

# **Prodigal Sun By Christina Engela**

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Preview

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## **Prodigal Sun**

Imagine, if you will:

Life is a cheap thing in the cold of space, out here in the black – a place where the only witness is space.

And space is silent.

It is here – far from home, in the fiery face of an alien star which burned bright with the light of loneliness – that a small ship from far away now found itself through a peculiar combination of unfortunate circumstance, coincidence, timing and a large helping of terribly, incredibly bad luck.

It was said, by some, that space is like an ocean. “Never turn your back on it,” they said, “...it'll kill you! Go into it unprepared, and it will chew you up and spit you out like leftover Martian Quail stew. Whether it's radiation poisoning or a micro-meteorite punching through the hull of your ship, space is a very perilous place. Treat it lightly – or play with it, and it will kill you when you least expect it.”

As a panting Tracy Ferris scrambled into the life-pod, this thought was precisely what was running through her already agitated mind. From the very beginning of their association, she'd had a bad feeling about Brandon Carver! Something about that guy just never seemed to fit! Sure, he was good looking – but so were many of the other out of work space bums hitch-hiking from place to place she'd also had the misfortune to meet!

Carver himself had claimed to be a bounty hunter down on his luck – and having been in that position more than once herself, Tracey felt empathy for him. That was her first mistake right there! Her second was to take so him on as a member of her crew against her better

judgment – just for the trip – one way! That was all he needed to get back on his feet again, or so his story went... Both added up to a disaster on such a grandiose scale that it had almost cost her, her life!

It seemed in retrospect that Carver had been a very bad call on Tracey Ferris's part – because twelve hours out of Aldus Prime, he got into an argument with the crew over dinner. Well, not over dinner itself – dinner was chicken ala king – it was at dinner, but the argument was about vampires. Vampires! That's right – all this drama and inconvenience was the result of an argument at the dinner table – about creatures of fiction and fantasy! The guy actually believed vampires were real, and claimed to be a bona fide vampire hunter!

“Idiot!” She cursed mentally, not really sure whether she'd directed her anger at Carver, or herself for giving him the opportunity to burn her like this! Carver lost his cool when he got laughed at – and started a heck of a fracas by shoving Mak around the ship's tiny diner! The fist fight escalated into a full-blown melee' with guns and blasters – and somewhere along the way, someone shot the nav-computer and they dropped out of light-speed here – wherever here was!

Both Mak and Splinter, the other two members of her crew, were killed in the shootout with Carver – leaving her to fight for her survival alone against the raging madman! One thing led to another as they say, and now the whole inside of the small starship was a blazing inferno! She paused to grin tensely to herself – a rather naughty grin, because – well, at least Carver was still in it, somewhere... It was his problem now!

Tracey hurriedly shut the door behind her to prevent the flames that had been licking hungrily at her caboose all the way down the corridor, from following her inside. Then, almost falling into one of the gravity couches, she hurriedly strapped herself into it before punching the emergency release – she hoped the escape system still worked – it did. The explosive dead-bolts fired, shaking the pod loose, dislodging it from the rapidly disintegrating wreck, just about shaking the crap out of her on its bone-jarring way into the great wide open.

As soon as she could make out just one of everything around her again, she toggled the nav-system. A small display on the control console less than a foot away from the tip of her pointy little nose showed her the state of her largest and only possession, which was rapidly receding in the rear view. Flames were starting to sear through the hull plating, fuelled by the escaping oxygen and fuel, and licking the void like angry demonic tongues. From there, she couldn't tell if the other life-pod had been launched, but she certainly hoped not! She hoped she'd seen the last of Brandon fucking Carver after what he'd done!

Tracey noted that they seemed to have dropped out of hyperspace in the middle of a planetary system – which was a really, really good thing, because it dramatically increased her chances of survival. The blazing wreck of her ship was still drifting towards a small planet nearby and, seeing as the small engine of the life-pod hadn't fired yet, so was she. A quick check of the system proved that it wasn't going to either. She cursed. It was quite a foul curse to come from such a pretty mouth, but who aside from her and any gods who might be listening, would hear it anyway?

The main motor was offline, but the landing thrusters seemed to be okay. They were online at least, so after re-entry she could make a controlled descent, or at the very least, a hole in the ground at the location of her choice.

The planet she was rushing towards was unknown to her, and there wasn't time to interrogate the pod's computer about it just now. When the ship's stardrive crapped out, they'd dropped out of warp right here. It was highly likely they were off all the regular trade routes – and she had no real weapons left to speak of, so she could only hope she didn't run into any trouble down there. There seemed to be a breathable atmosphere – and there were a couple of viro-suits and atmo-masks in storage bins inside the pod – but still, the last thing she needed was to get eaten by the locals! After all, she was in enough trouble up here as it was!

“Out of the frying pan, into the fire...” She cursed again. It was Tracy Ferris's First Rule of Holes in action – when you're in one, stop digging. Boy, was she getting in deep!

The life-pod drifted for a few minutes before gently bumping against what could only be described as the surface of a very small, very shiny moon, and began falling rapidly towards the ground – slowly at first, and accelerating. Before too long, it became really hot inside the pod, and Tracy Ferris was beginning to wish she'd remembered to pack her bikini – and maybe some sun-block with the friction resistance factor of silica. By the time she got the thing under some semblance of control, she was already on the night-side of the planet, doing a pretty good imitation of a shooting star.

It was a rough ride, and probably not the worst she'd ever had – but then again, life-pods weren't designed to be comfortable. People didn't take life-pods out for a quick joyride around the block – they were single-use devices intended to be used in case the worst happened and the best course of action was to leave your ship and take your chances out in the black. A life-pod basically gave survivors of a calamity in space slightly better chances of reaching the nearest ship – or the surface of the closest habitable planet alive – than they had in their underwear. Which, statistically speaking, was most frequently what survivors of space disasters happened to be wearing at the time of said disasters. Go figure.

A few minutes later, her head still ringing from the jarring impact of a 'landing' so not 'text-book' she hoped nobody had seen it, and after checking the atmospheric readout, Tracey Ferris popped open the hatch. The cool night air streamed inside, giving her sweaty body a sudden welcome chill. She was alive! At least that was one less thing to worry about! Tracey took a moment to breathe deep, then picked up a spanner from the tool bin and wielding it like a weapon, climbed all the way outside.

The outside of the hull was still hot to the touch and bits of it glittered in the moonlight where the paint had been scoured off by soil and rock. The life pod had made quite a crater in um – whatever this planet was – a shallow crater about half as deep as the pod was high... and it was at the end of a half-mile long shallow trench scoured into the landscape of what looked like a large ploughed field. She saw what looked like burning vegetation in the distance, at the other end of the trench leading away from the crash site! Boy was that farmer going to be pissed!

“Well, that’ll endear me to the locals,” Tracey thought, hoping that they wouldn’t invite her over for dinner at the business-end of a knife and fork!

The stars glowed faintly above in the night sky. Where was she? She scrambled back down the side of the crater to the pod. The communications system was out of action – and the pod computer had also fried some of its circuits in the crash perfectly ordinary landing she hoped nobody saw, and would be of no further help to her – unless she wanted to hang around and listen to music. There was nothing else much of value left inside – just the viro-suits, which she didn’t need, and a survival pack containing a canteen or two of water, some food packs, and a survival knife which contained a line-fishing kit in the handle, with a built-in GPS receiver in the handle cap – which incidentally, was of no use on a non-colony planet without satellites. Was this a colony planet?

She grabbed the survival pack and slung it over her shoulder, and turned on the GPS receiver in the hope that this was a colony world and not... nowhere. The small display blinked... and blinked... and then brightly displayed a name in small letters. ‘DEANNA’, it said.

“Where the hell is that?” She wondered.

So there were satellites here – and that meant she was on a colony world of some sort! That also meant there were people here – and right now, people were a most welcome change – especially people who wouldn’t want to put her on a menu!

A little arrow indicated the direction of the nearest settlement, and a distance. 17km. Lovely! 17 was a lot better than 170 or 1700! Strapping the utility belt around her waist, Tracey Ferris scrambled back up the slope to the ploughed field above. Once at the top, she shifted the weight of her baggage before starting her long walk. The phrase ‘every journey begins with a single step’ popped into her head, causing her to roll her eyes dramatically. Steadying herself, Tracey Ferris took a determined step forward. Something in the grass went ‘eek’, faintly.

\* \* \*

Quite some distance away, a man who went by the name of Brandon Carver was smoking – but not in the usual way that a man would casually sit and smoke a cigarette – for relaxation, for instance – or after sex for example – or to satisfy an addiction, or for the sake of image. No. Oh, no.

Wisps of smoke slowly rose from the tangled and soot-smearred locks atop his aching head as Carver sat brooding inside his life-pod, pondering just how fucked he might have been at the present moment – and once again, probably not in a way he would’ve enjoyed. Together – he and the life-pod – were currently plummeting toward the planet below at a speed he’d rather not think about.

He’d only just got out of the ship in the nick of time – in fact, he felt quite tender in a medium rare sort of way, as though sunburned – as one might get trying to swim the breaststroke through a fireball! He realized with considerable discomfort as the pod shuddered and jostled

around him, that his tender bits were chafing against the body harness that kept him in the seat. Tugging at the straps proved futile, as gravity and g-forces were set against him. He checked the small control display to make sure there was nothing more he had to do to assist the autopilot in controlling the craft. There wasn't – so he allowed his mind to wander.

