



IZ—THE SAGA: CREATION

By DDWLEM

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Synopsis of Iz – The Saga: Creation

Long before Vikings ruled the seas and Olmecs carved colossal heads, when Akrotiri thrived as an Aegean trading center and mystical powers of Stonehenge healed the sick, an advanced society on the opposite side of our galaxy was attacked by a deadly virus.

The victims, inhabitants of planet Authair (pronounced ‘out there’) live on the Olympya hemisphere facing their sun, Olym, as it shines without ceasing. The planet revolves on its axis like a Ferris Wheel between two suns, the other sun, Valym, shines continuously on the Valympyon hemisphere from where the virus is secretly being created.

Olympyon and Valympyon cultures, developed a sophisticated society calling themselves raptans as they evolved from reptiles. Each individual sports a family identifying tattoo that runs up the back of the head allowing the green hue of skin to set off the artfully crafted black image.

The story opens as Ursula von Menglebort is waiting to hear the update of casualties a virus has inflicted on her enemies; the virus she’s developed to annihilate the Olympyon culture. For those who escape the pandemic, she’s developed genetically modified orphans and is currently running beta tests to determine if the lethal enzyme they possess produces the intended death blow.

Dr. Ponce Heidon of Olympya is directing the effort to develop a vaccine against this pandemic. His researchers are harassed by protestors who believe the virus originated in his laboratories. The protests threaten the scientist’s progress and safety.

As Olympions die from the virus, news about an explosion of a Valympyon government building grabs Ponce’s attention. Chico Quwattle, a plant geneticist in Valympya, having left a job interview with Dr. Ursula von Menglebort unaware of the virologist’s depraved inventions, finds an injured cat on her way home and protects it inside her jacket. As she passes the state compound, the explosion blasts her through the air to unconsciousness.

The only person seen on surveillance cameras approaching the building before the explosion is Chico. Ponce, a close friend of Chico’s deceased father, learns of her circumstance. He fears the dictator of Valympya would like nothing more than find a reason to torture and kill the daughter of his deceased nemesis. Ponce plans her escape to Olympya.

Disguised as an old man and supplied with a powerful weapon Chico makes her getaway from Valympya with Sequence, the cat. During her flight through the Equapyon Mountains she destroys a spy drone, narrowly misses death in an undercurrent of rapids and almost perishes as a daredevil pilot flies her through caverns grazing mammoth crystals.

Chico arrives to Ponce’s relief, but her misfortune. She learns she’d been poisoned by mud ants whose venom rotted the flesh of her right arm. During the prosthesis operation, a spy assigned to the trauma center discovers her patient, CQ Maize, is the fugitive wanted by the Valympyon government.

Cimi Nuja, an Olympyon technology geek and mathematical genius, designs two weapons concealed in Chico’s prosthesis. Leaving the hospital Chico joins Ponce’s genetics team, harboring the torment of her compromised position.

Sequence escapes his keeper searching for Chico and enters Dorf Tzeus, Chief of Genetics, laboratory. When Dr. Tzeus trips on Sequence who bites his calf causing him to fall pulling down shelves of vials with live cultures, a pulsating blob materializes. It develops into an unknown species displaying superior intelligence, glialpathic ability and a charming personality deserving of the name Izzy.

The Valympyon spy reports her findings about Chico Quwattle to General Gore Andriol, a schizophrenic who hides his alter ego, Buster, a toy rabbityle inside the sleeve of his uniform and schemes to replace his superior, Mumba Zola, as dictator of Valympya. He blackmails Chico by holding her mother, aunt, and brother hostage, threatening to kill them unless she spies for him supplying information about Ponce Heidon's research facility.

Skeptical of the new species' intelligence, Director Heidon, asks him to derive the Schrodinger Wave Equation and shocked by his ability and witty personality falls in love with Izzy as have the other scientists who are keeping his presence a secret from the outside world.

