



Unity

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PREFACE

Welcome to my new novel *Unity*. It, like all my stories, *begged* to be told. For me, novels rise out of a title, or initial story idea, something meaningful that has inspired me, or something I see as important to share. It is most often *all* of these things, and they drive me to go through the effort it takes to write a novel. Writing for me is essentially a labour of love, love of story, and love of meaning and understanding. Sharing meaning and understanding, as well as exploring them.

Writing *is* exploring for me, because as I write a story I explore. Ideas rise out of reflection on a particular theme, and the creative process itself; symbols and characters are found, and ideas and concepts come as you focus on the subject. But in saying all this, this particular book is essentially just a story, even though some reflection on the book, and deeper, or shared, reflection on parts of it, will yield up many essential aspects of unity.

This novel is a work of fiction though, and only my own thoughts. The opening quote, and others the back of the book provide a Baha'i view of unity if you wish to explore its nature further.

I wanted to write this particular story because of the original story idea. A flow of ideas was born from it and the main theme arose from the story very organically as I went. I wanted to tread more lightly with the main theme than in my other novels, yet still serve it. The story *itself* developed very differently than I thought it would, becoming as much a story of redemption. I tend to let a story tell itself, with the aid my characters keeping true. A story needs to be set free, yet structured; structured, yet free to roam where it will. That is the nature of writing to me.

Like anyone who seeks to explore and refine their art, I needed to write this book; just a story that gently reaches deeper themes. I needed to write *Crash* too, and I need to write *Clown Town*, to develop as a writer and storyteller, and reach a more universal audience. *Crash* became much more than I imagined and gently beautiful. *Clown Town*, well that will be a life's work, in that it explores all the ages of life we all travel through here, and lessons of life which loomed large for me in each; with a bit clowning around, *huh huh*. *Crash* and *Clown Town* are very *human* books.

I hope you enjoy *Unity*, this far off future, space adventure. I hope the characters bring you some joy, and some humanity, as they walk the path that fate has set them on. I hope you, *and I* find, a greater understanding of unity; what it means in a wider sense, and what it means in the simple things of life with our very human differences. But mostly, I hope you just enjoy the story and the characters; the twists of life and the quirks of being human.

So...board the Perpaduan with me...and let's blast off together, to see what we will find.

***“So powerful is the light of unity that it can
illuminate the whole earth.”***

Bahá'u'lláh¹

Equality

“I don’t know what turn of fate brought these two together. A woman of beauty and dreams and a killer born in the belly of hatred itself. I don’t even know where they were headin’. But the day I saw their path’s cross was somthin’ I wouldn’t soon forget.

I’ve prospected all over this planet in my one hundred and twenty years, and life was hard out here back then. Much harder than it is now. Most folks were lost in the grip of desperation. Well...it was that way beyond all the walled cities, and away from the high planets.

Those high places weren’t caught up in the struggle and loss, or bein’ chewed up in the violent chaos on some of the other low rocks, but they *were* livin’ in their own kind’a hell, and slowly growing a chaos of their *own* makin’.”

Sasha Eden’s eyes opened to the new day. Today, they were full of wonder and expectation, and a smile blossomed on her face as she lay there. She had experienced another dream. These vivid dreams had been with her since she was fifteen, and they had not abated, even coming with more frequency since her twenty first birthday. Such dreams of wonder and beauty were rare on her home world, as wonder and beauty had left this planet long ago; at least, beyond the walled

cites here on Loma Se. It seemed that only dreams of fear, frustration, or survival, filled the nights of most; even though they could not imagine the nightmares of even *waking* life on some other worlds. But last night's dream had been even *more* wonderful and vivid; one making it very clear to Sasha that her path was about to change.

She got up with a sense of expectation and went to a communal basin in the main room of her family's dwelling, to wash her face. She loved the simple joy of starting each day that way. There was also a deep thanks in her each time she did this, as water for things beyond drinking and cooking was a luxury to most here on this hot dry world. Her father was thankfully a trader and had more income and opportunity, albeit from his risks and effort. She loved her father. He was a deeply good man, and would often, unseen, leave food and water for souls who were struggling; as well as employ people he didn't need to at times. The drive in him to succeed was not to gain wealth. It was simply to see to his own family's needs and endeavour in life; to test his mettle and help those who did not have opportunity. He would always prefer to give someone work rather than a handout though. To him people needed to stand up and put in, no matter their struggle; but he knew too, that he was very fortunate.

Sasha wondered at the planets she had seen in this latest dream, and especially at the darkened soul standing in the half-light, as she now quickly dressed and walked out the front door. She was going to the market like she did every week, but she knew that today was going to be different. Her mother had given her this weekly job when she was twelve years old, much to her father's dissent at the time. He had not liked her going to such a place so young, but her mother had known that Sasha needed it, and that she was somehow more capable, or more aware, than their other children were at that age.

Since that age too, Sasha was always helping with families who were struggling, mainly when parents were sick. Providing support for their children in these hard times, as well as doing some small, but regular, schooling for the very young. She was strongly connected with people in this settlement, and much loved. Her mother always said that there was more of her father in Sasha, but she also saw something in her that was far beyond what either of them may have provided.

“Anyway, it was in a large settlement right here on Loma Se, as a five-year-old child, that I first noticed that rare creature. My father was there tradin’, and on reflection, she moved gently and with such love in that desperate place. Children wandered after her, and people made way for her, without really thinkin’ about it, it seemed to me.

Unfortunately, that day, she also caught the notice of some walled city flunkies. *Fronts* as we called ‘em. *Fronts* was the name we had for all the well-off on this rock, as well as for people who lived on the high planets. We called ‘em fronts because they had their own kind of empty behind their outward confidence and fancy clothes. Those three men were the essence of that word, and all we hated about those who lived life easy, while most of us struggled.

Flunkies like those were always on the lookout for people that’d be good as indentured servants for rich folks in the walled cities on Loma Se. These fronts, like most traders who travelled to markets like that one, simply plied their particular trade.”

Sasha had reached the market, and was doing her normal rounds, yet with some expectation of what may come today. Three very well-dressed young men had been watching her from almost the moment she had entered the market and were quite intent on her. She had never seen them before, but was almost oblivious of them, as she was intent on her shopping, and not impressed by their finery like many others. This kind of finery, in the markets beyond the walled cities,

engendered hope in many; hopes of a good sale, a free coin, or maybe even release from the constant struggle for life in the settlements. Most locals here wore bland clothing, much of it quite raggedy, so these men most certainly stood out.

Another man, a tall man, not so raggedly dressed, in off-white long-coat and trousers, a light blue shirt, and well strapped tall boots, happened to walk past the three fronts. He followed their gaze to what they were intent on, seeing the young lady. His eyes then darkened a little as he glanced back to the fronts, then back at her again, only now seeing the children all about her and the reactions of the folk who interacted with her. It was more than her just buying goods from the merchants there too; there was a deep respect, even though merchants can be most respectful, and very impressed by what is indeed not impressive, when a sale is on the offering.

This stranger knew the likes of these fronts, and what they would be up to. The look in their eyes told him that it was not going to be just an *offer* of a better life in the walled city they came from. At least, it was most likely not going to be a beneficial one. The men's faces had 'big payday' written all over them, and sadly, young women like Sasha were often just taken. It was because most people on the lower rocks were so disempowered, and desperate, that there was often little resistance. Many lived in such great hopes of attaining a decent life in the walled cities, or more so, in the need for the survival of their family, that they did not want to upset these vultures.

The visitor in the long coat knew the score, so he wandered around the market, keeping open sights on the girl, *and* these fronts. They had gathered the attention of a bounty hunter, a *very* deliberate man, and things were only going to go one way when this visitor made up his mind. Erron Rowes knew only chaos for most of his years, and as an older teenager, he had escaped a kind of servitude to one of his planet's warlords, to become a killer for hire. While that might seem

extreme to some, it was not to him, and not strange at all on the planet he came from. It was told that he would always say “I release you” when he had killed a man, but he was not totally irredeemable, because he never would kill a woman or child, no matter the payday.

Those who went down to his guns, or more so his wits, were mostly men who were so lost, so cold dead, that it didn’t matter much to him anyway, and well, killing was...*just life*, for Ed. His friends called him Ed. At least, for as long as they lived. You see, on his home world, chaos and the rule of the gun *were* mostly life, and it had been that way for very a long time. It’s also been told that this was the reason he used those particular three words when he dispatched another soul to face The Centre, because life there was that bad and broken that death *was* a release.

In any case, Erron had eventually left that kind of work, going into bounty hunting in his twenties. He had found reason to change his profession after he got caught in the middle of a turf war between two warlords. He had woken up slightly wounded that day, under a couple of bodies that were blasted black, in a town that used to border the territories of those two malevolent monsters. Ed had been drinking at a bar when the shooting started, and he had quickly realised that there was going to be no quarter, as children were gunned down like anybody else and dwellings were being levelled from the get-go.

When he had woken up, pushed those two bodies aside, and stood up, he saw that every man, woman, and child were dead; including what had to be almost a hundred fighters from both sides. Looking to the burning remains of the ramshackle buildings and assault trucks, he remembered fighting his way out of the bar and into the street. But no matter how good he was, or how many he killed, they had just kept coming; and as he told it, nobody seemed to even know who their enemy was that day. They were *all* alone that day, every last one of them. It’s even told

that Ed saw a woman using a child as a shield. It was the saddest thing this determined killer had ever seen, and he had seen some *very* sad things. You see, evidence to the contrary, Erron Rows was not one of those *totally* mean creatures, the ones who *enjoyed* killing. He just did it because that was what you did. Sad as that is.

He had recalled taking life after life, that day, but all to *no* end. People had died, to no end. *No end*. Just dying. Just power shifting, before it would shift again; each time, life and hope fading a little more for those who lived thereabouts. He saw the total irredemption of his home-world in that small town that day. He saw the end itself coming. He had experienced the futility of his physical power, and the end of hope. He had even sought to save his own skin with no real thought at all for anybody else. That day, he came vividly, *and violently*, face to face with the void inside and outside him; both with no life, and no air, no water.

In his last conscious moment of the battle, he had recalled ducking behind the two men when he saw the launcher round coming in. They had saved his hide. But they were just cover. Not *people* right then. His ability, and his experience, *had* saved him, but it was *actually*, and strangely, this *vivid clarity* of his own deep lack and the deeper consequences for life on his home planet, which *really* saved him that day. He saw how life had ended completely in that town, and it was *never* coming back. That in time, it would end, *just like this*, everywhere on his home rock, and maybe on many others that he had heard about. He saw the future that day, and he saw *himself*, and he knew that life, and his life, could no longer be just about surviving.

So, Ed swore off killing, right then, and in time, decided to help protect life where there was still a little of it left, by bounty hunting. It was a big shift in a darkened creature like him, but this small ray of goodness must have always been there, or it would never have risen out of him.

He eventually found himself a tight crew, a small fast ship, and came to working off-planet sometimes, which was why he was here on Loma Se. He had originally started in his new profession working alone, but soon found, that contrary to common knowledge, bounty hunting wasn't something easily done alone. In any case, having a crew to be responsible for put even more structure, trust, and purpose into his life.

He also ferried people here and there on occasion, especially when he ventured off-world to these other rocks out here floating in the black. Not many people on his home rock had a ship that could do that, and even less of them could dream of having the credits for fuel for interplanetary leaps. There was plenty of money in bounty hunting, and plenty of work, as most of the planets were lawless, almost lawless, or partially so, and even some of the high planets had jobs. But while a good number of credits could be made that way, few actually took it on, due to the fact that bounty hunters were much more than a little bit on the nose. You see, bounty hunters mostly came from the tough stock of the low planets, but they were also most often seen as traitors to the common man in these lawless places. That made this kind of work a little traitorous, let alone, going looking for more trouble like these hunters did. So, it was scarcity of supply and high demand that provided a good rate of pay in this particular vocation.

Ed and his crew were based in a small settlement that was out of the way. Away from the bigger places and the main trade routes on his home world. It was an old mining town, and they spent a lot their money *there*, endearing themselves to the locals. He and his crew needed these souls to watch their backs and their gear, and the town often used Ed's reputation as protection. Bounty hunters *were* generally on the nose to these folk too, but he became their bread and butter, and their protector. It was mutual, *symbiotic* I think you call it. It wasn't love. No one could afford that word on the rock he came from.

Thankfully, in this free settlement here on Loma Se, love was a word still available to people, and to most of the lucky ones who lived in, or were accepted into, the three fortress cities in this region. *Real* order only survived within those three islands, as even the larger settlements outside them were unravelling, or dying slowly.

Dust rose up from the many feet in the market today; the feet of locals, and of others from surrounding areas who had travelled to the settlement to trade for supplies. Almost encircling this wide, more oval shaped, market, there were light tan mud brick dwellings, including eight or so double storey buildings with shops on the lower floors. They were dispersed in amongst the other single storey ones that were family dwellings with tables of goods set out in front of them. All the buildings had open flat rooves and were spartan in design. There were pathways between some of them, leading to smaller mud buildings, and tent dwellings, which radiated out irregularly into the dry surrounds. Loma Se was a dry sparse planet, but a water well had been found here that was good enough to sustain this larger settlement. The walled cities had *abundant* groundwater, and money naturally followed the water; especially since the rains had failed more often on a good number of the planets.

The fronts now nodded to each other, then began winding their way individually through the various stalls, and piles of goods set out on the ground, towards Sasha. Fear for her safety, and their own, took hold of the locals here, as they noticed the fronts' interest. The walled cities were strong, and tended to take what they wanted if they could not buy it; even though mostly, payment *was* made for family members to go work, or marry, there. But *today* would be the *former*, because most in that market knew that there would be no price that could take this particular young lady from her family.

When the locals saw Ed walking over too, they just assumed he was more muscle, as he was not dressed raggedy. But he was here chasing down quail on this planet. *Quail* was what he and his crew called those they hunted down, because they were usually hiding somewhere, gone to ground, and scared; just ready to burst out of cover when any danger came near.

Ed beat the fronts to Sasha, and put his arm around her, like they were wedded. “Follow my lead,” he whispered to her, then said out loud. “Common’ darlin’ let’s get home. We have enough.”

Sasha smiled at the strange embrace, then saw the fronts. Fear did not come to her eyes at all, as she then looked back to Ed. She looked up at him in gentle wonder and a small smile, and he got a little lost in her peaceful eyes. He smiled too; a free smile, and strangely his eyes began to water. In her face, in this moment, in this service, he had *found* something. He was feeling something that he had not felt before, something strengthening and beautiful; honourable. He knew right then, that not liking fronts, and this new feeling, had just purchased his labour and his guns to whatever end was required here. *Not money*, today.

She took his hand and they started to walk off away from the fronts. But one folded around in front of them, and the other two spread out behind.

“Well. Isn’t this just lovely,” said the obvious leader, behind them, as Ed and Sasha stopped and turned to him.

“We don’t want any trouble, mister,” said Ed, as he unbuttoned one button that held his long coat closed.

That got all three fronts on guard, but the leader put up a hand, and said, “No need for that. We just have a proposition for you.”

“We will be going home now,” stated Sasha, looking straight into the man’s eyes as she did. She turned to go again and took Erron with her.

The leader was a bit confused, and his men waited for direction. Then he just got mad, and said, “I was *trying* to *help* you, and you *just go and* treat me like some *yob*,” as he directed his men to form a triangle with him around the couple. “I am not...”

Before he could finish, Ed had drawn and opened fire, to the sudden terror of Sasha and the fumbling efforts of the fronts to draw. All three went down in the dust quivering in shock from the charges now racing through their bodies. He had put a stun round in each of their chests from his two pistols.

He then walked over to the leader, still prone on the ground, and went down on one knee. He slapped him twice, gently, but strongly, on one side of the face to get his attention away from the rolling shock he was experiencing. He looked him square in the eyes, saying quietly and calmly, “I don’t like *dogs*. Never have. And *that much* that I’ve put most of ‘em down, where *I* come from. You were *lucky* today. I only had stun rounds loaded. You were *real*’ lucky. Best you don’t come back here.”

He got up, took Sasha’s hand, and led her away from the quivering forms of the three fronts. Most in the market who had now witnessed this altercation had hidden smiles, but none they would keep when these men finally managed to get up.

“It *was* fortunate that you had stun rounds, I am *so* glad. They are not good souls, but I would not have wanted to have their deaths on my soul. I also hope it does not endanger the settlement. If their master is as deliberate as you seem to be, there may be more trouble.”

“Their pride won’t let them tell *anyone*. They’ll be considered next to useless if they tell how a single *yob* brought ‘em down,” he started. ‘Yob’ was a derogatory word used by many in the walled cities, and on the high planets, for the folk who struggled. “They’ll want to keep working, so they can buy their pretty clothes and seem tough for the ladies where they come from. But they *would* have taken you; today, or another day.”

“Then I am no longer safe here.”

Erron looked down and admitted, that in the long term, that was probably going to be the case. These particular fronts would most likely not be coming back, but the likes of this woman would always find new attention. He was even a little surprised that she had got to this age without drawing attention like this.

“You travel between the planets?” asked Sasha, drawing Ed from his thoughts, and knowing things from her dream.

“Yep. *If* we have a job.”

“Could you take me with you then?” she asked.

“But *where* would you go. I hear even the bigger fronts on the high rocks do this kind of thing to their own, so I don’t reckon anywhere’d be safe for the likes of *you*.”

“Last night I had a dream. I am to travel. I am to find Earth. I seek to dream in the First Garden.”

“Earth! Earth’s a *myth*, honey. Just like *heaven* is. It’s just a story people still tell ‘em selves to feel a little bit right; a little bit strong.”

“*I believe*, and it takes *strength* to be a true believer. We do not fall to the fears of this life. I have to go. Would you take me?”

“Like I said...Where?”

“Earth,” she insisted.

“It *doesn’t exist*, sweetheart. And even if it did, no one knows the way there. Besides that, I’ve heard it reckoned that the First Garden’s just a symbolic story.”

“I have the same understanding of it,” she said gently, “but I also know that a real place exists. *I know it*. I don’t know how to get there, but I trust it will unfold, just as I trust that you coming to find me was the *first step*.”

Ed laughed. “Man, you Centre’s *sure* are amusin’.”

“I *saw you* in my dream.”

“A *lot* of women have seen me in their dreams, lady.”

She looked at him kindly, but said, “That does not become you.”

“You don’t *know me*, honey.”

“Maybe I don’t. But in any case, I am to go with you, and my father *will* pay you.”

“Well, that’s *all* you had to say,” sprouted Ed smiling, but inside he felt that feeling of honour again, as well as a knowing deep in his bones that this would not be an ordinary job. Not with this one.

MECH LOOKED UP FROM THE WATER UNIT. It was a gatherer that he had made to draw moisture from the air. Their home planet was almost as dry as this one, so it was more than useful, and it kept them more self-sufficient when they went off-world. At least, it was one less thing they would have to trade for.

He was set up beside their ship, which was now landed in an open space. They mostly landed in wide open spaces if they could, so they could see people coming. Some of the quail they hunted, had paid and unpaid friends where they went to ground, so these hunters always had to be on their guard. They also had to be on their guard for raiders. Raiders were of two kinds, one’s on the ground and one’s out in the black, the general term for space. They were mostly pirates of the sky, and the black, who just took what they could, when they could. Any payday was a payday to them, and they had no qualms killing anyone who stood between them and their booty, or their survival.

Ed’s ship was called The Perpaduan. It was a Striver; a deep space special op vehicle they had traded for on a high planet. It was old, but Mech had done a lot of good work on her. She had square lines, and was streamlined, with a dull dark blue hull. It was shaped almost like a smooth-edged flat wedge, which was just a little narrower at its snout than it was at the rear. It had a single rise across its full width on the upper surface, halfway up. The full front of which held a steeper angled, split windscreen, with single windows on each side of the vessel. The windscreen and

windows were at the front of the flight cabin, allowing vision out of the cockpit. The wedge shape continued on, up beyond the windscreen to the back of the craft, at the same angle as the nose. At the back of the craft were three large round rocket exhausts, all in a row, taking up the bottom third of the round-edged rectangular space there.

The ship now sat squatted down on four hydraulic legs, which held its main door very close to the ground for quick disembarking and extraction. It was a bit dirty looking, and the hull seemed somewhat piecemeal with paint touch-ups and laser torch repairs, but it was left that way, so it did not draw too much attention. There were hatches on the sides, top, and bottom of the hull for weapons and other gismos that extended for a fight, as well as sensors. These weapons and tools were all set up in spaces between the inner and outer hull, and a few low antennas and small sensors sat fixed in places on the hull; again, upper, side, and lower.

Mech, as they called him, was the ship's mechanic. He kept all this boat's systems tight and tidy and was good at his work. He was something of a savant, from hydraulics all the way to software, from the wheels of their cargo carts to high end super computers. He had worked for a big shot, a very heavy front, before he had served with Ed and Cycle putting down a warlord on one of the high planets. At least that was his story. Ed had sworn off killing before taking on the job of training soldiers with small firearms in that conflict. He knew it was still dirty, killing by extension, but he had seen his own world fall to the chaos of warlords, so that was enough to appease his growing conscience. He was only bounty hunting on his home planet before that, and jobs had got scarce for a time, so he had taken that one-off job.

Cycle was the other man on the Perpaduan. He was sniper of some repute; an ex-regular, who had a shy Mamma's boy way about him. He wasn't all there it seemed, but he was as much a

part of this crew as any of them. He and Ed were tight and worked almost intuitively together now. They were naturally in sync in most situations, and Cycle *always* agreed with Ed. Ed *always* returned the favour, agreeing with Cycle, even when he said something stupid. Cycle was short for cyclops, for obvious reasons, and he, Ed, and Mech, had hit it off when they had served together. They were like any individuals who were naturally drawn together in the lulls in the fighting, and after that small-time usurper and his small army were put down, they knew that their combined skills could make them good money in Ed's line of work, especially if they got themselves a decent ship. They had been together over eight years now. That's an eternity for the likes of them; for bounty hunters like them.

There were three accommodation pods in this Striver; one for the captain, and two for the crew. They were at the very front of *The Bus*, as they called the Perpaduan, on the lower deck, in the nose of the ship. They were set in front of the open, ship-width, staging deck, and its large upwardly retracting door that led out of the craft on one side. Beyond that, towards the back of the lower deck, was a gear room and store on one side of a short corridor, with a shower room and toilet on the other. At the end of this small corridor was a hatch to the lower level of the engine room.

On the upper deck, was the large cockpit and map room, and behind that was a reasonably sized mess, both of which were accessed up two separate ladders set up on the inner hull in the staging area, opposite the staging door. Behind the mess, towards the back of the vessel, was Mech's happy place. A room where he worked on things, then more of the engine room behind that. The engine room took up the two decks at the rear of the craft, and there was another ladder from the lower deck to an upper mezzanine deck there.

The flightdeck and mess were really one big room, with the ladders from below coming up on the hull within each of them. They were only demarcated by a computer robot that was set in place at the back, ladder side, of the cockpit. This robot was fixed from floor to upper hull, but rotated to face the cockpit or the mess, if needed. They called it Bot; it had voice interface and protruded out about a metre and a half from the side hull. It was best described as being a five-sided cylinder; three sides, each sporting multiple screens and a keypad, as well as four telescopic extendable arms and tools it used for various physical functions on the two other sides. The mess was a galley and server bench set against the hull on the ladder side, with a table and three bench seats on three sides set away from it in the middle of the deck. Against the far wall, above the big staggering door on the lower deck, was also an old lounge chair.

The Perpaduan *was* a fast strike craft, but it had long haul ability, so it was designed to be somewhere between spartan *and* roomy. So, the mess, the quarters, and general open feel of the upper deck, made long hauls more doable. Cookie, or Mamma, as the crew sometimes called her, had set up the galley and mess a bit homier too. Calling Cookie, *Mamma*, was something Cycle started. He had followed it with his cheeky naughty-boy giggle, one that was a bit more like a pulsing wheeze. Cookie had not been present at her christening, or she would have powered up on that tall lean fightin' machine, something *fierce*. But they *were* her boys, and they knew who was boss, so when she did find out, and after the required time of chiding faces and anger, she was really quite happy to let them call her Mamma.

She had her own room, and so did the Ed; Cycle and Mech shared the other one. It was Ed's ship, so *he* got the captain's quarters. He and Mech could pilot the Bus, and Cycle and Mamma had learned to do some basic stuff, like take off and re-entry, and *some* atmosphere flying. Cycle was a bit of savant at mapping courses through the stars, but Bot did that mostly. It was

fortunate to have Cycle's skill on hand at times though, because Bot would glitch every now and then, so they had to do it themselves.

Mech now saw Erron coming with a lady. She had a canvas backpack and Ed was carrying a canvas bag.

"Well, what'a we got here, Cap?" queried Mech, as they reached the craft, and as Cookie stepped down out of the Perpaduan.

"Get her stowed, Cookie," was all Erron said. But Cookie bailed him up as he went to board the ship, pulling him aside.

"Who is she? What's the dear's name?"

"I didn't ask."

"You didn't ask her, her name?!"

"She's a passenger, and she's payin'. So, what's in a name? Make room for her with you, eh," finished Ed, as he boarded.

Ed *didn't* know her name. She was just *cargo*, even though there was something about her. He had to keep on point for the good, and the safety, of the crew; well, as *he* saw it. Sasha had gone by herself to say goodbye to her family, and they had packed her up to go with many tears and hugs. Ed liked it that she had done her own leavings and done it on her own terms. It said something about her, even though her father *had* come with her to meet her new protector.

He had walked up to Ed with Sasha, on the outskirts of the settlement. He regarded the bounty hunter, and Ed had regarded him. He then asked a few questions, all in a row, to which Ed

answered, “I am *built* to be good at what I do, and my crew and ship are the best you could hope for, but there *are* no guarantees. She’s up for it, and even a bit purposed. Maybe she lives longer or freer this way, and your family gets left alone.”

The man then put his hand out, Ed thought with credits, but it was for a handshake, and it took Erron by surprise. Shaking hands was not something he *ever* did. But Sasha’s father held his hand there until Ed finally took it, and they looked each other in the eye as they shook. It seemed that the older man found what he needed in Ed’s eyes, then gave the hunter a large payment. He had then hugged his daughter, sobbing heavily as he did; as did she. He eventually waved them off, standing there until Sasha was completely out of sight. He had then simply sat down on the ground and let out his pain.

Mech had been talking to Sasha, while Cookie and Ed had their small interaction. She was looking at the ship in some wonder, as she had not seen a flying craft before. Mech had come over to her, saying, “She’s the Perpaduan.”

“I love her name. Is she fast?”

“We’re *bounty* hunters, sweetheart. Quail are *always* on the run, and even if they go to ground, they *will* fly when they can, so we have to fly *faster*. *She’s* fast.”

Sasha smiled at Mech’s words, loving the spirit of them and his love for his work, just as Cookie came over and greeted her, asking her name.

“I’m Sasha.”

“Let’s get your things stowed, and get you set up, Sasha. They call me Cookie.”

“Lovely to meet you, Cookie.”

Cookie was a tough, rather large old woman, who had never received much loving respect. So, Sasha's respectful words, bought her the instant endearment of this older soul.

"Where are you headed child?" asked Mamma, as she now guided Sasha towards the ship and up the short step to the staggering deck.

"Earth," answered Sasha.

"A true believer, eh"

"I guess so."

"*We'll* look after you, darlin'. These men are children *mostly*, but they'll look after you."

They entered Cookie's cabin in the nose of the ship, and Mamma started getting Sasha settled in. The older woman was a bit embarrassed at first, and started cleaning up a little, but the new passenger stopped her. Sasha reached out and touched the back of a hand full of dirty clothing, saying, "It's *your* home, and I take people as they *are*."

That just endeared her even more to Cookie, and she soon left to give the girl some time to herself and settle her things.

"She's a *lot* easier on the eye than most of our passengers," commented Mech, who was just stowing something on the staggering deck as Cookie was passing.

Cookie gave him a *Mamma*-look; one with far more murderous intent in it than that of a mother chiding her child. To her, Mech was *definitely* a child, and she said nothing as went up the ladder to the mess. She didn't have to. The look had done the job.

Ed was firing up the ship's systems, and Mech began packing up a bit quicker as he heard the start-up noises, knowing each and every sound on this bus.

"Signal Cycle to come in," called Ed, over an intercom to the lower deck.

Cycle often watched over the ship from a vantage point when it was useful. Ed had gone into the settlement alone looking for the one they were after, as this quail wasn't real' dangerous. Ed had found out that their quarry had taken a ship to another planet, after he had paid his way into a walled city here on Loma Se. There were folks, all over, who knew the goings on of any place, and Ed had paid his way to right one here. The quail had flown, so Ed had been wandering around the market looking for some things for Cookie, when he came upon those fronts and the new payday.

Mech now signalled Cycle in, and quickly ducked for cover as a round came in. It hit the hull only an inch above Mech's head as he ran along the side of the ship. It was a stun round and it shorted out on the hull. Cycle hadn't missed. He just used Mech for practise from time to time.

"Missed me! Ya' freak," shouted Mech, now stomping the fallen stun round into the ground to get his adrenaline out. Well, it wasn't quite *that* cognitive an act.

"Quit mucking around, Mech. We got'ta go," called Ed, on the 'com again, as he saw Mech dancing around out of the small side window of the cockpit.

"*Gelf*, Cap! It's that *child* out there."

"Man up; and *load up*. He'd only hit you by accident."

"That's easy for *you* to say," responded Mech, which had Ed laughing hard.

Mech got the joke, but he wasn't happy. He then dodged around as he loaded the gear, including his water unit, as sometimes that young sniper would take a few shots. The water containers were heavy and so was the unit, so it was quite a show watching him move them at pace, as well as zigzag; spilling water too, because he had rushed putting the caps on.

"Hey, Mech man," said Cycle, as he came up behind him from the other side of the ship.

Mech jumped, because he was still heightened from Cycle's practise shot, and he said, "*Damn*, Cycle. You got'ta stop doin' that."

"That's what you say *every time*," commented Cycle, followed by his childish wheeze-laugh.

"Well, no water for *you*, boy. I spilt *your* share."

"Get *it done*, and seal it up, boys," called out Ed. "Help him, Cycle."

"Sure, Ed," responded Cycle, and he went to helping load the last of the gear with a very satisfied smile on his face.

THERE WERE ONLY FIVE SEATS IN THE COCKPIT, or flightdeck really; the pilot's and co-pilot's up front, one nearer the wall behind the pilot, and in front Bot, and two others against the left-hand wall, set behind the co-pilot seat, and behind each other. An interactive mapping table sat between the rear seats, in the very middle of the small open deck. Cookie sat behind Ed in the single chair, with Sasha across from her, and Cycle in the seat at the back of the flightdeck, opposite Bot. That was *always* Cycle's seat, as he was taught to take a perch and always be looking over the field, so he did it everywhere. There wasn't an ounce of bad in this tall young adult, even

though his duty as a regular had been quite bloody. He was just Cycle, a simple-minded soul, with no real education.

“Let’s get off this rock and hit the black. You got us mapped, Bot?” asked Ed, just checking that Bot hadn’t glitched.

“*Instinctively*, Cap,” responded the computer robot, as it swung on its turntable, showing its navigation screen to Erron.

“Dumb robot,” commented Cycle, with a small giggle. Well, a bit bigger one than his usual giggle, as he was showing off a little for their new guest.

Bot *had* a few glitches on occasion, and it also had some kind of random speech aphasia. But thankfully it swapped words for other words that seemed to get the message across. Some of these words stayed the same, while others changed, but the meaning was mostly clear. Mech had explained that it was because this computer bot was *super* smart, and probably said those particular words because they were closer to what it meant. Cookie, Cycle, and Ed never did quite buy that explanation, but Bot sure had its moments.

The wings of the craft were already out, as were small aileron blades that extended out of the nose on each side, all these low on the hull. The short wings that had extended at the back of the sleek craft had moving flaps at the back of them, as well as small rudders positioned partway out from the body of the ship, which telescoped upwards out of the wings after they were fully extended. All these were for atmosphere flying. They were retracted after landing, and when they were out in the black. When they were out in space, thrusters, set in configurations on every side of the hull, and along its full length, gave it great manoeuvrability. It was a special op ship, so it needed to be sharp and lithe in its movement.

“Antigrav’s on, Cap.”

“Lift us up, Mech.”

The craft floated up off the ground, then rose up into the lower atmosphere.

“Let’s *rock and roll*,” then called out Bot, as some blast off music began to play.

That was Mech’s doing. He had added it to the take-off programming in Bot. The music was loud and punchy, and the crew’s heads started bobbing. Sasha’s too, with a wide smile growing on her face.

Ed waited for a big punch in the music, then he hit the engines. The thrust was a hell of a punch too, as they suddenly hurtled *full on* towards the black.

“*What a ride*,” called out Cycle, always enjoying the punch of take-off and the powerful build up to escape velocity.

“What a ride,” agreed Ed, as they broke through the outer atmosphere.

Sasha was surprised just how quick the change was from *atmo*’ to *the black*, as these people called them. There was a line where reality suddenly changed, and she was in a mild state of wonder at being out in space for the first time. The others though, were now simply unstrapping themselves, and Cookie was off into the galley. The galley was a small space up against the inner hull, that made up part of the mess. It was tucked in behind Bot, with a service bench out a bit from the wall. Bot even had the capacity to provide meals with its arms and super knowledge, and that was partially why it was positioned there. But the main reason, was so that its data and other functions could be easily accessed in both the mess and the flightdeck.

Mech and Cycle just loved Cookie's grub and were always hanging around trying to get an early taste, or pinch a nice morsel. Cookie played the game with them every night and was passionate about her food. She loved making the effort and creating something new for dinner, but the crew always tended to their own breakfast. Two meals a day *was it* for this crew, and they were very thankful for them, as many folks they knew, and came across in their work, just didn't have the means for that many meals.

As good as Cookie's grub was though, it was just food to Ed. He had faulty tastebuds, or at least the taste centres in his brain had been sacrificed by design, which, among all the other differences in his physiology, came by the nature and circumstance of his birth. The Cookie in Cookie sure didn't like that, but the Mamma in Mamma just fed her broken boy like she was tucking him in at night. Ed would always give her a nod and a wink after dinner each night just to let her know much he appreciated her feeding him. It just filled her heart up every time, but with just a sprinkle of sadness for him, which made it a perfect feeling.

The conversation around the table, as the night went on, was full of boys showing off. Mech had his feet up along the old couch, against the wall, eating there, and the others sat on the benches at the table in the middle of the deck; both structurally attached to the floor. Eventually the talk came down to business, and the crew decided that they had to go on chasing the new quail that they were after; for now, anyway, as they might lose track of him, and as Sasha was not yet sure where to go. Ed didn't believe in her Earth mumbo jumbo and was thinking that maybe she needed to live at their home base, or that they could find the right sort of folk on a high planet who could keep her safe, given a little time. But even so, to his way of thinking, the well off in these places might just as likely fall to the right price, or the right threat. *"They don't know just how*

good they got it, and they just want more,” thought Ed. It seemed that everything had a *price*, and that it was what life was *all* about; high planet or low.

He now glanced at Sasha, thinking how *impossible* she was, in so many ways. He wondered how she had managed to stay safe this long, and couldn’t even be sure she would be safe in the mining town they were based in. She was a *high price commodity*, so he really couldn’t work out how to keep her from harm right now.

The banter then went on as it usually did, until Cookie gave Cycle and Mech the evil eye. It was their turn for washup, and they always tried various ways to dodge it. It had developed into a challenge and a game, rather than some childish will to be free from chores. Being men of action, and them bringing their own particular skills to the crew, they had, at first, presumed it was not their job. But in the end, they had to fall to the call for respect for Cookie that Ed had put out there.

He had reminded them, or really held the line right from the start, that they were all in this *together*. That having turns on this duty was more about respect, and that it was a baseline exercise reminding them every day that none of them were better than the other. Cycle had agreed, as that was what he always did with Ed, and Ed took his turn too. But Mech only begrudgingly agreed; knowing that what he brought to this crew was priceless, as well as his solid workload maintaining and enhancing the ships systems; even in down times. But Cycle was *his* gopher too, as was Ed, in some things. They were a *crew*, even though Ed, or the circumstances of a hunt, had the final say as to who put in what, and where.

