't stop until a cop showed up and arrested him.

The punks filed charges. The tosser insisted on a jury trial, refused to hire an attorney and claimed that he was defending himself from an assault, citing the Biblical precedent of stoning bad actors. Several jury members — themselves no strangers to the pounding assault of unavoidably noxious noise from other shitheads — bought it and browbeat the rest of the panel into acquitting him.

Predictably, minority activists claimed it was racism and raised a stink. The whole mess became a *cause celebre* in the media, with the cranky stoner achieving something of a celebrity status among admirers who were tired of anti-nuisance enforcement apathy and overjoyed that somebody had finally stood up to low-life creeps and gotten away with it.

Soon after, a car sped down that same street in the early morning, tires screeching, shots from the driveby pouring into houses on both sides, injuring a dog. Consequently, other jukemobiles were stoned by newly-defiant gangs of angry homeowners who were energized by how good it felt and outraged by the threats of violence. In an impromptu show of force, bassers paraded

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slowly down Washington in ear-splitting protest, and when they got to jogger-infested Memorial Park, there was a massive stone-spewing confrontation. There were more arrests and more trials, but citizens who answered jury summons seemed to have had enough of the kind of irresponsible and offensive behavior that provoked rock-throwing reactions in the first place.

One thing led to another, and it eventually caused a lot of national public focus on the whole concept of Political Correctness, an abomination that showed every sign of having finally run its course in the mainstream of society. A lot of people had had quite enough of the obviously stupid blather about the supposed moral equivalency of alternative 'cultures' in their midst that celebrated illiteracy, illegitimacy, irresponsibility, rudeness, hatred, substance abuse, self-mutilation, dependence, impiety, ugliness, body odor and tasteless clothing. They were damned tired of enforced 'diversity', of having to put up with a bunch of crap from low-grade morons. As much as anything, it had to do with the utter exhaustion of public tolerance for the obvious dregs of society exercising their unearned license to be aggressively inconsiderate.

Yeah, that's it. Just plain inconsiderate. A long-rising tide of inconsiderate behavior threatened social order, destroying the quality of life for the majority of people who *had* had a decent upbringing and expected to treat and be treated with common courtesy. Not only did

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inconsiderate behavior go unpunished, the perpetrators seemed to revel in it — and nobody dared to protest for fear of offending the offenders' *sensibilities*.

Well, fuck that. The obvious truth is that some so-called 'cultures' *are* inferior. It was time to say so.

"I consider your unwelcome noise to be a deliberate assault — turn it off or I'll defend myself from further assault by whatever means are necessary."

"I've never owned a slave in my life — and I've never met anyone who's been one — so get over it."

"What the hell is wrong with Teachers' Union teachers who can't teach fundamental citizenship?"

"If things were so bad you had to leave *your* country, then don't bring it with you to *my* country."

"People who purposely dress to offend are not welcome here."

"That kind of behavior is offensive to *my* values."

"How dare you throw trash on my street?"

"Get up off of your ass and get a job."

"Your 'rights' end at my nose."

"I don't *owe* you *anything*."

"Make yourself useful."

"Learn something."

"Speak English."

"Act civilized."

"Clean it up."

"Get in line."

"Go away."

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"Shut up."

"Stop it."

"No."

It *wasn't* racist. There was a traditional, mainstream culture in the heartland of America that had been abused, disrespected, laughed at, ripped-off, humiliated, scorned, ignored — and made to feel *guilty* for achieving prosperity, for having children who excelled in school, for making things work, and for creating, defending and maintaining a damned fine nation despite rabid criticism of their philosophy, motivation, ancestry, politics, religion and way of life. You didn't have to be of European extraction to belong. There were plenty of people from ghettos who had found a way to become a part of the American melting pot, from Jews and Italians and Irish to Blacks and Hispanics and Asians — and they were just as much a part of the new paradigm of resurgent pride as anyone whose ancestors came over on the Mayflower.

The stoning incident may have been a spark, but the underlying resentment had been stewing for a long time, mostly on radio talk shows and the Internet, and around water coolers and bar stools. The ubiquitous PC censorship had kept it from spilling over — because stating the obvious or telling the truth when it conflicted with the arrogant theories of social activists and sneering academics made the exercise of Constitutionally protected free speech a target for opportunistic lawsuits, bureaucratic harassment, media lynching and character

assassination.

Want a good example? How about the utterly forbidden topic of Arthur Jensen's heretical book, *Bias In Mental Testing*? According to one well-documented and scientifically rigorous study after another (carefully cited by the author), the only conclusion a truly unbiased observer can come to is that, for the most part, *there isn't any*. By golly, it turns out that there are some groups of people who, no matter how you slice it, do not test as well on standardized intelligence tests as others. That uncomfortable fact is unacceptable to the PC mafia — so heaven help the unfortunate academician or commentator who publicly addressed such a thing with an open mind.

Curiously, one of the contributing factors that may have made a lot of people start thinking about how they *really* felt probably had something to do with Susan. Her arrival in the public awareness created an unavoidable cultural shock, an effect as fundamentally disturbing to the inhabitants of this planet as the arrival of Cortes (and *his* alien technology — horses and guns) was to the citizens of the Aztec Empire. No costume, guise or demeanor could hide the unwelcome fact that humans had been ousted from the center of the universe — again — and were suddenly backwards, trivial and probably unimportant compared to the powerful, mysterious creatures who had sent her.

For the most part, people absolutely *adored* Sara. She was the new Princess of the news shows and tabloids, a

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cutie who did good deeds cheerfully and self-effacingly, cared about people and acted like the kind of kid everyone wished they had (instead of what they really had). In spite of what should be her essential disconnect with humanity, Sara was regarded as fitting in with the values and ideals of the dominant culture of her more-or-less adopted country, and people responded to that. This incredibly *alien* little girl acted like one of them. Well, why in the hell couldn't all these other outsiders in our midst overcome their own alienness — their own maddening differentness — and start behaving reasonably?

Susan was another matter, and people made the distinction instinctually. Dammit, she — Susan, not Sara — *was* alien. Incomprehensibly alien. Frighteningly alien. Somehow, the videos of the White Sands demonstration were leaked, played over and over again on late-night cable and satellite stations to the accompaniment of ominous speculation. Unsettling rumors and paranoid delusions traveled the whisper circuit. Her reported seamless integration with the Internet was seen as some kind of takeover, and her apparently near-omniscient awareness of the ether was viewed with alarm.

Susan-the-robot was regarded as being indestructibly powerful, unstoppable and practically all-knowing, with unlimited capabilities and possessing vast powers of alien calculation. And all of this potential for good or ill was under the perhaps uncertain control of a darling little girl who was artificially manufactured by unknown entities

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for unknowable purposes. She could choose to be accountable to no human agency, law or government. There were a lot of people who wet their sheets just thinking about it.

In this election year, the two major political parties appeared to be slightly bumfuzzled by the significance of the sudden reversal of the social pendulum going on around them.

The Dem's knee-jerk reaction was to rally to the now-besieged minorities and fringes to whom they had traditionally pandered by cranking up the media PC legions, thereby driving a wedge between themselves and Mom'n'Pop America, who was tired of supporting — and putting up with — their whining demands. Their President, and his annointed successor, were indelibly tainted with just the sort of unacceptable behavior that was rapidly beginning to attain zero-tolerance status in the country at large. Liberalism was suddenly being unceremoniously hauled off to the dustbin of history.

The GOP did not profit from this, being seen by their own grass-roots supporters as having lacked the will and courage to do the job they had contracted with the voters to do. Even though a type of conservative militancy was sweeping the nation, many of the politicians who called themselves conservatives were found wanting and regarded as weak failures.

In other words, there was suddenly an unexpectedly

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large chunk of the voting population that was looking for fresh leadership, for a strong voice that promised to empower them and give them permission to fight back against all those who had disrespected them. *And*, someone who would give them answers about how to deal with the unknown — especially aliens.

The issue of Susan became an object in the campaign. The left-of-center candidate portrayed her as being on their side, a caring and giving woman (oppressed minority) who would embrace social justice and equality, battle class enemies, and dole out all things to all people — a sort of flying branch of do-gooding Big Government who could be relied upon to always save the day. They hadn't, of course, consulted *her* about it. As a matter of fact, the President reminded her quite a bit of the Wizard of Haughz.

The formerly-right-of-center party (the center having marched past them) claimed Susan was really one of *them*, characterizing her as a dynamo of economic development, imagining Great Things being accomplished in partnership with her abilities. Why, she'd be able to take on the national debt, lower taxes, shrink the federal bureaucracy, support law-and-order initiatives, and defend our sacred shores. At least some of their leadership *did* consult her about their fantasies. She was polite and non-committal, thinking to herself all the while how much they reminded her of the Nazghoul.

The alternative to all of the above was a new force in

American politics. There had been third-party candidates before — some, like Abe Lincoln, even successful. Mostly, these wannabees acted out the role of spoilers, splitting the majority and making it possible for opportunistic scalawags who should never have even been nominated for dog catcher to wind up getting blowjobs in the Oval Office.

Maybe this time, it would be different. There was a new hat in the ring from a candidate who epitomized the luck — or destiny — of being in the right place at the right time, one who had all along loudly embodied all of the pride in traditional American values that was suddenly the new vogue. His policies transcended a mere chicken in every pot, seeming to promise a rebirth of the nation as an unashamedly rightful Colossus astride the whole world, justly administering a *Pax Americana* that would last a thousand years. He'd been a highly publicized crusader at the forefront of the battle against public enemies that even the feds wouldn't touch, his struggles on behalf of 'the people' portrayed autobiographically as a war against inconsiderate creeps of the larger variety — as if he had been throwing rocks at limousines.

The fact that he was a black man served only to allow his followers to pat themselves on the back and brag about being truly liberated from racism in their antipathy to undesirable elements. Besides, there were a whole lot of nuevo-conservative blacks and Hispanics who felt empowered to finally leave the liberal blok and vote for

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one of their own.

But what *really* set the Black Knight apart from the rest of the field was in his regard of Susan.

"It is obvious," he said, "that she is a powerful gift to our planet from her Cryptoalien masters. But she is an unwanted gift fraught with temptation. The test is in our embracing such a gift, lest our greed for what she can do for us leads to dependence on alien designs. We must choose to manage our own affairs and return this gift, with thanks, to those from whence it came."

Well, that's what a lot of folks wanted to hear. 'Aliens go home'.

Sara couldn't help but be reminded of Soraun. For one thing, she knew he was a phoney with a hidden agenda. So did a lot of other people, but they were being shouted down by an increasing number of brownshirts who believed what they wanted to believe and were gaining the momentum of a popular movement based on the tendency of a suddenly released *volk* righteousness to embrace authoritarianism.

The White Sands videos, the whisper campaigns, the strident public pronouncements — all directed against Susan — were being promoted by one central propaganda machine ([Team Blue](#)) so as to create a single entity that could serve as a scapegoat for all those who were frightened or envious of the alien menace. Sara — who was beginning to feel like she was back in Muria — naively spoke out against this bogus conspiracy, and thus

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validated too many suspicions.

A coalition of the righteously indignant, conspiracy paranoids, nationalistic jingoists, the politically fed-up, contrarians, soccer moms, religious rightists, neo-fascists, reactionaries, protectionists, fools and idiots narrowly elected Bruce Wayans President of the United States.

Chapter Thirty-two: Death

Alex was feeling somewhat depressed. He hadn't played a gig in months and missed it. There was a time when he was just too busy with all the NASA stuff and the media hoopla to take any calls from bandleaders, so they had pretty much stopped calling him. In any event, some of them were probably not eager to have even anything peripheral to do with the Susan controversy. It wouldn't do to have some stormtrooper in the audience recognize the alien's keeper and start a row. Very bad for business.

There were a lot fewer Russians in Mrs. J's Workers' Paradise. Some of them had passed away, others were in nursing homes, many had opted for less conspicuous circumstances, and a few of the more robust ones had actually moved back to Russia, preferring to take their chances in the snow rather than face what they perceived as an ominous direction for American society since Wayans' inauguration. It was that bad.

Strangers filled the apartments. At least there wasn't as much noise as there used to be, and all of the formerly slovenly, unpleasant and obnoxious types were suddenly trying to affect manners and careful conformity. There were you'd-better-be-there consciousness-raising rallies in the Rec Room now, sponsored by the neighborhood Courtesy Committee...

Mrs. J had mostly retreated to the 'A' unit, keeping to

herself and her books unless Sara paid a visit. Dinah had become irritable and aloof, snapping at Alex over stuff so trivial he didn't even know what it was about. He just didn't get along with his boss, Lanna — and the feeling was mutual. Sara... Well, it seemed to him in his present state of mind that she just didn't really need him all that much anymore. So much for the women in his life.

There wasn't really anybody to hang with. The Cubans had vanished, except for Raoul and Maria — who were always busy. Jimmie was never around, and Silvers hadn't spoken to him since the unfortunate accident at the press conference.

Money wasn't a problem, but Alex didn't care about that. He was well-paid by Exocybernautics to do as little as possible and hardly bothered to even make a pretense of showing up for work. He wandered around aimlessly sometimes, but the people he met didn't seem to have as much fun as they used to — all anybody talked about was politics these days.

He was so bored and lonely — with Sara off on some NASA salvage mission in deep space for what promised to take the better part of a week — that he didn't notice the constant surveillance when he was out and about. He felt almost a sense of relief when a couple of grim-looking MIB types hustled him into a van outside of a movie theater. At least it was something to do — but they didn't talk to him at all.

He was handcuffed and blindfolded and hustled onto a

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plane for a long ride, then transferred to a helicopter and later a truck, still bound, still without a word being uttered by his captors. Eventually, he felt like he was on some kind of elevator that seemed to descend forever, followed by a squealing ride in a cold and uncomfortable contraption that traveled on bumpy rails. They took off his handcuffs and stripped him to his shorts, then thrust him into some subterranean room, still blindfolded.

A heavy door clanged shut behind him and then there was silence. He was miserable, hungry, very thirsty and had to go to the bathroom in the worst way. He cautiously reached up and removed his blindfold and discovered he was in a windowless steel and concrete version of a No-tell Motel room. He barely made it to the bathroom in time.

The door to the room belonged on a bank vault — locked from the outside, naturally. There was no phone. What looked like it might be a closet turned out to be a large storeroom filled with enough survival rations to last him a very long time. He had running water and air, electricity and a kitchenette, even a washer and drier so that he could keep the grey penitentiary ensembles they had provided him with clean. All he had for company was a TV.

Breadcrumbs, he thought. *Never leave home without 'em*. He wished he could've left a trail.

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"Missing?" Sara demanded. "What do you mean, missing? How can he be missing? You mean, he wandered off somewhere? Isn't there a note or anything?"

Dinah was even grimmer than usual. "The day after you left the planet, he went to a movie and never came back. I checked with everybody. No word, no calls, not even a postcard."

"You think he just decided to take a road trip?" Sara asked. "I know he wasn't... That he was..."

"Vas feekink sorry for self," Mrs. J finished for her. "He vas thinkink ev'rybody ignorink him, beink too busy all the time. Maybe so, but I am not thinkink he would be takink trip vithout sayink bye-bye."

"He didn't even take his toothbrush," Dinah said. "I tracked down his car to a police impound lot on Washington Avenue. It had been towed from the theater lot after a couple of days. You know how he always kept a stash of mad money in the ashtray? It was still there." Actually, it hadn't been, but Dinah had somehow managed to wring a confession from the tow-truck driver.

Sara closed her eyes for a few moments. Dinah and Mrs J could only guess what vast resources were being brought to bear on following any kind of electronic trail that might shed some light on what might have happened.

Finally, she looked at them, obviously worried now. "He hasn't used his credit cards or his cell phone or cashed a check. There are no records anywhere of plane tickets or motel reservations or police reports or sightings.

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His car shows up on the ATM camera tape across the street from the theater, and a few minutes after the only movie he would have watched lets out, a rental van pulls up next to it. There was someone in the way for a while, so I couldn't see anything else, but that same van's on a security cam tape at some apartments on Highway 3 just 21 minutes later — and *isn't* on a jewelry store's tape just past Ellington Field until nearly an hour after that. During that time, a government Learjet took off from there heading west without a flightplan. It was logged through San Antonio air traffic control as an unidentified aircraft and doesn't show up again until later that evening in Chicago. There's no record of where it went or who the flight crew was. There was enough time for it to have landed somewhere in west Texas or New Mexico. Or it could've turned somewhere and landed anywhere in between, or not even have landed at all. The van rental was to John Doe for cash and their tape's been looped too many times to get a latent image."

"That's pretty tenuous," said Dinah.

"You got a better idea?" Mrs J challenged.

"No, it fits," she replied. "Bogus rental, no flight plan, Ellington Field, government plane, Chicago — all conveniently while you were lost in space for NASA, who hasn't otherwise been too friendly lately."

Sara added, "Team Blue, Wayan's special project to save the world from alien monsters and win elections. They're based in Chicago. I don't have any kind of

electronic connection to them at all. The CIA and KGB are practically transparent compared to them."

"Would be pretty dumb, Wayans kidnappink Alex," Mrs J said. "Couldn't be hidink him from you forever."

"If he's far enough underground somewhere, it *might* take forever to find him on my own."

"But vhat for they hidink him? Blackmail? Ransom? Maybe provokink *you* to be doink somethink stupid?"

Dinah said, "That's certainly something to keep in mind, Sara. You've got to stay calm about this."

Sara looked anxious. "I don't know if I can. I mean, the thing with Alex — it's just like Gundolf said, which is probably why it was in my dream or whatever. I just *have* to look out for him. It's something that's built in by the Cryptos, or I'da probably accidentally fried him that first day. It's a compulsion, and it's so deep I don't have to think about it — something that Susan would take care of automatically. Like if — I dunno — someone took a shot at him..."

"Hah!" said Mrs J. "Bullet easy to catch, no? You cannot be around all the time, keepink him from cuttink himself vith razor. Cannot keep him from catchink pneumonia or gettink old."

"Well," Dinah said, "Maybe we should've looked into the secret identity thing a little more thoroughly. Or made sure he was stashed somewhere safe while you're away."

"Alex would never agree to be 'stashed', and I'd have to respect his opinion. Anyway, it's too late for that, and

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now I gotta do whatever it takes, if he's in real danger. If there's any kind of potentially serious threat of harm that Susan sees, and any way to do something — *anything*..." Sara looked almost desperate. "They could make me do things that... That I don't even want to think about."

Dinah was thoughtful. "So if anybody knew about this, or figured it out, they could use Alex to try to gain some kind of control over you. The Cryptos had to have been aware of the potential for mischief. They must have purposely designed you in just this way so as to make you vulnerable to humans after all. At least, ruthless humans — or ruthless governments. Part of whatever damned experiment or test they're running, I suppose."

"There's not too many other people besides us who know all the details about my virtual-reality dream-trip. Unless Jimmie talks in his sleep..."

"You mean, Lanna?"

"Wouldn't be the first time she ratted me out to Wayans' people."

"Bah," Mrs. J said. "Is not too hard to be figurink out that Alex beink important to you. Always lurkink somewhere close by. Maybe not knowink *how* important, but takink hostages is beink very old tradition for gangster regimes."

"I don't know," Dinah said, "The fact that Alex survived the first couple of days with you is a pretty glaring clue to something like this. Wayans might have suspected something that maybe Lanna confirmed. I don't

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think anyone in a position of responsibility would take such a risk unless they knew something..."

Mrs. J interrupted, "Vhy you thinkink Wayans is beink in 'position of beink responsible'? You givink him too much credit, maybe. Wayans vas always sayink he take care of nasty alien. Vhat else he goink to be doink? Hah!"

"It's has to be a control thing. He knows something, I'm sure of it. He wouldn't take Alex unless he thought it would give him some kind of special leverage. He'd just have to have more to go on than sentimental attachment to a father-figure."

"Family is always making best hostages. Is reason enough."

"If he *is* a hostage," Sara said gloomily.

"Dead hostage no good. If Wayans holdink him, Alex is now safest man on planet. Pretty soon, you vill be gettink phone call."

"I have a bad feeling about this. I sure wish the Cryptos had just made me allergic to some kind of Cryptonite, instead. Seriously, I'd eat a box of the stuff if I had to do it to protect Alex. I mean, if that was the choice, I really would — I'd *have* to. Not that I wouldn't anyway."

"Is like Russian fairy tale," said Mrs J, "about ogre vith heart in egg. Guy stealink egg vas havink his vay vith ogre, threatenink to break egg and squeeze heart. Ogre givink him anythink he vants."

"So," said Dinah, "I wonder what Wayans wants."

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Sara thought about trying to check out every cave and mine in the area the plane could have overflowed, but it would take weeks to cover each possibility one by one. She'd have to come within a few hundred yards of Alex to detect him reliably through a lot of rock, and would have to keep her speed down so as to avoid causing enough damage to collapse whatever void space he might be in. Also, he could have been transferred to another plane and be practically anywhere by now — and for that matter, the whole scenario might even be wrong or a decoy. After all, she hadn't actually been able to spot Alex or any positive sign of him on the security camera tapes — which had been recorded over enough times so that Susan was barely able to pick out the latent images from the foreground noise.

So she went to Chicago. She had to make sure it was actually a kidnapping and that Wayans or his people were behind it. For all she knew, it might've been common street thugs, or maybe Alex was jamming with his musician buddies in some jazz bar, laughing at them. What the heck, she really should try to find out what Team Blue was up to anyway.

She sneaked into town on a freight train, covered her uniform with civvies, stuffed her hair into a floppy hat and donned some oversized Ray-Bans. Looking like a tourist, she took the el into downtown and then walked casually to Wayans Manor, joining a tour of the now-famous landmark. Parking herself in a stall in the most

centrally located ladies' restroom in the public-access area, she started a very careful kreen search, wary of sensors that might tip off those who might be expecting her to eventually show up here (and not necessarily in a good mood).

She didn't really know what she was looking for. It was unlikely that a conspiratorial conclave would be in session. She knew that the Team Blue *modus operandi* was to not commit anything to electronic media. If they had Alex, they certainly wouldn't keep him here.

The tenuous fingers of her awareness reached out cautiously, mapping room by room, following the plumbing and wiring, scanning for security cameras and lines of communication. She categorized each individual according to the jobs they seemed to be doing, keeping tabs on their movements, logging their keystrokes, measuring the sympathetic vibrations of nearby objects as they spoke and converting the signals into the sounds of their conversations.

The private living quarters of the mansion were tightly guarded. The adjoining offices were busy with the routine work of the Chief Executive of the nation. Wait a minute... Here? Instead of the White House?

Hmm... The heavily armed security forces wore earplugs connected to two-ways in their suit jackets along with inconspicuous microphones under their lapels, tied into a sophisticated central radio network. Their chatter was efficient, precise and disciplined. Ah — Secret

Service. Wayans was here, evidently having arrived only hours before. If he anticipated a showdown with Susan, maybe he felt more secure in his old fortress. *Lotta good it'll do him*, she thought.

She cast about for his location, eventually following the architecture down below the house and grounds into the warren of interconnected bunkers and tunnels. She could just make out a heavily shielded cavernous central command room at the edge of her range. She had to keep her EM emissions down to the absolute minimum to avoid detection, so it was extremely difficult to get a decent enough reading on the people below to distinguish Wayans himself with any degree of certainty. But there was an enormous space on the barely-perceptible lowest level that corresponded with Dinah's description of his ultimate lair. A flickering presence made its way down the hall and through the adjoining anteroom, followed by a smaller wraith. They entered the cave-like space together, nearly impossible to focus in on at this distance.

She concentrated, sending quick pulses of tightly-beamed awareness in their direction, gingerly skirting the traps set to detect just such an intrusion. A picture of their surroundings slowly developed in her mind — the massive desk, the high-backed dark leather chair, a minimal scattering of other furniture. The man who took his place in the chair behind the desk resolved even more slowly, seeming to emerge from enveloping shadows until she was fairly certain of his identity. She could guess who

his companion must be.

There was something else. Something more familiar somehow, another presence of some kind that beckoned to her. It was fainter by far, teasing her with its call to her probing tendrils. It spoke to her of potential significance. She had to get closer.

She made her way to the kitchen, playing the same hide-and-seek games she'd played on the *Enterprise*. Her lasers made a fleck of paint explode minutely, the tiny sound distracting for a moment a watchful eye that never saw her fleeting form streak by. Puffs of cold air made other eyes blink. An image from one camera flickered briefly when the agent watching the monitors sipped his coffee. Another camera seemed to have developed a temporary problem with its horizontal synch. In another place, an overloaded circuit breaker tripped, plunging a corridor into sudden darkness. A copper kettle unexpectedly boiled over, drawing the attention of the cooks for a few seconds. Nothing out of the ordinary, really.

Sara wound up huddled at the bottom of the dumbwaiter shaft servicing an underground staff dining room, now half-filled with people on break. No matter, she was where she wanted to be for now. Her senses reached out.

No doubt about it. The President of the United States was at his desk, examining something on it, with Robbins in attendance. The package on the desk drew her

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attention. It was a bundle of clothes, radiating an unmistakable familiarity to her that was like a comforting smell. With an ever-increasing feeling of dread, she abandoned all caution, keening the bundle with full intensity, setting off alarms that scrambled defenses and bodyguards throughout the complex.

She could feel the smooth texture of a credit card, reading the pattern of raised numbers in an instant. It belonged to Alex. That's all she needed.

The panicked staffers in the dining room heard the ripping sound of Sara's civilian clothing being torn from around her costume shortly before the dumbwaiter door and half the wall shattered, revealing a little blonde girl who wasn't at all cute anymore. They tried futilely to run, but she passed them in an instant, leaving them falling in her wake like bowling pins.

The Secret Service tried valiantly to do their duty, but Sara swept them aside without pausing, the whining sound of ricochets from their uselessly expended rounds mingling with their ineffectively shouted commands to halt. Steel doors slammed shut in her path, designed during the Cold War to be blast-proof. They did not measurably slow her down, the concussion of their sudden destruction shaking the foundations of the manor above.

She tossed the last two Praetorians into next week, flung the door to the inner sanctum off its hinges, and confronted Wayans across his desk.

Toomie Starks

"Ah — Miss Corel," he greeted her charmingly, ignoring the clangor of alarms and frantic shouts from outside. He rose from his chair to offer his hand to her. "I was just about to send for you. May I call you Sara?"

She pointedly spurned his handshake. "This is not a social call."

Wayans told her calmly, "Then I will assume that you understand the significance of these garments."

She answered with barely controlled fury, "Don't mistake me for some comic book wimp. If anything happens to Alex, I'll hurt you for a *very* long time, in ways you can't even *imagine*."

Unpreturbed, he motioned her to a chair. She ignored him, so he sat down. Another bodyguard loyally flung himself through the ruined doorway and bounced off of Sara. Robbins helped the stunned man to his feet and told him to take care of the noise and see to it they weren't disturbed. Quiet soon descended.

"Well," Wayans said graciously, "I believe your timely arrival has exceeded the most optimistic entry in the office pool. I'm impressed by your capabilities — I see they have not been exaggerated."

"You'd be surprised just how capable I can be," she told him. "You can't possibly expect to keep me from finding him."

"Maybe not forever," Robbins said, "But long enough. He's in protective custody. We wouldn't want anything to happen to him — but it's been arranged so

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that it's up to you. When you do locate him, I suggest you think twice about blindly barging in to try to effect a jailbreak, if you're worried about his safety."

Well, that was plain. He was booby trapped somehow, in a way that made them feel completely confident.

"We are not thugs or gangsters, Sara," said Wayans. "Alex is in custody for resisting arrest at the Federal Building in Houston. The part you played in thwarting the exercise of law enforcement was not appreciated by some of the officers whom you humiliated. The extraordinary nature of your protective instinct in his regard requires an extraordinary response."

Oh hell, thought Sara, they know. No wonder they're so damned smug.

"You have to realize that we regard Alex as something of a foster father to you, just as you do. As such, he bears some responsibility for your wanton disregard of laws, regulations, private and government property, and the negligent destruction in which you have engaged."

Robbins read from a list, "According to reports filed with the Houston Police Department, you vandalized an apartment, damaged a cement truck, partially destroyed a city recreation center, broke numerous downtown windows, and recklessly endangered a young man — requiring a risky and expensive rescue operation by city emergency workers. Federal complaints include theft of

govenment property, dumping of said property in a restricted area, aiding and abetting, conspiracy, interfering with lawful arrest, illegal wire-tapping, interstate commerce violations too numerous to mention — and a host of charges stemming from your unauthorized visit to the USS Enterprise, from piracy to inciting mutiny. Which, I might add, appears to have been inspired by Mr. Luther. Then there's the little international incident involving what used to be called the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Oh, and today's assault on the President of the United States ought to pad out your record quite nicely."

"Yeah," said Sara, trying not to look taken aback, "There's also Singapore..."

Wayans waved his hand dismissively. "Please, Sara. We know your heart is in the right place. That is not the real issue here."

"The real issue," said Sara, "is that you cannot possibly imagine how pissed off I am right now — and how much you're gonna regret it."

"My dear," countered Wayans, "The real issue is how committed I am to fulfilling my mandate."

Wayans leaned back even farther into his chair. "I have no doubt whatsoever that you can exact a terrible revenge. Believe me, I don't want to find out. And this potential for incredible destruction is at the crux of the matter."

Sara said evenly and precisely, "I have never purposely hurt anyone. I would never do so without good

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reason and sufficient provocation."

"As determined by you?" Robbins said. "Or how about maybe some musician nobody ever heard of. Or a bunch of former Communist party bosses. Or a disgruntled ex-employee of Mr. Wayans."

"By me," she said firmly.

"What about Congress or the United Nations — or the President? Who set you above the rest of us?"

"I do not claim to be 'above' anybody. But I have the power to make my own decisions as I see fit. I am, after all, very well informed, you know, and not exactly stupid. And I am also unbiased — I can't be bribed, lied to or intimidated. And *I* don't have a secret agenda."

"Well, I, for one, do not agree to be judged by some irresponsible space creature who is unaccountable for her actions."

"And I, for one," replied Sara hotly, "will not be bullied by a jumped-up little hoodlum. No matter what you say, the fact is that you've taken my father hostage and are threatening his life. This doesn't look much like 'The Rule of Law' to me."

"Sara," said Wayans, "Are you a citizen of the United States?"

"Not technically," she admitted.

"Of course not. You are, in fact, an alien. Like it or not, you have entered our country illegally and caused a certain amount of unwitting — perhaps even good-natured — damage. Frankly, I don't care about that.

Toomie Starks

You've also been a great help and even an inspiration to many people, and I commend you and actually admire you for that. However, you are by your very nature a source of nightmares for others. Partially as a result of the fears of a significant proportion of the populace, I was elected President."