Bluffing his way onto the merc ship was as easy as getting sparks out of a Flirpavian Flormbird... no, wait, dammit – a Florpavian Flamebird! Sure, there were easier ways for a merc – or even an aspiring vampire hunter to travel – he could've bought a ticket on one of the many tramp freighters and loderunners traveling this part of space... but therein lay his boggle. He was broke – as in on the bones of his ass broke. And yes, you read that right – Brandon Carver was a vampire hunter – well, at least he believed he was. Not that he told most people that, because they would just laugh at him and wave him off dismissively – but that's what he did sometimes, as a freelancer. Or, more accurately, what he really wanted to do. He wondered if people dismissed him out of hand as some kind of crank because they thought he was crazy – or because they worried that if he wasn't, it meant the things he was supposed to be hunting, were real! They were. Or at least, he believed they were. That is, they seemed real to him.

“Not to worry,” he consoled himself, “a lot of people go about building their lives on things they believe to be real!”

Carver also knew, with some certainty, that if enough people believed the same thing, it would make that thing true in the same sure-fire way that if you repeat a lie enough times and get enough people to repeat it as well, it would become true. Of course, there was quite a lot of money to be made on that principle alone, he knew – otherwise he had no other explanation for the religion business. As far as having enough belief to physically manifest something like an entire society of vampires living under the radar of Humanity, the jury was still out on that one.

The small ship he'd conned himself onto only had a crew of three, and during meal time just an hour or so ago, the subject came up (it always did if he had anything to say about it). They didn't believe him either, and then – well, things got ugly – and well, uglier than he'd intended it to. Mak and the other guy started to laugh and trade insults with him over his mental capacity, and well – Mom always did say he'd inherited his dad's impulsivity and violent streak! The two dudes went down without much fuss, but the chick – well, she was another story! She put up so much resistance he'd just barely made it to the escape pod himself before the ship turned inside out! His clothes had caught fire too, and he'd lost all his kit!

Thump-thump, his head pounded. The fight had got very intense and personal very quickly. A fire had started during the fight and quickly got out of hand, and he was left with no choice but to use one of the escape pods! Of course, none of this had been planned – well, except for the timing of bringing the ship out of hyperspace – because this is exactly where he needed to be! The gunfight hadn't been part of the plan, though – or him getting lit on fire and sitting inside this blasted life-pod! He'd screwed up – he'd lost his temper and lost control of the situation. Again.

Thinking back carefully, Carver couldn't tell if Ferris had made it off the ship – things were too desperate at the end, but if she hadn't, well – no problem. He couldn't afford to keep making

screw-ups like that – he had to keep his shit together. But – yeah – the planet looked about right – this seemed to be the right one! All he had to do now was survive the landing and the rest would take care of itself!

\* \* \*

It was well past midnight on a brand new Thursday morning, near what was perhaps the most well-known river on Deanna. The Whatoosie River, which had long ago been made famous by the Galactic Tourist Guide under the “Fishing” section, wound its way from the northern mountain ranges across the southern plains and finally through Skeggs Valley, to where it ultimately met up with the ocean. The Whatoosie River was probably the only river on Deanna (or possibly anywhere for that matter) that had signs along its banks that read “DANGER! FISHERMEN BLASTING!”

The valley itself was a quiet place, mostly, except for the odd weekend, maybe once or twice a month or so, when members of the local fishing club would be out on the river in canoes. It was just before dawn, and the water on this particular section was still and the stars were out. Reclining in the back of one canoe near the center of the river, a male figure was singing a song, badly.

“Mister Jordan?” Came the genteel, restrained voice of a more senior gentleman in the front of the canoe.

“Yes, General?”

“Please shut up.” The General said curtly. “You’re scaring the fish.”

General Albert McIntyre-Smythe (retired) was 75 years old. He was the highest ranking former officer in charge of the Imperial Officers Reserve on Deanna, which consisted mainly of pensioners and veterans. This bunch of refugees from the old age home, whose company he shared this fine morning, also happened to be most of the Skeggs Valley Dynamite Fishing Club, of which he was, naturally, the Chairperson.

Young mister Jordan at the back of his canoe, was the only member under 60 years of age – being in his mid-thirties, and himself a former Lieutenant in the Starmarines who had been cashiered because of his persistent fondness for Hessian Chill Weed, and a tendency to make things more interesting than they had to be.

Perhaps this was not the nicest way to end a military career, Smythe had thought, but he was handy to have around when there were more physical things that needed doing, like heavy lifting. And he didn’t complain much – and besides, he never asked to be paid for anything – at least not in cash – it just tended to make him – well, a little slow.

The General was still an active and healthy man for his age, having retired only about twenty years previously after a career spanning 36 years in the Starmarines. These days though, the closest he got to his former professional life was paddling in a canoe, sleeping under a bivvy by a warm camp-fire and (of course) blowing several different shades of crap out of cocka-snoek in the river with live military surplus hand grenades. Okay, okay, he corrected himself – not so ‘live’ anymore! After that unpleasant accident several years ago, when they lost their last

qualified medic, the Club decided to switch over to stun grenades instead! Well, Smythe conceded – after a stern talking to by the Sheriff... and the Mayor of Atro City. Er – and the Governor of Deanna afterwards. Anyway, it was a lot safer now – and although the stunners made the same sort of loud bang as the real thing, he had to admit, it did sort of take the fun out of it.

Occasionally one of the good ol' boys would still sneak in one of the old stock, for old time's sake – just to keep things interesting and real. In the back of the General's canoe, Jeremy Jordan finally wondered what the hell could scare a fish that needed to be stunned with a grenade before it could be caught and eaten.

Three other canoes were on the river, paddling to prearranged positions. The light from Deanna's crazy little moons above, Ding and Dong, helped guide their way. The river gently whispered around them, and there was the sound of paddles being dipped in the fresh water, nearly silently. Nobody made a sound otherwise, aside from the sounds made by a cluster of very old men trying very hard to be quiet.

Cocka-snoek were tough critters. It would normally take a direct hit with a stun grenade to get just a handful of the critters to float to the surface. They were smart too. If startled, they could play hide-and-seek for hours – and a bunch of geriatrics in canoes didn't have hours to play games with dinner – besides, they'd all been raised not to play with their food. Canoes also didn't have bathrooms – and the last time someone tried to go over the side, they all did – and the Whatoosie River was not that narrow in places... or that shallow!

About twenty meters away, in the front of another canoe, it suddenly dawned on Commander Michael John Atkins, (67, ex of Space Fleet) – why it was that young people called them old farts. And the bit about sound traveling further over water, well – that was true too.

“Sis, Andy! That was disgusting!” He chided his paddling partner in the awkward silence.

Warrant Officer class 1 (retired) Andy Wilkins, (80 – former Starmarine RSM) stopped paddling and looked at him with a blank expression.

“Eh?” he shouted, cupping a hand by his ear. “Deaf as a doorpost, poor old codger!”

From the lead canoe, Smythe watched in a supervisory manner as the others formed a large circle and prepared to start tossing a few stun grenades in the center. The cases of surplus military ordnance were opened, grenades were picked, pins were pulled and –

“Ready everyone?” The General said, preparing to give the order. “On my signal...”

There was a sudden deafening boom and a large waterspout shot up into the night sky, right in the center of the circle! The churned water rained down again, splashing over them in a heavy downpour! When the deluge had passed, sitting in the now bobbing canoe, soaked, spluttering and coughing, and wiping water out of his bushy white eyebrows, the General carefully replaced

the pin in his grenade, before laying it gently in the puddle by his feet. Then, swearing genteelly under his breath, he wrung out his hat and chucked it beside the grenade.

“Bloody hell!” Someone else said across the water. He could see the other canoes bobbing on the small waves rippling across the water.

“Who the blazes did that!” The General demanded. “I said to wait for my signal!”

“Wasn’t me!” Atkins replied hoarsely, instantly on the defensive.

“Wasn’t us!” Replied Col Riley, (69, Star Marines Armored Division) from behind glasses as thick as bullet-proof glass. He was trying hard and unsuccessfully to smear them dry with his soaked jersey sleeve.

“Jordan?” Smythe asked suspiciously, turning round. But Jordan was still lazing in the back of the canoe, sopping, but just as relaxed as before. He hadn’t realized he was drenched yet – and would probably only catch up in another eight minutes or so, as he usually did – like clockwork.

The plastic case of grenades between them was still closed anyway. He just shrugged at him. Then Atkins shouted to draw everybody’s attention.

“Look! Over there!”

Where it had suddenly surfaced in the center of the circle, an object was floating, bobbing in the water. It was quite large, looked metallic and almost spherical in shape. There were no lights on it and judging by the steam rising from it, seemed to be quite hot. They brought out some flashlights and suddenly the thing was lit up from all sides.

“What is it?” Someone asked.

Just then, cocka-snoek started popping up around it, floating upside down on the surface, quite still, steaming. Keen and experienced fishermen all, this did not go unnoticed.

“Well, bugger me!” Riley cried.

“This is no time for your quaint sexual fantasies, George!” Smythe cried, nearing exasperation. “A man your age! Ahem! Now, what is it? Is it dangerous?”

The cocka-snoek were out cold, which was reason enough to wonder, wasn’t it? Something about the shape... A memory prompted Atkins.

“That’s an escape pod, that is!” He said, convinced. “I recognize the shape!”

“Where’d it come from?” Shouted Andy Wilkins, cupping a hand over one ear.