Sasha went down to the lower deck to wash up and get some sleep. It had been a big day and a sudden change. She rested easily for a while, thinking of her family and home; reflecting a little on the wider picture of her life and said a prayer before nodding off. She woke later in the

evening, and feeling a little lost, felt the need to return topside. By then, Cycle and Cookie had retired, and Mech was looking over something on a small data pad, still on the old couch with his feet up. He looked up and nodded to Sasha as she came back up. She smiled at him and walked onto the flightdeck. Ed was there with his feet up on the control console and leaning back in the co-pilot's chair. He usually piloted this beast, but he always liked to sit in a different chair each time he came up here at night.

Ed looked around, and Sasha asked, "Do you sit here often?"

"Yep. Every cycle. It's just good bein' out here away from people, and all the sad business on the planets," he answered, a bit uncomfortably; and before he could stop himself, he added, "I like going home *too*, but I *love* blasting off into the black again after a while. Gives me a sense of freedom."

Sasha settled into the pilot's seat, and said, "Yes, it is wonderful. You and your crew..."

"We're *all* the crew," stated Erron, very strongly.

It took Sasha by surprise, but she took no offence to his tone, continuing on with the thoughts that Ed had cut off, "That's what I was going to say. You're friends more than a crew, and you work efficiently. You are all so different, but it works."

"We have our moments, but we are all in it together. Equality works, girly, when each member is valued for what they really are. We chew over every job *together*, and if anyone has something they *need* to get said, it gets a hearin'. *No exclusions*. And not because we *have to*, but because we want to, and it works."

"That's nice, Erron. I like that."

“If you have anything that needs be said, *you* say it too.”

“Sure.”

“Another head’s always useful when we decide some things as well, so join in.”

“I’m not part of the crew.”

“Well, what you put in won’t carry as much weight, or any weight really, but different perspectives are often useful.”

“Okay.”

They then went on talking about the crew, the planets, and life. They talked over many things of import, agreeing that the future was more than bleak for what they called *the planets*; the known settled planets; high and low. Race did not come up in the conversation on the breakdown, because there was only one race on all the planets. To historical memory it had always been that way. The races had mixed long before these peoples ventured out into the stars and colonised the planets on this spiral arm; well, that is, if it could ever be said that humans weren’t *always* one race. But there *was* planetary prejudice and prejudice between the haves and have nots. There was also some religious versus atheist prejudice, but it was more so just low-level disrespect. In any case, there was sadly *very little* tying these peoples and planets together, whereas once, they had relied on each other to break ground and settle these new rocks. But that was *long ago*, and even though not completely forgotten, it *was* forgotten.

Ed never did take to, what he considered, the fairy stories of the religious, but the conversation had eventually wound its way there; and not because Sasha was trying to change him; it was just because of who she was. She saw most things through the glass of her beliefs, so it

flavoured how she saw things in life, and she had never been afraid to speak honestly. She had, just now, commented on the need for humans to have a moral authority, something greater than them, to live better; that to her, a shared belief was the only thing that could create unity among the planets, and begin to address the violent and hedonistic breakdown on most of them.

“There’s so *many* types of you Centre’s. All with your *own* ideas, and your *own* name for your Centre fella. Some of ya’ are downright *nasty* about it and hate the other crowds. So *that’s* not goin’ta happen.”

“Don’t judge them, Erron. They believe, and that is something in this dog-eat-dog existence we have fallen to. People need *meaning*, and only meaning is ever going to save the planets.”

“The planets *are* goin’ta hell. *That’s* for sure. But, as I was sayin’, you religious folks are just as divided. You aren’t going to save *anyone or anything*.”

Sasha looked down, feeling a little wobble in her faith for a moment. She could see what Ed was saying, but then she remembered her certainty in the Centre, and His wisdom. It *was* true what Ed had said, but it was He, the Centre, who brought evolution and change; *not people*. She knew that civilisations always fell to disorder when folks walked away from Him and good, and He had *always* sent someone. She believed that the *One* would come; most religious folk on the planets now did, no matter their differences. She thought that the faithful, and the many others, would all come together in that time, even though there would initially be fierce resistance to a new Binding Message.

She then went on to explain how she saw things coming together, but Ed didn’t hear her really, and just said in the end, “Don’t give me all that mumbo jumbo.”

“The Centre *will* send someone.”

“Well, you know, I hope your God *is* real, and I hope He *does* send someone. I only say that, ‘cause *anything* ‘ll help, and we sure as hell don’t seem to be able to help ourselves; religious or not. We’re *dyin’ slowly*, sweetheart. *Ever* so slowly, but we *are* dyin’. I’ve seen this creeping death. I’ve seen the *end of things*, at its work. It will take all life away in the end.”

Sasha wondered at Ed’s insight; more so what he may have been talking about. She didn’t know the man he used to be, and what he had seen in his life. She then stated, “The One *will come* and recreate us all. All things flow out from the Centre. *All things* are created and sustained by Him.”

“Well, He sure as hell didn’t *create me*. Some scientists did that in a tube. My old man, if you could call him that, was a warlord who paid for me; for my specialised DNA, for my surrogate mamma, and my delivery. He wanted a soldier, and someone to keep his name alive after his death. He and his men trained me up my whole childhood, and he set me to work as very young man, but I broke loose as soon as I got old enough to know that *I could*.”

“That is *so* sad.”

“It’s what it is. Can’t *change* it,” responded Ed, in cool resignation.

Sasha didn’t keep on. She could now see that Ed had literally been born out of the murderous chaos consuming his planet; that maybe he *had* seen *the end of things*; something that she could not know. She just sat back and looked at the stars, and Erron was sure thankful for that.

IT WAS THE NEXT WAKE CYCLE. They were all sitting down for breakfast, as the Perpaduan moved on through the black. The conversation had come around to Sasha, and what would be done about her. It was all about looking for ideas really, as the rest of the crew had not bought into the *Earth* thing either. She just needed a safe port to their way of thinking.

“Your money will only get you so far, you know,” now added Ed, but you could tell he didn’t mean it, and the faces of the others too, were definitely not in agreement. It was quite strange how they had taken to her. She already seemed part of the crew, besides Ed’s words to the contrary last night.

Sasha had been very patient while they talked about her future, but quite disappointed about where this conversation had come to. She *knew* that they all wanted what was best for her, which she very much appreciated, but her pathway, even as yet *unseen*, was set, and she would see it through, and now responded, “I know I only have limited credits, Erron. But I trust...”

Suddenly, and very loudly, something hit the hull. It was something small, and metal. Mech jumped up, and immediately went over to Bot to send out a probe. The output of its camera was by default sent to the map table, as it had the biggest screen and resolution. “You should have *seen* that, Bot boy,” Mech commented, as he went about his work.

“Dumb robot,” commented Cycle, as he then stared Bot down hard.

“It has no signature,” Bot reported to Mech, its screens and lights seeming like they were cowering a little. Its two moveable video sensors, on its presented side, were also focused on Cycle. There was a noticeable way that readouts and lights, on Bot’s screens etc, gave the impression of various emotions at times, and Cycle just loved playing with the *stupid robot*.

Bot could spin freely on its turntables, with sensors all around, and hatches for its various arms to extend from. It could spin all three hundred and sixty degrees to fulfil its various functions, and would spin, or pivot back and forth, to bring the information required, at any moment to Mech, or any of the crew. It also had tiny drones that it could send out to get eyes on things within the ship when required. The drones had been used as tools for its original security protocols, but Mech reprogrammed Bot to use them for other uses too, like being eyes for maintenance work.

“We’re lucky the bus is armour plated,” said Mech. “At the pace we’re moving, it would have been a little more than bad,” he added, as he now moved the probe out of its hatch and started it searching the hull, and all its hatches, thrusters, and antennas, for any damage.

Ed had gone to check for any damage, or sign of what hit them, out the front window of the cockpit, even though the bang had definitely come from above them. Mech got the probe checking on the upper hull first, and it took a little time, but it eventually gathered sight of an anomaly in the hull. As it zoomed in, Mech, and the others, now at the map table, could see that what had hit them was still there.

Mech’s face went white, saying, “It must be real strong magnetic to have latched on like that,” while looking intently at the camera feed on Bot’s screen. “It has to be military. It could be a *mine*, or *Centre knows what*, Cap.”

“Better go out Mech,” suggested Ed.

The mechanic was not *at all* happy that he had to be the one for this job. But if it *was* a mine, he wanted the *damned thing* off his bus. The ‘bus’, The Perpaduan, was *his baby* for sure, and the others knew it meant a lot more to him. But the bus being their home, more and more often over time, had slowly made them all feel a bit partial to it.

“Come back into the mess, and eat, sweetheart. They will either get it, or they won’t,” said Mamma, as Mech went down the ladder to suit up.

“It’s not a time *to eat*, is it?” offered Sasha.

“It’s *always* a good time to eat,” replied Cookie, adding supportively, “Better to die enjoying a good meal than staring out the window, *all anxious*.”

Cookie had seen her share of rodeos with these boys and had experienced a good number of dry gullies in her existence. She was tough, and raspy from life, but she, like many from the hardest rocks, was also her own kind of broken. Some things rocked her hard, while other hard things were like water off her back. Right now, she was focusing on Sasha, for the girl’s comfort, and to keep her mind off what might happen.

Sasha smiled at her words, and Cycle, strangely enough, followed them off the flightdeck and sat down too. Sasha figured he must have been hungrier than he was scared, but he was harbouring a small innocent crush on her. Ed smiled as saw Cycle head off the flightdeck, and shook his head, as he and Bot now kept working the probe, trying to see if they could get more of a clue about what this thing was. He didn’t think it was a mine, as it had no protrusions, but it could still be something dangerous. They had their own tech that stuck to hulls to do their particular work, and in his experience, anything that latched onto ships was usually designed to do damage; well, beyond zero-grav’ tools, and some types of tether grips.

The object was not natural and made of a kind of metal that he had not seen before. Mech had commented on that too, as he had disappeared down the ladder. It was a flat rectangular lump, and it did not seem to be anything more than that. Ed was starting to relax a little now, but he kept changing the angle of the probe’s lens, while Bot sharpened the focus each time for best resolution.

“Women are just *chattels*, high planets and all,” added Cookie, to what she was now talking about. It was Mamma too, who said that...if you get my drift.

“Women have always been respected in my home, and we are in it *with* the men, but many are brought low, or bring themselves low, in our settlement. I was never taught to think that I was less than a man, and I’ve *never* believed women are possessions.”

“Good *on you*, child.”

“But, as you say, it *is* a reality for many, and for *too* many, *far* worse,” conceded Sasha, to which Mamma seemed to flinch, just a little. “I believe, that in time it will change. More equality will come when the One comes; when there is more order, and our eyes are reopened once more to what is good. We’re *all* people.”

“But we are still *women*,” sated Mamma.

“That we *are*, Mamma,” agreed Sasha.

“And with *all* due respect to you, deary, *I don’t* have to wait for order, or for some *One*, to be a woman, *or* to be equal.”

Sasha smiled and nodded. She really liked that.

The mechanic now floated out of the outer hatch into the freezing cold of space. Bot had halted the Perpaduan before Mech had stepped out into the forever, this, just in case there were any other lumps waiting in the ship’s path that their sensors couldn’t see. It was all about speed in relation to other bodies out in the black, and a walk was always a risk in itself. In any case, Mech had donned a backpack that supplied oxygen, which also had small thrusters on it. He was adept at this kind of thing, a real natural. Probably because of his trust and feel for machines. He also

had a tool belt on, and a magnetic tether gun tied to his side, which definitely helped support his confidence.

He soon reached the flat rectangular lump adhering to the hull, and Ed moved the probe so that he could watch Mech work. Sasha finished eating and her curiosity drew her back into the adjoining flightdeck, with Cycle following along behind like a puppy. Mech now used a small handheld sensor unit to test for a few things, including radioactivity. The lump of metal seemed totally inert, yet still had a strong magnetic field holding it to the hull. He then touched it tentatively with a short, insulated probe. There was no response, and it did not budge. He knew its magnetic grip had to be strong, so he soon gave it a harder push, but it seemed stuck solid. He then tried to pry it off with a small pry rod from his belt, which, like the handheld sensor unit, was tethered to him.

The rod too, wouldn't budge it. He then looked up at the free-floating probe's camera lens, and gave the 'I don't know' signal to Ed.

"Use your hand," said Sasha, unthinkingly.

"Use your hand, Mech," said Ed, over the communicator.

"You come out and use *your* hand, Cap," responded Mech.

"I feel it will be right," added Sasha.

"She *feels* it will be right," communicated Ed, with a big smile on his face, knowing he would stir up Mech a little more.

"I don't *care* what she *feels*."

“We have to get it off there, Mech. If it’s inert, then try it.”

“Okay, but it won’t budge anyway. It has a *killer* magnetic field.”

Mech then tentatively reached out and got hold of it. As he started to try to lift it, lines of light appeared on the metal lump; ones more like veins, than circuitry. He pulled his hand back instinctively, but the lump had now gently released itself from the hull. Mech held his breath and waited for it to explode or something, but thankfully it didn’t.

When nothing happened, Mech blurted out, “I can *tell you all* what I *feel* right now,” which sure got Cycle laughing, and Sasha and Ed doing the same.

“*Harden up*, Mech. It was an *easy* job,” then commented Ed, as he gave an elbow to Cycle, and they had a bit more of a laugh.

“I’m comin’ in. I’ll *get* you guys. I’ll get you both *good*. You *know* I will. So, watch your backs.”

“*Meeeeccccch*,” commented Cycle, like it meant something, and he and Ed had a bigger chuckle.

When Mech made it back, they were all on the lower deck waiting for him to come out of the small airlock. All except for Cookie, she had been happy to stay on the upper deck. Well, happy wasn’t really the right word, she wanted to bring her emotions back into check. When she knew that Mech was *actually messing* with what could be mine, she got quite stressed, and sadly, very heavy stress brought on certain behaviours in her; behaviour that Mamma was always embarrassed about, and she would be mortified if it came out in front of her lovely new daughter.

“Let’s have a look,” said Ed.

“We still don’t know what it is,” warned Mech, as he unsealed and removed his helmet. “We need to get it in an insulated strong box. If it decides to turn on its magnetic field again it could fry some of our systems, and we *don’t know* this tech. We don’t know what it might be able to do.”

“Okay, sure, Mech,” responded Ed, nodding. “It *does* seem to have a mind of its own.”

“For sure,” responded the mechanic, as he set it down, and sealed it in an insulated strong box strapped to the wall of the staging area.

Sasha felt some sadness, because she believed that it held some answers for her. Ed was not unaware of her disappointment, or that how, somehow, she knew that it could be lifted off the hull by hand, so he said to her, “Maybe when we land and take it a little distance from the bus, we can *all* take a look. We’ll soon be on the rock our quail flew to, so you’ll get your chance soon enough.”

“Thanks, Erron.”

“*Thanks, Erron,*” mimicked Mech, battering his eyelids, already working on payback for Ed and Cycle’s enjoyment of his predicament out there with that thing. But Ed just turned and went up the ladder, and Cycle fun-bumped Mech into the bulkhead with his shoulder for good measure. What good measure, only Cycle knew, but it was all part of the strong connection he had with Ed. Truth be known though, he would die for *any* of them. He had a pure heart and all the innocence of a small child.

Ed smiled at Mamma as he came up, and said to Bot, as he walked onto the flightdeck, “You saw what that thing did, and how it was unseen ‘til it hit the hull. Interface with all the tech we used to probe it and think it over for a while. Give me all you can after our next sleep cycle.”

“Humanly,” replied Bot.

“Get us underway again,” added Ed, as he leant back to look out at the stars for a while.

It was a long wake cycle after that; one of many *maybes* about the object; most especially for Sasha, both in thought and in conversation, as the Perpaduan flew on. That night Sasha dreamed again, a new vivid dream, while inside the strong box the metal object pulsed again with the pathways of light that seemed to randomly move across all its surfaces.

Justice

“You can’t tell now. But over a century ago I was a fiery young redhead, and I went after that super soldier, turned bounty hunter, like a woman possessed. I knew he was special, and as it turned out, I didn’t know just *how* special. But I knew he was top line cargo and I had plenty of buyers back then. I retired a good while ago from work that was in the same line, as the market on such things as him died out with all the changes on the planets. But nothing was as exciting as it was back in those days, and I was clever, so I was *not* to be denied.”

Cycle stamped one foot hard, and continually, on the upper deck. Just managing to, as the electricity poured through his body. He had got up to get some water, after he and the others had gone to bed. The object was still pulsing, and Sasha was still dreaming in the night when he had got up. Well, more so, a sleep cycle, out here in the black. He had felt a strange energy around the strong box as he had passed it and climbed the ladder to the upper deck.

He now stamped harder, and harder, and was near to passing out when Ed flew up the ladder, followed by Cookie and Sasha.

Ed almost crash tackled him, dislodging his hand from the metal water tap. The pulsing of the object had ceased when Sasha woke, so they did not feel what Cycle had felt as they passed the box below. They were in a hurry anyway.

“You okay, Cycle?”

“Yeah, Ed.”

“Is he okay?” asked Sasha, as she and Cookie made it up the ladder.

Cookie just smiled, and Ed did too. Sasha not seeing the joke at all.

“You should’a known Mech was gunning for ya’, after your practise shot back on that rock, and the fun we had with him when he was floating around outside with that lump of metal.”

“Meccchh!” called out Cycle, then began to laugh, as Mech, lying on his bunk with his hands up behind his head and his elbows out, had a real good chuckle at all the commotion and that fool stamping his foot time and again on the deck.

“He got you too, Ed.”

“Well, he said he would, I s’pose.”

“He’s smarter than you two, and he’s got more skills and ways to play with you two boys,” commented Cookie. “Let’s get back to bed, darling,” she added to Sasha.

But Sasha said, “I might just watch the stars for a while. I had a big dream. I need to reflect on it.”

“Sure, child. I’ll see you in the morning,” said Cookie, as she turned to go and get some more sleep.

“Meccchh!” repeated Cycle, and he and Ed had another chuckle.

Ed very much appreciated the mechanic’s work tonight and was glad to have his services and his wits. Mech had got them out of plenty of jams and made them strong with the tech he had developed, and he sure had a good sense of humour. Ed stayed to unwire the tap, and Cycle went down the ladder to *visit* his good friend and rough him up a little. Mech was locked in tight though, knowing that the boy would forget, or let it all go, in the morning. It would make for some good fun at breakfast time.

Sasha glanced back at Ed from the co-pilot’s seat, as he turned from the small job, and he walked over to sit with her a while. He could feel she wanted company, and he was awake now. This awake response would keep him up anyway, as it was part of his makeup. Like other things that he had been made to be, he just took it in his stride. He had no choice anyway because he was just wired certain ways.

“So, you need to say some things?”

“You are a mystery, Erron. You are so hard, yet you can feel I needed an ear.”

“It’s just how I’m built.”

“No, Erron, *it’s you.*”

“You’re seein’ what you want to see, girl.”

“Maybe. But you aren’t Bot, or the like of Bot, like you *seem* to think. Maybe part of you has been physiologically and psychologically programmed, but there *is* spirit in you.”

Ed liked that. It felt good to hear it. He didn’t really know ‘what was what’ with him. But he was a sure creature despite that, as surety, was definitely part of his engineered DNA. He now realised that he had not thought about such things, just accepting what he was, and doing what was in front of him. He relaxed back in the chair beside Sasha, in thoughts of his possible humanness, when a deep pain raced through him. It came with memories of the lives he took with no concern. The hope of being more human than he thought *was* a freedom; but one that brought with it a *great* burden.

Sasha saw his face change, and she felt a certain knowing in her, saying, “It’s always how you go on *from here*, Erron Rows.”

Ed just nodded, with that terrible feeling deep in his upper torso now waning. She had set him free from his burden, for now at least, in this new perception she had granted him. Her own new perceptive ability brought a little wonder to her. She *had* felt this ability to see other folks and know the nature of their pain before, but it was never so clear and sure as it was tonight.

“It’s the same for *all* of us,” she added.

Ed breathed out a big breath, releasing himself a little more, and asking, “So what is it you want to talk about?”

“Oh...yes...What do you know about Mercy.”

“Ain’t no mercy in life, but I sure did feel a little just now.”

“That’s wonderful, Erron,” she said, and feeling that he had more to say, let go of her true intent in asking that question right then.

“You know, I was in bloodbath that changed me a little. Killin’ made me strong, and special, until I realised that I was just another rat scurrying for survival. I saw the futility of violence that day. There was *no* mercy. *None*. Strange though, how there *was* a kind of mercy for *me* that day, now that you mention that word. I pulled myself from out of pile of bodies and sat down there a good while. I was glad to be alive, but I realised that nobody wins. ‘Cause if they do, they’re still dead inside anyway. There are no winners when things fall that low, and I saw that we were all slowly going to hell, one way or another.”

“Oh, that’s sadly true. Things *are* falling. But I actually meant, the planet, Mercy.”

“Oh,” responded Ed, with a smile and a chuckle. “Mercy’s where we got the job for the quail we’re chasin’. He embezzled a good deal of credits from some *cargoed-up* front on that high rock.”

“I *have* to go there.”

“We won’t be goin’ back to Mercy. Our quail has made it to Malian. They’ll have extradition with Mercy, so we’ll leave him with the Malian authorities. Well, if he hasn’t bribed them already.”

“I *have* to go to Mercy.”

“Well, I s’pose we will be partin’ company on Malian then. It’s a shame. You sure are good for a man.”

“Thanks, Erron. I am so glad I was able to ease you a little,” she said. But Sasha was a little shaken, as she was going to be on her own going forward. She thought that the crew would be with her all the way, but she could now see that things would be as *they would be*; knowing only that she would follow the guidance of her dreams no matter what.

She was disappointed that their association would end, as she had felt his kind words strongly, as well as knowing that her company was good for Ed, and could have been more so with time. But she now realised that there would be more hidden tests along this new pathway she had set out on, and she would just have to meet them.

“So, was that all you wanted to talk about?” asked Ed, feeling the same disappointment, but knowing it was too far to Mercy to ask the rest of the crew to stay out any longer in the black. He and the crew sure wanted to get her somewhere safe, but their quail had been one of the hardest one’s they had tracked, and they were showing signs of wearing down, as well as all making more comments about getting home and off the job for a while. This quail had not gone to ground like most they went after. He had just kept flying, and they had almost run out of credits for fuel when they came across Sasha. Her old man’s money would have covered the fuel to Mercy and back, but they had to allow for profit, or it was all work and risk for nothing.

“It seems my dreams are *for me*, Erron. So yes, that’s all wanted to talk about.”

“I thought we might have had more time together than this too,” offered Ed, reading her a little. Reading people was definitely strong in the sequencing that he had been created with, as it was more than required for hybrids like him.

“Yes,” agreed Sasha, as a small sadness came to them both.

That word ‘yes’ hit Ed quite hard; well, the feeling was surprising to him. He was also feeling a sense of discomfort about not keeping the promise he made with her father. Did he *make a promise* when he shook the man’s hand? Looking back, he was sure he didn’t, but he knew he had failed to meet the spirit of that meeting by parting company with Sasha so soon. This kind of concern was new to Ed, but he brushed it aside, even though not being able to quite brush aside his disappointment at Sasha’s need to go her own way.

THIS CITY TEEMED WITH LIFE. The buildings here were architecturally sharp and white mostly, with varied size windows of different colours. The streets were clean, and people very well dressed. They wandered around the shops and stopped to eat, enjoying all that was around them and the delicacies they could partake in. Ed walked steadily here, trying not to gather too much attention. The clothes he now wore were higher end too.

They had set down in a spaceport on Malian. They usually didn’t on a planet where they were hunting a quail, but they needed to fuel up to get home, or be prepared if their man had flown again. It wasn’t likely, but even so, only Ed and Mech were seen out around the ship. Ed making out he was *somebody*, and Mech very obviously his servant by the way he talked to him. Mech made further preparations for the op, while tinkering with the systems, so it looked like he was just doing maintenance.

Ed had stridden up to the office at the port and asked for a local guide, paying for three days, and saying that he had important business here. Ed made an excuse to the guide and sent him on his way an hour later; carrying on like a spoiled front, saying he would find one worth the money. Mech fuelled the Striver, but only well after a few other jobs, as he had to seem in no rush.

This crew had not been here before, and landing in a spaceport made things that little bit harder, so being very obvious was the best covert action. If their quail was worth his salt, he would have someone on the lookout for strangers.

The quail had indeed done that. He had paid a woman, now a local of this rock, to watch out for new arrivals. But she was no mere lookout. She was a trader and a fixer, and she had her own network. Her nickname was The Surveyor; one who looked around to find good tech, arms, and the like, for customers who may be interested; one who did various odd jobs for a premium price. She knew where the fruit was on this planet and on two others, and she would share knowledge of it for a price, or she would procure it for the right price, among other things. She had a lot of repeat custom, and powerful customers, even one planetary government.

She now watched Ed walk the streets. "*He's good,*" she thought. A watch had been kept on any new ships coming in, and no matter what they had planned, the striver did not fit a front from another high planet.

Ed had quite quickly found her customer's whereabouts today and was heading there. She would call her customer from where she now sat at an outside table of an eatery, nearby to where he was now housed. She was between where Ed was and where her package was staying, but as she now put her communicator to her mouth, she noticed something. This Surveyor was a pro. She had been around. She only had one regular right-hand man, as she liked to keep her business to herself. But she had five hired men on this job, as well as her informants here, and others around the planet. One of the informants was naturally in the spaceport here.

She now stood up quickly and walked out into the street. She walked fast and met Ed face to face in the middle of the wide walkway that was lined with high end trading houses, looking into his eyes for what she sought.

“Excuse me, dear. I have no time for whatever you’re selling,” said Ed, like a front would. He didn’t like the high planets. He didn’t feel at home here, and it felt emptier to him than even the most lost places on the lower rocks. Things were too perfect here, everything to a formula, and he could see the lifelessness in the people of the high planets. They thought they were living, but every day they sought a new sight, a new smell, a new taste, a new experience, a new hit. They were just junkies to Ed, but he now gathered that this lady was not one of them by the way she walked, and by the way she looked into him.

“Oh, I’m not selling anything. Well, I might be talked into it.”

“Sell it to someone else,” said Ed, continuing to feign ignorance, as he brushed her aside, and kept on.

“Don’t see soldiers like *you* walking around free very often.”

Ed stopped in his tracks. She had not even turned. She knew she had an ace, and while Ed wanted to keep on bluffing, this woman *had* looked strong into his eyes. She *knew* what he was, and he was on a high planet. There was *money* here, a *lot* of it, and this one was a *real* player on this trader planet.

He turned, saying clearly, “Don’t waste *my time*, honey. That would *not* be a smart move. You play threats with me, and you soon won’t be *here*.”

“Oh, *please*. Save me your warrior blustering.”

She stood there, still facing away, waiting for him to come around *to her*. She had to wait this way, to show him clearly that she had the upper hand.

“My boys know how to deal with the likes of you,” she added, when he had not immediately come around to her. She stood there for another minute, one that seemed like an eternity to her, when her communicator buzzed. She ignored it, cursing inside at the timing.

It stopped thankfully, but it was getting too long now, and she had not personally dealt with one of these creatures before, so she turned, just as her communicator buzzed again. Ed was gone.

“*He’s gone*, Elle. The other two are tracking him though,” came a voice, when she hit the answer button.

She swore out loud, using a deeply offensive word, much to the distaste of the fine folk all around her. She just laughed at their sad reality. “*Fronts*,” she thought, as she quickly called her customer. “There’s someone good on your trail. He’ll be there any second. Don’t move, just hide we’ll be there.”

“To late, sweetheart,” replied Ed, “and tell your boys, *when* they wake up, that they might need to get some more schoolin’.”

She sure wasn’t taking this one at his word, and she was fuming as she called her two other boys. She was dying for a response, every calling beep a stabbing knife in her gut. The voice of her main man then came over the line, “*They’re down*. He *has* the package.”

“*The port...now!*” she called, into the speaker. “Tell those other two they’re coming! Take him down, but *don’t* kill him. He’s worth more to us than our package can pay or any credibility we may lose botching this job. *Understood!*”

“Understood.”

She immediately turned and whistled. A small, but flashy, sleek single occupant hover sled dropped down for her to get on, and she was off; as was her cohort on one of his own. She was more than happy that she had the other two boys at the space port. A paid lookout *had* seen the Perpaduan dock, and while not knowing what they were about, still called the red-haired entrepreneur with a report. As Ed had gone about his work today, this ‘surveyor’ had gathered his intent, and so sent two men to the spaceport for insurance. She had sent them there *knowing* that she, and her three remaining men, could easily handle one bounty hunter. *Well*, until she realised that Ed was a hybrid.

It was on, and the stage was set. Things were stowed and tight on the Perpaduan. The roll down hatch was two thirds closed, with Cycle staying out of sight in a high position that he had stealthfully moved too. The ladies were strapped in, and Mech was in the driver’s seat, with all systems ready to go. Ed had called in that there had been pro’s guarding the quail, and that there were maybe more. “So, saddle up!” he had finished.

The fixer’s two boys were already set, and she got there as her main man was taking up his position. She took up a position like all of them, but a more defensive one. They were all above the ship, all on the large staging hatch side of the Perpaduan; at various heights and positions. This spaceship dock was five separate, great open, flat disks of metal, radiating out from a wide building with three, railed office and service levels, and a main tower above them. There was one other metal structure on the side of the dock for craning.

What then came, was a precision job. One which that fiery redhead would have very much appreciated, but she was the first part of it, and was no longer conscious. Ed had bugged her when

he brushed her aside in the street, and had now hit a button, dropping her cold, as he entered the spaceport. He *had* wanted the Perpaduan just to come meet him, and his quail, at a pre-planned extraction point. But at the time, before Ed had even left the bus on the first day, Cycle had complained that he needed some practise; that he was getting rusty. To which Mech had said that he did not want the fool rusty either. Cookie was definitely not happy at them not taking the easy route, but had agreed, because Cycle just looked at her with a big puppy dog look, and well, Mamma just couldn't say no to her boys.

Cycle was high on the tower. He now took out the man on the crane with a knockout round and put a flash round into the railing in front of the other man, blinding him to Ed and the quail boarding by a small hatch on the opposite side of the bus to the large staging door. The ship rose up quickly as the fixer's third man, and main man, fired on the craft's antigravity pods. That's all he could do as it rose up, well, before Cycle got him ducking for cover. The bus then swung back toward the tower as it rose, covering Cycle as he jumped. He rolled in under the partially open staging door, and Ed slammed it closed. They both raced over to strap themselves into the harnesses on the inner hull, where their new guest was all trussed up. Mech then shot out the wings and ailerons as the craft smartly rose higher and out of range.

The fixer lady's right-hand man had no idea where his boss was. He *did* know she was *down* somewhere, as well as what it was going to be like when she woke up. He was happy enough though, because it now seemed that these bounty hunters, thankfully, weren't the killing kind. Well, unless they were under instruction from their *payday* not to take lives, that was. That thought put a little dread in him, as these hunters were obviously highly trained, and they would surely be bumping heads with them again. The Surveyor would now have a bone to chew on, a score to settle, and she was good at both. He knew her, and also gathered that she wanted one of these men

as cargo. He now watched them blast away on main engines, knowing that this was only just the beginning.

THEY HAD BEEN IN THE BLACK FOR A WEEK NOW. There had been a mighty celebration on the upper deck, on their escape, with the embezzler still trussed up down the hole. They had left him sat down there, and he had slept by dropping his head. Cookie had hand fed him twice a day since then, which she thought was more than he deserved, because this job had fallen into the red, as they now had to deliver him. Better to make sure that that high rolling fixer couldn't undo any arrest on her home world. She was a high-end professional, and corruption was king, even on the high planets.

Mech occasionally commented to the bound up forlorn fellow as he wandered past him, and Cycle did too. With Mech it was a game, a bit of fun as to how many different ways he could tell this guy that they had *got him*, and with Cycle, it was always the same comment. He would just say, "Bad quail!" and have a little chuckle. Ed checked on the man each day and let him walk around the lower deck when everyone else was topside.

Things were now just in the day to day on the Perpaduan, but the night that they had shot out into the black from Malian was a good night, and Ed had shaken his head at the girl when he realised that they were *all* now heading to Mercy. He was kind of happy. Actually, he *was* happy, as were all of them. They liked this young lady, and they just wanted to do all they could for her. It was generally the payday that made them feel good after a completed job, as well as the joy of a win, or netting a quail unscathed. They *had* helped people in their work and travels, which gave them occasional satisfaction, but it was often done out of a spite for some fronts. There were some

little kindnesses here and there too, but with this young lady it was different. There was something different about her, and right now, there was something different about them.

THEIR CUSTOMER WAS A VERY RICH MAN, and he had paid them well, when the Law-paid bounty would be added in with it. They had contacted him as they came in and he requested to see the quail first when they landed. He had made an upfront payment, so they were happy to oblige. It was odd to get credits before a job in these times, but they had not looked that particular gift horse in the mouth, and it was good that they were going to see him, as they could now beg for a little more to at least break even.

Sasha tagged along with Ed and Mech because she believed she had to find someone on Mercy, and Ed didn't mind helping get her connected here before they headed home. Cookie and Cycle stayed with the ship, well Cookie did go do a little shopping for grub, as they were too low for the return trip home, and they had landed near quite a quaint town. The authorities here had given them the fifty questions treatment when they landed, so they were now free to roam. The high planets were policed, and this planet, not a corrupt one, which had surprised Ed. He didn't think any planet was free of the grip of the ugliness that he had seen on all the rocks he had been to.

The bounty *would* get them fuel home and bit more, but they still owed on some tech they got to fulfil this mission. Mech thought he could trade some lesser tech here for credits or fuel anyway, to help out if their *payday* here was too tight to, so he peeled off as Ed, Sasha, and Johnny Quail, as they dubbed most of their prisoners, went to visit the crew's benefactor. Ed had also decided to look for some quick local work here on Mercy when they picked up the bounty from

the authorities. They had travelled to other worlds to work, but not this far away before, or here before, so they didn't quite know how their kind of work would pay, but they were hopeful.

Their payday's personal assistant, Johnny Quail, had flown with a good deal of his money, so they also hoped that taking him there might induce him to tell his old boss where he had stashed it and maybe *that* get them the extra payday they needed. Mercy was a rich planet, real rich, but it seemed a little different to other high planets. The houses were quainter here, and things a little more natural. Some people even said hello as they walked past, and some even seemed to know their quail in this large town, shaking their heads at him. But Ed knew it wasn't just them bringing this man to justice, or even Sasha's open way and deep eyes, that got the hellos here. It was just in them. He had never experienced this kind general good regard, *ever*. Well, beyond the mining town he was based in, but he was a stranger here.

They had walked from the ship, as it was not a big place. They had close jump gear, and a three man power sled, but they usually brought themselves down close enough to walk. They liked to come in quiet anyway, and people mostly only walked on the low planets, at least beyond those who lived outside the walled cities. This planet was a ball of green, all kinds of green, as they had flown towards it, and down onto it. Great forests covered the planet from pole to pole, and dispersed throughout it, were circular fields of all sizes, and some larger and smaller settlements. There were also some fruit and nut orchards dotted here and there, and some areas of open grassland along river flats and over low rolling hills.

It was a food bowl for all the planets, which gave it money and clout. Cookie was really animated about this place as she knew they would have all kinds of fare for her to purchase. This great green planet was protected by its very strong police presence. They were there to simply keep

order, but they were packing what most planets would die for to arm their military. The Pepaduan had looked a bit tardy up against the two silver strike craft that piloted them in.

They now stood at the door of the great two storey, wooden, house, after knocking. Ed was not real sure he wanted Sasha to see what came next, and had warned her, but she had been adamant that all would be good. Ed shook his head at her naivety, but also thought that she *had* been right about a lot of things since she came aboard.

An elderly lady came to the door. She was proper and dressed proper, which somehow had Ed standing more respectfully than he might have.

“Hello. Do you have business here?”

“We are here to see Mister Ellington.”

“He doesn’t just see *anyone*. Do you have an appointment?”

“Tell him it’s Erron Rowes, and that I have brought a gift,” answered Ed, as he pulled the handcuffed ex-assistant into the lady’s view.

“*Oh*, I see,” she responded, as she looked down on the man; him dropping his gaze low as she did. “Please come in and take a seat in the entry room. I will inform Mister Ellington.”

They walked into a large double storey entry room, with a great staircase and a mezzanine walkway above it. They sat down on a large couch up against the wall of this open foyer, and Sasha sat silent with a kind of wonder in her eyes.

