

High Steaks By Christina Engela

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Preview

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High Steaks

Imagine, if you will:

Somewhere in the black void called deep space, a bright yellow star shone seemingly with the determination to make the universe a brighter place. Nine ordinary-looking planets circled it on more than one plain, so that occasionally, this little star system would resemble some kind of atom – perhaps representing a new element – one that should eventually earn a place in the next update of the periodic table under ‘Wr’, for weirdness... or perhaps even ‘Su’ for surprise. And why not? The small backwater Terran colony called Deanna certainly deserved it – it was the center of weirdness in the galaxy... and as the many tourists who visited it each year found out for themselves, it was full of surprises.

The star it orbited was called Ramalama – and its two little moons, Ding and Dong. Yes, the first humans who landed on Deanna to colonize the planet – and to civilize it (with dubiously inconclusive results in the case of the latter) as it turned out, had a very strange outlook on life – but then, who could blame people who lived on a world where one of the moons – a small perfect sphere of solid titanium about fifty feet in diameter – would fall down occasionally?

Of course that didn't happen too often – most of the time, whenever a visiting loderunner failed to notice it and accidentally bumped it out of orbit – but most importantly, when it was actually funny. Timing, as the saying goes, is everything, and the knowledge that the Tourism Office actually had three space tugs specially reserved just to put the small moon back into its orbit again, was commonplace on Deanna. After all, Ding was a matter of local pride!

Dong, the larger moon, was by comparison just plain ordinary – boring, even. It just stayed where it was and hadn't fallen down once in the century since the colony was founded – and considering its slightly larger size (and high iron content) that was probably just as well.

Atro City, on the coast of the Landlocked Ocean, was the capital city of Deanna and home to a million plus inhabitants. The city, being the center of local government, was also occasionally referred to by critics of the Planetary Governor, Thomas Kelsy Landry, as ‘the crapital’.

Lupini Square was roughly at the center of Atro City, which was appropriate since it was also very much at the center of public life in the city. It was also really far more of a large circle than an actual square – and very crowded at the moment, for reasons we’ll go into later. It is here where our story picks up: inside the hallowed walls of the Governor’s Palace, which stood on the outside of the road that encircled Lupini Square and faced onto it. Things were very tense inside. Things were tense outside too, but again, for reasons that will be revealed.

The aptly named Situation Room – which was a crowded chamber on the ground level of the building – was at this very moment occupied by the Governor himself, his Aide, members of the Governor’s staff, the Mayors of Atro City and San Fedora – Deanna’s two largest cities – and the chief of Atro City’s police force, Sheriff Peggy-Ann Muller.

A fresh dead body occupied a space on the floor near the holographic map-table, its former occupant having earned for himself the unflattering name of Piss Pot – at any rate in the memory of the Sheriff, who generally went by the name of Peg – at least to her friends – and she was reasonably certain there was nobody there with her that was any closer than the classification of colleague, or even superior. On an ordinary everyday basis, Peg had to answer to either the Mayor of Atro City or the Governor, depending on context – but these were anything but ordinary everyday circumstances!

For starters, Peg would never have considered threatening a room full of friends with her regulation side-arm before uttering the fateful words “Anyone else want to be on the wrong side of history?” and Piss Pot had been a colleague – at least, he had – until he pulled out his side-arm and tried to take the whole room hostage!

The Governor’s Palace was just in the process of being sealed off, with Landry’s Security guards scampering about the building to ensure all the doors were securely locked from the inside. The reason for all this unusual drama, in brief, was because that very morning – only minutes before – a visiting member of the imperial family had been assassinated during a welcoming parade, right outside, on Lupini Square!

The unfortunate Prince Justin, who was up to that point, thirteenth in line to the imperial throne, had met his end only about eighty meters away from the Situation Room – in the back of a convertible on Lupini Square.

The cause of death? Poor security. That is, somehow the assassin had managed to wangle a job where he would freelance as the Prince’s driver in the motorcade – and once they arrived on the Square, he turned around and blasted the bejesus out of him with a sonic-pulse pistol set on fully-automatic at a range of less than two feet! Peg was still wondering how the hell he managed to get away – vanishing into thin air seconds before the Prince’s team of body guards could even get their guns pointed in his direction!

Their woes didn't end there. In the minutes before the assassination, SOD (Sheriff's Office Deputies) cars that had been stationed around the city and along the parade route for the duration of the parade, had mysteriously begun to vanish in quick succession. Communications appeared to be on the fritz as well, and her attempts to contact any law enforcement units in the city proved futile. As though that weren't bad enough, in the confusing moments just after the shooting, a column of mysterious soldiers just appeared seemingly out of nowhere – and began marching across the Square!

After that, as if things couldn't get more surreal, some guy calling himself a General, who brought along his own podium, made a speech proclaiming a revolution – and blamed the assassination of Prince Justin on 'terrorists'. To top it all off, the 'General' declared martial law! Nobody seemed to be laughing, because apparently there were around three thousand well-armed troops outside, who agreed with him! They must have been shock-troops – because everyone was, well – shocked!

Peg tried again to raise the SOD head office, dispatch, a patrol vehicle – anyone, to no avail! All the building phones were offline too. She dropped her phone on the map table in disgust. She had no idea if something bad had happened to her deputies, or if something was just preventing her from contacting them!

She'd been trying to formulate a plan of some kind, but so far she'd only managed to get as far as 'lock the doors'. As far as she knew, the doors of the Palace, front and back, were the only way in or out of the building. In the absence of any secret tunnels in the basement she didn't know about, she fervently hoped the next phase of her plan wasn't going to be something along the lines of '...and hope they don't try to come in'.

The others in the room began chattering nervously amongst themselves, debating courses of action. Nerves were frayed and everyone left in the building – pretty much all that were in the situation room – was tense. Someone had covered the body of the former imperial security liaison with a bed-sheet. White, Peg considered, was probably not the best choice of color for that job, since the sheet had now partly turned blotchy red and pink where Peg had shot him.

"Governor!" McCracken, the portly, elderly Mayor of San Fedora bellowed. "What're our chances of rescue?"

Governor Landry straightened up in the chair he was sitting in, seemingly having an internal debate with himself.

"Well... er..."

"Expecting a rescue is beyond hope under the circumstances!" Sam Barthoff, Mayor of Atrio City, interrupted grimly, throwing up his hands in hopelessness. "Hopeless!"

Politicians, thought Peg, massaging her temples with tense fingers. She'd never been in the military, had no idea about military strategy, and in her position, never had access to information about the military, such as whether the Empire had any secret bases anywhere closer to Deanna than, say, Turnkey Station – which was, well – a good way away!

Peg considered herself a realist. Sure, this was a shitty situation to be in, but they weren't going to get out of it by getting hysterical! Anyway, she thought, she didn't have to be a military genius to know that it would be a good long time before the Terran Fleet could react or mount any kind of military intervention – and probably – if the folks outside knew what they were doing, they wouldn't even know something was wrong for at least a few days! Longer, if those people had some kind of ace up their sleeves!

“Sheriff!” Landry lashed out at Peg, regaining her full attention. “Your SOD’s are clearly not a match for whatever is going on out there – not a sodding match, er – if you don’t mind my saying so! We have to call out the Reserves!”

“Now just a crabby-grass kickin’ minute, Governor – sir!” Peg began, raising an irate finger. “I…”

“Umm… Sir?” The Governor’s aide interrupted. He was a tall thin man wearing an expression that might have been #255 Diplomatic Deadpan, “Sorry, Sheriff – Governor, Deanna hasn’t got any military Reserves!”

An awkward silence fell.

“No… military reserves on Deanna?” Landry repeated, his voice shooting up a whole octave. The aide shook his head.

“None!” Peg added, feeling her patience wearing a little thin.

“But…” Landry spluttered. “I remember seeing some mention of a reservist association in some files a little while back!”

“Yes, Governor.” His aide agreed – those are mostly pensioners and retired veterans – they do Sunday picnics, pensioner discounts, specials at the prosthetic devices counter at C.J.’s – maybe a little dynamite fishing on weekends, that sort of thing – they aren’t formally part of any actual military reserve unit!”

McCracken sighed loudly. “That’s it, we’re screwed!” He moaned, and sank hard into a wheelie-chair, placing his head in his hands. “Screwed, I tell you!”

“Well – call them up anyway!” Landry continued. “If they can still blow the ack out cocka-snoek, they should be able to do something about this!”

“Governor,” Peg interrupted. “I agree with you that the veterans in the Skeggs Valley Dynamite Fishing Club probably have way more combat training and experience than anyone on Deanna – but for now, we’ve got no way to contact anyone! Perhaps, if we can find a way out of the Palace, and even the city, then we can call Shady Palms and see if the Matron will let them out to deal with the fuckers that shot Prince Justin! In the meantime, we still need a way out of here, and as fast as possible!”

“Right.” Landry nodded enthusiastically in agreement. “First thing’s first then, capital!”

“Okay.” Peg sighed, wishing she had remote access to the headache pills in her desk drawer back at the station – this was turning out to be a very long damn day!

“Well?” Asked Landry expectantly.

“Well, what?” Peg asked in turn.

“What’s the first thing?” He asked.

What was the old man smoking? Peg wondered. Just then, the building’s chief of security returned, entering the room through the door into the lobby, accompanied by two of his colleagues, who were also dressed in the beige and brown uniforms of state building security. He went right up to Peg, giving the Governor a nod, sending a drop of sweat falling from the tip of his chin. His face was wet and shiny with perspiration – clearly he was not handling this very well.

“The doors are locked, Sheriff!” He said in a nearly trembling voice. “All entrances to the building secure!”

“Thank you.” Peg said, placing a hand firmly on one of his shoulders. “What’s your name?”