“It fell off a truck! Where d’you think, you putz?” Atkins replied sarcastically. “From a ship in orbit, where else!”

“Eh?”

“From up there!” Atkins shouted back, pointing upwards while adding under his breath in frustration, “Idiot!”

“Oh! You think we should call someone?” Wilkins shouted, now cupping his hands over both ears. He failed to notice as his paddle slid overboard and drifted away.



“Who – the Navy?” Suggested Nathan Forrest (Formerly a WO in the stores) from his canoe.

“There isn’t one – leastways not on Deanna!” his doddering paddling partner, Major Willingsly (63), retorted.

“Think someone’s inside?” Riley asked. “Hello?” He shouted. “Hello! Is anyone there?”

There was no reply from the pod.

“Right, that’ll do! I said, that’ll do! Ahem!” The General shouted, waving for silence and order. “Come on men, let’s take a closer look – Jordan, start paddling!”

Right then, Mr. Jordan suddenly wriggled and writhed and squealed – and did a little dance sitting down in the back of the canoe. “Yup – that’s him all caught up again!” Smythe thought, paddling solo. In eight minutes time, they’d already be at the life pod, he grumbled.

After much commotion of paddling and splashing, the four canoes drew up to the little floating dock that was the escape pod. It was just slightly warm by now – like the water that surrounded it, and they tied up to it. The hatch was somewhere on top, out of sight. Wilkins reached out to the water and grabbed a fish off the surface. It was warm and quite dead, probably partly cooked – perhaps even well done, and felt a bit rubbery to his fingers. He smacked it against the side of the canoe a few times, just to make sure – it bounced off, wobbling slightly and curving from side to side with the impact. Then, satisfied it seemed dead and quite cooked, the old man turned it over a few times in his hands.

“Well, that’s breakfast sorted then!” Wilkins muttered, satisfied, and dropped it inside the canoe.

Forrest was standing in his canoe and lightly leaning against their anchorage, watching Wilkins casually with interest. “Think that’s wise?” He asked. “That could be radioactive, you know.”

Atkins withdrew his hand as if stung and bent down to wash it in the lukewarm river. A splash followed as Potential Breakfast went back overboard.

“Fine time to think about that now!” Wilkins muttered angrily. “Damn! Couldn’t you have said that sooner?”

Smythe sighed. The trouble was, this little lot were excellent at throwing grenades at cocka-noek – if they were all pointed in the same direction – but deep thought and co-operation seemed to be something of the past. So was concentrating on anything for longer than five seconds – and quite a lot could happen in five seconds with this bunch – anything from fondly remembering something that happened thirty years ago, to arguing among themselves about what happened thirty minutes ago – in between frequent toilet breaks. Sometimes even the seemingly small task of getting them to throw grenades in the same direction was a daunting (and hazardous) experience – which is why the General regularly made certain his Will was in order –

and why Jeremy Jordan was the only member of the club forbidden to handle explosives – even stun grenades – unless they were still in their cases, and even then, only under strict supervision.

The main reason for this ban was the time Jordan took a dare and tried to juggle a couple of live hand grenades to amuse some tourists. “It’s amazing,” Smythe had been heard to remark many times since, “how often, the only thing left of a man is a pair of smoking boots – and sometimes a hat!” Well, Smythe supposed, fishing was an industry – like tourism – and no industry is without its share of industrial accidents, right – so why should dynamite fishing be any different? Or tourism for that matter?

Game fishermen would travel to Deanna from – well, everywhere – just to have a go at catching cocka-snoek. Most were lucky enough to go back home again, with all their bits attached and no more harm suffered than a trip to the doctor to remove bits of shrapnel from their derrière’s – or to the local dentist – though nowadays that was part of the past, along with using live grenades! Though, it was really fun, wasn’t it? After all, the Club’s fees were modest and it was kind of fun watching the greenhorns picking bits of metal out of their supper around the campfire, while trying to act all macho about it. Especially later, when they had to take one or two of them to the Institute for the Dentally Challenged – where the Club had a special arrangement with the local dentist. Nowadays, the most entertainment they had in using stun grenades, was when gun-deaf tourists kept shouting “what?” at everyone even more than the club members.

“Yes sir?” Said a perplexed and delayed Jordan from behind. “Wasn’t me either, sir!”

Smythe ignored him – except to quickly roll his eyes, because suddenly a deep hollow ‘clonk’ sound came from the pod.

“Watch out – it’s opening up!” Atkins warned, pointing with a trembling hand. The hatch lifted, opened and fell back with a loud thud, allowing a faint light to stream out the opening like a vague searchlight. Then they heard the sounds of somebody enthusiastically trying to climb a ladder, while possibly unsure which way was up, and probably with a bit of a concussion.

“Fire-in-the-hole!” Riley yelled suddenly.

Completely without warning – and before anyone was likely to even attempt to stop him – Riley lobbed an object at the pod. With uncanny and wholly improbable precision, the object curved through the air, and dropped neatly through the opening, and landed inside with an echoing metallic clang – at which time the climbing sounds came to an abrupt stop.

A terrified, echoey, but very human-sounding scream emanated from inside the pod, followed in short order by a muffled, distorted explosion – and a stunned silence from the rest of the Club, who were probably trying to calculate the odds of something like that actually happening... and if it was time for the little white pills yet, thank you, Matron.

The white smoke that started billowing from the opening went completely unnoticed, since everybody right then was staring at Riley in sheer disbelief! The canoes bobbed slightly as they rode out the little ripples as the wake of the explosion in the pod slowly moved away from it and

passed into the darkness. Riley beamed with pride as though, frankly, he was surprised he'd managed that throw himself!

“Think we should call someone now?” Someone muttered audibly in the tense, shocked silence.

It sounded vaguely like Atkins, Smythe thought – but truth be told, he really didn't care. Right then, the General would've been beside himself with anger, but there was no room left in the canoe – and anyway, he'd already taken a sedative the previous evening – it was a necessity when hanging around with this bunch, although the pills he was taking seemed to be losing their efficacy! Smythe slapped a hand over his eyes in a face-palm that stung his cheeks and brow. Then he began shaking his head slowly.

“Please, someone tell me that was a stunner?” He muttered in a still, audible voice laced with roughly equal portions of dread and menace.

“Yes, Skipper.” Riley grinned from behind his smeared windscreens. “Of course!”

“Was it?”

“Yes, Skipper!”

“Are you sure?”

“It had three little black stripes on it, Skipper!”

“Thank the gods for that!” Smythe muttered, and risked a glance at the top of the pod. Smoke was still billowing from the opening, and there was no sign of life. Then the General looked round at the assembled Skeggs Valley Dynamite Fishing Club and lamented, his voice getting louder every other word:

“Sixty-nine years old! Sixty-nine! Glasses so thick they could stop actual fucking bullets – the muscle-tone of wet tissue paper – I mean, actual godsdamn bingo wings – and you manage a throw like that, at an elevated, obscured target from ten meters, in near total darkness!”

“Just lucky I guess, Skipper!” Riley grinned at him, clearly mistaking the General's reaction for praise and perhaps positive reinforcement.

“I'm bloody serious!” Smythe lamented. “How? Why? It's a life pod, man – what the hell were you thinking?”

“Sorry, Skipper – they could've been dangerous!” Riley argued apologetically and awkwardly in an even more tense moment filled with the faint sound of eight old soldiers trying to shuffle their feet while sitting on them.

“I suppose he's right.” Said Atkins, not really helping Riley's case. “What if it's an alien in there, eh? A hostile alien, eh?”

The General slumped down, as though he could sit any lower in the canoe, and resumed slowly shaking his head again. It occurred to him that he spent so much time shaking his head in disbelief these days that he seemed to be coming down with Alzheimer's. An alien life form using a recognizable Terran life pod? Not inconceivable, he supposed – but a hostile alien? Most

known aliens were friendly and had friendship treaties with the Terran Empire, except for the Ruminarii – and they didn't interact with the Terrans at all – and nor did they believe in life pods – even though the things obviously existed.

“And we've got no weapons!” Riley continued, perking up and raising a bold forefinger as he realized the need to find extenuating circumstances. “Well, except for the paddles!”

“So that was a paddle you threw just now, was it?” Smythe retorted sarcastically. “Great! Just bloody great!”

What should they do next, Smythe wondered? His original plan was to see if someone needed rescuing, or perhaps first aid – and now, well – now... Smythe imagined that whatever the person inside the pod needed originally, their need was suddenly a lot more intense than before they came along! He shuddered to think what would result from having any of this motley crew descending on whoever was inside the life pod – even with the best of intentions! It would, he guessed, be like getting gnawed to death by a committee! No, they'd done enough already, he thought. It was time to make themselves scarce, discretion being the better part of valor! Smythe hoped whoever was inside, they didn't wake up too pissed off. Or worse still, wake up pissed off – with a blaster. At any rate, he hoped the occupants didn't come back later, looking for them! At least the fish didn't come after them with high-energy weapons! Not yet, at least... Right, then.

“Ahem! Okay, let's be off – back to the fishing then!” Smythe decided. “Before he – or it – wakes up and starts asking questions!”

“But, Skipper...” Atkins objected. “Aren't we at least going to take a look inside?”

“I think it's best we were on our way – before we cause any more damage, don't you?”

“Yes, but...”

“We've put that poor bugger through enough already, don't you think?”

“Yes, but...”

“Ship all messed up in space, crashing here in the river, getting blown up by Riley and that infernal throwing arm of his...”