“You saw it in a dream, *right*,” commented Ed.

“The like of it. Images the soul gathers are just signs of what will come with the meaning of that place symbolised within it. The soul sees with our eyes but sees these things its own way.”

“I’ll take your word for it, honey.”

Sasha smiled. “You are more than that, Ed. You feign ignorance because you are used to ignorance, but you know there is more to life.”

“Don’t *know* what I know, but you *sure are* an education.”

“Good,” she said, smiling openly.

She sure was beautiful, but it was as much in her pure hearted way as it was in her physical beauty, and Ed smiled less guardedly with her than he ever remembered. Maybe as a kid, he did. He couldn’t remember. His childhood was surrounded by malevolence, and he soon learned about the malevolence wired into him. He felt its power, and he liked it back then. It was certainly not as attractive now, as this woman exuded a different power, not some lesser lower strength. He never saw power like this before, a surety like this, a beauty like this.

“Mister Rowes,” greeted a man in his middle age, which was around eighty years, even on the lower rocks if you survived, as he walked up to greet them. “Hello, Dath,” he added to the younger prisoner.

“Hello, sir. You know all this was not my idea. Your daughter brought me to it.”

“I am well aware of that, Dath.”

Dath looked at him with questioning eyes, as the older man said, “I just wanted to look you in the eye, and have you look me in the eye.”

Ed was surprised by the way the older man acted towards this man who stole from him. That was why he hadn't wanted Sasha here. He had never brought a quail to anyone but the law, so he was expecting at least *some* violence. He was glad there wasn't, and seeing a deeper honour in this fellow, he was hopeful that maybe this was where Sasha could find a home.

"We will talk further in the library, gentlemen." Then he turned to Sasha. "Young lady, my wife wishes your company. She is not well, so she asks you to forgive her lack of good manners and asks if you would kindly come to her upstairs."

"I *well* understand. It would be my pleasure," replied Sasha.

He looked at her and nodded in respect, then asked the lady who had answered the door to escort Sasha to his wife's bedside.

Arron and Michelle Ellington had married young and had sought all their lives to love each other. They knew that love was an outward flowing force, not something one *got*. It was something one gave, and they had given it copiously to each other, and others. They were fair people and just in their dealings. Arron understood equity, respect, and justice well, and so had the respect of many here and on his home world. Michelle fostered kindness and charity, more so, and was respected in her own right here.

She was now dying, as nothing could be done for her, but she had been assured of seeing the very beginning of change before her death. She had been deep in prayer as a child; praying for all the planets, most especially the lawless lower planets, when she received a promise of seeing, what was termed in the answer, the conception of unity; the very first ray of justice, and last of night. She. Michelle had dreams too, mostly of tomorrow, these days, and she had seen embodied

light enter her house last night in her sleep, so she had prepared herself and her room today. Beside her, on the nightstand, was a small metal lump, just like the one in the strong box on the Perpaduan.

“I thought we were in love, sir,” pleaded Dath, in explanation. “She said we could escape together, but she turned from me when the crime was done. I was in love.”

“It was not love,” responded Arron, “and you are responsible for your own actions. We have cut her off, and she will have to make her own way in the world. She will see the term of your incarceration out, as such; whatever the courts consider is the due term for your crime, and what is hopefully time for your, and her, rehabilitation.”

Ed did not think that was justice. It was something, but it wasn't justice. A life on this planet was not a hard one. Having to work was not a punishment to him at all considering the pain existent for most on the struggling planets. But it wasn't his place to say.

“I was a fool,” expressed Dath.

“You were,” agreed the older man. “You simply had to ask for her hand. You simply had to ask.”

“She said there was no way you would have it. That I'm just someone who works for you. Not high born.”

“You needed to think for yourself, see for yourself. You needed to do what was honourable, no matter the risk. We seed our own sins, Dath, and we have obviously failed in our parenthood of our daughter. She has much to learn, and hopefully it will be good in the end. Its seems that no matter what our efforts are with our children, they are responsible for their own actions.”

This was a revelation to Ed. He saw his own journey within those words and not a small amount of meaning there for him. He realised that *he* was responsible for who he was now and would be. He also saw his lack up against the good nature of these people. It would be a perfect place to leave Sasha, so he took a chance, and decided to make the sacrifice required to have her kept well here.

“Sir, um, I would ask, since we’ve done this work in an honourable fashion for you...”

“I will pay you more, son. I was always going to.”

“Well, I would consider it a favour if you’all could keep on the lady I came here with, in lieu of any extra payment. She doesn’t belong out there, or with the likes of us, and a woman like that is not safe anywhere but the likes of here.”

“*Mister Rowes*. For a hard creature like yourself this request is quite something.”

“It’s for the best.”

The older gentleman smiled, and said, “Take Dath to the authorities and we will consult with your young lady while you do. Did she come here with that wish?”

“No, she walks to the beat of a different drum. She trusts that all will be good, and she will be guided by her dreams. But she *don’t belong* out there.”

“I see. Please take Dath, and on your return I will have an answer for you.”

“That’s good enough for me,” responded Ed, and he walked that young man out of the library, as Arron smiled at the deeper honour he had just found in a hybrid.

He had done his due diligence when he had looked for the right person to send out after young Dath. He needed a bounty hunter who at the least had boundaries, as he needed Dath back here, so the lad could gain any chance of redemption. His daughter had told her parents what had happened between them, and it was the saddest day of this father's life. They had spoilt her, quite obviously, and he had sent her away to help her grow, deciding at the same time that it was his duty to give Dath the same courtesy.

In any case, he knew Ed was a hybrid, but also that he had sworn off killing. His enquiries had also shown that this crew was good at its work, and that authorities considered them true to their word.

He now looked up to his wife's room as he walked out of the library, with a smile for so many graces in this one day, as the conversation between the two women went on upstairs. Sasha had sat on her bedside and held her hand immediately she had entered, and Michelle had begun to cry. Her visitor was so intent on her that she did not see the metal lump beside this gracious lady. They talked together of life, faith, and Sasha's journey here, and it had buoyed the older soul so much.

"A *strange* deliverance and you were brought *right here* as I was promised."

"The Centre is indeed wondrous."

"Yes, young one. So where from here?"

"I do not know. I follow the path set for me. *It* has provided all I need."

"One needs be somewhat cautious in these times though," offered Michelle.

“I am powerless, Michelle. I *know* I am. I am not a fool, but this pathway must play out as it will. I am not a saint by any account, but I only find solace and courage in Him. I have nowhere else to turn and feel deeply that the planets are in need of something that my journey *seems to promise*. I have a duty to *all others*, and what is my life. What are any of our lives up against the beauty of sacrifice, and the return of justice?”

“Oh. I wish I had your faith. Why do we all struggle and fall short in this thing?”

“Because we do not *know*. We only have our faith and the proofs we find before us, and it just takes faith to have faith.”

Michelle smiled, and allowed herself a small giggle, which had Sasha smiling wide.

“It does, Sasha.”

ED HAD RETURNED TO THE LARGE HOME. It was the next day. He had gone for drink or two, or six, last night, after taking Dath in and gathering the bounty. Drinking was all in the alcohol content for him due to his inability to taste. Truth be known it is the danger to a person’s system, the body’s reaction to toxins as such, that enhanced the taste of alcohol and coffee; even chocolate, and the many other treats available to the people of any planet. All the planets and places had their own drug, their drug to kill the pain or lift them just a little out of their hell, even if it *was* fleeting; many souls lost terribly bound in the heavy stuff.

He had eaten, and stayed the night, in the drinking house, to give time for the folk at the house to talk over things. It was because he had also wanted to go over all of what had happened. He usually reflected on a hunt, alone and with the boys, so they all got better at what they did, but

this time it was not about the hunt. It was about what had happened to him on the *inside* since that lady had graced his life; most especially today's revelation about his personal responsibility for his own behaviour; his own future. He *was* responsible to a measure before now, but now he saw a little deeper; he been given people to show him what it meant to be truly noble. These aspects had mixed so perfectly together, with such eloquence and form, in that experience, that its sublimity lifted him. Life had given him, in that moment, a greater vision of life and possibility.

He had gone over the interaction with that redhead as well, and what she had seen in him; or more so what he saw in those eyes of hers. She was coming after him for sure, so he would have to watch his back a little bit more, for a good while.

He had then walked out on a wide first storey veranda that serviced all the rooms on that floor and looked out at the black above. The moist gently cool air here had a good feel to it. His body drank it in after the somewhat lifeless scrubbed air in the bus. They had been out in the black for longer than usual, so he enjoyed this small stay. Even the water had more life in it here. He had watched people below out for an evening walk, even women and children. This place sure was different. A good place for their passenger. He usually felt like breaking free of other planets and blasting back into the black, or washing a job off that was done, and walking away clean. But it wasn't that way last night.

Sasha now came down the stairs and he caught his breath a little. She smiled at him, feeling a little the same.

“So, they go’na let you stay?”

“I can’t Ed,” she answered, and she showed him the metal lump she was carrying.

He hadn't even noticed it and was thinking just how much this woman had him off his game, "You *can't*?"

"I need to keep on with you it seems. I won't find my goal here. I am still after Earth."

"Geeze, I don't know. We'll be heading home, and this place is a good place. You *know* that's sayin' something."

"I do, but Arron has offered to pay my way for a good while and add to your pay for bringing Dath here to face him."

"I don't know. I sure can't see you riding with us long term, and the crew are a bit done with the black."

"Don't you want to take me?"

"Well, honey, to be honest, it's more like I would find it hard to *let you go* if you spent any more time with us."

"Oh, Ed. That's lovely," said Sasha, looking down a little.

"Well, *you know*, we *all* would. We're used to breakin' away clean, and you'd still be better off stayin' here."

"I don't want to be safe, Ed. There is no life in *safe*. No future."

Arron then emerged from a hallway beside the light-stained wooden staircase.

"Hello, young man."

"Good day, sir."

“It seems this young lady wants to continue on, so I will pay her way, and some more for your bringing some closure to our situation, as well as some real joy to my wife.”

“We would sure be appreciative of that. We didn’t figure for such a long hunt. As much as you mightn’t like that boy, he sure did acquit himself well. He was a challenge to gather up.”

“I don’t know you, son. And I don’t know the life you live or have lived, but you are best suited to the job of escorting this young lady where she needs to go. She is a great hope you know.”

“She sure *engenders* hope.”

“*Please*. Enough of that. I just have to do what I have to, and I don’t even know where this is leading,” put in Sasha.

Arron took on a serious look, and added, “But she will draw more attention, and word of her *will* spread. So, wherever this quest takes you, take real care. There are many who will not like what she represents. To some, she will the devil himself. Do you understand, young man?”

“I’m not getting’ you.”

“There are many strains of faith out there, and it would now seem that she has more than a few planets to travel to, to find the rest of the Icons. Who knows what hands they will be in and what those people believe, especially if they know she already carries two of them.”

“So, those lumps have a name?”

“Yes,” answered Sasha, with a smile. “It seems that Michelle and many others know of them.”

“So, having *them* on board is a danger too. I’ll have to talk with the rest of the crew.”

“I will pay you handsomely,” said Arron.

“They like the girl, and they sure like credits, but they like their lives too, and we are only a small ship.”

“Talk with them, Erron. I accept whatever His will is for me. It will all be well,” said Sasha.

“Well, *you keep sayin’ that. We’re already makin’* a trail for that vermin fixer woman.”

“Well, take your time. Think about it and see what they think,” suggested Arron.

“I’ll call ‘em. I’ll be outside for a while I reckon.”

“Please use my library, Erron,” offered Arron, like he was happy to use Ed’s name right now.

“You aren’t like most on the high planets, mister.”

“*I am*, actually. Most people are good, hard working, people. Just because some are corrupt doesn’t mean we all are, or that most people on the corrupt planets are that way. There’s always a silent majority who get taken along in the tide of breakdown. People just trying to live a decent life and see it through.”

“Maybe.”

“I understand what you see. There *are* a lot of violent folks on many of the struggling planets.”

“But it’s because of that struggle, *I reckon*.”

“No. It’s an excuse for that violence, Mister Rowes.”

“You haven’t *lived* there, old man. Chaos doesn’t allow for choice.”

“Maybe so, but *we* all make our decisions.”

“Opportunity, even to have a choice, is big deal. No hope of breaking out can make you all kinds of mean. A lack of opportunity is a big deal that you don’t seem to understand.”

“Maybe, Erron. Maybe I don’t.”

“And anyway, we all hold our *own* idea of justice.”

“The truth is justice, young man, not an *opinion* of it.”

“Yep, I s’pose it is,” mused Ed. “But it can *sure* get relative,” he added, looking down in thought. He then looked up, with a broad small cheeky smile on his face, “Well, if you want me, I’ll be in *the library*.”

“They were gone when I got to Mercy. I knew they would take our customer back home. I didn’t have anyone there, so we couldn’t get ahead of them, and the police were good at keeping things tight on that world, so we had to tread lightly.

That rock *was* beautiful, but too much order, and not enough vice for me to profit from, that’s for sure. But I did think I might like to retire there one day.

Thankfully, there were plenty of innocent, and very open, mouths there; to help me out with what had gone on and gather talk of where they might be headed. Talk of those Icons was very interesting, but I thought they were just religious hokum, and I knew what I wanted. I always got what I wanted.”

Words

"I watched them touch down. We were just kids out playin' in the big rocks. We didn't go to ground straight away like we usually would, because even though it was a rough looking ship, it wasn't a raider. They always had skulls painted on 'em somewhere. Raiders were all we really knew of the planets back then, and any who landed didn't stay long, as to them our world was lifeless.

The sand holes had always kept us well hidden, and when that ship sunk in the sand as soon as it landed, like it knew where to come down, well, we all tore off and slid down the small fall we came up by. We wanted to see this ship, and they had hit the sand so fast, like they were runnin' from something, so our young legs were moving as fast as our curious minds were.

Because that ship hit the big fall-through, *bang on*, they either knew what they were doing, or it was fate. As a people we believed deep in *fate*, and we could feel the excitement of change coming with that ship.

We weren't looking for heroes though. We were always taught that it was all up to us, *along* with Providence of course. In time, as the change came, we learned that people on the other low rocks *were* looking for heroes. But it takes *everyone* to make things better. Better to look to yourself, gather your courage, and do good things to make life better."

They had left Mercy after a day of buying, and jamming everything they could fit into the ship, as it looked like they would most likely be out in the black for a good while. If you would have told them a couple of weeks ago that they were going to be following some woman's dreams in search of a mythical planet, well, you would have got more than a laugh. In any case, old Arron had been more than generous, so they loaded up on everything they could. It was always smarter to be more prepared.

The crew were all in on Sasha's quest now, and they were headed to the deserts of Scinta. Sash, as they mostly called her, had seen dunes, and heaps of them, in a dream she had on Mercy. It was all she had seen in her dreams since they had stowed the second Icon and taken off, and the only planet that was in large part like that, was Scinta. There was an excitement in them all and the conversations started to change a good deal among them as they rolled through the black. They were still the same people, but they had a real sense of adventure and purpose rising in them. They could all feel it, but it wasn't something they could get their heads around or understand, so they took the lead from the young lady, even though, it was still up the whole crew to decide on things.

They now came towards Scinta. They were not strapped in, but all sitting in the chairs on the flightdeck, having a cup a' joe after a sleep period. They did not know it, but this old naval saying about coffee had originated on the planet they were searching for, many millennia before. Sayings strangely have long lives, and travel far, even when the meaning is unremembered. The seats they sat on were able to swing, just being locked in for atmo' flying, blast offs and re-entries, so they now sat at different angles to each other while talking and looking out the window as the planet was just coming into sight.

It was a high planet, well, two thirds of it was. It was a high planet for the most part, but a low planet too, in that some of it was definitely struggling and ruled by the gun.

“Oh, *it’s beautiful.*”

“You think *everything’s* beautiful,” commented Mech, as he then held up the mug that he was drinking coffee from, adding, with feigning femininity “Oh, this is *beautiful*. Oh, I *love* that colour. Oh, *look* at that *flower*. And, Cycle is *so* beautiful,” he added, with all the actions, including a little gentle touch on Cycle’s shoulder.

“*You’re* beautiful, Mech” put in Cycle, as a strong retort, as he sure as hell was not going to be called that or have Mech doing that.

“I got to agree,” put in Ed.

“Geeze, Cap. I didn’t know you felt that way,” joked Mech.

Ed just smiled, saying, “I was meanin’ that you *sure do* see things different, Sash.”

“You sure do see things different,” added Cycle, as he was looking down at the deck.

“Don’t *any* of you think Scinta looks beautiful from up here?”

“It’s just another *planet*, love,” responded Mech. “And there are *people* on that planet,” he added, with a face that said there was no more need for explanation.

“All *fronts*, full of themselves. Nothin’ beautiful about that,” added Ed, which had all the boys nodding.

Sasha, looked at them, wondering how they could not see what she saw. “I see *beauty*, and another world, full of what kind of wonders I *can’t* yet imagine.”

Mech made out like he was throwing up, and the rest just laughed. Well, all besides Cookie. She had just been looking out the window, seeing all of what Sasha saw. “I get it, honey. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, Mamma,” added Sasha, with a smile.

Mamma loved that, and a mean look then came across her face as she said, very seriously, “You boys are just *idiots*.”

“We’re just idiots,” mimicked Cycle.

“We *sure are*, Cycle,” agreed Ed, which had them all going, except for Mech.

“Talk for *yourselves*,” pronounced Mech. “*I see what I see*. I don’t need be *told* what to see.”

“I understand that, Mech,” said Sasha.

“Don’t go *agreein’ with me, Sash*,” protested Mech, like she was not helping at all.

“Oh, I think *it’s beautiful*, her doin’ that, Mech,” commented Ed, as he got up from the back seat he was sat in and headed off to do some of the early prep’ for entry and landing.

Mech got up and started *just loving everything* as he left the deck; he hugged the flight console, and smelled the mapping table and Bot, like a young girl would flowers. He even went to hug Cookie, but then thankfully got far enough away, and ducked, before she threw her metal mug at him.

IT WAS NOW VERY CLEAR that those innocent open mouths on Mercy had been *fed* words, *fed* stories, as Elle Vernt, and her new line up of soldiers and ships, now came up empty on another planet. Elle was the fixer that the Perdauan's crew had come up against on Malian. She had been born into a different kind of hell than Ed, and some might say, a far more terrible one. Enough is to say that the poor child had become this quite malevolent woman from that struggle, as well as, sadly, from other deep wounds inflicted on her after she had ventured out of the hell hole that she was born into.

She was a woman with some adventurousness and humour, but sadly one with no kindness, and whose constant thirst for cargo to trade would not be denied. She had been stronger than her sister, or really, she had a different makeup that had deflected much her early abuse, or more so, made it right in her mind so it would not haunt her. But these things, no matter a person's ways, haunt them through the defensive walls and devices of the mind created to stop it being so. The controlled, end up controlling sometimes, but in a different way; the abused often only half living, in hiding, in full sight and with many others around them; or the real broken ones growing mean and loving the malevolence in them, enjoying the power of control over others. Sad, all these things, but *sad* was not what she was right now. She was a *tempest* inside, but she was not showing it. She had learned to channel the tempest into action, and she believed it made her strong.

She knew she just had to keep looking, that she would pick up their trail sooner or later. "*Scinta*," she now thought. "*Yep, Scinta.*"

THE PERPADUAN HAD COME IN, and they were just levelling off, when two Vipers came down over them, and another, shot down behind them.

“We’re *locked on*. Follow us back to the black. But if you *want* to rumble, *let’s rumble*,” came a voice over the ship’s communicator.

The ship’s sensors had been blind on their entry into Scinta’s atmosphere, so these antagonists had the bus and its crew snared before they knew that they were there. The vipers had been launched from a larger ship that had been tracking them from the shadow of one of the moons nearby, and it now jumped itself to the roof of the atmosphere high above them.

“I repeat. *We are locked on*. Just want your cargo, boys.”

The Perdaduan suddenly dropped down, leaving charges in its place, which blew the trailing Viper, the one that had a lock, to pieces. The other two dove quickly after them.

“Big mistake,” came another voice, that was all too cool at what was happening.

“We got some pro’s here,” expressed Ed, but knowing, that pro’s or not, these raiders could not be trusted not to kill everyone on board after they had got what they wanted. Pirates like these were as cold as the black.

“I think they might need an uppercut, Ed,” said Cycle.

“I think they just may, Cycle,” agreed Ed, as he drove the bus up, sharply back towards the two diving Vipers.

It took them by surprise, and the Perpaduan clipped one of them, sending it hurtling out of control to the desert below. But the larger ship above had moved along with them, and began firing small rounds from its belly guns, while two more vipers launched.

“Gelf! There’s more of ‘em, Cap.”

“What’s their strength, Bot.”

“Eloquent sufficiency,” responded Bot.

“Details!” yelled Ed.

“Vipers remaining on board, two. Command ship: 806M phase cannons, three. Small round belly guns, two. Atmo’ mines, unspecified, ten. Fast, deep space, engines. Jump capability.”

“*Gelf*, Cap,” yelled Mech, looking to Ed for a solution, but not real sure they had one.

“Get the Tick ready, Mech. Now!” ordered Ed, as he dodged a charge from the remaining viper. “I’ll get these gelfo losers comfortable.”

The vipers were fast in atmo’. Faster than the bus. The two new ones now came in quick at different angles, firing small automatic projectile rounds that drummed on the reinforced hull. *They* weren’t a real issue, but the pulses from their smaller phase cannons, and the few metal-cased atmospheric mines shot ahead of the bus by the larger ship, could disable them, or even bring them down. Fortunately, the command ship couldn’t bring its phase cannons to bear, below itself, and these raiders didn’t want to destroy any possible cargo anyway. Ed dodged two mines, while shooting out magnetic net throwers behind him to catch any phase cannon pulses from the trailing viper.

The two new vipers soon fell into formation with the survivor behind the bus. Not what Ed wanted, but he kept them guessing with a random path, but not *totally* random, showing the vipers a pattern that their computers would gather up quickly.

“They’re comfortable now, Ed,” then said Cycle, feeling the nature of the fight from the back seat, and from watching Ed and the monitors.

“Yep, I reckon *they are*, Cycle.”

Cycle just laughed as Ed now extended the spin cannons.

“Never show your cards too early, eh, Ed.”

“Never show ‘em too early, Cycle,” responded Ed, as he hit the trigger.

Bot ran the spin cannons. He was faster. The fast-moving multidirectional pulse cannons swung freely on two extended arms that had sprung out from the hull at midships. They quickly blew two more of the hunters out of the sky, and as they did, Ed shot the ship up towards the black.

“Get me a pathway, Bot.”

“Hyperliscuous,” responded Bot, at the same moment that Mech said, “Tick’s ready, Ed.”

“*Hyper jump?* Is he glicthin’, Mech?”

Mech unstrapped himself, flashing a smile at Sasha in the thrill of the moment, as he went over to check on Bot. She was strangely calm, with a somewhat serene look on her face, but Cookie certainly didn’t. She had her nails deep in the arm rests, with big dire eyes nearly popping out of her skull. Mech smiled at seeing the both of them, as he quickly checked Bot’s calculations.

“He’s shootin’ for *way* out in the black. It’s in the only direction that big raider wouldn’t have a good shot at us, and that big bus wouldn’t have the fuel to get home from such a big jump. He’s calculated multi-scenario, and it looks like we won’t get a good enough chance to use the Tick. So, it’s this way or *no way*, Cap.”

“Gelfin’, *God damned*, raiders!” cussed Ed, as he dodged more pulse charges, and sent out more magnetic nets to catch others. “*How big*, a hyper?”

“*Big enough*. But we’ll get back to one of the planets. He’s seein’ something out there, but it’s not on the map.”

“Dumb robot,” cussed Cycle, but definitely not meaning it. Bot was good in action and had saved their skins more than a few times. It saw wider, and more of the detail, all at once, and it could project fast; skills Cycle could relate to. Cycle wasn’t schooled, and was childish in his ways, but he wasn’t stupid. The crew really didn’t know whether he was, or whether he wasn’t. It was like he was camouflaged. Maybe *he* didn’t know either. He just did as he did and said what he said.

“Maybe he figures they can’t see what *he’s* seein’. Bot’s the *smartest* thing out here, Cap. I trust him.”

“Damned thing could be glitchin’, Mech! You *gotta* fix that thing.”

“I fix it, and maybe it loses its magic. I *still* trust this jump, Ed.”

“*Set, it*,” called Ed, immediately, as two more vipers shooting out of the raider ship above them made up his mind for him. “Let’s get *the hell* out’a here!” he added, as Mech strapped in, and Ed hit the button.

THEY PUNCHED OUT OF THE JUMP. There was relief, but they were in atmo' and falling like a rock. They had retracted the wings to jump, so there were alarms going off as they dropped.

"Get the damned wings out, and the antigrav' on, Mech," shouted, Ed.

"Power drain from the jump, Cap. They'll kick in soon."

"That *damned* so called *magic* Bot of yours, jumped us into *atmo*'."

"If those raiders *do jump*. If they mimic our jump, with their size, they are gon'na hit this rock so hard they'll get splattered," explained Mech. "Nice work, Bot."

"Unpusillanimously," responded Bot.

"Don't *talk* to the *damn* computer! Get *the wings* out!"

"It's all *good*, Ed. We *got* this."

The bus's wings and front ailerons soon shot out, but not quite stabilising it, as only one antigrav' unit powered up fully underneath and another one came on and off randomly, screwing the craft around, and pitching it at an odd angle as it hit the sand. It was big a jolt, but as fate, or maybe Bot, would have it, it was just the right speed and angle to punch through the sand that was covering a large 'fall-through'. The ship fell through the sand and hit the ground beneath with a thud, it's extended hydraulic legs just taking the strain.

Ed called, all good, then asked if they were all okay. He got nods and mouthed okays from all but Cookie. Strangely, got a very relaxed, "I'm feeling *just fine*," from the previously terrified

cook. Which had Sasha looking across at her with a curious smile, and Cycle looking just a little bit scared.

They had found themselves on the hidden world of Besede. Besede was a desert world; at least it was on the surface. But natural rock and sandstone caves, and tunnels, were everywhere below the sand. Under the sand were also endless networks of small streams of water, and large natural water stores. Between the great veins of limestone, the hot springs from volcanic activity blowing water back up from deep in the system, and the cool tunnels condensing the discharges, the streams were almost continually flowing. This strange water cycle was all below the sand, and so were the local inhabitants.

This world had been passed by, by the early explorers and any settler ships which had come upon it. The locals, originally marooned here just a few millennia ago, were the last wave of settlers, and they had found the *fall-throughs* by accident. These geological oddities were large and small holes where limestone had been eroded away by the slightly acidic water from the soils, plants, and atmosphere, when this planet had been lush in its earlier evolution. The people here lived on moss and fungus that now grew in them, and utilised mirrors to bring the sunlight down into small crop fields near the great natural water stores, but each family had generally settled where they could grow a smaller plot. They lived in dug out sandstone dwellings, and there were now even a good number of cities built this way.

The light from the mirrors was not the only light these people had. There were natural cracks, running crevices, in the surface rocks in places, and they had electric lights and other technology powered by solar collectors on the surface, which seemed from above to be natural rocky outcrops. They also used hydrogen engines, as this planet was rich in it, and some hydro

power from small wheels and turbines built on the underground streams. But this hydro power was more for small use, to power single dwellings mostly, or as an adjunct to the main power sources where the main power networks had not yet reached.

The two huge, marooned settler vessels had long ago been broken down, and the survivors on them had seeded this world. They also brought seeds and plants with them that had thankfully taken to the soils below. They were people of fate, most likely because of the dire fate of their forefathers, and instead of seeking to be rescued from this rock, they had, over millennia, come to hiding from any ship that may stray their way. They believed that any who found them, came here by fate, and the writings of three notable Mediators, as they called them, were carved into the walls here. They were done as a record, in amongst the planet's early history.

The *fall-throughs* were made by the many varied holes in the surface, but mostly by the nature of the sand on this planet. They were naturally magnetic particles, and the sand's grains were shaped in such a way that it slowly bridged any gap as it fell in. There was something to do with the resonance of the sand particles as they tumbled that helped pack them tight too. It took a certain force, or more so, a certain angle, for anything to punch through, depending on the size of a hole.

When the crew disembarked, they looked up, amazed at such a big wide hole now being sealed by a great, almost circular, sand plug. It was not lost on them just how perfectly Bot had found and calculated their escape. To Sasha it was simply more proof of her God. She saw all things as His instrument, even Bot, and certainly fate. When the children came running out of the tunnels, they had *no* doubt that fate was the master of this ship's entry into their world, just as their forebears had been, and all that had passed in the time since they came here.

These people had evolved deeply and had been warned about what they called the Falling of the Planets. So, they hid, and lived, and waited. Developing all they could, materially, technologically, intellectually, and spiritually. They had been united since the Falling of the Ships, again, as *they* called it. Staying united was the first Law and the last Law, and was a call in all aspects, and at all levels of collective life. This too was due to the nature of their arrival, or more so what needed to follow it due to the nature of this world they had fallen to. It was deep in the psyche of this culture, and they awaited the time when they could unite with the other planets. They trusted the Mediators and knew that the day would surely come.

They were not zealots or fools, and their society was flexible, always seeking to advance. They *were* human, so things would rumble, but they worked on solutions together, not endless argument. War was not even thought of in this place, only solutions, kindness, learning, individual and collective initiative within a united system of planetary goals. They had large and small hover vehicles that plied trade and moved people around above the sand. These were flat and oblong, and had sand covered tops, that easily sat down unseen on the surface. They were always parked above and accessed through the smaller fall-throughs.

A small group of adults now came out to join the children who had grown quickly in number around the Perpaduan. It had received some damage, and Mech was looking over the ship, along with Bots tiny drones, which had filled the children with more wonder as the small swarm flew out above the visitors when the Perpaduan's door had rolled open. The antigrav' engines had sustained hits as the remaining viper had fired hard on them as they rose up to jump. Mech wasn't sure if he could fix them. On his first look-over he realised they needed a proper spaceport to undo some of the damage, but he could bandage the systems up enough to get them to one. At least he hoped so.

“Hello, and welcome,” now said a woman, in a small group as it reached the children and the Prepaduan.

“What is this ship called?”

“It’s *the bus*,” replied Cycle, with that ever-present chuckle.

“It is not the Unity?”

“It’s the Perpaduan,” answered Ed. “She took a bit of damage. Do you people have technology here?”

But there was no response; until after a short time, when one pronounced openly, and with some wonder, “*It is the Wanderers.*”

The children went silent, and the looks they gave the crew changed almost completely. It was one of some reverence, and some of the adults cried; one fell down to sit on the sand. The ship’s name was mentioned in their holy texts. The Mediators had called it Unity many times, but the Wanderers had in one text been called the Prepaduans. Until now, it been thought that the souls who would come in that ship would be from a cultural group by this name. It now also seemed clear that the ship’s name in the Holy Text more so *represented* the dawning of unity of the planets. So, today, as prophesy does, these things were made clear to them.

“The Wanderers?” asked Sasha, in curiosity.

“The age of Unity has begun.”

Mech shook his head, thinking that he was *sure as hell* not birthing anything, and that these folks were a little lost in their superstitions and old myths. He still kind of thought Sasha was too,

come down right down to it, even though these people talked about the First Garden just like she did.

“The Centre has delivered you here,” added the lady.

The mechanic got a little more indignant with that comment. He couldn’t help it because Bot had brought them here to safety, not some dude hidden in the black.

“Well, we won’t be wandering anywhere until we fix this bus,” stated Ed, as Cookie wandered around the great cave looking all around.

Cycle noticed her, and said, ominously, “Looks like *Lula*’s back.” While Sasha talked with the lady who had called them the Wanderers.

Ed smiled at Cycle’s discomfort, as Mech said, “*Damn it!* The food’s gonna be *grack* juice until *Cookie* comes back.”

Cookie was a bit broken, and the high tension of the dogfight and their escape had pushed her back into an alter-ego that came out in her sometimes. Lula couldn’t cook, and neither could the crew, so Mech was not happy. Cycle was not happy either, and a little bit scared, as Lula had a thing for him, and it was more than a bit weird that Mamma was sweet on him when this other creature came out.

There was some confusion right now, as the crew were a little at cross purposes with each other, as well as with Sasha and the people here. So, Ed said, “Let’s take a look at the damage, Mech, and see what we can fix for now. We’ll leave these folks to talk for a while. We’ll be getting no sense, and no help, out of them until they settle a bit. So, let’s just get on with it.”

“Sounds good to me, Cap,” agreed Mech, as Cycle stayed silent, and tried to hide in plain sight from Lula.

MORE SOULS HAD COME TO SEE THE WANDERERS, and Sasha and the crew were invited to a council meeting, also to view the Words. These were the words of Mediators, and some symbols given by one of them, as the people here thought it fitting that they should read the prophecies for themselves. Ed explained the need for the crew to stay and keep working on the bus, asking Sasha to make a request for people who knew tech’ to come and see them, so they could use anything available here to help.

“Mamma might like to come along, though,” suggested Sasha.

“Mamma ain’t here right now,” explained Ed, smiling, then looking over to Cycle who was moving around fast, doing his tasks, with Lula right on his tail.

Sasha was just about to ask about all that, when Ed said, “Cycle mightn’t like the idea, but she’s better off with us right now. We look after her when she’s like this.”

“Okay, Ed,” agreed Sasha, wondering what it was with Mamma, but also not sure why the crew would not want to explore another planet and culture.

Ed would have actually liked to look around this this one. It was amazingly different, but he was built ‘job first’, and that woman he ran into on Malian had him stirred up. The likes of her would not think twice about working with raiders or reaching out to any of them to seek information. If she did eventually connect up with the ones who had tried to take them, they would not need much convincing to help her, as they definitely had a score to settle. He wasn’t happy

that he had had to take lives, especially ably managing to dodge that reality since making his vow. But they were wolves, intent on the innocent, so it was not something that he thought deserved dwelling on. He now just wanted to be ready, no matter how safe they seemed to be here right now, below the sand of this strange world.

Sasha went over to a group of folks who then escorted her out of the rock cavern, and along a short passage, before helping her up a rock chimney. One person had explained that they were going up to the desert above to embark on a hovercraft. They used, what they called a *sleeve*, to push up through the small fall-throughs here, so people could leave and enter the tunnels. They were all the shape of a hollowed out, sharpened pencil, and they pushed the sand up and to the side, holding it back. They had small ladders attached inside, and the first person up, opened the cone at the top; it also serving as a hatch, with one hinge. The sleeve was then closed and retracted to its lower position, leaving no sign of the entry. These sleeves were extended and retracted with cogs and gears mostly, some hand powered, some by motors. This invention helped all the small fall-throughs to reseal with little to no loss of sand.

The hovercraft now flew low over the sand and the windows allowed for a full 360-degree view, with the other passengers, the pilot, and some thin struts, the only obtrusions. There was only a single open elliptical deck, and the upper hull and base of the craft projected out beyond the windows. The top was curved, but irregularly so, with sand plastered to it, so as not to be seen from above when stationary. The bottom of the craft was the same. It was that way so that it left irregular marks, and the jet air nozzles that lifted and propelled the machines did the rest; hiding where any of these craft may have sat. All the craft here, large and small, had basically the same configurations. Not all invention was taken planet-wide, but the hovercraft and the sleeves had simply proved best, so their use became universal.

“It is wonderful running low over the rippling sand dunes like this. This place is a picture,” commented Sasha, as she kept looking all around from her seat. While the craft was somewhat round, it had a front where the pilot sat, and on this one, there were three rows of three seats facing forward, and three facing the back.

“Yes. We love it up here in the sunshine. We gather much of it and project it below, but it is never as good as being up here,” explained the lady, who had greeted them originally. “We will take you to some of the Words, and then to the Council of Elders. There is also a special place we are compelled to take you after that. We call it the Open Rock. It’s a rock depression, but it is a place where the sand will not plug. It was created by the first Mediator, and it is hallowed ground for us.”

“I would *love* to go there, and I am honoured with your kindness.”

“Are you the *One*?”

“No, I am just a human soul. I am like anyone else *awaiting*. I have simply been guided to travel to Earth; to dream in the First Garden.”

The lady smiled, but then began to cry. Overwhelmed, she stood up and went to the window of the craft and stared out to the dunes.