“Phil.” He said. “Phil Roberts. Er – they have the place surrounded! We saw ‘em movin’ out back through the windows! Just...thought I’d mention that...”

“Sterling job, Phil.” She said reassuringly. “Just stay calm and we’ll all get through this, okay?”

Phil nodded weakly, closing his eyes for a moment. Clearly Phil was in this job for the perks and benefits, and not an adrenalin-junkie.

“Is there anyone else in the building, Phil?”

“No ma’am.”

“Y’sure?”

“Yuh.” He nodded. “Everyone that wasn’t involved in the welcoming went outside to watch the show. The reception lady, my security detail, and everyone in here – that’s all of us that’s left inside!”

Peg did a quick head count. That made fifteen people, excluding her. From the look of things, only about five of them had weapons, including the pistol belonging to the dead guy on the floor – and that meant handguns, no rifles, not even an assault blaster between them!

“What do we do now?”

“We work this out, Phil!” Peg said, as leader-like, confidently and inspirationally as she could muster under the circumstances. “We work this out!”

“Okay.” Phil said, before breathing deeply in and out.

“Now.” Peg said, looking Phil in the eye, looking hopeful, “Is there any other way out of here except through those doors?”

Just then, a loud thump came from the direction of the front entrance on the far side of the lobby, amplified by the echo.

“Better hurry, Phil!” She breathed. “We don’t have much time!”

Peg had barely uttered her warning when suddenly, a weird sound like a cross between a guitar twang and Mozart being played backwards at high speed, came from the situation room doorway and the lobby. Already tense, Peg automatically drew her sidearm and turned to face the potential threat – which turned out to be an attractive male figure wearing dark slacks and a blue long sleeve tee. She did a double-take. The cowboy hat was conspicuously absent.

“Who the hell’s that?” Governor Landry demanded. “Where’d he come from?”

“Why, that’s Beck!” Said Phil in amazement. “Beck the Badfeller! An’ without his hat!”

It was Gary Beck, aka Beck the Badfeller – who was without argument, the greatest bounty hunter on Deanna of all time – but why he’d just appeared out of thin air, looking puzzled and holding a half-empty mug of coffee, very few people would be able to say. Gary Beck wasn’t too sure about that either.

“Gary!” She said, giving a relieved sigh before lowering her weapon. “Where’d you come from? When did you get back? Weren’t you on Mars?” She said in quick order. Then, after the reality of things set in, and a funny look had finished crossing her face, she asked “And – how the heck did you get in here?”

“Oh, hi Peg!” Gary Beck said, smiling innocently. Suffice to say, despite having just been at the Time Saving Agency with Cindy-Mei, where they were entertained by Johnathan Scrooby for what seemed like several days, Gary was well aware that they’d just landed on Deanna about an hour before they actually left Mars!

Gary hated time travel – that is, he hated the complicated quantum physics in everything that explained it – especially when it gave him a headache! Just the thought that right now, at that very moment, another Gary Beck and a different Cindy-Mei Winter from the one standing across the room from him – were sitting in Mei’s apartment in Mars City, sipping coffee, oblivious to current events back home on Deanna and chatting to their friend Johnathan Scrooby – was a four-alarm migraine in the making! That said, Johnathan Scrooby – their friendly agent at the Time Saving Agency, had brought them up to speed on current events, and they were here to do some old fashioned arse kicking!

“Yes, Mars! Just now, actually! Long story! Tell you later!” He said, evading all of Peg’s questions at once. Trying to explain a second-hand version of Johnathan Scrooby’s ten minute lecture using candles as props probably wasn’t a good idea. Besides, he didn’t see any lying around.

“Sure, sure.” She nodded, then after a pause she asked. “Gary?”

“Yea?”

“Why do you have a half-empty mug of coffee in your hand?”

Gary raised the half-empty mug of coffee and stared at it like he’d never seen it before. It was still warm! Then it hit him –

“Scrooby!” He breathed, and shook his head, appreciating the joke. It was the same mug he was holding when Scrooby time-shifted them out of Mei’s apartment earlier. No, later! Damn –

he was never going to get the hang of this! He knew Scrooby had a warped sense of humor, but this was a bit silly, even for him!

“Uhm...” He said.

“Lemme guess...” Said Peg. “Later?”

“That’s the one!” He nodded, smiling brightly.

Just then, another loud thump on the front doors carrying a faint note like a big bell ringing, echoed in the lobby. Some of the people in the room flinched nervously. Obviously someone was trying to batter the doors down! Gary seemed unsurprised. He swallowed the contents of the mug, nodded approval, and put it down on the map table. Then he smiled at Peg again in that maddening way she knew too well.

“Excuse me!” A voice called. It was Landry again. “What’s going on here? Are we being rescued?”

“Governor!” Peg replied, smiling. “I’d say our chances of making it out of here alive just went up – by a lot!”

Peg only just noticed Mei standing at the other end of the room, her medium length blonde hair tied back in a short pony, a blaster in one hand. Somehow, for some reason even she couldn’t explain, she’d arrived there dressed in what looked like the same black simulated leather outfit she’d worn on her first night on Deanna – right after the Ruminarii hammerhead bombed Atro City!

“How?” Mei asked, looking at Gary, puzzled. Gary was just examining her, and craning his neck to look past Peg. That was quite a sight for sore eyes!

“Don’t ask!” He grinned back. “Same answer!”

Gary thought Mei looked amazing! He supposed Scrooby thought that outfit was a little more appropriate under the circumstances than the summer dress and heels she’d had on the previous day – er... no, on Mars right now! Good thinking on Scrooby’s part!

“Mei.” Peg greeted tersely, looking her over.

“Peg.” Mei returned, with a curt nod, as they launched into a brief exchange. “Good to see you.”

Peg: “You too.”

Mei: “Everything okay?”

Peg: “No. You?”

Mei: “I’ve been better.”

Peg: “Same old, same old, huh?”

“Yup. ’fraid so.” Mei smiled. This was after all – clearly – not their first adventure together. Luckily for her, Peg thought, at least she knew it probably wouldn’t be their last.

“So what do we do now?” Peg asked, turning back to Gary. “What’s the plan?”

“Mei?” Gary asked Mei, who nodded to him meaningfully that she was ready for action. “If you please!”

“Okay, listen up!” Mei said, channeling the voice of former CIA Agent Winter, formerly of the Colonial Intelligence Agency. “We’ve got approximately five minutes before they break through, so we’re getting out of here now! We need to travel light, so we’re taking no baggage along! Please – make no attempts to salvage little Jemma’s school photo on your desk upstairs on the way out! We go, and we go now – green?”

There was a general round of nodding and murmurs of agreement. Everyone was antsy and very eager to get out of there – and with extremely good reason! The fascist conquerors of Atro City hadn’t to their knowledge, actually killed people yet – except for the unfortunate Prince – but they didn’t want to push their luck!

“Yo, Phil!” Gary called. The head of building security of the Governor’s Palace looked startled.

“Beck the Badfeller knows my name!” He said, shocked. “Yes, sir?”

“We need to get to the basement, pronto – you lead the way!”

“But…” Phil protested, reluctantly finding himself being pushed toward the doorway of the lobby by his eager followers – the Governor and the two Mayors jockeying for first place. “There’s no exit in the basement – we’ll be trapped!”

“Not yet! There’s no way out up here either, Phil – but don’t worry, leave that to us!” Gary smiled, stepping aside and coaxing Phil to pass and lead the others ahead of him. Mei brushed past him at the tail-end of the group, and paused to give Gary a kiss.

“Hm-m-m!” Gary smiled at her sexy little swagger as she moved on after them, heading down a dimly lit corridor. “Agent Winter sure is starting to grow on me!”

Gary turned his attention back to the task at hand. He could hear a commotion outside the large windows on either side of the door. While at the TSA, Scrooby had used a device called a Projector, which seemed really like an overcomplicated video player that used holograms (among other things) to show them the time-stream – what had happened, what was happening – and what was going to happen.

Scrooby, being the thorough and precise Time Agent that he was, also showed them what should happen – and what would happen if what should happen didn’t happen – which, believe me, wasn’t pretty. But, neither was what should happen… but there was no way round that. And, as if that wasn’t confusing enough, he’d also showed them what was happening outside the Palace right at that very moment.

People had come to Lupini Square that morning to watch the parade and the motorcade – hoping to see Prince Justin make his speech – but instead, they’d witnessed a horrible assassination first-hand. Now they were trapped inside a cordon of fascist troops who had encircled the Square – troops from an army that now controlled Deanna. Right at that very moment, not too far from where he was standing, people were being separated and sorted through a form of crowd-control funnel, into two groups – those the fascists approved of, and those they didn’t. Those they approved of were sent home – while there would be dire

consequences for those they didn't. Gary felt a wave of anger rising within him, and tightening his grip on his determination to see this thing through, surfed it out.

There was another commotion on the other side of the large white double doors as the rapidly tiring and grunting team of fascist soldiers charged it again. They managed to gather enough momentum to ram their improvised battering-ram into the door a little harder, making the hollow bronze statue ring like a bell on impact. A slew of fine gray dust fell from the surrounding lead-wood door jamb.

Gary smiled grimly to himself, as the last sounds of Mei and the party of refugees from the situation room faded from hearing. He knew the door was made of solid Deannan lead-wood. It would take a hell of a lot more than that to break it open!

He sidled past the reception desk nearby the entrance, and risked a stealthy peek outside through the window on that side, taking care not to disturb the lace curtains. One of the big boys at the front of the statue groaned with fatigue and frustration, and let the heavy weight sag to the tiled floor of the verandah.