It isn't until the protestors invade the research lab, that Izzy is discovered. During the break-in of PHI the protesters threaten the lives of Izzy's friends. Unaware of his power, Izzy emits a sound so formidable it paralyzes everyone within hearing. When paralysis wears off the protestors flee fearing another attack from a monster created at the PHI.

Ponce immediately enlists the help of Kurl Tszargon, a noted astronomer, to steal the government's spacecraft Graviton 1, and take his researchers along with Izzy to another planet to develop the vaccine. Kurl formulates a journey to take them back in time so they'll have five years on MBG21, Earth, to complete their research and return home having been gone only one Authairian day.

As Ponce's team load their supplies onto Graviton 1 they're attacked again by General Gore and his troops disguised as Pink Peace Power members. Chico saves Cimi's life using one of her prosthetic weapons and Izzy's power saves the day, devastating the enemy and protecting his friends.

Creation ends as the crew of Graviton 1, including Izzy, cheer their successful take-off unaware that soon the Valympyons will be in pursuit.

Creation comprises 93,942 words that include a 6,000-word dictionary and 1500-word bibliography. We use italics to indicate a character's thoughts so not to confuse Authairians who may communicate by glialpathing or speaking directly.

This is a work of fiction. Any reference to characters, names, incidents, organizations, and dialogue in this novel are either the products of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously.

IZ—THE SAGA: CREATION

by D. Duayne Whitehurst and Lucille E. Mayton, who write under the shared pseudonym DDWLEM.

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Dedication

To scientists around the world who produce lifesaving research while encountering obstacles created by naysayers, misinterpretation of their research, and threats to their lives. Ours is a better world because of these dedicated researchers who resist bribery, coercion, and political adversity.

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Teresa TL Bruce, our mighty raptan. Her editorial expertise is as powerful as Izzy's weapon. She held firm to Iz's original content while meticulously scanning for inconsistencies and errors. Through thoughtful question after question, Teresa took us deep into character building. We are forever grateful for her patience, humor, and dedication.

<https://www.facebook.com/TealAshesbyTeresaBruce>

Patricia Charpentier, multi-award-winning author and lecturer. She rescues many writers and threw us the TL Bruce lifeline while offering advice and encouragement.

<https://writingyourlife.org/meet-patricia/>

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In Another Time and Place

Long before Vikings ruled the seas and Olmecs carved colossal heads, when Akrotiri thrived as an Aegean trading center and mystical powers of Stonehenge healed the sick, a deadly virus attacked an advanced society on the other side of the Milky Way.

Evil's Origin

“What is zat? Only 500?”

The virologist stood behind the upper tier of seats in the empty lecture hall. Her forehead wrinkled at the brow and ink-black eyes widened in horror. “There should be hundreds of zousands by now.”

She dug her ruby nails deep into the plush fibers of a chair's back, impatient for National Public Telepathy's update of deaths to scroll across the holovid at the front of the room.

The tally came into view as an impassioned announcer's face filled the wall. “Breaking news: A virus of unknown origin has spread to the suburbs of Olymopos, resulting in 500—no, make that 501 more deaths in the last hour. That brings the total to 15,610. Emergency measures...”

Dr. Ursula von Menglebort dismissed the accuracy of the NPTO report. After a lifetime of work to create the annihilator of millions, she'd succeeded in killing only 15,000 Olympyons? “Zat is a cover-up. Zee Olympyon government doesn't vant to frighten zee mazzes.”

Ursula pushed her tall, slender body away from the seat and brushed off the crimson lapels of her black suit, purposely designed like her many others to draw onlookers' eyes from

dwelling on her skin of mud-green, so unlike the spring green of most Valympyons. Though unblemished and smooth, hers appeared in need of a good scrubbing.

She straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin as the lightning strike tattoo up the back of her bald head rippled at the neck. Her black, pencil-thin brows pinched a V over eyes that darted from one side of the empty hall to the other and then cut to the Dyzzeberry Communicator cuffing her bony wrist. The DB flashed the time. There'd soon be a class filling the hall. Looking ahead, she glared at the announcer as if it were his fault more innocents weren't dying.