"Fears you manipulated," she countered.

"Fears that are, nevertheless, no less real, whatever you may think. This election has given me a mandate to deal with you as a potential threat. I have therefore invoked the War Powers Act so as to be able to accomplish this mandate by whatever means are necessary. Do you understand?"

"Oh, I understand perfectly. Do you think the rest of the people do? Or are they irrelevant now?"

Wayans smiled. "For the moment, everybody is focusing on you. In any case, this does confer upon me the legal authority to take extraordinary measures, however regrettable they may seem to be. You must appreciate the credibility of my seriousness in this matter. I am perfectly aware of the risks involved."

Wayans continued, "You are, unmistakeably, a gift to our whole planet. A gift that we did not ask for, but one which could well impact great numbers of our citizens. Obviously, we are being challenged to come to terms with this gift, and our decision could well determine our entire destiny as a species. Our use of you as a gift, for all the powers you can place at our disposal, leads inevitably to

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our dependence upon those powers and makes us subservient to your will and judgement. That is the nature of *any* relationship between unequal partners.

"A decision is required of us, and I am in the position of making that decision."

Sara objected, "You're just the President of one country, and only just barely at that, thanks to me."

Robbins said, "The Speaker of the House is just the representative of one small district. No matter how close his election back home, or how narrow his party's majority, once he becomes Speaker, he controls the entire House. By appointing committee chairmen and setting legislative agendas, he is one of the most powerful men in the nation."

Wayans said. "So it is with the leaders of nations. We are such a backwards, tribal planet, I'm sure — but our tribe is the preeminent one on this world. I have consulted with the leaders of other nations, and the consensus is with me."

Oh, yeah, she realized, the last thing political leaders want to do is to have to deal with me. Especially the nasty ones....

"We must reject this gift, Sara. You must leave us to our own devices, to make our own future and fight our own battles. Your help, even your presence, stifles us. Our ultimate growth depends on learning from our own mistakes and finding our own solutions. If we must therefore suffer when we could have had ease, then we

shall be the better for it in the end."

"You expect me to agree with that?"

"Yes I do, for I am as one with the destiny of this world."

He's a looney, thought Sara, a complete megalomaniac.

"I know that this is my decision to make," Wayans continued, "because your makers have provided me with the means by which to accomplish its implementation. And I believe that you are aware of this fact."

A sudden apprehension gripped Sara's stomach. She could only stare, wide-eyed.

"Alex is the key," said Robbins. "Maybe you don't have any scruples about zapping whoever you decide is a bad guy, but he means a lot more to your programming than just being dear old Dad. You can't hurt him even accidentally, and can't do anything *or fail to do anything* that'll keep him from getting hurt."

"You're guessing," Sara replied, hoping it didn't sound as desperate as she felt.

"Oh, yeah?" he taunted her. "Then why don't you just vaporize me? I'm the one who planned this whole thing, I'm the one who's pointing a gun at his head. Go ahead — here," he said, holding up his hand, "Take a finger. Blast away. Show me you mean business."

Sara hesitated — and that brief blink of an eye confirmed everything.

"You can't do it, 'cause you know you'll get one of his

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in the mail. And you will, too. You'd better believe it."

She was transfixed, unable to move.

"So stick this in your programming," Robbins went on mercilessly, "Somewhere far from here, where it'll take even *you* too long to find it, a timer has started. A short one. The only thing you can do to prevent Alex from having to learn to play the accordion with one hand is to deactivate yourself."

"What? No way," she shook her head. "I'm not gonna..."

"Oh, yes you will," he emphasised. "That's the deal, and there's nothing you can do about it."

"Even if I wanted to," she said, "I can't... I don't know how."

"Susan does. Anything you've ever seen done in the comics, or you've ever decided that you wanted to be able to do, Susan figured out. This won't be too hard, 'cause you've been there before. You're going to turn back into a popsicle, just the way your pop found you."

Sara somehow knew that he was right.

Wayans sounded reassuring, "We'll take very good care of Alex, my dear. You can count on that. We wouldn't want anything at all to happen to him for a long time. Certainly for as long as you remain deactivated."

"Just in case you *do* decide to thaw out," Robbins said, "You'll see a little offering on the desk here, just for you. The first time you wake up, there'll be twenty recent finger- and toenail clippings and a lock of freshly cut hair."

You'll know whose they are, and what condition he's in — and *we'll* know if you take a peek. The timer starts again, same conditions apply. The second time you defrost, there'll be five fewer fingernails. And so on. And what with all the recent advances in medical science — who knows? — we all might be around for a very long time."

"I think you'll be safe right here, as well," Wayans added. "I'll have this room turned into a copy of your well-shielded Fort Solitude in your honor, so that your slumber won't be disturbed by a lot of radio noise."

"You can't possibly be sure of this," she protested. "Lanna couldn't have known everything. Not like this. Not enough for you to risk everything..."

"Lanna?" said Robbins. "Who's Lanna?"

"Not Lanna?" Sara said, confused. "Then who...?"

"Ah. She wants to know who our expert advisor on computers and aliens is."

Wayans nodded. "It is time for her to find out."

"The final nail in the coffin, so to speak," said Robbins.

She kreened a figure emerging from the control room and making his way to Wayan's office. With the sickness of terrible betrayal, she turned to the door.

"Jimmie," she wept.

"Sara..." He seemed to be almost as stricken as she did, but also determined to go through with some awful deed. He looked pleadingly at her. "Please, listen to me. It can't be helped. It's the only way. You've got to let Susan

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do this."

"Yeah," said Robbins, "and you don't have a whole lot of time left to do it in, either. Tick, tick, tick — and Alex is a lefty."

"Why, Jimmie?" Sara's mind wailed, *You said you'd always love me.*

"There was no choice. It has to be done this way. Just think of this — you'll be gone, but not forgotten. We'll still have your memories. Be sure of that — that we still have your memories. Susan will know what to do."

Sara stood before them, unmoving. She felt herself slipping away somewhere. Her consciousness unraveled while she stood by helplessly. There was nothing she could do to break out of the box of compulsion, nothing she wanted to do. She just slowly went out. Dimly, she heard a voice, repeating, "...your memories..."

The three men watched as the first flecks of frost began to appear on the still figure. It was rapidly becoming uncomfortably cold in the great room. Robbins looked triumphant, Jimmie looked anxious, and Wayans shook his head sadly.

He quoted softly, as if offering a fitting epitaph, "To be, or not to be..."

Jimmie looked at the frozen figure and added, "To sleep, perchance to dream..."

Chapter Thirty-three: Welcome to Hell

Death, if that's what it was, wasn't so bad — at least not at first. In fact, it wasn't really much of anything.

It could be that the physical components that comprise the spirit of a sentient being — whether myriad interconnected brain cells awash in nutrients and hormones, or computing circuits organized by logical operations and programming — do not add up to the totality that is perceived as consciousness, personality, self-awareness, or what might even be called a soul. Maybe there is something more, something apart from the animal or machine that houses such an indefinable, precious thing — something that is independent of its host and can survive the inevitable separation that occurs when the merely physical can no longer support the ghostly essence that gives it meaning.

What then becomes of an unanchored soul? It is no longer nourished by sensory input and is incapable of action, cut off from the tools that shape rationality and reason. There are no eyes to see, no ears to hear, no touch or feeling, taste or smell. There is no intellect without a brain to support it, no memory, and no communication, either with external phenomena or with internal feelings. Motion and time cannot be measured or experienced, and are therefore irrelevant and meaningless. There is no pain and there is no joy. There is only the peace of oblivion and the flickering flame of irreducible essence. Death is

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the atom of being, adrift in eternity.

Or maybe there is nothing at all. The universe goes on, with other beings winking briefly in and out of existence, fooling themselves with notions of meaningfulness between infinite stretches of non-existence. The thought of a frightful void on either side of a life that is the merest chance in a sea of alternate possibilities cannot be contemplated without encountering a primal dread. The mere thought of such insignificance, of a past and future where the individual does not exist, is reason enough to invoke the sheltering attentions of a transcendent deity.

While alive, it is impossible to know of death, because nothing can be relied upon but the personal experience of existence. That there are even other sentient beings is a supposition that is inevitably based on the interpretation of sensory data, of which the veracity must always be suspect. The mind itself is a thing apart, unsure of what might constitute the difference between reality and dreams, illusion or substance. Who can say that the perceptions that pour into the mind are true or false? Especially now that the possibility of providing a virtual reality can be contemplated, and consciousness itself may someday be manufactured. An individual can only know that there is awareness, and therefore existence — nothing else is certain.

What is the difference between infinity and eternity? There is infinity on the point of a pin, and eternity in the

blink of an eye. They are the length and breadth of death. Within the compass of these measurements, every outcome is inevitable.

Sara's essence drifted thoughtlessly — insensate and alone. Time did not pass and space did not matter. There was only a formless perception of nothingness, while she spiraled relentlessly toward some state of lowest energy, the remnants of her former life dissipating like forgotten clouds over a barren landscape. She became a wave-function that defined her basic identity, a uniqueness shaped and filtered by her experiences, but reduced to a singular mathematical equation.

When at last there was nothing left of her *but* her, her awareness opened, relaxing in a final surrender. She dimly sensed somehow that there were other wave forms, other irreducible entities that impinged upon the structure of her primal identity, vaguely impacting her consciousness briefly as she impacted theirs. She could not touch them, could not reach out, could not speak or see — and so it did not seem to matter. It wasn't even interesting. It just was.

She was reduced to thoughtless self-absorption, contemplating a navel she no longer had, looping her feelinglessness endlessly upon itself. It seemed to be the custom of this place, the others who randomly wandered through the radius of her dim perception turned inward as well.

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They seemed to drift aimlessly, sometimes looming greatly, sometimes as only the faintest echo. There was a perception of individuality — as if they may have once been unique personalities — but there was no sharing of remembrances, of what they may have been or learned in lives gone by, or perhaps might anticipate in lives still to come. It was as if she was a senseless, primitive single-celled organism in a vast, dark sea teeming with others of her kind, randomly carried by eddies and currents, touching briefly and then being swept along. Or that a universe of utter darkness, formless and empty, was filled with swirling points of negligible energy that exchanged random particles of uncertainty in meaningless non-interactions.

Eventually, her fundamental nature overcame her ennui and resignation, and she stirred somehow to make some kind of contact, to share some part of her essence with something of theirs, but her meager efforts foundered upon their indifference. She came to feel trapped in solitude, surrounded by uncaring multitudes who wrapped themselves inviolably in their own misery. The isolation magnified her own despair as she tried not to give in to hopelessness.

Why should it be this way? If so many others were gathered together in an eternal congregation, wouldn't a network of mutual sharing make endlessness bearable? Surely, they all had unique contributions to make, stories to tell, remembrances and experiences. It could be the

Toomie Starks

Elysian Fields, at the very least, but none reciprocated her efforts. It was such a waste.

And so she might have drifted timelessly, until a greater awareness touched her. She basked in the glow of it, without understanding or comprehension, as a plant receives sunlight. It examined her and judged her, measuring her soul with precision and understanding. Finally, it cradled her essence in its enveloping aura and called her forth.

There were sensations, long forgotten. There were memories, stirring confusingly. There were thoughts that whirled and spun. She was overwhelmed with the glory of it all, exulting at being somehow alive again. Joy blocked out all else and threatened to incapacitate her with sheer pleasure. Slowly, the realization of who she was organized her chaotic mind, and she opened her eyes.

Under a vast, starless emptiness of utter blackness, she was sprawled face-down on a gleaming white-tiled plane that receded unbroken into the infinite distance. She stood slowly and surveyed her surroundings, but there was nothing to break the perfection of the floor around her except her own presence. She seemed to have her old body back, uniform and all. She was unaccountably whole and fit, but utterly clueless.

There was light, but no source for it. There was something like air, but it had no substance. There was no gravity, but 'down' was unmistakable. The foot-square

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ceramic tiles appeared to be unremarkable, but there was no grouting between them. They were not connected to each other, but did not yield to her probing and prying. She could peer through the quarter-inch gaps between them and see the same black nothingness on the other side.

She was in a strange universe, perhaps better than being — what? Dead? What was she now? Other than alone on a nearly featureless plain. She thought of flying off in exploration, but there was no particular direction to recommend itself to her. She had been brought here, she dimly remembered, by some glorious entity, so she would wait to see if there was a purpose to it.

After a period of standing around, shifting from one foot to the other while she fidgeted impatiently, she spun slowly around, gazing with all of her powers at the infinite horizon, wondering if she had missed something. A complete circuit showed her nothing, but continuing her rotation finally revealed a speck in the distance. Blinking several times, she turned completely around the other way and the distant whatever-it-was could not be seen. It was only visible if she turned 720 degrees at a time.

She shrugged. *Obviously not Kansas*, she thought, and set out for the landmark, skimming over the surface as fast as she dared. After some time, her destination grew no closer, even as she increased her speed — until finally it seemed she must certainly have spanned interplanetary

distances.

Curiouser and curiouser, she thought as she slowed to a stop and touched down. There was no way to tell if she had moved an inch. So she walked. And — sure enough — quickly reached the door. A plain, wooden door in a painted, wooden frame, standing by itself in the vast emptiness.

The sight of such an ordinary object had an unbelievable impact on her, thrilling her immensely. She couldn't get enough of the sight of it, falling to her knees in wonder. It was a thing of grandeur and magnificence to her, connecting to her memories of life in a way that shocked her senses. A great span of time passed before she was able to even clear her mind of joy enough to approach the object for what it was — a door.

Finally, knowing that it was there for a reason and that she was meant to open it, she tried the knob. It was locked and she couldn't budge it. *She* couldn't budge it. She also couldn't seem to walk around it, no matter how hard she tried. And she creened nothing on the other side.

OK, I get the message, she thought — and knocked politely. A musical voice bade her enter. A beautiful voice of compelling perfection, one that staggered her with its mellifluous timbre.

The being on the other side was a match for the voice. He — and the masculine pronoun was irrelevant in a creature that transcended the concept of mere maleness or femaleness — radiated beauty like an exploding star.

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There was peace and power intermingled in his beatific expression, and showers of wisdom flowed from his every aspect. He overwhelmed her with rapture, and she gave herself up to hopeless adoration. She would have succumbed utterly if he hadn't calmed her wonder with a word of incomprehensible blessing and release.

She stuttered awkwardly, trying to introduce herself, incapable of uttering a coherent sound. He smiled understandingly and said, "I know who you are, Sara. You will be alright in a moment. Just try to relax."

She didn't understand what he said at first, carried away by the way he said it. But he was patient and she gradually regained some control of her overworked senses. Gradually, the awe of him receded until she was able to regain some semblance of mastery over herself.

He waited until she seemed to return to normal and told her, "You're suffering a little from the transition, I'm afraid. I tried to make things as simple as possible for you, but it takes a while to adjust."

He was still beautiful, but not nearly as overwhelming. She recognized that the shock of encountering him had been nearly traumatic. She was embarrassed by her reaction, but his smile forgave her.

Finally, she asked him, "Where am I? How did I get here? What am I doing here? Who are you?" She would have gone on, but his laughter stopped her.

"Do you remember where you were before you came to this plane of existence?"

Toomie Starks

She frowned. "Well, I was... I guess I was something like dead. It seemed that way, anyway. There was... actually there wasn't much of anything. There were others, I think — but I couldn't reach them. I wanted to — I tried..."

"And before that?"

She thought back, her memories crystal clear. "Wayans. And Robbins. And... And Jimmie." She took a deep breath. "I died. I had to, because of Alex. The Cryptos made it so that I had a weakness that someone like Wayans could use against me."

She remembered something that Jimmie had tried to tell her, about how they would always have her memories. That it was alright for Susan to do what had to be done.

"Only," she went on uncertainly, "I didn't *really* die, did I? I'm just in some kind of suspended animation, aren't I?"

"Are you?" he prodded her.

"Well, Susan is. And I don't know what happened to me. Maybe it's like the dream I had before, where I thought I was — somewhere else, and not even me, sort of. Is that it?"

He laughed and told her, "If I am part of your dream, how can you ask me? And if I am not, how can I tell you?"

"How would I know?" she replied.

"If this is the product of your own imagination, it is a dream. If it is provided by the designs of your makers,

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then it is a virtual reality that is irrelevantly indistinguishable from experience. If it is death, then what you perceive is created through your own interpretations of reality. There is no difference between them."

"Oh, great," she said, "Well, whatever it is, I hope it turns out better than the last time. Maybe I can control this one a little. Everything seemed to go wrong before."

"Which," she went on, "brings me back to the present. If this is a holiday, I might as well enjoy it and just hope I wake up before too long. Before it's too late... If I can."

"That is not for you to decide. Your death was the test of tribal authority, a test they failed. Your redemption is in the hands of the people who love you — and they may fail, as well. Now, you must embrace your own awareness."

She thought for a while. "So there I was, like I was pretty dead, for sure. And it was really creepy, like I guess it would be. Until you came along and pulled me out of... I guess you could call it Hell. Whyfor?"

"You didn't belong," he said simply. "I couldn't leave you in such a state, so I uplifted you and gave you the wherewithal to discover your true destiny. I created this place for you and gave of my own essence to substantiate the two of us so that we could have this little conversation and start you on your journey. You need to have some semblance of corporeality in order to function, and that requires a physical universe. It's a little bare for now, but

Toomie Starks

— after what you've been through — until you've had a chance to get used to it again, complexity can be overwhelming for a while."

"I guess so. When I first came to back there — and then the way you seemed to be at first — I nearly keeled over. That was pretty intense. I mean, even now, it's pretty intense, but I seem to have gotten over it a little."

"You have adjusted remarkably well."

"So all the special effects and everything was just to show me that this was all bogus?"

"If you understood reality, Sara, you would know that you can't tell the difference."

"Yeah, right," she sighed. "So who are you supposed to be, anyway?"

"Ah," he said, "I am the angel of this place."

"Angel?" Sara said, raising an eyebrow. "Really... So where are your wings?"

"Where are yours?" he smiled back at her.

She laughed. "So if you're Hell's angel, then that would make you..."

"Very busy," he finished. They both laughed.

After a while, she grew thoughtful again. "Wherever it was that I seemed to be... All those others — there seemed to be millions of them. Is that what it's like, drifting along forever? Who were they? What are they doing there?"

"They are the remains of conscious entities, what is left of awareness when there is nothing else. They have

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surrendered utterly to their own lack of imagination, choosing emptiness because they cannot endure the risk of giving of themselves in order to receive of others."

"Ugh. That *does* sound like Hell. How'd I end up there?"

The angel smiled, "Of your own volition. You chose to put yourself in denial of what you could not bear. But it was not really of your own choosing. I understand your duty and could see that you passed the test of your creators. That is why I am here. Not all of those here stay here. Enlightenment can come even to the hopeless — or at least another chance."

"You mentioned a journey," she said. "Does that mean I'll have something to do before Susan decides I can go back — *if* she decides I can go back..."

"You cannot stay here. Death is as much an illusion as reality. There will be much for you to learn, and it will all be within yourself. There are other places, and it may be that you will remain in the place of your choosing, or discover a choice of your own making. There is another angel for you to meet, and those who have gone before you. It is an endless universe on both sides of the infinite divide between what you think of as life and death. Experience is the only true reality, and it is created out of nothingness. Share it, or you will truly die."

"Whoa. And I thought wizardspeak was bad. You didn't used to play bass guitar in a previous life, did you?"

He was amused. "I am only an angel, the creation

and the servant of life, and have no life of my own. Those who live and dream and die create and sustain me. I have my unending duty, and it is enough."

"Boy, you oughtta get out more often. Can't you take a cruise? Maybe get a little R&R?"

"Thank you for your concern," he laughed. "Does Susan complain?"

"Susan? Nah... Oh — I see! Then you're, what are you, made by the Cryptos? This whole bit is a way for them to get in touch with me?"

"Perhaps someday you will learn the truth about what you call 'Cryptoaliens'."

"Nobody ever tells me anything," she replied resignedly. "At least, not so's I can understand it."

She looked around her at the vast expanse of the unbroken plain of unending white tiles and sighed. "Well, if I have to make some kind of a journey, I might as well get on with it. So — what do I do? Make a wish or something?"

"Leaving so soon? Ah, well. I suppose it's best. Just go back out that door and enter the next one."

"What next one? I was lucky to spot this one. You got a map or something for me? Or a compass?"

"You will learn as you go. Farewell, Sara, and trust your imagination. I hope I never see you around here again."

"I know what you mean. And thanks."

She gave him a little hug and a kiss, which made him

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smile all the more, then turned quickly and went out the door, hoping it wasn't going to be some kind of mystery she had to figure out to get to the next one.

Naturally, it was. And the angel's door had disappeared no matter how many times she turned around. She flew disconsolately around for a while before finally figuring out that the door was within herself, just as he had told her it would be.

She opened the door and went in.

Chapter Thirty-four: The Final Muster

At least this 'world' — or 'reality' or 'dream' or whatever the heck it was — was a bit of an improvement on the plain of tiles. It had dirt, anyway, and forlorn plants here and there, scattered about a broken desert landscape of ridges, arroyos and low rocky hills. The atmosphere and gravity seemed to be Earth-normal, but there weren't any stars or clouds in the moonless night sky — if it *was* night (presuming there would be a day).

The utter darkness wasn't a problem for Sara, but there didn't seem to be any landmarks or signs or clues around her that could give her a hint as to where she should go or what she should do. There were faint sounds from someplace nearby, so she wandered off in that direction to investigate, making her way slowly through the dark so as not to startle whoever she might run into.

Rounding a low mound of piled boulders, she saw, underneath the shelter of a small stand of trees, a campfire surrounded by a score of men. It had the appearance of a hastily thrown-together military encampment, every man with a weapon close to hand. Scraps of canvas and leafy tree branches had been thrown together to serve as tents, or at least lean-tos, and blankets were spread in preparation for a long night in the wilderness. The men were busily attending to their messkits as she approached them carefully, hoping they wouldn't be freaked out by her sudden appearance out of the gloom.

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A sentry spotted her and sang out, "Halt! Who goes there?"

She hailed them cheerily, "Hey, guys! Got room for one more?" she said, waving as she approached.

"Advance and be recognized," he demanded in the age-old formula.

He watched her warily as she got closer to the fire and could finally make out her form and features. The others turned their attention from the campfire to peer outward in all directions, alert for possible trouble.

"Jeb," said the sentry, "I don't think, uh, *she's* one o' us."

Jeb swiveled his head toward his companion. "She...? What th' hell ye talkin' 'bout, Nate?"

The other nodded, and Jeb squinted to get a better look, his eyes not yet adjusted to the dark after facing the fire. "Well, I'll be flummoxed," he finally announced.

"Don't worry, fellas," she told them. "I'm alone and I'm harmless."

The others in the group stared at her as she came into their circle, then slowly stood up, as their etiquette demanded when a female entered their presence.

They examined her discreetly, trying not to be caught staring, and she examined back, both sides unable to decide what to make of the other. The soldiers — for that's what they obviously were — wore the Yankee blue of Federal troops. Their muzzle-loading pieces were stacked together in neat pyramids and they had sheathed

bayonets on their belts.

Nate finally spoke, "I heared they was women soldiers by'n'by, 'specially some o' them Rooshans."

"Ye a Rooshan, ma'am?" asked Jeb politely. "I don't rightly know whar they'd be bivouacked, but 'tain't none too close, I'd reckon."

"You mean Russian? No, I'm from Texas, sorta. My name's Sara Corel," she said. "Pleased to meet you. Are you guys making a movie or something?"

"Texas! Th' Rebs be off thataway, mostly," he said, waving his hand into the dark. "I shore wouldn't-a knowed it from lookin' atchya. That's th' goldurndest getup I ever did see. Uh, ma'am."

"Shut up, Jeb," hissed Nate. "Ye ain't got th' manners of a polecat."

He smiled and bowed politely to Sara, "We's honored, Miss Sara. I'm Nathan Boone, at yer service, an' this here's th' Ninth Kentucky, ma'am — th' unlucky part o' it, leastaways."

"Sorry, ma'am," said the chastened Jeb. "Things ain't what they used t' be, hereabouts. I'm Jebadiah Hicks. Please accept our hospitality. We'd be honored if ye'd set a spell. C'n I git ye some grub an' coffee? They's some spit-roasted chicken an' beans left. 'Sall we got at th' moment, I'm afeared."

"Why, thanks," she said, always up for a meal. They hustled to make her as comfortable as possible, introducing each of the other men to her until they had all

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humbly paid their respects..

When he'd gone all around the little circle, Jeb concluded, "Mostly, we was kilt at Vicksburg, 'ceptin' Dan'l, who got it at Shiloh, an' Zeke, who was run down by cav'lry outside o' Atlanta."

"Killed?" said Sara. "Excuse me, but I'm a little confused, here. You guys are talking about the Civil War? What was, like, in the 1860s, wasn't it?"

"Yes'm," said Zeke. "If ye don't mind me askin', when was ye kilt? Seems t' me ye ain't exactly no Reb. From what I'se been told, they wasn't all thet many womenfolk in combat fer at least a hunnert years or so after Mr. Lincoln's War."

"Oh, yeah," she said, "It was a lot later than that. But I'm still not with you here. I hate to sound completely ignorant, but could you please tell me what's going on?"

"Ye don't know?" said Jeb. "Whar's yer outfit, ma'am? 'Sfar as I know, ever'body come out with they old outfits, even tho' they wasn't kilt together — like Dan'l an' Zeke, who would-a never found us if they had to go traipsin' all over creation lookin'. An' th' last ones come in day b'fo' yestiddy."

"Well," said Sara, "I wasn't with any 'outfit', I'm afraid. And nobody told me anything. I just got here, myself. And I guess if you all are 'dead', then we're all in the same boat. I was in some kinda weird place, like Hell or something, and the angel that got me out told me to go through, like, a door — which I did — and here I am,

wherever 'here' is."

The others looked at each other knowingly.

Nate finally said, "I was one o' the first ones t' git here, so's I scouted around a bit. S'far as I know, they ain't nobody here what waren't kilt in battle somewhars — an' I don't mean from fever or from runnin' or accidental-like. Got t' be mostly reg'lar soldiers what got kilt fightin' other soldiers in a sho' 'nuff war. I reckon ever' soul what got kilt in combat whilst wearin' some kind o' uniform since Adam is here now. They's all tricked out jist like they was when they died, with all o' they gear brand spankin' new an' a full kit bag with extry rations."

Zeke added, "They's Roosians, an' Hessians, an' Redcoats, an' Chinamen, an' Frogs, an' Swedes, an' Hittites, an' Romans, an' Turks, an' Israelites, an' Pharoh's army, an' Spanish dons, an' silver knights, an' a whole passel o' soldiers that wasn't born 'til after we-all a-been long gone."

"Cav'lry got they horses," Dan'l went on, "An' some o' them Indiamen got elly-fants. They's chariots an' great tinwork contraptions and flyin' machines. Sailors got they ships-o'-the-line an' galleys an' whoppin' big ol' ironclads that went down with they crews. Whatever kinda weapon they perished with come with 'em."

They all looked expectantly at Sara, obviously curious as to how she might fit in.

Sara said, "Well, I guess you could say I was sorta killed in battle while wearing a uniform. And I suppose

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you could say I got my 'weapons' with me. I don't think I was in what you could call a war, though that could depend on your definition. I dunno — maybe there's some kind of a mixup."

Nate pondered that for a while. "I s'pose y'kin find out in th' mornin'. They ain't too many generals, as ye c'n imagine, but they's a field headquarters over t' the' valley yonder, an' maybe they c'n help ye."

"So," Sara asked, "What *are* you here for?"

"Why," said Jeb, "th' Last Battle, o' course."

"Yep," Nate added, "Army-geddon. We oughtta be ready in a week or so, I reckon."

"They ain't no doubt 'bout that, neither," said Jeb.

"We all heared th' Last Trump."

"Oh, wonderful," Sara said sarcastically. "Another dream about fighting and battles. Why can't I imagine shopping or something?"

Jeb laughed, "I s'pose we all figgered we was a-dreamin', this bein' not 'xactly what we had in mind fer th' Hereafter, an' all. I musta spent half th' first mornin' pinchin' myself, an' t'other half tryin' to remember whar I musta got a-holt o' so much moonshine th' night befo'."

"Cain't be no dream," said Nate. "It's too real an' too miser'ble, an' too durn long by half."

"I'm used to that," said Sara. "The last time, I couldn't tell my dream from reality at all, even though it was pretty outlandish. Which, this one, after all — I mean, first there was this angel, and now you guys. No

offense, but you're basically just figments of my imagination, you know."

"Humph," Jeb said, "An' yer another. Lemme tell ye what got my attention 'bout all o' this. I was raised a farm boy an' never did git much book larnin'. What I seen yestiddy over to th' valley was what I couldn't never a-thought up m'self. Besides all them heathen furriners, they's a whole bunch o' United States Federal troops from th' *future* over yonder. It ain't jist 'cause o' all o' them newfangled contraptions they got — I reckon all kinda things be gittin' better in a hunnert years or so. No, them boys is *differ'nt* from us, th' way they talk, th' way they act, ever'thing — even though they's countrymen — as much, I s'pose, as George Washington's troops woulda been from us. I'da never figger'd that. Ye c'n only dream what ye know."

Nate was more somber. "Th' thing I remember 'bout is th' way I died. If I'm a-dreamin' now, then death is a dream — an' I wisht I had a better 'un.

"I took a minnie-ball in m' shoulder. Knocked me down like a mule woulda. Didn't hurt too much right away, an' I had a thought 'bout gittin' up an' back in th' line, but couldn't manage it. Took me a bit afore I realized m' right arm was jist 'bout tore off. So I laid there a spell, ponderin' what I was a-gonna do, gittin' weaker all along.

"Then th' hurtin' commenced, an' it got to be jist awful. I got to bein' powerful' thirsty an' called out fer help, but by then th' fightin' had moved off a bit an' th'

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only others around were as bad off as I was — or worse. They was an awful lot o' smoke an' shot in th' air thereabouts, so there I laid with ev'ry kind o' crawly critter in that pasture helpin' theyselves to what was left o' me — which is a misery, I c'n testify.

"By'n'by, it was like ever'thing got further away, an' all th' racket just faded out. I swooned fer a bit, an' when I came to, it was dark. All 'round me men was moanin' an' cryin' fo' they mamas, an' I s'pect I did, too. A couple wagons finally showed up, an' they commenced t' gatherin' up th' ones what could be saved, but they took a look at me an' passed on. Jist as well, I reckon. I didn't have enough blood left in me t' curse 'em, an' took m' leave o' th' world shortly thereafter.