“Why don't we just shoot the lock out? Or blow it up?” He heard another trooper suggest. A shorter, rounder man of similar age looked to another who seemed to have more authority, for guidance. He saw the tall blonde man standing to one side of the group operating the battering ram – which he recognized as a statue taken from the large fountain at the center of the Square.

“Hmmp.” Gary muttered under his breath. “Adriano Lupini! Who says you can't fight city hall?”

The guy in charge wore what looked like an officer's cap and insignia, and Gary recognized him as the dude who was running the show. He shook his head. Gary knew the fascists wanted the Palace taken as intact as possible – after all, it was to remain the seat of government! The officer looked round, seemingly gauging the large windows along the wall either side of the door.

Gary entertained the thought that if he waited a few minutes, he could take out General Clayne and a couple of the high-ups and put an end to what was happening toot-sweet... He and Scrooby had already been over that. The reality of the situation was, that even Clayne wasn't the big-wig in the show. Clayne was replaceable, and even Luciferus Krant was replaceable. Besides, there were rules to Time Travel, and the TSA rigidly enforced them – the only way they could help was to speed things up a little, work around the blurry edges of the historical facts, and to assist the good guys as best they could without altering history too much.

A funny sort of urge overtook Gary, and he reached down to a faintly glowing control panel on the reception desk. He cleared his throat, and stifled a little chuckle.

“Hello? Hello?” He called, distorting his voice so that he sounded just like a doddering, senile old man. “Hello? I say, is someone there? Did someone ring?”

Leaving the group of fascists outside to ponder what the hell that was about, he dashed out of the lobby, down the corridor – after Mei and the others. He knew what was coming next. Just as he reached the kitchen, which was at the far end of the left wing of the building, at the rear, he heard the sound of breaking glass, which told him the fascists had lost patience with the door and instead smashed the window with Adriano Lupini – the bronze edition, and were now climbing through the hole. They would of course, conduct a thorough search of the building – which would take time! Mei was waiting for him in a far corner at the back of the kitchen, at the entrance to a dark stairwell that led to the basement.

“Took your sweet time!” Mei grinned at him. “Did you have fun?”

“Some!” Gary giggled. “Is everyone inside?”

“We’re waiting just for you!” She said, looking him in the eyes as he moved up beside her at the top step. “I know we have a big advantage!” She told him. “But let’s still be careful, okay?”

He nodded. He knew she was right, of course. She led the way down the stairs. The basement had been used as a storeroom for many years. A row of dim lights illuminated the concrete chamber – at least enough to cast delightfully creepy shadows everywhere. Old furniture stood stacked about, covered in dusty sheets. The pair squeezed through a gap between an old bookshelf and stacks of dusty picture frames leaned against a wall – portraits of heads of state, visiting dignitaries and former Governors of Deanna. The anticipated cluster of agitated and impatient worriers stood huddled at the very back wall at the far end, waiting. There was no way to go any further – a fact that had not gone unnoticed. Their faces lit up when they saw Gary and Mei coming to join them.

“Mr. Beck!” Phil said urgently, “There’s no way out! We’re trapped!”

“No worries, Phil!” Gary said, and pulled an object from his slacks pocket. It looked vaguely like a TV remote. A little red light blinked on it to indicate power – though perhaps only Mei and Gary appreciated exactly how much. Phil blinked back, unsure what to think.

“Right about here, eh love?” Gary checked with Mei, pointing at a spot in the center of the wall. Mei nodded. Gary pointed the device at the wall, pressed something, and waved it in a circle. As if by magic, a dark circle big enough to swallow an adult humanoid and still fancy dessert appeared on the wall.

“What is this? Art class?” Landry, his nerves fraying, murmured. “How will drawing on the walls help us get away?”

Gary shook his head, more from amazement at the tool Scrooby had loaned him, than irritation at the crotchety old Governor.

“Easy!” He said, smiling victoriously back at Landry, before sticking a hand into the circle – and shoulder-deep into the wall!

“Follow me – quickly! Don’t stop!” Gary announced, before taking a step forward – vanishing into the dark circle on the wall.

“Quickly! Move!” It took a barked order from Mei, standing at the rear, to snap them out of their momentary state of confusion and awe. Even Peg’s mouth hung open – right up to the

moment she reached the circle, which as she got closer to it, became clear enough to see that it wasn't just a black circle on the wall – it was a hole of some kind that went right through it! Only, the wall still seemed to be there at the same time! Peg looked over at Mei.

“Go on!” She said, encouragingly.

“Is this thing safe?” Peg quavered. “I can see the bricks vibrating!”

“Time's a-wasting!” Mei said tunefully, raising her eyebrows and tilting her head towards the opening. Peg shrugged, and took the plunge, vanishing like Gary had. After the last person went through, Mei went in herself. It was really just a hole in a wall from a practical perspective, except that the hole was just temporary. The tool Gary had used simply altered the chrono-spatial characteristics of the matter in the wall – and the solid bedrock behind it – to make it allow solid matter pass through it ‘sort of like how glass is transparent and allows light to pass through it’, she remembered Scrooby's explanation. Scrooby had called it a ‘portal’.

The hole – er, portal, went through the wall and downwards into the dark Deannan bedrock that lay beneath Atro City. Because it was artificial, the sides were fairly smooth and regular along a tunnel about only fifty meters or so long. At the other end of the portal, she emerged into a dark space that seemed to be lit – somewhat erratically – by the rest of the group, who were holding flashlights. Their eyes were still quite vacant and their faces numb. Gary was there waiting for her, and planted a kiss on her forehead as she came through.

“That's it.” Mei said. “I'm the last one – you can close it!”

Gary pointed the device at the portal and pressed something on it. Silently, the portal vanished, leaving nothing but virgin bedrock – as it was before!

“Makes you feel kinda sorry for anyone who might've been trying to follow us, doesn't it?” He winked.

“No.” Mei sighed. “Not at all.”

The light being cast erratically around the dark space in the rock by moving flashlights, and her own, allowed Peg to see some detail. They were in some kind of tunnel – a natural space in the bedrock under the city, with either end of it obscured by darkness. The surface under her feet was hard rock. There were patches of grit here and there, and what looked like potholes filled with fine gravel. Everything was bone dry. She spotted Mei, who seemed to be passing out bottles of water and small food parcels to their charges.

“Nice touch, Scrooby!” Mei thought.

“Where the hell are we?” Mayor McCracken grumped, pointing his light at the tunnel roof and staring at it. “Where is this?”

“It's part of an underground river.” Mei explained. “Running under Atro City. It passes right under Lupini Square!”

“A river? Where’s the water?” Landry observed. “I don’t see any water!”

“What if it floods?” A staffer asked, verging on hysteria.

“We’re fucked!” Came McCracken’s voice in the darkness. “Ohh yes...”

“Actually, we’re safe!” Gary added. “This part of the river was cut off a long time ago, when they built the fountain in the Square. It’s been dry ever since.”

The group began to chatter among themselves – a jumbled chaos about what had transpired that morning, their unusual escape – and the unusual means of their escape! Some were starting to crack under the pressure – and for those who hated closed, tight and dark spaces and who had vivid imaginations focusing on being trapped in an underground passage choosing exactly the wrong moment to flood, their emotional states seemed suddenly all too fragile.

“Now look!” Said Gary Beck, nibbling on an energy bar. He softened the tone of his voice in the new silence to compensate for the amplification of the rock walls. “We’re perfectly safe down here for the moment. Take a few minutes, rest-up, eat something, have some water, and then we’ll head that way toward the end of the river.”

This gave them all a few minutes to rest, eat something and re-organize themselves. Then it was time to go. Feeling a little like tour guides, Mei and Gary herded the group through the darkness, down the channel the river had cut through the bedrock. What no-one in the group had asked, was how far they had to walk.

* * *

Meanwhile, in what had just been the Palace of the Planetary Governor, Sergeant-major Luciferus Krant of the Deannan Republican Army, was eyeballing a very nervous corporal who was standing rigidly to attention in front of him. Krant bobbed slightly with annoyance, so that the soles of his polished black boots squeaked faintly on the polished marble tiles in the lobby.

The large white doors of the main entrance, now a little marked and scuffed and not quite so white anymore, had been unlocked and stood wide open behind him.

From that hallowed doorway, half a century of just, peaceful, dignified, noble – and perhaps even honest government – had looked down upon Lupini Square and the city around it. Now it was witness to a scene of horror – a spectacle of depravity and tragedy which should bring tears to the eyes of any long-time resident of Deanna.

Over the previous few hours, Lupini Square had begun to resemble a prison camp more than the lively bustling hub of Deannan society. A few shops which operated from former shipping containers now stood dark and quiet amid clusters of empty tables and chairs that dotted the Square, like rocks in a small sea. At the center, water in the desecrated fountain splashed in the growing silence. Strangely, even the pigeons had deserted Lupini Square. The vast crowd that had been caught up in the D.R.A.’s cordon that morning had dwindled in size during the course of the day, and now scarcely a thousand people remained to still pass through the gate at the other end of the funnel. Trucks had begun to remove the undesirables that had been filtered out, moving busily to and fro.

Krant scowled. The corporal in question had just reported to him that, after a thorough search of the building – lasting two hours, not one single person had been found inside!

How could that be? The building had been surrounded by D.R.A. troops on all sides, and no-one had been seen leaving! Further, the corporal had reported that all the outside doors in the building were found to be still locked from the inside!

Despite all these glaring, obvious facts, and despite having a second search of the building conducted – this time to include all closets, cupboards, nooks and crannies, the kitchen, the basement, and the attic – they had still come up empty-handed!