“The victims display no signs of early trauma or disease. They suddenly lose consciousness, their lungs collapse, and their hearts stop. All lifesaving attempts have failed. Geneticists at the Ponce Heidon Institute have isolated an unknown virus from the victims' blood. No source has been established for this deadly strain. The Olympyon Center for Disease has issued a public notice via National Public Telepathy Olympya: *When at all possible, place activities on remote operation, activate level-five sanitation, and stay tuned to NPTO for updates.* It is speculated th—”

Ursula scoffed at the OCFD's attempt to prevent contagion. “Well, zat's not going to help one little bit.”

Reflecting on the good news that the virus had spread to the home of her nemesis, she allowed her thin ruby lips to shape a smile seldom exercised, then expounded in her affected accent. “Urzula vill triumph over zee great Doctor Ponce Heidon. We vill see who has zee genius in genetic manipulation.”

Deep in thought, Ursula swiveled a stilettoed heel toward the door. The news announcer's somber report continued, his voice fading as she swaggered from the lecture hall, purposely allowing the live broadcast to greet the arriving students.

Speaking to other raptans was not something Ursula enjoyed, so it seldom happened. When it did, however, she spoke about herself in the third person, elevating her persona—she imagined—to the prominence deserving of Valympyon's preeminent virologist. Her time was too important to waste collaborating with inferiors in her field who believed research for the good of raptan civilization required open lines of communication. Discipline and hard work, directed by a strong leader, produced a society that would best rule Authair—one whose elevated understanding of genetics selected the strong and brilliant and eliminated the weak and lazy.

Thus, Ursula ruled The von Menglebort Genetics Institution annexed to the science complex of the University of Villanois. Weekly evaluations kept her small group of talented scientists task-oriented. She assigned her well-paid engineers the daily responsibility of maintaining the performance of her extensive inventory of botts—the programmable members of her staff lacking messy things like lungs, skin, hearts, and the need to rest or the ability to gossip. Casual conversation was a waste of efficiency she'd not tolerate in her laboratories.

Dr. von Menglebort headed straight to her private office, choosing the long walk instead of taking the underground flyway. Mentally strategizing a meeting with her superior, Mumba Zola, Ursula passed the employee break room, scowling at the necessity of such frivolous space.

Dr. von Menglebort's staff spent every microsecond of their breaks in the employee lounge. Since this location wasn't under her direct supervision, it became a place for idle chatter and their boss a favorite subject of gossip.

A young new virologist holding a frothy cup of nectar sank into a chair and joined her colleagues. Sipping the foam, Frothy remarked, “Ursula just passed me on her way to the lab. Don’t know why I bothered to say good wake-cycle to her. She clicked by me in those stilettos like I didn’t exist.”

“Oh, don’t let Dr. Cuddles bother you,” said a microbial geneticist preparing to enjoy his gnarly-jam puff. “We all get the same treatment. You’ll get used to it.” Gnarly smiled as he sat back and sank his teeth into the confection’s fruity center.

The biomedical engineer, catching Frothy’s attention across the low table, raised his dark eyebrows. “The good doctor would have you disciplined if she knew you called her Ursula.” He took the last chug of TX, a potent vegetable cocktail, and picked up a firm stalk of apium. Turning it slowly with two fingers, he glanced at Gnarly. “Just think, in another proxi-cycle or two, Dr. Cuddles will be hunched over suffering spinal curvature of stiletto syndrome.”

Gnarly grinned and wiped berry from the corner of his mouth. “Stiletto syndrome or not, you’ve got to hand it to her. She’s no dummy. Her conclusions of the genetic basis for hundreds of diseases are unrivaled. I’ve read most of her findings. Hate to admit it, but they’re practically flawless.”