Sasha got up and followed her, and put her hand on her shoulder, and rubbed it gently, asking, “Are you okay?”

“I would suppose it is that we have *awaited* a very long time,” she answered, but clearly, she was holding something back, and her tears had not all been ones of pain.

“We *all* have. The One will come.”

“That I am sure of,” she responded, now smiling, yet with a deep feeling coursing through her and tears rising again.

At various points in the journey to the Council of Elders the ship touched down, and they would enter natural tunnels where the Words were carved. Each stop presented deeper understanding of life, and more prophecies of the Wanderers. Sasha’s journey was growing beyond dreams and more into reality here, also growing beyond faith, and becoming more one of certitude, as she gathered from the Words. This planet had been a far greater confirmation of her dreams than anything so far. She had gathered a strong taste of this on meeting with Michelle on Mercy, and it had prepared her for the feast that these people now presented to her.

It was some hours before the craft again touched down, and Sasha was ushered through a larger sleeve to below the sand again. This one had a hydraulic lift, rather than a ladder, and was designed for more people to rise and return below together. As she walked off the lift, she found herself on a great cement walkway. It was very long and fed by many doorways; doorways that were part of a great network of tunnels; and at its quite distant end, was a glass tube lift. The walkway was open on one side with stone balustrades, and the many entries, or exits, along its course, on the closed rocky side. The sight from the high cement walkway took Sasha’s breath away. It was open to a gigantic chasm with large buildings far below and others rising most the way up its upwardly curving sides.

Above the city was a great pattern of light that came through from above. It was a natural pattern created by slits in the rock that were not unlike the patterns that pulsed over the surface of the metal box, the Icon, now still in the strong box on the Perpaduan with the other Icon. It was almost like tree roots casting light down on the city below, and it too was a wonder.

“Great Centre! Is this your main city?”

“This one is the seat of Elders, but there are many more like this; some larger.”

“It is *magnificent*,” expressed Sasha, as she looked to the lights of the many buildings and homes below. It seemed that both the light from above and smaller ones were utilised in the day.

“That is where we are going,” said Feece, the lady who was escorting her, as she pointed out a building near to the middle of the city. It was not the largest city on the planets by any means, but it being underground certainly made it a marvel.

“Come. We will go down now.”

THE ELDERS BID HER GO. One of them going with her, as they were to go to the Open Rock. It had been an uplifting experience for Sasha, and all those present in the high chamber. She had never been in the presence of such combined wisdom and humility before, and it was strangely a relief to be around a people, a whole culture, of faith. She drank it in like she had been living all her life before today in the desert above. Just like one drop of water, fighting the hot sun of life.

Feece had gone into the chamber with her, to help with the meeting, and she now walked out behind Sasha and the Elder. The Elder did not ask Feece to walk on with them, she simply did so. Just like on the Perpaduan there was no one greater here, yet there was respect for those who had lived long and for the Council of Elders. There was respect for all ages and ideas here, the power of youthful creativity and change, the joy of the children, the hard work of those of parenting age, and the ability of those just beyond that. All had their gifts, all times in life presented its opportunities; all put in effort, and there was no real separation. That no one could be idle was a

great boon to this culture, most especially early on, and it too, had most likely risen out of the necessity born of the original marooning of the settler ships on this desert world.

There had been much said and unsaid in the meeting, as wisdom required it. This visit to the Open Rock would make things much clearer to these people, but not yet to Sasha. The Elders knew that her path was guided, and they could not interfere or place their view of the last Mediator's Words on this situation. It was as it would be, but the need for Sasha to visit the Open Rock was clearly stated in what they called the Words. A Wanderer was to enter that place and the sand would again be allowed to fall there.

On reaching this hallowed place, Feece, Sasha, and the Elder, disembarked the hover vehicle, and the pilot was asked to take it back up to the sand above, and away a distance from the wide opening. The three ladies then took each other's hands in a small circle in the large open space, and they prayed. Feece and the Elder chanted out loud, and it filled Sasha with joy as she wandered deep into the spirit. They were there for a good while when something in the sand below their feet began to resonate with the chants. As they continued it grew in intensity and the ground began to break up where they had stood. They moved backwards, not in fright or fear, but a step at a time, in reverence. They eventually became silent, as the vibrations had broken the sandy ground away, revealing a small metal pillar.

The last Mediator, many hundreds of years before, had visited *other* Open Rocks that were believed to be created by the First. All of them plugged again after he left, just as the Words of those before Him had prophesied. The fact that there was still one Open Rock left was a great test to many at the time, as people thought He was to close *all* of the Open Rocks. In any case, He did what He did on this world, and later in his life he simply disappeared. But just before leaving, he

penned Scroll of the Wanderers and making clear the necessity that one should enter the last Open Rock.

On the steel pedestal was a third Icon, and it still chanted, as it sat there. The ladies waited for it to stop, in reverence and some awe, and after a short while it stopped resonating. Lights then flowed freely across all its surfaces; while again, the ladies waited in the spirit. It then rose up, and it took the three souls upwards with it. They were elated but remained in reverence as the Icon went about its work. They rose above the sand, and the sand began to fall in, slowly beginning to bridge the wide roughly circular open hole. The Open Rock was soon sealed and the three were deposited down on top of the plug, along with the metal box, which then seemed to become inert.

They did not move. They stayed in the spirit in respect and thanks, and more chants rose up from that place before they stopped and looked at each other smiling wide. The Elder and Feece were crying silently and seemed unsure of what they should do. Sasha had not noticed. She had simply gone and gathered up the Icon, looking curiously at it, and wondering what marvels it and the others may yet perform. The demeanour towards Sasha had now certainly changed in these two Beseden ladies, and she noticed it as she turned to them with the Icon.

“I am not the One,” Sasha said, very gently. “This is marvellous, miraculous maybe, but I have no intimation that I am in any way special. Where my journey is taking me, I do not know. I simply trust, as you have trusted.”

The other souls still remained silent, both now even more overcome, but looking down. Sasha being Sasha, let them be as they were, and to see as *they* were to see. This courtesy for another’s belief and perspective was strong in her. Her faith and her perception of life were not something she forced on anyone, and certainly would not do so today. This experience was beyond

her knowing, as were her dreams and the clear instruction to seek Earth. She had always been sure that she would find it, and now it was even clearer to her that she would. But she did now see that her surety was something, not wished for, or hoped for, but something *known* to her. It *was* knowledge, and she stood there now realising that.

“We all knew things were going to change when they lifted off again, so the celebrations and prayer went on long afterwards. I mean, we knew change among the planets was going to take a good deal of time, from what they shared with us, but that visit from the Perpaduans was the beginning of something. The Great Change was coming.”

Knowledge

“I remember when they came in. I was a twelve-year-old apprentice at the spaceport, and we didn’t get any low boats come in back then. That’s what we called ships from the lawless rocks. The ship was a beast, and their mechanic was a real joker. He was *certainly* on the job, but he was not all business and looking *down* on me like most did, if you know what I mean. He even taught me a few things. The tall guy was a bit creepy though, giggling at his own jokes and staring all the time. He eventually kind’a disappeared, and went off somewhere, thankfully.”

The take-off from Besede was interesting. It was all in the resonance of the antigrav’ units, and them creating a particular resonance in the hull to push up through the sand. The crew of the Perpaduan had done a good amount of the repairs while Sasha had been away. It had been three days all told, and Mamma had just come good, much to Cycle’s relief. Mech had been working Cycle’s discomfort real hard, so he was a bit unhappy when she had woken out of her other personality. But he sure was happy to not have to make his own grub, as he just could not stomach ‘Lula food’, even though his own efforts left much to be desired.

Cycle had not cooked, as he was busy dodging Lula, and he and Ed had just eaten her grub. Ed was sure glad of his not having taste buds when Lula came to visit, but one meal in particular

was a little sickening because of its texture and consistency. They had looked after Mamma like they always did. It was just a matter of course for them. She was crew, having their respect and care no matter what. She always came back out after a while, so they just had to wait it out. Cookie was totally unknowing of what happened when Lula was in charge, and they would just tell her that Lula was here, and that there were no problems. She loved her boys for that kindness, as she had often been unkindly told of Lula's misadventures before she had joined this crew.

They were back in the black now, after some tearful goodbyes. A great crowd of people had been up on the sand waving them off, or really, Sasha, as they broke free of the sand and rose up to blast away from Besede. They were heading to Scinta, as they needed a proper port for some of the repairs. It was a risk with the raiders they had encountered but Mech reckoned Bot could jump them straight there when they entered the system. Jumps took a lot of power, especially a long one, so they went on standard engines most of the way.

They didn't tell Sasha, and especially Mamma, where they were headed, as they didn't need the stress. "*Well, Mamma for sure,*" thought Mech, as he remembered Sasha's serene face while in the heat of the dogfight with the raiders, and also about the taste of grack juice.

It wasn't long before dinner time now and Mech was hanging hard for some real food, as was Cycle. They were all in the mess, as Bot was on the job flying the ship. Sasha was talking about her experiences on Scinta, and even though it was a lot about Centre' stuff, it was enjoyable.

"...The Words were...perfect."

"Of course, you'd say that," challenged Ed.

“No Ed, they gave real insight, really simply. It was the way they were strung, but it was more than that. They held the Spirit. Words like that take you there, and Knowledge poured out of them. More so than anything I have known until now.”

“Why? I mean you Centre’s sure have plenty of words you quote.”

“But we had no actual books, just remembered parts, and broken stories. That’s all we had to gather from. But those Words on Besede were like melodic clear bells in comparison; *so* beautiful and nutritious.”

“Well, that’s true of anything good,” commented Cookie. “You can’t just throw a heap of things in a pot willy-nilly and have it always come out good. It’s *knowing* what you’re doing, as well as having good produce.”

“Knowledge,” put in Sasha.

“And love, dear. You have to cook it right too, as well as adding just the right spices.”

“Yes, I think our surviving religious stories at home had a lot of those things missing.”

“Hell, *yeah*, they did,” chimed in Mech. “At least the grack juice I was fed as a pup did. Man, they were *off* recipe, and most of ‘em all high on their own maybes, but still like they knew something.”

“*Most* people struggle with humility, but at least they tried.”

“I don’t know about *that*. I reckon I’m as good as most of ‘em. No Centre in some of ‘em at all.”

“You’ve never talked about this before, Mech,” said Sasha, interested in what he said and how he saw things.

“No, I haven’t, and I don’t. Engines and tech’ are simpler than people. Well...some people,” he said, as he shot a glance at Cycle, with an attending smile.

“I’ll be watchin’ you, Mech. I’ll be waitin’ long enough to watch you sweat a little more next time we *touch downwn*.”

“*Yeah*, well, you’d take pot shots at me *anyway*. So, no loss there,” responded Mech. “But back to what we were talking about; words got’ta add up in life. The parts of an engine run neat when they’re in order. Things work on this bus, just like Cookie’s grub, because I know what I’m doin’. You Centre’s just don’t have the knowledge. It’s all mystery and hope.”

“It’s better than nothing, Mech. And it’s just people trying. But those Words in those caves back there, were a beautiful inspiring instruction book, on how us human’s work, and what we need to build to make life better.”

“Well, that’s great, Sash. Glad you got what you were looking for,” said Ed. “Not for us folk though.”

Sasha was a bit saddened by that, and she let it show. There was kindness and courtesy, her usual way, and then there was honesty. She *knew* it was right to be honest right now.

Mamma gave Ed a nasty look, and a shake of her head as she went back to cooking. It actually hurt Ed a little. He was not designed to ever feel hurt, or feel much at all, but havin’ Cookie look at him like that, and Sasha saddened by him like that, he sure as hell felt something. It was new, like everything had been since coming upon their new passenger.

IT WAS AFTER A GOOD MEAL, and some fun, that Sasha found Ed sitting up on the flightdeck again. He didn't know why he came up here. He just did.

“Hi, Erron. Looking out at the stars again?”

“Yep,” he replied.

“Thanks for all you're doing for me,” said Sasha, as she sat down in the co-pilot's seat beside him.

“Well, you're payin' you way, so no skin off my nose.”

“It's more than that, Erron. You know that.”

“I just do the job.”

“I know you feel more than that.”

“You're barking up the wrong tree, Sash. I am designed to survive. Full stop,” said Ed, trying to brush off even the beauty he had gathered in reflection on Mercy.

“Oh, that's just not true.”

“You sure are annoying,” stated Ed, with a small smile.

“I just remind you that you are more. Your soul is trying to make itself known to you in all this.”

“I haven't got one darlin'. I am a biological machine. I am manufactured.”

“You keep telling yourself that, Erron.”

Ed smiled, as he looked over to her, and then back out the windscreen to the stars. He knew he was different to the man who pulled himself out from under the two charred bodies, all those years back, and he sure was different since signing up to escort this girl. This rare creature beside him had made him more just by being around.

Maybe she was right. Maybe he did have something inside him waking up, and it didn't feel bad. Well, it did, and it didn't, you see when Ed started finding he was more, it was great, and he felt some beautiful release in seeing more, but just after that, it kinda wasn't. It brought up more questions and unsettled his mind. He was not at all used to that, so he pushed it all aside. He even made the excuse to himself that he needed to be *clear and cold*, with that redhead on his case, and to keep their payday safe. This was where he was used to being, for sure ground, and quick action.

“I'm not going to believe in your Centre, you know.”

“I just want you to believe in yourself, Erron.”

That hit him like a ton of bricks. It was a huge burst of hope. It was beautiful, like the other things, but then that hope began to hurt. He knew what he was, and he could never make up for all the death he had dealt out.

“You are a good man,” she added, as if she had read his thoughts.

“I'm *not* a good man,” responded Ed, like it was too much.

“You *are*.”

“I’m *not*, honey. I killed more men than I care to mention. You don’t understand where I live. You don’t know the darkness that some can sit easily in. You just don’t know what that is.”

“The Centre calls to all of us; to the light that is within us.”

“He don’t speak to me. He never has, and if He did, I’d turn my back to Him, like he’s always turned his back to me, ever since the day I was started off in that tube.”

“Forgive Him, Erron. Forgive *yourself*.”

Ed did not reply, but he *sure as hell* did feel something free up deep inside him. He could not believe the feeling in his being right now, and he quite suddenly *knew* there *was* hope. Forgiveness was new, he had never even known that word in his life, and especially when men had pleaded for their lives, before he killed them. His thoughts had brought him back to what he had been, and what he still was. She couldn’t see the darkness in him. She couldn’t see that he enjoyed his strength, that he was at home in his sure power over others; maybe not as much as he used to, but he was sure in his own power. She didn’t see in him take the lives he took. It was like she just ignored these things in him, or walked straight past his darkness, to talk to this other part of him.

Those last words of hers had most certainly driven deep into the heart of him, and they now echoed around in his being, creating sure dread in a clear picture of the depth of his own malevolence, but also lighting it, changing it, as they both remained silent, looking out to the stars.

THEY HAD JUMPED TO SCINTA, and Bot now immediately set them into entry. They broke into atmo’ and began to float down to the spaceport. It had been some days out in the black before

they had jumped, and Sasha had spent time with the Icons. They seemed to speak to her, just in intimations and feelings, but last night she had experienced another vivid dream. She was to find someone here. Someone hidden, in a way, but another Icon also shone out of the darkness of that place, so she knew she had to find this hidden soul and gather another Icon here.

Ed was not happy about that. He had wanted to touch down, get the repairs done, and be back out in the black as quickly as possible. But she was paying, and that was that. Ed was not all in this quest of hers, even though he actively was. To him it was really hers, and that in essence it was just another job. Even despite his recent experiences, he was a soldier with a job to do, and his payday was definitely not making it easy for him with her latest request. In any case, he and Sasha had headed off into Las, the city they had landed in, while the crew got on with things.

They now came to a trader's market and Sasha looked around for the hidden man, as strange as that may sound.

"Just keep watching him."

"He's close. That girl's with him. The med trader'll find out more for you. He was glad for the credits."

"Good, but don't get seen. Even if you have to lose him. We're just...*getting to know him*, so we can take him right later," reexplained Elle.

"Sure."

It was a sunny day on Scinta. There had been a good deal of unseasonal rain recently, and even the desert country had been set to bloom. People walked around the market with more spring

in their step, because, like on most of the planets, the rains had been wanning here too, and, well, rain just did good for people's outlook and demeanour.

This was a high rock, mostly speaking, and was so because of the mining in its deserts. People here did reasonably well, so life was not as hard as it was on the low rocks, but it was still that bit harder here than the other high planets. Traders certainly lived on their wits and the med trader who had been paid to engage Ed was happy for the windfall he would receive. The trader knew he could get a good price for any information he gathered, and that he might even get a good trade, or credits, from the soldier too. That redhead had been all over him since she turned up here. She was after this soldier with a passion and had been very open about it. He knew she would pay well, because she was not holding her cards close to her chest at all.

The trader smiled as Sasha and Ed neared his place of business. He was standing out the front of his place of business as all the traders did here, and was smiling, because that was what traders did, as well as the potential payday in that soldier. It was both those, but also the strange nature of the woman who was with this killer. The trader was a cold creature but could not help being taken by the sight of a gaggle of children following them around. Sasha had gathered a following, like she always did at home, and Ed was not happy. It was hard enough to watch his back here, and if that redhaired woman ever came here asking questions, they would be remembered; let alone, if she was already here. Stealth was the usual base operating reality for Ed and the crew, so this whole trip was not going to be easy.

Ed was quail now, and he felt like one, as the trader now made himself known to him.

"Hello, sir. I have meds of all kinds. Even for the likes of yourself."

Ed stood looking at the trader. Just staring straight at him with no facial expression, and no words. He then looked around, turning 360 degrees, scanning the market from ground to sky. Someone stepped back out of sight. He was being watched; they were here. He didn't *really* know though. It *could* be the woman; or the raiders, or just some low life playing his own game. He stood calm though, as he knew that if those former types were coming at him, they would come in hard, but more than likely not in a busy place like this.

"The likes of me?" then stated Ed, as he kept scanning, now realising it had to be the woman, as this med trader was unlikely to have picked a soldier like him unless he was once in the military. He didn't stand military, or look smart enough to be one of the scientists who made people like Ed.

"Um...well...you are one of the special ones, aren't you?"

"Special ones?" responded Ed.

"Do I have to say it out loud? I have meds, and at a good price."

"I don't need meds."

"That's not what I've heard about your kind."

"You are a *slimy little man*, and you don't know what you are talking about. I'm not whatever you think I am, and I've never needed meds."

The trader was genuinely shocked. He had provided meds for a few like Ed, and they all had the same look in their eyes, the same bearing. Meds kept hybrids under control, and no one made hybrids that could live without them. But Ed was an exception. His old man had paid high

for someone deep in the soldier programme to provide such a hybrid. Where there was money, there was incentive, and where there was greed, there was opportunity.

Ed now took a shot across this trader's bows, to see how he would react, saying, "You tell that redhead for me, that if she comes after me, I will take any army she sends *apart*, and I will *hunt* her down dead."

"I don't know..."

But Ed did know. From the feel of just those few words, and the look in the trader's eyes. He didn't hear the rest, as he turned to see Sasha still talking with a man she had been in deep discussion with for a short while now. The other man who had ducked back when Ed had scanned his surrounds openly, had wandered out into the street among the crowd now, and was now walking towards Sasha.

Ed moved slowly but surely to Sasha, took her hand, and wandered up the market. Then they were gone in the crowd.

"He's in the wind. He's good. But *yeah*, she's his achilleas heal *for sure*. We got what we need. Now we just got'ta work out how, where, and when."

"We've tagged the ship, so we can bide our time."

There was no answer, as the man had suddenly found himself nose to nose with Ed.

"You and me, have no quarrel...yet! You can stick with that low life woman, and you can come for me, but you know how *that's* gon'na end."

"I heard you swore off takin' lives."

Ed smiled.

“Yeah, we *know* you, cowboy,” responded the lieutenant, easily.

“You see that’s the strange thing.”

“What da’ya mean, soldier boy?” questioned the man, with a confidence that Ed hadn’t seen in many, or only when a man was being covered by his compatriots.

“I *thought* I did swear off all that. But I’ve been runnin’ across a lot of *wolves* lately. Sent a few boys home to hell, not a week ago. I don’t like dogs, but I *hate* wolves, so it looks like wolves are the exception. You and your *sister* are wolves,” stated Ed, with no emotion at all, and walked off with Sasha in tow.

The young lieutenant turned easily as they walked off, when he saw the man who had spoken with Sasha. He was moving quickly, and now reaching for a knife in the back of his belt as he passed him. Elle’s man took him out quick, with a hold around his shoulders and a stun round in his lower back, then, lifting and escorting him off down an alleyway.

“She’s *our* weapon. Best you *forget* about her,” he said, as he laid the man down, then left him still quivering on the ground.

The man who had drawn the knife was called Kafsa. It was a name passed down in his family from long ago. A revered name and one he wore proudly. It was a single word full name in his culture, which meant sentinel. He now passed out on the ground, with charges still running through his musculature.

He had heard the rumours from Mercy, ones about the Icon, and a special soul who had gathered it there. He knew the prophesies *intimately*, and he was sure from their small conversation

in the market that this woman was not what people were beginning to call her. She was certainly *not* a “...*Great Light born from the chrysalis of darkness and cold...*”. To him she was more likely the Zealot, who would seek to undo the coming of the One, before being brought forth by the Centre.

She was just *human*, and the One would be *transcendent*. She most certainly didn't fit the bill, and he had found her knowledge *very* limited. She was dangerous, even if just as an ignorant, as she had lay no claim to being the One in their conversation. But many of this man's fellows had fallen to the stories of her from Mercy, and now other stories rising from Loma Se as people sought out her life story before her visit to the green planet. It was like they *forgotten* their God, their beliefs, and for a woman, no less. This usurper, or ignorant, had to die, and quickly, before she became more known.

The Zealot woke, assuming that he had been taken out by one of her minions; she even had her own bodyguard. But he had the Centre and *right* on his side, so this setback was simply that, and he knew he would prevail. The true One would certainly need *no* protection and would suffer any ordeal in the path of service, so there was *no* doubt in him. Just a sure knowledge of the truth, and of what he had to do.

The warning given this man would not hold him back, just as the young lieutenant would not be held back by Ed's threats. He was impressed that the soldier had picked his relationship to Elle, but his sister was smarter than any one they came across, and she was *connected*. They would take this soldier down; he *knew* it.

“They hared it out of space dock. Repairs not complete, and all. They were so full of life, so it was a shame what happened to ‘em.

I loved workin’ on that ship. It was really something, and Mech was a kind of genius. He even told me that there was a ghost in the machine. That this ship and Bot were special somehow, so I was honoured to have worked on her before the end.”

“We *can’t* leave yet, Erron. We haven’t found the hidden man,” Sasha had pleaded, as Ed had walked her fast back to the Perpaduan.

“We *have* to leave, and quick, Sash,” Ed had responded.

“If this is all meant to be, and you *have* to think so after our visits to Mercy and Besede, then we will be protected.”

“Faith’s fine, darlin’, but we still had to fight. Those *fronts* on Loma Se, the raiders, and *now* this fixer and whatever crew she may be able to muster. You need to pray and leave us to do what we do.”

“Please, Erron.”

“You can’t complete your journey *dead*, Sash. If this *is* all meant to be...then it’ll happen,” he had argued, but more to use her language of belief, so he could protect her. He really just wanted out of Scinta for good, and he wanted the crew out of harm’s way.

“But I am sure we have to find the next Icon here.”

“I can’t put the crew in that kind of position,” argued Ed, concerned that the redhead would have a warm trail to track them by.

“Then I’ll stay.”

“Gelfin’, *gackin*’...” started Ed, but he held the rest back.

“I will stay. You go.”

Ed stopped walking and looked down in thought, realising that he hadn’t been thinking. He was being *quail*; all panicky and weak, and wanting to fly, so he had then slowed his roll.

Sasha was known to this fixer. She would just end up as bait to lure him, by staying there, and he knew he may fall in saving Sasha’s skin if she was used like that. Her safety was his safety, but he was also questioning where it would end anyway. Where could he go, but to ground at home, and would he now be forever watching his back? Just another quail. He had no respect for quail, and he decided there and then to take the fixer head on here, or when it came to it. Maybe even hunt *her* down. He would have to take that woman’s life, *and* her brother’s life, or there would be no peace for him.

“Let’s go,” he had then said, as he started off again to the ship.

“I’ll pack soon as we get there,” said Sasha, as she followed along.

“You’re comin’ with us. We’ll find your hidden man. We just might have to take the long way about it.”

“But, Ed...”

“Sasha,” said Ed, stopping, turning to her, and taking her by the shoulders to get her full attention. “I would like to say that I am just caring for *you* here, but I’ve just realised that I *can’t*

run from this, and neither can you *because* of me. I have to go after *her* or go at her *hard* when she comes at us. I might even have to jump ship and do this *on my own*. I don't know yet."

"I don't understand."

"I'm a danger to you *and* the rest of the crew now. We might even have to go three different ways, Sash. Like I said, I'm not sure yet. We'll all talk it over on the bus, and *when* we're in the black again."

"Okay," Sasha had agreed, even though she was as unsure as she had been on this journey. But she trusted Ed for now, and they had headed on, back to the Perpaduan.

She wondered at all that had happened. Now finally seeing both the good and the bad of this journey. She had just seen the guiding hand of the Centre, and all about Besede was miraculous, but she had been almost blind to the violence and death associated with her path. Her deep faith had made her also a little blind to the dangers these people had to deal with to keep her safe.

Ed's problems *were* his own. *His* path had brought him into the parlour of Elle Vernt. His decisions, and the dangers of his work. He figured that he would die hard one day, but he never figured on the likes of the Surveyor, and he never figured on being vulnerable because of a passenger. You can't have knowledge of what's coming though, you just have to meet it, or go through it.

"Pack it up, Mech, and check for tags," Ed had said, as he signalled Cycle in. There would be no target practise today, as Cycle knew Ed's body language, and he had known that they were out of here quick.

“No one but the boy’s been *near* the bus, Cap.”

“Check it!”

“And we haven’t finished repairs yet.”

“It’ll have to do. Are we fuelled and loaded?”

“Yep. Always the first job, eh.”

“Then like I said. Pack it up, and check for tags. We have to be gone...*now*.”

“NO MEDS!?” commented Elle, with a now brightening face.

Their tags on the Perpaduan had been found, and the bounty hunter and his crew were in the wind, but she had now measured the hybrid soldier a little and found his weakness. It was only a matter of time until she tracked him down again, or his passenger, even if she wasn’t with him. But she had been disappointed, well, more like seethingly angry, about the tags until her brother had shared this new information from the trader.

Elle and her brother had grown up hard on one of the low rocks. They had traded their way off-world to Malian about five years ago, long after Elle’s sister had died. She had made her presence known to certain people on Malian, and on some of the other high planets, all due to her success in her field on her home planet, and other work since then. It was all about opportunity for her, and she had a keen sense of perception and judgement which had served her and her brother well.

She now revelled in this new opportunity and the challenge of netting this super-soldier. It was a high risk move, especially as this one did not need meds.

“Send out feelers. Find them.”

“Sure, Elle,” replied her brother. “Do you still think it’s worth the risk. This bounty hunter and his crew are trained up and they are *not* stupid.”

“Don’t you like the risk?” she asked him, with a real caring that she only felt for her brother.

“We’re doin’ okay. But...you know...just asking.”

“He’s *got* you scared.”

“Yep, *he has*,” admitted Hal. But only to her, and only away from other company, did he ever show any weakness.

“He’s the big payday we’ve been working towards. We can *choose* our own way from there. We’ll have the credits to go legit, and just do business. Don’t you want out of all the begging, borrowing, and stealing?”

“Sure, I do, Elle. But do *you*?”

“Yep, Hal. I would *love* to be in the game with the big guys who play the legit game. I’ve learnt a lot, and they would not see the likes of me coming.”

“Well, I still don’t know, but I’ll keep on the job while we’re makin’ up our minds.”

“Yep, Hal. I think that’s the way, right now, but I don’t think I can resist this challenge or the payday.”

“Yep, I figured as much.”

“I need to know where you are soon. We can’t go at this half-hearted.”

Hal was always honest with her, just as she was with him, and he said, “I just don’t feel this one like the other stuff we’ve done, and he got his quail without really trying. He spotted us easy, and on reflection, I reckon they could have taken an easier exit on Malian. It’s like they *wanted* to do it the hard way. We’re good, but they’re *better*, and the likes of that prize of yours, especially if we get him cornered, might be more than we can handle.”

Elle looked at her brother now. She loved him more than life, but the ego in her and the will to finally break free of what she saw as a lesser life was strong. It was the first time these siblings had been even a little at cross-purposes, and it saddened her a bit. He was the only person she could trust, and she did not want to leave him out of this hunt, but she was now fully decided, saying, “I *am* going after him, but *you* don’t have to. If I don’t care about the people who work this job with me, it may be all the better.”

“You know I can’t leave it to *someone else*. You need someone who has your back *solid*, Elle, and with this guy I wouldn’t trust anyone *but* myself. So, I’m in,” he said, nodding.

“Let’s *go for it*, eh. The *big* prize,” expressed Elle, with some real enthusiasm.

“The *big* prize,” agreed Hal, with a smile, straightening up and nodding.

THEY HAD BEEN OUT IN THE BLACK FOR ONE SLEEP CYCLE. They had had something to sleep on for sure; something to think on a while. They had all kept to themselves after Ed had shared some things, and asked them to think on it, all sleeping and not sleeping last night; but they

were now in the midst of talking it all over. Ed hadn't sugar coated it and made sure they knew that *he* was the one endangering them. He reckoned *they* still had options, but *he* didn't; even though Sasha, and the crew, might be in danger anyway if they parted company.

Ed *hated* being like this. His fear had served him well at important times, but this was *owning* him, and he was feeling weak and a little bit angry. He really had no wish to take Elle and her brother's lives. He didn't hate them, he just hated his father right now, and being made the way he was. It was *all* on that mongrel as far as he was concerned.

"Only the Centre knows the way ahead for me. I trust Him," put in Sasha.

"Well, I have to trust what's been put in me, and I believe in action, so I reckon I'll go after *them*," put in Ed.

"You reckon she's that keen on you, Ed?" asked Mech.

"I *know* she is."

"I'll go with ya', Ed," said Cycle.

"If you two fellas want to do that, we can go to ground back on-world, 'til you get 'em," offered Mech, talking about the mining town they were based in.

"She'll be lookin' there, Mech," said Ed.

"Then maybe we *all* wait her out *there*. Home ground advantage, eh."

"Sit like quail, you reckon?"

"I ain't no quail, Ed. We go after 'em, I reckon," said Cycle.

They were a bit lost in their conversation. They were circling again, just like Ed had been on all this in himself, and each of them now thought things out a little more. Cookie had suggested Besede, even though she kind of missed the whole experience there. It was a good option, but Sasha would not have it. She refused to bring the chance of violence and death to that people, and she would not shift on it.

“What da’ *you* reckon, Bot?” asked Mech, hoping the smart robot might have a solid solution, or the ghost in the machine have an answer, as it was getting frustrating for all of them.

“Unitedly,” responded Bot.

There was no *dumb robot* comment from Cycle right now. He liked that answer. He didn’t really know why, but he liked it.

“We have to take a wider view,” then suggested Sasha.

She had been reminded of the bigger picture by Bot’s response. It was not what Bot meant, but it had shifted things in her. To Bot, staying together was a tactical no brainer from all the conversational input and the data. Well, that’s what the crew assumed.

Sasha now looked around at the others and they looked to her as she gathered her thoughts. She took a deep breath, and said, “We need sit in the *Centre’s* knowledge right now, as our own is not enough, and I believe my path, all of this, is to do with the One. We have been guided to three Icons, and now a possible fourth, so the time of *uniting the planets* is no doubt dawning. There is a greater purpose at play here. I gathered that clearly in my time on Besede, and I believe our service to *that* goal needs to continue to be our focus. It must, at the least, be mine. I cannot

turn, no matter the danger. Maybe we just have to keep on with finding Earth. To simply keep going and serve this greater purpose. I would give my life for *that*.”

There were no quick reactions to her words, but it had somehow released them from fear and concern for themselves. It had shown them, or put before them, a clear choice. Save their skins or just get on with bringing a future to the planets. They had all experienced enough of this journey to know that something bigger *was* at play, and they could now all feel the machinations of something greater within it, even Mech. There was a sense of fate in the mess tonight and they were all feeling it.

“Unitedly,” piped up Mech, breaking the long silence.

The others nodded, and Cookie got up to get some grub on. *Just like that* it had been decided. Now that it *was* Ed and Mech’s purpose, all that small band’s purpose, it felt more than good. There was a freedom in it, a freedom that the crew of the Perpaduan had never felt before. They had something important to do, and they all now *knew* it.

Purpose

“I had lived there for a few months before they turned up outside my dwelling. I had been told in a dream to take the Icon and go to the deserts of Scinta. Thankfully for me I didn’t have a family yet, as I was only really just a pup. It was hard living there, and you had to hide, because the raiders there loved to kill folk and take what they wanted. Actually, that was one of the strange things to me. I was sure the Icon would have been safer where I came from.

My pap and his pap, and kin of mine going a long way back, had been purposed to keep the Icon safe. But it *sure* was strange when I had that dream, because the Icon had been in my family so long that it had really just become a family heirloom, and a story. But when the call came that sure changed. I knew my purpose, my *family’s* purpose, and I just *had* to honour it. As strange as it all was.”

“It’s good not bein’ *all quail*,” expressed Mech, when they had gathered for breakfast after the next sleep cycle. “We sure dodged *that* bullet.”

“Yep. Can’t believe the freedom I feel,” responded Ed.

“Me too,” agreed Cookie.

“Determinational!” added Bot, which had the crew all staring at each other. Well, except for Sasha and Cycle. She was in prayer in her pod, and Cycle always enjoyed a lie in when they were out in the black.

Bot was built to respond to questions, not be self-initiating, so it was a surprise. But they definitely got what he was spelling out to them. They had felt what he was now saying after the decision they had made yesterday. A clear purpose had informed their shared decision and set them free.

“Good morning, Darling,” greeted Mamma, as Sasha came up the ladder from the lower deck. “Did you sleep well?”

“Like a baby.”

“No dreams?”

“Not last night, Mamma.”

“I think we *all* slept tight last night,” put in Mech.

“Don’t really get why things changed so quick, Sash. But glad of it,” commented Ed.

“The truth calls to all of us, Erron. We searched for it together, and we found it.”

The crew did not know how to respond to that, or more so, that it simply deserved silence and needed be left be.

“So, your hidden man on Scinta?” asked Ed.

“I saw dunes.”

“Okay. That’s a start.”

“We’d have to get close to scan for the Icon. We can’t be invisible,” put in Mech.

“We have to trust. The Centre is omnipotent and the lady who hunts us is not,” said Sasha.

“I *am* feelin’ what we came to last night, but we have to be on our game too,” said Ed.

“Yes, pray *and* act with wisdom. It takes both,” agreed Sasha, much to the relief of Mech and Ed. While they were definitely in this, had felt the flow of fate, and even surrendered to it, they still knew that being on the job going forward was the smart thing to do.

“Maybe those bricks can find other bricks,” then mused Mech. “Hopefully from further away.”

Sasha laughed at Mech’s word for the Icons, and said, “Maybe. I really don’t know.”

“Let me work on ‘em for a while. See if we can’t hook ‘em up the bus’s systems. Maybe *Bot* can talk to them.”

“You were all keen to have them stay in the strong box before, Mech. What if they fry the systems, or Bot’s just not as smart as you think.”

“Have faith, Cap. *Have faith,*” pronounced Mech, with a killer smile.

Cookie and Sasha had a good laugh. Ed just smiled a little, shook his head, and gave a ‘well, what the hell’ look as he returned to eating.

KAFSA WAS DETERMINED. He had now found these minions of hers here on Scinta. He wasn't sure about how the redhead fit in at first, but he *had* now learned a little about her. He eventually 'realised' that this Surveyor was obviously in the pretender's employ and that the soldiers were *hers*. He knew a lot of good people here, believers who had helped him track them down, and as these miscreants were here, his enemy would most likely be close. The fact that one of those soldiers of evil had called her a *weapon*, made him even more determined. He was awaiting the One like everybody else and he was thinking, well theorising, that the creature he was hunting must have the Dark's power to be able to kill the One. His purpose was becoming more and more 'clear' to him.