“Do you mean to tell me...” Krant growled at his subordinate, his beady eyes boring into him, “That I have to tell the General that the Governor, the Mayor of Atro City, the Mayor of San Fedora, and the Sheriff of Atro City’s police – have all escaped?”

“Sar’major!” The stone-faced and decidedly pale corporal responded, visibly trembling. He was, of course, completely unaware of the real reason why Krant had taken the news so hard. Krant had played those cards close to his chest – Landry. Landry was the main reason Krant had got into this business at all!

Luciferus Krant was born on another Terran colony called Hesperus 32 years ago – the poor bastard child of a young unwed mother with little schooling, and little other means to support herself other than on her back with her legs spread. Men who had means and power were what kept her alive – until an up-and-coming politician, who was such a man – had taken what he could while he could, and then moved on – leaving Dorabella Krant holding the only evidence to show he'd ever known her. Him. Oh, he believed in the D.S.L. and the D.R.A. – and the cause alright – but work wasn't the only reason he'd come to Deanna two years before! The opportunity to settle a score with the biological father he never knew was too big a temptation to resist!

In the uncomfortable silence, the faint sounds of a terrified woman screaming as she was being dragged away echoed across the Square. Sergeant-major Krant ground his teeth. General Clayne may have had a liking for him, but Krant was under no illusions that Clayne handled failure very well. As of that morning, he knew, Clayne was one of the most powerful and dangerous people on Deanna!

“Don’t you ever bring me news like that again!” Krant growled. “Dismissed!”

* * *

It was late afternoon and Ramalama was low in the sky, and sinking fast. On the opposite end of Lupini Square, across from the Palace, a young man in his early twenties – who happened to be wearing the snappy black uniform and rank insignia of a D.R.A. Colonel – stood admiring the realization of his life’s dream. Granted, he was a young man and hadn’t much actual life behind him, but as to what little he’d had – this was a dream come true.

Michael Francis exuded pride! Great men, in Francis's opinion, like Heinrich Himmler – could only have dreamed of the speed and efficiency – and also the direction in which they were moving! Francis had always been fascinated by earlier efforts to defend the Human race, to keep it intact and to protect its purity, and he'd been a lifelong fan of figures like Adolf Hitler, Rudolf Hess, and Himmler! Although, he didn't agree with the Nazis one hundred percent – they'd only got it part right, he believed.

While the Nazi ideology and state machinery believed that “Aryans” were the superior Human and despised all others as lower beings – and sought to eliminate them – he personally believed that all Humans were superior to other beings, and that Humanity deserved to live apart from the inferior, corrupt and unworthy alien horde that he felt was being forced on him! Hitler and the Nazis – and in fact, the myriad of neo-Nazi movements that followed them – hated non-white Humans, Jews, homosexuals and sexual deviants and multiculturalism equally across the board! ...and so did the D.R.A. – at least with the exception of the non-white Humans.

Like the Nazis before them, the D.R.A. employed religious imagery to support their actions – and they found it to be a very useful tool in uniting their supporters. In fact, Francis imagined Herr Himmler would've been hugely impressed and very proud of his achievements! This was his project! This was patriotism – the loyalty of one and all to the principles of the Movement! Obedience and compliance to the Message – fealty to the Human Race, to the one true Religion and the Creed of Eurocentric Human Christian Nationalism!

Keeping in mind that one man's dream usually turns out to be another's nightmare, everything seemed to be going well according to plan – the Clayne Plan, Francis begrudgingly admitted, but this part of the plan was his! And Michael Francis couldn't wait to get the ball rolling!

The last of the thousands of people caught in the cordon that morning had finally been processed through the 'filter'. Naturally, the vast majority had gone free, disappearing into the city to make their way home as quickly as possible to avoid being arrested for violating curfew!

Conversely, the last of those identified as being 'undesirable' had been herded into a temporary holding enclosure in the form of a barbed wired ring that had been set up in the meantime, at the center of the Square beside the fountain. The enclosure – basically a large wire cage – now contained about a hundred pathetic figures who were waiting the return of the trucks to take them to their – he smirked – their new home! Ha ha – but not for long! As a new, morbid kind of silence descended over Lupini Square, he started to hear their melancholic moans and cries.

In the wire cage built by the fascists to hold the dregs of Humanity, a young girl of around twenty sat on the cold cobbles and leaned against the wire, looking outside. The expression on her pretty face was blank, her thoughts miles away. Danielle Grauffis wasn't the last to be pulled from the crowd, but it happened near the finish. In the end, it wasn't some tell-tale sign of lingering masculinity that had given her away to the guards at the exit – it was pure coincidence:

someone in the crowd who had known her family, and recognized her – and pointed her out in order to gain their own freedom!

By the end, those caught inside the cordon had got swept up in the panic as well. Some people, frustrated and angry and tired from being stuck there most of the day, began searching for those among them who appeared to be the ‘undesirables’ the soldiers were looking for – and forcibly handed them over... People like her, the transgender, were also high on the fascist’s list! First they came for the aliens, and dragged them away. They were easy to spot after all, so they were the first to go. Then they came for the gays, and they too were dragged away by gangs of people wanting to win their immediate release from the torture of waiting hours more to be filtered out at the gate. A Sikh and a Rabbi were dragged past Danielle so roughly, she heard the sound of their flesh scraping against the cobbles.

“Tranny freak!” The woman had called out, pointing at her. After the initial shock of being discovered, Danielle had been dragged quickly to the front by hard, rough, cold hands, and was quickly deposited inside the barbed wire topped pen for ‘undesirables’. In the morose, uncanny quiet and the stillness of despair, the reality of her situation suddenly began to set in. Despair filled her up like a cold, dank thing she couldn’t escape. She was surrounded by emotional people – angry and afraid. Some had been roughed up by the soldiers, having been searched and robbed. Some were nursing injuries. Some wept. None made eye contact with her.

* * *

From orbit, Deanna looked as serene and peaceful as always, but today something was different about it. From orbit, one might see the lights of cities and towns during the night with the naked eye, but obviously, you wouldn’t see the people on the ground, or their faces, or what was happening down there.

Perspective was important, because when most people imagined a blue world teeming with life this far out in the black, they would talk about its beauty – the shallow freshwater ocean, the flora and fauna – the quirky ones especially, and so on. To most people, a planet in deep space that promised life to those willing to live on it, Deanna was a sparkling jewel – a prize all of its own. Which is why it’s probably interesting to note that this is not how the owner of the pair of eyes watching the planet from orbit through a viewport, saw Deanna at all.

In the darkness of his cabin, dressed in grand new clothes that still smelled like the fancy store that sold them, Professor James Eregut McMillen – formerly the head of Atro City University – contemplated the power and status that was coming nearer to him with anticipation that grew with each passing second!

To McMillen, Deanna was not so much a sparkling jewel in space, as it was a piece of real estate that had just changed hands. From orbit, Deanna looked exactly the same as it always had – but it wasn’t. Not anymore.

As it circled the newly troubled little world and moved in a little closer, the gray and black hull of the small warship glistened in the light of the nearest star, Ramalama. McMillen knew

there were now three such ships in orbit around the planet. The people who had bankrolled the fascist takeover of the Terran colony hadn't pulled any punches! Each one had been specially and secretly built for them. They were highly automated, so that each one needed no more than fifty crew to operate at the same level as Terran warships of a similar size and capability. These orbiting eyes in the sky belonged to the Deannan Republican Army. They carried modern sensor equipment and weapons secretly siphoned away from the very same shipyards that constructed ships for the Imperial Space Fleet, and were designed by some of the brightest young minds ever to leave the Space Fleet Academy before reaching graduation. They were extremely versatile craft, immensely powerful for their size – and they had eyes in the dark, and they were watching!

Together, the trio of warships held positions in orbit that were ideal to keep an eye on movements on the entire surface simultaneously – and also to provide communications for the D.R.A. forces below once the official satellites were disabled. Their other function was to prevent any ships from approaching or leaving Deanna! Ultimately, they would serve as a deterrent to anyone intent on trying to unseat the D.R.A. They had no names, and no numbers. The lead ship of this small fleet held orbit directly over Atro City. Its call sign was Angel One and, in his cabin, James Eregut McMillen – one of the engineers of this grand scheme – was making preparations for his pending return to the surface, which he anticipated to do in triumph! McMillen looked forward to taking up residence in the Governor's Chancellor's Palace, from where he would rule his little kingdom. So far, everything in that regard was going according to plan. Well, mostly. Nevertheless, he was in a very good mood.

McMillen stood before a wood-framed mirror, fitting a new coat with the assistance of – well, an assistant. He looked up as the cabin door slid open, humming. A man stood waiting outside, looking slightly apprehensive.

“Well, well!” McMillen nodded approvingly at Brandon Carver. “My favorite assassin! Come in, sit down!”

Carver was reluctant to spend any more time in the company of the Professor than he absolutely had to. This feeling might have had something to do with the previous week's events – having being trussed like a turkey to a heavy iron garden chair placed on the very edge of the man's swimming pool... and the nagging feeling that somehow there was an invisible leash that still spanned between that chair and his collar! Eager to not aggravate the man any further, Carver obediently sidled to a chair, and without a word, sat down.

“Thank you, Horton.” McMillen dismissed his manservant. A tall, gaunt, middle-aged man nodded without making any eye contact before silently leaving the room. McMillen went to sit down on a chair opposite him. He smiled in his usual disingenuous fashion and reached over to a silver tray atop a low table between them. He raised one of two freshly poured glasses of red wine to Carver. “Please.” He said, indicating to Carver to take the other.

“Er. Thanks!” Carver said with unease, and reached out to retrieve the glass.
“Cheers!” Said McMillen, with unusual friendliness, and sampled the wine.