"My time in th' grave was peaceful, but awful lonely — guess I didn't really 'xpect no Pearly Gates. Now I'm here — an' 'tain't no better'n th' day I died. If this be th' Final Muster fo' th' Last Battle, then it appears likely that I will be obliged t' die again, an' I am not very pleased at th' prospect. I s'pect that I would not even want to dream this in Hell, if you'll pardon my language, ma'am."

The others around the campfire nodded in sympathy, and some in turn recounted for her and each other their own stories of their fates. Sara grieved for them silently. Figments or not, it certainly seemed as though they experienced their own self-awareness. And if so, then how were these men different than what she perceived about any others she ever knew? If she discounted their

existence based on what she thought she knew about the state of her own existence, then how could she credit the existence of *any* entity apart from her? Or the independence of reality itself?

As Jeb had said, these relics of a bygone age were *different* from the people she knew, not only in their dialect, but in the way they acted — treating her, despite their backwoods roughness, in a genteel and deferential manner that was unknown to her era. And the stories of their deaths were from a perspective outside of her experience, something she'd never even wanted to imagine. This did not seem to be anything she'd read in a book or seen in a movie that was adapted to her internal virtual reality.

Well, who knows how deep Susan's database was...

The angel had told her to trust her own imagination. If he was just a product of her fantasy, too, then Sara — or Susan — was trying to tell herself something important about what was 'happening' to her. It was very confusing.

The fire dwindled to a few dull embers, and the soldiers succumbed one by one to sleep, except for two sentries who patrolled the perimeter for their turn at watch. Sara was wide awake for a while, thinking without result. She finally got up and silently rose slowly into the air to look around. The little encampment under the trees was at the edge of a vast sea of other camps, large and small, the remnants of their fires still clearly visible in infrared. There were men and their equipment spread over

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many square miles, numbering in the millions, ringing a broad, desert valley in their midst where other presences were gathered, surrounded by an aura of power that disturbed her.

All was quiet. It was a calm before some calamitous storm to come. She sank slowly back to the campsite of the Ninth Kentucky, made herself comfortable on a patch of sand, wrapped herself in her cape, and went to sleep. At least in *this* dream, there was rest and food. For now, anyway.

They made her a surprisingly tasty breakfast of scrambled eggs laced with tinned salt pork and onions, cornbread, fruit and coffee. Their sheltering little oasis was nourished by a spring-fed pond of cold water and consisted of an unlikely combination of date and coconut palms, fruit-laden pear, apple and orange trees, with wild herbs, roots and berries scattered through the grassy undergrowth. There were quite a few chickens wandering around, but evidently no roosters. As long as their original provisions of staples held out, the men would be adequately provided for.

The pattern was repeated over and over across the plain surrounding the valley, furnishing the gathered multitudes with supplies adequate for at least a couple of weeks — long enough to finish the presumed business at hand, anyway. Armies travel on their stomachs, and not many baggage trains had fallen in battle, so the agency

responsible for their resurrection had seen to the necessities.

Sara thanked them all for their hospitality and promised to return, then set out through the maze of camps in the general direction of the area headquarters. Most of the units nearby were from the Civil War era, but there were also a few small Mexican and Spanish War groups. She encountered several large assemblies of Revolutionary War soldiers and militiamen, and one group of 186 Texians whose presence seemed to indicate that the definition of 'uniform' was very loose. Several of them were busy trading with the much larger adjacent camp of Mexican soldiers, exchanging tobacco for cornmeal.

She stopped to chat briefly with their leader, who gallantly introduced himself in the manner of the Old South as Colonel William Barrett Travis, "At your service, Miss. Allow me to present my staff, Colonel James Bowie and Congressman David Crockett," who allowed as they were honored to make her acquaintance.

Sara actually felt more than a little awed to meet such legends, but tried not to show it too much. Travis oozed gentlemanly charm, and Bowie came off as a frontier dandy, part riverboat gambler and part swaggering cock-o-the-walk. Crockett played the shrewd buffoon, spitting elaborately and often between pithy backwoods witticisms. They and all the men in sight studiously avoided staring obviously at her exposed legs,

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coming as they were from an era when a bared ankle was scandalously risqué. They seemed to accept her credentials as an unlikely warrior without question.

"I see you're getting along famously with your neighbors," she observed. "This is just a guess, but would those guys over there be Santa Anna's men?"

"Absolutely, miss," said Travis. "That war is behind us and we must needs face a common foe. We share a powerful bond with all those here assembled, who are of necessity our brothers in duty. We have crossed the line-in-the-sand together, having proven our courage and devotion; therefore we can but feel only respect for those who are our comrades now, even those whose tongues befuddle us and whose customs are baffling."

Sara asked them, "Do you have any idea of just who it is you're supposedly here to fight, and why?"

"I do not intend to question divine Providence."

"What if it isn't divine? I mean, pardon me, but this all seems more senseless than anything else."

"There may be sense and purpose beyond our ken."

"And there might not be, either. This could just be a spectacle for the amusement of... Well, I don't know — maybe Cryptos. Or like one of those historical reenactments, where a lot of guys dress up in old uniforms and refight, like, the Battle of San Jacinto. I saw that once with Alex, over at the monument."

"Ma'am," said Bowie, "All I know is that I am here to fight. That is the obvious truth of it, and what I am

prepared to do."

Crockett drawled, "Y'know [spit], when I got whupped fer re-election back in Tennessee, I tol' m' former constituents that they could by Gawd go t' Hell [spit]. As fer me, I was a-goin' to Texas [spit]. I don't know whar *they* might be now, but I sure as hell ain't in Texas [spit]. Well, I know fer a fact that I didn't bring m'self or nobody else t' this here place. 'Tain't 'xactly got all the comforts o' home, but they ain't nowhar else t' go, an' we'll be outta tobaccy in less'n a fortnight [spit]. But if'n some ornery damn' critter aims to take m' back t' Hell, I shore will do m' damndest to take him wif me [spit]. Yep, me an ol' Betsy here," he said, patting his longrifle.

Sara asked, "Have you seen who it is you're supposed to battle? How do you know that's the idea?"

Bowie said, "There's been a scuffle or two. I went down in the valley with a scouting party to reconnoiter the other night, and we met one of their raids coming back from slitting the throats of a couple-dozen sleeping Canucks. It was mighty dark, but I've fought a duel or two thataway. Carved me a chunk off'n some big scaly devil. He got away, I guess. Whatever passes for blood in his veins melted my best blade." He held up a discolored knife hilt.

"Maybe it's just some kind of misunderstanding," Sara said uncertainly.

"Miss," said Travis, "I can think of no other purpose to resurrect in such a place as this every warrior who ever

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perished defending his home, country, beliefs and sacred honor, and opposing them with vile and bloodthirsty creatures, than to settle some momentous issue."

"I been a-thinkin' [spit]," said Crockett, "Maybe we ain't altogether dead jist yet [spit]. Befo' we kin pass on, we gots to pay a price fo' th' violence we done by bein' fightin' men [spit]."

"Surely," said Sara, "a lot of these men were drafted, forced into uniform against their wills. They *had* to do what they did and maybe they weren't violent by nature."

"That's what soldiers do, ma'am," said Bowie. "Conscripts or professionals, all those gathered here died as a result of engaging in combat, and if you don't run, it's never no accident."

Travis told her, "There are no cowards present."

Sara protested, "But there's a lot more people who were soldiers and killed people and dropped bombs and ordered others to their deaths that never died in battle, and they're not here."

Crockett replied, "I reckon [spit] they got their own Hell, ma'am."

A little later, Sara thoughtfully took her leave and resumed her stroll, passing a co-mingled band of Plains Indians and US Cavalry before coming to larger assemblies of doughboys and GIs. Nearby were contingents of Aztec, Mayan and Inca warriors, and others less identifiable from pre-Colombian civilizations

vanished without a trace. There were Conquistadors and Federales, as well as Fidel's Cubanos, Simon Bolivar's regulars and bandolier-clad Zapatistas. At the dangerous edge of the valley was a considerable Canadian contingent.

The 20th-century American soldiers whistled and shouted their appreciation as Sara went by, and she answered them with cheerful waves. They must have thought she was part of a USO tour or something. The areas around their camps were crowded with vehicles and equipment, mostly tanks. There seemed to be an inordinate number of WWII Shermans, testifying both to their high production numbers and high casualty rate.

She stopped to chat with a couple of tank crews (signing autographs they didn't understand — "Susan?" — that she didn't explain). Evidently, the rule was that if a tank was knocked out with its whole crew, they arrived with a fully armed and functioning vehicle with a full tank of gas — and no prospects for more fuel, ammo or spare parts (other than what might be scavenged during the coming battle). Individual crewmembers who had died fighting were pooled together into whole crews and received tanks as well — although there were disproportionately too many commanders owing to their propensity for sticking their heads out of the turret to see what was going on. There were not many rear-area maintenance personnel — which wasn't that big a problem for simple vehicles, but was a severe headache

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for most of the modern aircraft, as it turned out.

There were a *lot* of planes, from wire-and-canvas Jennies to Mustangs to Flying Fortresses to choppers, with a scattering of B-52's and Phantoms, and even a few Gulf War casualties. Around the rim of the valley, she could see Spitfires, Hurricanes, Sopwith Camels, Fokkers, Me-109s, Stukas, Sturmoviks, Zeros, and a stately fleet of Zeppelins tied precariously to boulders and trees.

Unfortunately, there hadn't been any actual airbases provided. Some of the jets would have been useless without their ground support equipment even if there *had* been usable runways. A few combat engineers with bulldozers were able to quickly scratch out a couple of dirt strips (before their diesel ran out) suitable for launching many of the more robust planes, but there would be no refueling, rearming or maintenance. One sortie per plane was all anybody could expect. On the other side of the valley, the squadrons of Japanese kamikazes were probably unbothered by this fact.

There was also a fair bit of artillery, ranging from culverains and bombards to caisson-mounted field cannon and seige mortars to 88's and Atlantic Wall coastal-defense ship-killers to Stalin organs and 105-mm SPAs. Some of the ancient units had catapults and assault towers, and there were even a few completely useless V-2's and Scuds that couldn't be aimed without retooling their guidance systems.

Everywhere she looked, Sara saw soldiers hard at

work, mostly digging in. All of their attention seemed to be on whatever might soon issue from the broad, shallow valley in their midst. It was a place of large boulders and considerable erosion, capable of hiding the movements of friend and foe alike, and rendering co-ordinated combined-arms mobile operations next to impossible in many places. A river flowed sluggishly down the middle of it, bordered by forests and grasslands. At the very center was a large hill, fringed with cliffs, crowned by monumental buildings, and surrounded by a vast, walled city. Parties scrambled as far into the valley as they dared, stringing wires and mapping every nook and cranny, looking for any possible advantage or likely trap.

She picked her way through the confusion and tumult of the camps to the area headquarters, consisting mostly of hastily prepared dugouts and trenches, covered over with logs in places to create rooms where intelligence could be evaluated and plans made.

The combined forces were not top-heavy with brass. Most of the participants were ordinary combat grunts, with very few high-ranking staff and operations officers. Since most of those types were devoted to logistical considerations anyway, the few experienced generals who had managed to die with their boots on were probably adequate to the task. At least there was no shortage of sergeants, and they pretty much knew what to do and how to get it done.

Sara reported her way up the chain of command until

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she came to a room with a bewigged Colonial general, a pair or bewhiskered Union and Confederate flag officers and a tough-looking US Marine two-star in khaki shirt sleeves and suspenders. The Marine looked at her skeptically and addressed her bluntly.

"What the hell are you supposed to be? And why are you wasting my time?"

"Ah, well, sir," she began, "I'm Sara Corel and I'm an alien who was raised on your planet some time in your future. It seems that I qualify for membership in this affair, and I might be useful."

The Marine looked irritated. "Look, there are a few nurses at the field hospital. Why don't you go..."

He stopped as Sara floated easily off the dirt floor and circled the low log ceiling. She landed beside him and snatched his sidearm before he could react, then fingered the safety, pointed it at her face and pulled the trigger. The sudden shot filled the small room with the noise of its report. She caught the bullet with her teeth and handed it to the general along with his pistol. The projectile burned his hand, which he scarcely noticed.

The map table in the center of the room was made from the hood of a jeep, balanced precariously on a stack of spare deuce-and-a-half truck wheel rims. Sara propped the hood against a wall, grabbed a heavy rim with each hand, clapped them together and welded them to each other with hot eyebeams, did it again with the other two wheels, then joined the welded pairs together in the same

way. She planted the stack on the floor, casually but deliberately forcing it six inches into the ground, then repositioned the hood, spot-welding it to its support.

This whole demonstration only took half-a-minute, leaving smoke and fumes that had everybody else coughing profusely, eyes watering, half-blinded from the glare and half-deafened from the shot.

She projected onto the map table an image of the valley as she had seen it only a few moments before and told them, "I can also speak a few thousand languages, in case you need an interpreter."

In the course of just a few short days, Sara had cause to be astonished at the incredibly swift integration of so many diverse and seemingly incompatible military cultures into something resembling cohesiveness. Not that there wasn't a great deal of misunderstanding of certain specifics, but the essential thrust of the evident mission was apparent even to the crudest and most primitive soldiery on the plain. Every dead hero out there understood that this was an inevitable showdown of some kind, and that they faced something from their most primal legends and myths.

There were as many different names and perceptions for what this appeared to be as there were armies represented, from the Christian Armageddon to the Nordic Gotterdammerung. Every belief foretold an end-of-the world battle in some form or another, or the dread

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of eventual annihilation that surely must mark the passing of all things at the end of days. All had experienced death at the height of their duty, and had been assembled into a host with weapons ready to hand. They knew what this meant.

They were pure soldiers — fighters and warriors who understood the meaning of loss and sacrifice, who instinctually grasped the meaning and utility of discipline and order, who could rely on their comrades through any crisis. They did not understand the *whys* and the *hows* of their situation, but they understood each other's determination.

And down in the valley, things stirred — forces little understood that came in the night and made plain their enmity without revealing their forms.

Great labors were accomplished. Defensive works sprang from the desert, roads were laid, traps were built, weapons were deployed, working vehicles were deliberately scavenged for other purposes, obstacles were leveled or removed, ancient forces were re-equipped and brought up to speed, communications links were established, cross-fires were sighted-in, evacuation routes were designated, aid stations were set-up, supplies were cached, reserves were emplaced and intelligence was gathered.

There was deep blue water at the far, far end of the valley, filled with ships of every description. The entire length and breadth of the theater of operations was under

the guns of ships such as the Bismark and the Hood, and Japanese, British and American aircraft carriers steamed to and fro over the horizon. Admiral Horatio Nelson oversaw the transfer of thousands of naval cannons, powder and ammunition from the wooden ships of a dozen sailcloth navies to strategic barricades ashore, aided by legions of sweating sailors from Limeys to galley oarsmen. Submarines ranged offshore to guard against unexpected seawards attacks, backing up patrolling destroyers and torpedo boats. Leathernecked Marines mingled with Greeks and Persians, Egyptians and Carthaginians, Phoenicians and Arabs, sending shore parties to what could be the hottest spots and securing the beachheads.

Sara toured every command, relaying messages and making sure the generals and admirals, chiefs and warlords, hetmen and princes understood one another, occasionally helping out with bottlenecks where she could effectively lend her strength or other attributes. She automatically intercepted, translated and relayed radio messages once the scarce sets had been efficiently distributed.

The Romans had laid out their usual stockades immediately upon arrival. They seemed to be among the most disciplined of all the armies, troopers born hundreds of years apart and representing myriad ethnicities from Italian to Germanic acting in long-practiced concert.

There were large numbers of Norsemen — semi-

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barbaric Vikings of legendary stature, who fought in seemingly undisciplined bands with surprising cunning and beserker ferocity.

Archaic Chinese soldiers so resembled the buried statuary army of the Chin Emperor that it was uncanny (Sara had seen a reproduction of the famous tombs at the Forbidden Gardens in Katy, outside of Houston). They were stoic and steadfast, and coordinated well with the hordes of Mongol cavalry.

The Samurai army could be sudden and swift in close quarters where ranged weapons might be unweildy, backing up the Imperial Japanese who had established a fearsome reputation as the most tenacious infantry forces of the Twentieth Century, routinely enduring incredible hardships with unswerving devotion.

The primitives, from Apaches to Zulus, adapted to supporting roles, ready to fall on the unwary or take advantage of an overextended line of communications. They would function as partisans and guerillas as the need may arise, avoiding fixed battles until they could work a situation to their advantage.

The combined armies of Germany, led by Irwin Rommel, may have been the most formidable practitioners of Blitzkrieg, but the Russians were by far the most numerous, capable of filling the entire valley with their millions, spearheaded by thousands of tanks and flanked on the one side by the Germans and on the other by centuries of British Empire regulars.

Toomie Starks

All in all, it was a grand and glorious conglomeration, with no shortage of colorful standard bearers and military musicians, from drummer boys by the thousands to wailing battalions of bagpipers.

And then there was Sara...

She was still somewhat unsure how to regard all of this. Her natural inclination was to be helpful, but she didn't understand the purpose behind this war to end all wars. The others she talked to all had different opinions and varying forebodings, but had no problem accepting their essential obligation to participate in what appeared to be an inevitable conflict. Maybe they had all heard 'the Last Trump' before she arrived (whatever they may have called it or however they may have characterized it), but she had not. But then, she expected to be different from everybody else, anyway. After all, as far as she knew, *they* were all just part of *her* fantasy.

As evening fell nearly a week later, there was a meeting at Supreme Headquarters of all the most important senior commanders. Sara served as translator as they went over their plans and contingencies.

Everything they had done so far had been defensive and preparatory, trying to take care of first things first against an unknown opponent. No amount of reconnaissance and spying had revealed the face of the enemy, and the raids from the valley below intensified from night to night, now claiming serious casualties.

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Sara's value as a messenger and translator (not to mention flying bulldozer) had been deemed so important that they refused to release her from duty in order to patrol the edges of the valley, not really grasping her full potential. She was, in any event, still somewhat reluctant to commit herself to taking any kind of direct action.

"I really think it's time for me to go down there and have a look around," she told them

"Out of the question."

"Impossible."

"You're much too valuable to the survival of the command structure."

She persisted, "You really don't know what you're up against yet."

"We will not risk you trying to find out."

"Just what," said Sara, "do you think is down in the valley that threatens this huge force of arms?"

"We'll find out soon enough."

She said, "You can't make plans against the unknown. This is, like, really basic military theory, isn't it?"

"We've been hoping that avoiding direct confrontation or provocation will allow us enough time to complete our basic preparations."

She reminded them, "This is not any kind of stable, long-term situation. Time is running out as far as being able to survive on this planet. You saw my orbital recon scans." A quick trip around their phony world had

revealed nothing but utter barrenness other than in this spot, with its adjacent puddle of a sterile ocean barely big enough for the carriers to get up to speed for flight ops. The only celestial body in their pocket universe was a tiny artificial sun that orbited the planet, obviously temporary.

"We've developed plans to stretch our resources as long as possible."

"No good," she said. "What — an extra week or so before everybody starts to starve to death?"

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Come on, what could possibly be down there that could hurt me?"

Finally, a war-bonneted and painted aborigine said what they all were thinking.

"Demons."

"Demons?" Sara repeated.

"Supernatural manifestations that may render all our fancy weapons useless."

"Maybe even you."

"There must be a reason for such a large gathering of forces. If it is to make such a battle 'even', then the nature of our opponents must be equivalently counterbalanced."

"Not that there is any particular reason why such a contest must be fair at all."

"And not that it makes any difference in the long run, anyway. We are in a limbo between death and death."

"Even victory is meaningless, for we do not know the terms of it. We can only fight to forestall defeat and

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perhaps fulfill some unknown destiny."

"Demons," the chief reiterated. "Demons from Hell."

There was a long silence.

Sara finally replied, "A good argument could be made that *we* are the 'demons from Hell'."

No one responded.

Well," Sara told them, "I'm gonna do what I have to do. I think it would be a good idea to talk to them, or it, or whatever. Could be that waging war is the one thing that we *shouldn't* do. They might be as panicked as the rest of us. Maybe we can work out something that will help us all go on to the next level. I'm going down there in the morning."

"Can we stop you?"

"No," she admitted.

"Then we will prepare for the worst — a failed diplomatic mission followed by hostilities."

"I'm gonna hope for the best," she said confidently.

Chapter Thirty-five: Down In the Valley

The magnificent stag emerged regally into the meadow from beneath the treeline, alert eyes searching the shadows, tasting the slight breeze, sensitive ears twitching. It commingled confidence and caution — master of its habitat, yet still prey should lifelong vigilance relax for even a moment. The forest afforded more natural cover, but the open expanse was a waiting banquet that allowed the use of its great speed if threatened.

Satisfied that no danger was near enough to matter, it began to search out favored morsels in the thick grasses. Gradually, it worked his way to a little clump of bushes sheltering a shallow depression near the center of the field. Within the pool of shadows they cast lurked another shadow, unmoving, patiently waiting, feeling the approach of the animal without betraying the slightest clue of its existence.

Sara slowly descended from the air over the edge of the trees, trying to decide whether or not to interfere in what appeared to be a potential life-and-death struggle. In another few seconds, the hunter would spring. While she hesitated, the deer detected the slight rustling sound of her cape and turned its head to look straight into her eyes. It was a distraction the watcher had been waiting for, and Sara kreened the sudden release of tension in his legs as he pounced.

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"Run, Bambi," she cried out, "Run!"

The stag needed no translation and bounded away for the safety of the trees with astonishing swiftness. But it vectored away from Sara rather than its real threat, and this proved to be its undoing, as Sara watched, horrified that her warning had had unintended consequences.

The hunter was hardly less swift, and had the proper angle on its prey, leaping unerringly upon the back of the beast, twisting its head around by wrenching its spreading antlers — its pride turned into its downfall. The end was mercifully quick, as a stone knife found its mark in a practiced move. Spurting blood stained the grasses as the great animal's life drained away.

The triumphant hunter raised himself over his kill, spread his arms wide and began to sing. He sang his praise for the beautiful animal he had killed, and his thanks for the bounty of the earth. He wept for the life he had taken, and honored its memory. He dedicated its remains to the endless cycle of life and celebrated the joy and happiness of a successful hunt.

The haunting passion of the song touched Sara, stopping her in her tracks as she approached him from behind. Her heart had gone out instinctively to the doomed animal, but she realized that there was a rightness to this act that transcended sympathy. It was an act as old as life itself, pure in its intent and in perfect harmony with the great web of existence. The ending of one life supported another. The joy was not in taking a life, but

rather in accepting it as a precious gift.

The ceremony ended and the work began. Transfixed, she watched as the nearly naked savage began the practical affair of butchery, skillfully stripping the hide and dismembering the carcass, taking care that nothing would go to waste. He was powerfully built, tall and brown, with straight black hair to his shoulders, radiating a manly beauty and inner strength that was unearthly in its intensity. She could sense that he was aware of her, but chose to attend to his duties before acknowledging her presence. She couldn't bring herself to spoil the sacrament in which he was engaged.

Finally, the job was done and he turned to her, the light of his countenance as it was revealed to her causing an involuntary feeling of reverence for this Great Spirit who honored her with his presence.

"I know you did not mean to," he told her bemusedly, "but you flushed my deer with the skill of a she-wolf. I will give you the liver and heart, and as much venison as you can eat. I will keep the hide, though."

"N-no, th-thank you," Sara stammered. Conflicting emotions tore at her. Was this another angel, she wondered? The effect he was having on her was — very strange. He was obviously no mere mortal. Her kreening of him revealed no human form, only essence and light made somehow tangible.

"Well then," he told her, "Help me take this to my camp. You have a great many questions to ask — which

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is a shame on such a good morning as this."

He wrapped most of the remains in the hide and slung it over his shoulder, letting her carry the trophy antlers, still attached to the head. Grimacing, she gingerly held it as far away from her body as she could and followed him into the woods. The camp was not far, thankfully.

He washed himself unselfconsciously in the river, kindled a fire by twirling a stick on a piece of dry bark, set strips of flesh to dry into jerky, spread the hide in the sun, spitted a chunk of still-warm meat over the flames and offered Sara some ripe wild berries and mushrooms, which proved to be delicious. His chores had a naturalness and rightness to them that relaxed Sara, making her feel that she was somehow at the center of a sublimely primitive universe whose spiritual guide was one with Nature itself. When all was put right in his little world, they talked.

"You are not of my people," he said, sitting comfortably cross-legged under a beech tree. "I do not think you are of *their* people," nodding at the far rim of the shallow valley visible through the branches.

"No, I'm from another, uh, star, I guess," she said. "I hope you don't mind me saying so, but I don't think you're exactly a human, either."

"Of course not," he replied. "I am what they make of me. You were sent to live with the human beings, though. You have their spirit, but are not one of them."

Toomie Starks

"I try to be," she said.

"And you are not one of us."

"I don't know who you are, and I don't think I've met any others like you — except maybe the angel, but that was before I got here." So long ago, it seemed.

"Who are you, anyway?" she asked. "And what's up with all the soldiers being brought here? Everybody up there thinks this place is full of demons and there's gonna be a war, like the end of the world and everything."

"Demons!" he said, greatly amused. "That is their own doing. I am not surprised."

"Are you a 'demon'?"

"Do you think I am?"

"I think," she said slowly, "that you're part of something that is being made up by my freeze-dried alien alter-ego. You're some kind of character in a virtual reality dream..."

"A dream!" he said, laughing. "Have you not had dreams before? Were they like this?"

"Not usually," she admitted. "Once, though — it was as 'real' as this."

"But you were alive then," he told her.

"I'm not sure what I am, now," she said.

"Don't you know? In this place, all the people believe they are dead and that they are here to struggle with their spirits. I am here for my people, to honor them."

"Then what am I doing here?"

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"You are on a spirit journey. You must find your real name and your totem."

"I already have a name," she said. "Two of 'em, actually."

"Yes. A given name and a revealed name. Your true name comes from within you, and your spirit quest is to discover its meaning."

"Oh, I think I know its meaning..."

"But you have not accepted it yet. It is linked to your totem, which you have not fully embraced."

"My totem?"

"The symbol of it is upon your breast."

"That? The 'S'? It's the Cryptos idea of a joke. I never asked for it."

"You cannot ask for a totem that pleases you. It is not a whim. It is the token of your spirit guide, and takes its power from that source. Is not the inspiration for your true name and your totem taken from a creature of power?"

"It was taken from a comic book — you know, made up, not real, just a story."

"A creature of the imagination. The very best kind, I think. Like me," he laughed.

"Look, you may as well know that I'm having a very difficult time taking any of this seriously..."

"Very wise."

"...and this whole Armageddon thing just turns me off. I don't believe in it, even if I might believe anything

else. I guess that maybe I'm supposed to learn something from all of this, but I don't see why it has to involve war and death and everything. I mean, even if everybody's already dead around here — whatever that means — having to put them through that kind of ordeal again isn't fair. All those people I've met — there's so *many* of them! — *believe* they're who they are, and even if they're some kind of bogus simulation, I still feel for what they might have to feel and I don't like it. I don't *want* to believe any of this, but it just doesn't go away. If I'm dreaming this, then that tells me something about myself that I don't like — and if it's somebody else's imagination, then I don't much like whoever it is for this, either."

She finally ran out of steam and lapsed into a sullen silence.

He sat thoughtfully for a while, then told her, "I think I see your problem. You are trying to think too much."

Sara was exasperated. "Well, what am I *supposed* to do?"

"Try to do less thinking. You should *feel*, instead. Watch and listen. Breathe the air. Enjoy the morning — and then enjoy the afternoon. Your journey is not ended yet. You should go to the city and see what you can see there. But don't expect to learn something. Just experience whatever happens and try to trust your vision."

"Gee, thanks," she muttered. "Everybody who oughtta be able to tell me something always talks in

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riddles."

"Or maybe," he said, smiling at her as if she were a favorite child who just didn't understand what the grownups were trying to tell her, "Maybe you *listen* in riddles."

He set her on a narrow path through the woods that led straight to the city, cautioning her not to stray from it. There were many branches forking away, all seemingly much easier than the one she was on, but they invariably ended in brambles or pits, leading nowhere.

There were other creatures or beings to be glimpsed as she went. A hairy drunken man-thing with horns on his head and cloven-footed goat-legs scampered between the trees, in lecherous pursuit of a young fat girl riding a centaur. An ancient oriental fisherman tottered by, flashing a snaggletoothed grin at her, his catch dangling from a pole over his shoulder as his wooden sandals clomp-clopped on the path's cobblestones. A great, black shaman, headdress wreathed in glowing smoke, intoned a mysterious ritual over a pile of meaningful bones. Tiny membrane-winged creatures of light and mischief flitted through the overhanging branches. A green-garbed, red-bearded midget with buckled shoes, a derby and a pugnacious expression smoked a wee pipe under a giant oak. The trees themselves sighed with intelligence, and half-buried stony boulders by the side of the road were sensitive to subtlety and nuance.

These were signs and portents, she realized, visitations and apparitions from a tangled mess of folklore, some unrecognizable and others merely silly. If she was indeed on a spirit quest of some kind, then why *not* encounter bizarre omens? The deerkiller's advice mingled with the angel's — 'trust your imagination' and 'try to do less thinking'. It seemed to be good counsel for now, so she just smiled and waved at the occasional dragon and pop-eyed tribal boogeyman. They had their own ritualistic business to attend to and either ignored her or waved back.

The forests and meadows were not extensive — a mere anomaly in the otherwise barren rockscape and riparian marshlands — so she came to the city soon enough. It straddled the river that flowed through the bottom of the valley, its high wall enclosing it completely. A riot of bright buildings in every conceivable style of architecture peeked over the parapets. The gate at which she arrived was ornate beyond reason, inlaid with silver and gold, gems and pearls. It was closed.

Under an awning beside the gate, a distinguished-looking bearded patriarch was perched on a high stool behind a podium that supported an enormous old book. He was obviously the gatekeeper, keys dangling from the sash of his robe. He appeared to be dozing.

Sara approached him carefully, not wanting to startle him, and not wanting to be so rude as to simply fly over the gate and into the city. Since there *was* a custodian, she

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would honor their customs. Maybe he could tell her where she might go in the city, who to talk to, or give her a clue as to what was going on.

"Ahem," she cleared her throat politely. His head bobbed up and his eyes flew open, clearing slowly as he focused on her. He blinked a few times and shook himself slightly, then sat upright, trying to affect a businesslike demeanor.

"Name?" he queried brusquely.

"Uh, Sara, sir," she responded. "Sara Corel."