TX, about to take the last bite of apium, added, “Flawless like that lightning bolt tattoo that creeps down the back of her muddy green head. Bet it goes all the way to her butt.” He glanced around to make sure no one outside the threesome was listening, then leaned in toward Frothy. “I bet her pearl’s black just like that lightning bolt.” TX leaned back, crunching the apium, eager for Frothy’s reaction.

“That’s none of your business,” she said, surprised any male colleague would mention a woman’s biopearl. Frothy had assumed the subject was off-limits at work—titillating,

nevertheless. “But black? No one has a black pearl. If it’s true, she’s brewed up her own coating.”

Frothy raised her voice. “Either of you get the grand tour?” She planted a stare first at Gnarly, then TX. “Well?”

Gnarly put down his cup of hot brew. “You gotta be kidding. Valympyons don’t reveal laboratory results—especially if Mumba himself orders the work. My hunch is Ursula’s up to no good. Did you see the holomeet where she and Dr. Heidon chaired a panel of experts? Something like Authair’s Initiative on Infectious Diseases. Anyway, the discussion got lively when Ursula tried to defend Valympyon’s secret research. Like this.” He crossed his legs, clasped his hands, and straightened his back to give the full effect. “Vhy, Dr. Heidon, Valympyons vill hide nothing zat would be for zee benefit of all Authairians. Urzula eez close to announcing a major dizcovery.”

“You nailed her, attitude and all,” TX said and then added in his own Ursula-voice. “I vonder vhat zat dizcovery eez.”

Snickering, Gnarly sweetened his hot brew and took a swiggle. “Don’t know, but she’s been having a run on rabbityles—deliveries every other work-cycle. Guess she’s testing a new vaccine. You’d think she’d involve me in the study...probably doesn’t want my opinion on using live animals for test subjects.” He stirred in more nectar. “Bad choice for panel chair, that woman.”

Frothy crossed her legs, leaned back, and clasped hands behind her head, almost covering the swirly lined tattoo that ornamented her bare scalp. “Well, she’s given me a personal office. Can’t beat that. Imagine, all I do is review lab reports for inconsistencies. Just DB her my report

at precisely 16:18 every work-cycle, and she responds, ‘Lab number *blah blah blah* received.’ Don’t think she checks them. Gives them to her bots to file. Bo-or-ing.”

TX sat up, looking at Frothy. “Did you know she’s got bots performing lab experiments? That way, she just trashes the ones that get contaminated. No problem. No report required—just follow proper disposal procedure while she’s sitting in her plexiwalled office pushing buttons.”

Gnarly looked from Frothy to TX. “Yeah, untouchable. She’s got one huge government contract for the benefit of society and my pocket. Who am I to complain?”

Frothy straightened and raised her eyes, making little wrinkles in her forehead. “Look, if that’s the case, Ursula, oh, excuse me, Dr. von Menglebort, is sure to get drafted by the Planetary Center for Disease Control to find the source of that deadly outbreak in Olympos—something I’d love to tackle. Sure don’t want that virus spreading to our hemisphere.”

Each clap of heels in cadence with her thoughts brought Dr. von Menglebort closer to the office. Her lips tightened as she passed through the reception foyer and outer office. When she entered her private inner office, the door sealed behind her.

Pacing the room, Ursula ranted. “What could’ve happened? Hundreds of zousands should’ve breathed zee spores and died. Urzula vill demand inveztigation from zee time zee microbes left zee lab to zee drone’s self-deztruction. There vill be death to zee incompetents who failed!” She made fists as far as her nails permitted and pounded the air. “Zee next operation vill not fail.”

With palms throbbing, she opened her hands and observed her nails’ lacquered finish. “Perfection,” she said. “Urzula demands perfection.”

The virologist tapped an icon on the face of her Dyzzeberry Communicator, sending an order to Mumba Zola's trusted manservant, Jeeves.

The response was immediate. "Dr. Ursula von Menglebort, what message have you for His Excellen—"

Ursula cut off Jeeves's recitation of the twenty-five-word title demanded of all subjects referencing Valympya's supreme leader. "Get zat blood-beer-drinking megalomaniac to contact Dr. von Menglebort. Now."