“Cheers.” Said Carver softly, hoping it wasn’t poisoned, and risked a sip. He didn’t like wine, least of all red wine – he was more of a lager kind of guy. It tasted as bad as he expected, but at least it was cold and contained alcohol, which was always a plus in Carver’s book.

“Ah!” Said McMillen, noticing his discomfort. “Chilled, just how I like it!”

“Yup. It’s great.” Carver said, and then forced a smile.

“You did a very good job of it!” McMillen said to him in a very friendly tone. “I was very impressed! Yes, very impressed indeed!”

“You were watching?” Carver asked.

“Indeed I was.” McMillen explained, “This ship has some very good equipment – cutting edge stuff, you know! From up here we were able to draw on all the different camera feeds – even the ones the TV channel didn’t use, and filtered them into a coherent data stream! My favorite part was when you turned around in the front seat of the car and blasted that little blue-blooded worm right in the chops – guns blazing! It was Oscar-winning stuff! Your face was so clear it was like – like, looking at you right now!”

“My face?” Carver repeated uncertainly, suddenly overcome by a curious mixture of shock and panic. He wasn’t sure where all this sudden praise and hero-worship was headed, but he was sure he didn’t like it. “You could see my face?”

“Absolutely!” McMillen grinned terrifyingly. “Of course, once our people took control of the TV station, we had full control of the cameras and everything they recorded. We saved the whole thing for posterity – in surround sound and HD! Of course, nobody else saw those ...shots – just us – please forgive the pun!”

“Sure, no problem.” Carver groaned. The implications of this whole conversation were pretty dire – for Carver! His face being visible in a video record in which he assassinated a member of the Terran imperial family? Now there was a risk too big to contemplate! It meant that McMillen had leverage – between him, and a very likely death sentence should that video ever fall into the right hands!

“Good!” McMillen nodded buoyantly, taking another sip of wine, seemingly without noticing Carver’s trendy new shade of panic-stricken pallor. “Day One of the New Order on Deanna! Our glorious revolution – a bold, fresh start!”

“Okay, okay!” Carver acquiesced. The wine in Carver’s glass almost spilled as he abruptly put it down hard on the table. “I give up! What do you want me to do now?”

“Nothing you didn’t already want to do, dear boy!” McMillen smiled, raising his glass at him. “I want you to just keep on doing it – it’s just nice to know people can be trusted – on both ends of a deal, that’s all!”

Carver slumped noticeably. McMillen raised his glass again, pointing at the table with his index finger. Taking the hint, Carver picked his glass up again, and without pause, downed the remaining contents at a gulp.

“That’s the stuff!” McMillen encouraged, putting his feet up on the table, crossed. “Now my boy, tell me everything you know about real vampires!”

* * *

By the time the party of rescued colonial government employees emerged through another portal, it was already late evening. Gary Beck was the last to emerge from it this time, and found the rest of their company waiting for him. The part of the basement – for it was obviously a

basement of some kind they'd entered into – was dark, deserted, and hardly used, except apparently for storing redundant, dusty equipment.

Both Gary and Mei were starting to find Governor Landry's occasional grouching and griping really, really abrasive – but not as bad as Mayor McCracken's constant bellyaching and doom and gloom! If 'the Mac' (as he was called in San Fedora) wasn't whining about his feet hurting, or complaining about his back, or cursing the darkness of the underground passage, or whining about how screwed they all were now – or swatting anyone who accidentally shone a flashlight in his eyes, then it was something else!

Granted, it had been a long nine kilometer hike for the short and stubby McCracken through the dark of the dry subterranean river channel – and for the rest of them as well! There were a few moments along the way that Gary had wished he could've just left 'the Mac' behind, perhaps inside a closed portal! But no, he couldn't do that – the rescue was about them – Landry, McCracken, and Sam Barthoff, the Mayor of Atro City, so that was out of the question! Although Gary had to admit, Barthoff was an okay sort, and the better behaved of the three. In fact, Barthoff had barely said a thing – he'd spent most of the trek just plodding along quietly, keeping to himself.

Apparently, according to something Scrooby referred to as 'the Anals of History', the fascists wanted to capture and execute Landry, McCracken and Barthoff to seal their rise to power in the eyes of the public – but they escaped. That was all going according to plan so far, so okay – no problem! The three were to be heard from again a few pages later, apparently – doing something important – possibly to do with taking Deanna back from the fascists. Apparently the fascists had wanted Peg dead too, being the Sheriff of Atro City – and a likely leader of any resistance cells that might arise. Scrooby had very specifically mentioned that the Anals never said anything about how they escaped from the Governor's Palace... Bit of a loophole there, Scrooby said, and Gary could see his pal at the TSA had opted to exploit that loophole as far as possible!

"Clever Scrooby!" Gary smiled to himself, feeling rather pleased that he'd managed to contribute something useful to the – er, 'Anals of History'. Saving people, especially people he cared about – that was nice too. Gary closed the portal, stroking the Remote fondly. He had really grown to like this intriguing new toy!

"I can't wait to hear you explain this!" A female voice said close beside him, the speaker's face partly illuminated by a flashlight, only since the light was reflecting upward, it made her look rather evil. It was Peg. "I've never seen anything like it! What is that thing – some kind of top secret CIA tool Mei just 'forgot' to give back when she quit?"

Oh boy. Peg's question reminded him of the time he had to convince her that his death had been staged using holograms. As a matter of fact, he still wasn't sure she was convinced by those rather sketchy excuses and evasive explanations. Especially not after all this.

"Not now, Peg!" He said, evading the question.

"I know – later, right!" Peg said resentfully, a note of anger in her voice. "Where are we?" Peg demanded of him.

“The basement of Atro City General Hospital, Peg.” He replied brusquely.

“For all I know, my deputies are all dead, or arrested!” She snapped. “I need to get back to the station!”

“To do what?” Gary snapped. “What d’you think you’re going to do on your own, Peg? Your deputies are all dead! I’m sorry, but it’s true – you’re the only SOD left alive in Atro City – there, are you happy now?”

Peg froze, speechless, stunned. All of them? Dead? They were more than just people she worked with...colleagues – they were familiar faces, people she went bowling with – people who took bullets in the same line of work. Some of them were almost friends.

“Look.” He said more calmly. “You want to help, to do something, to make it right – I get that! I feel the same way! That’s why I’m doing what I’m doing right now – and you will – you’ll get your chance! But right now, we have to keep moving!”

“Okay.” She nodded. “Okay. So we’re in the hospital basement – where to next?”

“We have to get you and the Governor and the Mayors out of the city.” Gary said, ushering Peg ahead of him and taking the rear. Mei led the group through the dark basement, winding through the maze of stacked crates, shelves of dusty clutter, piles of old worn gurneys and assorted clutter, towards a set of battered swing-doors. They were closed – chained and locked from the other side. Mei paused at the door, and took out a device just like the one Gary used to make the portal, pointed it at the crack between the doors, and pressed something.

“What an amazing device!” Mei thought, as the chain links over the crack dissolved and turned to dust! All she’d done was to focus the time-field on those specific links, and project their state in a million years’ time onto their present forms – and poof! No wonder Gary seemed so enamored of the device – and the TSA! She was starting to really appreciate the appeal of Johnathan Scrooby!

“Humph!” Peg grunted softly, right behind her and looking over her shoulder.

“Lasers.” Mei grinned at Peg, thinking quickly on her feet.

“Right.” Peg smiled back sarcastically. “Lasers.”

Mei pushed the doors open slowly. The doorway led into the back-end of the hospital’s maintenance workshop. As the rest followed behind her, their flashlights added some illumination. There were more shelves inside, littered with what looked like gas cylinders, welding equipment and electric motors. Large workbenches lined the walls, and what looked like a lathe, and beside it, a band saw.

The large open space on the floor was where the hospital serviced and repaired its own ambulances – one was currently parked over a service pit. Another newer model – a hover-ambulance – stood beside it on the concrete floor, on sturdy-looking stands. Behind all that, a dull gray steel roll-up door stretched right across the width of the room. Behind them, a larger rectangular object stood against the far wall, covered in dust sheets. Mei found the light switch and turned on the lights. After the long trek in the dark with only flashlights to light their way, they were blinding! The company stood blinking in the blinding light for a minute or longer.

Then Gary went over to the mysterious shrouded form, and began pulling at one end of the dust covers.

“C’mon Phil!” He called. “Gimme a hand!”

Phil and some others went to help, including the rest of his security guards from the palace. When they’d finished removing the covers – and after the dust had settled, and after they’d finished coughing – they saw what was under it. It looked like an old city bus – and yet, it looked different somehow! The expected row of windows along the sides were absent, and the whole thing had been painted white – although it had become chipped and stained over the years, and was now more of a faded creamy yellow. A little rust or a small dent here and there marked the body. The windows up front were dusty but intact. Above the windshield there were two dusty emergency lights, and another set above two doors at the rear end. A large medical red cross was emblazoned on the side facing them that they could see, with the words “Atro City General Hospital” in neat black letters underneath. At the front end, under the window in the driver side door, was a word written in bold red capital letters.

“Am...am...bus-ulance...” Peg read aloud, puzzled. “What the hell’s an ambulance?”

The Ambulance was a relic of a bygone era, when the colony was still young and things were much cruder and emergencies more unpredictable... and typically further away from a hospital. (Gary paused at that point in his recollection to wonder if the current emergency had been taken into account.) Designed and built by the legendary Scott ‘Nox’ Axelrod – Deanna’s greatest motor mechanic and inventor of all time – this was an attempt at making a better ambulance! Thirty years before, when the hospital was the only one on Deanna – and back then, much smaller, it was much more difficult to get sick and injured people from outlying areas to the Hospital quickly enough. Axelrod figured, naturally, that the solution was bigger ambulances – more space, more patients – more staff, and more equipment to do more helpful stuff on site!