He had kept watch on the mercenaries for three days now but had seen no sign his enemy. She *had* to be in there, the large dwelling they were set up in, and he wanted to get closer, but one of this Weapon's minions knew him. He now decided that he needed more support from the true believers here, so he headed off to gather cohorts who would sacrifice in service to the safety of the One.

Striding strongly as he went, he revelled in his mission, and he thanked his God for tasking him with this duty. He would not let Him down.

THE BUS HIT THE SAND. The dwelling was just over the large dune to the south of their position, and Cycle was the first one out. Ed and Sasha went straight up the dune, making a beeline for the dwelling, but stopping beyond the lip of the dune to check for signs of danger. They had spotted nothing as they came in, but taking a look on the ground was always a good idea.

Ed had wanted to go in alone, quickly; be in and out, and done. But Sasha had insisted that she had to go with him. She wanted to talk with the hidden man to find out as much as she could, and to honour him properly. Ed didn't like the idea of all that because it would add time. Every moment would count, as each minute, each second, could present the threshold between success and death. An unknown line that had to be avoided with all effort. He understood Sasha's reasons, but he knew that her wishes might just be the difference between avoiding that line, or *finding* it.

It was the day after Kafsa had left his high lookout over the partially two storey building, which had a large, enclosed, courtyard. His mind had been clear as he had gone off to seek out fellows for his mission, and he had been busy.

The Perpaduan's crew had been cautious coming in, after making escape plans to fit various scenarios. They could not know what would play out, so had to be flexible, and needed some baseline strategies. Mech had been able to get the Icons talking to Bot, and it seemed that these Icons were *very* connected; that there *was* one on Scinta, and at least one other. But Bot wasn't sure if even the Icons knew how many there were, as each Icon was designed to only give the position of the next. They had the power to communicate intimations in the dreams of certain souls, and now it seemed they were also designed to use direct detailed data communication.

In any case, the Perpaduan's cohorts were on, and as Cycle sent the safe signal on the communicator, Ed and Sasha were over the dune and running towards the dwelling. It was a mudbrick dome, and seemed to be the top of an old, much larger, sand inundated building. The man had just woken in the pre-dawn and was setting himself to pray when there was a knock at the door. He was immediately in surprise because he had heard no sign of engines or movement before the knock. The antigrav' generators always ran silent, except for the necessity of escaping

the sand of Besede, and the engines had been turned off as early as possible after their re-entry to Scinta.

The man looked up, as if accepting the Will of the Centre, and he breathed in deep as he opened the wooden hatch in the dome that he used as a door. He was gladly relieved to see a woman at his door, as Ed was walking the perimeter of the dome, triple checking.

“You seek the Icon?” he asked, but knowing he stood in the presence of the one who was told of in the story passed down through the generations. It was very clear, but mostly in the look in her eyes.

“Yes. I do.”

“It is time.”

“Yes.”

“I will gather it.”

“What is your name?” asked Sasha.

“It is not important.”

“I suppose none of our names are.”

The man shifted a box on the sand floor and pushed away a shallow layer of sand to reveal a small cloth bag that held the Icon. He could see lights streaming across the surface of the metal lump through the bag, and now knew for sure that this was the person who was to take delivery. He gasped a little as he saw it, and as he got up, turning to Sasha with different eyes, he asked, “You are the One?” as he offered her the cloth bag, and its still pulsing contents.

“No. I am not. I am not born of the cold and dark as the prophecies tell.”

The man simply nodded, as Sasha took the bag.

“You must come with us. We are to take you from here, and you must not talk to any soul of us after we deliver you home.”

“How do you know this is not my home?”

“I dreamt that you were in hiding, I suppose I just assumed, but Evil hunts us, its minions will hunt you if you let out even an intimation of meeting us.”

“Certainly,” agreed the man, like it was a command from the Centre Himself. It was new to him, as while he had always wished to honour his ancestors and his father, he did not really believe the stories upon becoming an adult. He had not been at all a religious person. His dream had reawakened his childhood belief, his belief in this duty, and in the Centre. It was all quite strange, and a sudden departure from life as he had come to see it.

“*They’re back.* They’re coming in over the northern desert country,” had pronounced one of Elle’s soldiers who was sitting at a small portable screen, as they were covertly tapped into some satellites around Scinta.

Elle’s eyes had fired up and her mouth curled just a little, as her brother had called out, “Get to the star riders.”

These small attack craft held three crew each and were housed in a warehouse nearby. It was a large vacant building that they had paid for the use of while they were gathering here. Scinta was the natural place to gather mercenaries and set up, as their quail had last been here. They had also left here quickly without really doing anything. Elle was almost certain that they had

unfinished business on this rock and that they may be back. If the Perpaduan *was* seen on another planet it would then naturally become the next staging point.

“Stick to the plan, and remind your men again, that we are *netting* them, *only*. Well, we’re netting *our payday*, the others are expendable.”

“Don’t worry, Sis. I got this.”

Ed was getting antsy. It was taking *too long*, and he, in no way, underestimated his foe. He now went into the dwelling after Sasha, to get her on the move.

The man looked at Ed as he entered and saw that he was armed. He was surprised that a soldier would accompany the One. As no matter what Sasha had said to him, *he* knew different. The man looked away from the weapons and up to Ed’s eyes, only to see a smile, and Ed saying, “Pray *and* take wise action.”

The custodian of the fourth Icon smiled, but still a little confused that a soldier would say such a thing or even be here right now. The Mediators of the past had all suffered deeply and given themselves to all danger and sacrifice, so the One *with a soldier* was not something even imagined.

Ed was on the job and now saw that Sasha had her hand on the Icon. She was far away as it pulsed and streamed with light around her hand. It was like she was in communion with it.

“What’s going on?” asked Ed, of the custodian.

“She communes with the Icon.”

“How long?”

“I do not know. The Icon has never activated before, and I am not *her*.”

“Centre *gelfin*’ Icons,” was all that came out, as Ed went back outside to check the skies and surrounds. Cycle had all that covered, but Ed couldn’t just stand there watching Sasha and hoping she finished quick. “*Why the hell she has to do this here, I don’t know,*” expressed Ed to himself.

The man was bit surprised at Ed’s language in Sasha’s presence and his disregard of such a deep religious moment. He was obviously not a believer. The man was strangely calm as he now turned back to watch and be part of this momentous happening. He knew it would sustain him until the end of his life, even though what was happening was beyond his comprehension.

Cycle signalled on the comm’s that he was watching, and Ed just threw his arms up. Cycle had a giggle, knowing just how *happy* Ed would be right now. Cycle was in a way oblivious to danger when he was on-mission. All his focus went to *it*, and it only. His purpose was always right here and right now, and he felt more at home in that state than he did normal times of life. It was taking some time though, so he spoke into the communicator strapped to the side of his head.

“Time?” was all he said.

“It’s open.”

Cycle again scanned the horizon, as Mech above scanned for traffic above them from where it sat on the sand. Cookie was getting a bit stressed, and Mech was doing all he could to settle her, to ease her. Not for her sake though. He needed her cooking, not Lula’s, as they had a long way to go to gather the other icon.

“Mech?” communicated Ed, checking in with him for an update.

“There’s some traffic out of atmo’. Nothin’ inside right now. We are *way* over time projection. What *the hell* is holding things up.”

“She’s *communicating* or something, with the *damned* thing.”

“*Hell*, Cap.”

“Let’s keep it silent, Mech. But when I call, come in and get us,” ordered Ed, changing the plan of them all returning to the ship for extraction. Every second counted. “Copy, Cycle.”

“Copy. And we have movement. Repeat: Have movement.”

“Gelf!” shouted Ed. “Bring it in boys. We are *gone*,” he added, as he now raced inside.

“Something’s comin’ into atmo too, Cap,” added Mech.

“Do we still have *window*?”

“Yep,” replied Mech, but the situation was fluid, and both of them knew what could happen to that measurement.

Ed raced in and took Sasha into his arms like she was a child asleep. “Follow!” he stated strongly, to the custodian.

The man grabbed the Icon from the table and followed Ed out at a run. He was now even more concerned about this man’s obvious disregard for what was happening there, but also thought that a soldier like him might just have a clue about his work. Sasha was still off somewhere as they ran for the ship.

The bus was coming in, as was Cycle.

Elle's brother Hal had gone to gather the mercenaries on the bottom floor. He was ready and set to purpose now. No matter his earlier misgivings. Just like Cycle he was on task, on purpose, and on his way. He went over the plan two times while he gathered their soldiers. They had all run outside, heading for the star riders, when all hell broke loose. Kafsa and his cohorts fired down hard on the mercenaries from many positions, and some other mercenaries, posted away from the awakening hot zone, had then raced to better positions.

The fire of zealousness had made them stronger than they really were, and they had stayed the course no matter how many of them fell. But even though the soldiers had been taken by surprise, they eventually blasted their way out, still going for the attack craft. Hal had led them away, as other mercenaries came to the windows of the house and covered their exit.

Hal was more than angry, as these misfits had kept them pinned down for a good twenty minutes. They weren't professionals and he thought that Rowes must have hired this rabble to keep them busy. He and Elle had been caught off guard with this move, but his attention had not been on those behind him as they broke away. He knew that any soldier worth his salt would not be hanging around, so he had hoped that Rowes' business here was going to take longer than he and Elle had planned for.

But the Perpaduan lifted off when they were still miles out, and it was gone soon enough. They would track it, at least until it jumped, but they had missed their quarry. The ship above the bus had thankfully been a freighter coming into a mining port a good way from their position, so had not been a threat.

Kafsa had seen the mercenaries break through, but he and his cohorts were after their prize. They ignored them, not being aware that they were being outmanoeuvred as some of the merc's

broke off and started picking off Kafsa's friends from new positions. They took them all down fairly quickly, injuring and capturing Kafsa. When he was dragged into the house and into the courtyard, he saw the redhead. It was like a bad dream, and he could not believe that the Centre had not made them victorious. He was hurting strongly from his wounds and from the loss of any hope of completing his mission. His hope drained away, as his blood did, and he now drifted into unconsciousness.

"They jumped as soon as they hit the black, and after three cycles they jumped back *into* atmo'. I had *never* heard of *that* being done before. I disembarked as soon as we landed, just beyond sight of my hometown.

My duty was done, and it was good to be going home, to be around people again, even though part of me wanted to ride along with them. All this was not how I or any of my family might have imagined passing on the Icon, but the Spirit was alive in that desert dwelling like I had never felt it; that's for sure.

The Perpaduan's crew were all very ordinary people and quite likeable souls, well, to all seeming. So much is said about them, but they were just folk. It's sad how violently it all ended, so that the new Dawn could come. But when they left me, they were full of life an' running.

I can still see them celebrating and joking with each other after we broke atmo' and were delivered from those mercenaries."

COOKIE HAD BEEN QUIET FOR A WHILE. She always did after Lula visited, but she was now again in full voice, and definitely in Mamma mode. They were safely out in the black again from the return jump to Scinta and had set out on their way to gather the next Icon. They had jumped again, but just one of a few that they would do to make anyone following them impossible.

“It’s time to regather. Catch up with ourselves,” said Mamma, strongly.

“It’s best to keep moving,” began Ed. “We don’t want to give them any time to reset and regroup.”

“I am putting my foot down, Erron Rowes,” said Mamma, using Ed’s full name to show the full intent of her words.

“I agree with Ed. We’ve got them on the back foot. So, the quicker we go the better,” put in Cycle.

“If we put down somewhere, I can get the bus fully spic and span,” offered Mech.

“We need to take a wider look, and you boys have been out here much longer than usual. You need to be rested and strong for the work ahead,” argued Mamma.

“I am *sure* there will be time. Maybe some reflection will be good too, so we can see the way forward better,” added Sasha, which had Mamma smiling.

Ed knew that *he* was fine to keep on, and still thought swift action would keep an upper hand, but he was reminded that the others were not built like him. He also knew that some time to get the bus fully operational, and to set a clearer strategy now that they knew more, would be wise. “*Wise action*,” he thought, as he said, “Yeah, Mamma. Okay.”

“We’ll be stronger for the long run, Cap,” offered Mech. “Bot. Two jumps to Nepasa. Make ‘em random as you can.”

“Yes. Nepassa. *Perfect*, Mech,” added Ed, which had Sasha wondering why.

ELLE SMILED AS KAFSA WOKE. “*Finally,*” she thought. It had been a solid week since the firefight. She and her boys had gotten off Scinta fast, and back to Malian. They were protected on Malian. The authorities on Scinta had been on the job quickly after the skirmish in town; something unheard of on this part of that high planet, and something not to be suffered.

Her band had loaded up quickly, and all jumped here and there a number of times, large craft and small, going in all directions to confuse any chase. They had thankfully all broken away clean, as she wanted no open mouths in the hands of the authorities. She wanted to remain unknown on Scinta, bringing this lone survivor of the skirmish along with her to make certain.

It was not the only reason she brought him back, or for giving him all the medical aid at hand to survive his blood loss. Hal had pointed him out to one mercenary in the heat the battle as they fought their way to the star riders, making sure he knew to take him alive, and back to Elle. Hal remembered him. He had taken him down in the street when he went to knife the girl, Sasha. When Hal had returned, he had filled his siter in on this man, and they now thought that this Scintan was still on a mission to kill Sasha. They needed to know more about this man and about any other cohorts who might get in their way in the future. Elle wondered at what his motive to kill the girl was though. She was just another Centre fool looking for objects that they believed were holy. They did that stuff all the time.

“You owe me,” she said, plainly to Kafsa as he woke.

“You killed many good men for the sake of the Dark!” charged Kafsa, back at her.

“The Dark! *Really.* You went after us because you think she’s the Dark.”

“You are *her* dark army.”

“We *aren't* with her, and she's now in the wind *because* of you. If you had been patient, we would have had her and the soldier. We only protected her because we wanted her in play. We are after the soldier.”

“Lies, lies, lies. She is the Zealot, and she threatens the coming of the One.”

“I'm *not lying*, you Centre *idiot*. I am after *the soldier*. I couldn't care less about your little games.”

“The Centre does *not* play *little* games.”

Elle laughed hard, really appreciating this moron. She would have loved to hear more but gave him a shovel to the head with what she said next. “You claim to know the Will of the Centre! *You* are the only zealot that I see, *you* got all those men killed, and *you* let her get away.”

But there was to be no way through this man's thick skull, or his absolute purpose.

“I *will* hunt her down. I *will* succeed. She is *not* the One, and so a great danger,” he argued, just now realising that he had survived by the Will of the Centre, to continue his quest. He wandered at this strange design that had led him to the very people who stopped him dispatching her; yet the ones who could now help him find her. “*Indeed, the Centre's designs are great,*” he thought. “*I have been tested, but I am still true,*” he then prayed silently, thinking that it had all happened this way because he had to prove himself worthy of the task of taking down The Zealot.

Elle could see how locked in he was, and that no amount of words were useful right now. She did like it that he was motivated though. She would use his rantings to cajole information on others like him who might get in her way, and she could even see the possibility of using *him and*

the girl to get her super-soldier. She was now right back on purpose, and she sent feelers out again to the other planets. She too, was sure she would succeed.

THEY TOUCHED DOWN ON THE GRASS. It was on privately owned land and set in amongst tall trees. The ship then rose again with its legs still extended and moved cautiously in under the canopy of the great figs, before setting down again.

They weren't there long when a tall heavy man in a white kaftan walked through the trees toward the bus. There were three men behind him, fanned out, and he gave the signal that they should stay put in their current positions, as he moved confidently forward. He could see the ship through the trees as he neared it, and some movement, as he kept on.

The side door of the bus was open, and Mech jumped out as the man entered the landing zone from behind him.

"What is your business here?" the man asked ominously.

Mech turned, and they regarded each other seriously for a short while, before they both smiled and embraced in a man hug. Not *too* long, and with a lot of nervous back patting on Mech's part.

"Hey, big fella. We're in need of a safe port, and a few parts."

The man was very excited by that and made it clear that all he had would be in service to them.

"It is good to see your smiling face again, my friend," said the large man.

“It’s good to see your forest and your wallet, Bas,” responded Mech.

The man laughed loud and well, loving Mech’s slight on him.

“So, you like my trees, eh?” he then said, looking around.

“Well, they could have been a bit closer to the house,” shot Mech, with a razor smile, which had Bas exploding with more laughter.

“You are not easy to please, little man,” he said, as he moved quickly and enveloped Mech in another unwanted embrace. He then locked Mech’s head in one of his huge arms, while smiling at Ed and Sasha as they stepped down from the bus.

The man was large in all senses of the word. He had been a prize fighter and had earned almost unlimited credits due to his size and ability. He had come to live on Nepasa during that time, like all the filthy rich, or at least many of them, did. He loved having these bounty hunters visit. They made him feel alive because of the danger of their work and the stories they told of it. Things were so good this planet that there was no struggle and no life up against it at all. The people here were quite apathetic to things and the struggles on the low rocks. They were just that rich, but it also meant no real excitement. They lived in constant search for distractions of all kinds to keep them alive or feeling that way a little.

“Where is your tall friend?” asked Bas, looking out to see if he could see Cycle.

“He’s supposed to be guarding us. He sure doing a gelfin’ grack job of it today.”

“I think he is *enjoying* today,” responded Bas, looking around with a wide smile for Cycle, as he messed up Mech hair.

“Baaaaas!” said Cycle softly, from his position, very much appreciating the huge man’s small tortures of Mech.

“Hey Bas. Thanks for the cover. We sure do appreciate it,” said Ed.

“Any time, Erron Rows. The Perpaduan is *always* welcome here. You know that.”

There was more in those words than his enjoyment of these men’s company, and Cookie’s of course. She certainly made him happy too with her different recipes. It was mainly because they had brought in the men who were responsible for his sister’s murder, among the many others, when a passenger ship went down on a very chaotic rock. No one, not even the Topian military, had wanted to venture there, so Bas had taken on the services of Ed and his crew. The fact that the Topians wanted nothing to do with it spoke strongly to him of the measure of the crew of the Perpaduan.

Bas now shook Ed’s hand, and smiled at Sasha, remembering the day of their return vividly. He had done his duty to his sister and the other victims, and these bounty hunters had done their duty to him, even at great risk. Ed had not been sure of that job at first, as it was going to be one hell of a job. Bas had offered more money when the bounty hunter had baulked, but Ed had refused it, saying that if he decided to do the job it would not be for the extra cash, saying it would be for Bas’s sister. Ed had been very taken with how much this man loved his sister and the rest of his family. They were tight and a far cry from what he had known, and he wanted to do the job, he had baulked because had to make sure he was not sacrificing *his* family to do so.

In any case, Bas loved their stories and lived vicariously through them on their rare visits, very much enjoying their wild company. But it was that they had honoured his family by not asking for more money, and *actually* doing the job. That kind of honour was rare on all the planets. *That*

had supplied a deep trust between them that could not be broken, also, sadly, something very rare on the planets.

“Tell your Cyclops man to come in. My men are on the job. They have honour like you, Ed.”

Ed now thought back to that time, seeing that he was maybe not some sadly lost creature beyond redemption even before he met up with Sasha. But she had sure opened up that box of hope in him since her coming aboard. They had even had an argument last night about hope and forgiveness. At least the conversation took them there as they looked out at the stars again on the flightdeck. She did not always join him there as she knew it was something he needed to do alone mostly.

“There is always hope, Erron,” she had said that evening, after Ed had fobbed off her talk of him being a good man again.

This comment had hit Ed hard too, like a punch to the chest, and he had responded strongly, “*Gelf* woman. Stop it! Hope’s a beautiful thing to you. But hope *to me*, and the *likes* of me, is...well...something painful. I am that deep in the dark that I don’t dare hope. I *can’t* hope, or it’ll destroy me.”

“You misunderstand hope and forgiveness, Erron. Forgiveness especially. I know you hope, and I know you see more now. I know you felt it last time we talked about all this.”

“That’s e’damned’nough!” he had responded strongly, as he got up and walked off the flightdeck.

Sasha had felt deeply for him and what he had to face within himself. But he was courageous, and she knew he would do it; break free of his hopelessness about himself. Even though he protested and walked off, she knew that she had challenged him deeper into that place of hope, not away from it. In time, she believed, self-forgiveness would follow. She would prod him again if the subject naturally arose, as she could not leave him in hopelessness, or let him fall to apathy, or to misunderstanding about his true nature. Ed *had* come to see his nobility, and that prod had taken him further along the road of discovery, and even in his pain that night, he had known it was a good thing.

“Thanks, big man,” Ed now replied to Bas, as he signalled Cycle in. “It seems there might be hope for me yet.”

Sasha smiled. Somewhat proud of Ed for saying that.

“Who is this lovely lady?”

“I’m Sasha. A passenger.”

“He helps you too, eh.”

“Seems we’re helping each other,” commented Ed, looking at her seriously.

“*Good*,” responded Bas, seeing something there between them that he was not sure of, but leaving it a happy mystery yet to unfold in their time together. “So, when you are ready, come up to the house. We will share a beverage, and some stories I hope.”

“Sounds good to me, Bas,” replied Ed, with Sasha nodding and smiling. “Sasha can go with you now, big man. We won’t be long.”

“That will be well,” responded the large man, with a respectful smile and a nod of the head, as he then proffered the way to the house to Sasha.

THE BIG MAN WAS JOYOUS TONIGHT. As the night of stories wore on, he realised that it was not the stories he was after, as much as it was real company. He, like most on this planet, lived more in fear of losing what they had. He, so much so, that he had not married, as marriage was fleeting for most here and failed often. Its power had been lost in all the excess and games of life on this world. He had come from a hard life and there was no way he going to fall back to that, so he never took the risk. It was an underlying purpose that had closed him off from many, leading to a constant distrust.

Apathy was rife here with the lack of meaning. The only purpose, to enjoy what they had and not lose it. Games of ego and intrigue ruled the social sphere, even though many families who worked for those with big money were connected and purposed in their work. Those folk lived thankful and content in their deliverance from struggle. It was an *existence* here for the well off, not a life really, and Bas was also feeling the joy that came from being of service to his visitors. Sadly, it did not rise further, to thoughts of others he could help, as it was somewhat unconscious.

Most on Nepasa guarded their ease jealously, constantly consuming and seeking new experiences to assail the dire thirst of meaninglessness. They, like Bas, were really somewhat unconscious of what they ran from, but indeed most were running, and certainly did not know any kind of true freedom.

“You had better keep any talk of the magic of these Icons to yourselves while you are here my friends. Greed abounds and mysteries like this are thirsted for. We have plenty here, so such things, things that are new, or that we know little of, are precious to us.”

“Sure, Bas,” responded Ed.

Sasha had looked down when Bas had explained that, and he was curious at why. Through this night of good food, stories of their adventures, and laughter, he had come to see the quiet ease within this soul, and although she had spoken little, he had come to see something in her. It was like he had always been thirsty, and her few words were like sips of cool crystal-clear water. The enjoyment of the stories even fell to his anticipation of what this woman may yet deign to say. But now he sought to open that flow, asking, “Why do you look down? And please be forthcoming with the truth, as it is something bartered too often here for many other things.”

“It is not my place to say. You have been such a gracious host, and I do not want to burden you.”

“Cannot you see that I am large. I am built for burden.”

There was some laughter, as Bas clearly showed in his face his wish for her to share what she thought.

“I am still a little unwilling, Bas.”

“You *must*. I have *asked* for it. I have taken a lot of punishment to get here, so I am not so tender as I may seem.”

“Not like Cycle, eh,” put in Mech.

“Not like Mech,” responded Cycle, with his small coy giggle.

“Please,” pleaded Bas again, with a small expectant smile.

“Well. The Icons are not baubles or distractions, Bas. And it seems to me that souls here struggle under the greatest burden.”

“Really!” responded Bas, laughing loud. “There are *no* burdens here. It is the *lack* of burden if anything that challenges us,” he added, now realising from his own words something he knew, but had forgotten after coming to fame and endless credits. He then smiled.

“Love and understanding of the spirit are freedom. The joys of life are wonderful, Bas, and I have enjoyed the meal and support you have given us, but *love* and *soul* are life. Your explanation of the high need for distraction tells of your loss. Giving, not taking, or having, *is life*. The wellbeing of all, and seeking it together, is meaning and life.”

Bas was a little sad of face and his eyes had watered a bit, as he now looked down, just feeling his response. His brow then furrowed at the seriousness of what was now clear to him. He needed no thoughts, or more words, to know what he was feeling. He looked up at Sasha to ask another question, but she answered him before he asked it.

“Look to what you can do for *anyone*, always, Bas. Even in small things. Life is *there*. Joy is there.”

“Indeed, lovely lady. Indeed. The light is evident in the dark, and your words are cool water in the desert.”

“It is true, and sad, but great lack shows more so the beauty and value of higher things. In poverty *and* in so called wealth. Loving activity is life, and apathy a slow death.”

“This is now very clear to me,” stated Bas, looking down, and then up again to the crew, “You are all indeed *more* fortunate than I, having such a rare creature among you constantly.”

“We know that,” responded Mamma, making it clear to Sasha in a look.

“Please don’t,” requested Sasha. “We are *all* very able in our own way and everyone is capable to rise above the material and learn wisdom. Who really knows anyone else’s journey, or our own challenges but ourselves and the Centre. He sees us and knows what efforts we have made. You all may have gathered much more grace in your efforts than me because you come from great struggle. These things are relative, even if in goal, they are not.”

“Geeze, Sash. You haven’t filled us in on this stuff,” commented Mech.

“Would you have listened before now?”

“No. No way!” answered Mech, laughing loud, and Bas’s booming laugh joined in, which brought them all in.

Love

“They lifted off after a joyous week. I even got my hands dirty with Mech, and Mamma got me on the job unclogging the food waste sump. Such glorious work! Their visit, those many years ago, changed me. It opened my heart to love and purpose. I thought that I was free, but I wasn’t, and it was that visit that gave me new eyes.

I am very old now and should not still be here. But the doctors keep me alive so I may fulfil my purpose. I found, that in the purpose of aiding all our brothers and sisters, our family, and children, we fulfil the purpose of our own souls. This is where we are found, and grown, not in apathy or in another wellness retreat.

I found a loving soul soon after that, one who I had known for a long time, but not connected to because of fear. I learned that life is in connections of love, and that safety and credits deny their balm. Life and purpose are found when we connect meaningfully in life, and so give out, even in small ways and things.

Gifts flowed after that small visit from that unlikely company, as I also came to understand that love is an *outward*/flowing force, and that we can all create it. That sacrifices, large and small, grant it. We certainly don’t have to wait for it to come into our lives.”

It was raining when they had touched down. The fourth Icon had found the fifth, and the company of the Perpaduan had made their plans. But the signal given off by the final Icon was general somehow, or interfered with, so it would take time to locate it. They were all glad for Mamma's insistence to regroup and re-energise, within themselves, and in having the bus and its gear well set for the challenges that lay ahead.

This planet, Purisqan, was one of rain and great rivers, of waterfalls and great wide freshwater lakes, which ran through, and sat in amongst, the forests and jungle that covered this rock from pole to pole. Salt collectors on the river deltas gathered salt for all the planets, and hydro turbines supplied copious electricity, which too, was stored and exported. Water was sacred here, so was not exported, but there was some black-market activity, which had increased with the slowing of the rains across the planets. The planets were not united, all holding to the perceived necessity of their own interests, but trade was strong.

Ed, Sasha, and Cycle now disembarked and went off into the trees. "Keep a lock on us Bot and pull us out at any danger."

"Uncertainly," responded Bot.

"I don't like the sound of that. Get that *damned thing fixed*, Mech."

"Bot's talkin' about the jump harnesses, Cap. They're not great at distance, so the further you are away the less your chances of an accurate jump. He's just sayin' it *how it is*."

"Okay. But I hope you know what you're doin'," replied Ed, into the communicator tied to his throat. Both he and Cycle had one.

“Bot’s *the man*, Cap. He’s got you as good as anyone’s gonna. Just be as close to the bus as you can when you call in for a jump.” Then adding with a chuckle, “Or don’t be anywhere too dangerous if you are too far away.”

“I’m getting less confident with every word, Mech.”

“We’re on our own, Ed,” commented Cycle.

“Looks like we gotta think that way, Cycle,” agreed Ed.

“All will be well,” added Sasha.

“*Centre’s*,” commented Ed, to which Sasha smiled.

He meant it, but he did know how things had *indeed* been...*well*, in a way, right from the first Icon bumping into them in the endless black.

They kept on to a small fishing village within the search circle. They figured that the Icon would be more likely there than anywhere else. Cycle took point on the narrow one-person pathway through the jungle. He was a good way ahead of them as a precaution, because there was no making his way for better cover and line of sight in the thick jungle here. Cycle was a foot soldier today. There was no line of sight from a high position, even if they found one.

Ed took up the rear, at a distance too. It was looking even harder to stay away any danger, or to remain hidden here, now that they were on the ground; that was even without the jump harness issue. But it sure heightened and sharpened Ed and Cycle’s focus and wariness. Ed was even thinking of praying, but he was more partial to the ‘wise action’ part of that saying he liked. It gave him a deeper sense of things for his work and called him to more awareness, or scope, to see a situation he was in. He liked that.

The tall bounty hunter had been here before. Long before he had joined up with this crew. He hadn't liked the jungles, and he still didn't. The quail he had tracked here was smart, as a runner could hide here forever. Ed had followed him by thumbing rides and paying for passage on any ship that was going where he needed to in the planets, and it was that hunt that had made him consider having his own ship one day. This was the perfect planet to hide away in, as long as the locals had your back. A quail could be right beside you in the vegetation and you wouldn't know. Fortunately for Ed the quail he had been after was not *that* smart, as the locals were somewhat afraid of him and had agreed to help Ed track him. The jungle became his advantage in the end.

The rivers here were the main thoroughfares, and plenty of different boats plied the waterways and larger bodies of water, from small fishing vessels to big salt carriers. There were always workers travelling for shifts on the salt collectors, and others maintaining the hydro wheels, but the folk here more generally speaking were gentle simple living people. There *were* the big salt merchants and large energy consortiums, but most of the folk lived by gathering, hunting, fishing, and bartering in the markets. The government here was powerful. Not just because of its abundance, but because of this planet's alliance with the Topians. Traders, consortiums, and even planets watched their step here, as crossing the Topians Law only meant trouble. Big trouble. More than any of the planets could handle; maybe even all of them combined.

The Topians got their power cheap and that had helped them power up militarily. They didn't have a presence here, but a whole fleet of their battle cruisers could jump here in no time. The Topian's culture was interesting in that a handshake was Law, and *that* was *that*. You kept your word, or you lost your freedom, even your life, on their world, and they did not hold back off-world either. Life was black and white on Topia, and Topian Law was wherever Topians were; everyone just accepted that on the planets. Fortunately for Purisqan one handshake fifteen hundred

years before had kept this planet of rivers unmolested, and the deals done here, beyond the small black market, were kept. A deal with Purisqan was effectively a deal in Topian Law.

Ed, Sasha, and Cycle now entered the small village. People gathered around them as they came in and an old woman came up to them, bidding them good-cycle. She then asked them their business, not in a demanding way, but seeking their respect.

“Emos Had,” said Ed.

“Emos Had, tall man,” replied the old woman.

“I am Erron.”

“I am Sen.”

A short silence followed while they looked to each other, and in time Sen broke the silence, as it was respectful to let the owner of the ground speak first after the greeting. “Thank you for honouring our traditions.”

“I find them to be good,” responded Ed.

“You have *definitely* been here before tall man. It must not have been a short visit.”

“It *was* a long visit.”

“So, what is your business here?”

“We seek an Icon. A rectangular dull metal lump. Sasha here is gathering them, and we are escorting her.”

Sen waved her hand in a wide horizontal arc, saying, “In the jungle?”

The crowd laughed, and so did Ed and Cycle. Sasha smiled easily. That a dull metal lump would be found in this wild place was indescribably ridiculous to these people, and the visitors gladly agreed.

“Well, Sen. We believe it will be found. Is there a special place nearby? A sacred place?”

“There is a *strange place* upriver, Erron. About a cycle and a half by small craft from here. The water flows strangely there. We believe it is natural, that the rocks have simply worn that way to create it.”

“When did it become known?”

“You have talked long with people of the jungle. Your last visit *must* have been long,” suggested Sen, now a little more respectfully.

“Too long for my purpose, and *too short* for the honour and friendship I found here.”

Sen now said to all who were assembled there, “We will do our best to support such an honourable man,” knowing that this man must have helped souls here on his last visit. Only outsiders who gave great service to the jungle people were given what they called the Most Honourable Language, or truly, a right to speak it, beyond greetings or the first few speakings. All Ed’s words had most surely spoken to Sen in that Language.

The elders too were given right to speak this way, in reward, or more so, in thanks for their long years of service to their community. All served in these places, and greater service was honoured, but never spoken of. Ed had certainly not talked of himself or any service at all. Such a way *was honour* here.

“We’ll be going out of jump range,” said Cycle.

“Indefatigably incorrect,” Bot responded.

“I don’t know what the hell *that* means, Cap. It looks to me like it’ll be borderline at best.”

“Frogs *and* croaking,” explained Bot.

“Jumps, and comm’s, Ed,” answered Mech, calling him Ed because it was more a caution to a friend, rather than an operational the answer to a man in charge.

“We’ll get ourselves back in range if we jump, Mech. I want the bus to stay put. If someone has eyes on this planet, the less we fly the bus the better.”

“Sure, Cap. But I don’t like it, and Bot seeming to disagree with himself is spookin’ me.”

A shadow moved place in the jungle as they headed off to the small boat they had been given use of for their search. A guide had also been granted them, a good boatman who knew the river. This shadow had been stalking them since it had picked up the Perpaduan coming in. The soldier now climbed high and easily followed them through the branches of the mid canopy, because the small boat was not powerful, and the hard going upriver made it slow. It was a long canoe like craft with a shallow draft, with two short and narrowly placed, wooden outriggers, which were set to the back of the craft, just in front of where the guide sat at the tiller. The motor was electric and made little noise.

The river gave the stalking man good view, and he was sure he knew who he now followed. These were definitely the ones he had been told about. He would watch some more, and when they made camp, he would consider his options.

It was a lovely day out on the river for Sasha. She drank in the moist cool air of the cooler season here and looked to all the life around them. The verdure was a joy and time out of the black

was life giving. She had been thankful of her time with Bas too and had wandered his grounds a good deal of the time there. There were no large predators in these rivers, just fish-eating mammals, and large river-grass eating ones, so no dangers lurked below them, as they slowly made their way upriver.

Ed and Cycle though, were not at ease. They were sat out in the open and going slow. It was unlikely that Elle had people here, and their sensor footprint coming on-world would have been negligible, but that didn't help ease them.

They only stopped twice over the day, in a clearing by the river, and in another small village. They were welcomed, and fed, as word had passed quickly of them, much quicker than their boat could manage. Word moved far more quickly through high vibrations. The people here had the ability to hear much higher frequencies, as did Ed. He had learned the language of these silent whistles and clicks, and he kept a bead on them too.

After a day of slow movement, they stopped to camp. Their pursuer had easily kept up, which was no mean feat. He was glad of the stops and glad they had now settled in for the night here. His eyes were fierce and intent as he thought of his options; go in, or go back to his dwelling and call in his friends. His gear was not with him, as his comms and sensors were old and bulky, and at his age it was not an option to carry them and move fast enough through the canopy. That such an older man could keep up with the boat was really not possible, but this soldier was not ordinary. He now sat there high in the foliage and watched his quarry carefully, as if the answer would come in watching and listening to them.

They had finished eating, and the conversation was gentle, when Ed suddenly turned towards their stalker and blasted a stun round at him from one of his side arms. Cycle had seen

him, and Ed had felt him, right at the same time. Eye signals had been shared, and Cycle was gone when the man had finished dodging the round. The old soldier had moved quickly higher and now sat still in thick foliage. The man smiled, as Ed had not hit him, but he knew by the nature of the round, that this *was* the soldier that he had been told of. He was smiling in relief too, because a stun round would have taken him all the way to the forest floor and most likely to his death. In all this, his mind was now made up, and he called out, “Friend of the camp. I’m coming in.”

Ed was a little surprised at that, and Cycle followed the man’s movements from his position into the clearing beside the river. Ed and Sasha looked with puzzled eyes as the older man now walked in, very well at ease in himself. He was smiling at Ed and looking only to him. There was a strange feeling in this, one Ed had never felt before.