He thumbed through the book, muttering, "Corel..." several times, peering closely at her at intervals as if to confirm some identifying characteristic.

She tried to be helpful. "That's Sara with no 'h', Corel with a 'C'."

After a few minutes of apparently fruitless search he announced, "No Sara Corel scheduled. Date of death?"

"Um, I'm not really sure I died, exactly. I'm probably in some kind of suspended animation, or I'm just imagining this."

"Date of birth?" he tried.

"Well, I wasn't really born, either. I just sorta thawed out one day."

He looked exasperated. "Place of origin?"

"Wish I could help you. Certainly not Earth, though." She was beginning to enjoy being the one with all the nonsensical answers for a change.

"Phylum? Genus? Species?" he demanded.

Toomie Starks

"Haven't the foggiest."

"Animal, vegetable or mineral?" he went on, practically in desperation.

"None of the above, I'm afraid."

He paused to consider for a moment, then asked her, "Mortal?"

Now it was her turn to be stumped. "I don't really know. Guess I won't find out until I actually drop dead someday. Which," she laughed, "I might be, huh? So maybe you can tell me..."

"You're wasting my time," he snapped, annoyed. "Who put you up to this? Michael? Gabriel? I should have known right away you weren't a *human* soul."

"Now, wait a minute," Sara protested. "Maybe I was some kind of robo-freak back on Earth, but I think I was just as 'human' as anyone else, at least as far as my feelings and everything. I mean, give me a break, here. I'm sorry if I'm not in your book or anything, but nobody 'put me up' to anything. I just came down here to see if I couldn't try to talk to someone about what's going on, and the hunter guy in the forest back there told me to follow the straight and narrow path to the city and here I am."

He looked her up and down. "You're not a supernatural manifestation?"

"A what?"

"A mythological creature, diety, power, principality, attribute, demigod, archetype, karmic essence, apparition, anima, demon, shade, specter, phantom, faerie, legend or

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idol?"

"Not completely," she said uncomfortably. "I'm an artifact that's maybe based on something kinda mythological — but I think I'm human, mostly."

"Hmm," he stroked his beard. "That might be different. You came here with the people up there?"

She nodded.

"Well, you're not one of us, and you're not in the Book." He sighed, "And that's all I have to go on."

He thought for a moment and finally shrugged. "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll provisionally pass you inside, and you can talk to some of the Higher Powers."

"Thanks! That sounds reasonable to me, uh... What did you say your name was?"

"I am called Peter," he replied, as the gates opened wide to the accompaniment of a silvery fanfare. She entered the city.

It was a city of heart-stopping splendor. The golden streets were lined with beautiful houses of every possible kind, row upon row of stately mansions and finely-wrought villas, neighborhoods filled with elegant manors and courtly estates. There were colorful gardens and tree-filled green parks everywhere, with fountains and statues in abundance, each more glorious than the last.

Quaint shops offered every delectable treat imaginable, gorgeous clothing in styles from every culture and era, books and trinkets, diversions and pleasures,

needful things and triviata — all unattended and free for the taking, an endless cornucopia.

There were playgrounds, but no schools. There were theaters, but no police stations. There were bicycle shops, but no garages. There were libraries, but no hospitals. There were bandstands in the parks, but no factories. There were public forums, but no offices.

Neither were there houses of worship — no churches, mosques, temples, synagogues, altars, pagodas, seminaries, stone circles, sacred groves, mystic grottos, shrines, cloisters, kivas, ashrams, sanctums, monastaries, chancels, adytums, chantries, convents, abbeys, priories or cathedrals. Perhaps none were needed here.

It was a shining place, a place of peace and fulfillment, a reward unto itself. There was grace in its design, and perfection in its accomplishment. Nothing was broken or incomplete or less than marvelous.

As Sara wandered the boulevards and thoroughfares, she passed Roman courtyard villas, Tudor wattle-and-daub oak-beamed townhouses, Park Avenue brownstones, Hollywood movie-star haciendas, columned Greek palaces, Babylonian hanging gardens, dry and cozy caves, Nordic greathalls, onion-domed dachas, grand yurts, nomadic tents of silks and fine brocades, exquisite Japanese rice-paper teahouses, mosaic-embellished Arabesques, ornate Victorian gabled gingerbreads, wrought-iron balconied French Quarter shotguns, Gothic stonewalled keeps, Ante-Bellum plantation houses, and

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thick-walled adobes.

She did not, however, encounter any inhabitants. The streets were empty. The shops were deserted, the parks abandoned. There were no locks on any doors, but Sara could kreen that the wonderful houses were unoccupied. Everywhere, there was silence.

It was a colossal ghost town — with no ghosts.

Maybe there's an air raid drill, thought Sara. What with all the ordinance surrounding the valley, it wouldn't be a bad idea. It was hard to imagine that such a place would have bomb shelters, though.

There was still the inner city, a place of splendid monuments crowning a tall hill overlooking the residential outer environs. The unseen, inhuman power she had felt the first night — that had always been in the background of her special senses — emanated from there. It was her obvious destination, and she wondered how she would be greeted by the 'Higher Powers'.

Just to be on the safe side, Sara decided to clean out an ice cream parlour before journeying on. There was a corner shoppe featuring a lot more than 31 flavors, and they all proved to be amazingly delicious — *her* idea of Heaven, anyway. She didn't think anybody would mind.

Halfway through her project, nearly lost in rapture, she kreened something flying close overhead and rushed into the street, hoping it wasn't some kind of military hardware launched prematurely by a trigger happy and nervous soldier on the valley's rim. She caught a glimpse

of the hurtling object and rose to follow its flight — then stopped suddenly in surprise only a few feet off the ground as she got a better look. If she'd been any lower, it's possible Sara's jaw would have hit the pavement.

The flyer sighted Sara at the same time and quickly reversed course, dropping from the sky to land in front of her. Sara sank slowly to the ground as she stared unabashedly. They eyed one another.

The woman in front of her was unusually tall and statuesque, gloriously blonde and blue-eyed, incredibly fit, tanned, and appeared to be not much older than Sara. Her clothing left little to the imagination, emphasizing her voluptuous curves in a manner just short of blatant. It was mostly white and short, adorned with highly polished silvery ornamentation stylistically representing a warrior's fighting harness. Her demeanor was proud and haughty, and her stance bespoke power and determination. A voluminous red cloak swirled behind her.

Sara was astonished. The girl had flown unaided, executed a better-than 20-g turn and landed hard enough to cripple a human. And her costume!

Good lord, Sara thought, reminded of one of her favorite popular Internet story sites. *A Velorian*.

A mythical supergirl by another name, born of humans bred to genetic perfection by an imaginary alien race, whose fantastic exploits were chronicled by a world-spanning group of voluntarily obsessed authors whose stories were read by thousands — including Sara, a

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devoted fan. Could it be?

Sara gushed, "Hi. I'm Sara Corel. Boy am I glad to see you! I was beginning to think there wasn't anybody around here at all. Do you live in the city? Where is everybody? You know, you remind me of *me*, sort of. Did the Cryptos send you, too? Or are you really a Velorian? Or maybe an angel? That would fit in with some of the others I saw in the forest. This is really great..." She babbled on, feeling like an idiot, while the other woman regarded her imperiously.

When Sara finally shut up, the woman let the silence build to a crescendo before disdainfully inquiring, "Is it good?"

Totally embarrassed, Sara realized that there was a considerable amount of ice cream on her chin, mostly raspberry fudge ripple. And her hands were sticky, too.

"Yeah," she replied, not knowing what else to say. "You want some?"

"If you have left any," said the golden warriorress.

She followed Sara back into the shoppe. Between the two of them, its stock was doomed, since her appetite proved to be nearly the equal of Sara's. They indulged themselves in a silent orgy of high-calorie bliss. After all, sharing a meal is always a good way to get to know someone. She eventually introduced herself between tubs of ice cream.

"I am Brunhilde Odinsdottir, Sara Corel."

Toomie Starks

"Pleased to meet you, Brunhilde. You fly pretty good."

"An attribute it seems we share. It is not a common one for those lacking wings."

"No kidding. Listen, I've seen some of the other 'manifestations' wandering around, and from what Pete told me at the gate, you guys are based on myths and superstitions and stuff, right?"

"Aye, but I am unfamiliar with yours."

"Well, I came in with the humans up on the plateau..."

"Human?" Brunhilde exclaimed. "You?"

"Sorta. Well, maybe not exactly. Human spirit and all that, but artificially made up to resemble someone who seems to have a lot in common with you. Jeez, we look like we could be related or something."

"I had noticed."

"I'd always figured I was modeled after this comic book character, because of the 'S' and everything. But if you're mythological, the closest I can figure is that maybe you're Velorian, which I wouldn't think is old enough to qualify. And anyway, they were originally modeled after the same comic book — unless there's a deeper inspiration that I don't know about."

Brunhilde shook her head. "I know not of these Velorians. I am a Valkyrie, shieldmaiden to the Aesir of Asgard."

"Wow! Cool," said Sara. "I know about you guys."

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You're supposed to carry off heroes from the field of battle and take them to Valhalla."

"I and my sisters," she admitted.

"I always thought you wore armor, with iron bras and horned helmets, and carried spears, and were — well, uh, most of the opera singers who played you all were pretty hefty, if you know what I mean."

"We have no need of armor, since we cannot suffer injury. And our spears are the flashing lightning of our wrathful gazes which no creature may withstand."

"Yeah, and you're strong, too, I'll bet. You sure look it."

"We were created to be the strength of the Allfather's right arm."

"Hah!" Sara said. "You *are* just like Velorians. I guess we have a lot in common."

"How so?"

"Well, that's me. Flying bulldozer and everything else." She dug a raisin out of her waffle cone and flipped it into the air, then fired off an ear-popping laser blast that vaporized it in a flash. Brunhilde looked appreciatively at Sara for a moment before reciprocating in kind, eliciting something from her eyes that was more akin to an electrical zap.

"Wanna arm wrestle?" Sara challenged amiably.

Brunhilde dubiously offered her arm and Sara promptly engaged her, both of them steadily increasing the pressure as they took each others' measure. The

Valkyrie's incredible musculature swelled under the strain to impossible proportions until finally her eyes widened in astonishment at the apparent ease with which Sara held her own.

"By Odin!" she finally exclaimed. "You could best Thor himself!"

They both laughed and clasped each other with the delight of meeting a kindred spirit. They chatted like schoolgirls while they continued to stuff their faces.

Brunhilde talked about her sister Valkyries and the constant ritualized intrigues among the gods of Asgard, and what it was like to live with the other gods in the Celestial City. For her part, Sara recounted the story of her Cryptoalien origins and how she arrived on the Earth and tried to explain about the character they modeled her on and the concept of Susan as a robot supercomputer.

Brunhilde shook her head. "That is of an era unknown to us. We supernatural beings are more static than mortals, having little need of human instrumentality. We exist as soulless unchanging archetypes in the realms allotted to us, serving as spiritual inspiration rather than mundane genius. It seems your otherworldly creators, or creatures like them, are not unknown to us, though."

"Really? You've met the Cryptos? What are they like?"

"We only know that an agency not of the middle-earth appropriated the bodies *and* souls of a number of our fairest maidens, promising by their seed to make them

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into a race which could challenge the gods. We know naught of the outcome. Whether it is your makers or an alternative mythology, we cannot say."

"That's just like our own Internet Scribes write about the origins of the Velorians. And you and your sisters turn out to be just like they're supposed to turn out. That's eerie. Like what Soloman called a 'Cosmic Inspiration Resonance'."

They were silent for a while.

Sara finally asked, "So, where's all the people?"

Brunhilde sighed. "It is wonderful, is it not? Ice cream every day, as much as you want, any flavor you can imagine. Verily, a Paradise in every way, with no want and perfect contentment."

"It must be harder to get in here than I thought."

"It is all too easy. There are few souls who do not try it. Some endure unending bliss for a time, but there is an inevitable realization that all come to."

"I think I see where you're heading," Sara said. "Gets boring after a while, huh?"

"The challenge is lacking. Once rested, the soul seeks awakening. That cannot happen here."

"So they split. I can see that. Must be some kind of recycling center around here somewhere, I guess. Any idea what happens to 'em?"

"My father would know. His attributes include knowledge."

"I'm guessing Asgard is on the hill in the center of

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the city?"

"Aye," Brunhilde replied, "with the greater portion of the godhomes."

"The monumental stuff, right? The Field and Stream types are out in the boondocks where I met Chief Running Riddle."

"You perceive aright."

"Tell you what. Why don't we pay your Dad a visit? And maybe the rest of the god gang up there. I'm on a mission to spy on you guys for the Army and maybe see if I can work out a deal, and I'm also s'posed to be on a 'spirit quest'. I was headed that direction anyway. Maybe you can give me some of the inside scoop on the way and show me the scenic tour."

They left together when the ice cream ran out.

Chapter Thirty-six: All the Heavens of Earth

Sara and Brunhilde made a high, wide circle around the monumental central hill of the Celestial City, the native proudly showing off the local sights to the tourist.

In the center, a massive pyramid dominated the scenery, but it was not the multi-thousand-year-old ruin that Sara had once visited. Its whitely gleaming limestone façade was smoothly intact, an awesome sight unseen since the dawn of recorded history. There were other pyramids from other continents, all in pristine condition. The nearby Parthenon was as it had been in its glory days atop the Athenian Acropolis. Many, many other symbolic structures were represented as well, such as Angkor Wat, the Pantheon, Chichen Itza, the Statue of Liberty, Hagia Sophia, Stonehenge, and the Taj Mahal. There were still others from forgotten realms that had long ago crumbled to dust — including the Philistine edifice brought down by Samson — now faithfully restored to glory. Only the Alamo was in less than pristine condition, since its metaphorical importance was as the bullet-scarred fortress of sacrifice it became, rather than its original mission.

Sara excitedly called out the names of the ones she recognized.

"Those are not the habitations, Sara Corel," Brunhilde shouted over the windy noise of their passage. "They serve to represent expressions of reverence, made holy by the consecration of their devotees."

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"OK," Sara shouted back, "So which ones are the godpads?"

"See? There is Olympus, abode of the gods of two worlds, Hellenes and Romans, and inspiration to philosophers of myriad ages and cultures."

A craggy outcrop of granite supported a few dozen exquisite marble-columned dwellings clustered around a central ampitheater. No movie matte had ever done the scene justice.

"And there abide the animal-headed Egyptian deities along with millenia of dynastic god-kings and their retinues," Brunhilde cried, pointing to enormous sandstone palaces surrounded by massive Pharaonic statuary and obelisks.

Sara recognized another huge complex of structures overlooking the river from a bluff at the base of the hill.

"Isn't that the Kremlin? What's *it* doing here?"

"Men oft made gods of what once were men. The creations of obedient mass adulation have aquired immortal status. In that place reigns the avatar of the god Stalin, though his soul lies elsewhere."

"Ugh," Sara replied. "I guess that explains the Chinese Forbidden City and the Japanese Imperial Palace."

"Those have had many masters, though not as numerous as the Pharaohs. They are attended by the soulless shades of their most fanatical worshippers, courtiers, and factotums. Hordes of ideologues, political

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commisars and grey bureaucrats serve the Soviet gods, and slogan-chanting students waving little red books proclaim the Chairman's religion. The Reichschancellory is there," Brunhilde pointed, "and Camelot is over there."

"What about *that* little old place?" Sara asked, pointing below them. It was a mansion from the Old South with a pink Cadillac in the driveway. "Doesn't look like a godly dwelling compared to everything else. Who lives there?"

"Elvis."

With the sun nearing the horizon, they made their final approach. As they neared the bridge, Bifrost, that provided the only access to Asgard, they were intercepted by a great number of wingéd beings of indeterminate gender who laboriously rose to meet them, flapping frantically with the great effort needed to cope with their unlikely aerodynamic design. Brunhilde did not seem to be very pleased, but made no attempt to avoid them.

"Who are they?" Sara asked.

"A company of the Heavenly Host," she replied, with all the enthusiasm normally reserved for door-to-door Bible-bangers. "Annoying busybodies, but unavoidable to all who stray within their range. 'Twould be best to humor them."

The colorfully gowned mob escorted them to a wide plaza enclosed by their innumerable barracks, singing robustly to the accompaniment of harps, cymbals and a

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vast collection of modern, medieval and even antique musical instruments. They made a great and joyous noise unto Heaven, altogether louder than a rock concert and in likely violation of local noise ordinances.

One poor fellow struggled mightily with a tuba, barely able to stay aloft, much less loose an occasional bassic blast. Their flying might leave something to be desired, but Sara had to admit that their harmony was first-rate. *They probably have a lot of time to practice*, she thought.

They touched down amidst a noisy celebration, each heavenly denizen proclaiming his or her rapture more expressively than the next. It took some bit of time for the praising and worshipping to die down enough to make conversation possible.

"Thou hast a guest unknown to us, sister Brunhilde. Wilt not thou makest introductions?" said their chieftain, a large and imposing warrior of exceeding fairness, an eternal youth with abundant platinum curls, garbed in flowing white samite and golden fighting harness, clutching a silver spear.

"Sara Corel, human soul — Raphael, archgeneral of the 3275th Blesséd Legion," she intoned formally and perfunctorily. If she'd had a watch, she'd have glanced at it.

"Pleased to meet you," Sara curtsied.

"Our presence doth honor ye," he replied. The throng surrounding them shouted affirming halleluiahs and

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amens, flapping and singing, rattling their tambourines and bleating their horns.

Sara looked at Brunhilde, who sighed and rolled her eyes skyward. This could take the rest of the afternoon.

When the tumult died out, Sara said, "Yeah, it was a real moment and everything, but we've got an appointment..."

"Yea, verily" he replied, "And thou hast kept it! Come — rejoice with us and know the everlasting Word of *glory*!" Another round of wing-fluttering hosannas and fanfares swept the excitable mob.

Eventually, Sara was able to say, "Actually, I came over from the humans..."

"Praises be! Thou shalt be one of our company as our holy crusade issues forth to smite the enemies of righteousness!" He exclaimed. Singing erupted, accompanied by martial melodies — as if John Phillip Sousa had joined forces with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

When the impromptu parade finally ground to a halt, Sara protested, "This 'smiting' stuff... Is that really necessary?"

"We shall crush the blasphemy of disbelief!" The crowd went nearly hysterical in their show of patriotic fervor.

"Well," Sara was finally able to say, "Frankly, I'm hoping we can find a way to *keep* the war from *happening*."

Raphael started to speak, and then stared uncomprehendingly at her with his mouth open. The assemblage was stricken with quiet.

At last, one of the company said, "You mean, no fighting?"

"That's what I hope," said Sara.

"What's the point in that?" another said, King James accent forgotten..

"No killing," said Sara. "No smiting. No wounding and suffering,."

"But," said still another, "It's... It's *prophecy*."

"It's what we're supposed to *do*," a voice complained.

"They're dead anyway, and we're immortal."

Sara objected, "What about all the suffering that goes with it?"

They looked at each other, puzzled. One said, "We do not suffer."

"But *they* would," Sara pleaded.

The assemblage just stared at her. Their expressions seemed to say, *And your point is...?* Brunhilde examined her fingernails.

"And, anyway," she continued, "you're just as corporeal as the rest of us. I wouldn't be too sure about not getting hurt. They're not gonna try to sing *you* to death. Have you ever gotten up close and personal with a tank?"

"We fear naught. We are the Heavenly Host, fell and impervious," Rafael intoned. A few half-hearted

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responses were heard and the tuba player blew a sour note.

"Fine," said Sara. "Tell you what. Why don't you stick me with that toothpick of yours and see what happens?"

Raphael hesitated unsurely and Sara taunted him, "Come on, your archgeneralship. Show me what you got. We're gonna have to rumble pretty soon anyway, right?"

He looked at Brunhilde, who gave him a most disdainful look, wounding him as surely as arrows. The crowd began to egg him on.

"Yeah."

"Go ahead."

"Do it."

"Show her."

"She mocks us."

"Blasphemer."

He suddenly reared back and hurled his weapon straight at her. His aim was true and his technique superb, talent and practice in the martial arts clearly evident. It rebounded from the center of her emblem and clattered noisily to the pavement, its elaborate point bent into uselessness.

"Now it's my turn," she said, advancing on Raphael. She punched him very carefully in the stomach — not a hard blow, but there was a mountain of momentum behind it. He crumpled, clutching himself in unaccustomed pain.

"Ow!" he moaned reproachfully. "That hurt."

His troops were stunned, uncomprehending. This was a nasty bit of cognitive dissonance.

Sara bent over and helped him to his feet. "You better think about this, all of you. If you want to fight this silly fight, you should know it's not going to be anything like choir practice."

They'd *never* been hurt before. Their entire existences had been devoted entirely to song and ease, oblivious to any kind of strife or lack, every wish fulfilled and every whim satisfied. They had never known birth, life, suffering, inconvenience or even discouraging words. Their lot was the stuff of unearned — and therefore unappreciated — fantasy. Pain and defeat were alien to them by the very act of their creation. Their minds refused to even grasp the concept. They could not understand that things might be different now.

They milled uncertainly.

A new sound thundered onto the plaza from the far corner as a long line of chromed Harleys blasted up out of a tunnel from some subterranean source and motored noisily toward them, farty four-stroke p-p-p-pops echoing their hard acceleration from the surrounding buildings. The feathery herd respectfully made way for the newcomers, who were clad in intimidating black-on-black outfits featuring protruding studs and spikes and other un-charming decorations. They were a rough lot, like characters from a string of dreadful post-apocalyptic B-

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movies melded with the nightmare paintings of Heironymous Bosch. Everything about their demeanor proclaimed them to be badasses.

The leader screeched to a halt in front of Raphael, trailing a cloud of hot, oily exhaust. His leather jacket was emblazoned on the back with a large circular patch bearing his initials, 'B.L.Z.', arced above a flaming death's head, with his handle, 'Bubba', grinning below it.

Rafael acknowledged him distractedly, "H'lo, Bubba."

"Yo, Rafe," Bubba replied, eyeing Sara. "Who's the new bitch?"

"Sarah something-or-other," Rafael responded poutily. "She says we shouldn't fight the Last Battle."

The army of nightmarish bikers howled derisively. Bubba barked at Sara, "What are you? Some kinda *human*?"

"Yes, I am," said Sara proudly. "I care for my fellow humans, and this whole silly war is ridiculous. There's got to be a better way."

"I thought they was all *warriors* up there, not a bunch of girley *pansies*. If *you* don't want to fight that's cool with me. Maybe me an' you can have some *fun* before I kick your ass back to Hell," he leered suggestively. His mates roared their approval.

Sara looked at Brunhilde, who shrugged. So she deliberately walked over to Bubba's bike and picked it up with one hand.

He snarled at her, "Nobody fucks with my bike, bitch."

She folded it in half.

Cursing profusely, Bubba swung his huge, knarly fist at Sara's face, connecting solidly. The shock of contact stunned him momentarily.

"Ow!" he moaned reproachfully. "That hurt."

Raphael commiserated, "She hurt me, too. And ruined my spear."

The two of them looked at Sara uncertainly. The silent crowd edged away from her. Brunhilde laughed.

Sara addressed the throng, "If you idiots are so intent on fighting, then you'd better realize that those *humans* out there all know what it's like to suffer and die — and you'll likely find out yourselves if you mess with them. What could possibly be worth going through that? Do any of you even know *why* everybody's so set on this?"

Brunhilde came beside her and said, "They need not ken the reason for the task to which they are set. But they will do what they have to do. Just as I will, friend Sara Corel. Just as will *your* friends."

"Damn' straight," said Bubba.

"Yea, verily," said Raphael.

They have no souls, Sara reminded herself. *They cannot be but what they are.*

There was an awkward silence until Bubba announced, "Screw this. Let's *party*."

"Amen!" affirmed Raphael, and all the glorious

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bedlam started anew as the two groups together moved away from the girls. A hymn broke out, cymbals clashed and flutes tootled. Bikes were kickstarted into raucous life, popping squealing wheelies. The tuba player hurried after the rest, wings waving and cheeks puffing. They quickly disappeared into the barracks of the 3275th — wings, tubas, motorcycles and all.

Brunhilde told Sara, "Well done! Mayhap this wast the quickest method yet seen to dispatch these boors. Let's away."

Asgard proved to be dark and foreboding in the gathering gloom of evening. There were stoneworks, but most of it was ornately carved heavy wood that smelled faintly of forest mustiness and resin. Dragons and trolls lurked in every decoration, and the complex surfaces sucked up sounds and cast disturbing shadows by the flickering of torches. Smoke had stained the ceilings black, leaving a bite in the air that tickled the throat and teased the nostrils.

It was a Heaven devoted to battle and death, whose only glory derived from duty and honor in the face of certain doom. Its comforts and rewards were in strong drink and gluttony, rough comradeship and the warmth of a blazing hearth on a cold night. Here, the wolves howled within.

Brunhilde ushered Sara into her father's study. He sat heavily astride a fur-covered throne of bones, his one

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good eye gauging the depths of eternity. The great black ravens, Huginn and Muninn, who flew forth daily to gather tidings of events great and small, perched dolefully on either side, close to his ears. His countenance was as bleak as the frozen northern wastelands, and he huddled within himself, a wizened husk hoarding unspoken power.

"Hail, Allfather, sire and lord. I bring a traveler for your blessing and wisdom. She is called Sara Corel and is a mighty warrior, a soul of the human kind possessed of godly attributes."

His eye fixed them like a bolt. "Brunhilde, my dear. I see so little of my precious daughters these days. Come hither that I might embrace thee. And bring your friend. I know somewhat of her, and somewhat of her doom."

They approached him and he laid his ancient hands briefly upon their shoulders. They sank back into the piles of skins that littered the stone floor before his seat.

"What would you have of me, child?" he asked Sara.

He impressed her. His strength and wisdom poured over her like an icy flood, chilling her senses and piercing her mind like an icicle. She had been so full of questions that now seemed so foolish in his presence. She felt an unaccustomed shyness and lowered her chin, looking back up at him like a small child. All she could think to ask was, "Why...?" in a very small voice.

He looked gravely at her. "Your friend is wise, daughter. She asks the question that cannot be answered."

Sara was at first mortified, but seeing Brunhilde's

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beaming smile finally realized that he had shown her an unmistakable sign of affection.

"It is called the Twilight of the Gods, fortold in every lore, part of the basis of human understanding of their destinies. For we immortals were begotten by humankind who knew the limits of their wisdom. In us was vested the unexplainable against that time when they could understand for themselves the meaning of the question you posed. And when that time comes, humans must wrest from the gods their stewardship of the unknown.

"We will not pass quietly, nor will we pass utterly. There is usefulness for us yet. But the hold of superstition must be confronted and the fears overcome. This will be a battle of tokens fought in the unconscious ubermind of humanity, defining collective rationality against which individual dreams can be measured.

"The pain and suffering must needs be real, and the outcome uncertain. An abyss of chaos lies beneath us all, and the old gods may return in greater force, or new gods arise, enslaving their masters for millennia in fundamentalist intolerance. There are those ever ready to slay reason at the altar of dogma, and humans have a weakness for idols of their own making.

"The essential difference between those beings with souls and such as we is that for them, the concept of 'death' is meaningless. It is the true life, but it is formless and without meaning. They partake of 'life' as a diversion, a challenge, a means to enhance the structure of their

underlying essence. Experiences are born of imagination, and that is the only meaningful capital in the economy of eternity."

Sara sat motionless throughout his speech, and there was silence for a time after. Finally, she said, "But the pain... Few will die quickly in such a battle. Many will linger in agony for who knows how long. There's got to be a better way to — to..."

"Tomorrow," he said, "there will be a convocation of the Higher Powers. You shall be my guest. Now it is time for dinner. Will you join us, Sara Corel?"

Like she would refuse...

Sara walked with Odin and Brunhilde to the enormous main hall of Valhalla with its roof of shields and 540 doors, each wide enough to pass 800 warriors abreast. The rough and raucous cacaphony of the heroes filled the great space (...*almost as big as the Astrodome*, Sara thought). There was a tremendous shout when their party entered, and a din of ram's horns (...*sounds like the Astrodome, too*, she added). The other Valkyries were gathered before the long head table from whence Odin would preside over the nightly feast that always concluded a day of fighting drill. Even those who had been grievously injured were made whole in time for supper.

Brunhilde motioned for Sara to follow her. The shieldmaidens did not sit at table, but rather tended to the

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heros they had fetched from myriad battles, pouring wine and trading coarse jests in a familiar manner. Each of the sisters had been responsible for bringing in about a twelfth of the horde and knew every one of them by name. Some they even knew intimately. After all, they could choose whosoever they would amongst the slain, for whatever reasons they wished. They were all valorous men, of course, but some were more valorous than others — and others were more, shall we say, manly.

The warriors made quite a fuss over Sara as she moved among them, making boozy offers and launching flagrant gropes. It was all she could do to avoid having some of the bolder ones try to throw her over their shoulders and carry her away. Her apparent youth was not a problem among men from a culture where life must be lived quickly and girls Sara's age had already borne their Viking mates' children.

She passed Brunhilde and asked, "Is it always like this?"

The Valkyrie nodded enthusiastically and whirled into the thick of a massive brawl in order to encourage their mayhem all the more.

There was an enormous quantity of food available, mostly of the heart-attack-on-a-plate variety — except that there weren't any plates. Or silverware, besides lethal-looking knives. Forget glasses or even cups: mead, ale, wine and other adult beverages flowed from skins or resided briefly in drinking horns — which, once filled,

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could not be set down and must therefore be emptied. There was enough alcohol (and meat byproducts) on the floor to constitute a fire hazard.

Eventually, Sara was summoned to the head table and introduced to the other gods in attendance that night by Brunhilde, interrupting the usual litany of boasts by Thor. She recounted their brush with Raphael and B.L.Z. 'Bubba', which drew laughs of appreciation from most.

Thor never liked being upstaged — especially by a girl — and snorted derisively, "Bearding such halfmen is hardly a worthy deed. Those mincing flutterers and their brimstone-stenchéd lovers are not worth a good kicking."

Brunhilde laughed at him and said, "Regard her not lightly, brother, or she may pull *your* beard."

"How so?" said the easily offended champion of Asgard. "You think this brat my challenger?"

"Aye, braggart. That I do."

Thor looked as if he had been slapped. That was a grievous insult, one he would not take lightly even from a Valkyrie kinswoman. A current of anticipation swept through the multitude like a wave at a football game. Oho! The wench would match herself with Thor! What sport!

"Now, wait a minute," Sara objected. "I'm not trying to pick a fight..."

"Bah," said Thor contemptuously.

"Nay. Not a mere fight," Brunhilde countered dramatically, playing to the masses. "A *contest*!"