It was a rather clever idea, Gary thought, wondering why it never went mainstream! The rear doors squeaked as he worked the handles and opened them. The inside was empty, all the medical equipment had been long ago stripped out – but the drivetrain was still sound. Anyway, Scrooby had assured him – and they needed to move these people out of town all at once, and as quickly as possible. Besides, the Ambulance came loaded with handy features that still worked!

“Right folks,” Gary grinned. “All aboard the Ambulance!”

* * *

Meanwhile, in a little suburb of Atro City called Lugaluru, a couple of D.R.A. troopers who’d been patrolling the dark alleyways – very bravely on foot – stood near the back entrance of Japp’s Saloon & Speakeasy tensely pointing their weapons at a cluster of garbage cans. The lights were out around them and all was still – except, one of them had seen a movement and heard a noise!

“Come out there!” One of them ordered sharply. “Put your hands in the air and we won’t hurt you!”

“Much!” The other sneered with looming malice. The garbage cans didn’t reply, and they certainly didn’t put up any hands.

“I’m warning you!” the first trooper said again. “You’re in violation of curfew! Come out, or you’re going to regret it!”

“Meow.”

The two troopers breathed heavy sighs of relief and lowered their weapons a degree.

“Meow.”

“Cat!” The other chuckled at his mate, giving him a punch to the shoulder. “Friggin’ twat – you really had the wind up me!”

Laughing, the two troopers turned and went on about their business of patrolling the dark streets. Meanwhile, in the dark behind the cluster of garbage cans, the ‘cat’ smiled to itself as it rose to its feet from where it had taken cover, and carried on walking in the opposite direction.

“Meow.” Tracey Ferris smiled to herself in the dark. If there was one thing that stood out about Tracey Ferris, a registered deep-space bounty hunter recently stranded on Deanna – and former guest at the Fancy Chancy Motel in Lugaluru – it was that she detested rules. She made her own, naturally, but the benefit to making her own rules was the luxury of being able to disregard them if or when she felt like it.

It started in childhood, she reminisced while moving down the dark alleyway, with bed-times and getting-up times, do this, don’t do that – comply, comply, comply! Right now though, the world under her feet had gone totally nuts – well, probably not as nuts as what she saw in the motel – but close! Tracey Ferris was a stranger in a very strange land indeed! Things had taken a turn for the surreal, and there were no friendly faces here. Well, okay, save one! There was only one place she could think of at that moment that seemed appealing – and it lay outside the city!

She was getting out of Atro City, she decided, and regardless of any martial law or curfew, she was going to do it, and she was going to do it now!

* * *

The old hydrogen motor turned over, and reluctantly fired. It had been many years since it had last run, Gary knew, which made starting the thing up something of a chore. Nevertheless, prodding the accelerator caused it to give a satisfying, smooth rumble under the short hood that bulged forward of the front windshields. The roar of the old-school hydrogen-fueled internal combustion engine reverberated loudly inside the workshop. Then, satisfied the thing was running well enough, Gary pointed his Remote at the roll-up door in front of the Ambulance, and then as the door began to slowly roll open, grinned at Mei who sat beside him.

Light from the workshop leaked outside, lighting a shallow concrete ramp that led upwards to the parking lot behind the hospital, and freedom! That is, on the other side of the fascist patrols driving through the streets of the city, enforcing their curfew. Timing was going to be everything.

“Now!” Mei said, pointing. Her eyes were fixed on her Remote’s small display. Gary eased the throttle open, and the Ambulance started moving smoothly forward.

* * *

Meanwhile, across town, two shadowy figures silently darted across a side-street, avoiding patches of light cast by street lights as they ran in the direction of Atro City Space Port. Both were dressed in dark clothing and carried knapsacks on their backs that bobbed slightly as they ran.

The big floodlight towers that lit the huge tarmac inside the space port every night – and most of the immediate surrounding area outside it like daylight, were dark for the first time in living memory. The fascists had taken control of the space port and had completely shut it down.

The pair of shadows weaved around a row of parked cars and jeeps and took cover behind a row of refuse bins outside an apartment block at the end of the street, where it formed a T-junction with the road that encircled the space port. Just then, a green jeepo pick-up hummed past, carrying four troopers in combat gear on the back! They were cunningly riding with the lights off, so as to not be seen.

The two figures huddled in the darkness behind their cover, looking at the space port. In a minute, the jeepo had passed out of sight and hearing, slowly patrolling the road around the outside of the perimeter. It was midnight and usually at this time, the huge concrete tarmac – where smaller and sometimes medium-sized ships would land and park – was brightly lit and abuzz with loaders moving cargo containers, and ships landing and leaving. The spaceport usually hummed with activity round the clock. Tonight, it looked like a really, really big really, really dark open space.

Through the three rows of wire fencing that ran right round the huge complex, big shadows loomed in the darkness – shapes that might have been rows of lifeless cargo and small private ships.

The terminal buildings were enormous, and the complex housed the arrivals and departures lounges for passenger services, immigration, customs, ticket and admin offices, baggage and cargo processing systems, storage areas, and passenger waiting areas. There was also a selection of small bars, coffee shops and stores – and there was even a medium-sized hotel for people needing to stay while awaiting connecting flights! Tonight it all looked dead, aside from a couple of lights in a few hotel windows – and in the silence, nothing moved.

It seemed, thought a panting Timaset Skooch, like a scene out of a zombie apocalypse movie. Except, possibly, for the starkly obvious absence of the lurching dead – and the only sign of life he could see. His heart sank. They’d taken a gamble – a big gamble – in deciding to make a run for it. The plan? Reach the space port, find a ship, any ship – and get the hell off Deanna! This just made things a little harder. Damn it!

“What is it, Tim?” His fiancé whispered by his ear, without so much as a sign of having just run a midnight marathon five clicks across town in the dark while trying to not get spotted by patrol vehicles!

“What do you see?” Dory whispered again.

“Guards, Dory!” Tim whispered in reply. “Patrolling the fences!”

“Well, what do we do now?” She asked, scared.

Tim was an ex-cop and former P.I. – Dory wasn’t cut out for this sort of lark – she was quite happy running her interior decorating business! If Tim were alone, he’d wait for an opportunity to make for the perimeter fence and use the cutters in his pocket to snip through them. The guards patrolling the perimeter might not notice one person on their own in the dark, but two? He didn’t want to get her – or both of them killed! Things heading the way they were – and with Dory being trans – they were in enough trouble just being on Deanna as it was! That made it worth the risk!

* * *

The passengers in the rear compartment of the Ambulance kept silent as the old vehicle slowly wound its way through the network of darkened side-streets that ran through the inner city like capillaries. It was late, it had been a very long disturbing day, and some of them were trying to get a little sleep if they could.

Gary Beck spent a considerable amount of time gritting his teeth at the wheel – he wasn’t used to driving in the dark without headlights – let alone driving a vehicle of this size and antiquity! It took a great deal of skill – and nerve – and a night-vision windshield! They couldn’t very well do it without one of those! Scrooby had described “Nox” Axelrod as ‘Deanna’s greatest vehicular innovator, and Gary was literally beginning to see why!.

Referring to their Remotes, Gary and Mei worked as a team to judge what needed to be done to avoid the patrols, and Gary would slow the vehicle or speed it up, or even stop for a moment. In this sense, timing really would mean everything in order to safely slip past their enemies and get out of the city!

“Probably just as well this thing doesn’t have windows at the back!” He grinned at Mei.

“I’ll say!” Mei grinned back. Doubtless, Peg – sitting at the back of the bus – was trying to work out how they were managing this! If the passengers saw how close their narrow-misses of fascist patrols were in the past few minutes, it might have caused a panic!

* * *

Timaset Skooch and Dory had come to a standstill in an alley just off the big broad road around the space port – which had seemed clear enough at the time – before a jeepo-full of troopers came around a corner unexpectedly behind them, and caught them in their headlights! The electric vehicle came to a halt almost silently behind them, and the driver and three troopers that had been riding on the back jumped off, weapons at the ready!

“Hold it!” “Freeze!” “Halt!” “Don’t make a move!” The four ordered all at once, waving dangerous-looking sonic-pulse rifles all over the place, and rushing at them. The closest guy – a fresh-faced kid in a dark gray urban-camouflage uniform, leered at him from under his black helmet – coming quite close to Tim, who was looking every which way for an out!

“Oh, fuck it!” Tim cursed. With a sudden move, he grabbed the nearest kid’s pulse rifle with both hands. The weapon wasn’t slung, so it was easy to twist out of his inexperienced opponent’s grip, and in a second, Tim had applied the butt-end of it to its former owner’s jaw! The kid crumpled into a heap on the pavement, lights out!

The other three, only slightly behind him, froze long enough for Tim to turn the weapon on them. Timaset Skooch wasn’t a cold killer, but he wasn’t going to take any chances! The three troopers seemed a similar age to the first, and also inexperienced and nervous – whereas Tim, who had been a street cop and a P.I. for years – was... well, scared shitless! Aside from his own wellbeing, he had Dory to worry about too! Right now, she was standing a few feet behind and to the side of him, immobile. As the three were considering their options, he considered his and Dory’s. They outnumbered him, but they still had to bring their weapons up to aim at him – where he already had his on them! Plus, that really dandy move he pulled on Lance-Corporal Fuckface just now showed them this guy wasn’t going to go down as easy as someone on their knees pleading for mercy! And then there was the look on his face – the one that told them the guy who was pointing a rapid-firing sonic pulse-rifle at them was probably out-of-his-brain insane!

“Drop your guns!” Tim ordered. “Then go! Nobody has to die tonight!”