“Yes, but...”

“Never mind that!” Smythe replied, raising his voice – his thin moustache bristling in a manner that left his audience with no false impressions that his was a mind that would be changed by further debate, or that the Club was currently a democracy. “We're not soldiers anymore – we're supposed to be fishermen, and now let that be the bloody end of it!”

It was only some time later, when he'd calmed down a little and settled back into the familiar and therapeutic rhythm of paddling and muted swearing, that General Smythe remembered a small insignificant detail that had eluded him earlier.

“Oh... crap!” He muttered under his breath. “Dammit! Still, it's too late now though...”

Smythe shrugged pragmatically, grateful that he was no longer expected to actually give account of his actions to a higher HQ, and resumed paddling.

\* \* \*

Brandon Carver awoke sprawled on the rear bulkhead of the life pod, which gravity seemed to indicate was now the floor. He coughed, squinting with disbelief at one or two little smoke rings which drifted above him before quickly dissipating. His head rang like the inside of a church bell on a Sunday morning – and he really hated church, almost as much as he hated Sundays and mornings in general.

Unfortunately – or was that the other way round? Fortunately, Carver was accustomed to things going wrong, even on a regular basis, so these little mishaps didn't usually faze him – but he wasn't used to things going as badly wrong as this! Even with the occasional small setbacks and cock-ups, things usually went generally according to plan – roughly, but this trip so far had been rather bumpy, and even jinxed from the outset!

He noticed the peculiar sun-burned feeling on his face, which now felt even worse than before...and everywhere too, for that matter. Hmmph. "Everywhere!" He pondered that interestifying word for a moment. "Must be a concussion," he thought dismissively. His black clothes were a little more blackened, if that were even possible – and a little ragged too. His dark hair had taken on a frazzled, stand-upish blown-back kind of look and his abdomen felt like he'd been tap-danced on by a very large animal with big heavy feet – quite possibly a pink one, taking recent events into account! On top of that, he was feeling a little queasy. The whole pod seemed to be quickly rocking in all directions underneath him. Hadn't he landed yet? He was sure he remembered the impact. Or impact of a sort.

The landing was pretty rough – rougher than expected, he remembered. There'd been no control – blasted life-pods! Anyway, it wasn't supposed to go that way... Thump-thump, his head pounded with the headache from hell as he sat up to survey the oddly blackened and smoky interior of the life pod, listening to the roaring sound in his head while he made sense of the tiny world around him.

Frowning, Carver struggled to remember what the hell had happened after the landing. He finally remembered starting the climb up the ladder – was it just now? Or longer? He remembered popping the hatch and... and – what the hell happened just after that was a puzzle. He felt something whizz past his head, and he heard something clanking on the inside of the pod... Then there was a bright flash and some kind of loud bang... Then it hit him:

"Who the fucking hell would throw a grenade into a life pod?!"

He shook his head, steadying himself by holding onto a railing. If he'd already landed, then why the blazes was the pod wobbling like this? Climbing up the ladder again (more cautiously this time) Carver reached the still open hatch and breathed in the clear fresh air of Deanna. He peeked over the edge. It was just after dawn, and a sun was low and painfully bright above one horizon. He looked down – the pod was floating in white churning water... a river, moving quickly downstream... Well, that would explain the wobbly feeling, anyway. Great – now he'd have to swim for it... but first he would have to gather a few supplies for his hike back to civilization...

Carver turned his dull aching head round to face the direction in which the pod seemed to be traveling – and then, with a sudden shock, noticed the actual source of the roaring sound. His eyes slowly widened in terror and disbelief. Suddenly very mobile, and screaming, he scrambled at the hatch cover – frantically trying to close it. The pod hung in mid-air for a brief moment, rotating slowly on its vertical axis before gravity recovered from its momentary lapse in concentration and dragged it down into the thundering thirty-meter high turbulent raging maelstrom that was Craptacular Falls.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, some distance away – in the middle of a fallow cornfield surrounded by distant low scrubby trees – ones that were not actually on fire, Tracey Ferris staggered through the dark towards a distant light on the horizon.

Although she hadn't walked all that far, distance-wise, it'd been a long damn night, and in the last few hours she'd had quite a harrowing damn walk! In that time, she'd been partly mauled by some really violent and vicious little clumps of what looked to be a sort of animate grass – which must have taken exception to getting stepped on – and had started to chase her on creepy little legs, snapping at her ankles with strangely sharp little teeth! The creatures didn't much like getting swatted at with a large shifting spanner either – fancy that! Then there was the horse – the wild, half-crazed animal that seemed to be giggling, but which she recognized as 'definitely a horse' as it tried to trample her! It wore a saddle too. Granted, it was on upside-down under its belly, but that still meant one thing to her – she was near civilization! How comforting!

It took her at least twenty minutes of running and playing evasive maneuvers till she managed to lose the horse! Running, ducking and crawling and dodging wasn't exactly something she saw a lot of in space, except perhaps the figurative kind people did in a ship (and usually away from Tracey Ferris). She huffed and puffed like an old steam locomotive, and narrowly avoided another encounter with more of that not-grass.

By now, she'd lost the spanner (she'd thrown it at the horse) vaulted a barb-wire fence (ouch!) and fallen into a ditch. She'd managed to keep the light in sight on her hazardous, zigzagging way, and now it seemed to be coming from a house, maybe a ranch house in the countryside of this Deanna – whatever, or wherever that was! The roof of the structure seemed to stand out against the flat, gradually lightening skyline, blending into what looked like a large barn close to it. A bright edge on the horizon finally seemed to answer her prayers for the promise of daylight! She noticed the two moons in the sky, one small and bright, and the other larger and dimmer, as they seemed to chase each other across it.

Tracey stopped and sat on the rough earth to catch her breath, leaning on her upper legs with her arms. She wiped some errant wisps of her long brown hair out of her face. Then she took a mouthful of water from her canteen. She had to keep moving. Time was wasting.

\* \* \*

Rising early was something that came naturally to Jenny Grauffis, the owner of a ranch an hour or so outside Atro City. It was something she was used to – getting up, having breakfast and then going out to repair fences or help some of her cattle that had fallen over during the night to struggle back onto their feet again. Red-horned Wildebeest were bred in a lab, which seemed to be the only ideal environment for these harmless inoffensive creatures.

Outside in the real world, the ground was well – just too, well – natural and uneven, and the beasts had a tendency to stumble, or overbalance and fall over. This wouldn't be such a drawback if they could actually get up by themselves again, and this sometimes endearing feature of the Red-horned Wildebeest generally required a lot of effort, patience and determination – and the winch on the front end of her jeepo. Farming the creatures was a time-consuming chore, more of a calling than a job, and something that fell more under the heading of 'life's work' than 'career'.

The milk variety was called 'milk cartons' because of the genetically engineered livestock's rectangular shape (which also made their hides easier to work at the local leather industry). They were really excellent cattle for meat, if you didn't mind steaks with corners. Jenny Grauffis was more inclined to favor the milk variety as they seemed calmer, and much less stressed than the other breeds. Besides, they lasted longer – you could milk a cow more than once, while a meat animal was something of a single-use commodity. Of course this was all relative, depending on how much valium she put in the water supply.

Then there was the small matter of the crabby-grass. A native life form on Deanna, it appeared to be a remarkably ordinary looking grass-like plant – until trodden on, or if something tried to eat it – when the creatures would suddenly turn into snarling, spitting, snapping nightmares with hundreds of sharp little teeth and legs to chase after whatever it wanted to annihilate!

Consequently, most livestock on Deanna were on sedatives and anti-depressants, had serious trust issues and wouldn't usually try to eat anything that didn't arrive in a plastic bag that wasn't opened in front of them first. Pets smaller than say, an elephant didn't really last long in the wilds outside the city. Lassie bounding across the prairies? Hah – if a dog went off doing that on Deanna, you could probably forget about ever seeing it again. For a while after, people might tell strange tales around a camp-fire, of a deranged animal vaguely resembling a dog that had been sighted giggling nervously in the trees near Blue Echo Ridge!

Ranchers tended to live in their treasured steel-capped safety shoes, and hers made the usual dull wooden thumps down the stairs as she made her way to the living area of the ranch house. Once downstairs she heard the familiar sounds of Mark being busy in the kitchen. Having someone else in the house was nice, especially since her younger sister Danielle had moved out and enrolled at the university in Atro City. Ever since Mom and Dad died it had been just the two of them in the house, until last year when Mark turned up. He'd lived with them ever since and had become an even more important feature of her life now that she was alone. Jen walked through the swing doors into the kitchen, yawning.

A tall dark humanoid wearing jeans and a tweed shirt stood at the counter, sorting through veggies and bits of shredded chicken with dark, scaly fingers. It was warm and muggy in the kitchen, but she realized that being a reptile, Mark didn't really enjoy cold mornings. Cold made him slow and crabby. Mark looked up at her and hissed her a good morning in his usual heavy Ruminarii accent.

"Breakfasst's on the table." He hissed. "Bacon and heggsss."

"Thanks, Mark." Jen said, and poured herself a cup of hot steaming coffee. "What're you making for lunch today?"