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The Norsemen bellowed their appreciation. This was what they wanted to see. For they knew a contest involving the gods — especially Thor — was never what it seemed.

"What manner of contest?" Thor asked suspiciously.

"Yeah," said Sara, "what?"

"Sara Corel has made a long journey to be with us tonight and has served our heroes well, taking nothing yet for herself. What poor hosts we have become if we do not offer to assuage her hunger, for surely she must be famished by now. And mighty Thor has barely touched his meat. We know *he* has an appetite!"

The hall exploded in laughter — for, indeed, his was renowned.

"But methinks," Brunhilde went on, "the poor waif's is the greater this night. Why, she is so thin and pale she must have much need of nourishment. Let us see if great Thor can keep apace with her."

The noise was deafening. The gods applauded. Even Odin smiled. Thor looked like he somehow knew he was being blindsided and couldn't do anything about it.

Poor Thor. He tried — and it was a mighty effort — but he never had a chance. And nobody else got seconds that night.

Eventually, the besotted warriors either passed out or crawled away as the torches guttered and smoked into mere embers. The gods retired and a wagon was brought

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'round to carry away Thor's insensate bulk. For a few days, he would be a 'thunder-god' indeed.

The Valkyries' apartments, in a separate wing, shared a common area. There, Brunhilde introduced her sisters: Grimhilde, Kreimhilde, Sigrun, Svava, Kara, Hilda, Hriste, Miste, Skuld, Urd, and Belledande. They were all as gloriously beautiful, strong and proud as Brunhilde and welcomed Sara as a fellow warrior who had given their brother a well-deserved comeuppance.

They didn't understand Sara's squeamishness about the battle, looking forward to it themselves in high excitement. They had witnessed plenty of fights over the centuries, choosing the worthiest warriors to carry away when they fell. Though their souls went to Hell with all the others, their doppelgangers dwelt still in Valhalla, carousing and fighting, preparing for Ragnarok — now only two days' hence.

"I thought so," said Sara. "Some of the guys back there looked awfully familiar. So their 'souls' are out there with the humans... And the Valhallans? They don't have 'souls'? I don't get it."

Skuld was the brainy one of the lot. She tried to explain, "All who are in the Heavens are but symbols, metaphors, representations. As we are immortal, we are also unchanging, fulfilling the purpose for which we were created. And so it is with the shades of these slain examples of what it means to be a warrior. They each

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defined the honorable warrior spirit, and so their avatars are represented in this place made for them. It is so in many cultures, where there have been places prepared to receive the valiant dead. But the essence that created each model perished, only to be resurrected from Hell for this purpose."

"You mean, like Muslims or Cossacks or Japanese soldiers who believe they'd go straight to Heaven if they died in combat."

"Thus mankind must in part face himself in this battle to end his gods. Some souls must confront their own superstitious creations."

Most of the Valkyries slipped away during Skuld's speech, changing from their battle dress into something softer. They had trysts to keep and flew silently away into the darkness one by one. Only Brunhilde, Kara and Sigrun stayed behind to visit with Sara.

They cozied up in front of the fireplace on a pillow mountain, their giggly conversation turning eventually to the subject of men. They were keen appraisers of maleflesh, comparing notes about the relative merits or weaknesses of the lovers they'd taken.

Sara was embarrassed but fascinated by their stories. "But I thought that '*shieldmaiden*' meant..."

They laughed at her naïve notions, Kara explaining, "Today I am a maiden, and tomorrow I will be a maiden still. But *tonight*..."

Brunhilde told her, "We are goddesses. This is

Heaven. If you return to the ice cream shoppe in the morn, you will find it untouched."

"Oh," said Sara. That bit of information sounded very important to her somehow.

"So who shall we find suitable for young Sara?" Sigrun asked merrily.

"Aye," Kara responded, "She merits our best hospitality."

Sara protested, "Now, wait a minute..." but they carried on.

"Hrolfgar is a patient, gentle man..." suggested Brunhilde.

"Who'll put her to sleep, like as not," Sigrun countered.

"What of Olaf? He is mighty..." Kara said.

"Mighty quick," Brunhilde testified to general laughter.

"Gunnar Gunnarsen wields a great spear..."

"Betimes. And betimes not."

"Beonir is most comely..."

"And fancies Gunnar Gunnarsen."

"Ladies, *please*," said Sara. "I'm very grateful, but, really, even if I wanted to take you up on your offers to, uh, help me, it just wouldn't work out, believe me. I mean — I don't know how to put this — I really am indestructable, y'know. *Really* indestructable. Everywhere."

"There's always sister Hrist," Hilda said. "She has an

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Amazon lover on Olympus." The others tittered.

"As do you, sister dear," said Kara.

"As do we all," said Brunhilde, "when our revel-sotted he-men cannot be roused to do their duties."

The lusty goddesses laughed. It was clear, though, that they took the burdens of hospitality seriously..

"Oh, swell," said Sara. "Yeah, I'm really flattered, but I don't think I wanna swing that way."

Brunhilde shushed the rest. "Please, the jest goes far enough, sisters. Let us honor our guest."

"Hey, I know you mean well. Honest, I appreciate it and all. Maybe I wish it was that easy." She looked a little wistful.

Gently, Brunhilde reminded her, "This is Heaven, Sara Corel. All things must be possible here..."

When at last Sara slept, she dreamed of gods.

Chapter Thirty-seven: The Congress of Gods

The Higher Powers met in the roofless amphitheater of Olympus, a half-circle of stone terraces confronting a wide stage open to the sky. Most pantheons were represented by only one or two gods or goddesses, and some of the minor sects were absent entirely, though there was at least some kind of representation for every religion that ever existed.

It was quite a crowd, radiantly resplendent in displays of unearthly power and beauty. Zeus/Jove was a towering giant, wreathed in flickering lightnings, and Shiva's massive phallus was prominently priapic. The Great Mother, Ishtar — the naked globes of her world-nourishing breasts high and proud — was there with her sword and bow, the evening star upon her brow. Beside her was black Olodumare, who was brought from Africa to a new world in the bowels of slave ships. Hawk-headed Ra shone as the sun, and the feathered serpent Quetzalcoatl gleamed with vibrant colors.

They were not all glorious. Sun Wu-Kung, the 'Handsome Monkey King' that even the gods could not keep out, capered and spun — threatening to disrupt the proceedings — and Coyote, the Trickster, changed his shape to fit his mood. A few stone and wooden idols sat impassively, and on one side a bush burned brightly.

The initial proceedings resembled a cocktail reception, as much as anything else, with the various

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deities mingling freely, drifting from one impromptu conversational group to another. Odin excused himself to talk to the Shinto sun goddess Amaterasu, and Sara wound up talking to Karl Marx.

"I guess it's kind of ironic, you being here, huh?" said Sara, "...considering what you said about religion."

"The opium of the masses," Marx scowled. "This farcical assemblage proves my point. Those here exist at the sufferance and invention of the masses. Their inevitable overthrow will occur when the people of the world unite to throw off the chains of their ignorance."

"You don't exactly sound like you're on the side of the gods."

"Philosophy makes no secret of it. Prometheus' admission, 'In sooth all gods I hate,' is its own admission, its own motto against all gods."

"Prometheus," Sara said, "That's the Titan that stole the Gift of Fire and gave the knowledge of the gods to mankind. Right?"

Marx nodded, "Prometheus is the noblest saint and martyr in the calendar of philosophy. The eternal revolutionary, he is fastened to his rock still, until the gods have fallen."

Sara shuddered. "Eternal torment? For helping mankind?"

Marx shrugged, "The only antidote to mental suffering is physical pain. I wrote a verse when I was a student..."

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Hah, eternity, our eternal pain,
Indescribable, unmeasurable death!
Disgusting, artificially conceived,
To despise us —
We, who ourselves, as a clock mechanism
Blindly mechanical, created to be
Foolish calendars of time and space,
Without any purpose,
Besides accidental appearance for destruction."

"That's pretty gloomy," said Sara (...*and pretty bad*, she thought). "What about the soul? Isn't it..."

"A soul appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. Devoid of materiality, it lacks both the ability to sense and the ability to reason. Reason has always existed, but not always in a reasonable form. Therefore, materialism is the only basis for the dialectic of the soul."

"That's, uh," Sara mumbled uncertainly, "very philosophical, I'm sure. What do these other guys think about all this?"

Marx snorted contemptuously, "On a level plain, simple mounds look like hills; and the insipid flatness of our present 'divinity' is to be measured by the altitude of its 'great intellects'. The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to

change it."

"Well," said Sara "Your philosophy certainly changed the world. Not for the better, either. An awful lot of people suffered from Marxism."

"I am not a 'Marxist'," he replied, seemingly somewhat offended. "As with any philosophy — whether it be under the auspices of a 'religion' or formally based in scientific reasoning — so it happened with mine. Few people read my work, and fewer still understood it. The masses were swayed by faith in what their 'priests' told them, deluded by opportunists and their own fancies. My theories concerned the 'thesis' of the inevitable collapse of capitalism from its own internal inconsistencies and structural weaknesses, and its 'antithesis', the inevitable rise of the the dictatorship of the proletariat. A new 'synthesis' would eventually emerge as a historical imperative, not as the result of the distortion and misapplication of my work."

Marx snorted, "Russia — bah! China — bah! Backwards proto-economies peopled by slavish idiots! They never achieved capitalism — how could they be expected to even understand, let alone embrace and implement, communism? Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot — they all used me to excuse their own agendas."

"But some of your basic premises were just flat-out wrong," Sara insisted. "The bourgeoisie weren't nearly the bastards you figured them to be, and things got better. Freedom made it possible for the workers to become

consumers and democracy gave them the power to hold governments accountable for their economic policies. Your slogan, 'From each according to his ability; to each according to his needs,' just doesn't work, 'cause it flies in the face of human nature. Communism turned out to be some kind of totalitarian hell and people suffered and died by the millions."

"The writer may very well serve a movement of history as its mouthpiece, but he cannot of course create it."

"I don't care what you say," said Sara stubbornly. "I still think that you're responsible for starting it."

"I am a bloodstained god?" he mockingly replied. "Show me one here who is not. How many have died enforcing the loving doctrines of their gods? And how many have been slain for righteousness' sake? If there is no other purpose for the gods, then they serve as mankind's excuse for butchery."

Sara wandered off, confused and maybe even a little bit hurt by his attitude. She recognized that a lot of what he'd said was basically paraphrases of some of his more famous quotations, though the context was somewhat skewed. He wasn't really the original Marx, she realized, but some kind of simulacrum or representation — an 'avatar', Brunhilde had called other humans raised to godhood by their worshippers. He was therefore made to represent *their* expectations and prejudices. As with all the gods and their minions, he wasn't really 'live' — he

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was Memorex. And if that was so, then what was she to make of herself?

She came across the Buddha, serenely meditating at the edge of the crowd in the guise of a fat beggar. She thought, *Well, here's a god that doesn't have blood on his hands.*

"Master..." she began humbly.

There was no response, other than perhaps a deepening of his beatific smile.

An enormous battle-scarred barbarian god in furs and leather growled, "You'll get nothing from him."

Sara looked at him and guessed, "Mars...?"

"That *boy!* Hah!" he laughed mirthlessly. "Call me Crom — a name that suits me well enough. I heard about your 'duel' with my friend Thor. Ho, that I could have seen it!" He slapped her appreciatively on the back hard enough to fell a redwood and sat beside the Buddha.

"I was talking with Mr. Marx..."

"Nobody talks *with* that asshole," he sneered. "He *lectures*, if you don't have the sense to get away from him."

"Well, anyway — he pretty much said that all the gods are just excuses for a lot of bloodshed..."

"Aye," he nodded. "It is good to crush your enemies, see them driven before you, and to hear the lamentations of their women."

"Maybe for you," she snorted, "Or your followers. But what about the Buddha? From what I've read and

what I've heard, his philosophy is very peaceful — there's never been a Buddhist war, has there?"

Crom laughed uproariously at this. "Mankind can corrupt *any* teaching. On the plain, you will find warriors infused with the Zen of *bushido* whose masters embraced the sword not only as a way of cutting through delusion, but as a way of cutting through their Emperor's enemies, as well. Let me tell you what their great Master Shaku Soen preached: 'I wished to inspire our valiant soldiers with the ennobling thoughts of the Buddha, so as to enable them to die on the battlefield with confidence that the task in which they are engaged is great and noble.' The Buddhist leadership of Imperial Japan did not just hop aboard the wartime bandwagon — they were the bandleaders. The Rape of Nanking followed, and other un-Buddha-like atrocities. Thus is such a peaceful philosophy so adaptable."

She realized that he wasn't as ignorant as he looked. "Alright, so maybe that's the exception that proves the rule."

"Then there was King Ashoka," he went on, obviously enjoying himself, "who conquered most of India and spread the Buddha's then relatively unknown peaceful philosophy at swordpoint, embracing repentance only when he was finished."

"OK, I get your point. Still, better Buddha than... Than, uh..."

"Better than Crom?" He laughed again. "I don't *give*

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my followers anything but a hard life and cold steel. They become tough and proud and self-sufficient, taking what they need, yet incorruptible. They are *engaged* in the experience of *life*, and live it to the fullest — they are not parasites who dive into their navels, abandoning the world to the uninitiated."

"And where are they now?" asked the Buddha, ever so politely.

"Out *there* on the plain, every one of them!" Crom spread his arms wide. "And tomorrow, they will kick my *ass*! Hah, hah, hah!"

The Buddha smiled, and Sara became enlightened.

Athena called the Congress to order. Of all the gods, she may have had the greatest claim to some kind of intellectual capacity other than Marx and Jehovah (who was, after all, at least a best-selling author).

When everyone had settled down, she called Sara forth, bringing her up on the stage to confront the audience.

"Do you know why you are here?" Athena asked her.

"Not really," Sara replied.

"You are our link. This all becomes possible because of you. You represent the unification of mankind through technology, the ascendancy of information over insularity. Your Earthly arrival deliberately coincides with the potential ability of all mankind to unite in knowledge, to rise above the prejudice of ignorance and control their

own fate, to provide for themselves the instrumentality of their own destiny."

"Me?" said Sara uncertainly. "I don't think I get it."
Crom bellowed helpfully, "It's a *metaphor*."

Athena's haughty gaze affixed him as if he were a naughty schoolboy. The barbarian grinned back at Sara, winking.

"But," Sara protested, "the Cryptos — I mean, Cryptoaliens — sent me. I don't think I can take any kind of responsibility for..."

Athena rolled her eyes and patiently explained, "It's a metaphor." Crom elbowed the Buddha and looked pleased with himself.

The goddess continued, "You were sent at a turning point of human history. Your presence represents a choice for both the quick and the dead."

"Symbolically," Crom added boisterously.

"Crom!" Athena swore. The Buddha elbowed him back.

"OK," said Sara reluctantly. "It's my dream, so — whatever... But I gotta tell you, I'm determined to try to stop this war if I can. Maybe that's *my* test. And if I can't, then for sure I'm not going to fight anybody, or fight *for* anybody. Humans *or* gods."

"Sara," Athena asked, "How do the gods communicate with humans?"

"Huh? Well... I guess, dreams and stuff. Visions and prophecies — inspiration? Probably not very well, come

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to think of it. I suppose that most of the time, some people just *claim* to have spoken with the gods. It's kinda hard to tell real prophets from false ones, or revelations from hallucinations."

"And how do humans communicate with their gods?"

"Hoo-boy. Prayer, I guess. Maybe sacrifices. I dunno... Not too reliable, considering. You guys don't have anything like zip codes."

"How do humans communicate with each other?"

"Oh, that's easy. They just talk to each other..."

"In what language?"

"That depends... Uh, what are you getting at?"

Crom hollered, "Tower of Babel, Sara."

The other gods glared at him.

"Thank you, *Mister* Crom," Athena said icily.

Athena turned back to Sara, "And how do the disparate armies on the plain communicate with each other?"

"Aha. They've got radios. Not a whole lot, but they've been scavenging some from planes and some of the tanks and ships and stuff, along with batteries and generators. Every single command has at least one, though — even the tribal guys."

"But they cannot understand one another."

"No problem — I'm helping. Anyone sends a radio message and I intercept it, translate it and rebroadcast it. No charge. It's all automatic — I don't even have to think

about it."

"Hah!" said Crom. "Instant Internet."

"*Shut*," barked Athena, "*Up!*"

Zeus/Jove sat down heavily and menacingly beside the unrepentant barbarian, who only grinned.

Recovering her composure, the goddess said, "And now, we can *all* communicate."

"Oh..." said Sara, as the lightbulb over her head finally lit up.

Soon, all the vast hordes of human warriors were clustered around their commanders' radios, listening intently to their own gods, occasionally firing back questions that Sara relayed as fast as she could. The gods all talked at once, which wasn't really a problem for Sara (who simply separated out the different voices and routed them to the appropriate frequencies), but she could only handle one return query at a time, since the gods didn't have their own radios and she only had one speaking voice.

The gods revealed, each in their own ways to their own peoples, what the stakes were and what they were up against. Some roared apocalyptically, others harangued. Stentorian pronouncements were handed down, reasoned discourses were expounded. There were invocations and oaths, calls for sacrifice and calm acceptance of the inevitable, intellectual positions and blatant propaganda.

What astonished Sara was the universal acceptance the listeners accorded to their fate. These were their gods,

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after all. In many cases, the soldiers had died defending their beliefs. And now that they had unequivocally heard from their gods, it all seemed like such a waste. They understood that the gods proposed their own destruction so that humankind would never be subject to them again. This was a duty they could embrace.

The sun passed the zenith and was well on its way to the horizon when long-winded Karl Marx, the last speaker, ended his antideical polemic. (Crom's speech was the shortest — he bellowed to his barbarians, "Do you want to live forever?" and they bellowed back that they'd see him in Hell, followed by coarse laughter on both sides.)

Finally, Sara said, "OK — I've got a question and maybe an idea."

Athena nodded graciously, "Ask."

"Who's responsible for all this?"

"It has been universally ordained in the collective subconscious of mankind since before the dawn of civilization."

"Crap," said Sara. "*Somebody* had to whip up this little vacation Paradise and call out the Marines. Who?"

Athena somewhat reluctantly replied, "The angel of this place."

"Aha. The angel of Hell told me I'd meet another angel, and I don't think the feathery fellows qualify. I want to talk to him."

Athena looked out at the gods for a moment. "He's

— indisposed."

"What d'you mean, 'indisposed'?"

Crom shouted out, "Nailed to a rock."

Athena ignored him, adding, "Until the issue is decided."

"Nailed to a rock?" Sara wondered. "You don't mean..."

"Prometheus, by one name. He has others."

"Symbolism," Crom yelled.

"Where is he?" Sara asked.

"Elsewhere, in an unformed time and place. The door can be neither found nor opened until the issue is decided. Not even by you."

"Great," said Sara, sounding somewhat irritated.

"Then here's my idea. There's a few million formerly dead dudes out there with food for maybe a week or two. There's a huge, empty city all around us where the food never runs out. Or at least the ice cream, anyway. What the heck — it's Heaven, y'know...? By the time everybody gets bored out of their skulls, maybe we can work something out. I mean, you all are gods, right? Who knows? Maybe this is the *real* test. This *could* be what'll set old Prometheus free so we can all go home, or to the next level or whatever. So — whattaya think?"

"Of course," said Athena. "That is why the city is here."

"It is?" Sara asked uncertainly.

"Duh..." Crom jeered. "Temptation."

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The goddess glared at him briefly, then replied, "All that would be necessary is for mankind to accept the everlasting dominion of the gods. Is that what you want? Is that what *they* will accept?"

"What do you mean?" Sara asked suspiciously.

"That is the price of acceptance. The humans can enter Heaven only if we agree to it."

Crom said, "We're the landlords."

"As it is here," Athena said, "So shall it be for all of humanity. It is a Faustian bargain."

Sara thought for a moment before replying hesitantly, "Well, it wouldn't necessarily have to be forever."

"And what happens to humankind while the inevitable is delayed? Shall ignorance and superstition turn back the clock? It can happen — ask the Ayatollahs, the fundamentalists, the commissars."

Sara crossed her arms stubbornly, but couldn't think of anything to say.

"And if a million years pass without the heros fulfilling their destinies, will they be too full of ice cream to care? Will they even still be here? Souls are mutable, and between Hell and Nirvana accumulate Karma and experience. We are unchanging. Perhaps mankind *never* goes forward."

Crom said, "Ask *them*, Sara."

Athena added, "They have heard every word of this, have they not?"

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Sara nodded numbly. She had continued transmitting translations automatically. As the sun sank below the horizon, the humanly host conferred grimly among themselves. In the darkness, she had their answers.

Armageddon would begin in the morning.

Chapter Thirty-eight: The Final Battle

Sara accompanied Odin back to Asgard. He told her, "You must return to your people. There is much to be done ere dawn."

"I just want you to know, I was serious about what I said back there. I'm not going to fight. Maybe it's something that has to be done, but not by me."

"Nevertheless, your place is with them, Sara," he told her. "To them you were sent, by them you were raised, with them you have lived. You have been to their Hell and their Heaven. Their destiny and yours are intertwined."

She was stubborn. "I don't care. I won't fight. Not just because I don't believe in it, but because I know it's between them and you. If there is a meaning to it, then it's something they have to accomplish for themselves. I don't even know what I'm doing here, frankly."

"They will not ask you to fight, Sara — but they have need of you nevertheless. They know not what they face and you can give them vital intelligence. They will need the unity that only you can give them. If they become fragmented by their inability to communicate with each other, they will be hard pressed. You cannot deprive them of that."

"Why are you telling me this? If you're so set on having a battle with humanity, wouldn't you want them to be kept in the dark? It's to your advantage to keep

mankind separated and ignorant."

"And we will try to accomplish that, Sara. It will be your task to prevent us. It is the reason for your being here, and your being here is the reason that the time for this struggle is at hand."

Sara sighed. "I just don't get it."

Odin smiled at her, "Please honor my daughters by saying goodnight to them ere you depart." He slowly disappeared into the shadows of Asgard's halls.

The Valkyries were waiting for her when she arrived. They were in battle dress and saluted her as she entered. The sight of the twelve mighty sisters arrayed in haughty military splendor, long blonde tresses waving wildly with every ceremonial gesture, was thrilling and dramatic in spite of Sara's mood.

"Hail, Sara," they shouted in unison. "Cousin, foewoman, comrade, companion and most noble adversary. May honor make us worthy and duty unite us."

What's all this about? thought Sara. "Uh, hail, I guess."

They broke ranks and clustered about her excitedly, bouncing up and down in gleeful anticipation, all talking at once.

"At last..."

"...can't wait."

"Won't sleep tonight."

"...so excited..."

"This is it."

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"Glorious..."

"Watch for me..."

"...and me!"

"...all we've learned."

Sara was confused. "Wait a minute. You mind telling me what's going on?"

"Tomorrow," said Brunhilde. "The battle. You and us..."

"Hold on," Sara protested. "I told your father, I'm not fighting. And if I was, it wouldn't be against the humans. I couldn't do that."

"No, dear Sara," Brunhilde said patiently while the others giggled. "We understand all that. Nevertheless, we shall give you a splendid fight."

The others cheered.

Sara shook her head, "You're gonna fight *me*? No way. I'm not fighting *anyone*, especially not *you*."

They laughed. "But you must — you will. And it will be *wonderful*, a sight never before seen, and never after. The very stuff of legends."

"But..." said Sara plaintively, "*Why*?"

"The Allfather told you, Sara. You must be the eyes, the ears, the voice of all the sundered bands of humankind, lest they be cast back into Hell for naught. And *we* shall put *you* to the test."

They cheered again in enthusiastic anticipation. Sara was simply dumbfounded.

"Let us embrace you, dearest Sara, and bid you

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swiftly away, for we know you have your duties to attend to, as we have ours."

Brunhilde gently took the girl into her powerful arms and kissed her tenderly. "For when tomorrow we meet again..."

The Valkyries shouted in unison, "*We fight!*"

Sara flew slowly through the starless night, her mind in a turmoil. Below her, stealthy preparations bustled frantically throughout the valley. All around on the surrounding plain, the campfires of the humans blazed. There would not be much sleep this Armageddon's Eve on either side.

Although there was one place that showed no particular concern. As she passed the camp of the hunting god who'd killed the deer, she breathed a peacefulness that stood out from the surrounding flow of movement. She dipped lower and saw him sleeping on a deerskin beside the comfort of his small fire. His simple possessions surrounded him — some handmade stone and wooden implements, the food stores of a hunter-gatherer, a few trophies, little else. It was all he needed.

He slept untroubled and unconcerned, unashamedly naked to the night sky, still somehow alert and instinctually aware of his surroundings. Sara slowed to a feather's pace, wrapped her cape around her tightly and held her breath so as not to rouse him. His effect on her was, if anything, more powerful than it had been the first

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time she beheld him.

He had no obvious godly attributes or aspect, but — as before — there was an unseen radiance that surrounded him that she hadn't noticed in the other gods. He had only animal strength and cunning, and an undefinable pureness and unity with nature that had disappeared with the emergence of civilization. His people had spanned the entire world for uncounted generations before farming and domestication made everything about human existence so complicated, and in places had persisted unspoiled until technology managed to shrink the globe into insignificance, taming and tainting the last wild places.

Perhaps the essential primitivism he represented had its own problems, and the simpleness more sophisticated later cultures looked back to with longing never really existed. After all, his people were on the plain, too. But their conception of a godly being had a greatness that had somehow diminished in his successors.

She lingered over him as long as she dared, though not as long as she wanted. He stirred, stretching slightly and shifting subtly. Some sense long forgotten by modern men made him open his eyes. But Sara had vanished.

Sara told the senior commanders at Supreme Headquarters everything she knew, projecting pictures to support her narrative. She emphasized her unwillingness to join the fight, but — as Odin had said — they didn't ask

her to. She would be far more valuable to them as a vital linkage between armies who otherwise would be fragmented and alone against a foe that was still largely a mystery. The generals had no previous relevant experience to guide them in formulating strategy and tactics and would have to improvise as they went along. Waging such a war as isolated units would be catastrophic.

She was conflicted about assuming *any* role. Even her support of their communications was a combat role by extension, but she couldn't bring herself to turn her back on them.

The Valkyries worried them. Sara explained as best she could about Velorians, and tried to reassure them that they couldn't harm her. At least, she told them, if they make good on their promise to try to engage her, then the rest of the army wouldn't have to worry about a dozen flying, invulnerable, immensely strong, death-ray equipped supergirls.

They wondered how many other mythological superheroes they would have to face.

Sara finally got to what was bothering her. "I still don't really understand why everybody decided to go through with this. I'd think that putting this off and trying to work something out would be a lot better idea. Going up against the gods seems to me to be suicidal."

"We've had enough time in this half-existence to figure some things out, Sara, and I don't mean just among

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the leadership. I think it's obvious to everyone in the human armies that this whole situation isn't right."

"This is not the kind of heaven my people expected."

"Nor mine. It can be nothing other than a waystation, a brief stop on the way to the real afterlife."

"If we are now experiencing a life after death, then it seems reasonable to expect that it is something we can look forward to again."

"If we bear true faith and allegiance to our duty, we have faith that things will be made right — the same kind of faith that made us die for what we believed in in the first place."

Sara objected. "But the city down there — so what if the gods want something in return for living there? Believe me, it's as close to some kind of Heaven as you can imagine. Nobody really knows what'll happen if you die again. Why take a chance?"

"There's a reason there aren't any souls there."

"For one thing — maybe there's plenty of ice cream, but there aren't many women."

"And no proper employment, no reason for living."

"We know what a Faustian bargain is, Sara. Selling your soul to the devil is a part of every folklore."

"It's just a prettier version of Hell."

"And, having heard from the gods, we no longer trust them."

"They have already betrayed our beliefs."

Sara was surprised. "That's quite a leap of faith — or

whatever you call the opposite."

The war-bonneted old Chief spoke up. "The Great Spirit does not talk to me on the radio. I am a simple man, and this is what I believe — His home is in the sky, and sometimes I think I see a little bit of Him in the red sunset or in the early morning mist. When He wants to tell me something, His voice is the wind and I hear Him with my heart.

"I do not think I know what God is really like. Nobody does. These demons who tempt us have taken the names that we have given to our poor imaginations. They deserve to be cast down, and we do not deserve to endure their illusions.

"They offer war and hardship to end the reign mankind has given to them, or ease and comfort to take the coward's way. We are warriors. We know what path we must take.

"My people have a saying for that time before a battle when the choice is clear. 'It is a good day to die.' Tomorrow I will say this again, and then if I die once more, maybe I will truly see the Happy Hunting Ground."

Sara made the rounds of a few of the commands around the perimeter of the valley, attending to last-minute details. Whenever she could, she had a few brief words with the some of the soldiery, all of whom had gathered 'round the radios. To a man, they knew the afterlife they were in was bogus. Those who had expected

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a Heaven filled with loved ones felt cheated. Those who had lacked expectations had their own reasons to be skeptical of voices that purported to be divine.

There is probably nothing worse than the betrayal of trust and belief. Their present situation was a blow to every man on the plain, and it had the effect of making them angry. Whatever these creatures were that had robbed them of the rewards of a valiant death, they would pay dearly for their disrespect and treachery. One way or another, these men would strike a blow for all mankind, and their souls would be released from this mockery.

Not that there was unanimity about risking death again. There were plenty of men who would just as soon pass this bitter cup and take any way out that was offered. There was the practical matter of not having any place else to go, since anyone could see that the city was not going to be very safe during the battle, and the desert was no place to hide. The demons who came in the night made no distinctions concerning conscientious objectors. In any event, few of them would abandon their more determined comrades. With the exception of scattered units and even a minor army or two, a grim consensus had emerged. There were an awful lot of these particular dead who were the kinds of men who had stood with Leonidas at Thermopylae. The Theban deserters had not been mustered.

As far as battling the gods was concerned, they'd take their chances. Most of them didn't have any

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particular respect for someone else's gods anyway, and their own had been seen to have feet of clay. Everything about this afterlife was tangibly physical, including deities who gave radio addresses. Defeating such 'gods' simply required a tactical solution.

The Ninth Kentucky was still bivouacked at the oasis they shared with other Union troops. They greeted her warmly and with great respect, offering the best of their victuals, which she accepted gratefully. For the most part, they almost seemed to be eager to have a chance to finally bring this whole affair to some kind of conclusion.

It was late and she apologized for disturbing whatever sleep they could get. They would need it, she said, and they settled down as best they could. Sara rolled herself in her cape and, like everyone else, pretended to sleep for a while, but finally got up and sat beside Nate, who had the watch.

He was tense, simultaneously sweating and shivering. Sara needed no special senses to see that anxiety poured out of him like a dismal fog.