The one at the rear began to put his weapon down.

“Don’t!” The one in the front growled at him. “Don’t you dare!”

Reluctantly, the kid at the back raised his weapon again. The front guy, who seemed to have the makings of a leader, moved his rifle slightly, so that his aim shifted onto Dory – a detail not lost on Tim.

“You drop it!” The trooper growled at Tim. “Or the chick gets it! Last ch-”

Tim squeezed the trigger, and the weapon shuddered once as it fired.

Whoosh!

Across 100 meters, the sonic pulse weapon was still accurate and deadly enough. At close range, it could blast a hole the size of a football through a humanoid body. As the echo of the single sonic burst rolled up the walls of the alley, what was left of the kid in front, crumpled and pitched over forward.

“That’s my fiancée you were threatening!” Tim growled to the corpse at his feet, the muzzle of his weapon covering the other two. “Jerk!”

Right away, pale as death, the two remaining troopers tossed away their guns and put up their hands.

“Dammit!” Tim swore. The shot would bring more patrols to investigate – if they were still going to make a break for it, the time was now! But what would he do with these two?

“Better get running!” Tim ordered the two troopers. “Move! Before I change my mind!”

Without a word, the two young troopers turned and fled down the alley back to the main road, their boots pounding a disjointed rhythm, while Tim dumped the rifle onto the front seats. He looked over at Dory, who was still frozen to the spot, looking at him.

“Dory!” He called. She looked at him, ashen-faced and frightened. “We have to go, sweetheart!”

Pausing to eject and pocket the power packs from two of the fallen weapons, he rushed over to her, and gripped her gently by the shoulders.

“The noise will have tipped them off! More will come!” He said as calmly as he could, as her eyes locked onto his. “We’ve got to go now!”

She nodded, and went with him silently to the vehicle, clambering into the passenger seat while he took the wheel.

Pulling out all the stops, Tim gunned the throttle. With the back wheels spinning, he backed the jeepo down the short stretch of alley back into the main road, into a left-turn, and floored it!

They just needed to get into the space port! Once inside they could find a ship – any damned ship – get off Deanna and make a run for open space! All that stood in their way was three layers of chain-link fence around the complex and a few guards – and he was damned if he was going to let that put him off!

“Hold on!” He cried, steering the jeepo toward the broad, grassy sidewalks that stretched around the outside of the perimeter fences. The vehicle bounced lightly up the kerb, and careened up the shallow incline towards the outside fence! They tore through the first fence, and then the second, and the third, before careening onto the dark tarmac of Atro City Space Port! Tim directed the jeepo into the mass of large indistinct shapes in the dark that were parked loderunners, and weaved between them this way and that a few times, before turning off the headlights and stopping under a random ship. Tim started climbing out, grabbing the pulse-rifle by the muzzle.

“Come on Dory!” He urged his partner in crime. She got out and Tim reached under the driver seat for the jeepo’s toolbox – which he wedged onto the accelerator. The jeepo took off like a shot! Tim and Dory took cover behind the nearest landing skid of the loderunner they were under. Just then, another jeepo passed by at speed – in hot pursuit. Moments later, they heard the whoosh-whoosh-whoosh of rapid pulse-rifle fire not far enough away – then a loud crash... more firing, a loud bang – and some shouting! A fire lit up the tarmac in the distance, casting faint light into the shadows.

Tim slung the pulse-rifle over his shoulder, grabbed Dory’s hand and led her, hunkering low, under the row of parked ships, moving as quietly as they could from skid to skid. He was looking for a ship that would be easy to get into – something nearby that had been left open, an open loading bay, a lowered ramp – and preferably without a ground-clamp on one of the skids!

As they sought cover behind another skid under the nose-end of a loderunner, a jeepo patrol slowly cruised nearby, out of sight, searching!

“Tim?” Dory cried, standing beside him. She sounded afraid, perhaps even panicky. “I’m feeling all weird and tingly!”

“It’s just the tension, Dory.” He replied, getting back on his feet. “Try to slow your breathing.” ...and then Tim also started feeling weird and tingly too! A bright light made his eyes hurt! Blinking, and with a sudden shock, he realized he was now somewhere else!

* * *

After cruising several kilometers through back streets of Atro City, Gary turned the Ambulance into a parking lot on the outskirts of the city. There was nothing extraordinary about the parking lot itself – that is, it belonged to a school that served the area, and being well past midnight, it was empty. What was special about that particular parking lot, was that it was right on the edge of the city – standing between the streets and houses and apartment buildings of suburbia – and the farmlands and wild open plains of Deanna.

The main roads were going to be watched, Gary knew. There would be road blocks. At least, this wasn’t a road, so it wasn’t likely to be watched or guarded. Sure, there was a low fence at the back end, basically just to try to keep obsidian crows from wondering in from the wild, but it’s not as if it was meant to be an actual wall or anything like that.

“Hold on!” He warned Mei, and floored the accelerator. The motor roared, and the vehicle surged forward towards the fence! The chain-link fencing didn’t stand much of a chance – the old vehicle had a custom-made crow-bar on the front, and the fence just folded over as they passed over it! The ground was rough on the other side, uneven, and covered with grass and small trees. Somewhere in the distance, they would intersect with the highway that led towards San Fedora, joining it at a point that bypassed any road blocks by miles!

* * *

It was nearly 1am Tuesday morning, Central Deanna Time outside the Blood Bank in central Atro City. The plain rectangular building, Marla De Bris thought, had been decorated in a manner intended to make it look more pleasing to the eye than ordinary drab concrete should be. Rows of big, recessed windows coated with reflective material filled the sides, lurking under slats of angled steel that would cast shade over them during the daylight hours. For vampires, shade was always important. Vampires didn’t go ‘poof’ in sunlight, not exactly, but their eyes were sensitive to UV rays – as was their skin.

It should go without saying, that the Blood Bank served the needs of all the inhabitants of the city, and not necessarily all in the same way. It gave credence to a very old joke that some people would come to the facility to make deposits – while others would come to make withdrawals – and in a sense, this was very, very true.

The Blood Bank was a type of clinic facility – Humans came to donate blood, which was processed and supplied to the Atro City General Hospital, as well as several smaller hospitals, including the one in San Fedora. As with most blood banks, it also formed a vital link in the distribution network that kept the local vampire community well fed and not on the streets, hunting. It was also, perhaps predictably Marla thought, an intrinsic part of Deanna’s Vampire Underground.

After having failed to find her friend Danielle at her apartment earlier the previous afternoon, Marla had come here. There was really nothing else she could have done. She was angry and bitter, but in the cold, pensive silent way that only a 205 year old teenager could be. Marla De Bris had gone inside and now sat in a waiting room outside the Director’s office on the top floor. The view through the windows was uninteresting to say the least. Atro City on a good day – or night, was a pleasant sight – but Atro City under the current set of circumstances, under the iron rule of a fascist revolutionary army? No, the dark skyline outside was foreboding and sinister, troubling.

Marla’s thoughts dwelt on her missing friend Danielle. There was only one likely reason she couldn’t be found, only one reason Marla could think of – she’d been detained and arrested at Lupini Square! That being the likely case, a million things were running through her mind with sharp, razor-like claws!

The door opened at last, and Vernon Carridene, an Elder of the local vampire community and family friend, stuck his head out to look for her.

“Marla?” He called. “Would you come in, please?”

She rose silently, dropping an unread copy of Deanna Weekly on the bench seat as she went to the door. Uncle Vernon, who reminded her a little of a caricature of Bella Lugosi because of his pasty black hairstyle, showed her past the vacant desk opposite the door to a seat at the nearest end of a small rectangular conference table in the rectangular office. There were bookshelves all around the room, and no windows. Duh. She thought.

An assortment of Elders sat around the table – not that they all looked elderly! Marla knew very well that Melissa Scarr, who was the elegant and beautiful lady seated at the head of the table – the one with the platinum blonde streaks in her jet black hair and looking like she’d slipped off the silver screen – was nearly a thousand years old. Dr. Bradley Killian was the Director of this facility, and he was a whole 347. Uncle Vernon was himself 423.

There were five in total – five members of the Council. Uncle Vernon, Melissa Scarr, Dr. Killian, and the other two – a man and a woman who seemed vaguely ordinary in comparison. Five was an important number in vampire culture – it was the number of digits on each hand or foot, it was the number of points on a pentagram, it was number of the different clans of vampires, and also it was the number of the sacred kiss – the fangs, upper and lower, and the tongue. It was also, coincidentally, the number of floors in the building. That is, the number of floors people knew about.

“Ms. De Bris.” Melissa Scarr smiled a silky greeting from the head of the table.

“Milady.” Marla greeted, giving a slight bow.

“Please sit.”

Marla complied, noticing the eyes of the others around the table, on her. Uncle Vernon took a seat opposite Dr. Killian, to the left of Ms. Scarr.

“What can I do for the Council?” Marla asked, forcing a little smile.

“Ms. De Bris.” Melissa Scarr began, “We don’t want to take up too much of your time. You know by now what the general situation is on Deanna – the visiting mundane Prince was assassinated yesterday morning in full view of virtually every creature on this planet, as the first act of what we now know is a revolution against the Terran Empire – or rather more specifically, an attempt to wrest this colony from control of the Terran Empire!”

“Yes,” Marla nodded. “I got the gist of it.”

“As you also know, while we seldom involve ourselves in mundane affairs, and certainly not overtly, mundanes do not...” Scarr paused to allow little smile to flash briefly across her lips, “...do not always return the favor.”