Mark paused in his sorting ritual, and indicated a book lying open on top of the counter that had a hint of something that suggested it was an old recipe book. Being a Ruminarii warrior, the alien – like his entire race – had previously enjoyed things raw and bloody and sometimes still living – so as the only living member of his species on Deanna, he'd become keen to explore Human cuisine. He'd made the leap to cooked food during the previous year already, expanding his experiment to include other non-carnivorous delights. Mark enjoyed fruit, but struggled with bananas because he kept forgetting to peel them. For some reason he favored cheese, and had even taken to chocolate recently. During the previous month, he'd made an enthusiastic foray into Italian food. This month, he'd taken an interest in Chinese. There were times, recently, when Jen had seriously considered taking the contents of the old bookshelf outside – and burning them.

To be blunt, Jen just wished he would stick to the basics, like maybe some good old rice, meat and potatoes – and gravy! Lots of gravy! That would be nice for a change! Come back, Danny, she thought half seriously – you can wear all the dresses and make-up you want!

"I found a book called Once Upon a Thyme." Mark explained.

"That's Irish cooking, Mark!" She began, gulping a mouthful of coffee. "Too much Leprechaun's not good for you. Like Hessian Chill Weed? That's why there are so many Irish jokes."

"Thenn." He continued, "I ffound that book, chal-led Drunken Chicken And Other Ress-cipes."

"Hmm." She nodded. For someone who'd only learned to speak Terran at a Ruminarii military training academy, he could sspeak and rhead it rather adeptly. Mostly, she assumed, they would have learned phrases like Hssurren-dher ohr dhiiiiiee – not 'How Dhooo Yhoo Like Yhhourrr Khoff-heee?'

"So? What can I expect come dinner time?" She smiled. Her alien house-guest's dark eyes seemed to glaze over, an indication he was deep in thought, still warming up in the kitchen slash sauna. "I'm sstill looking." He said. "Mhaybee Sscallop & Sshrimp Double Wong?"

"Two Wongs don't make a wight." She grinned, feeling unusually sharp and witty at this early hour. Mark was still cold and a little slow, so it went right over the top of his smooth, scaly head like a blast of cold air.

"Maybe ssome Ma Po Tou Fu?"

"Nah. I'll be seeing Ants On The Trees after that. Just be careful." She warned. "Can't have any firemen poking around here again. You know what it means if someone finds you here."



“Hhokay.” He almost-grinned at her. This was true. As a bona fide illegal alien living here, he was in danger of being seen, reported and caught – and she ran the risk of getting arrested for harboring him. Mark – or Marsh’k as his real name was pronounced, originally arrived at her doorstep as it were, the year before. In a cruel twist of fate, the former commander of a Ruminarii warship saw his ship and crew destroyed, and he alone managed to escape into the Deannan wilderness – dressed something like a cowboy, except the hat kept falling down on account of the Ruminarii not having any external ears to hold it up.

Jenny Grauffis had no fondness for the Ruminarii, in fact prior to meeting Mark, she’d never even thought about them – that is, since touching on the history of the Gimp War in history class at school. That being said, Jenny Grauffis didn’t much care for politics, but she certainly believed in the saying that ‘one good turn deserved another’ – and perhaps by sheer luck, Mark happened to arrive at the ranch just in time to intervene and save her and Danielle’s lives. It was kind of hard to turn in someone who had just single handedly dispatched three big men with blasters, using little more than a small paring knife – especially after the aforementioned gentlemen had just finished discussing at length how they were going to torture and kill her and Danny in a rather slow, messy fashion after having a little fun with them. Besides, Mark did help them to get rid of the bodies – and she’d agreed to let him stay ever since.

Humming contentedly to herself, Jenny went round the counter to the breakfast table, where she sat down to bhacon and hheggs. She missed Daniel – um, Danielle terribly sometimes. Now there was a b- um, girl who knew how to cook. It wasn’t what was in the recipes, Danny always used to say, it was in how you read them. It was so quiet too. She remembered some of the recipes in that book and wondered again what would be waiting for her come dinner time? Shredded Pork With Yellow Bean Paste, Hsing-Ren-Tou-Fu or – shiver – Szechuan Bang-Bang Chicken? For all she cared, it might as well be Peking Dish Of Vegetables Wearing A Bloody Hat!

It was right then there was a knock on the front door. It was the kind of knock people around here got at early hours of the morning from a nervous traveler who had hiked four kilometers from the highway where his car had broken down – or the kind of knock you got at 3am when the entire Sheriff’s Department was outside in jeepo’s, on horseback and on foot with sniffer dogs, searching for an escaped convict from the nearby Lulu Penitentiary. The Warden was funny that way – sometimes he would let one out just to give the dogs and his men some exercise, which made keeping a secret like Mark a little awkward. She looked up at Mark, who had, rather slowly, snatched up a cleaver and was looking at her pensively.

“Find a cranny.” She said, rising. Mark disappeared in a way that suggested he had practice. Wiping her mouth on her sleeve, Jen picked up a blaster from the mantelpiece behind her and went over to the front door and opened it, holding the weapon behind her back with one hand.

A raggedy looking – but not unattractive – young woman in black jeans and a khaki shirt was standing on her front porch. Judging by the scratches, scrapes, and dirt and bruises on her toned form, it was obvious she’d not had a very nice time recently. In fact it seemed pretty clear she was still having it.

“Hi” Jen greeted, noting the relieved expression on her visitor’s face. “Are you lost?”

“Hi.” The visitor greeted tersely, and lifted one foot, and paused to yank something loose from the ankle of her military-style boot and held it up so that Jen could get a good look at it. She recognized it at once – it was a spitting, wriggling, hissing little bundle of fury with tiny chunks of her trouser material lodged in its tiny rows of teeth!

“What the hell are these things?” the stranger asked, shaking it expressively like a little pom-pom of gnashing teeth – making her frustration and fatigue – and the fact that she wasn’t ‘from around here’, glaringly obvious.

“Well, uh...” Said Jen, pointing at Tracey’s other ankle, “That’s crabby-grass.”

“Eeeeeeeeeek!” it went, as Ferris angrily tossed the little creature at a nearby bush, the sound slightly distorted by the Doppler Effect as it made an arc through the air. She grabbed the second one and sent it after the first.

“Crabby-what?” She muttered tiredly, half-hoping the look on her face didn’t betray her fears that the bush might actually throw them back at her. “What crazy place is this?”

“Deanna. Where you from?” Jen answered. “And what can I do for you?”

“Aldus Prime.” Tracey said demurely. “Actually, I don’t live there, I’m pretty much from everywhere in the outback. My ship used to be home, mostly – until some asshole killed it a few hours ago! I guess that makes me technically homeless... Speaking of which, I crashed in a field a few clicks in that direction – and I think some of it’s still on fire.”

That would be on old man Mc Goughan’s land, Jen realized. Her neighbor would probably be running around the countryside by mid-morning with a shot gun and a truckload of the local gun-nuts shouting ‘yeehaw’ and looking for the person responsible. Probably by sundown some unlucky hobo or hitch hiker would have been lynched at the side of the main road for no good reason at all. Jen sighed.

“You better come in.” She said.

\* \* \*

Somewhere at the far end of the Whatoosie River – and fast leaving Skeggs Valley, Brandon Carver was still in the middle of having an even worse day than his self-made arch-nemesis, Tracey Ferris.

After a gentle meander along a part of the river which was dominated by cocka-snoek (and the Skeggs Valley Dynamite Fishing Club), the river (and Brandon Carver) had dropped sharply by means of what the locals referred to as ‘The Long Drop’ – or ‘Craptacular Falls’ as it appeared on most maps. If it weren’t for the life pod which the still traumatized Brandon Carver was technically wearing at the time, like a rather over-sized life preserver, he probably wouldn’t have been alive to complain about it.

Carver, now waist-deep in foaming, splashing water inside the half-submerged and somewhat dented life-pod, spluttered and shivered as he clung half-frozen and waterlogged to a slightly bent handrail at the top of the hatch opening. He was extremely happy to be alive, such as he was – although still confused by the strange welcome he'd had earlier!

He was technically lost. Yes, he knew this was Deanna – after all, that's where he wanted to be, but he had no idea where on Deanna he was... or where the river was taking him! He'd intended on landing at a spaceport or something – a place he could plan his trip from – a place where he would be met by his contact, perhaps be taken out for drinks and a chat about business matters! Nice warm drinks – perhaps even alcoholic ones! This was not exactly what he had in mind!

Ahead of the shivering and waterlogged Carver and his rapidly foundering life-pod, lay the final bend in the Whatoosie River. Of course, he didn't know that. He also had no idea that after the bend, the river would widen into the last two kilometer stretch that would take him through the river mouth and out into the Landlocked Ocean. This might have been a point of interest for Mr. Carver – had he been aware that the heads on the river mouth were marked on the maps as “Goodbye Point” – because of the powerful rip-currents along that part of the coast!

Carver was just contemplating his chances of surviving a swim to the swiftly passing river banks, which were now, er –approximatorially a hundred meters away to either side of the pod, when he heard another roaring sound coming from behind. He went ice-cold – well, even colder than he already was, eyes scanning his surroundings frantically for another waterfall! But there was none – instead, with an equally unnerving ‘thunk!’ sound, a harpoon lodged itself in the side of the pod, close to the handrail he happened to be holding! His eyes followed the tow-cable attached to the end of it to a small speed-boat. Two men stood upright in the approaching boat, wearing what looked like camouflage fatigues, and one of them was holding what looked like a sonic-pulse hunting rifle. That is, if the game were bipedal and able to shoot back.

Half-frozen and completely exhausted, Brandon Carver began to grin and giggle uncontrollably with relief at the sight of his rescuers just as the cable pulled tight and a winch began to reel him in.