Satisfied her message would produce results sooner rather than later, Ursula sat and kicked off her high-style steppers, watching as one bounced off the other. She admired how their red leather glistened. The same color decorated her DB and pulsed from her rubellite biopearl—the power of life, she liked to think. No one had ever cast eyes on it, hidden, to be seen by only the chosen. Since she found the male population of Valympya substandard to her desires, she took pleasure in sharing her biopearl's attraction with only herself.

No longer did Ursula resist the urge to look upon it. Right palm up, she made a fist and hinged-back the bony underside of her wrist. Long nails cut into the flesh of her palm. A drop of blood oozed onto a protruded tendon. The double nictitating membrane concealing her biopearl slowly separated revealing a garish red glow that pumped power to every molecule of her imagined celebrity. Blood rushing to her face settled in her lips. She ran her tongue over the thin puffed-up ridges and opened her fingers as the eye-like aperture slowly closed over her pearl.

Ursula lifted her head and spoke again, enjoying the imperial ring of her voice. "Mumba vill agree with Urzula. He'll pronounce death to zee incompetents and kill each one slowly to satizfy his gluttony." She rubbed her hands together then wrinkled her nose. "Dizguzting diet."

Even Ursula found washing down beating hearts with blood-beer unpalatable.

“Urzula vill speak to Blood-Beer himself. Soon we vill be rid of Olympyons, and there vill be no Ponce Heidon. Urzula vill be zee supreme geneticist in all Authair.”

Assignment

The door to the underground conference room closed. Neither raptan sat in the plush seats that awaited their repose. If either carried the virus, it would be minutes before the other became a victim, seconds before the carrier became a corpse.

Innocents were dying by the thousands—their misinformed and desperate loved ones demonstrating against genetic research this very moment outside the Ponce Heidon Institute. Someone had convinced the demonstrators that research at the renowned Olympyon genetic facility created this deadly disease. The echo of their mantra—“Stop this insane research!”—haunted the institute’s director.

Dr. Ponce Heidon and the head of the Olympyon government’s health department, Secretary Yesped, stood on opposite ends of the long conference table. Every wrinkle on Ponce’s brow testified to the many hours spent as director of the institute of genetics known as PHI. Ponce, tall and lean, displayed the anguish of the moment in his clenched fists and stiffened back. He knew—at least, thought he knew—why he’d been summoned on short notice to meet secretly with Secretary Yesped.

The secretary of health, equally tall, placed gloved hands on the polished surface as if to keep his body from crumbling under the burden of the message he was about to deliver.

“Director Heidon, our government has concluded that if any of us are to survive this deadly virus, our survival will come from a vaccine discovered in your laboratory. We’ve followed your progress and understand your chief of genetics research, Dr. Dorf Tzeus, has identified this biological hazard as an A-plus-B merged retrovirus, the most promising lead to date. We have confidence that, with our backing, you will soon have a vaccine to save Authairians from extinction.”

The superior stood erect and brought his hands together, lacing the fingers over his jacket while Ponce nodded in silence. “You are to immediately select a team of experts to test and develop vaccines at speeds heretofore unknown in the scientific world. This A-plus-B merged retrovirus will be identified as ABMR. The ABMR team is to be housed in an underground clandestine laboratory at PHI. We will give you all funds, security, equipment, and staffing necessary. All equipment must be portable in the event your research team must relocate. Once the underground facility is completed, ABMR team members will remain underground.”

Secretary Yesped looked down then cleared his throat. “Make a list of essential staff replacements so that, in the likely event one or more of you do not survive, we can fill those positions immediately. Research must proceed without confusion over succession of authority. The Olympyon Institute of Health has waived application and licensure protocol.” His jaws tightened, “Do you have any questions, Director Heidon?”

The secretary’s eyes sought the director’s, but Ponce stood deep inside a thought chasm. In the past, a specific time to complete research had never been the driving force for Ponce. Time would now rule his actions. Mentally assembling his team, the director double blinked. “None, Secretary Yesped.”