“You have *not known* us soldier, but we are *of you*.”

Ed was sure he was, even though he didn’t know what that was, and Sasha had wide eyes and questions. Ed relaxed and the man embraced him. He just stood there in it, now for the second time in this strange journey, in surrender to life, or death, or whatever would come.

The man then stood back and regarded him, saying, “Yes, there *is* something you *belong to*. There are many of us who have escaped and survived the curse of meds. We live hidden, on many worlds; dispersed *but connected*. One, in each other.”

Ed’s innards and chest filled with a deeply strong and warming wave; a feeling that he had not experienced before, and it threatened to flow out his lungs and tear ducts, but he held it back, and his gaze firm.

“Derme Tortant,” added the old soldier, after a short silence.

“Erron Rowes,” replied Ed, like it was to be done.

“Welcome home, boy.”

“We are not staying,” responded Ed, in reflex, but still deeply moved inside.

“That is *not* what I meant.”

Sasha smiled and cried openly at this revelation. She was so happy that Ed had somehow, in all this, found his tribe, and maybe his roots. The love, the deep connection, of belonging is strong, as is the love of family, and it cries out to be honoured in us. These deep alliances of the heart are only ugly when one is too proud of one’s small group above others, or when it is pitted against other tribes.

“You seek the knot. I will walk with you while you are here. Come now, let’s sit by the flow and talk,” requested Derme, of Ed. “It seems we have much to talk on.”

Ed just nodded and followed his fellow down to the riverbank.

THE KNOT WAS A HUGE FLOW. It took up much of this wide river’s width; over half of it. It swallowed the water, drawing it down deep after, in over, a shallow rock lip. It was an almost perfectly circular, great wide, deep cup in the rock river floor. The water then circled down, before rushing back up from the bottom, streaming back over itself and then out over the underwater rock lip downstream.

The Icon is down there,” said Sasha. “I feel it.”

“This flow brings death to those who fight it,” explained the guide. “If you seek something in it you must allow it to take you and release you. But how you will see or gather anything without being driven into the rock walls is beyond my knowing.”

Sasha walked over onto a rock shelf only a metre above where the knot flowed in. She seemed to be in prayer there for a time, while the men thought about what they needed to do. Before they knew it Sasha dove in and instantly disappeared in the torrent. The men all knew the score. She would make it, or she wouldn't, as the deed had been done and there was no power that they held to help her.

The knot took her swiftly within it, down into the dark. She was in surrender to the care of the Centre but looked down through the torrent as she went. The Icon lit up as she reached the bottom, and she grabbed for it. The Icon flicked up into the flow with her and followed her up. She was struggling to hold her breath when she was taken beyond the downstream lip. She came up gasping and turned in the slowing water to see and gather the Icon. It came along after her like a puppy in play and began to sink in the slower current.

She dove for it and gathered it, receiving a vivid, almost physically felt, glimpse. It was of a great blue gem sitting in the black, quite near to a yellow Sun. This vision changed her a little, she could feel something different in her, strangely the knot had changed too. The water now just swirled and foamed a little as it rolled over and through the rock formation. It seemed that the Icon had powered its strange movement, and over time created the formation itself.

SHE HAD COME TO THE SURFACE TO WIDE SMILES, and to the many loud calls of celebration from the guide. Stories of the woman who quelled the knot would spread like the rain on this world.

It seemed that they had quickly gathered the fifth Icon, and after some enjoyable banter about how she just may be tougher than super soldiers, she sat and dried out on the rock shelf she had jumped from. They let her be there in the sun, while the guide heated some soup for them all to share before returning home. She stayed there a while above the knot, somehow knowing that this was the last Icon, and revelling in the glimpse of what had to be Earth.

They made better time back to the fishing village going downriver, and after sharing the *whole* story, due to respect, they said their goodbyes and ‘fare thee wells’. Sasha and Ed then jumped back to the ship, but Cycle waited a short while, still watching for any movement while waiting for them to signal that they were on board. He had been on the job even more so since Derme had joined them, and with all the focus on the knot. He had not forgotten their wider situation and Ed had been distracted, so he had stayed on point.

“Come on *slow poke*. Jump!” called Mech.

Cycle ignored the barb and just nodded to Derme. It saying to the old soldier that he had Ed’s back, and that Derme had his respect.

Derme nodded back, and Cycle hit the button on his harness.

When Cycle was on board, they took to the black, and set the first jump of three, just in case.

“Let’s do it, Bot,” said Mech.

Brrrvrrrrrr...brrrrrvrrrr...brr.

“Come on slow poke. Jump!” shot Cycle, to Mech, with a satisfying chuckle following.

Mech looked at Bot, and Bot responded, “Jump drive failure-ality.”

“Gakin’ jump drive,” cussed Mech.

“I thought we we’re all systems go after Bas’s,” said Ed.

“*It* was in *good order*, so I did a lot of *other* stuff,” responded Mech.

“Come on slow poke. Jump!” added Cycle, enjoying it even more than the last.

“*Shut up, ya’ gelfin’ moron!*”

“*Jump*, Mech. *Jump*,” retorted Cycle.

Ed had to laugh, and so did Cookie and Sasha.

“Oh, *okay*. It’s like *that* is it,” expressed Mech, as he unharnessed himself violently.

He went over to Bot, while Ed turned to the screens. There was still no traffic, so they were good for now. Mech quickly checked some systems through Bot, swearing hard; then stormed toward the back of the bus, through his workroom, and into the engine room’s upper deck. He slammed the engine bay door for good measure, and Cycle had a good chuckle at that.

“Strap in *there*, Mech. I’m going to fire us out into the black a little. Don’t like siitin’ near a rock, like this.”

After a short silence, a more relaxed voice came from the engine room over the open comm's, "Okay, Cap, I'm stowed and strapped," and Ed fired up the big bangers and shot them away.

Mech kept on with his work through the sleep cycle, and Ed did some time alone in the cockpit. Sasha had felt it proper not to join him, as she was sure he had plenty to reflect on tonight. Sitting up on the flightdeck tonight Ed could see the old super-soldier and hear the sounds of the jungle again as he recalled it. Derme had given him a good deal of information and insight in their long evening chat by the river. As they had talked Ed had also informed Derme about the redhead Surveyor from Malian; her being after him, and how her finding out about other soldiers would not be good.

These men were not just about hiding, they were working on a way forward for themselves, and on a way to free others like them from enforced servitude. They had come to know more of their own nature and had realised that they were more than they thought, just like Ed was discovering. All of this was a strong confirmation to Ed of what he had himself experienced lately.

Derme was old, at least a hundred and fifty, so it seemed that they were built with genes for longevity too. That put a new spin on things for Ed, because to him, life was short in his experience, and he could not have imagined living that long. He didn't know if he even liked that idea, as even though life had become more meaningful recently, he himself sought *release* from life somehow. It was in learning about the longevity of his kind, that he had found this wish within him; or gave him conscious sight of it. But this revelation, and the other insights into these soldiers' wish to become a force for good on the planets, certainly had changed his view.

He looked out into the stars and contemplated change. He had more to live for, and a purpose to belong to with these dispersed soldiers. He *belonged* now. He *did* belong to the crew and to Sasha for now, *all* of them really, but these would pass away in time. So much had changed for Ed in that night's conference in the jungles of Purisqan.

In the morning, Ed woke, and headed for the lower deck of the engine room. Mech was still going, and he shook his head at Ed when he entered.

"It's no good, Cap. She's not comin' back."

"We need parts?"

"We need a *whole new drive*."

"Gelf! Can we build a new one?"

"We're going to have go where there's one on a shelf. It would take too long to gather old parts and build one with these merc's on our case. It would leave us vulnerable for too long."

"So where do we gotta go?"

"We have to go to Apellaus," answered Mech, cringing a little.

Ed hated that planet, and Mech knew it. It was where he was made, by the scientists there, and he cursed out loud.

"Okay, Mech. Prep' what you got to, and I'll get us there. I'll call you when I am ready to blast away again," said Ed, as he walked out of the engine room.

"Good morning, Erron," said Sasha, as she emerged from her room.

She broke Ed out of his thoughts, as he was grabbing the ladder to go up.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, reading Ed’s face.

Ed stopped and sighed, telling her the situation, also sharing his own. It seemed that he had started doing that with this girl. It was not something he did before, *at all*, and it was now not lost him what a woman could do for a man. He had always been self-contained and self-generating, but he could see now from his interaction with Sasha, and Derme, that it had probably been self-limiting. It was good to be strong in himself, but there was more.

After Ed had finished explaining, Sasha’s face was bright with promise, saying, “It seems, that it’s part of your pathway, Erron. See this as a gift of providence and a chance to make your peace with it. Maybe it is part of your rebirth. This time you will leave there on your *own terms*.”

Her words brought a totally different perspective; it settled him, and he nodded. Rebirth was certainly what he was experiencing lately and the thought of leaving Apellaus on his own terms meant a victory of sorts; the end of something, and the beginning of something. He had never set down there due to his revulsion of all it stood for, but now he saw the power of release available in visiting there. He then wondered at the designs of life, and he thanked Providence for the first time in his life, even though he did not know a God.

GENAUX WAS A GREAT INDUSTRIAL CITY, with the biggest spaceport outside of Topia. Its reach was wide over the flat ground that extended well beyond it. Stark low brown rock hills sat in the distance to is south, but to the eye it was the only rise in the ground hereabouts. A pall of smog always sat over this city, at least mostly over the factories. It supplied many manufactured

goods to all of Apellaus, and to the planets that could afford its products. It was a hub, as it was central to all the planets, and much trade also flowed through the great markets and business houses.

Most of the arrangements were made from the black. They had arranged for a drive and people for immediate fitting. Mech knew a crew that he had sourced parts off over the years, so was promised anonymity and silence as part of the deal. There was something more solid about people you knew and dealt with before, where trust was concerned, and Mech had always paid well, so both parties were good to do all they could to cover each other's interests. But the kicker was that they still had to go on-world to get the job done right and quick.

"That redhead'll have people at a port like that," said Ed, sitting in the mess with all of them present.

"So, what's the plan?" asked Mech.

"Well, as I'm the quail, I might fly about, while you get the job done, Mech. Cycle can keep you all covered."

"I've got a closed shop set up down there, Ed. Her lookout'll see us coming in, but they won't be annoyin' us once we're down. These guys have security up the wahzoo. So, take this sad streak of human with you," suggested Mech, referring to Cycle.

"That just leaves us getting out of there and into the black again."

"We'll be too quick on the job for her to get any real strength here, Cap."

"Okay. Me an' Cycle can wear the jump harnesses. You can keep Bot on alert with his eyes open for stray traffic while you work. Push comes to shove we can blow through them anyway."

“Blow through, ‘em,” reiterated Cycle.

Mech had made these jump harnesses himself from the space jump technology in ships. He had tested them on inanimate objects until he got it right, and he finally jumped a dog a few times to test it for humans. He loved that dog, but he loved his tech more, and he reckoned he had it right anyway, as the big jump drives in ships did no harm. It was a little bit glitchy still, so they only used them when they absolutely had to, but it was an ace up their sleeve that no one else had.

“That just leaves *me*,” said Sasha, which brought a ‘What!’ look to Mech’s face, and a serious questioning one to Ed’s.

“You’re staying *with me*, in *the bus*, darling. *No* arguments,” responded Mamma. “Let my boys do their work. You’ll have plenty to do soon enough with those Icons. They’re just the start of something, and we’ve been paid well to keep you safe as well as take you where you need to go.”

“I had a dream,” said Sasha, coyly.

“*Of course*, you did,” commented Ed.

“Of course, you did,” commented Cycle, in agreement, and for the humour.

“Another Icon?” asked Ed.

“No. There’s a hidden danger here. One that somehow threatens the future of this process. It has to be brought into the light. There was a warning that I *have to* see to this.”

“And all will be well, eh,” commented Ed, kind of believing it this time.

“There was a question there. It wasn’t clear, but I trust. I have to. I do.”

There was a long silence, and Mamma broke it. “We’ve come this far. We all let it all go back a while, so it seems like this is just business as usual for us now.”

“Yep,” agreed Ed.

“Yep,” agreed Cycle.

“Yep,” finished Mech, with a bit of a sigh. “But I’m gelfin’ well getting over it.”

They all had a laugh or a smile, thinking a little the same.

“Okay, Sash. You can come down and suit up with me and Cycle. We’ll jump with the harnesses when we’re low,” said Ed, thinking he still had to give them every chance.

But their enemy *was* now set up here. This was the biggest port, and Elle had finally decided to base themselves here because it was in a central position to all the planets.

“I’ll bring the bus in slow, Cap. Good luck.”

Ed, Cycle, and Sasha, then got up and headed to the ladder.

“Good luck,” added Mamma, as they went down to the staging area to suit up.

“Thanks Mamma. See you soon,” responded Sasha.

“See you soon, child.”

CYCLE RAN RUNNING COVER OVER ED AND SASHA. He would take high outlooks over them and their course, and regain it again and again, always looking for eyes on them, or trouble,

as he went. They had been out and about now for a good while, but he was young and fast, and he enjoyed the movement; he enjoyed all of it.

Ed and Sasha moved slowly, adding to the effectiveness of Cycle's efforts, as well as allowing anyone hunting them to keep them in sight, so Cycle could get eyes on them; gather any sign of this danger Sasha had spoken of, or any sign of the fixer's men. This kind of action was not new to these two soldiers. They had often gathered up their quail, or sight of those in league with them, using this strategy. As well as that, you just move around obvious enough, and quail will start chattering in the grass so you can hear them, or spook them enough, so that they burst out of hiding into clear sight.

Elle's lookout *had* called it in when the Perpaduan docked, and sighting of Ed and Sasha came in soon after, so one of their scenarios was already well in play. Her brother now even trailed Cycle, and Kafsa was on his way to engage the girl. Elle's ship was in orbit, and the star riders were prepped and ready on the ground, should the soldier escape somehow. The girl would make it harder for him to get away. In fact, she would make it impossible, but as things developed the redhead just wondered why her payday was being so easy to gather. It was like he wasn't afraid, and they had been just wandering around for a couple of hours now.

She now made her concerns clear to her brother, and the other teams, as it was too strange, but she was glad for the excitement continuing to run through her. She was also glad of having the zealot on her team, as he was no soldier, and Ed would have known it was a trap if she used one of her boys. That, as well as Kafsa being *fully* motivated, even to his own death. Better than some dupe who might run at the first sign of trouble.

"Hello," said Kafsa.

“Hello,” replied Sasha.

“I was on Scinta, asking questions of your religious understanding, and your intent.”

“Yes. You did not seem at all happy. I am *not* the One.”

This comment of Sasha’s put Ed on higher alert, and he stared down Kafsa strongly.

The zealot almost laughed inside at the futility of the soldier’s strength before the power of the Will of the Centre. But he knew he needed to answer her frank comment, to fulfil his duty today.

“*I know* you are not the One,” stated Kafsa, in genuine honesty, which settled Ed a little, as he saw no deception in the man’s face. Then adding, again in total honesty, “You see, there is *darkness*, even in the *seeming* light.”

“I have dreamt of a danger here. One hidden.”

Kafsa could not believe his luck, and his response had to seem in no way feigned, but thankfully the soldier was now casting his eyes around for any danger. “You have *dreamt* of it. Could you come and share this dream with those who seek to circumvent this danger?” he asked, in seeming humility, now lying on the run.

He was not the great liar that was often found in the lost reality of a sociopath, but he *had* learned how to lie well from just a child, as his parents had been so strict in what was *deemed good* and what was *definitely* not good. It had been a natural response to protect himself early in his life. Often great Messages produce fools, who damage their children’s hearts, and lay waste to their souls and their intellect, in the attempt to follow their small perception of them. Such poor ones

are usually ignorant of essential Wisdom for many reasons, as it is with any extreme ideologues who rail angrily; be they religious or secular.

“This guard of yours will draw *attention*. We *must* go alone.”

“I will follow discretely,” said Ed, making sure by his tone that it was not heard as just a suggestion.

“I am not sure,” responded Kafsa, honestly, but not. All he needed was her at *some* distance from the soldier to do what he had to do. He was, and had already taken things, off plan. His *own plan* was always his only plan. The redhead had treated his high duty like it was a joke. He saw her guarded looks, and he would show her that it was not.

“He’s *not here*,” called a mercenary into the comm’s, as they had set the place to take Sasha and Ed. Kafsa was to draw them there, and when they took Ed, the girl was to be his. But he could not guarantee anything in a firefight, and he definitely wanted her to die by *his* hand. That it would be done by *some scum*, was *not right*.

“Yep, something’s wrong,” put in Hal.

“Go after him! Now! All of you!” yelled Elle, knowing that the stupid fool had botched it somehow. She had warned him about the soldier’s ability, even beyond his ability in an open fight. Then Elle grimaced, as she now allowed herself to figure that maybe that fool had made a *fool* of her.

Two groups left cover to grab Ed, and Hal knew he needed to take out Cycle now, so they could gather the super-soldier. So, the game was now on in earnest.

Ed followed Sasha and her new friend, with Cycle also helping Ed keep a good distance, and see around corners. Cycle called quietly, “Blind spot,” and Ed, raced to the corner to check Sasha was still okay. Ed called back, “Good,” but got no response from Cycle. Ed didn’t need a response to that, and besides that, the sniper’s work was all about stealth, so sometimes he went silent for good reason. There had been no sign of activity here so far, so it was likely Cycle was now resetting his position.

Sasha looked back to the corner Ed had peaked around, and he now came around it, a good way behind them. She had been getting nervous, as Kafsa didn’t seem to know where he was going. He had hesitated three times now, just long enough each time for her to notice. As she looked back for Ed, she saw mercenaries coming down a street a long way behind her protector. She called out to him, as Kafsa pointed Ed out, calling out, “There! That’s him!”

Then, Kafsa, *the great sentinel*, pulled a knife, and screamed, somewhat squealing, “*You are the Dark!*”

He brought down the knife, just as Sasha jumped. Ed was gone too, and the Perpaduan roared over the merc’s down low over the city.

Ed and Sasha found themselves in the staging area on the bottom deck. But no Cycle.

“We haven’t got Cycle!”

“That *fool’s* up here, Cap,” called Mech. Then adding, “Should’a jumped him into the *engine room*,” with a satisfied smile for Cycle, and a nod that said ‘Yeah. I could do that any time’.

Hal was down. Cycle had seen him stalking him and let him come in real close. He had moved out of sight for an instant, then ducked back out again when Hal made his move on him,

putting three stun charges into his neck. It was very painful, and Hal went down quickly, just as Mech jumped Cycle, and one of the team leaders called over the comms', "They've *jumped*. They're in the sky! Repeat: They are on ship!"

The star riders were soon in the sky and Elle's ship was over the top of them. Her scope man had missed Mech's take-off, because of a jam wave sent from Mech's friends at the spaceport, but he had soon picked up their signature over the city.

"They'll be on us! Get us out of here!" commanded Ed.

"Wait for it, Cap," said Mech, with a knowing smile.

Mech had deployed the tick when Elle's ship had moved into orbit above the bus. The tick was a thin black, foot-wide, ring that deflected sensors. It was designed to covertly settle onto the hull of a ship and lock itself on with just a small magnetic field. It then slowly, but surely, drew the power out of a ship's systems and left them cold until they found it. They now sailed past the helpless Elle as they left atmo', then shot off into the black as two star riders came at them from below. The Perpaduan was too fast for these smaller craft, and it had the jump on them. It was soon out of range, and out of sight.

"How'd you know to come and get us, Mech?" asked Ed, after he and Sasha had made their way up to the upper deck.

"They sent a team to the spaceport. My people saw 'em and told me there seemed to be a lot of anxious chatter. We had the drive in, so I decided to jump you, but you were out of range. Didn't want to do comm's, so just came after you, knowin' you might have had the same good company."

“Nice work, Mech”

“Nice work, Mech” echoed Cycle.

“It was perfect timing,” said Sasha.

“It was *Bot*. Did ya’ get your job done, Sash?” asked Mech.

“Some freak is after her. But we know him now,” said Ed. “Whoever he is, he’s not gonna stop. Can’t believe he slid those lies by me like that.”

“*Lies*,” echoed Cycle.

“Sure glad we didn’t waste the tick with those raiders back on Scinta, eh.”

“Providentialated,” piped up Bot, to give clarity on the odds against them all making a good jump back to a fast-moving ship, as well as the circumstances that attended them not deploying the tick on Scinta.

“Sure was, Bot man,” agreed Mech, not really seeing Bot’s full intention, but seeing the perfection of how things panned out. He then shared a look with Sasha to show that he saw the design in it all, and she smiled wide.

“Extranaturally providentialated,” added Bot, but not as a reiteration of its first comment as the crew thought it was. You see, Mech had linked the fifth Icon to Bot just before he went after Ed, Cycle, and Sasha, as he and his mechanic friends had gotten the new drives installed very quickly. The Icons were linked with Bot *and* Sasha, so her thoughts had called out for help, so Bot had passed it on.

But its last comment was also because it had now discovered a map forming in its programming. It was a sphere with one of the Icons spinning vertically at its centre. Two more sat spinning vertically beyond the spherical map, one above it and one below. The other two were to the left and right of the sphere, and again, out a little way from it, spinning horizontally. Bot immediately jumped them further out of danger, as was the plan, but not to Mech's prescribed coordinates. The computer bot had now shot them off into unknown space.

KAFSA HAD NOW BECOME KNOWN TO SASHA AND ED. His *intentions* also very clear by what went down on Apellaus. His alliance with Elle too, was now plain to them.

Kafsa now made the excuse that the super-soldier had made it impossible for him to stay on plan. "I just had to do what I thought was best, and go ahead like nothing was wrong," he said, not sharing his failed second attempt on Sasha's life. "We *almost* had them, so I wasn't wrong."

"We went after you. *That's* why we *nearly netted them*, and you sent *no* signal of any change," argued Elle. She now knew that Ed knew Kafsa, so this zealot was no longer of good use to her. But she would let him live just in case she needed him for a diversion.

"You warned me about not underestimating him, and I just wasn't game to hit the button in my pocket." lied Kafsa, some more. He had to keep in with these hunters because they had the means that he didn't, and they did not understand how important *his* work was no matter how much he sought to explain it to them. The redhead was intent on that soldier, but he was no danger. That *woman* was.

Elle responded with the right words and noises, and Kafsa was very happy with that. They both smiled inside loving it that they had things right where they needed them to be.

“They jumped and were gone...*again*. I won’t repeat what I screamed into the air when they did, but that soldier and his crew were good at the game, and I only wanted him *even more* after that. We followed their jump path when we regained power, but we lost them on the second one. They would have made more jumps anyway, and every jump made it exponentially harder to find the next.

But it was still only a matter of time before we found them again, and I had an *ace* up my sleeve for casting a wider net on jump activity. I had had more than enough of them slipping through my fingers, and I knew, that it was time to call in more players.”

Earth

“I hadn’t wanted to call in that marker from my Topian Admiral; a gentleman who I had helped out with a personal matter. But they had the power, ships, and technology I needed to net my payday. I certainly wanted to cast off that fool from Scinta to their care as we continued the hunt. I was sick of the sight of him and done listening to his ravings.

Anyway, we cast a wider net, *and* went looking for a time, but mostly we waited. We used the Topian fleet’s scanners to try and find them among the planets, eventually working out they had jumped beyond the charts and the Topian’s sensors. I was ropeable, but they were definitely out there, and my Topian cohort suggested that they couldn’t last forever out in the black.

I was set to wait for as long as it took, and *so* was my Admiral. I had him on a debt of honour, and Toppins were all about that.”

“Where the hell is this thing taking us, Mech?” asked Ed, now strapped in the pilot’s seat.

They were all strapped in, now that Bot had kept jumping. Mech was now in the seat in front of Bot, turned, and locked into position towards him. Cycle was in the co-pilot’s seat, but

that was so that Cookie could be away from the windscreen. Jumping, while looking out, disoriented and upset her. Cycle was all for giving up his favourite seat today, for that reason alone, but he loved being up the front with Ed. They were brothers, and he would die for Ed.

“Where are we *goin*’, Mech?” asked Ed, again, when he just got silence.

“Earth, Cap,” finally responded Mech, smiling with a bit of wonder, and a little disbelief, as he continued to work two of Bot’s screens.

“*Earth*,” expressed Mamma, very glad of it, and tapping Sasha on the shoulder in congratulation on her finding her goal. “Us women know what we’re doing, eh.”

“We sure do, Mamma,” agreed Sasha, smiling back. She was in no disbelief, as she had always known she was to go there. It had been knowledge all the time; rather than certainty, it now seemed to her.

“It’s been jumping us all over, so does it know where it’s going?” asked Ed.

“Maybe Bot can’t relate to unknown space, so it’s just gathering its bearings; building a bridge between old information and the new information that those bricks seem to have provided to him.”

“Dumb...”

“*Yeah, yeah*, Cycle. We’ve heard it all before.”

Cycle just smiled at Mech’s reaction, very pleased with himself to have got a rise out of his adversary. It was like hitting a target bang on for him, and it was always satisfying.

“I was right about that woman not stopping, and that freak we found won’t be giving up either. It might be you’ll stay on Earth when we find it, Sash. It might be the best place for you. It might be a good place for us *all* to settle. You know, the *hell* out of it all, and away from those freaks,” offered Ed.

“I think I have to return, Ed.”

It was hard for the crew to hear that, as they all liked that idea. Well except for Cycle, because he was happy as long as he was with his crew. It was a letdown for the others, even though they were not sure of what it would be really like. Mech was definitely looking forward to learning more about the technology there. The Icons were *something else*, and only Bot came close to them in his experience around the planets.

“That’s a shame,” mused Mamma, as having peace in life was a deep underlying need in her, figuring that Earth would be such a place. Her boys liked the challenge and the work, but she just really needed peace. That was actually why she was with the boys. It was that they looked after her, but a true peaceful life exploring culinary delights and simply creating new dishes was what she really craved.

She didn’t dwell on her disappointment though, as she, more than any there, knew that *life was life*, and like Cycle, she was mostly happy just to be with her family. The Perpaduan and these men provided all she really *needed*. They had been the most stable and safe place she had found in her life, so even though she was disappointed, she was also content.

“It *is* a shame, Mamma,” agreed Ed, but thinking back on the surprise connection with his kind and what that might mean to him and his future. It relieved him a little, and he could feel some passion in him about exploring all that.

“Let’s all unstrap and get together in the mess...and talk about our *feelings*,” then suggested Mech, like they were all getting soft, and he wasn’t. It was also an instruction, as Mech had closed down the jumps for dinner and the sleep cycle.

“You gotta *have* feelings to talk about ‘em, Mech,” shot back Ed.

“Yeah, Mech. You gotta...”

“*Shut up*, Cycle. You’re like a goddamned parrot.”

“You’re squawkin’ like one,” retorted Cycle.

Mech hated it when Cycle got one over him. He was *way* smarter than that lanky fool, but he always got under his skin, as well as having him wet with his practice pot shots. He was about to launch into some more *back ‘n forth*, when Ed said, “Let’s just go over some things while our last little altercation is fresh, eh. Maybe look to what we may have to do if Sash wants to return to the planets.”

“You don’t have to come back with me, you know,” suggested Sasha.

The crew hadn’t thought of that, well Mech did, but if the crew were going back, he was too.

“Oh, we can’t leave you, darling. Especially with that mad man out there,” put in Mamma.

“Yep, the way he squealed when he had the knife out. He is *not* stoppin’,” added Ed.

“I trust...”

“We know you do. But we’re a *crew*, and nobody goes in alone.”

“Thanks, Ed. Thanks,” she repeated, to all the crew.

It was all just the way it was. Life and the nature of each of these soul’s was running this design. Even though they were all deciding, it was also like this story had been written, and they all knew it.

“If people, and the planets, come to this kind of caring for each other, then the future will truly be bright,” added Sasha.

The crew were all a bit awed by that. They *all* now felt, knew, that they were more than they had thought. They strangely felt like good people. None of them were without deep sins or emotional issues. Each one was just doing their best to make it through, but they now saw in themselves, and each other, much more than they had seen before. Even *before* this crazy ride they were *doing okay*. The crew felt noble right now, or really, they got a glimpse of the nobility inherent in them. They had gone beyond mere survival, or even being stronger by staying together; they *were* family; each for the other, to the end.

Any reflection on their last altercation with Elle, or what the future held, fell away to nothing as they all unbuckled and headed into the mess for dinner. It had been a big day; a dangerous, but *marvellous*, day.

IT WAS NOW HALFWAY THROUGH THE NEXT WAKE CYCLE, and Bot was jumping around again. Mech was getting concerned about that, because the first big jump into unknown space would have depleted them plenty. The small jumps were less of a concern, but on top of the big one, and the fact that Bot still kept on, was worrying him. He figured Bot knew that, but it was

eating at him a little. Well...a little more than that, as he thought that maybe the Icons were a bit in charge, and he was also tired of being strapped in for so long.

When Bot finally stopped jumping, he pronounced “Earth...inascertianably inascertainable.”

Mech got up to check why, and found they were lower on power than he thought. The ship’s systems were definitely set to stop power drain to this level, and there should have been depletion alarms going off before now.

“Damn it Bot. Why’d ya’ do all the jumps then!”

“Positionalariuos resolution.”

“Gelfin’ Icons!” cursed Mech, realising that the Icons *had* to be responsible. Maybe they were designed to find Earth without regard for anything else. They had indeed circumvented Bot’s safety parameter programming to fulfill their purpose, but they weren’t as ignorant of wider realities as he thought.

“Stop your cussin’, boy,” said Mamma, as she unstrapped and went to the galley. Cookie was going to fix a special meal for tonight, as she had decided they needed it. Cookie got real joy from creating something special, and Mamma wanted to do something special for her growing family; no matter how long it would be that way. The Mamma part of Cookie had been taking more of the lead lately, so it was good to let Cookie loose for a while. It wasn’t a multi-personality thing with these two. It was a little bit akin to it, but not like Lula.

Mech worked with Bot resetting its protocols. The Icons had done a real job on the computer robot, but he was still there. Mech could feel him, and as he started looking further, he

noticed a key set of coding that read the same in Bot as it did in the Icons. It was just coding before now.

“The Icons are certainly magical. Maybe they know something we don’t,” offered Sasha.

“They got some of the same code as Bot it seems,” said Mech, as he checked a little more.

“I knew there was something *magic* about Bot.”

“Really, that’s wonderful, Mech. But the Icons do much more. They produce dreams.”

“Mmmm” responded Mech, gruffly. It not being a protest for Bot’s credentials up against the Icons, but a need to know more about them. “Tell me about ‘em. I mean your dreams, and how you reckon those Icons are doing it?”

“They have an essential spiritual reality, beyond the mechanics.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure, but what *happens*,” responded Mech, pushing Sasha’s God stuff aside to get to the bottom of how they functioned.

Sasha smiled at that and did all she could to explain how it seemed to her. A long conversation followed that went all the way to dinner time, punctuated only by Mech getting up and down to keep Bot on track, and twice to check out some code on the Icons that the conversation led him to. He had to get control of the systems again before he worked out how to augment the power they had left. He just wasn’t going to take the chance, no matter how much faith they were all gathering on this strange journey, and in these Icons.

“It’s *all* cause and effect, Sash,” argued Mech, after Sasha had made a suggestion about the nature of the Icons. “This is a physical reality. Those Icons are made of metal, and they have been *made*.”

“What about Bot, the ghost, and the faith you have in it.”

“I still need to know more, Sash. So, stay with me for a bit longer.”

“Special dinner’s just about up. So, you’ll be leavin’ it ‘til later,” then said Cookie.

Mech looked over to the galley and saw Cookie. He instinctively knew it was her, and truth be known he was a little afraid of her. Just enough for him to let it go for now.

He was thinking it was electromagnetic discharges, all through the meal, but that still didn’t take all the mystery out of how things had happened. After a time, he realised that their electro-signature had to be compatible to the electrical firing of Sasha’s brain, and somehow, he thought that maybe she was related to the initial maker of these Icons. Sasha had explained that the first Mediator of Besede may have made them and that the last most likely distributed them among the planets, especially as he closed the other Open Rock’s there. Maybe her brain wiring was just different somehow. This was all just a possibility though, as the tech was far more advanced than what he was used to.

But he was still all beside himself when the linkage between Sasha and the Icons occurred to him, only his low-grade fear of Cookie holding him silent while they ate. Ed could see him working it, and even Cycle could not bait him as he was so focused on it all. He was even thinking that maybe some of that core programming was the ghost in Bot, and that it worked *him*, or reached *his* particular brain wiring. It was all coming together, and he sure was getting excited. It was all he could do to not pop when he had to do the wash up after dinner, and he was hoping like hell that Sasha didn’t head down for the night before he finished this mundane task.

He would look back to the table every ten seconds or so to make sure. But Sasha knew he wanted to talk some more, and ended up saying, “I’m not going anywhere, Mech. I’m getting curious myself.”

He liked that. He liked open minds. This girl sure was *something else*, even if they did work this all out, tech’ wise. To him, an open mind was strange in a Centre lover like her, but then he hadn’t hung around with those types anyway. It seemed to him that they preferred superstition, especially when he did dabble in conversations with some of them. To him, so much of their stories were obviously symbolic, if anything at all, but they seemed to need them to be literal. There *was* a lot of literal stuff, but definitely not all of it, and definitely not up against all reason, the reality of life, and the laws of science.

“Everything in the physical universe is explainable. Maybe we have to learn more about things sometimes, but it’s all about the laws of physics and the reality of maths, Sash,” argued Mech, after he had explained his theory on the Icons. He reckoned that it was solid. It required more scrutiny, and testing, but it was still a good theory for now. Science was a process, and really, science is the gradual discovery of things. Some locked in, but other things going through model after model, due to experiment after experiment, and as more was learnt.

“I agree,” said Sasha.

“You agree!”

“Why wouldn’t I?” she asked, which had Ed, Mamma, and Cycle, smiling.

“Well, you’re all *Centred up*. All religious and everything. I mean I know you have an open mind, but...” finished Mech, just a little lost for words.

“That’s not very scientific. I think your theory of *me* needs a little more work.”

Mech smiled, admitting, “It sure looks that way, Sash.”

“To me, cause and effect even increases the possibility of something greater than us existing. A deeper intelligence at play in the formation of the universe and its constant evolution is a reasonable position, as even the Perpaduan with all its varied systems, and those systems being kept up, wouldn’t exist or function without the intelligent creative force of the likes of you. Atoms all the way to our impossible universe are ordered.”

“Intelligent and creative,” agreed Mech, eyeballing the rest of the crew, so they gathered *that* part.

“To me the Centre created the laws, so it is not strange to me that He uses them.”

“What about all that miracle stuff?”

“There are deeper realities in us, Mech. In everything, and to me, this deeper reality underpins this physical reality. My soul can see things beyond my current position in physical time and space. My dreams are so. They *are* a subjective experience, but seeing the future, or feeling someone close to me is in trouble, have happened so often for me, that me having a deeper reality beyond time and space is *objective* to me.”

“So, what about those Icons, and the possibility of you being a descendent of the maker?”

“That’s a mystery to me, Mech. It could just be dumb luck, as you often say. But if your foundational theory holds, and it *is* a good one, then maybe we need keep to what is here now and what is more provable here and now.”

“Yeah, for sure, Sash. But we still can’t account for you running into the first brick. The odds against that are impossible,” added Mech, now more working *with* Sasha.

“Maybe that’s part of the mystery, and a gift of confirmation to help us on our way.”

“There’s definitely a hand in this, but who’s hand I’m not sure. You want to be careful girl. You could be being collected, and who knows how many before you.”

“I think the theory of higher guidance, is more likely than some conspiracy like that,” suggested Sasha, with a wide smile.

“*Yeah*. That’s *not* scientific,” put in Cycle, to bait Mech.

“*Shut up*, dummy!”

“*You* shut up,” retorted Cycle, glad to have gathered his old friend back into his web again, and chuckling into his hand with his shoulders jumping.

The lights went out.

“Bot!”

“Power-save for jump. Safety positions, please,” called Bot, which had them all scrambling for the belted seats on the flightdeck. Mamma was the last one to secure her harness, or was that Lula, and Bot shot them away.

THE ICONS HAD BEEN WORKING ON A SOLUTION. A solution to get them to Earth with what power they had left. Bot was really turning into their plaything, no matter what function Mech had regathered. But even so, it was still somewhat an interaction.