\* \* \*

It was a beautiful early Thursday morning over Atro City and the star Ramalama was already climbing higher into the sky, making a day of it. Haha birds flew low over the city, always seeming to be desperately looking for a favorable place to crash. Haha birds were one of the few bird species actually known to be afraid of heights and who could literally crap themselves (and everything else around them) while in full flight. Their complete ineptness at anything remotely bird-like, and absolute clumsiness was legendary. In fact, the entry in the Deannan Tour Guide had this to say about them:

“Avoid if at all possible. Observe from a distance (the further away, the better!) Remember to take hand sanitizer and an umbrella!”

Occasionally – such as right at that very moment – a spectacular mid-air collision between two of these misguided missiles sent showers of bright yellow and orange feathers spiraling down to street level... where someone very special came into view – someone who could make Brandon Carver’s sycophant fantasies about his preferred career choice seemingly come true.

Marla de Bris was 20 years old, pushing 200 – virtually a teenager by her people’s standards. Being a vampire was risky enough, but being a vampire living secretly among millions of people – Humans and aliens – on a colony many light years from the Earth she was born on, was – well, dangerous. Worse than that, it broke with tradition, and for vampires, tradition was considered very, very important indeed. Taking into account that for vampires, the only things which were considered dangerous, were things that could actually cause death for vampires – this made a considerably shorter list of life-threatening hazards than for everyone else. Considering that Marla de Bris was already technically dead – at least by Human standards – she tended to view that threat of death as something of a personal challenge.

High overhead, a C-formation of strato-penguins had just climbed above a massive cloud bank and resumed moving westwards in their eternal migration that would take them around Deanna once every six months or so. One strayed a little too high and turned into a tiny red smudge on the edge of space, marking its passing with a distant explosion – which made a slightly delayed and very faint ‘pop’ as it reached her extremely sensitive ears.

The planet Deanna was a Terran colony with 2 million inhabitants, give or take a few to the left or the right of the decimal, including the Humans and several hundred non-humans living there. Aside from those, there were the vampires – people like her, who lived quite a lot longer than everyone else, who never aged, and who tended to walk away from mundane things like ordinary death while dusting their coats off and sharing amusing anecdotes about that other time someone (who was now long dead) had tried to kill them.

Vampires were people who lived in secret and seclusion, and in the modern technological age, they were people who found it increasingly difficult to live their long lives under the radar and coping with the ever-advancing tech which ‘mundanes’ – what they called non-vampires – used to satisfy their obsession with identity and identifying and controlling everyone around them. They were, broadly speaking – aside from sometimes needing a little blood to get by, quite ordinary people. Boring, even. But very, very secretive.

Living a life like this, in the shadows – and being part of a closed community, made keeping secrets something of a necessity. Even more so when one lived in a space overlapping between more than one community, and interacted with people who were not only unaware of the existence of their community, but who mustn’t become aware of it... Otherwise, there might be fairly dire consequences to follow... such as the aforementioned personal challenge.

“I think I’m going to have a purple turtle shake.” Marla’s very young companion mused, while deep in thought. “What about you?”

The dark-haired girl sitting across the table from Marla was quite beautiful in the classical sense, at least that’s how Marla perceived her. She was for the most part, an ordinary every-day

sort of Human girl entering her twenties, studying at the local university in Atrio City. The two had been friends at varsity for some time now, and took most of their classes together. Her name was Danielle Grauffis – and she had no idea at all. About Marla, that is.

“Hmmm.” Marla mused. She wasn’t all that keen on the new flavors people – especially the ones kids young adults (which in her book included every Human still breathing) enjoyed these days. “What the hell is a purple turtle shake anyway?” She asked herself before replying: “I think I’ll have a vanilla, thanks!”

“Si, signorina!” Said Albrecht, purveyor of diverse and fine beverages, and owner of Albrecht’s Takeaways in his put-on Italian accent. “A-one purple a-turtle, and a-one vanilla shake! A-comin’ right up!”

As Albrecht quickly turned and bustled off to the colorful former shipping container that was his very popular and successful little one-man business at the center of Lupini Square, just across the square from Atrio City University, Marla allowed herself to relax. She gazed round to take in her surroundings. In the distance, past the clutter of the many moveable outdoor tables with their colorful mounted umbrellas to shelter patrons from the sun or occasional light drizzle, she could see the Governor’s Palace on the opposite side of the square. Right next door to it, she saw the mundane’s court building. Yes, mundanes always seemed to put a high value on justice, she thought, but their justice only seemed to apply to those whom their laws recognized!

What need would a 200 year old vampire have of studying at a university is a question that not only Marla asked of herself. Many vampires used to indulge in studies and the pursuit of knowledge, either to better themselves, or to while away the endless stretch of days. It gave Marla the opportunity to meet new and interesting people, for one thing – and for another, it gave her the chance to make new friends to replace some of the old ones. To vampires, mundanes didn’t last very long, after all. They would be around for a few years of partying and fun, and then they lost interest and wanted to get married, settle down and make babies – and before you knew it, they’d got all old and wrinkly past their expiry dates and were no fun at all anymore. Marla sighed. Danielle was a great friend. So far. She was a bright mind, so sharp, so awake – not like most mundanes she’d known throughout her life. Being friends with her was great. Knowing it wouldn’t last long, wasn’t.

Her relationships with mundanes reminded Marla too much of her studies. Anthropology and archeology were wonderful subjects, but they hit a little close to home for Marla. You see, before long, her friendships would change from a routine of doing things, having fun, enjoying life and so on, to a detailed analysis of what they used to be like before and why they weren’t that way anymore. It was all too depressing.

“Hey!” Danielle called, bringing her out from her funk. “Where’d you go off to?”

“Nowhere.” Marla smiled back, her razor sharp canines not quite as obvious as they might have been. “Did that new guy call you for a date yet? It’s been almost a week since he asked you for your number.”

“Nope.” Danielle sighed, rolling her eyes. “He probably heard about my birdie problem.”

“Your what?” Marla chuckled

“My birdie problem.” Danielle sniggered. “You know, my trans-ness.”

“I know all about your ‘trans-ness’, dear.” Marla parried, smiling at Danielle. “If that were a problem for me, I wouldn’t be your friend, would I?”

Marla knew about transgender people. She’d been around longer than the Terran Empire, after all, and could relate most of the history of the transgender human rights battle of the 20th and 21st centuries just from having been there – and often drew parallels in her mind between the struggle for LGBT rights and the possible obstacles which other, less visible minority groups, such as vampires – might encounter at the hands of very similar opponents.

Of course, Marla knew, just being friends with a transgender person wasn’t the same thing as actually getting romantically involved with them. Marla was also keenly aware of some of the struggles her young friend had endured, even only to get this far! At least she had a sister who was – well, mostly supportive. Danielle also had a few friends at varsity now, including her. She decided to not get pulled down by the emotional connotations of that line of thought just at that moment. Life had enough real-world dark alleys, to ponder what-if’s, and maybe’s. For someone like her, there was very little that was new, or really original anymore.

“I’d just never heard it put quite that way before!” Marla giggled, genuinely surprised. “Birdie problem! Cute!”

Just then, Albrecht returned carrying their orders on a round tray, his little brown upturned moustache quivering as he remembered to put on his smile and said ‘graci!’ multiple times while placing the drinks in front of them on the table.

“Anything elsa, just a’call!” Albrecht said in parting.

Marla eyed Danielle’s shake. It was purple, as the name suggested, but she was unable to determine how much, if any of it consisted of turtle. There seemed to be a lot of half-melted purple ice-cream and milk in it though, topped with a good deal of froth and tiny, shiny slivers of what she’d been told were little multicolored sugar beads called millions of millions. It looked rather nice, and Marla couldn’t help wondering if it might come in blood flavor.

“Rats!” She thought, catching herself out. She always tended to wonder that around Danielle for some reason. The girl smelled so good to her vampire nose! Marla distracted herself by wrapping her lips around her straw and sucked on her vanilla shake as Danielle took to digging in hers with a long spoon first.

“I haven’t really decided yet, anyway.” Danielle chatted, licking the back end of the spoon. “I mean, I know I’m female and all.” She continued, “But I’m not sure if it’s guys I want to be dating, if y’know what I mean? Everything’s just moved so fast – and now I’m here. Almost at that Big Op! Boys can be nice, but girls are nicer!”

“Well,” Marla added her two cents worth, “You do know that sexual orientation and gender identity are two separate issues, don’t you?”

“Yup.” Danielle nodded. “That’s been covered in counseling.”

“No need to worry then.” Marla said between sips. “Why label yourself? Labels are for clothes, not people, right? Just do what makes you happy. Be with whoever makes you happy.”

“So serious!” Danielle chided with mock sarcasm. “You sound a hundred years old, Ms. de Bris!”

“Is that all?” Said Marla, feigning mortification. “I must be losing my touch!”

“What time’s class start?”

“Nine.” Marla replied. “What time is it now?”

“It’s just on eight.” Said Danielle. “Plenty of time then.”

And so the morning continued for the two friends – a blissful, carefree Thursday morning.

\* \* \*

Jenny Grauffis often took her comfort in the closed circle of friends who always helped her to deal with this kind of thing – this kind of thing referring to anything that involved outsiders turning up unexpectedly who might put their common secret at risk – A.K.A. the illegal alien living in the Grauffis family basement!