“Very well. Your mission is to ensure the survival of not only your fellow Olympions but the whole of raptanity. Our government is at your service. May Olym be with you.”

Ponce stood motionless, watching the secretary of health, answerable only to Olympyon’s president, exit the room. Dr. Heidon knew that the moment his superior reached roof level, Secretary Yesped would depart in the solitude of his stealth flier—hopefully, free from viral infection—to continue service to their country.

The PHI director, instructed to depart nine minutes after Secretary Yesped, utilized every moment of that time to plan. *I need individuals who can focus their energy, work cooperatively, and think beyond reality. A networking expert and an astrophysicist among them.* Ponce’s bushy eyebrows almost touched. *Cimi Nuja and Kurl Tszargon. Yes, she’ll be able to customize our computer operations to meet the critical demand on time, and Kurl will upgrade our satellite security system. They must work together for optimum results.*

Ponce checked the time: four minutes left. *It won’t be easy expecting them to collaborate. I’ll contact Dorf first. He’s worked successfully with Kurl, allowing him and his OCD to fit comfortably within a working environment. Dorf’ll figure a way to convince Kurl to accept—or at least ignore—Cimi’s unorthodox behavior.*

Ponce stepped into the lift. Ascending in the spacious round of steel and glass, Ponce reflected on his boyhood friend. Kurl walked a different path than others, managing to arrive first while exerting less energy than his competitors—a metaphor Ponce attributed to Kurl’s brilliance in physics. Kurl’s male acquaintances respected his accomplishments but kept their distance from the self-absorbed astrophysicist. Meanwhile, Ponce had witnessed the admiration women showed for the well-proportioned male specimen and felt it unfortunate that any effort on their

part to engage the kan-du master in conversation failed miserably. Kurl openly admitted to preferring chess or a good workout over what he considered nonproductive behavior.

The director nodded to himself. Ponce could trust Dorf to persuade all the ABMR team members to not take Kurl's potentially thoughtless comments as insults. The chief of genetics had earned the respect of the PHI staff, who fondly referred to him not as Dr. Tzeus but as Chief.

One-sixth of a proxi-cycle ago or two years Earth time, fear of biological weapons targeted on Olympya jump-started the Ponce Heidon Institute's rapid construction. The director needed an expert to fill the position of chief of genetics. Dorf Tzeus, a young PhD, brought to his virtual interview an impressive list of awards and citations for developing vaccines to combat viruses. Ponce determined Dorf had the expertise PHI needed to fulfill its goals. What sealed the deal with Ponce, however, was meeting the young man face-to-face.

The work-cycle after their holomeet, Dorf arrived for his face-to-face interview dressed in a casual shirt with loose-fitting pants—not the body-hugging athletic attire his generation of professional men usually wore. Dorf's slacks belted a slim waist, and the loose sleeves of his plain blue shirt hinted at the geneticist's well-toned biceps. He stood a few centimeters shorter than the director yet nodded a confident greeting.

Ponce wasted no time. "Have a seat, Dr. Tzeus." No sooner had they taken their seats than the director began the interview. "Now tell me, how would you create an atmosphere for developing new vaccines in record time with a team of scientists who've never worked together?"

The candidate did not hesitate. "Four things, Director Heidon. One, a goal the team is passionate to achieve. Two, freedom to fail and encouragement to keep trying. Three,

collaboration through an open forum of idea exchange. And four, means to improve accuracy and speed of research.”

The applicant had at this point taken Director Heidon by surprise when he said, “If hired, I’ll refrain from practical jokes, pursue answers beyond work-cycle hours, and supply you with a complete analysis of every failure.” Those had been the last words Ponce heard from Dorf as merely a young geneticist.

“Follow me.” The PHI director led the applicant not to the labs but the personnel office, where he signed Dr. Dorf Tzeus in as the new chief of genetics at the Ponce Heidon Institute.