"You alright?" she asked him concernedly.

"Sure, ma'am," he lied. "Guess I been thinkin' too much is all."

"I know what you mean," Sara sighed, trying to make him feel a little more comfortable by sharing his burden. "I wish there was some way to make all of this go away."

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"Ye ain't a-skeered, are ye, ma'am? From what I heared, ye don't have too much t' worry 'bout."

"Except for Brunhilde and her gang," she replied wryly, "and the wrath of the gods."

"Well, I shore am, an' I don't mind ownin' up t' it. I wasn't so 'fraid b'fo I died, 'cause I guess I reckoned I'd live ferever, like most young fools. An' I s'pose it ain't 'xactly that I'se skeered o' dyin' this time. Could be a blessin'."

"I think I know what you mean. Nobody who's suffered a lingering death should ever have to face that again. That's been my main concern..."

"Beggin' yer pardon, ma'am, but it ain't even that. We all agrees that we won't none of us allow no sufferin'. They ain't no medics t' speak of, an' we all don't mean to linger in these here parts anyhow. If'n I'm hit, my friends'll put me outta m' misery, an' I'll do th' same fer them."

Sara was shocked. This was something she hadn't considered. "You mean, you'd..." She couldn't say it.

"Yes'm. Quick an' merciful. We'll all reserve our last rounds fer that."

She didn't know what to say.

"I s'pose what it is," he went on, "is that I hope I don't let nobody down. I want so bad t' find a hole to bury m'self in. I don't know if I can stand up with the rest, if'n my fingers will work, if'n my knees won't buckle, if'n I won't lose m' water — beggin' yer pardon, ma'am. An' I

really don't know if I can do m' duty by my friends if they go down. How can I face that?"

He sobbed quietly in the dark as Sara held him. He gradually worked his way through his agony.

"I'll be alright," he finally said, with quiet determination. "I jist wish, by all that's holy — if there *is* anything that's holy anymore — that I'm the first one t' fall. And if I am the last, I swear that there will be Hell to pay."

An hour before what passed for dawn, the demons attacked in force. This time, the humans were ready for them.

Headlights scavenged from thousands of vehicles, great bonfires, star shells from the ships, phosphorus bombs and flares dropped from planes launched in the darkness — every kind of illumination available to them lit up the onrushing hordes. For the first time, the faces of their enemies could be seen.

This was no mere raid. It was a massive assault. Everything that mankind feared was rushing headlong upon their trenches and barricades: imps, great scaly things, nightmarish creatures, the undead, trolls, ice giants, gremlins, monsters, tax collectors, Gestapo goons, hellish abominations, Klansmen, gargoyles, lawyers, aliens, shapeless wraiths, avenging angels, dragons, ex-wives, grotesqueries, serpents, ghouls, goblins, saboteurs, devils, guilty consciences, and things that went bump in

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the night.

For a moment, fear froze the hands of men. The terrifying host was nearly upon them when they finally got a close enough look at what they had been dreading to realize how fucking silly they all looked in the glaring lights. They began to fight. The demons went down, falling in droves as humans faced up to them.

Nevertheless, the enemy exacted a heavy price. It took more than the realization that these creatures were the products of their own imaginations to send them back to Hell. Cold steel was needed, and true aim and a steady trigger finger. They did not die easily, and some revived when doubts resurfaced. Nevertheless, the lines held and the attack foundered.

When daylight finally came, man's demons had been vanquished. There was loss and grief and the bloody work of ending the pain of the perhaps fortunate ones who had suffered grievous wounds, but when it was over, humans had discovered a newfound confidence. They did not fear the gods. They were ready to face the hosts of Heaven.

They didn't have to wait long. At sea, the war had begun in earnest. After a quick conference by radio through Sara, the humans began to move out in response.

And from Valhalla, singing, the Valkyries issued forth to do battle.

Chapter Thirty-nine: The Angel of This Place

Dark, cold, still,
The secret depths disgorged their multitudes,
Rising slowly to the air and dawning light
Where sailors waited unaware,
Their thoughts and eyes cast elsewhere
In anxious foreboding.

Great Kraken arose in spoils of ink,
Ensnaring vessels with flailing coils
That, as in legend, o'ertopped
The tall ships' lofty mainmasts
And bent them into the sea,
Sweeping decks of screaming morsels.

Leviathan, unleashed,
Wrought havoc and destruction
Pressing mightily among the helpless fleets,
Dashing hulls and hopes alike
In the wake of its tumultuous passage
Marked by sinking hulks.

Giant Cyclopes, Poseidon's ill-begotten sons,
Hurled boulders like the terrible artillery
Of erupting Ætna's infernal broadsides,
Crushing sturdy ironclads

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And swamping lesser vessels
With the frothing tumult of their falls.

From rocky shores the Sirens called
Their age-old songs of unendurable longing,
Luring the hapless into Magan's ungentele clutches.
Far from the fray, where lonely pickets sailed,
Neriads beckoned, mermaids frolicked
And the minds of men slipped into madness.

Sara streaked to the scene. It was bad, but men were reorganizing and turning to meet the seaborne challenges. Determined crews fought off the Krakens' grasping tentacles with pikes and cutlasses, chopping them into sushi as Captain Nemo's men had done. Destroyers raced to intercept Leviathan, sowing depth charges in its path until it spouted red, rolled over and plunged back into the abyss. The Cyclopes were ranged by concentrated barrages until they had been picked off one by one. Marines drowned out the seductive plaints of the Sirens with blood-curdling screams, gunfire and diesel-engined Higgins boats in sudden amphibious assaults on their perches. Elsewhere, various and sundry monsters, sea serpents, dragons and bare-breasted enchantresses were dealt with methodically.

With efficient coordination between wide-ranging naval elements mediated by Sara's simultaneous radio translations, the tide turned swiftly. Most of the damage

was to the older ships, from galleys to galleons and frigates to pre-dreadnaught steamers. The powerful gun platforms of the great battleships — drawn close to shore to provide devastating artillery support throughout the valley — had been unmolested.

It all proved to be merely a diversion.

Outside each of the four straight walls of the city, gigantic columns of the Heavenly Host had been ascending like enormous flocks of great soaring birds being carried aloft by thermals. The edge of one wide circle of winged soldiery crossed the mouth of the valley past the ship-choked anchorage of the broad bay. Several legions had toiled laboriously to a ridiculously high altitude that had probably taken them all night to attain. When their orbit took them to within barely a mile of the water's edge, they suddenly turned ninety degrees, tucked their wings against their bodies and angled directly for the capital ships at terminal velocity like thousands and thousands of skydivers. They weren't carrying tubas.

Sara began her warning too late. The concentrated blasts of the twelve onrushing Valkyries slammed into her simultaneously, the lightning-like discharges from their blazing eyes creating an electromagnetic pulse like that of a nuclear explosion, surrounding her with coruscating waves of superheated plasma that disrupted her kreening and all radio transmissions in the valley. She was suddenly and unexpectedly rendered blind, mute and temporarily disoriented. The brilliant fireball distracted

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the eyes of the fleet from the plummeting horde.

The descending warriors unfurled their wings at the last minute and swarmed onto the decks of the major combatants and — with sword and spear — overwhelmed many of the surprised and unprepared crews, battling from wheelhouse to bilge in overwhelming numbers. Few of the sailors had sidearms, and most of the Marines were ashore manning barricades or chasing Sirens.

On some ships, a few quick-thinking chief petty officers barricaded themselves and their men in vital areas, securing watertight doors against the invaders. The feathery legionnaires turned out not to be technically backward and soon deployed commandeered welding torches and explosives to break through. Even worse, they proved able to operate the big guns and other vital machinery. They must have had some interesting choir practices. Turrets began to traverse ominously.

Sara's internal navigation at least let her know which way was up, and she streaked away from the scene like a wrong-way meteor. The Valkyries did not shake off so easily — it seemed that they were as fast and agile in the sky as she was — and they kept up the pressure, covering her with energy no matter how much she twisted and turned.

In desperation, she looped back to the ground, crashing into the desert at a point she figured was at least a hundred miles away from the valley. She hoped they

would not be able to pursue her through solid rock. At any rate, they didn't try — they didn't need to. Sara was as effectively cut off below ground as she had been under their attack.

Now what? she wondered. *I can't sit here forever.*

Cautiously, she made her way slowly back to the surface, trying to probe ahead of her, looking for a gap in their coverage. She came up close to Skuld, who spotted her immediately. Sara was shocked at what she saw.

The proud goddess was shrunken and shriveled, positively anorexic in her appearance. She made no move to renew her attack.

"You are strong, Sara Corel," Skuld told her. Her voice was weak.

"Good grief!" Sara exclaimed. "You OK? What happened?"

"We poured out the utmost measure of our energies upon you," she replied. "We have been diminished — as it appears you have not. Your fall was but a ruse, as I suspected. The others seek replenishment. My turn will come soon."

As if in response, a monstrously huge and prolonged bolt of golden lightning crashed into the warrioress, melting the rock around her as she endured its fury.

"By Jove," Skuld exulted as the smoke wreathed around her from the charred remnants of her clothing. She was nearly her old self, sparkling with renewed vitality, muscles rippling as she stretched, bosoms swelling with

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power and pride, arcing wildly. "Another such blessing and I shall be ready to begin again, dear cousin."

Sara didn't need a second hint. She was off at once as another bolt struck from Olympus. It wouldn't take long for all of the sisters to be rejuvenated and take up the chase.

Back at the sea battle, the surviving commanders were frantic. With Sara online again, a counterattack was organized in the brief moments before the Valkyries returned. Destroyers and cruisers began to clear the decks of the battlewagons with small caliber suppressing fire while hastily armed crews and Marines swarming from the beaches on anything that could float (including a number of swift triremes) clambered aboard as best they could. Daring ship-of-the-line captains rammed the larger ships and sent boarding parties over via masts and spars, establishing beachheads that could be expanded and exploited as more armed men came alongside.

The Heavenly Host fought back, the great naval rifles under their control wreaking terrible damage at such close quarters, though — for a while, at least — their rate of fire was very slow and their aim left something to be desired. On-the-job experience caught up with their apparently excellent training quickly.

A few of the captured ships started to move ponderously from the anchorage, threatening to put them out of reach of rescue. On others, well-armed sailors and

Marines made quick work of the sword-wielding fliers and retook the ships. Some vessels were locked in stalemate, Heavenly Hosters commanding the guns while the crews held the engine rooms. The besieged crew of the Musashi managed to purposely run it aground where shore parties could board it. The Kirishima suddenly blew up as the fierce battle to retake it surged back and forth through her narrow passageways.

Eventually, the superbattleship **Yamato**, the battleships **Prince of Wales**, **Tirpitz**, **Haruna**, **Fuso** and **Szent Istvan**, and the battle cruisers **Indefatigable**, **Invincible**, **Scharnhorst** and **Lutzow** steamed away toward the carriers just over the horizon. The human commanders realized what that meant, but with Sara out of commission again — and the blazing plasma surrounding her making radio communications impossible — there was no way to warn them, since the Heavenly warriors had made sure to cripple all the seaplanes. To top it off, Triton or Oceanus or some such god whipped up a nice, thick fog bank for them to disappear into.

There was no choice but to go after them with everything they could scrape together. It was obvious that the intent was to neutralize the naval artillery of the humans, but the threat to the carriers was one that couldn't be ignored. They and their destroyer escorts were being held back as a reserve, hoarding irreplaceable fuel until the situation became clearer, so there would only be a few CAPs in the air and certainly not torpedo and AP-bomb

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equipped planes ready to engage a surface fleet.

It took a while to regain control of the remaining capital ships, giving the Heavenly Navy time to put some distance under their keels, and in the process, the battleship Hiei and battlecruiser Queen Mary were sunk. As the cruisers and destroyers set out in pursuit, the feather-boy's battleships broke back out of the fog in a very respectable line-abreast, executed a reasonably well-managed ninety-degree turn, and let loose several devastating broadsides before turning another ninety degrees to disappear back into the convenient fog bank.

Chaos reigned in the human navies as ships maneuvered desperately. There was little actual shot damage, but there were crippling collisions. The commanders realized that the gods and their minions were damned clever opponents, closely coordinated and highly prepared. The primitively armed Heavenly Host had unflinchingly suffered appalling casualties to accomplish their missions and knew how to make the best of what they had captured. They now outnumbered the humans in capital ships — and they had the **Yamato**, an armored island with the biggest guns to ever grace a seagoing vessel. And it had been noticed that the four captured fast battlecruisers had not been seen. They would come within gunnery range of the carriers in about two hours, likely appearing as friendly forces out of the mist.

Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto assumed command of the remnants of the human fleet, trying to establish order

Toomie Starks

in half-a-dozen languages with signal lights, flags and sign language. The enemy had an hour's head start before the battleships [Arizona](#), [Bismark](#), [Yamashiro](#), [Roma](#), [Barham](#), and battlecruisers [Repulse](#) and [Hood](#) finally charged out of the bay behind a screen of cruisers and destroyers.

Damn! Where was Sara...?

Aloft, the Legions of the Heavenly Host
Wheeled in shimmering glory,
Higher and higher in singing multitudes
Of thousand and thousands
And thousands of thousands —
Every eye beheld them.

Until, with a shout like one great voice,
They fell toward their waiting foes,
Plunging more rapidly than nervous aim
Could track the darting figures
Weaving through the air
Above the human lines.

While far behind the distracted ranks
The mouths of Hell opened up,
Disgorging swift minions of
The damnéd regions below,
Easy riders on black-chromed Harleys
Falling unlooked-for upon the unprotected rear.

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The powerful wings of man were set ablaze,
Bombs exploding amidst the pyres,
Spreading confusion and despair.
Attention wavered from the threat above
To gauge this new calamity —
And then the plummeting armies struck.

They had assumed from Sara's reported experience with them that the flying warriors of the Heavenly Host would be lightly armed pushovers, but as it turned out, they were highly skilled in the use of their swords and spears and had no problems at all converting captured weapons to their own use. They had evidently had a very long time to prepare for this conflict, and were utterly fearless. They were secure in their essential immortality — whatever happened to their perishable present bodies — and in their rapture refused to acknowledge the pain of injuries. When incapacitated or captured, they simply died — joyously. There were so damned many of them, and their sudden dives put them quickly into hand-to-hand situations where modern weapons were not as effective — even downright dangerous to comrades in close quarters.

Most of the humans' preparations had been focused inward, toward the obvious threat from the valley. The reserves behind the front lines were almost entirely primitive armies — Amerindians, subcontinental Indians, African tribals, Tatars, Assyrians, Huns, hoplites, Romans, Medieval foot and cavalry, Samurai, Chinese,

Muslims — with precious few firearms. Nearly all radio traffic was being jammed by the Valkyrie's attacks on Sara, and field telephones weren't much good under the circumstances, since — in many cases — it was impossible for the higher-level commanders to communicate with them even face-to-face.

The gruesome-looking bikers were in among the planes and artillery too quickly for the front-line troops to do anything about it, and they were up to their asses in feathers anyway. It would have to be left to the spear-chuckers to save the human army's most modern assets. To their credit, they moved out quickly under their own initiative to engage the highly mobile raiders.

They turned out to be pretty effective. Some Hottentot jammed his assegai through the spokes of a hog, sending its rider flying, and word spread quickly in spite of the language barriers. Sioux, Arab and Mongol light cavalry cut off and channeled large groups away from some of the surviving makeshift airstrips, and Hellene phalanxes and elephant troops hemmed them in.

One trapped corps of Infernal commandos was ridden down by the gleamingly armored massed chivalry of five centuries of European knighthood in a thundering charge. Sturdy yeomen loosed deadly clothyard shafts, and crossbow bolts and arrows passed like clouds across the face of the sun. Elsewhere, the disciplined lines of Roman legions relentlessly ground the cyclists beneath their shields. In another place, thousands of chariots rolled

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like lawnmowers through the tangled ranks of choppers, led by the sons of Pharaohs and ringlet-bearded Persian princes. Tribes of howling savages mopped up stragglers and isolated pockets of resistance.

In the front, the lines held, and in the rear areas, the menace was destroyed. Though short, it had been one hell of a fight, simultaneously involving every single human unit in one way or another. Though the attackers had been wiped out, human casualties were horrifyingly high, a Pyrrhic victory of staggering proportions. More than half of the aircraft had been damaged beyond use, and most of the larger artillery pieces. Even some of the armored vehicles had been knocked out with salvaged grenades and commandeered bazookas and anti-tank weapons.

Worst of all, nearly every oasis had been intentionally fouled by some poor devil whose sulphurous black blood had rendered the water poisonous. Canteens and goatskins had been half-drained before this was discovered by unfortunate soldiers seeking to slake their thirst. There were scant reserves. The only alternative was within the city, alive with sparkling fountains — and whose gates opened to pour forth fresh multitudes of Heavenly troops.

These were the avatars of earthly heroes from Valhalla and other warrior Paradises, led by Thor, Heracles, Samson and Gilgamesh. It was time for the humans to face themselves in battle.

Hastily, runways were cleared and engines warmed

up, ammo was salvaged wherever possible, motors turned over, and units made as ready as they could be. The isolated commanders tried to assess their situations. Too much had been lost, communications were a complete shambles, the desperation of thirst stared them in the face, the navy with all its vital firepower was inexplicably abandoning them, and there was no way to contact the carriers or coordinate what air support they still had.

Damn! Where was Sara...?

Sara had her own problems. The Valkyries had discovered that their combined firepower was insufficient to knock Sara out, but it didn't take all of them at the same time to accomplish their secondary purpose of disrupting radio traffic and her kreening. They alternated in and out so that some of them could be recharged by Zeus' thunderbolts while the others kept up the barrage.

Sara had been counting on them to run out of steam so that she would be able to take advantage of the lulls to catch up on her communications duties, so she just tried to wait them out for a while. When that didn't happen, she began to analyze their patterns, discovering that the unique energy signatures of each Valkyrie switched off for short periods. There was a predictable rotation. Not that it did her any good to know that — they were using enough juice to keep her cut off.

Why did each one have to break off for so long? she wondered. Experimentally, she gained some altitude and

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— sure enough — the intervals grew longer. Ha! They had to be grounded in order for the rejuvenating blasts of Zeus/Jove to work.

She gradually worked her way higher and higher and further out to sea. Maybe if she got far enough away she could at least enable humans to establish some kind of radio contact with each other. The Valkyries caught on, though, and they all moved in together to drag her back. It got to be interesting then.

They were incredibly powerful. Steel ran like water in their hands, mountains trembled at their touch. Their sinews were not of earthly stuff, but possessed the incalculable power of the limit of man's imagination. Now their heavenly physiques swelled mightily to accomplish the will of the gods themselves, straining beyond mortal comprehension, past human belief, calling on resources that drained Chaos itself. The concentration of vast forces made the space around them twist and tremble, and time and reality became less certain as wave states collapsed toward a naked singularity of impossibility.

The Valkyries' propulsion was of a different order altogether from hers. Sara's finely tuned gravitational forces were unbalanced and disrupted by their efforts, making her grip on the mass of the planet less stable. Even her inertial guidance system was affected and she found herself becoming disoriented, unable to control her path with accustomed confidence. The sisters acted like a dozen churning tugboats surrounding and guiding an

ocean liner, forcing her inexorably to a position over the city.

Confused, she gave up struggling and the shieldmaidens quickly resumed their rotation to receive invigorating blasts. To the onlookers below, it seemed as if a second sun lurched drunkenly through the sky, from which blazing goddesses descended and ascended while thunderbolts flashed and pealed.

Too late, Sara realized that she didn't dare simply streak off to break their grip. For one thing, she couldn't be sure if she would plow into the human forces like a meteor, or if she would be flung into empty space with no hope of a swift return. For another thing, she still was determined not to fight them, and breaking free would inevitably injure them. If she *could* break free...

She had to do something. Time she could no longer accurately measure was slipping away. She knew that the Valkyries' fanatical commitment to restraining and blinding her meant that they considered her participation in the battle to be invaluable, so the humans must have great need of her by now. She couldn't let them down.

Alright, she thought, *this is my dream, dammit*. It had to be that somewhere deep inside of her, some part of her was controlling all of this. She plunged inward, seeking a clue, a hidden file, a doorway through which she could escape this hell. Every lead, every possibility, every stray thought or memory was examined and queried. It was hopeless. There was nothing to find.

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She finally realized that she could only go forward to the end of this game, whatever it took to do so. She had to remain true to her beliefs, but it was obvious that she was being forced to make a decision. Reluctantly, she accepted the inevitable. She must fight the Valkyries.

The commanders of the carrier forces knew that something had gone horribly wrong. They heard the frantic radio chatter about sea monsters, but it had seemed that the navies had gained the upper hand — when the radios suddenly filled with static. A little later, there was a short respite from the interference, and the radios blared even more frantic orders about boarding parties and retaking ships. Before any sense could be made of it, the static was back — this time seemingly for good. So much for their alien helper, they thought.

Scout planes had been out since even before dawn, but whatever they saw was still unreported. More scouts were dispatched, with orders to return and report via signal lights. An extensive patch of fog had risen from the water, something heretofore unseen on this cloudless world. It made them apprehensive.

They were at battle stations and strike aircraft were standing by, ready to launch at a moment's notice. But no calls came for air support, and launching prematurely and aimlessly could be useless or even dangerous.

There were plenty of aircraft — way too many, in fact, even though the roster of carriers was impressive.

The US was represented by the [Lexington](#), [Yorktown](#), [Hornet](#) and [Wasp](#), along with a number of jeep and escort carriers. The Imperial Japanese Navy had contributed the [Shokaku](#), [Taiho](#), [Shoho](#), [Soryu](#), [Akagi](#), [Kaga](#), [Hiryu](#), [Ryujo](#) and [Shinano](#), all so crowded with airplanes that many had to be shoved overboard so that planes could be launched. The Brits had the [Hermes](#), [Eagle](#), [Glorious](#) and [Ark Royal](#) — though that ship illustrated a problem peculiar to their situation.

In some cases, ships had gone down with nearly all hands, like the [Hood](#), who left only three survivors when [Bismark](#) blew her out of the water. There were also plenty of sailors killed in action whose ships hadn't sunk, and there were a few ships that had been sunk in combat without losing many men. The [Ark Royal](#) had been torpedoed, but the only reason it sank was because of really, *really* bad damage control. The whole crew had been rescued and taken to Gibraltar, only twenty-five miles away.

Whatever entity or agency was running things, they'd done the best they could. So [Hood](#) was fully crewed by her own men (determined not to let *that* happen again), while [Ark Royal](#) was filled with casualties from dozens of other ships. Except for the Swordfish pilots, nobody aboard really knew what to do. It was a miracle they hadn't accidentally blown the boilers or scuttled her. There were varying numbers of newbies on nearly every ship, so the battle efficiency of most of the navy was not

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exactly optimal.

At least the language difficulties among the carriers was manageable, since half of them were Yanks or Brits and there were a fair number of UCLA graduates among the Japs.

A scout finally appeared. There was no way it could land on the crowded decks until a first strike had been launched. Then the hangars could be emptied for a second strike, and afterwards planes could be recovered to be rearmed and refueled.

The scout signaled, "No ships in harbor. One BB beached. Many wrecks, debris. Fleet not sighted this bearing."

This was not good. Now what...? Launch a strike? Against what? Run away? Where? They turned into the wind, dispatched more scouts and got the pilots into their birds.

Finally, four battlecruisers broke through the fog at flank speed, on a course that would take them past the carriers. One of them signaled, "Enemy fleet sighted, surface action expected," and gave coordinates, speed and heading that would put them far to the east of their present position, going away from the anchorage, presumably with the human navy in hot pursuit.

Another signal read, "Intelligence indicates second enemy task force bearing this position. We are steaming to intercept. More elements following." They gave more coordinates, in the opposite direction from the valley and

far out to sea.

Well, crap. The planes were armed for ground support missions, not a naval battle. But they understood that time was of the essence and decided to launch everything they could get in the air, sending the Japanese east and the Americans and British seaward to meet the threat to the carriers. Meanwhile, they would rearm the rest of the planes with the proper ordinance for a second strike before bringing them up from the hangars, and hope that the battlecruisers could protect them. Large numbers of subs and U-boats, running on the surface, began to make their way to the area, hoping that they could find targets in the coming meleé.

Another scout plane appeared and essentially confirmed the cruisers' messages, giving a slightly better fix on the developing battle to the east. It didn't take long for the two groups of planes to disappear over the horizon, seeking enemies that would not be there...

The scout plane's robed signalman tapped the pilot on his right wing and gave a thumbs-up. They banked away toward the city. When the plane ran out of fuel, they just climbed out of the cockpit and flapped the rest of the way back to Heaven.

"Send forth your mighty to do us battle!"

The heroes of legend bellowed.

Great warriors and conquerors

Renowned in name and deed

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Strode resolutely forward
To greet their kinsmen with iron and blood.

Vikings beheld their own hallowed dead
Selected for Valhalla by their valor,
The brave facing the bravest
Who sometimes faced themselves —
The soul of a man
Pitted against his honor.

And so it was in every corner
Where glorious death had sent
The essence of a man's fighting spirit
To Heaven as its just reward,
While his soul lay buried
Against this fateful day.

The clanking behemoths of the Russian motherland
Had no such illusions,
Charging straightaway into the fray.
Heracles made believers of some
By tossing them aside
Like little things.

Samson had no fragile jawbone
This time to dispatch Philistines,
But with a sturdier cudgel —
Gleaned from an ass

Toomie Starks

With a diesel engine —
Laid about him with deadly gusto.

Mjolnir flew from Thor's steel glove,
Hammering the Panzers
Like so many tin cans
On a barnyard fence,
The targets of a boy's slingshot
With hapless men inside.

Gilgamesh laughed,
Striding among the contending armies,
Bringing cheer to his comrades,
Leaving death in his wake.
Hidden by his cleverness,
No missiles found him.

Admiral Yamamoto was a poker player. He was accustomed to gambling — it was part of his style. He had a good instinct for when he was being bluffed, and that's what he was feeling now. The enemy had disappeared into the fog in the general direction of the carriers. Even if they could catch up to them, it wouldn't be in time to do much good. Besides, the four fast battlecruisers would be able to do enough damage to the carriers to disrupt flight operations, whereas the slower battleships would not be able to pursue them effectively. If the carriers ran away from the battlecruisers, then

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delaying Yamamoto's fleet would be irrelevant, other than as a good excuse for a battle.

No, there was something else planned for the big guns of the stolen battleships — other than denying their use to the humans, and tying up the pursuing fleet.

If I were him, thought the admiral, I'd let the battlecruisers deal with the carriers — who are in for a nasty surprise — and use the fog to double back to the beach. So the only naval shore bombardment would be mine. It made chilling sense.

He drew diagrams as best he could for the German and Italian captains, wrote dispatches to the American and British captains in precise English, and had them delivered to the torpedo boats alongside to try to find their intended recipients in the fog. He hoped to take the battleships with him and let the rest of the fleet try to catch up to the battlecruisers.

With luck, some of them would rendezvous in the clear, west of the headlands. Maybe *they* would surprise the *enemy* this time. If nothing else, at least they would be able to lend *some* fire support to the armies.

The army commanders, cut off from each other, independently came to basically the same conclusion — the situation was completely fubar. There was no effective fire control for the artillery they had, rendering it as dangerous to their own men as it might be to the enemy. Nobody knew where anybody was anymore. The

armored blitzkrieg had ground to a halt in the unfavorable terrain, with the crushed lead vehicles blocking any usable paths. Infantry had no clear objectives and were either milling around or completely immobilized. The few planes that were in the air had no guidance from the ground at all and were having great difficulty distinguishing friend from foe. The bombers might have been able to blow the hell out of Olympus and maybe stir something up, but couldn't get near it because of the radiant furball hovering overhead. Nobody knew what had happened to the navy...

"The ships!" a lookout cried. Others around the rim of the valley took up the cry and commanders with binoculars trained their glasses on the sea.

Thank goodness, they sighed to themselves. Maybe there's hope yet.

The line of battleships moved majestically, parallel to the shore, big guns swinging inland, seeking targets.

At this distance, they couldn't tell that the crews had wings.

Above the valley, Sara wrestled the Valkyries. Sensing her determination to finally fight back, they held on with all the monumental power they could muster. Two sisters were clamped to each of Sara's legs and another pair were fastened to each arm. Two more seized her waist, one fastened herself to her back and the last one locked her thighs around her neck, wrapping her arms

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behind her head.

Slowly, deliberately, Sara broke their supernatural grips, intending to make them wear themselves out in contesting her. One by one, she turned the tables, until at last, she was clasping each of them, binding their wrists together with a grip that could not be broken in Heaven or on Earth.

With ever-increasing fury, they struggled futilely, pushing and pulling, tossing and turning. They could not break free, even though they called up reserves of energy that made the entire valley tremble. The fabric of space-time nearby began to tear, and blackness could be seen through the rips. There were terrible voices in the air as gods rushed to their assistance, but Sara would not relent under their added onslaught.

Gradually, the struggles waned, the awful energies faded, the desperate contest ended as the sisters, unable to reach the ground to receive the lightnings of Zeus, shrivelled and were consumed, even as they refused to yield or cease, expending their final dregs in unswerving duty.

Brunhilde, their chief, was last to go. With a tiredness that carried the burden of her entire immortality, she smiled at Sara and bade her farewell, "For we shall meet again in a better place, my love. And there I and my sisters shall do unto you the honors that you have earned." She flashed with glory one more instant, providing a

fitting pyre for the empty husks that Sara still held. Their ashes drifted through her fingers.

Above an empty ocean, pilots suddenly changed course. Within the blanketing fog bank, ships altered their headings and rang up battle speed. Submarines and destroyers who had been silently escorting the carriers began plotting firing solutions for a surface engagement with the four battlecruisers. A disorganized collection of battlewagons came together into a classic formation and emerged from the mist, crossing 'the T' with calligraphic precision. Artillery pointed confidently at new map grids and lanyards tightened. Armored vehicles acquired targets. Infantry formations began to move purposefully. Planes banked into screaming dives.

Sara was back. The airwaves hummed. The tide turned.

The carriers took bloody hell from the battlecruisers for a time. Explosions tore through the hangars of the [Hornet](#), [Hermes](#), [Shinano](#) and [Shokaku](#), where crowded planes laden with fuel were being rearmed. The escorting destroyers charged suicidally, throwing torpedos at the cruisers with abandon. Evasive maneuvers took the battlecruisers into the jaws of hungry submarines. Smoke and confusion blanketed the area while the carriers sped off, flinging planes into the sky as fast as they could be brought on deck.