The bus was on atmo' entry when it popped out of the jump; tearing down towards the planet.

"*Gelf*," called out Ed.

"Bot'll bring us in, Cap."

"I'm getting' over this, Mech. Between that bot and those goddamned Icons, we're just quail."

"Just *quail*," agreed Cycle.

Mech looked down at his console in the co-pilot's seat, seeing that they would have no power to lift back up off this rock, so he just sat back and left it to the ghosts in the machine do their thing. Mamma was as white as ghost, and Cycle looked across at her very nervously.

The ship finally landed, crouched down on its legs, and powered down. It was night here, and they had no idea if the air was breathable, if there were bad news beings here, or anything else. They had not seen any lights as they came into land, so they did not know what to think.

"Breathe *deep* my friends," came a recording from Bot, that Mech had put in, like he was an old-fashioned preacher. It was an indication that Bot had ascertained that the air was breathable. He did it on any unknown rock. "*Breathe deep, and rejoice, for you have reached the Promised Land.*"

“You gotta change that, Mech.”

“All good fun, Cap.”

“See’n we got good air, I’ll take a look around,” said Cycle, unharnessing himself and sliding down the ladder a second later.

“Keep focused. Just get a look at what you *need to*. We got no sensors for now it seems,” Ed called after him.

“Sure, Ed,” came Cycle’s reply from below, and he was soon out the door, goggled, armed, and on his way.

Ed, Mech, and very thankfully for Cycle, *Mamma*, all kind of looked a bit blankly at each other. They were not used to being on another world without a plan or being firmly in charge of their own gear. Ed was glad that the bus didn’t have much power because he didn’t even know if the Icons would have taken off without Cycle if it did. It sure was strange, feeling weak, and not having much of an idea about what or where from here. But it was just another time to surrender. It seemed to Ed that surrender was working on becoming a constant companion.

It wasn’t too long before Cycle called in. He had headed for the highest ground nearby to take a look around. He had found some kind of station. A temporary staging post of tents, an antenna array, and what seemed to be a tiny drilling rig, but it did not seem to be military or miners. Even Cycle was feeling a little on new ground because he couldn’t work out what he was scouting. A loud laugh then came from one of the tents, actually on the other side of the largest tent. It was a distance away, so Cycle had not heard the quiet conversation until the laugh.

“I don’t know what it is, Ed. But it feels tame.”

“Give me your position. I’ll come out. Not much use here anyway,” replied Ed, as Mech found his feet and started looking into Bot and the systems again.

It didn’t take long to get there, but Ed was a bit stuck on what he was looking at too. They sent the live feedback to Mech, to see what he thought, casting it around slowly at the camp and its equipment, zooming it in and out.

“Looks scientific to me,” offered Mech.

“With no lookouts?” asked Ed. He had seen mining exploration, thinking that was what Mech meant, but they always had lookouts. He and Cycle had never seen a scientific expedition.

“Ed, look. On some high planets they do this stuff. Check the soils, the water table, document and learn about plant and animal life. It’s all about learning about things.”

“Why the hell would they do that? Don’t scientists just make drugs, war machines, and super soldiers?”

“Geeze, Ed. There’s more to scientists than that. They’re just exploring, and they ain’t afraid of anything by the look of things, so I reckon we’re all good to get what we can gather from ‘em. Maybe they’re why the Icons set us down here.”

“*We’ll* check them out to make sure,” said Ed, signing off.

Mech smiled, as he knew the likes of these civilised folks, and he would have loved to have seen the reaction when two openly armed yobs entered their camp.

He wasn’t wrong. Looks of sheer terror came over all their faces, until Ed, assured them that he and Cycle were just folks in need of some help and directions.

One then said, “You shouldn’t be here.”

“You gonna make me leave,” responded Ed, with a furrowed brow.

The man melted back into his seat.

“He just means this planet isn’t clear for settlement yet,” explained a lady. “He meant it for your own good.”

“I reckon *I know* what’s good for me. We really would appreciate your help, but I don’t need no *front* tellin’ me what’s for my own good.”

Most of them just felt threatened again, but the lady who had spoken stood up, now asked cordially, “Where are you from?”

“We’re from hell, and we are looking for Earth. We are out of power, and we need to get there.”

She smiled, trying to imagine these boys on Earth, and she smiled, saying, “I am sure we can help you get there, friend.”

“Thanks, name’s Ed, and that’s real kind of you.”

“It’s our pleasure, Ed,” she said respectfully and honestly. “We didn’t hear your ship coming in. Is it a good way from here?”

“A bit of a way. We have antigrav’ drives that run silent. What do you folks do here?” asked Ed, now turning on the comms’ so Mech could hear what they had to say. Ed wasn’t really worried now, but Mech might help them communicate better when it came down to the wheeling

and dealing. He had no idea that the offer of help was actual *help*. A gift, or more truly, a natural open sharing that existed in their culture.

“We have a large science station, and we have a few outstations like this, which we move around. We are working on future colonisation here, but we need to know what’s here. You know toxins, microbes, and checking the soils can grow food and how the water works here. There’s not a lot of it above the ground, so we are looking into it. There is much to come to understand before we can recommend it for settlement, not recommend it, or figure out the population load this planet can sustain.”

“Why do you do that? Aren’t your people hardy?”

“We are and we aren’t, I suppose, but we’re not *foolish*.”

“Our Old Fathers just went looking,” commented Cycle, from what he heard in the old stories and the hardships they had endured.

“Really! Where are you from?”

“The planets. We only just found out that Earth was real, and that’s only me and my crew. It’s just a myth on the planets. We have a guest who told us she needed to find it, and we can trade, or she can pay for any help.”

“Oh, we don’t need to trade. We can help you with directions and some power. We can talk about that later on.”

These people *were* different, *for sure*. They weren’t intent on money or survival. They were smart and seemed like clean living, hardworking, folk. It was all Cycle could do to keep himself from smelling them to try and work out what the hell they were. He kind of smelled them anyway

without their notice and not being all up close. They seemed a bit boring to Ed, like they would not be on for a good time, but here they were, relaxing at night just like he liked to.

In any case, the crew were all invited for treats and hot beverages. Mech sure did like one of their drinks; raspberry lemonade they called it. It was really sweet, and he asked if he could maybe take some bottles of it with him when he found out that they had plenty. Mamma was very happy to be invited into polite company and kept silent mostly, so it wouldn't end somehow. Sasha was quiet at first and later asked more about Earth.

They explained that life on Earth was lived for higher purpose, and that people endeavoured in all kinds of ways. That people were equals, but natural builders were not held back. There were some with more, and others rich in various capacities, but they used their abundance in service to the whole. Their learning of people in the walled cities and on the high rocks not helping bring succour to the low rocks, and the broken places, saddened them greatly.

They talked about the first settlers who had left Earth some millennia ago, explaining that most assumed that they had all perished, but some did believe that they were still out there. Even a Great One had gone out to seek them some hundreds of years later, but still, no word had come back from the waves of souls who had left Earth back then, or the Messenger.

One of the scientists commented, "It was all so long ago, and you now just showing up, is a little more than unexpected. It's almost a forgotten story on Earth now." But most of these people were a little awed at contact with people who it seemed were the descendants of those lost settlers.

The conversation rolled on with only one cautious soul. It was Ed. He was close mouthed, and he even touched Sasha's arm once, and cleared his throat at Mech, to stop them talking about the Icons. He wasn't feeling these people. It was like, all except the Cathy woman, that they were

not there, not alive somehow, or not being honest. He didn't really know. It was strange for Ed, because they seemed normal enough. In any case, he was being cautious for now, and them being scientists, his guard was naturally up.

The night ended as Mamma grabbed Mech by the ear, got him up out of his chair, and started pulling him toward the Perpaduan.

"Com'on Mamma! I was just talkin' to those ladies," he said, smiling back at them, and winking, so they understood he was just being kind letting Mamma take him away like this.

"I know what you were up to. You know I can't stand you boys disrespecting women."

Mech well could have broken away, but he didn't, even though he was sure enjoying Cathy's company. Playing his part when Mamma went off like this, and about other things on the bus, were a bit of how he loved this old girl. It was a respect thing. He knew where she came from and the den of wolves that she was born into. But he really didn't know the half of it. It had been so horrendous that she had shattered a little inside. Cookie was the gritty defensive part of Mamma, and Mech always knew instinctively who he was speaking to and interacting with. Lula was most especially the result of the depth of the pain and dysfunction of her childhood and youth.

Mech though, was from a high rock, and always liked playing the low rock yob. He never did tell the crew where he was from. He could see and understand more than he made out, and he was super smart. Nothing these people talked about tonight was above his ability to understand. He had been a natural since he was a child. He would read something or learn something, and just understand it. Some people are born like that, naturally gifted, and some people are like Cookie. Beautifully broken mammas.

Mech didn't give a damn what these people thought of him...well...with the exception of Cathy. He could see them trying to talk down to him and Cookie, so he gave them what they expected. He played the part of a job so well that Mamma got unhappy with him. She had no idea what he was doing and just reacted. Well, he was sweet on that Cathy. But these people weren't being mean; they were being stupid, and Mamma and Mech had given them just what they expected.

A lot of people are like that. They can assume they are smarter, better people, more sophisticated, or more in the know, and look down on folks. Sometimes even in a kindness that really isn't kindness, and in seeking to inform people who do not need to be informed.

"Your friends are funny."

"Cookie's bad broken. Mech's more than you reckon, and I've had enough of your company," said Ed, getting up and walking off with a backwards wave.

"*Don't* be like that. A little respect goes a *long* way. Judgement doesn't go anywhere, friend," called out Cathy.

"It *sure* doesn't, and you are *not* my friend. If you folk are an example of people from Earth, well I don't think much of it."

That confused Cathy, and Sasha stayed silent as Ed walked away. He could see now that Sasha was far more than even these evolved folk. Far more. It had actually only made his wish to help her greater. It was strange how this woman was. Beyond the likes any, most probably.

"I don't get what just happened," commented Cathy.

“You don’t understand where they come from,” started Sasha. “You don’t know their story and the deep pain of many who live on the planets we come from. You can’t *see* them, and sometimes we don’t see ourselves a little.”

These souls were genuinely taken back. A few of them then realised that they had looked down on them, *even with* the intent of kindness, and even though Ed *was* judging them.

“So, what’s *your* story?” then asked one of the men, by way of respect.

“Mine is one of love, nurture, and good grace. Maybe tomorrow you can ask them *their* stories.”

“Yes,” agreed two of them, and nods of the others agreed to it.

Late in the night, Sasha came upon Ed in the cockpit. She remembered back to her father sitting out on the porch at times when she woke in the night. She loved going out to talk to him as he reflected on things. She figured it was a bit of a man thing. They just did this sort of thing when they needed their own mind for a while. She didn’t know if he did it every night like Ed, but it was part of the reason she liked joining Ed up here.

There *was* more to it, as she liked Ed’s company and loved helping him gently see more. It wasn’t a preaching thing for her, just giving love to another soul, and she was always respectful; only sharing what was good for him, and only if he was open to it. It was *his* life, and she understood that. She wondered, like Ed, just how long she would be with them. Her inner voice told her that it was going to end sometime, but that was another reason to enjoy Ed’s company. She genuinely enjoyed it, as did Ed hers, even though she challenged him. Maybe her challenging him was the part of the reason he liked to see her up here.

“Things are *sure* movin’ on. This whole road with you has been a *real* education.”

“Yes. So much has happened. I’m glad we can all relax a little from the strain of having our two new friends on our tail.”

“*Friends*, eh,” said Ed, with a wry smile, still looking out at the night sky here.

Sasha smiled, saying, “People get lost in the violent throes of life, their egos, things, or even deep beliefs that don’t hold water. Some of these things make them just broken, or lead them to fall to their own malevolence, and bring harm on others. They are to be pitied; and helped if possible.”

“Or *avoided like the plague*.”

“Yes, we have to wise. Many we can only pray for.”

“Do you *pray* for them?”

“Yes, I do, Ed. They’re lost and so I pray for them. I pray for all of us. For you and the crew, and for us to be delivered safely on.”

“Can’t do the prayin’ thing. That’s *your* job I reckon, and I ain’t beggin’ for anything.”

“It’s *asking*, not begging. And anyway, it’s much more than that.”

“It just *isn’t* natural, Sasha.”

“It *is*, Erron. It’s just like you and me talking. You *talk* to Him...”

“And He talks back? *Sure*.”

“He *does*.”

“You keep *believing* that, sister.”

“...and He listens, and he helps you with things. He may not give you what you want because it may stunt your growth; or be too important that it does not happen for the wider order, and the sake of others. But you can just sit, and talk to Him from your most honest heart, if that’s all that feels right to you. He knows all of you, so there’s no pressure.”

“He won’t want’a talk to *me*.”

“I am sure you would enjoy talking to *Him*. There is *something* about respecting something greater than us and being humble before it. It brings us to the ground and provides inspiration.”

“Look Sash, I just like comin’ up here and reflecting a little; letting my mind settle.”

“Reflection is even greater than prayer, but just talking with Him adds to reflection.”

“I don’t know about prayin’, but I do like that ‘*wise action*’ saying?”

“What do you mean?”

“You said a little while back that we should...pray *and* take wise action. The words *wise action* adds to my vision, or something. It makes me sit back and watch a little more, see wider, maybe more so deeper into things, you know.”

“Sure; and talking to Him honestly while you reflect on things is like that too. Talking to Him makes things more in many ways. There would be no harm in just *trying* it,” suggested Sasha.

Ed blew out a short breath from his nose, that said ‘I don’t know’, and just looked away again out to the stars. But he began talking to the Centre without Sasha’s knowledge. The ‘honest’ part of what Sasha had shared had taken him, and he talked to Him about his life and this journey.

He didn't ask him for anything, as he didn't think it was right to ask for anything from some fella' he really didn't believe in. But it *felt* good, and a little right, just straight talking to Him. He liked it a lot, *strangely enough*. "*Maybe I do believe in this Dude out in the black just a little,*" he thought, after he finished. He then laughed out loud, but to himself.

"What's funny?" asked Sasha.

"This whole damned thing, Sash. This whole damned thing."

Sasha smiled, as her heart rose in her chest and her eyes watered just a little. He *had* been talking to the Centre. She just *knew* it.

She had come to care deeply for this Erron Rowes and his struggle to come to what was good. She had had no such struggle. Her life was blessed, and grace flowed all about her always. Her parents and family, and her life, had been safe, secure, and loving. Nothing like this poor man. She teared a little more at the malevolence within his making, and his upbringing, and how it took him to killing like it was okay. The torture he must have endured on the inside as a child to easily allow him that, must have been terrible. It was a wonder he was not lifeless ash. His soul *had* called him out of the darkest place, and still did. It had *prevailed* when it should not have. She looked across at him looking out into the stars, and she smiled a little.

Ed felt the same caring for her. It was obvious to Mamma because Ed never followed *anyone*. He followed her *in a way*, a little like poor Cycle did, but more removed and less obvious. Erron Rowes had never fallen to love. He wasn't a hater, but his makeup made him a warrior and it was ever focused to that. It was just who he was. Him feeling more for this special soul, was just another revelation of his humanity that this lady had brought out of him. But this girl would be on her way soon enough, and they would be back on the job...well...after going after the redhead and

that crazed fool. He would never tell Sasha that, and he kind'a didn't hate them, but it was going to get done. He might even pray for them when he dispatched their souls to hell, he had thought.

THE EARTH WOMAN, WHO HAD SETTLED ED INITIALLY, now came into camp. Mech was sure taken by her, as she was different from the other scientists. He had enjoyed her freedom of being, as well as her thoughts on various theories, not to mention informing him of others. She didn't talk to him like a dummy, which seemed to be the general attitude to all the crew last night. She was able to think for herself, and not get lost in group think. He sure liked that. And besides all that, she was a looker, so he had a big smile for her as he jumped out of the bus.

"So, this is the Perpaduan," commented Cathy.

"Yep, this is *my baby*."

Cathy gave him a look like she was a little jealous, just for fun, and Mech smiled wider, saying, "*Damn*, you are *hard* not to like."

"This ship is too," she replied, meaning it, but saying it like she was playing it cool.

"Damn!" expressed Mech, joyously, as he did a little dance. "I'm all yours, sweetheart. You don't have to play hard to get with me."

"Why, *good sir*. I don't know *what you mean*."

That had them both laughing as Mamma popped her head out the staging door, and Ed and Sasha exited to greet their guest.

She got straight down to business, saying, “You’ll have trouble when you hit Earth, but I have a possible way for you to get there.”

“What do you mean, *trouble*?” asked Ed.

“Not *your* kind of trouble, Ed. More the kind of trouble you had dealing with my cohorts last night. Your worlds, your lives, are *very* different to ours. Yours are chaotic and seem quite violent, and the ways of Earth are not. They’re ordered and nurturing. Our lives are more so about the wellbeing of the whole. I suppose I relate better to you all because I prefer to be out here. I love my home, and all it stands for, but I’m naturally an out-rider, what my culture calls a long-paddock woman.”

None of them had heard that saying, but they knew what it meant, just the same.

“So, like I said, what trouble?”

Cathy laughed at Ed’s way, and answered, “There are laws and ways of doing things there. You will have to surrender your weapons on entry, and you will have to trust that the authorities, and others who you have to deal with, do have your best interests at heart.”

“Like last night.”

“*Yes*, Ed. *Your* kind of human will feel a bit constricted there, and you will have problems trusting us because our reality and thinking are so different. But if you can relax a little, you may begin to understand how things work, and enjoy your time there.”

The lead man now drove into camp on a quadbike, and explained that he had called their contact in, and that these visitors needed to go to the main base for consultation.

Ed just looked at him.

“Well, that’s a...*request* really,” stuttered the man a little.

They *all* just looked at him, and he got even more uncomfortable, then said, “If you are going to Earth you will have to accept our law and form of order.”

Sasha then found herself saying, “You will all have to get used to dealing with folk like us soon enough.”

The crew, the two visitors, *and even Sasha*, were taken back by that. She didn’t know where it came from, and it showed. But Ed sure as hell loved it, especially the *us* part.

The man was just about to launch into something, when Cathy piped up, “There is a slingshot near here. We could provide you with enough power to get you there, if I got the translation of our power measurements right from our conversation last night, Mech.”

“You mean before Mamma saved you from me.”

Cathy smiled, “Yes. Before that. But I will need to see your power systems and get an idea of the nature of your energy banks for the right kind of transfer.”

“I’m returning to base to share what you’ve all said, and your intentions. If you are going to Earth on your own terms, and you are the beginning of some larger migration, then the Institutions should at least be appraised of these things,” stated the Earthman.

“I don’t know where that came from, sir. Most *sincerely*,” responded Sasha. “I think I was just feeling a little protective of my friends. No one on the planets that we come from even believe Earth is *real*.”

“I think the authorities on Earth are best to deal with this when they arrive there. Consultations here will only add to the workload,” suggested Cathy.

“*Certainly*, but a report of all this will be sent ahead of you, just so you all know. I *do* hope you enjoy your time on our world, no matter our little struggle here,” said the man, bowing his head just a little, in respect, before he turned to leave.

Ed was very surprised at this show of humility. These Earther’s, to him, with one exception, were just a little antagonistic, condescending, and maybe even untrustworthy, until then. Maybe these people *were* different, maybe even good different, but he did not like being unable to read them. Reading people was part of his stock and trade, he trusted it, and he was still not sure of these Earthers yet, so Ed couldn’t kind of help keeping his guard up.

“So, that slingshot. Is it all free of charge too?” asked Ed.

“It is, Ed. Things out off-world are *all* that way.”

“How does it...slingshot us?” asked Mech.

“The shunt kind of stretches space-time within a large ring, but really to just a miniscule amount. Then it allows return to equilibrium, and the shunt fires your ship off. All the energy goes into propelling your ship, so the shunt doesn’t move much past the threshold, and you’ll be there before you know it.”

“In orbit?” asked Ed.

“Near orbit.”

“*Nice. So sweet lady*, let’s take a *look* at those...*systems*,” suggested Mech, with a beaming smile, and Cathy laughed out loud as she was preferred the way into the Perpaduan.

This Earther out-rider stayed longer than she had to after they had done the work, as she thoroughly enjoyed their company. She also wanted to get to know them more, so a more nuanced report might be sent of them before they approached Earth. One that would help the authorities and these souls be more comfortable with each other.

“I couldn’t help but notice the old Earth technology you have aboard. I have to say they are not standard though. I mean, for tech’ that old.”

“They brought us here,” explained Sasha, knowing by the nature of day that Ed trusted this lady.

“*They* did?”

“Yep,” said Mech, then going on to explain the whole story to her, with a few “Dumb robot,” comments placed in here and there by Cycle.

Cathy, kind of sat up in her chair as the story unfolded. Then asking, or more so saying, “You come to dream in the First Garden?”

“Yes.”

“Then all will be well,” she said to Sasha. Adding to the boys, “But *you* guys will really have to be very self-regulating.”

“Maybe, we can stay aboard, out of the way until Sash has done her thing.”

Cathy was almost aghast at such a description of dreaming in the First Garden, saying, “I think you will be there a while, and don’t you want to look around the world you all originally hail from? It’s a beautiful and diverse place, in its peoples and its places.”

“See, I don’t understand what you even mean,” responded Ed.

“I just want to gather as much tech’ as I can,” put in Mech.

“I would like to find new foods and some recipes,” expressed Cookie.

Cathy could see that none of these folks understood the nature of their visit, even Sasha really. She definitely could not have imagined the kinds of responses she had from the crew, while feeling quite privileged to have met Sasha. She was very glad she had stayed, believing that they would all learn a good deal about themselves on Earth.

Heaven

“I will never forget those lovely, almost innocent, souls. I will never forget their fully alive ways, and of course, meeting Sasha Eden on Prospect. I feel very privileged, as you would imagine, but it is just as much that I met and came to know a little the *whole* crew of the Perpaduan.

I suppose I am not surprised at what happened on Earth when they went there. I thought their visit would be so much more than it was; that it would bring so much to light. But we all now know that it, like the rest of their story, was all part of the perfection of a great design.”

The next day, after they had repowered the bus, they were away, and on their way to the slingshot. It had been a very beneficial thing to have come across these folks beyond the power and the coordinates of the slingshot. It was a good taste of what was to come and what they might expect on Earth, and they all knew it. The crew were still a little uncomfortable though, except for Mech, and Sasha. Mech could hardly wait to learn about, and gather, new tech’. Sasha was thankfully expectant as there had seemed to have been no resistance in Cathy to her wish to dream in the First Garden. It even seemed like it would be welcomed.

The slingshot sat in the midst of the black. It was a thin ring array, with a spherical shunt sitting free in the midst of it. The shunt was at rest, as when they were sent on their way it would reverse from the array, pulling the ship with it, until it reached what they called *allowable stretch*. There was a large wide, disc shaped, control deck and quarters attached to the bottom of the array. It seemed to that it held the array upright, and it had pods slowly circling on arms below it. All five decks of this large geometrical disc and its orbiting pods had lights shining out from them.

A pilot had come over to the bus to work with them on making sure it was capable to use the slingshot and to set its guidance systems correctly for Earth. He seemed a little perplexed as he went about his work, because it was all new technology to him, and a bit too piecemeal for his liking. He didn't mind interacting with Bot though and certainly learned some things working with Mech. Mech, of course, just loved the whole process.

In any case, it took a good while before the pilot was happy with the systems, and his grasp of them. He would be taking the ship to Earth. These pilots shuttled back and forth on rotation, and usually had other work between them, as there were only four slingshots, and they were certainly not used often due to the nature of what powered them.

When they were good to go the pilot positioned the ship in place, in front of the shunt. There were some last-minute checks as they all strapped in with some excitement. The pilot explained that they might feel a little dizzy and disoriented on what he called 'return'. He then radioed the control deck of the array and gave the *set* and *ready*. The shunt soon started reversing out of the array, taking the ship with it, and it was not long before they sat ready.

"You are going to love this part," he said, as he signalled release in ten.

The countdown went down, and they were gone in a blur.

THE PILOT WAS STUNNED. They were now on the ground, on Earth, near a river flowing gently by. They were near a great city, but clear of any outlying dwellings or other buildings. The Icons had taken them directly on-planet, and to the First Garden. He was a little beside himself as any divergence was not possible, and a millimetre difference would have made them all pancakes or dust.

They had initially retuned close to the beautiful blue and white marble sitting in the black, and they watched it ever so slowly turn. The pilot though had been frantically looking around for any traffic, and checking the systems, as it had not been a normal return. They were much too close to Earth, and he had needed to know why, as well as make sure they were not in any other ship's flightpath.

"Wow, I ain't seen nothin' like this," expressed Mech. "It's beautiful."

"Everything's *beautiful* to you, Mech," shot Cycle. "Wow, Bot, you are so *beautiful*. Oh, *water unit* you are so beautiful."

"Watch it or I'll have to get all Rugged B on ya'," threatened Mech.

Cycle just kept chuckling to himself as he usually did, and also because Rugged B was just a fun alter ego they all used for a joke. They got it from a bounty hunter who called himself that.

"It wasn't what *we* called him," then commented Ed, and it had all three boys laughing.

"It is *so* wonderful," commented Sasha.

"It *sure* is, love," agreed Mamma.

The slingshot always took ships to designated coordinates well beyond Earth, beyond any space traffic. Never this close, and then, just like it was a strange hiccup in space-time, the Perpaduan was suddenly on the ground. The Icons had utilised the slingshot's reality, learning from its systems in Bots link to the control room, and used this to sling them right here to the garden.

The pilot was now thinking that it was a miracle they hit no atmo' traffic, and he *more* than said so as he unbuckled himself. He shook his head, and called in. The person on the other end was not impressed at where the pilot had found himself and was told to wait for instructions. Beyond the strange entry, the quarantine processes here disallowed any quick disembarking, and arrangements had to be made before anyone went anywhere.

"They sure are antsy *and* a little bit precious," commented Ed.

"It's *their* planet, Erron," commented Sasha.

"Just sayin'," responded Ed.

"Looks like we're sat here for a while. Our entry is creating quite a stir, so what you got for us Cookie?" asked the pilot.

The pilot's name was Jairaj. An old stager as far as slingshot pilots went, and he was always glad to be on the ground. He just wanted a meal and to try and forget this strange return. He was thinking that it may even be his last now. But he was only ten years from retirement from all work, so he was now figuring why take any more chances with another slingshot run anyway. The array he piloted from would be down for a long while in any case, after this kind of return. They were

very cautious with this technology due to what powered it, as well as the speed ships could reach, so an incident like this would require a lock down and full overhaul.

“What do you like, honey?” Cookie asked Jairaj.

“Surprise me.”

“*Comin’ right up,*” she said, smiling.

“So, have you boys got things to attend to, and how are you feeling young lady?” he went on. This, and getting Cookie on her normal tasks, was not all about him. It was actually also part of what he did to make sure all his passengers were okay and on deck again after a shot.

“Yep,” Mech had responded, moving to Bot to see what had happened.

Ed just looked at the slingshot pilot, until Sasha punched him in the arm as she walked up and sat in the pilot’s seat to look out at Earth. She enjoyed punching Ed and even seeing him a bit lost on what to do. The pilot went down the ladder to check on Cycle while the crew reset. He had been strapped into his bunk for the ride.

The Icons had enhanced the shot; not that the pilot would agree. They were certainly in charge of this return and had taken their passenger to her destination. Mech saw the activity just begin to wane in them as he had checked the systems; the running pulsing lights just slowing and fading in Bot’s screen depictions of them. The Icons had been housed in the airlock, and connected to the systems from there, as Ed had wanted a contingency if these things started doing something they shouldn’t. Mech could now see that these things were still changing Bot a little to. It was like they had plans and the crew had just been passengers. He knew they were great tech’ but a part of him wanted these things off his bus.

As time passed here, he would actually see that wish come true. No Earth tech' was to be taken anywhere beyond its control, and current experts would want to study these Icons. They were definitely beyond the capability of such early technology, and even seemingly beyond current technology in strange ways. There was so much that could be learned from them, so in the end they would be taken from the Perdauan.

This open parkland beside the river, where they had landed, actually *was* the First Garden. The Icons made that clear to Sasha as she slept that night. The authorities had promised to begin the quarantine procedure the next day, but as things played out beyond the bus, it was to be longer. She woke from her dreams in the night, got up, and went up the ladder, hoping a little to find Ed still up there. Jairaj was asleep on the old couch in the mess, so she walked quietly onto the flightdeck. It was way past Ed's sack time, but *there* he was, and he said, "I had a feelin'."

"Either you are getting softer, or you are getting more spiritual, Ed."

"Sorry to let you down, but it's all instinct, girly."

"Did they build that strong in you?"

"*Hell* yeah. It's a *big* part of the thing they made me; or augmented in me. But to be honest, I just thought it would be hard for you to sleep now we're here, and I hoped to talk to you alone. I like talking with you alone."

"It's nice for me too, Erron," said Sasha, allowing some emotion.

"You know, I know that this is not gonna *be* anything. I mean, *you and me*. But it sure feels good."

“Yes. I feel the same. I feel *very* close to you, Ed, but I know somehow that we *will* part company. I suppose both of us knew that from the start.”

“Yep, but I’ll take it, because I haven’t felt this way before, and it’s nice to know I *can*.”

“Oh, I see, sure,” responded Sasha.

“But it’s more than that, too, Sash.”

“Yep, I know, Ed,” she replied, as both of them got a little lost for words.

But it was okay. More than okay, as they now sat in resignation, as well as in love. It was what it was, and there was really no need for more words.

RAIN NOW SWEEPED ACROSS THE PERPADUAN’S HULL, and the sound of it was heartening to its occupants. It had been two days now, and there had been no contact yet. Mech was laying back on the couch working on a small e-pad. He was a bit bummed that there had been no action on getting them checked, and the bus cleaned, so that they could venture out. They had not even been able to access any comms’ or the information networks of this planet. The pilot had told them of Earth’s great planetary network and could not understand why they could not interface with these systems. They had tried, but not been successful. Mech had thought it had to be a system translation issue and was still working on it.

While there had seemed to be no intent to get *anything* sorted so far from these Earthers, the massing of people in the open area around the Perpaduan seemed to show that there was great interest in them. Many now had set up foldable shade to hold back the sun, some even camped there, and the numbers did not dwindle at all when the rain had started. The crowd had slowly but

surely grown, and many just sat or stood in the rain, and most of them even seemingly joyous at its arrival. The crew had known that feeling, so they assumed that the Earth was having the same lack of rain that most of the planets were experiencing.

Sasha would wave to the people at times when she sat in the cockpit looking out, and they would wave back. Cycle was often up there waving too. He just loved it, but it was just a joke for him. He thought it was a real lark getting those dummies to wave. Cookie waved a few times, feeling very special, which was so good for her dear heart, but Mech didn't bother. Ed just looked out and wondered at what he was witnessing. Was it curiosity about the lost settlers, or was it more? Were they here because of Sasha and the Icons?

Truth be known, it was both curiosity and religious expectation, but no open word had been passed on from the authorities about the story of these souls, this strange vessel, or the Icons.

Eventually, a perimeter was set up around the bus, and on the third day two visitors, in sealed suits with special breathers, were sent by the authorities. A good-sized makeshift natural polymer clean room was taped onto the surrounds of the large staging door on the side of the ship, and there was a knock on the hull. Cycle went down to open it, and Sasha went down to greet the visitors. Ed didn't see the point of him going, as he did not feel he had to give respect to anyone who had not done the same. He was not the main show anyway, Sasha was.

"Good day," said the man, through the face mask he wore.

"Good day, please enter," greeted Sasha.

"I am Gerhardt, and this is Abida."

"I am Sasha, and this is Cycle."

“It is lovely to make your acquaintance,” said Abida.

The man was an older gentle soul, and Abida was much younger. Some measure of love seemed to dance around her.

“Please come up to the upper deck and meet the others.”

“Certainly,” said Gerhardt.

“Thank you,” said Abida.

Sasha preferred the way to the ladder, and Cycle helped the older soul up the ladder, after Sasha and Abida had gone up.

Ed was on the flightdeck. Mech was on the couch and got up, feeling like he should, but not really wanting to. He felt a bit like Ed did. Cookie smiled and came out from behind the small open galley servery to greet the visitors. She was beaming, and really in awe of being on this mythical planet. She was full of curiosity about these people, and she could feel the good intent in these two. She had a sense of these things from the way people held themselves, her antenna a little more sensitive than most. Jairaj was standing by the servery drinking some coffee and stood a little straighter when they came up. Then, despite himself, Ed got up and walked over to say hello.

They greeted each other and introduced themselves, Mech respectfully, and Ed with a somewhat serious visage and eyes. It was not lost on either visitor, Abida saying, “Thank you for allowing us on your ship, sir.”

Ed just nodded. He was not falling to good grace until these two opened their mouths and showed who they were. Their words would probably not be enough anyway, because the *actions*

of these Earthers so far, with the exception of Cathy and Jairaj, were already talking very loudly of them. He could feel their gentle humility, but he wasn't about to let it all slide for the sake of their ease.

The two visitors sat at the table with Mamma and Sasha, and Cycle and Mech had sat down on the old couch, while Ed stood leaning on the bulkhead between the cockpit and the mess, watching on. Jairaj had stayed standing at the end of the galley servery. He felt very honoured to be in the company of these two visitors, but now, more so curious why ones such as these would be meeting with these folks.

“So, you come from...the planets, as you call them?” asked Gerhardt, after some gentle pleasantries.

“Yes. There are eleven worlds. All quite different. They have evolved in their own way mostly, and there is trade between them, but no real unity. Some struggle, others have plenty,” answered Sasha.

“Ahh, that is such a joy to hear. It is good for the people here to know the settlers were not just lost to the cold of space, or to have perished on planets unfit for habitation,” said Gerhardt. “It is told that they left here with such hope, so it is good that they have made their way well.”

“I wouldn't call it, *well*,” commented Mech.

“And I wouldn't be happy about it, if I were you,” put in Ed. “There are a lot of nasty people who would like to know this place exists, and if the Topians know Earth exists it won't be good for you.”

“We are not threatened by your planets. Earth has been the footstool of God for a few millennia now,” responded Abida, gently and with a kind smile.

“They’re tech is way ahead of ours, Cap,” commented Mech. “I reckon they can protect themselves in ways we can’t even comprehend yet,” he added, believing the Icons to be simply old technology, and imagining where their sciences had taken them since then.

“That would be true, Mech,” responded Gerhardt, but not meaning at all what Mech had thought.

“If you are so sure and so strong, then why are you this threatened by one little ship?” questioned Ed. But more so, challenging them.

Gerhardt smiled, and said, “We are not threatened by you, Erron. We just have processes, and we need to ascertain understanding of you all and your story. Then hopefully you may wander here more freely.”

“We would be most thankful if you would all share the story of your coming here,” then requested Abida.

They answered as one, after first looking to each other before they began. Sasha started, and they all added in if something was missed, or went on with the main story until someone else broke in, even Ed and Cycle.

Abida and Gerhardt listened with measured ears; with some reaction and joy of course, but it was more so their duty to listen for the Institutions on this world. It was not about them, and they had to gather things in a more detached and concentrated way; trying to hear and remember it as it was spoken and less with their own reactions or filters.

“That is a mighty story,” offered Gerhardt, when they had finished, and he and Abida then asked some questions to understand it better and qualify certain statements this small band had shared. Some of the colloquialisms also needed translation, as well as a good number of words that were new to their ears.

When they eventually came to silence, Sasha asked, “*Is this the First Garden.*”

“Some would say so, some would not,” explained Abida.

“So, you have differing beliefs?”

“Mostly one, but in the case of the First Garden, there could be said to be one, or two, or many. It is all relative to the frame you are placing on it. But mostly the people of this time would regard it to be one of two gardens, and the location of one is really unknown and somewhat mythical, the other *is* where you have landed.”

“So, you did not know where the Garden was?” then asked Gerhardt, to gather more detail of the story the crew had told.

Jairaj came into the conversation gently informing them that an error in the slingshot brought them closer than it should have, and that a space-time hiccup seemed to bring them straight here.

“It was Bot and the Icons that landed us here, big fella,” put in Mech.

“The Icons. Yes. They seem to have been a strong element in you coming here. The old Earth technology.”

“Yes and no,” put in Jairaj. “They’re old technology, but a little beyond anything I’ve seen.”