Currently, this unofficial circle included the famed local bounty hunter Gary Beck (aka Beck the Badfeller), former Colonial Intelligence Agency agent Cindy-Mei Winter, Peggy-Ann Muller (the local Sheriff), Jenny Grauffis and Jenny’s younger brother, sister Danielle. Although it seemed to be a rather organized group, they didn’t have passwords or decoder rings or anything so arcane – they were just a group of friends looking after a friend – and each other’s interests.

Having strangers round – such as deputies unfamiliar with the situation trampling all over the house and sticking their noses where they didn’t belong would not be the best scenario, Jen decided – there was no need to take unnecessary risks. Figuring that she had to call someone about her visitor, she decided it had to be someone with discretion, someone with authority who could be trusted, and someone who was in on the “Mark Conspiracy” as it had been dubbed by their small circle... She didn’t want to risk a stranger coming out to the ranch, or the local coppers getting too familiar with the place, so Jenny called a likely link already in her ever-growing chain of contacts in the local hierarchy.

Sheriff Peggy-Ann Muller, generally referred to as ‘Peg’ was a SOD – that is, she was with the local law enforcement office, referred to as Sheriff’s Office Deputies, and pretty much ‘the Law’ in the jurisdiction of Atro City. She was also a vital link in the group which kept Jenny and her younger brother, sister Danielle – and Mark out of danger.

Peg arrived at what was about breakfast time for ‘normal people’, being around 8am, alighting from her work jeepo, which was literally a black-and-white electric powered off-road vehicle with “S.O.D.” written on the doors, under the SODding logo.

“I tell you, Jenny...” She vented, climbing the wooden plank stairs up to the raw timber porch, “With meetings for the security arrangements for Monday’s parade and all, to have to still make house calls for ‘lost and found’ is a pain in the ass!”

“Well, thank you very, very much for coming, Peg!” Jenny greeted warmly in as friendly a fashion as she could muster. “Sure is good of you – I really appreciate it!”

The parade Peg referred to was to welcome a visiting member of the Imperial family on tour of the neighboring colonies in the outer territories of the Terran Empire. Jen didn’t care a preserved fig for politics or politicians, and she didn’t care too much for royalty either – in fact, she didn’t care too much about the news or the outside world beyond the limits of her property. She had enough problems on her own little patch of land to contend with, to still be bothered with what people on other planets were up to!

“How’s our friend?” Peg whispered, leaning in a bit closer.

“Hiding down under.” Jenny nodded. “He knows the drill by now.”

“He didn’t get seen?”

“Nope.”

“Well, okay. Where’s she?”

“Right this way, Sheriff.” Jenny said, leading the way inside, Peg in tow.

Tracey Ferris had cleaned up a little in the Grauffis bathroom. Her clothes were still a little mussed up and partly crabby-grass eaten, but for the most part, she looked quite presentable. Jen was struck by what a difference a little soap and water had made, and caught herself staring. After the initial uncomfortable silence, she found her tongue.

“Ms. Ferris.” She said by way of introduction.

“Tracey, please.” Said Tracey, smiling at the two of them, her eyes dwelling on Peg’s uniform and sidearm for a moment, and then back to Jenny.

“Uh, Tracey, this is Sheriff Muller.”

“Call me Peg.” Said Peg, smiling as she extended a hand. “Pretty much everybody round here does.”

After the brief introductions and explanations, Peg shuttled Ms. Ferris away ‘downtown’ in her jeep to fill out a few forms and reports, leaving Jen to get on with the rest of her day, now several hours in arrears! It was to be a day filled with thoughts of the morning’s events, and Jen realized later with some discomfort, some fascinating thoughts of Tracey Ferris!

For Tracey, it was a pleasant drive in the passenger seat of Peg’s jeep along the bouncy dirt roads to where they joined the smooth tar highway that ran into Atro City. At least, it was much more pleasant than her cross-country hike earlier that morning.

“So where will I go to from here?” Tracy asked.

“At the station we’ll fill out a report, and then if all goes well, I’ll arrange a room for you at a motel and an emergency social security advance to cover your accommodation for a week.” Peg replied. “After that, we’ll take it from there.”



“That’s very nice of you.” Tracy nodded. “I just don’t know what I’ll do after that.”

“Well, you could ask friends or relatives to send you money for a ticket back to Aldus Prime – or wherever you want to go? Or you could stay here, in Atro City, get a job – or freelance. Whatever. I don’t think Gary will mind the competition – that’s Beck the Badfeller – the famous bounty hunter in these parts.”

“Stay here?” Tracy pondered – and then repeated: “Atro City?”

“Yup.” Said Peg, preoccupied with driving.

“You do realize that if you put it together, it makes ‘atrocitiy’?” Tracey asked, thinking out loud.

“Er, yes. Of course, that’s why we don’t actually say it like that!”

Tracey was working this thing out in stages. It was possible, even likely. She had no money with her – and no relatives to ask for money to get a ticket – and she had no friends either – and certainly none that would lend her money! Tracey strongly doubted she had enough left in her bank account to pay for one, and in any case, she had no idea where she should go or if she would actually be any better off anywhere else. Whatever way she was to turn next, she would have to start over, from the ground up... It might as well be here.

All she had to do was get to know her surroundings, the people, how the local system worked... Who the players were, what obstacles stood in her way – and the competition. This Beck the Badfeller sounded interesting, but she’d never heard of him before. Anyway, her natural talent for bounty-hunting would see to the rest. She laughed. Peg just laughed with her, thinking that everything was going to turn out okay after all.

\* \* \*

Back in her office at the SOD building in downtown Atro City, shortly after having sent Ms. Ferris on her way with a social security advance – after taking her statement, Sheriff Peggy-Ann Muller placed herself behind her desk, and began rummaging through her drawers for a headache pill to take with her fresh coffee. Then she mulled over the events and highlights of the day.

At first, Peg’s thoughts dwelt on the pending royal visit, which involved quite a lot of planning – planning of the sort that demanded a truck-load of regular meetings at City Hall. These meetings – which had first begun several months earlier – had become more and more frequent as the timing of the dreaded event crept closer, and now took place daily – and with constant email and message communication between departments of the City to ensure that everything would be in place for the big day. The role players involved in the planning committee included the entire Planetary Governor’s office, and extensively involved the Mayor and Council of Atro City as well as all the chiefs of various city departments – including the chief of Atro City’s law enforcement community – to wit: one Sheriff Peggy-Ann Muller.

Aside from all the bureaucratic twaddle at that morning’s meeting, Peg really hadn’t been looking forward to the royal visit – which she thought of sans capital letters, much to her satisfaction. It was all too political and uninteresting – and although a large segment of the

population adored the royals, the visit created a shit-ton of logistic nightmares for those who had to plan it! She put that out of her mind again, and moved on to the next item on her list of activities for the day.

For starters – almost straight out of the meeting – she'd had to make a trip out to the Grauffis place where she picked up one Tracy Ferris, whose last known address was her privately-owned vessel, a class 'D' Voidger starship registered on Aldus Prime. Class 'D's, Peg knew, were very small ships – often carrying less than ten crew. Also, according to the central database, Ms. Ferris was a former resident of Apartment 127, The Vista, Rancho Boulevard, Central, Xedra City, Northern District, Aldus Prime – as of four years previously. Nothing seemed to be out of place as far as any of that was concerned.

The only red flag Peg had noticed was that Ms. Ferris's statement didn't tell her too much about how – or why – she'd come to Deanna at all. Her ship was a small thing, and according to her manifest, had three crew including Ferris, who was listed as the owner – and two males whose identities had not been confirmed yet. Without seeing the wreck, there was no way to know what really went down – er, up there – which technically, was neither in, nor out, of her jurisdiction... depending on which lawyer she might ask on any given day. According to a related report, the spaceport had sent up a tug to investigate a ship on fire near Deanna orbit a few hours ago, but no report had been filed yet – save to say that no survivors were found and the ship was a total loss.

According to Ms. Ferris, a fire broke out on her ship, got out of control, and she'd launched a life pod with barely a moment to spare. The other two crew members were reportedly killed in the fire (which made Peg wonder some about another report a little further down her list).

Ms. Ferris was a registered bounty hunter – that is, registered with the Colonial Lawgiver's Association – as an independent contractor licensed to operate anywhere in the Empire. She had a clean record, no black marks or crim-record on the imperial database against her.

Peg decided to wait and see if anything developed further in that regard, popped the headache pill, and chased it with a few sips of strong, bitter coffee. Then she resumed going over the morning's reports. It seemed some people on Deanna had had a very interesting night – and the mystery of Tracey Ferris would not be put away so easily!

A Mr. Job Frey Mc Goughan had complained about a life pod that had landed in one of his fields during the night and allegedly set it on fire (the field, not the pod). A case of malicious damage to property had been opened by the very irate Mr. Mc Goughan, which was then subsequently downgraded to an accident report by Deputy Flint Hogan who had been on duty at the time. Well, that was obviously where Ms. Ferris had landed – right next door to the Grauffis ranch, which tallied with Ms. Ferris's statement.

Another report had been filed very early that morning, by a witness who claimed to have found another life pod that had landed in the Whatoosie River during the night. The witness was Albert McKintyre-Smythe, whose report was corroborated by – well, by virtually the entire Skeggs Valley Dynamite Fishing Club!