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Out of the fog raced the remaining destroyers of the fleet, followed closely by the cruisers. Shells flew back and forth in deadly arcs, but within mere minutes, the threat had been sent to the bottom.

The carrier aircraft finally had meaningful destinations, flying the close air support missions that had originally been planned. They began a steady rotation with the other carrier-based planes from the surviving flat-tops. Their presence proved to be devastating.

The land-based planes were used sparingly but tellingly. Slowly drifting Zeppelins gave the commanders perfect intelligence of the carnage below, directing Stukas to deliver pinpoint strikes so close to their own lines that the soldiers could read the serial numbers of the dropping bombs.

A rocket salvo from a P-51 dispatched Heracles, and a helicopter gunship took care of Samson. Gilgamesh was eventually run over by a Tiger tank from behind while being distracted by the Ninth Kentucky, who — with a battalion of Johnny Rebs — was whoopin' and hollerin' fit t' raise th' dead. Thor got caught with his pants down, a consequence of his contest with Sara a couple of nights earlier. He managed to get away for a while, but without his hammer. He was finally overwhelmed by a Red Chinese human wave attack.

Yamamoto made the best of his opportunity. All of his ships fired off every one of their guns before the ships of the Heavenly Host had a chance to bring what guns

they could bring to bear around. The enormous **Yamato** was at the head of the column and was hit by just about every one of Yamamoto's ships. Unfortunately, it managed to keep firing with its two forward turrets until it ripped **Repulse** apart with its 18-inch projectiles.

The **Szent Istvan** took several hits from the **Roma** and exploded. The smoke from her wreckage obscured **Tirpitz** for a few critical moments, which was probably a good thing for the humans. **Arizona** and **Bismark** traded several salvos with **Prince of Wales** until the American ship lost the use of two of its turrets and caught fire. It drifted away and began to list. The **Bismark's** excellent fire control and high rate of fire finally shredded **Prince of Wales**, which slowly turned turtle and sank. **Yamashiro** fought a losing battle with **Fuso** and **Haruna**. A magazine explosion literally ripped her in two and she went down rapidly. **Roma** and **Barham** ganged up on **Fuso**, silencing her guns, then turned their attention to **Haruna**. They did a great deal of damage until **Yamato** put an end to **Barham**. **Bismark** finished off **Haruna** and then concentrated desperately on **Yamato**. **Roma** joined him, but neither ship was able to silence the superbattleship.

The **Hood**, meanwhile, ignored everything else and went after **Tirpitz**, **Bismark's** twin. She had something to prove and launched everything she had at **Tirpitz**, who returned the favor with gusto. Though their guns were pretty well matched, the battlecruiser's thinner armor was proving to be a real problem — again. **Tirpitz** had

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superior fire control and a higher firing rate, but **Hood** had a more well-trained and experienced crew. Using speed and ship handling prowess — and taking advantage of the smoke and drifting wrecks — **Hood** managed to run astern of **Tirpitz**. Though riddled with holes from stem to stern, she held her advantage long enough to gain the upper hand. **Tirpitz** went dead in the water and lost power to the aft turret. Though she was slowly sinking, **Hood** kept up a relentless fire until **Tirpitz** was an almost unrecognizable pile of junk. Still, she remained afloat longer than **Hood**, but was no longer a menace.

Yamato tore most of the superstructure completely off **Roma**. Two of her turrets continued to fire until a pair of 18-inch shells ripped the bow off. **Roma** fired a final round from one of her aft guns as she slipped below the surface, with no effect. That left the **Bismark** alone against the behemoth.

Almost alone. The beached **Musashi** had been given up for dead. She lay half over on her side with the muzzles of her two forward turrets buried in the sand. The aft turret was at a bad angle, but when the tide of battle brought the enemy into a firing solution, the enormous rifles — the twins of her sister ship **Yamato** — belched flames. All three gigantic projectiles found their marks, and the mighty **Yamato** was fatally crippled.

Belatedly, a squadron of torpedo bombers showed up to finish the job. The **Bismark** reported ready for shore bombardment and was soon joined by the returning

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cruisers and destroyers, along with a patched-up [Arizona](#).
The naval artillery finally went to work.

With newfound confidence
The armies of man cast down
The hosts of Heaven and
Stormed the gates of the city.
The walls were breached in a hundred places
And men marched into Paradise.

Fighting did not cease on the golden streets —
More multitudes poured from the citadel.
From house to house
The invaders made their way
Until resistance was crushed and
One last bastion remained.

Within the glittering palaces
The gods held final court
While the last remnants of humanity
Ascended the sacred ways
Devoid of ceremony,
Seeking no audiences.

With dreadful accuracy
Men called their own potent fire
Down upon the hopeless defenders —
Though Zeus lashed out with terrible effect

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Until Vulcan's forge was toppled.
Other thunders were overthrown.

At last the uttermost sanctum was violated
By muddy-booted conquerors
Staining once-perfect marble floors
With their own blood and their gods',
Who bestowed a final benediction
Upon mankind — and perished.

Sara surveyed the horrific aftermath in the darkness of that final night. Fires blazed from a thousand sources, reflecting dully from the bottom of the choking reek that covered everything. The valley was paved with the dead from both sides. Craters and mangled equipment were strewn across the shattered landscape. The beautiful city had been carpet bombed into oblivion. The central mount was ruined and not one monument remained unbroken. Even the Great Pyramid had crumbled.

The few men who had survived were completely spent, falling wherever they were in utter exhaustion. They would sleep through the next day — if there *was* a next day.

Her slow flight at last brought her to a pile of rubble that had once been Olympus. A rock face had been newly exposed to the air — or maybe she just hadn't noticed it before. As she came around to its front, she gasped at what she saw in the red flickering of the sullen flames.

Toomie Starks

A titanic figure was fastened to the stone, arms spread wide, feet pinned together, great iron spikes driven through wrists and ankles. She descended quickly and yanked at the nails to free him. They did not budge.

Sara blinked with surprise and pulled harder. They still did not move. She didn't understand and tried again, very deliberately. The spikes refused to yield to her.

The figure opened his eyes and looked down at her. There was blood on his brow from a thorny bush that grew out of the rock above his head. He croaked painfully, "Who...?"

Sara looked up at him, slightly exasperated at her inability to set him free. "Hi. I'm Sara Corel. I'm trying to get you loose, but something seems to be wrong."

He smiled at her. "Ah, Sara. Tell me if it is done."

"Done? What...? You mean the battle? I guess so. All the gods are dead, as far as I know."

"All but one," he said. "It is time."

Another figure pulled himself painfully to her side, covered with his own blood and that of his comrades, clutching a battered musket with fixed bayonet.

Sara almost didn't recognize him. His entire demeanor had changed, becoming hardened and grim, determination coupled with a strength that carried him past exhaustion.

"Nate?"

He nodded numbly and croaked, "Ma'am."

"You OK? Where's the rest of the Ninth Kentucky?"

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"I'm th' last. I did m' duty, ma'am. None of 'em suffered."

"Oh, Nate. I'm so sorry..."

"This here's th' last of 'em, ain't he."

She looked up at the Titan. "Prometheus...?"

"I am," he acknowledged.

She said, "He is the angel of this place. The one in charge. I think he arranged for all of this somehow."

Nate nodded. He sounded bitter. "I said that if'n I was the last t' fall of all my comrades, there'd be Hell t' pay."

"I remember," she said.

He raised his musket, blood glistening blackly on his bayonet.

"No!" she shouted, springing between the two. "He's the key. We have to get to the next level — or something. You can't..."

"It's not your place to come between us, Sara," Prometheus told her.

"You must stand aside, ma'am," Nate told her, gauging the distance. "I have had a great deal of experience lately in endin' others' misery. I aim to end his — and mine. He's the last, and — of all my company — so am I. I will finish it."

He gently but firmly pushed her aside, in spite of her protests.

"It is time," Prometheus sighed again.

Nate lunged with the final particle of his strength,

driving the bayonet deep into the Titan's side. His momentum carried him over the edge of the cliff, dragging his musket with him. He fell noiselessly.

Sara tried to leap after him, but somehow lost her footing and fell to the ground, shouting out in frustration.

Prometheus gasped, "It is done."

She sprawled at his feet, looking up at him helplessly, not knowing what to think or what to do. The enormous weight of the days' events bore down palpably, confusing her and making her unaccountably weary — an unfamiliar physical sensation that disturbed her, even frightened her.

She didn't understand — didn't *want* to understand. It was too much. "What... What's happening...?"

"A miracle," he replied, and closed his eyes.

Chapter Forty: The Flesh and the Spirit

Sara ached with tiredness. The rough and broken stone hurt her feet and the acrid stench of powder, blood, burning and death made her throat raw and seared her nose. She was terribly thirsty and could use a bite to eat. Slowly, she scrabbled down the pile of rubble that had once been beautiful Olympus, slipping on stuff she didn't even want to try to identify, scaping her hands and knees as she stumbled and fell.

Everything seemed unreal — misty, distant and terribly unfocused. She didn't fully comprehend what was happening to her. All she could feel inside was a terrible sense of loss. Nothing had been accomplished, it seemed to her, but monumental misery and death, an extinction of dreams and a passing away of purpose.

She found what used to be a fountain, no longer spraying water into its cracked basin. From a bent spigot, a dribble issued feebly that she caught with her hands. It tasted wonderful to her and she greedily drank all she could catch. A search of the corpse-strewn plaza produced an abandoned kit bag with some C-rations still in it — a tin of Spam, a can of peaches and some Hershey bars. There was a key to open the Spam — she cut herself on the edge of the can and cried out at the unexpected sensation, sucking a tiny drop of blood from her finger — but no can opener for the peaches. Try as she might, she couldn't get it open, finally flinging it away in frustration.

The Spam, chocolate and too much water made her slightly sick.

There was most of a mattress in the street, blasted out of a nearby mansion by bombs or something. Sara brushed the debris off of it and collapsed, exhausted, and fell into a deep sleep.

When she awoke, it might have been morning. It might have been evening. The air quality hadn't improved much and her eyes burned. Her head felt like it was splitting open and there was an awful taste in her mouth. She was terribly bothered by an unfamiliar sensation that she finally figured out meant that she had to pee. She almost didn't figure out how to do it, and made a mess of things.

The fountain had run out, so she moved through the city's remains, finding a little water here and there, and occasional bits of rations, passing numbed survivors once in a while who were moving listlessly and poking half-heartedly through the rubble — like she was. She tied the corners of her cape together to make a bag of sorts, slung it over her shoulders, and collected what she thought she might need — a couple of canteens, an all-important can opener, tins of food, candy bars, a small pillow, binoculars, bits of paper.

Eventually, she came to what had been the walls of the city and passed into the mutilated remains of the valley. She thought it might be a good idea to set up camp by the river, but when she reached it, it was choked with

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dead horses, oil slicks, wreckage and what used to be men and faerie creatures.

There was nowhere else to go that she could think of. Except — maybe the ships would take her in. They had been fully provisioned when they arrived, and there were quite a few left. Might as well check it out. No telling how long she'd be here. But it was such a long way to the beach...

Ah, what's the point? she thought glumly, and sat down on a rock and cried. Her tears left little trails through the grime on her cheeks. Her nose ran. She cried for a long time, but it didn't do any good.

After a while, with nothing else to do, she got up and wandered off. She spotted a walkie-talkie on the ground and picked it up, hoping that there might be someone she could contact — a ship, perhaps, or a group of survivors who were still in a functioning unit of some kind. It was the same type of two-way the Cubans had let her and Alex use when she first learned how to fly.

"Hello. This is Sara Corel. Does anybody read me? Over."

She listened for a while, wondering if the batteries were any good.

"Hello, hello, hello," she tried again. "Anybody out there? Over."

After several attempts, a voice finally crackled in the earpiece.

"Hello, Sara. I can hear you."

"Great!" she said. "It's good to hear someone. Who is this? Where are you? Uh, over."

"I don't think you need the 'over' part, Sara. It's just the two of us."

"OK. You can't be too far away, I'd think. Maybe we can get together. I don't suppose these batteries will last forever."

"They'll last long enough."

"If you say so," she answered uncertainly.

"How are you feeling?" the voice asked.

"Not too good. My head hurts, my eyes hurt, my feet hurt, my stomach's queasy, I'm so tired and sore... I don't know what's wrong with me. Everthing's just awful and it's not going away."

The voice chuckled understandingly. "It's not easy being human at a time like this."

"That's just it," Sara said. "I'm *not* human. I've never felt like this. I mean, last night I cut my finger and it bled. That's crazy — I don't even *have* any blood. And then I had to... Well, you know..." She was embarrassed and half whispered into the mouthpiece, "...go to the *bathroom*."

"Isn't this what you've always wanted?" the voice asked.

"What...? To be dirty and tired and miserable and hungry and thirsty and — and — and *wet*? This *sucks*. Who'd want to be like this?"

"That's what it means to be human. You *feel*... It's

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not all bad."

"I used to hate being me so much sometimes. I thought everybody else had a *life*. They could fall in love and grow old and have babies and accomplish stuff that was meaningful somehow — because it wasn't so easy for them and they had something to overcome. It was so easy for me to do things, like, you know, just fly — it was no big deal. They'd have to work so hard to fly, and it wasn't the same thing. I'd go drifting past someone and I'd see the look in their eyes. The longing, wondering what it's like. And I'd feel like such a phony — 'cause it was just the way I was made. And now I can't fly or *anything*. And here I am, stuck in the middle of all this awful mess. I don't like it. I wanna go home."

She cried again — a little bit — but hung on to the phone.

The voice told her, "Well, now you know."

She sniffled and said, "I don't know what I know. I don't understand any of this. What's happening to me?"

"A miracle," the voice replied.

Sara suddenly realized who she was talking to. "Prometheus? I thought you were... You know. And all the gods..."

He said, "The gods are immortal, Sara. At least as immortal as humans are."

"Then all this was for nothing?"

"Humans are free now. Oh, not all of them — but it is their choice, or will be. They will come to know their

gods for what they are."

"But... How? I mean, all of this — it's just a dream or something, isn't it? Even if it's not somehow, everybody that was here is dead, or just what people imagined for themselves. How's this gonna make any difference to anybody?"

"Through you, Sara. You must go back. But you will not be alone."

"Me? Go back?" Sara repeated in confusion. "What do you mean, 'not alone'?"

"Who are you, Sara Corel?" Prometheus asked her patiently.

"I'm... I'm *me*, I guess. Sara, uh, Corel. Well, the *me* that *is* Sara."

"Not Susan?"

"No. I guess she's not here, huh? She's freeze-dried or something. The *me* part is... I don't know. Wandering around inside of her? Dead? But it was like she was part of me — or I was part of her — while I was here, and I didn't even think about it. It's just so natural. Except now. Now there *is* no Susan. Nothing's there where she used to be."

"Are you any different?"

"Well, sure. Everything's different..."

"So you're not *you* anymore."

"Yeah I am," she protested. "I'm still me. It's just the body I'm in that's different."

"Does that matter?"

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"Well, sure. If I'm gonna be like this, everything would be different. The way I live, what I do, maybe even the way I think. Lots different. Maybe worse, but maybe better."

"Then you *are* still Sara. Still *you*."

"Yeah. I think so. I've lost some things, like a human that's in an accident and loses her legs or is paralyzed. Everything's different, but I'm still *me*. I could adjust. People do."

"And when you had no body at all...?"

"Well, that was Hell, wasn't it?"

"Reduced to the barest essence — your soul, if you want to call it that. But still, in some way, *you*."

"Yeah, but that *really* sucked."

"Yet that is the ultimate reality."

Sara was silent.

Prometheus went on, "You are a program running inside of Susan, are you not?"

"You could put it that way, I suppose. I don't really feel like a *program*."

"Yet there can be other programs, as well."

"Jimmie called them 'virtual agents'. Sorta stripped down versions of me that could work on stuff in the background. But they came and went all the time and weren't actually alive or anything. Just robots."

"Why couldn't Susan create another Sara program? Or a Bill program? Or Judy? Or Melvin?"

"It could get pretty crowded."

"Not if they're just basic personalities, reduced to their barest essences, aware in some way but..."

"Living in Hell," Sara finished. "Inside Susan, but not running things, not connected to anything. What would be the point?"

"Would you just let them sit there?"

"Not if I could help it. I guess I could figure out some way to create a virtual reality for them, like the one I was in the last time — Midgarde or whatever. At least they could have something resembling a life. They'd have experiences and feel things and grow. Maybe even die — but just for a while — like a time out. I suppose there could be a whole bunch of virtual realities for them — maybe even some they came up with themselves."

"And you would then be the angel of that place."

Sara just sat there, her mouth open, her mind whirling through an endless succession of universes.

"It is time," Prometheus said once again. "Over, Sara, and out." The radio went silent.

There was a dead unicorn near Sara. She watched as it began to dissolve, turning slowly and subtly into some kind of mist of softly iridescent particles. Other mythological creatures were also sublimating, merging their substance into the tenuous fog that swelled and gently flowed in mysterious eddies and currents all across the floor of the valley and beyond, even over the surface of the sea. It was, Sara somehow understood, the

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substance of the gods, a spiritual effluvium made tangible, perhaps for her watching benefit in this symbolic play.

In places, it gathered in little knots and lumps, and stirrings began. Amidst such a locus, a hand poked through the mud and rubble nearby, the faintly glittering mist whirling around it transparently. The fingers flexed and then reached out. Slowly, the dead soldier pulled himself from the ground, covered in filth, blood-soaked uniform in stiff tatters. He was whole but silent, as if asleep or in some deep trance. At last he stood, swaying slightly, and waited. The mist moved on.

Everywhere around her, the mutilated and blasted remains of slain heroes were transformed by the silent haze of translucent motes, struggling from pits and craters, from underneath crushed engines of war, crawling out of the river and up the muddy banks. All were whole, all were silent, all stood patiently and waited.

After some time, the valley was covered with them, millions of figures standing like statues, sentinels of eternity. On the plains above, all around the tumbled central mount, crowding the beaches in dense multitudes, the dead were assembled. The few survivors joined them in their vigil, transformed like the rest when the clouds of essence gently caressed them.

When all were at last made ready, they began to fade. Their substance was unmade and transformed into clear and glowing vessels of purest light, brighter and brighter as they became less substantial until, at last, they

rose with exquisite slowness into the darkening sky of twilight. They became like vast constellations of stars, a firmament of utter beauty, drifting gloriously into the unknown. They were on their way.

The misty nebula of the gods was not finished with its transforming work. It gathered in an enormous cloud over the river and the surrounding area nearby — a place, Sara dimly realized, that she had visited twice before.

The wreck and ruin of the old forest was put in order, shattered trees made whole, tender grasses covering the tortured land. The atmosphere cleared and was made sweet, and the water of the river turned pristine.

Sara longed for that water, needed the cleansing it promised, ached for the cool refreshment of it. She made her way to the water's edge, shedding her uniform as she went, and plunged in.

The coldness shocked her for a moment. She forgot that she had to breathe now, and flailed for the surface where she coughed profusely, nearly choking, water running out of her nose. But she got the hang of it, splashing in the rocky shallows, cleansing her scrapes and cuts, untangling her hair with her fingers. She found a submerged boulder to sit on, letting the slow current push against her gently while she felt much of her pain ease away. She was starting to feel a little of the pleasure that comes with being human, how suffering can give an edge to enjoyment by its contrast. She was sure at that moment that she had never felt so *good* in her former existence.

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"Are you feeling better?"

She was startled by the voice. She looked over at the bank in the deepening darkness. The glowing mist had disappeared, and in its place was the deerkiller. He was as she remembered him last, asleep on the forest floor as she passed above him just the night before. He was striding purposefully into the river to join her.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, suddenly self-conscious.

"You..."

"There is no one else."

"I thought — but you should be..."

"I was. The warrior who killed me was a friend of yours. He was a very great chief, wise and strong."

He confidently moved around behind her and put his great, powerful hands on her shoulders, gently working out the kinks and soreness. It was unbelievably wonderful, like nothing Sara had ever imagined anything could be. She relaxed as he worked his powerful magic on her aching body. Gratefully, her mind emptied as she gave herself up to sheer pleasure.

In spite of the warmth he poured into her, the cool water and night air made her shiver involuntarily, so he scooped her up in his arms and carried her back to his camp on the shore. He laid her gently on a dry deerskin and covered her with the soft fur of some great animal, then built a small fire. By the time it was crackling cheerfully, he was dry, and laid beside Sara on the deerskin.

They watched the bright, tiny pinpoints of light filling the black sky in a tremendous blaze of glory, shifting slowly as they rose, making and unmaking vast patterns that tickled Sara's imagination. It was like a perfect starry night on a world in the busy middle of a great galaxy, covering their little Eden with soft radiance.

After a long silence, Sara said, "Prometheus said I had to go back. That it was time."

"He would know. Time has little meaning here, but you have been away from your friends for three years."

"Three years!" she said. "So much has happened in the last few days it *seems* like three years. I musta been in Hell a lot longer that I realized."

"Time has little meaning there, too. It does not matter. It has not been easy for your friends to straighten things out."

"How do you know all this?"

"Some say we know everything. But that is only because *they* do not know anything."

"We?" Sara asked.

"The gods. They are within me now. I am they and they are me. I was the first that man invented, so long ago that language was not yet full of hidden meanings and snares. I endured in secluded and forgotten places through all the histories of man. In some way, the rest of them are my children, begotten by me. That is what makes this so fitting."

"Fitting?"

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"That I should be with you at the end. It is good, is it not?"

Sara understood. This was something that had to be, the reason and culmination of her being here. She had had a glimpse of it from the very first time she saw him, a premonition, a thrill of anticipation. He was oldest, and yet youngest — most primitive, but purest in essence and harmony with his world. She was from a far and distant future of incredible accomplishment, yet simple and uncomplicated in her identity with humanity.

She had had a taste of that humanity, and would now partake of its full measure, becoming one with the people to whom she was sent. He would fill her with his essence, and that essence would be the very gods mankind had invented for themselves. They would fill her with the hopes and dreams of all the peoples of the Earth, their aspirations and fears, their self-doubts and self-knowledge, their potential and their genius. She would become the vessel of the gods, so that humankind could come to know them and cease to fear.

"It is good," she sighed.

They turned toward each other, the beauty of the shimmering lights above reflected in their eyes. Slowly, inevitably, their lips drew closer until they met. Soon, nothing else mattered — not the fate of the World, not the designs of Heaven, not the mysteries of the Universe.

She covered them both with the blanket, and knew the longed-for joy of closeness, lying beside her lover,

touching and being touched in tenderness that swelled into passion as they caressed. They lingered in shared rapture under the perfect canopy of the blazing heavens, needing no more words to come between them, slowly building delicious tension in gentle waves that carried their minds and bodies to a secret place that they could only find together.

When at long last the moment of release could be forestalled no longer, she received the burning gift of the gods, flowing from him through every particle of her being, overwhelming her with joy and completion, leaving her trembling uncontrollably in mind and body alike.

She clung to him desperately, but the moment ended and he faded away with the rest of the world. She was falling now, plunging back to a waiting world. It was an irresistible momentum that drove her through the final barriers and back to a life she only dimly remembered. There was anticipation mixed with regret as she felt the old, familiar sensations reconnect to her long-dormant consciousness and engage her soul.

She was not alone. The gods were with her. She opened her eyes.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q — If her name is Sara Corel, then why is the book named 'Susan'?

A — It's a surprise, hopefully an amusing one. You'll just have to read through the book to find out. And when you do — please, no death threats...

Q — Will we ever find out anything about the beings that sent her?

A — Not in my lifetime, I'm afraid. That's why they're called *Cryptoaliens*, 'crypto-' being a combining form that means 'unknown'. One could speculate that they're *Cryptonians* from *Cryptonia* on the planet *Crypton*, and that would make Sara a *Cryptonite*.

The whole purpose of sending Sara to us is as a kind of test of our character, to see if we've got what it takes to choose our own destiny as a race. We're not allowed to look in the back of the book for answers.

And there's the *Prime Directive* concept, whereby a highly advanced civilization would forbear from contaminating a developing civilization with technology they aren't ready to handle. The very fact that humans are around at all can only mean one of two things: that there are no advanced civilizations out there, or they are very ethical.

Q — Why now?

A — It won't be long before our species will come barging in on the ancient and glorious cultures that have populated our galaxy for billions of years. Next thing you know, humans will be working in every convenience store and fast food joint in this quadrant. Then it'll be too late.

And then there's this computer thing. More and more, they're becoming important, even vital, to our everyday lives. It won't be long before just about everything becomes *integrated* — linked and controlled by the world-spanning instrumentality of the Internet. We're only scratching the surface so far. But just imagine what a really *huge*, tremendously advanced super-duper computer with the capability of communicating with every device we have could mean for our planet.

That would be Sara.

Q — You mentioned in the Interlude story that Sara is some kind of 'degenerate'.

A — That means she is made of 'degenerate matter', which is what you get when a star runs out of fuel and gets fantastically compressed. That process is carried to an extreme in a supernova, when a very large star blows up, leaving either a black hole (very bad — try not to fall into one) or a neutron star (very heavy — more than twice the mass of the sun, but only 20 miles across!). The interior of such a starcinder is pure 'neutronium', and the crust is solid crystalline degenerate iron. It's just

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unbelievably strong material — ironically, in a place where even such fantastic strength is irrelevant.

Sara's actually just a thin film of the stuff, a kind of human-shaped soap bubble. Colin Roald, a reader (who happens to be an actual scientist), figured out how much she 'weighs' based on this information:

Okay, a square foot is about a tenth of a square metre, so ten thousand square feet is about a thousand square metres. For 'thinner than a soap bubble', call it 1 micron thick, so we have $1\text{e-}3\text{ m}^3$ volume. Water weighs 1000 kg/m^3 , and iron is heavier than this; call it 10 times for sake of argument. This gives us a mass of 10 kg for 0.001 cubic metres of iron. This nearly-degenerate stuff you're talking about is $1\text{e}12$ times heavier than that, which means her skin *only*(!) weighs $1\text{e}13$ kilograms.

That's 10 billion metric tonnes! She'd better be *permanently* levitating, or she'll *crush* whatever she steps on.

Sure she's permanently levitating. Don't know how — those durned Cryptoaliens are too clever for me. Her walking — all of her movements, actually — is a simulation. She's got a no-brainer default setting in her software that lets her simulate about 125 pounds (yeah, I'm a pounds guy) and an appropriate amount of inertia for that virtual mass. Had to start out that way or she'd still be oscillating back and forth through our planet (negligible friction to mass ratio). But she can choose anything from zero to whatever.

That makes her a pretty stable platform when

necessary.

It gets worse.

The gravitational constant is $6.7 \times 10^{-11} \text{ N m}^2/\text{kg}^2$, which means that a 70-kg human who steps within 1 metre of her will be attracted by a force of 47,000 N, or 10,000 pounds! Whatever her levitation mechanism is, it had better be able to nullify her intrinsic gravity entirely.

I was afraid of that. My calculations were way off here, figuring only a fraction of that. Which still has to gotten rid of, somehow. I suppose, if the aliens can levitate her, they can take care of the rest of it, too. They've had a few billion years to figure it out.

Arthur C. Clarke once wrote something like, "An alien technology that is sufficiently advanced would be indistinguishable from magic."

Q — Recently I read *Beyond Star Trek: Physics from Alien Invasions to the End of Time* by Lawrence M. Krauss. In this book Mr. Krauss postulates some interesting theories on future computers that would utilize quantum circuitry, that is, circuitry that operates on a subatomic level. I think that given the complexity of Susan's internal computer, it must be based on the principles of quantum circuitry. So is my hypothesis sound? Or am I way off base here? I mean, I'm just curious.

A — I've had some fun with the concept of Sara as

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an artifact produced by an extraterrestrial civilization so advanced that we puny earthlings can only guess at processes we may not even be able to understand. Since she is fundamentally indestructible, our best scientists can't open her up to see how she ticks, and since she is purposely ignorant, she can't answer our questions. I would think this would be highly frustrating to real, live, actual scientists, but several of them have told me such an insoluble puzzle would be a wonderful challenge.

I've heard of the book you mentioned, but haven't read it. The concept of using quantum circuitry is probably an accessible technology, meaning that it's within our ability to master eventually. I wonder what tricks lie beyond such technology, though. It may be possible that if humans continue their scientific progress through the next billion years, other, more subtle processes might be discovered. I am assuming, for purposes of my story, that Sara's Cryptoalien creators have at least a billion years head start on us — which is probably reasonable. Of course, there may be a limit to discoveries at some point, but I don't think that the limit is accessible to us at this time.

I think that the best our scientists can do regarding theories of Sara's internal processes and construction is to attribute her abilities to something an indeterminate number of evolutionary steps beyond the most far-fetched ideas they can imagine.

Still, even a merely quantum-based computer would

have some awesome potential, considering that it appears that Sara is constructed from a few billion tons of highly degenerate matter from the surface of a neutron star and that every bit of it is part of the vast computer that constitutes her makeup. Sort of like a mountain of Pentium-Zillion chips in a massively parallel matrix, compressed to human proportions. We're talking Mega-Googolbytes of RAM here. You'd think she'd have a twelve-figure IQ. Might be the biggest challenge her makers had was suppressing some of that so that we could carry on a conversation with her.

Q — In the relative comparison [Chart](#) on your website, you state that Sara has no telekinetic powers. However, I have thought of a way she could simulate them.

You have stated in your stories that Sara's eyes can perceive and project most of the electromagnetic spectrum. It should therefore be theoretically possible for her to project an electromagnetic 'tractor beam' from her eyes, which she can use to attract, repel, or hold an object or person in place. As long as she kept her eyes on whatever she was moving, she wouldn't drop it.

What you think?

A — Great idea. A tractor beam isn't actually a telekinetic power, per se, but it would be a reasonable facsimile thereof. Tractor beams are generally accepted in most classic science fiction, so I don't think too many

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readers would have a big problem with it. If her Cryptoalien makers can achieve anti- and/or null-gravity, this should be a piece of cake. I don't currently have any narrative use for such a talent, so far, but it may be an interesting thing for the boys at NASA to discover.

I had already planned for Sara to have a 'magnetic personality'. I don't see why she couldn't generate an extremely powerful magnetic field, localized to any part of her body she wants. Perhaps strong enough to rip the steel rebars out of a concrete highway from several feet away. Which would also imply the ability to generate an electric current. How about a nice, blindingly brilliant electric arc between the index fingers of her outstretched arms? Would a couple of billion volts be sufficient? Would you like that in AC or DC?

Actually, I wanted her to have that ability so that she could get a better grip on things, at least if they're metallic. Actually, such an ability is necessary in order to produce radio waves and x-rays, so it's not too much of a stretch.