“But *they* guided you through the stars?” queried Abida.

“Yes, they led us each to the next, and together they provided a map to Earth, as we explained, but they are more than that,” re-explained Sasha.

“Yes. Tell me more of these dreams, Sasha?” asked Abida.

“Well, I have had dreams since I was fifteen. Special dreams. When it came time, I dreamt of Erron, like we told you, and I knew it was time to leave my home. The first Icon found us, as we said, but they did seem to bring most of the dreams to me from then on.”

“Such wonders!” expressed Abida.

“It seems the Icons link with certain people,” explained Mech.

“So, there are others linked to the Icons?” asked Gerhardt.

“No, just Sash. She is *the* certain person, somehow.”

“Wonder of wonders!” responded Abida.

“We now have to get to the crux of your visit here, beyond the story of you finding us. It is that we must ask you a question,” requested Gerhardt, directing it at Sasha.

“Please go ahead,” responded Sasha.

“Are you, or do you claim to be, the One Awaited?”

“No. I am not the One, as *we* call the next Mediator. I am simply a woman of dreams, and the Centre has brought me here. I just follow His path for me and know very little.”

“Ahh,” responded Gerhardt, with Abida a little disappointed, and a little thoughtful.

“But you *do* come to us from ‘*the dark and cold*’ of space?” she then questioned, still searching.

“I cannot talk to that,” responded Sasha. “I don’t wish to lay claim to what is beyond my knowing.”

Abida then asked Sasha a number of questions on parts of Earth’s Holy Texts; what she thought of them. Sasha answered simply, but not as Abida would have hoped, but she continued to ask all the questions on the Holy Texts that she was given to ask of her. These visitors only saw a cursory understanding in her answers to these questions, and to them, the evidence slowly built that this lady was not the One Awaited.

There was some hesitation in the visitors when they finally left, but they left with the Icons, and with Jairaj. The men outside the bus escorted them away and had the slingshot pilot on board a vehicle and away through the crowd soon after.

A deep love was existent in this crew, and Jairaj had even felt a part of it. They were a pleasure to be around, and they did not exclude him at all, even in the ‘have a go at him’ department. Jairaj carried with him impressions of the whole event, the crew, and strong impressions of Sasha. He knew the wider picture here on Earth and understood the caution of the two visitors, as well as their hesitation in leaving that day. There had been a rise in groups of adventists that seemed to be a small threat to order in recent years, but now he saw them as maybe

a little right, even though some of them were professing quite extreme understandings of the old texts.

“We’re still *here*, Sash. In your *garden*,” offered Ed, when they were all gone, and the ship had been sealed up again. “*Dream away*, girl.”

Sasha smiled, saying, “*Yes*. The promise *has* been fulfilled, so I will do *just that*, Erron.”

THREE DAYS OF HEAVEN FOLLOWED THE VISIT, and Sasha did dream. The dreams even began to come in her waking day too, and the whole crew could feel the energy as they went about ordinary life tasks. It was like they were *all* wandering in her dreams, in the feelings of the spirit, and she often shared them, as best she could. They ate, and laughed, and talked over their pathway here too, sharing their deeper thoughts on all this strange journey through struggle, malevolence, and the planets, to reach this mythical world that was now very real.

Sasha did wonder at her now waking connections to deeper meaning, and at her place in all this. But it all unfolded as it was to be, and she, more so, simply waited for the beauty of it to unfold more. The crew got to saying, ‘All will be well’, quite a lot; as a balm, and as a joke with smaller things. Mostly they laughed; the boys playing their games with each other, Mamma chiding them, and Cookie putting her two credits worth in at mealtimes. Mech even opened up about his past, which helped Mamma share more of hers. Lula even came to visit for a few hours once when she recalled a terrible event, such was the pain she had endured.

Cycle did not share anything. He was who he was, and while he shared comments naturally, he did not put all his thoughts out there. It was simply that he was not one to talk; a person who

mused more on his own. Over this time, he viewed all the interaction on the ship, and the wider picture of their experience. Because of his training he saw more of the field in these things too, so he related things that were shared to himself at times, and he began to understand the death he had dealt earlier on in his life. On the day he came to this clear vision he was *very* silent, even for him, as he had never really been conscious of it before. He was glad that he had put in with Ed and the others. He almost revered Ed, was thankful for his friendship over the years, and was now very relieved that Ed had taken a higher path in not taking lives in the pursuit of their work. There was still some burden in him, but he felt that he and Ed were doing better.

All these things came to these disparate souls in the First Garden, providing more freedom in this seeming confinement. It wasn't confinement to them, it was heaven, all easily one and at peace. There was a joy in them, and Ed had even had a yarn with the Centre each night. He still didn't ask for anything, as he had all he needed there, but he did thank Him for many things, as well as tell Him where He had gone wrong. It was strangely natural for him, but it really didn't change his view of religion, or Centre types, especially the one's on *this* rock. Well, except for Sasha. They talked alone for a time together each night, then Sasha would head off to dream, and Ed would have a conversation with the Big Man. He found it *was* a conversation in a strange way. I mean, the Centre didn't answer him, but He sure listened, and Ed found a lot of himself in sharing his thoughts without a filter. Not that Ed really had a filter.

Wonder of wonders, indeed. Heaven, indeed, and on the third morning after the first visit, the two visitors returned, again, suited up. By this time the crowd had almost filled the garden and there were now many in watercraft on the river too. This morning, as on other mornings, they saw many around the bus in prayer and supplication from the front and smaller side windows of the cockpit. The people weren't set toward the bus, but all pointed in the same direction. When the

visitors entered the Perpaduan, the upper deck at least, they could feel the rarefied atmosphere. It was more than a surprise, as they well accepted that this visit may even be a violent one, due to the reports of these souls and the stories these souls themselves had recounted on their last visit.

The gentle ease in them was felt more than seen, and Abida's heart sank a little as she saw a deep unity there that was called for thousands of years before, but also for what she and her cohort now had to ask of these souls. She saw how much her planet had fallen back by the sweetest air that now sat within, strangely, this metal weapon of war. Even though humanity had more than progressed beyond war and violence here, beyond ignorance and apathy, and advanced strongly in endless ways, this small space cried out to her of something more, a fresh wind.

She then asked Gerhardt to speak alone with her below, in private. After a good while of consultation, they returned up the ladder to the mess. The crew were sitting there, and Abida cried a little as Gerhardt passed on the message given them to pass on to the occupants of *'The Planets ship'*.

"We are here to ask that you leave us, and return home," started Gerhardt, thinking that it was respectful to come straight to the point, as the seeming captain of this vessel was of that nature of mind. "There is much happening here that could cause many problems," he continued, now more so to Sasha. "If you had claimed to be the One Awaited, then we would have given you more time to show us your proofs, and even accepted what unrest may come in its wake. But as you do *not* claim this, and as many people, without knowing you, *already* believe you to be the new Mediator, we *have* to ask you to withdraw."

"So, you're chuckin' us out," said Ed, not really surprised.

"We would prefer that you leave of your own will," responded Gerhardt.

“Then we will,” said Sasha, immediately.

That took these visitors by surprise, as Ed commented, “You’re fools. All *be it*, gentle ones. You’re too scared of things, and you can’t see what’s plainly before your face.”

“All will be well, Erron.”

“All *will* be well, Sash,” agreed Ed, genuinely, with his demeanour changing to suit, due to his view of this lady and the whole nature of these days here in the garden.

“We will provide any power or expertise you may need, but we would ask that you be quickly on your way. The longer you are here the greater may be the ramifications of your visit,” requested Gerhardt.

“Suits me,” said, Mech. “Let’s get to it,” now very keen to leave.

“I must add the apologies of our planetary Institution for this request. We consider ourselves an open people and society, and I must add my own deep sadness at having to ask this,” then said Abida.

“It’s done, love,” commented Ed. “Apologies are for the weak.”

“Erron, please don’t,” asked Sasha. “Let’s stay in the heaven we found here, and trust.”

That had Abida even more confused about Sasha and the wisdom of the decision, but she too had to trust just like this lady from the planets did. She looked at her, and Sasha said, “If it is His will, well maybe His design here is beyond our knowing. Don’t be concerned. Be at ease.”

“Mech here is your man,” said Ed, to Gerhardt, just getting on with things, but much to Abida’s discomfort. “So, talk with him on the people he needs. Power is our main need.”

“Very well,” said Gerhardt, a little annoyed by Ed’s abrupt ending to their conversation, yet somewhat relieved that the soldier was keen to go and was ready to get on with it. He *too* had small doubts about all this, but the decision had been made and it was simply his place to carry out the will of the governing body.

Mamma was quite disappointed, mainly for Sasha, but as usual, Cycle was just on with whatever Ed was. Mech *was* really let down by all this, but he was also keen to get away from what he now saw as an ignorant planet. He would just gather any knowledge he could from the people he would work with to get the bus back off into the black.

It was a day later that the Perpaduan lifted off, much to the now very expectant crowd’s deep disappointment.

Sasha had received another dream after the visit. Words had come very clearly in it. “*The first intimation has been supplied. We will return you.*” She didn’t know if that meant that providence would return them home safely, or that she would be back again, but she could feel that one day she would come back here.

Sacrifice

“The Perpaduan had been away a long time. People were getting concerned that those bounty hunters may have met their deaths. That was not good for folk here, because these hunters had kept the chaos away from our little town. We lived on a dark chaotic rock, and we had always lived on hope, but the level of it fell every day they were away.

Folks here were beginning to see that there could be no future. We had stayed off trouble for a good while, but we began to understand that our oasis would fall eventually, even if they did return. There *was* no future, more so for the younger ones, and we didn’t know what to do. We slowly came to see that we were little more than dust in the wind.”

They jumped, full of gratitude for what they had experienced, and in hope for the way ahead; whatever that would be. But on their fourth jump they ran straight into a welcoming party; a huge Topian Military cruiser, Elle’s ship, and a swarm of star riders. They could not jump again, as the initial big jump from Earth had depleted their energy banks too much.

The Perpaduan was armed to the teeth and wily, but it was no match for the Topian cruiser, even without the star riders. This force arrayed against them began a stand-off, as Elle wanted her

soldier. She knew she had them, and she knew the crew would surrender in the end, as Ed would want to look after the girl.

The ships all sat in their positions, primed and ready, except the Perpaduan. It simply sat silent, and so began a good while of them staring each other down; twenty-five minutes that seemed to be an eternity for all involved. The Topians and Elle's forces had them cold, so she allowed time for them to cool before she opened up negotiations for their surrender.

"We have you. So, let's make the best of this. You have no hope of escape, and I am sure you don't want to sacrifice your crew *or* your passenger."

There was just a long silence in reply, and it got too long for Elle to handle, so she added. "There is no way out. You *know* it. Time is not even your friend in this."

"The Great Centre has *sealed* your fate, *Zealot*," yelled Kafsa, while the channel was still open, much to Elle's distaste, and she ordered a crewman to restrain and gag him.

He didn't know it, but *his fate* was the one that was sealed. Elle was sick to death of his rantings, and he would regret sidling up to this viper, as there was no way she would let this random fool loose after gaining insight into her activities.

But still, there was only silence, like the Perpaduan had all the time in the world or was biding its time to make a plan, and preparations. It was now really getting to Elle, and *all* those waiting poised for a fight. It was unnerving because these bounty hunters should have been begging for mercy. The Topian Admiral was the only exception, as he was an old hand and knew that this old striver was no threat to him. He now pressed a communication button on the arm of his chair, where he sat in the middle of the control deck, stating, "You cannot jump, and there is no escape.

We can wait you out. We have scanned your vessel. You will run out of power and oxygen long before we do. You are depleted.”

Two torpedoes were then suddenly fired at the Topian cruiser and at Elle’s ship; one flying fast towards each, from holes that presented themselves on the bottom of the Perpaduan. One hit the Topians bang on. But their shielding was too strong. Elle’s ship was quicker and just managed to move enough to escape the second torp’. She and her crew then nervously waited for the torp’ to turn and find them again, but it failed to reacquire them, and tore off into the black.

“Stupid move, but you have to admire their fight,” commented the Topian Admiral, to the captain of the cruiser, who sat lower and to the side of the Admiral.

As soon as the torpedoes had been let loose, the bus had started moving; dodging, trying to out manoeuvre the big ships, while firing on and dodging the star riders, looking for a way out. The Topians lay down heavy disabling fire, but also set the targeting of their guided missiles to destroy the Perpaduan if it decided to shoot the big stuff again. All the craft were moving and resetting around the bus as it dodged and let its spin cannons loose on them. The Topians, Elle, and the star riders all sought to disable the Perpaduan, as its cargo was the payday, so the game continued longer that it would normally have with a Topian cruiser. Kafsa though, did not care if they destroyed them or captured them, so he was very confident and happy; even though he was now gagged.

“Let’s set the main phase cannons to follow their movements too,” eventually commanded the captain of the cruiser. “I have an inkling they’re playing with us. Their moves are just a *little wrong*.”

They still had them for sure, but Elle was getting nervous, and Kafsa began feeling that way too. *“Surely they won’t let them out of our trap,”* he thought. But as the battle went on, he became more and more overwhelmed. This super-soldier was smart, and the threat to the One *had* to be taken out, so it began to play heavily on his nerves as the game wore on.

The captain of the cruiser was now taken off guard, when the bus suddenly shifted tack, a move that was not at all expected. He was in a little disbelief, as the Perpaduan now blasted, straight and fast, toward the Topian cruiser.

Elle screamed, “No!” as they made the turn and accelerated towards the cruiser. She knew that the Admiral would not blink, and just hoped that Ed would, or that he had a plan to save their skins by this bold move. She wanted her prize, even if they had to chase them some more.

But the threshold was crossed quickly, and the Topian knew that their intent was to ram them and take them all into the cold of space. The pulse cannons then rained down hard on the Perpaduan, and it took a real beating, until eventually, a guided missile blew it into dust; dust, and small shards of metal. The spreading cloud froze in seconds in the cold of space, including any remnants of the crew, as the particles and small shards now bounced off the cruiser’s hull.

Kafsa was relieved and elated at the death of the Zealot, while Elle just screamed, as what was left of the crew and the bus then drifted out through the tomb of space.

There was something else though, which now moved through the dark and cold of space. It was the torp’ that Elle’s ship had just managed to doge, and Sasha lay within it; half awake, half dreaming.

When the Perpaduan had jumped into the viper's nest of Topians and mercenaries, Ed knew immediately that there was no way out. Bot explained the situation clearly some seconds after, simply saying, "No pathway."

All on the Perpaduan had looked to each other. A little lost in that initial moment, but still searching for possible options. The Zealot would be with the redhead, so Sasha's fate would be sealed if they took their chances with surrender. Even if they bargained with Elle for her safety in the terms of their surrender, while they still had Ed as a bargaining chip, the fixer would most likely not honour it once she had him.

"The tube, Cap," suggested Mech, breaking the silence.

"Sasha?"

"Yep."

Ed knew that success in getting her away would require this extreme measure, but it would also require the *ultimate* sacrifice from the rest of the crew. They all knew it, and Ed had looked around for unspoken votes.

The crew all agreed, and then looked to Sasha.

"I don't understand," said Sasha.

"You have to break free. *Free* and *clear*."

"It's *more* than that, isn't it, Erron," questioned, but stated, Sasha, as she looked to the crew and cried a little for what she now *knew* that they were intent on doing.

“We’ll get you off, then we’ll hold them up for as long as we can, and take our chances,” lied Ed.

“I *know* what you are going to do, Erron. None of you even *believe* in the Centre.”

“We mostly don’t know what to believe, dear. But we know we believe in *you*,” explained Mamma.

“Oh, Mamma,” cried Sasha, sobbing some more.

“It’s what you *paid for*, Sash,” added Mech, with a big cheeky smile.

“Yeah. It’s what you paid for,” added Cycle, agreeing with Mech for the first time, and both of them feeling real good about it.

“*Ohhh*. I don’t *want this*. I love you all *so much*,” expressed Sasha, her frame still shaking with her sobs.

“We *know* there’s something *bigger* at play here, Sash,” added Mech sincerely, a buzz running through his body. “And we all love *you, too*.”

Sasha just cried even stronger.

“It’s *gotta* happen, Sash, and its gotta happen *now*,” then stated Ed.

Mamma had been so proud of her boys right then, and so glad for Sasha. Sasha was one of hers, and beyond it being the right thing to do, it was a very Mamma thing to sacrifice for her. This will to sacrifice, provided an intense feeling of honour in her, but just as it strangely, or providentially, it made her *beat-up life* worthwhile; all of it.

They had *all* seen enough on this strange journey to know that Sasha was something different, and her continuing journey a necessity, or at the very least, a great hope. The atmosphere in the Perpaduan on the last three days on Earth had made it undeniable. These folks had changed so much along the way, and it was like this final sacrifice was the way it *had* to be, the only way it *could* be. It just *was*.

Strong embraces of goodbye had ensued, then Ed had taken Sasha to the lower deck and got her stowed in the torpedo tube, while the initial standoff was happening.

“It’s set to return to our home base, well, on the plains nearby. Then you’re on your own, or under *your God’s* protection.”

“How long?” she asked, looking at him through still streaming tears.

“That’s the kicker, Sash,” replied Ed, as he finished strapping her in. “It’ll take a few weeks, by Bot’s reckonin’, but I’ll put this tube in your arm, and it’ll keep you a bit *under* while you ride this beast. You can use this trigger here too if you wake too much. Its’ muscle relaxant and will make you all dreamy. So, it’s *right up your alley*, eh.”

Sasha smiled, and her tears abated a little, in a knowing that this escape would be an ordeal, even with this helpful measure.

“Don’t be shy to use the juice. There’s *plenty*, and sleep all you can. The tube’ll set you to entry into atmo’ *and* take you down. It’s a parachute drop at the end, so you’ll hit the ground pretty hard soon after you hear the roar of atmo’ entry. Just relax though.”

“Sure, Ed.”

“This baby’ll get you there,” he assured her, looking down at her in the torpedo.

“I trust *Him*, and I trust *you*, Ed.”

It was the first time she had called him Ed, and he nodded and smiled.

“You have *more* than *hope*, Erron Rowes,” she added.

A wide grin came across his face, and he said, “*Now* you tell me.”

They laughed, and then she sighed deeply as he gathered up the long lid. Tears came again to her eyes as Ed looked down on her for the last time.

“Goodbye, Sasha Eden. Go do what you gotta do.”

He had then leant down, kissed her tenderly on the forehead, rechecked the IV, then closed the hatch. Sasha closed her eyes and prayed to the Centre.

The main deck had been silent when Ed came back up, and he had sat down to get things going. They had stayed silent on the comm’s too, hoping that the fixer woman wanted Ed enough to be patient, and wait them out a little. It gave them the time they needed to get Sasha set. They had figured that the redhead would allow time for Ed to gather his options, but eventually see the futility of a fight.

The Admiral had been patient in his hunt; waiting for them to jump enough and deplete their energy. The bus had jumped a number of times in known space, so they could project their intended path and had jumped themselves to meet them. The tactical computers, sensors, and jump tracking ability of the Topian fleet made them a force to reckon with; one none had escaped from. They guarded their technology fiercely, so they had been Elle’s only option after the other debacles.

The crew had then talked over what they would do, and all said goodbye to each other; hugs and all. Bot included...well...Mech did. They all strapped in, feeling the deep joy of sacrifice and their unity with each other within this ultimate act.

They had shot Sasha out, knowing that Elle could *just* evade the torp', and fired the other torp' at the cruiser to keep it looking real. When Sasha was through, and on her way, they had just played for time and made out that they were attempting to escape. They had to get their assailants to take *them out*; to make it look right. It was the only way to get Sasha free and clear of the zealot *for sure*, and Elle off her case. *Her* seemingly dead, and Ed being gone, would be the only way to provide a definite outcome for their passenger, their friend.

Mamma was crying when it came near time, but it was one of release, and all through the battle Lula did not appear at all.

Mech had said, "Don't really like the idea of dyin', Cap. Sure hope that that Centre's *real* and we get some *credits* for this."

Ed had laughed, and so did Cycle, but Ed then said, "Better dying for *somethin'*, than nothin'," as he had turned the ship towards the cruiser, and oblivion.

ON EARTH, ABIDA SUDDENLY AWOKE. In her half sleep, in slowly coming awake, she had gathered intimations of something.

She sat bolt upright in her bed, now clearly seeing the elegant beauty hidden within the simplicity of Sasha's commentary on the old Texts. She cried. She cried in happiness because the promise *had indeed* been fulfilled, and that she had been given the great gift of being in Sasha's

Presence. But a sadness then followed on its heels; that she and the people of Earth had seemingly lost the chance to know the truth, and to hear the voice of God.

She knew then that she *had to* share her experiences and this new insight with others, and she prayed that they would come to see what she had now come to know. But, as with all the Great Revelations, there were always tests of understanding, or more so having the eyes to see the pure eternal Essence housed within them. That same Pure Intent that powered them all, one that belies the differences of outward seeming, and the perceptions, ideas, and doubts of men.

It was always souls *true* to that just and loving eternal Essence; the pure of heart, who had open eyes in such New Day's.

"Strange all that. Those rogues and the One. They never did come back, but *she* walked in from the dead dry country beyond our town and told her story. We were just poor miners, not educated at all, but we all fell to Her; Her ways and Her Words, and so it all began; the time that was to bring us to where we are now.

She had been 'born of the dark and the cold' as it was said, and She had a new name. She said as much, because before her long ride in that torp' she just thought she was like anybody else. But from the stories that eventually rose from Loma Se and Mercy, and later on, from the hidden planet of Besede, we learned that *that* had plainly *not* been so.

She went back to Earth, as you know, after laying the foundation for uniting the planets. I suppose we don't know what *that* will mean for us yet. She always said that her mission was to unite and spiritually reinvigorate *all* humanity, no matter where they lived, including Earth. People have always forgotten the Centre, and fallen back a bit, but there's always another Infusion to retrieve us from hell and take us further on in our evolution. There's always need for renewal.

AUTHOR'S OTHER BOOKS

As human beings we learn, discover, evolve, and grow, and what I can give as an author at the time of writing is subjective and relative; and so, does not seek to be absolute. There is much in these books that is symbolic, so readers can hopefully find their own perceptions of the concepts, which they may or may not be in agreement with. My main hope for these books is to awaken investigation and discussion; even self-reflection, while also entertaining those who read them.

James D

THE DEPARTMENT OF TRUTH TRILOGY

The first book of this series, "*The Department of Truth*", is the original adventure of Jack Johnston, who is taken away on a journey of discovery, that he wanted to take, but did not realise it. Its main theme is the search for truth. It is an existential journey, and seeks to explore the nature of truth, and intimate that the continuing journey of humanity is full of promise. It is a wild and wonderful journey that wanders to many different worlds, and places deeper, as it explores universal themes. It hopefully mimics the feelings of awe, questioning, confusion and realisation, of a spiritual journey.

The second book, "*Expectations of Happiness*" seeks to explore the nature of a human being, the nature of this life, and therefore, the nature of happiness here on planet Earth. The main character,

Jack, is struggling to get the great things he learned from his first journey, on the ground in life, and is again drawn to places deeper to find answers. “*Expectations of Happiness*” is about meaningful purpose, and connection in life; it is about striving and acceptance; it is about seeing ourselves as noble, and working at that. It makes it clear that happiness is not something that can be sought within itself, and is not, only an inner, or only an outer experience. The book is mostly about the *personal transformation*, which is required for any *collective human transformation* to occur.

The final book, “*The Halls of Certitude*” attempts to meaningfully explore aspects of finding a sure way forward for humanity, collectively. The human race and its future evolution is a wondrous story to me, not one of darkness that most seem to believe lies ahead. There may be some big tremors, some chaos, and outmoded ideas we have to deal with and cast aside, but the way forward is ripe with new fruit. There is much to share on this subject, and we may find that the answers to building a *new civilisation* are more about local communities, very much simpler than we might have imagined.

The *Search* for knowledge, *Growth* of that knowledge within us, which transforms us, and action in *Service* to others, therefore transforming our world, are key building blocks of life; *the* building blocks to a new future for humanity. “*The Department of Truth*” turned out to be seminal in that way, as its three secondary themes have become the main underlying themes of the three books, respectively.

THE STORYTELLER TRILOGY

This is the author's second trilogy and continues on with what will be a series of nine books. It introduces many new characters and renews our connection to some old ones. These books lift the storytelling to new heights.

The first book of "*The Storyteller Trilogy*" is, "*The Storyteller*". It is a story of the passing into adulthood of two young souls, Able and Eedra, while Eedra's world and all its peoples are in the same process on a planetary level. It talks to some of the nature of this time in the life of a person, and this time in the evolution of a planet; the challenge, upheaval, but great beauty and potential of these '*passings*'. This story holds other stories within it, and all between its covers attends to the theme of crisis and victory.

The second book is, "*Letter to the World*". It is a prequel to "*The Storyteller*" and talks to the story of good versus evil. It is a look at humanity through an angel's eyes, and a street kid and two visitors who get caught up in His mission, the story shows the disjointed psyche of the world, and the distractions that take us from ourselves; mostly our own minds. Also, how we need to battle the forces of decay, by seeing them clearly.

The last novel of the trilogy is "*The Traveller*". It is a prequel to "*Letter to the World*", and explores civilisation; its great power, and how we mere mortals may wield that power in our own neighbourhoods; no matter what our own ignorance, or the social norm seeks to put in our way. It also seeks to portray how the great dark force of self is our enemy, and that we are all friends; a human family now finally being united in one river, and one future.

THE KNOWLEDGE TRILOGY

James D Connolly's third trilogy completes a series of nine books, whose characters and storylines intertwine. These stories are again, like all the author's books, wild, untamed, and joyous adventures. They attend to big themes in enjoyable and symbolic stories, leaving readers spellbound and reflective.

The first novel of this trilogy is "*Knowledge*". It asks us to talk honestly, yet with respect, about what ails us as a society, as we are responsible. It asks us to open our minds to more exploration, to more open communication, in a more and more ideologically tribal world. It challenges the clichés of apathy and shows how a small group of people can take part in community building; no matter their age or outlook; no matter how seemingly ordinary. It has a good hard look at the world, through common, day to day eyes, as well as spiritual ones. It seeks to show how we have the power of initiative, and how we can utilise growth engines to transform lives and communities.

The second novel is "*Volition*". It attends to human will and its nature, and looks at different stages in life, finding our vocation, relationships, family life, and child rearing. It looks at three core times in life, and how the knowledge we use underpins how we will act. It also seeks to create more understanding of the power of consultation in all parts of our lives, and free ourselves from the rising noise around us.

The final book of the trilogy, "*Justice*", looks at the boundaries of human life, and how the ego can seek to subsume the greatest within us and threaten take people away from their high destiny. It talks to the inevitability of a mature, just, and unified humanity: and explores the power, and nature, of our link to the Creator as humankind.

CRASH and THE HUMAN CONTINUUM

I wanted to write a book to explore some of the implications of our burgeoning AI and robotic future. What I found as I wrote though was *how amazing* it is to be human. I *was* able find *some* clear implications in the rise of AI, but indeed, it turned out to be more a look at the seemingly small, yet powerfully amazing, aspects of our human creature.

The story is about Crash; an AI crash-test dummy that wanders out into the world by chance. He is a lovely fellow, experiencing a good deal of struggle as he explores further safety solutions for humans. Strangely the damage enhances him, allowing him access to deeper fields of the human continuum. Mmm, *maybe*.

See what *you* think of Crash and his journey in the human continuum.

CLOWN TOWN

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Duncan Connolly is an Australian writer and artist/ painter of Irish descent. He grew up in a Christian family, but as a young man his quest for knowledge and understanding of the meaning of life and the spirit, led him towards the Bahá'í Faith and has been a member of the Bahá'í community since then.

His driving interest is the nature of the human creature, and this life. It has led him to many sources from psychology to history to religious texts. He also believes in the spiritual wisdom written into nature, and in human inner vision, as great sources of joy and understanding; but believes that only by living life can anyone really hold knowledge. His writing and art are greatly influenced by his Faith and life experiences, and those of humanity.

He has been writing philosophical realisations and poetry, under the acronym JDC for a number of years, and has now written upwards of nine novels; which will be published, when edited and developed.

QUOTES

“The diversity in the human Family should be the cause of love and harmony, as it is in music where many different notes blend together in the making of a perfect cord. If you meet those of different race and colour to yourself, do not mistrust them and withdraw yourself into your shell of conventionality, but rather be glad and show them kindness. Think of them as different coloured roses growing in the beautiful garden of humanity, and rejoice to be among them.

Likewise, when you meet those whose opinions differ from your own, do not turn away your face from them. All are seeking truth, and there are many roads leading thereto. Truth has many aspects, but it remains always and forever one.

Do not allow difference of opinion, or diversity of thought to separate you from your fellow-men, or to be the cause of dispute, hatred and strife in your hearts.

Rather, search diligently for the truth and make all men your friends.”

'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*. p. 53

...

“...consider how the cause of the welfare, happiness, joy and comfort of humankind are amity and union, whereas dissension and discord are most conducive to hardship, humiliation, agitation and failure.

But a thousand times alas, that man is negligent and unaware of these facts, and daily doth he strut abroad with the characteristics of a wild beast. Lo! At one moment he turneth into a ferocious tiger; at the next he becometh a creeping, venomous viper! But the sublime achievements of man reside in those qualities and attributes that exclusively pertain to the angels of the Supreme Concourse. Therefore, when praiseworthy qualities and high morals emanate from man, he becometh a heavenly being, an angel of the Kingdom, a divine reality and a celestial effulgence. On the other hand, when he engageth in warfare, quarrelling and bloodshed, he becometh viler

than the most fierce of savage creatures, for if a bloodthirsty wolf devoureth a lamb in a single night, man slaughtereth a hundred thousand in the field of battle, strewing the ground with their corpses and kneading the earth with their blood.

In short, man is endowed with two natures: one tendeth towards moral sublimity and intellectual perfection, while the other turneth to bestial degradation and carnal imperfections. If ye travel the countries of the globe ye shall observe on one side the remains of ruin and destruction, while on the other ye shall see the signs of civilization and development. Such desolation and ruin are the result of war, strife and quarrelling, while all development and progress are fruits of the lights of virtue, co-operation and concord.

Consequently, when thou traversest the regions of the world, thou shalt conclude that all progress is the result of association and co-operation, while ruin is the outcome of animosity and hatred. Notwithstanding this, the world of humanity doth not take warning, nor doth it awake from the slumber of heedlessness. Man is still causing differences, quarrels and strife in order to marshal the cohorts of war and, with his legions, rush into the field of bloodshed and slaughter.

Then again, consider the phenomenon of composition and decomposition, of existence and non-existence. Every created thing in the contingent world is made up of many and varied atoms, and its existence is dependent on the composition of these. In other words, through the divine creative power a conjunction of simple elements taketh place so that from this composition a distinct organism is produced. The existence of all things is based upon this principle. But when the order is deranged, decomposition is produced and disintegration setteth in, then that thing ceaseth to exist. That is, the annihilation of all things is caused by decomposition and disintegration. Therefore attraction and composition between the various elements is the means of life, and discord, decomposition and division produce death. Thus the cohesive and attractive forces in all things lead to the appearance of fruitful results and effects, while estrangement and alienation of things lead to disturbance and annihilation. Through affinity and attraction all living things like plants, animals and men come into existence, while division and discord bring about decomposition and destruction...

...Consequently, that which is conducive to association and attraction and unity among the sons of men is the means of the life of the world of humanity, and whatever causeth division, repulsion and remoteness leadeth to the death of humankind.

And if, as thou passest by fields and plantations, thou observest that the plants, flowers and sweet-smelling herbs are growing luxuriantly together, forming a pattern of unity, this is an evidence of the fact that that plantation and garden is flourishing under the care of a skilful gardener. But when thou seest it in a state of disorder and irregularity thou inferrest that it hath lacked the training of an efficient farmer and thus hath produced weeds and tares.

It therefore becometh manifest that amity and cohesion are indicative of the training of the Real Educator, and dispersion and separation a proof of savagery and deprivation of divine education.

A critic may object, saying that peoples, races, tribes and communities of the world are of different and varied customs, habits, tastes, character, inclinations and ideas, that opinions and thoughts are contrary to one another, and how, therefore, is it possible for real unity to be revealed and perfect accord among human souls to exist?

In answer we say that differences are of two kinds. One is the cause of annihilation and is like the antipathy existing among warring nations and conflicting tribes who seek each other's destruction, uprooting one another's families, depriving one another of rest and comfort and unleashing carnage. The other kind which is a token of diversity is the essence of perfection and the cause of the appearance of the bestowals of the Most Glorious Lord.

Consider the flowers of a garden: though differing in kind, colour, form and shape, yet, inasmuch as they are refreshed by the waters of one spring, revived by the breath of one wind, invigorated by the rays of one sun, this diversity increaseth their charm, and addeth unto their beauty. Thus when that unifying force, the penetrating influence of the Word of God, taketh effect, the difference of customs, manners, habits, ideas, opinions and dispositions embellisheth the world of humanity. This diversity, this difference is like the naturally created dissimilarity and variety of the limbs and organs of the human body, for each one contributeth to the beauty, efficiency and perfection of the whole. When these different limbs and organs come under the influence of man's sovereign soul, and the soul's power pervadeth the limbs and members, veins and arteries of the body, then

difference reinforceth harmony, diversity strengtheneth love, and multiplicity is the greatest factor for co-ordination.

How unpleasing to the eye if all the flowers and plants, the leaves and blossoms, the fruits, the branches and the trees of that garden were all of the same shape and colour! Diversity of hues, form and shape, enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof. In like manner, when divers shades of thought, temperament and character, are brought together under the power and influence of one central agency, the beauty and glory of human perfection will be revealed and made manifest. Naught but the celestial potency of the Word of God, which ruleth and transcendeth the realities of all things, is capable of harmonizing the divergent thoughts, sentiments, ideas, and convictions of the children of men. Verily, it is the penetrating power in all things, the mover of souls and the binder and regulator in the world of humanity.”

Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha*, pp. 290-292

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“The Principle of Oneness

Let there be no mistake. The principle of the Oneness of Mankind—the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh revolve—is no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope. Its appeal is not to be merely identified with a reawakening of the spirit of brotherhood and good-will among men, nor does it aim solely at the fostering of harmonious cooperation among individual peoples and nations. Its implications are deeper, its claims greater than any which the Prophets of old were allowed to advance. Its message is applicable not only to the individual, but concerns itself primarily with the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family. It does not constitute merely the enunciation of an ideal, but stands inseparably associated with an institution adequate to embody its truth, demonstrate its validity, and perpetuate its influence. It implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced. It constitutes a challenge, at once bold and universal, to outworn shibboleths of national creeds—creeds that have had their day and which must, in the ordinary course of events as shaped and controlled by Providence, give way to a new gospel, fundamentally different from, and infinitely

superior to, what the world has already conceived. It calls for no less than the reconstruction and the demilitarization of the whole civilized world—a world organically unified in all the essential aspects of its life, its political machinery, its spiritual aspiration, its trade and finance, its script and language, and yet infinite in the diversity of the national characteristics of its federated units.

It represents the consummation of human evolution—an evolution that has had its earliest beginnings in the birth of family life, its subsequent development in the achievement of tribal solidarity, leading in turn to the constitution of the city-state, and expanding later into the institution of independent and sovereign nations.

The principle of the Oneness of Mankind, as proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh, carries with it no more and no less than a solemn assertion that attainment to this final stage in this stupendous evolution is not only necessary but inevitable, that its realization is fast approaching, and that nothing short of a power that is born of God can succeed in establishing it.

So marvellous a conception finds its earliest manifestations in the efforts consciously exerted and the modest beginnings already achieved by the declared adherents of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh who, conscious of the sublimity of their calling and initiated into the ennobling principles of His Administration, are forging ahead to establish His Kingdom on this earth. It has its indirect manifestations in the gradual diffusion of the spirit of world solidarity which is spontaneously arising out of the welter of a disorganized society.”

From a letter dated 28 November 1931 written by Shoghi effendi, published in *The World Order of Baha'u'llah*, pp. 42-44

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REFERENCES

1. Bahá'u'lláh. (1992) *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*. Bahá'í Publishing Trust Wilmette, Ill.
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RECOMMENDED LINKS

For further information on the Baha'i Faith the following links are recommended

www.bahai.org

www.bahai.org.au

www.bahaiebooks.com