The other Council members nodded their silent agreement. Ms. Scarr, their designated spokesperson for the moment, continued:

“Right at this moment, hostile mundane forces of an as yet unknown strength and number on Deanna have taken control of the cities of Atro City, San Fedora and Fortitude. They have closed off the space port to all traffic and they’ve declared martial law. At this moment, their patrols are scouring the streets of these cities for curfew violators. According to several of our sources, they’ve taken nearly a thousand people captive on Lupini Square – people they deemed... undesirable – and transported them by road to... a destination as yet unknown.”

Marla’s thoughts strayed onto Danielle – if she were at the parade that morning, if she were identified, then that was the likely answer! Marla listened intently further to Ms. Scarr.

“According to our sources, this Deannan Republican Army are neo-Nazi fascist by nature. They’re not just after the usual things – money, territory and power however! They’re fanatics, racists and xenophobes! Taking their militaristic and fascist Human-identity ideology into context, we can only fear the worst!”

Noticing an uneasy silent pause, Marla sensed that something was required from her.

“Er. The worst?”

“Yes, Ms. De Bris.” Melissa Scarr smiled. “War. Genocide. All the things that made the 20th century so memorable in history class!”

“Ah.” Marla sighed, almost imperceptibly. That worst.

“Even more disturbing, we’ve learned that the leaders of this organization are aware of our community here as well! They know we exist! I trust the implications of this are not lost on you?”

They weren’t. Marla swallowed. It meant it wouldn’t be long before the men in gray camo uniforms who’d rounded up aliens and gay people on the Square, came looking for them too!

“Why’re you telling me all this?” Marla asked pointedly. “I’m nobody in the VC, milady. I haven’t even attended a meeting or a community AGM since I arrived here thirty years ago!”

“When the fascist troops stormed the planetary governor’s palace yesterday, everyone inside had already mysteriously vanished! The Governor, the Sheriff, the mayors of Atro City and San Fedora, and all the staff – ‘poof!’”

“Yes?” Marla blinked. Where was she going with this?

“The leaders of Deanna’s legitimate Human society have escaped.” Melissa Scarr summarized. “This so-called General Clayne has been overheard only hours ago expressing concerns that they have escaped with the intention of forming a resistance – perhaps even a loyalist militia!”

“And-?”

“We would like you to find them for us, Ms. De Bris!”

“Me? Find them?”

“Yes.” Ms. Scarr confirmed. “You’re not hard of hearing, are you Ms. De Bris? Not with vampire ears that could detect a mouse fart three miles away, I take it?”

To say Marla was surprised would be an understatement of note! When the Council asked something of you as a vampire, it was considered very rude to refuse – and unwise!

“Nothing wrong with my hearing – but what on Deanna makes you think me capable of such a feat?” Marla asked, respectfully.

“The twelve years you spent working as a field agent for the EID?” Melissa Scarr smiled at her like the cat after eating a very tasty canary – perhaps one seasoned with chip spice? So they had a file on her and knew some of her history! That had been a long time ago!

“Okay, well – aside from that!” Marla smiled back. “That was a hundred and seventy years ago, ma’am – before it became the Colonial Intelligence Agency!”

Perhaps Melissa Scar had misread the feeling of irritation and disappointment that flashed across Marla’s face for doubt?

“Yet you got here unscathed, across half the city – past all their patrols!” She said. “I’m sure it will all come back to you, Ms. De Bris!”

“Our own network is spread very thin at the moment, Ms. De Bris.” Uncle Vernon interjected. “We have not enough experienced senior operatives to spare for this task. We need your help.”

“Okay, so let’s say I do find them – what then?”

“We want you to open negotiations with them on our behalf! You’re to be our olive branch – a representative of our community to open negotiations with the mundane Governor of this colony!”

“Negotiations?” Marla repeated in astonishment. “Negotiations for what?”

“You’re to speak to them on behalf of Deanna’s Vampire Community, as an envoy of peace, to offer them what assistance we can. It might also be advisable to also explain to them all the basic details – that we no longer hunt, and that we have made other arrangements with regard to feeding!”

“That’s all fine and dandy, Ms. Scarr!” Marla nodded, maintaining her self-control. “But what makes you think they’d believe me?”

“You would have to show them, my dear!” Uncle Vernon added.

“What you’re suggesting has never been done in a thousand years!” Marla pointed out, scarcely able to believe her ears! “Secrecy is one of our oldest, most sacred tenets – its violation punishable by death – are you asking me to break it?”

“These are exceptional circumstances, Ms. De Bris!” Scarr reassured her. “The Council has debated this issue at length, and you are authorized to do what you must to prove to them that you are telling the truth! Whatever...you...must!”

“What do you want me to do – bite someone in front of witnesses?” Marla suggested, “Tear out a jugular?”

“Your eagerness is commendable, but showing your fangs, your eyes, or simply ‘blinking’ should suffice, Ms. de Bris.” Scarr smiled. “You should inform them that the vampire community on Deanna is aware of the danger now facing various minorities on the planet – including our own... but most importantly, that we don’t have an army, but what we do have is centuries of experience, a vast network of informants on Deanna – and a means of operating without being detected by the D.R.A.”

“So we’re offering them intelligence gathering, spying – helping to organize an underground resistance? That sort of thing?”

“Yes.” Scarr smiled in reply. “That sort of thing.”

“Okay.” Marla relented. “I’ll do my best.”

“Excellent!” Scarr smiled. “Now get some rest and have something to eat! Vernon will provide you with an info package you can read while you’re busy... You can leave in the morning! The curfew will end at 8am, according to the radio bulletin – it should be quite safe to move about openly then.”

* * *

Timaset Skooch goggled. Aside from the point that he hadn’t been transmattered anywhere recently – or anywhere for quite some considerable time, this was totally unexpected and something of a surprise! Where the hell was he? He seemed to be facing a dull gray wall that curved away at both ends, around him...

“What the...?” He began, turning. Dory was standing just behind him, looking just as confused, and there was a transmatter console in the center of the floor... of what looked like a room on a ship – but not just any ship!

Behind the console, smiling, stood a man with a familiar, friendly face. Tim recognized Jonn Deire – who aside from being named after a kind of motorized farm implement, was a big old guy who didn’t like jokes about his name much! But it was then that the penny dropped! Trying not to panic, Tim frantically started patting himself down and did a stock-take of all his limbs and appendages – yup, he was all there! Then, almost hysterically, he looked the puzzled Dory up and down – yup, she seemed to be all there too!

“Are you fucking nuts?” Tim shrieked at Jonnulass Mc Watt Deire angrily. Clearly this wasn’t the greeting – or the thanks Deire had been expecting! The grin faded from his bearded old face. “You put us through that thing?”

“Well – er..” Deire stammered.

“We’re lucky we didn’t arrive inside-out, or looking like flat crispy biscuits – with shoes on! And yes!” Tim lowered his tone, looking pointedly at Dory. “That actually happened!”

“Garn!” Deire cried. “We jus’ pulled y’all out in the nick o’ time!”

“Well, thank you very much, Mr. Deire!” Tim retorted, stepping down from the transmatter platform. “But I’d rather take my chances with those... those... storm troopers – than be ‘rescued’ as... human soup!”

“I dunno what yer all upset about!” Said Deire, a little shocked. “The transmatter’s all sorted out now! Anyways, after we got our share o’ that reward money, we bought us a new one!”

Tim glanced round. The antiquated transmatter equipment he remembered seeing there the last time he was aboard the Celeste, was gone! In its place he saw new, shiny tech, smooth clean consoles and blinky lights!

“On the level?” Tim asked sheepishly, before he could stop himself. Deire nodded, grinning again.

“Boner fidey! Good t’ see yer Boss!” Deire grinned, as he and Tim leaned into a man-hug, which looked to Dory like a small rugby scrum with lots of back-slapping and laughing.

“How did you find us?” Tim asked, finally showing gratitude for the rescue.

“Well, we didn’t know it wuz you!” Deire explained. “Garn! Well, we jus’ saw those goons pickin’ on a couple o’ folks on the sensors – we got new ones too – and thought we’d ruin their day for ‘em! Jus’ yer lucky day it wuz you, I guess!”

“Very lucky!” Tim grinned. “Where are we, in orbit?”

“No.” Said Deire. “No, we’re on the ‘mac at the space port! We were just pickin’ up a load yesterdee mornin’, when those fellers in the green uniforms took over the whole place, shut everythin’ down, and chased all the workers out! An’ Bubba – he was watchin’ the local telly an’ saw all kinds of bad stuff happenin’ in the city!”

“Okay, I get it. Well, why haven’t you taken off yet?” Tim suggested. “Waiting for better days? Please tell me Triple-J hasn’t taken the engine apart again!”

“Nope! Muh baybee’s got new engines!” His former employee grinned again at the reference to the Celeste’s engineer. “They put some kinda shield over the place so we can’t take off, like! An’ we been here ever since – hunkerin’ down in the Celeste!”

“Pretending nobody’s home?” Tim grinned.

“Yuh.”

“So we’re safe at the moment?” Dory asked, still standing on the transmatter platform.

“Yes, ma’am!” Deire replied, more respectfully. It wasn’t every day the humble Celeste welcomed beautiful women aboard! “Fer a while!”

“Yes, hun.” Skooch said, going back to Dory, who seemed reluctant to dismount the transmatter platform, giving Deire a snarky sort of smile. “At least until they start wondering which ship parked on the tarmac isn’t empty – and who’s been yanking all their victims away under their noses!”

“Best y’all come on up t’ the bridge.” Deire sighed. “An’ I’ll show yers.”

END OF PREVIEW

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Thank you for reading my book! If you enjoyed it, won't you please take a moment to leave me a review at your favorite retailer? I also welcome your thoughts about my book, and you may send these to me at christinaengela@gmail.com

Thanks!

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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