Aside from that fact alone, the report itself – to be kind to the officer who had taken it all down (Deputy Flint Hogan) – was a jumbled incoherent mess! There was more in it about dead cocka-snoek and suspected radiation-poisoning, and anecdotes about war and the sound of farting carrying over open water – than anything relating to the matter! Halfway through reading that entry, Peg gave up, tried to read it from the beginning again, and quit at the same point where the random chaos threatened to overwhelm one poor solitary little headache tablet.

“Another life pod?” Peg mused. Perhaps that life-pod had been from the same ship as Ms. Ferris? Two life-pods from one ship in the same night made much more sense to her than two life-pods from two ships on the same night in the same sky? In fact, that seemed much more likely.

There was nothing in the report to indicate that there was anyone inside the pod alive or dead, so that was anyone’s guess... and in any case, the pod had been left to drift downriver – and everybody on Deanna knew what would’ve happened to it after that! All things considered, Peg grimaced, it was probably just as well Ms. Ferris wasn’t in the pod that landed in the Whatoosie!

An additional note from Deputy Hogan told her that the local Sea & River Rescue unit had been dispatched to investigate, and that one of their search & rescue craft had flown over the Whatoosie River mouth and past Goodbye Point a few times, and didn’t find any sign of a life pod. A postscript at the bottom of the note mentioned that falsely reporting an emergency was an offense and a waste of resources, liable to a fine and/or imprisonment. Peg didn’t think the entire Club would make something like that up – they were a daft bunch of silly old coffin-dodgers, but they weren’t prone to pranks! At least, not pranks that didn’t feature at least one grenade! That would’ve been fairly pointless as far as they were concerned! Peg applied her common sense – the pod must’ve sunk after going over Craptacular Falls, obviously, in which case, case closed! At least it was, as far as she was concerned.

Another unrelated note from the senior deputy investigating the previous week’s arson attack at the Jim-waian temple in Green Street told her that no progress had been made yet on the case. The temple had been badly damaged in a fire – the cause was plain enough to see – someone had emptied several cans of kerosene on the doors and windows of the building, apparently in broad daylight! “That was cheeky and dodgy as all heck!” Peg thought. “But then that part of Green Street was slap-bang in the middle of the Jim-waian neighborhood there, and was considered “pretty dodgy” by most people for that reason alone. Fortunately there was nobody inside the temple at the time, so there were no injuries. It would take some time to repair – and the local Jim-waians were not the wealthiest of people around, and the deputy warned of the likelihood that drifters and squatters might move into the ruined building soon, creating an increased risk of petty crime in the area.

The motive for the attack was clear from the messages left on an outside wall – “Aliens Get Out!” and “ET go home!” Another was more cryptic: “Make Deanna Human Again!”

The deputy mentioned in his update that there were no known hate groups active on Deanna, so he opined that the attack was the work of a ‘lone wolf’ arsonist, perhaps someone who had a beef with a local Jim-waian businessman. The Deputy had been thorough about it – noting that he’d even checked with the ER at Atro City General to find out if anyone had come in with kerosene burns, perhaps on their hands, around that time. He said there was little to go on – and Peg knew he was right. There would always be too little to go on when those doing the looking couldn’t see the wood for the trees.

Jim-waians were a relatively small, close-knit and secretive community of refugee immigrant aliens living on Deanna. They came from Jim-wa, a planet far from Deanna, and they there were identifiable by their unmistakable gray skin tones. They wore multi-colored seri-pha, which was a kind of traditional woven head-scarf. Most Jim-waians who left their home world to settle elsewhere tended to be refugees of a sort – since Jim-waian culture back home was very oppressive, Spartan, fanatically religious – and those who moved off-world tended to be the sort looking to get away from all that harsh, violent, zealous interference in their personal lives – or, perhaps more aptly – to settle down where they could have personal lives.

Almost without exception, Jim-waians lived peacefully among Humans, tended to keep to themselves, formed little communities in the cities on Deanna, with their own little neighborhoods, and ran little corner convenience stores, tailor shops, or café’s. After the attack, they’d clammed up right away, and nobody was talking – least of all to anyone wearing a SOD uniform – which Peg found annoying, but understandable. If she’d grown up on a harshly oppressive world, the last person she’d want to turn to for help would be anyone wearing a uniform – no matter what their skin tone. The chances of vigilante reprisals were good too, Peg knew, and it was very likely that one or more would end up in the ‘unsolved’ pile by the end of the month.

The last item on Peg’s list for the morning was about the body of a Jim-waian found hanging from a tree along the main road a few hours earlier. The unfortunate homeless milestone inspector appeared to have been beaten, robbed and hung by the neck. Despite having seen her fair share of senseless crimes and unnecessary cruelty in her line of work, and despite considering herself fairly jaded, this sort of thing still made her angry! She recognized a lynching when she saw one!

“In this day and age!” She thought. Still, it did happen sometimes, even here. Usually that sort of murder went unsolved – mainly due to lack of evidence, and no eye witnesses – plus, the people who did it were highly unlikely to admit it.

There was a significant and diverse alien population living among the Humans on Deanna, and not all people on the planet – Human or inHuman – were tolerant and peace loving, or at all fond of aliens, legal or otherwise. Most worrying of all, she’d noticed that it seemed to be happening a little more frequently lately than previously – this was the third such incident in the last month alone – more than in the previous two months combined! There was no apparent link between this case and those, leaving nothing much to go on!

There were always plenty of suspects to go round, of course – but never any witnesses or evidence to convict anyone. Everyone somehow managed to provide watertight alibis. It offended her morality as a police officer, and even though Peg had become gradually more cynical and gradually worn down by the pressures of managing the city's SODs, she still felt an angry tremor running through her body!

Peg pondered recent events further over coffee, all the while appreciating the efficacy of the headache pill and the numb calm respite it offered from the nagging dull thump at the back of her head.

\* \* \*

Professor James Eregut McMillen scrutinized the cause of his annoyance – which happened to be sitting across the table from him, as he slowly carved a chunk off the juicy, very rare steak on his plate. His knife was exquisitely sharp, so it didn't take long. Adding a little more cold to his stare as if it were a kind of sauce, McMillen also added a small piece of raw tomato to the meat skewered on his fork, and inserted it precisely into his mouth, chewing with equally steady, purposeful deliberation. All was silent, except for the sound of a parakeet squawking in a cage somewhere off the verandah, and the faint sounds of the Professor's genteel, cultured mastication.

Brandon Carver, who was the captive audience and recipient of the Cold Stare of the Month Award, began to suddenly appreciate what an unfortunate last name he'd been given, considering the sharp knife in the hands of his terrifying captor. The detail that Carver was tied to a rather heavy and substantial piece of cast-iron patio furniture – standing on the very edge of the deep end of a rather large and deep swimming pool – weighed heavily on his mind. The swimming pool itself was in the middle of a very well-tended garden and enclosed behind high walls. Carver could hear cows mooing softly in the distance, and nothing else at all. Shouting for help would be quite futile, unless he expected them to come trotting to his rescue.

Two rather well-built and well-armed young men wearing black T-shirts and gray urban-camouflage fatigues stood a short distance behind the Professor, respectfully a little off to each side. They did not seem to be like the nice chaps who'd rescued him from the life pod earlier that morning, just before it finally sank in the deeper river water very close to Goodbye Point. In the manner expected of bodyguards – or perhaps, henchmen – they held their rapid-firing sonic-pulse energy weapons at the ready – although, what it was they were ready for, Mr. Carver had no idea.

He knew the type of weapon – it could fire a single burst of high-energy sound across 100 meters without the ultrasonic burst losing any effect or potency. At close range, it could blast a hole the size of a football through a humanoid body, and probably still have enough latent energy left to punch a shallow crater the size of a tennis ball into a solid concrete wall behind that! The sonic bursts would only be audible by the dull whoosh it made if you were lucky enough to hear it pass you by. He really didn't like the idea of being on the receiving end of that!

Since he was at risk of ‘accidentally’ falling into the deep end of a swimming pool while tied to a cast-iron chair, he hoped the bodyguards might be ready to jump in and save him. No, that was the overly-optimistic expectation...but they did give him the bored sort of looks that told him they might pull him out later, as part of their cleaning duties... later... if they were actually told to, by the Boss.

Carver had lost his relieved grin since his earlier rescue on the river. Once the boat reached the shore, the goons had virtually frog-marched him to a jeepo, tied him up, bundled him inside, and brought him here to the manor in Wicking, a wealthy suburb of Atro City. At least he was given a blanket in the jeepo – probably more to conceal him in the back than for his comfort, but still, not a word had been spoken to him up to that point. Not one word! Carver pushed his patience to the limit, forcing himself to watch the Professor eat a little longer, just an arm’s reach across the table, acutely aware that the man was holding very sharp cutlery within that arm’s reach... Total silence reigned, except for the sound of a few haha birds flying overhead and much to everyone’s surprise, actually not hitting anything.

“So.” Said the Professor finally, genteelly dabbing at his bearded face with a clean white linen napkin. “Mr. Carver. What did you bollocks up this time?”

### **END OF PREVIEW**

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Christina Engela

### **About the Author**



Christina might not be the only writer – or even the only sci-fi writer from South Africa, but she is most certainly the most authentic, eccentric and unique sci-fi/fantasy/horror writer to originate from that country! She now has more than 20 published titles to her name – including a ‘how-to’ book about VW Beetles, a children’s book about bullying, and numerous fiction titles. If you would like to read more about Christina’s life and experiences, please visit <https://christinaengela.com> or <http://christinaengela.net> for more information.

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