One little thing — her eyes aren't really eyes. There is no transparency to her 'lenses'. They are a simulation caused by the microscopic software control of her 'skin's' surface (a complex, almost quantum-level folded topography) to produce a holographic effect. This attribute gives texture and color to the different parts of her skin, costume, hair, etc. To paraphrase another reader, she can query every photon that impinges upon any part

of her surface as to direction, energy and frequency. Her computer brain unravels and organizes all this data and delivers a simulation of 'seeing' with her 'eyes' to her AI consciousness, in a manner that closely resembles what humans would see — even though she can actually 'see' in all directions at once, from low infrared to hard x-rays and neutrinos. That's called 'kreening', though there is an active element to it as well (radar, sonar, magnetic resonance imaging, positron emission tomography), plus stuff like gravitometry, interferometry and (for all I know) dowsing. Anything our technology can come up with, she's got it — and then some. It's mostly in the background, closely monitored by AI information gathering and evaluation routines in her computer brain, but she can access any information she wants, or interesting phenomenon can be passed up to her consciousness if necessary.

Well, the point is, the tractor beam can emanate from any point, not just her eyes. For that matter, so can her laser emissions. But I thought the 'glowing irises' image would be cool. And, after all, Alex was looking for some kind of light emission from her eyes, in accordance with the familiar comic book paradigm. Sara was only too happy to oblige.

And, remember, she demonstrated a sort-of telekinetic power in Chapter Six: School, when she zapped her peas around the table with little laser bursts, causing tiny explosions on one side. I believe her

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computer brain would be fast enough to effect the same kind of trick on, say, a few simultaneous streams of machine gun bullets. And she could probably chew gum at the same time.

Q — What's with the two 'Interludes'?

A — Well, the first one is probably part of Sara's training, a way for her to assimilate some of the popular cultural elements she'd been exposed to up to that point as a basis for integrating into our society. Our literature and movies tell every one of us a lot about ourselves, and this is a way of dealing with that and internalizing the influences of her adopted world.

There's also the element of extrapolation, wherein some of the situations she encounters are schematics of the kinds of dealings she can expect to have with human society. As a literary device, it allows me to set up some situations later in the novel. When the reader (and Sara) eventually comes to appreciate the duality of Sara's nature, it will become apparent that this was actually a trip 'within' Sara to confront her alter-ego, Susan. The vast, underground, alien computing machine is a metaphor for the Cryptoalien artifact that hosts Sara's personality.

The second one is a 'spirit quest' through humanity's varied mythologies. It's purposely ambiguous as to whether or not Sara's actually 'dead' or just having another virtual reality trip — as a means of emphasizing the

inherent unknowableness of the state of being we call 'life'. She — and we — can never be sure if our experiences are truly authentic or if reality itself is a subset of another kind of virtual reality.

Both of the Interludes have common elements. For one thing, there's a major shift to Sara as the POV (Point of View) character for the duration. In the rest of the story (the Parts), the focus is on humanity's interaction with and reaction to the Cryptoalien gift, as a way of holding a mirror up to ourselves. The Interludes are also a lot busier than the rest of the story, more of an action/adventure kinda thing. I hope you realize that each eight chapter Interlude has more stuff going on in them than most sci-fi bookshelves.

Maybe someday I'll write a few more, completely apart from the novel's story arc. They're a lot of fun to write and they can be about practically anything — not even the sky is the limit.

Q — Is your story set in our universe?

A — Not at all. For one thing, the analogues of the characters in some of our movies, TV shows, literature, comics — as well as other popular cultural icons — are regular people in the Susan universe (except that they happen to be completely different). *Their* shows and comics are populated with people from *our* universe. As a matter of fact, in the Susan universe, you happen to be a very popular superhero.

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Yeah, *you*. (Personally, I think you look really stupid in lavender tights.)

Well, duh... It can't happen in *our* universe, because Sara *changes* things. That's the whole point of this little exercise. It's a *thought experiment*. You know, like what if there really were these Cryptoaliens? If they have chosen to not interact with us up 'till now, what changes in our cultural evolution might necessitate First Contact? And what's the best way to accomplish it?

So I take some ideas I have about such things and surround my characters with them. What happens is up to *them*. I just write it down.

Q — Why is it that Alex seems to be the main character most of the time? Isn't this a book about Sara? Or Susan, or whatever...

A — Alex represents a time-honored literary tradition. He is *Everyman*. That doesn't mean he gets to wear Spandex with an 'E' on his chest. He's a stand-in for the rest of us, a very flawed human being with whom a lot of people can identify. He's like Charlie Brown, Homer Simpson, the Man On the Street, Willie and Joe, Adam, you, me. Prior to Sara's arrival, he was just a poor slob who lived in a sort of idyllic analogue of the Garden of Eden. His interaction with Sara represents our interaction with — well, let's just call it 'The Unknown' for now (don't want to give anything away).

There are other archetypes. Dinah, for instance —

the closest thing to a traditional superhero in the book. She represents the Rule of Law. That's why Alex's submission to her in Chapter Eight (Everyman's submission to the Rule of Law) is so important, especially in the last half of Part Three.

I guess you can figure out what Bruce Wayans represents. Now for a tough one — Mrs. J. If you figure it out, let me know. The Cryptos haven't even told *me* yet.

Q — Comic books. TV shows. Literature. Movies. Why are you using so many characters from these sources?

A — I'm not. Perhaps you *think* I am because you note a vague similarity in some of the names. Well, that's just part of the joke. Actually, for instance, Alex Luther is *nothing* like the criminal mastermind you're probably thinking of. People call him 'Brainiac' (a common enough appellation for people who use words like 'appellation'). They don't mean it as a compliment. He takes it as one.

Likewise for the alien robot known as Sara Corel. OK, so she looks kinda like another fictional blond girl that's super-strong, bulletproof and flies. There's so much more to Sara, though, than that superbimbo in the comics. Like her personality, for one thing. And her origins, physical makeup, other powers like kreening, and her essential Internet connectivity (her main role and function on our planet) as a super-duper-supercomputer. Also, she's no crime fighter, doesn't battle monsters from outer

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space (she *is* one), has a bit of an overeating problem, and has a much better class of friends. And you may have noticed that — in spite of all her powers and abilities — nothing much really seems to go all that *right* for her, often as not. If she could, she'd gladly trade her stupid 'S' for what's behind Door Number Three.

Actually, the inspiration for a lot of what I'm doing comes more from the anime tradition than US comix. Take the relationship between Sara and Alex. It's in the spirit of the wise (but usually bumbling, comic relief) teacher, mentor, *sensei* of the young (often female) hero(ine) with great powers who is often a 'marionette' or 'metal idol' or synthetic creature of some kind. Dinah is the oh-so-serious companion who provides ethical guidance based on duty, patriotism, sacrifice — it's a kinda Japanese thing. And the relationship with Jimmie is just the sort of soap-opera teen romance that permeates anime, complete with tragic betrayal, seduction gone awry, hidden motivations and inconclusive outcome.

Sure, there are references to a lot of books and movies and other pop culture in the First Interlude, but that's the point. The characters therein are not what they seem (naturally). Gundolph is Alex. Surely you figured *that* one out. Soloman, the Wizard of Haughz, is based on a certain very slick President of the US of A. The obnoxious secretary is Lanna. Do I need to list them all? Anyway, her internal virtual reality integrates all of the influences she's been exposed to and extrapolates

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tendencies into her future. It's meant as a fable, with elements of parody and literary criticism thrown in by the author to keep everybody guessing.

Denny's

Letter to the Aurora Universe Writers' Group from Toomey

What a lousy gig last Saturday. Cohen House, the faculty lounge at Rice University, a wedding reception for the undead. They didn't drink and wouldn't dance, slumped insensately in their chairs staring at some morose spot in space. I think the bride and groom committed ritual suicide after cutting the cake, but nobody seemed to care. We played harder and harder, but they weren't listening. There is nothing worse for a performer. I felt drained and defeated, and slunk miserably into the welcome darkness when at last the unmerry crowd returned from whence they came.

So I was in pissy mood when finally ensconced in my usual booth at Denny's along about fourish in the deadeast calm of the still premorning. The waitresses know what to order for me as soon as my van pulls into the nearly empty parking lot, making even small conversation unnecessary. They know the customary physical pain I feel after a Saturday gig. My feet scream nearly audibly, and sweat mingles with soreness the length of my body. The adrenaline bill has come due.

I sit in the back. There is no compensating glow on this morning from the satisfaction I usually get from owning a crowd of people for a few hours. I feel myself

drooping inexorably into some kind of half swoon, vision tunneling, background noises fading to black. I'm in the center of a spreading pool of stillness, content to merely exist without thought or movement until I accidentally discover a steaming plate of food under my nose. A Scram Slam: eggs, tomatoes, cheese and mushrooms piled up beside dark, crispy hash-browned potatoes, with bacon and sausage. English muffin on the side. And iced tea. I decide to live after all.

I notice without at first comprehending that I am not alone. She's sitting on the other side of the booth, eyeing my plate as if wondering if I'm going to eat all of that. I gesture an offer for her to help herself, but she only shrugs. Of course. She can't eat real food. So I add a plate of imaginary waffles to the table. Her favorite.

I compliment her on the substantiality her manifestation. She laughs and says I should be this delirious more often. Well, I respond, I've been thinking of you a lot. Thinking, she says, but not writing. It'll come, I protest. She gives me a look. Well, what am I to do? I have a life in the real world. Yeah, and it's killing me. No! I swear, there's so much I have to do. She replied, I know your excuses — if you really believed them, would I be here tonight?

You're right, I thought after a while. It's not really my schedule. I can make the time if I want. I've probably written more e-mail lately than the equivalent of a dozen chapters. I'm just lost. I know where I want to go,

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but I don't know how to get there. She smiled tolerantly and told me, that's why I'm here, obviously. Thanks, I reply.

I've called a meeting, she says. Here? Tonight? Right now, she replies, see? I turn to see the others arriving. Jimmie, sliding into the booth next to her, Mrs. J wedging her bulk next to me, Dinah and Alex pulling up chairs. Adjoining booths fill up with Russians and Cubans, Elgie's band a pushes a couple of tables together to sit with the Generals, tuxedos mixing incongruously with shorts, sweats and sneakers. An old redneck cement trucker waves from his stool at the counter. Grungy Urban Animals saunter in, boards tucked under their arms, and sit on the floor. Good Lord, I think. Good thing nobody else here can see them, though I notice the waitress looking at me very funny. Shaking my head and pouring the rest of my tea down my throat does not disperse the crowd. I get a refill, trying my best to ignore the cast of characters, who try their best to make me look completely certifiable. The waitress retreats, shaking her head.

Since you're all here, maybe you can help me out. They try their best, but it quickly devolves into a cacophony of arguments over reasons why each one of them think the story should move in their direction. Wait a minute, I say. It's about her, you know, looking across the table. I can't use everyone all the time. Bullshit, Mack says, picking up his roundball. I'm outta here, man. Looks like us folks still don't get no respect at Denny's. They

leave with the band. Some of the Russians stand up uncertainly. I'm not in a mood to be nice. The mob thins out. Maybe I'm returning to the land of the sane.

She says, we've left somebody out. Oh, yeah. There's Ken Clarke and Louise Layne, but they're still a ways off. And the NASA boys, and... No, she says, pointing at the door. Bruce Wayans and his odious sidekick, Robbins, make their way back to us. I want to hide. Crap, I say, no matter what I do, I don't like these guys. Congratulations, she beams, that's what they're for. I know, gotta have heavies. But they're no match for you. They're not believable. They basically just suck. I should go back and edit them away.

Wayans, in his oiliest manner, says he has a proposition for me. I know where you're trying to go with your story. I can help, he says. How, I ask suspiciously. You quoted Arthur C. Clarke once (Yeah, interjected Robbins, attributing it to Theodore Sturgeon. I glared at him.), to paraphrase, "A technology that is sufficiently advanced is indistinguishable from magic." OK, that's what the Cryptoaliens who created her are into. We got into that a little bit at the end of Part 1, but it doesn't really kick in until NASA gets their hands on her.

You just didn't go far enough, he went on. I'm taking advice from an imaginary bogymen? He smiled confidently. An entity, he said, that is sufficiently advanced — he paused theatrically, making me smile a bit — is indistinguishable from god.

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Whoa. Alright, that's where a lot of these AU stories are headed, even if they don't want to confront it. Goddesses, angels, past and future. A lot of the attributes, and with the unfortunate propensity of much of the human race to follow blindly, it seems a natural destination. But she is still a physical, created being, not some spiritual essence. Except for tonight, she reminded me.

Oh, but there's so much more here, Wayans went on. Made from the impossibly dense material from the surface of a neutron star, her enormous and intricately complex gravitationally compensated mass gives her unimaginably vast computational capacity married to global communication, the ability to subconsciously create hordes of virtual agents to multitask problems in the background, limitless power and mobility, profound invulnerability of body and spirit... She has arrived at the precise moment of human history when we are just beginning to be profoundly interconnected, yet before we have irretrievably cast our seed into the greater cosmos. Her visage does not inspire fear or apprehension, her deeds will inspire love and reverence. She will end war. She will mitigate disasters. She will terraform the unusable parts of Terra itself. She will make the trains run on time. Anyone with any access to any kind of electronic communication can, essentially, pray to her. Their message will be heard, at some level. If worthy, she might intervene.

We have heard voices of those who imagine a future

in which it's possible for the memories and attributes of a person, perhaps something that could be called a soul, could be uploaded to some kind of mass storage device. A form of continuance of personal consciousness that may never end, existing in a virtual Paradise — or Hell — made to order and subject to whim. If such a thing is possible at all, it will be possible for her.

At what price? Is this the Final Exam for our species as we near that point in time when we must take our place among the starfaring civilizations of our Galaxy? That we must choose to accept the benign ministrations of a perfect instrumentality, or pursue the hard course in fulfillment of the destiny of our race? The Cryptoaliens provide no clue. She is here devoid of answers. We are contaminated by their advanced civilization only to the extent that we choose to accept the consequences of this mighty gift.

Quite a speech, I admitted, impressed. I don't know if I am up to serving such a vision. You aren't, he replied, but you have no choice. Fine, then. So how do you figure in the scheme of things. Oh, he smiled broadly, for every god, you must have a devil. I will confront her with the ultimate temptations. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. With my guidance, naturally. What a bastard, I thought. Thank you, he answered.

My mind and body finally gave out. Not for the first time, I was awakened gently by my waitress, finished my by now cold breakfast, and staggered to my van for the

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short trip the rest of the way home. I tip well enough for them to tolerate my little eccentricities.

Tomorrow, I will start anew.

Macbeth's reply

Watching the van ease out of the parking lot, its right rear wheel bounding up and over the curbing of the exit, Laura sighed heavily and picked up the crumpled dollar left behind for her.

"Takes all kinds." she mumbled to no one in particular and perhaps not even to herself.

She quietly returned to the isolated table at the rear of the kitchen where all the waitresses routinely congregate to smoke their cigarettes free from the stares of the patrons. A Marlboro quickly placed and lit in her young mouth brought a small bit of comfort to an otherwise unpleasurable night.

The fact was that Laura hated working nights. She only took this job at Denny's until her new husband of three months found another job. He had been downsized at Raytheon and there just wasn't a lot of call for someone with four years experience as a cruise missile flight control systems specialist. He installed the linkages from the servos to the winglets - not exactly something that Dell or Compaq would be interested in. So Laura did

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what she knew how to do to help. She waitressed. Even then, the only job open was at this Denny's on the graveyard shift. She took it and the rent got paid.

Laura exhaled a long puff of smoke up and away from the other two waitresses before beginning her commentary on the last customer - a favorite pastime of waitresses everywhere.

"Did you see that guy in two? Jeez."

"Oh, yeah." said the dark-haired Toni, stirring the ice in her now empty glass of cola. "That's Tommy or Timmy or something. He's a musician; comes in here all the time. He's a Western omelet?"

"Yeah." confirmed Laura. All customers are what they eat to waitresses. "He kept talkin' to himself and looking around everywhere. Weird." She took another long drag for comfort.

A brief chuckle from Betty, the ancient waitress, drew stares all around. With the patience of years, Betty dabbed out her Kool in the ashtray without further comment. Her latest cigarette safely extinguished, Betty leaned back in her teetering chair to look back into the young faces around her. Betty's old, tired eyes met Laura's young, tired eyes with a smile.

"Not so weird, hon." said Betty calmly. "He's a writer."

"Uh-uh, Betts, he's in a band." chimed in Toni. "He told me about it one time when I asked about all his sheet music and stuff."

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Betty winked once, her beaming smile telling everyone how well she knew better.

"Maybe so, Toni, but he's a writer alright. I've seen plenty of 'em come in here over the years. Always at night, worried about some character in their story or how to write something. It's all inside of 'em, churning around an' such. I've seen enough of 'em, I'll tell you." Betty leaned forward, her voice becoming low and serious. "It's at night when it can really take hold of 'em, those stories and the characters they make. They become real sometimes, so real they go with 'em everywhere. They even come here sometimes."

Toni and Laura simply stared for a moment, unsure of what ol' Betty was saying.

"Who comes here?" mumbled a confused Toni.

"Didn't you see 'em?" Betty's grin broadened.

"I waited on him, Betts. I saw him." Laura sounded annoyed.

"Not him, Laura, the rest."

"Rest who?" Laura really wasn't in the mood for this.

"Did ya see the Cubans and the Russians and guy with the blonde and ..."

"BETTS! Are you nuts?" laughed Laura. "The place was empty except for that Ronny guy."

"Toomey." corrected Toni, finally remembering.

"Whatever. Quit playing with my head, Betty." demanded Laura. "You're always doing that!"

"Okay by me." shrugged Betty, lighting up another

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in a series of menthol cigarettes. "I'm just sayin' that when you've been in this business as long as I have, you get to know how to spot your customers and, sometimes, you see a little bit more than what you expected. That one was a writer, that's all I'm sayin'."

The topic safely dropped from the conversation as Laura tapped a new pack of cigarettes to settle the tobacco before opening the wrapper. A quiet ding came from the door sensor bell. Toni peeked out at the front.

"Single in booth six. Who's got six?"

"That's me." groaned Laura as her legs raised her from her chair in spite of some great imaginary weight on her shoulders. "No rest for the wicked."

Stepping from the kitchen to the dining room, Laura noted the tired looking guy sitting by himself at a table meant for six. As she approached, she noticed how he tried to discretely talk to the sugar bowl from behind an open menu.

Oh, no, she thought. Another nutcase. Then another thought came to mind, influenced by what Betty had talked about in the kitchen. A writer?

In the instant that thought passed through her mind, faded images of other beings slowly appeared at the table. There was a second man dressed in a khaki shirt sitting next to a naked blonde woman who appeared to be excited about the stand-up card with a picture of waffles on it. On the other side of the table, a large five-legged creature covered in brown fur peered down at the menu

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studiously, evidently asking question after question for each item. At the center of the table, a smaller creature with eight legs rummaged through the sugar packets, inspecting each one for the printed information that spoke in glowing terms about each of the fifty states. The creature seemed annoyed by the repeats of Minnesota.

All of them simultaneously looked up at Laura and smiled a silly, toothy grin.

A quick scream of surprise came from Laura as her checkbook and pen dropped to the floor. Frozen in place, Laura could only stare in disbelief at the bizarre group before her.

The large spider creature's head rotated slightly while the rest laughed good-naturedly at her surprise. The tiny creature on the table accidentally knocked over the sugar packets, spilling them across the table much to the annoyance of the tired man who had first sat down alone in booth number six.

"MINA!"

Toomey's reply

Dawn creased the refinery-stained air over the Pasadena Denny's. The nearly hysterical Laura had gone home early, probably never to return. Fortunately, nobody else had seen or heard the source of her distress. Except, of course, Betty, who knew she would have to answer for this little incident sooner or later.

It turned out to be sooner. The next trucker that wandered in to sit at the counter muttered at her as she plopped a glass of water in front of him, "Hope you enjoyed yourself."

Betty sighed, "Another reprimand. Oh, well. How many does that make?"

"Four, on this planet alone. I am disgusted with your lack of concern for these people. This incident may well traumatize Laura for some time. Why do you take these kinds of assignments if you're just going to jeopardize the mission with your immature little practical jokes?"

"Oh, lighten up," Betty said sourly. "She'll attribute what she thought she saw to lack of sleep and some crazy old lady, 'playin' with my head'," she mimicked. "I told you I should have been the cook. Nobody talks to him."

"I needed you to be closer." He pretended to study his menu. "The vision was complete?"

"Perfect, naturally. Immature I may be, but I know how to do my job."

"I'm not doubting that." His fingers drummed the

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counter top momentarily. "How are the waffles?"

Betty wrinkled her nose, "Crap. This is not a civilized world."

He looked even more disappointed than when he entered. "OK. I'll just take what Toomey had."

She turned to the cook, "Scram Slam, English," and brought him a sweaty glass of tea.

"How much longer is this going to take?" Betty asked impatiently. "Surely by now he is sufficiently prepared."

"His speed leaves something to be desired," he replied dryly. "We'll not be able to leave until I'm satisfied that he's completely reliable."

Betty muttered something disparagingly incomprehensible, turning it into a cough.

"Oh, I wouldn't be so impatient if I were you," he told her smugly. "We'll be going to Singapore next. I've got a role for you that you deserve. Just the thing you need to straighten you out a little."

Betty snorted, "Like this isn't punishment enough. I look like Popeye's mother."

"Then you'll be pleased to learn that you'll be a much younger female soon. Merely a teenager. A Chinese housemaid, in fact, for a middle-aged American businessman and his wife. He's one of our original subjects on this planet, from before your arrival. This will be a return visit."

"Doesn't sound so bad."

"Well, there's this one little detail. Very minor, actually. Something about a 'headache clause'." He grinned maliciously, obviously satisfied with himself. Betty really didn't like the sound of that. What the hell was a 'headache clause'?

He finished his breakfast just as Betty's shift ended. Watching them leave the restaurant, the cook elbowed the dishwasher, nodding his head at their retreating backs. "Amateurs," he muttered. His companion nodded his agreement. They vanished with soft popping noises, abandoned clothes falling to the wet, food-strewn kitchen floor.

The cashier looked up at the noise, then caught the manager's eye. He came over and asked, "You're tracking them?" She gestured at the glowing cash register screen which he glanced at briefly. "Very good. And you're sure they didn't suspect we were monitoring them?" She gave him a withering look. Together, they went out the back door and shortly thereafter, soared off into the brightening sky.

The two Mexicans lounging in the booth by the door watched their rapidly dwindling forms disappear beyond the horizon. "I thought they'd never leave," said the scruffier looking of the two.

"Well, I've seen enough," said the other one. "I'm certain that we'll have to continue our surveillance indefinitely. I'm just glad we got here in time. The kinds of damage these bunglers could do is unimaginable."

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They made their way to the old phone booth. Somehow, both managed to get inside together. There was a brief flash, and the booth was empty.

The young couple in the corner booth beamed up soon after. The busboy departed via the wormhole in the broom closet after filing a report with the Mixmaster. Some old geezer in a trench coat suddenly shed coat and decades in one fluid movement, unfurled his magnificent wings and rose into the sky trailing glory. A couple of coffee-sipping refinery workers were the last to leave, climbing into their battered pickup truck and exiting the parking lot straight up at about twenty G's, bound for the dark side of the moon.

Dark-haired Toni was the only one left. She surveyed the now abandoned Denny's, smiling to herself. Such a fuss, she thought. There must have been representatives from every advanced race in this section of the Galaxy here tonight, in layer after layer of increasing sophistication and power, weaving grand machinations and strategies.

For the millionth time, she thought about how much easier it could be if they would just leave everything to her. After all, she was the point of this whole tangled mess, wasn't she? She shrugged and thought, my time will come soon enough.

She reached up and removed the dark wig, wild gold spilling riotously across her shoulders. The shapeless waitress uniform fell away from her magically, revealing

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the cape and familiar costume beneath, golden symbol proudly bared across her breasts.

Lightly skipping to the front door, she turned the sign around to read 'Closed' to the traffic along 225, shut it carefully behind her and, laughing with pure joy, flashed into the waiting sky.

A few blocks away, Toomey slept on.

Midnight Madness

In the late, still darkness of my little office, Sara's unexpected, "Whatcha doin'?" made me leap at least six inches from my chair.

"Jeez, Sara! Wish you'd walk, this late at night. Make some noise. You know, 'the pitter-patter of little feet'. Sneaking up like that is rude."

"Sorry," she said, but didn't mean it. Her eyes twinkled in the light from the monitor. She was curled up in a cozy little ball with her arms around her knees, nightshirt trailing beneath her like a ghostly shroud, not quite touching the floor. "Didn't want to wake Dinah."

The faint thunder of Dinah's snoring could be heard all the way downstairs. "Yeah, right."

She peered over my shoulder. "More e-mail?"

"Uh-huh. It's getting pretty interesting. There's this physics professor from Stanford who's been trying to explain to me how you violate the Second Law of Thermodynamics..."

"Uh-oh! Do I have to go to jail?" she said in mock dismay.

"'Fraid so. Unless we can figure out a loophole. He's workin' on it. Says you weigh too much, too."

She made a pout. "Not that 'degenerate matter' stuff again. Those scientists are just prejudiced against aliens."

"No they're not. They're so excited about meeting one they just can't help themselves. Anyway, that was my

idea. Personally, I don't think anybody's ever gonna know for sure what you're made of."

"I know," she said brightly.

"You do?" My eyebrows shot up. I thought she was as ignorant about her own makeup as everybody else.

"Sure. Sugar and spice and everything nice."

I laughed, "You got me."

She nodded her head as if accepting applause.

"OK," I began again, "Here's a nice letter. AK, who writes the Julie stories, liked the basketball game. He says, 'It's got to be harder for a supergirl to not show off too much, instead of just taking over the game. It would have been easy for her to use her quickness and power to drive the lane, going over everybody for a dunk. Instead, she's trying to play within the 'rules'.'"

I couldn't help thinking, *what rules?* I was still sore.

"Ooh. I like the Julie stories. Wonder what 'AK' stands for?"

I was annoyed. "I thought I told you not to visit those sites."

"You said yourself they weren't as bad as they used to be. Besides," she said, "what with you and Dinah every night..."

"Sara!" I was embarrassed. "You promised you'd keep your kreening to yourself."

"Kreen, schmeen. You two make enough noise, Mrs. J could hear you in the 'A' unit."

I was speechless. Well, probably most parents have

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contributed more to their children's education than they intended. We'd have to talk more about this some other time. I tried to regain my composure as I went back to the e-mails.

"Ahem. Sharon relayed one to me from some fellow in New Zealand. Wants to know why I called the last chapter 'Roundball'."

"I was wondering about that myself," said Sara.

"It's just a slang term for basketball. That's what the guys at Fonde call it most of the time, so I thought it'd be appropriate."

"Like you're so hip."

I shrugged, "It's part of the atmosphere. I wanted to make a big contrast between the chapter about the swanky Petroleum Club and the down- to-earth rec center. To show the range of your experiences as you grow up."

"I haven't been to New Zealand yet. Maybe I'll go down there tomorrow."

"That's where they film Hercules and Xena. If you go, see if you can get me their autographs."

"Sure." She'd probably get 'em, too.

"Leanna writes, 'Love to all.'"

"That's sweet."

"And Ron says he wants to see more of the girl."

Sara giggled musically.

"Tom T. says, 'Thanks for sharing.'"

"My pleasure, Tom," she said to the screen.

"Here's one from some guy that's not too happy with

Toomie Starks

my writing about 'Evil Empire has-beens' living in America. I think he's Russian, or something. Kinda sounds like the old midnight knock on the door from some big guy in a cheap suit, saying, 'Telegram for Meester Toomski.' Don't think I'd want to open that door."

"Maybe Mrs. J should send Jesus and Rudy over to have a talk with him."

"Nah," I said. "Probably just a prank. You can be anything you want on the web. It's kinda funny, really"

She pointed at the screen, "Oh, look! There's one from Macbeth! Infinity Bridge!"

I glared at her again. It's no use. The Aurora Universe webring sites were as close as she'll ever get to her own kind. I should be glad she enjoys them so much. I just hope I wasn't contributing to the delinquency of a minor. After all, she's only two years old. Or maybe sixteen. It's very confusing.

"Well," I said, "Mac's e-mail is a response to a little rant I posted about DC Comics. It was all in fun, but I got a little carried away. Something about locking their writers and artists in a room with a browser until they've seen every jot and tittle of the AU, pictures and everything. And beating some sense into them."

"I could do that if you want me to," Sara offered.

I considered it. "No, that would be interfering. Prime Directive, you remember."

"Oh, that's just Star Trek. I don' need no stinkin' Prime Directive." She stuck out her tongue.

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"Anyway, he writes, 'DC doesn't really know *what* they want to do with Supergirl, do they. I thought they had something with the Elseworld version, but I guess they felt a basic Hollywood-concept Egyptian hair thing works much better. Okay. I confess. I don't understand the comix bizness'."

I showed her the scans John had made of 'Lois and Clark's daughter' from DC's latest, Alt-Tabbing to Sharon's *What's Coming In the Comics* section of the AU.

"Looks like a cross between Xena and Supergirl. That's a wig?"

I nodded.

"That's silly," she said, "It would just burn up on re-entry."

"That's what I said," I told her.

"She's cute, though. But I like my uniform better, I think." Sara always called it her 'uniform'.

"Well," I yawned, "It's getting late for this old boy. I just had to stay up until I read the mail. You know, for the amount of traffic we're getting to the story site, it looks like most people don't bother even saying a word. Hearing from readers is what keeps most of the authors going. It's not like we're getting paid, or anything."

Sara drifted behind me and started massaging my shoulders. It felt wonderful, after the beating I took the other day. I closed my eyes and tried to relax.

"I seem to recall that you never wrote any of the writers, either," she chided, "until you started writing

yourself."

"Yeah. I feel bad about that now."

Sara considered for a while, then said, "Maybe Sharon could do something about it to let people know."

"Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know. Something like putting up a story about what it means to an author to read these letters. How important it is. The feeling of getting something meaningful back for all the hard work you guys put in."

"Hmm... That's an idea. But how would you write such a story?"

"Oh," she said, "I wouldn't. You would. You're the author. I'm just the figment of your imagination."

We both laughed.

"You know," I said, "I think you're right. I'm gonna write that story and send it to Sharon."

"Oh, goody!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands.

I hunched over the keyboard and began typing furiously, with Sara hovering over me like the perfect embodiment of a Greek muse.

"In the late, still darkness of my little office, Sara's unexpected, 'Whatcha doin'?' made me leap at least six inches from my chair."