Ponce stepped out of the lift and hurried to Dorf’s lab. Although Ponce knew his way blindfolded, others found the journey troublesome. The building employed a confusing system of hallways, offices, conference rooms, and lounges that all led in some fashion to various research laboratories. These could only be entered and exited through WRAP, the Wearable Resin Applied Protector sanitation system.

Ponce wound his way to Dorf’s WRAP, thankful that PHI had been the first facility on Planet Authair with such a sterilization system installed at the entrance to each lab. After Ponce lobbied to have the system purchased by the government, every one of his researchers applauded the installation. It screened them for admittance and then sterilized them from head to toe. Not one PHI employee had died from the killer virus thus far. This didn’t prove the WRAP was the reason, but it gave employees confidence their laboratories were exceptionally safe places to work during this time of crisis.

As Ponce entered, he smiled, remembering how quickly Dorf nicknamed the sanitizing system *wraptrap*. Ponce stepped to the center of this WRAP’s small space. A light flashed,

indicating recognition of the director's brainprint. He straddled both feet on indicator spots and lifted his arms straight out to his sides, activating sensors with his movements. Warm wisps of microfibers whirred onto his body from every angle—covering him in a cocoon of director-status blue from his head to the soles of his shoes. A transparent film covered his eyes, providing him with full vision, while an invisible but air-purifying filter protected his mouth and nostrils.

To others at PHI, these few seconds felt enjoyable—soft sensations encapsulating the body, relaxing moments. To the goal-oriented director, it seemed forever before the circular plate under his feet revolved a quarter turn and the marking device inscribed *Ponce Heidon, Director PHI*, onto the left chest of his wrap. Finally, the last quarter turn completed the process.

Dorf glanced up as Ponce headed toward him, passing researchers in white collaborating with one another, mixing chemicals, peering into scopes, and weighing minute amounts of organic matter. They paid no attention to him as he went straight for Dorf, the only figure authorized to wear the yellow wrap. “We need to talk,” Ponce said. “In private.”

Stopping his audio notes, Dorf tapped his DB, deactivating the program. “Timestamp.” He looked up. “Sure, Boss. The analytics room.”

No one knew why it was called the analytics room. It was a fully equipped lounge with instantizers offering snacks and drinks made on the spot with fresh fruits, veggies, and protein products. Fitted with semiprivate areas to sit and socialize, the analytics room also provided overstuffed chairs, one of which Dorf claimed as his own. There he dozed intermittently between spurts of work. Employees lowered their voices if they came in and saw Chief reclining.

This work-cycle, Dorf knew—by the creases in his director's brow—he'd not be napping anytime soon. He led Ponce to a section of the room with two chairs partially secluded behind a

wall of shelves filled with empty glassware and other paraphernalia. Ponce sat while Dorf activated the locking mechanism. An image on the outside door appeared: *Please do not enter the analytics room. Chief in conference.* Simultaneously, the message flashed to all employees' DBs.

Ponce gave Dorf a somber look. Dorf leaned in toward the director. "Boss, what's up?"

As Ponce briefed Dorf about Secretary Yesped's directions, Dorf sat up holding tightly to the arms of the chair knowing as chief of the ABMR team he must act with discipline and speed.

"You've got the skills, Dorf. I need your help to convince Cimi Nuja and Kurl Tszargon to work as teammates." Ponce hadn't needed to use either of their last names for Dorf to know who he meant. Kurl, a frequent visitor to PHI as a consultant on purification and sterilization, was often seen poking around in various labs. No one could miss the astrophysicist—the only black wrap at the institute. He'd refused to wear the purple designated for consultants. Therefore, black became iconic to Kurl Tszargon.

Cimi Nuja was a different matter. Dorf pushed forward. "Cimi Nuja. You mean *the Ms. Cimi Nuja of Pomegranate Neural Network fame?*"

Dorf had seen her remotely in interviews and had read about her achievements. He'd never met her in person. Dorf knew she and Ponce had met professionally via various holomeets before the WRAP's installation. He also knew the director had asked her to study the prototype of the WRAP and report any safety, security, and reliability weaknesses. Not yet two full proxi-cycles old, she'd given such a thorough report that the manufacturer immediately tested what she called faults and retained her to evaluate its rebuilds. Since then, Ponce and Dorf had discussed how an independent, creative mind like hers could be useful at PHI, but the director could never

justify hiring Authair's reportedly eccentric, preeminent innovator and mathematician on a permanent basis. Now the justification for hiring Cimi Nuja wouldn't be necessary.

Ponce nodded, waiting for Dorf to offer his objections to the pairing of such diverse personalities.

“Wonder how Cimi Nuja'll take to sacrificing her freedom and hunkering down at PHI for what will be little, if any, sleep. Yep, you're right, Boss. Isn't going to be easy.” Dorf lifted his head and stared as if he could see through the ceiling.

Ponce knew not to say anything. He let the chief think.

Making light of the assignment despite the dread Ponce saw beading along the chief's forehead, Dorf said, “Hmm. Boss, know what that brain in my laboratory would do? Electrify all the liquids. Death would come swiftly, and we'd not have to deal with Kurl's antisocial behavior.” Then Dorf's eyes got big. “Can you imagine Kurl Tszargon in the same lab as Cimi Nuja, still alive? The first time her black bubblegum stretches her wrap and pops, he'll have the wraptrap sucking up his microfiber before it recognizes who's inside.”

Ponce didn't comment, but he let his mouth curve into the slightest of grins as he visualized instant death by electrified liquids. It then lifted to a full crescent at the thought of the wraptrap sucking up Kurl in his microfiber to escape Cimi.

Dorf relaxed his elbows and leaned back. “Okay, Boss. Will make this work. Know what Kurl needs—his own space, full-time sanitizing opportunity, ambient sound, exercise room, and no small talk. For Ms. Nuja—plenty of hot brew, puffs, and bubble gum. She likes a mathematical challenge. Will assign her to efficiency analysis of our ramped-up operations.”

Tilting his head, Dorf added, “Heard she likes big clothes.” He put his hands out to the side as if exaggerating the shape of a full skirt. “Won’t work under wraptrap resin. She’ll have to get used to smash-fashion or change her wardrobe.”

Dorf scrunched up his forehead and asked, with forced politeness, “Anything else, Boss?”

“Yes. Get Ms. Nuja here morrow-cycle early—before the protester parade begins. Show her around and bring her to my office. She must meet Kurl.” Ponce stood and turned to go, then stopped. “Almost forgot. I’ll tell him to send a sketch of his new lab for your review.”

Dorf gazed into the distance as Ponce continued. “You know, Kurl’s going to feel more secure in this environment than in his laboratory. He’ll be able to create, nap, work out, and eat, all in a superior, sanitized space. Dorf make sure that happens. Get creative.” Ponce gave Dorf the thumbs-up and an I-know-you-can-do-it look.

“Sure thing, Boss.”

Dorf hoped the director hadn’t detected his faked enthusiasm. He deactivated the lock and—as Ponce headed off—changed the image on the door of the analytics room to a welcome: *Open for your lounging pleasure.*

The chief returned to his office—a space large enough for two to sit and talk with a low table between. Samples in ampules and flasks filled the shelves of one wall while randomly tacked photographs of nucleic acid molecules in various conformations covered the other walls. His thoughts never strayed far from creating the next trial for defeating the merged A-plus-B strains of this evil retrovirus. Now, he’d have to distract himself long enough to reach Cimi Nuja.

Not bothering to sit, Dorf tapped on his DB and spoke without raising his wrist, “Cimi Nuja, citizen Olympos, inventor of the Pomegranate Neural Network Computer, recipient of Alfred Wei-Authair Prize.” That was all he knew about her stats. He couldn’t remember in which twelfth segment of the last proxi-cycle or Earth year she’d received the prize.

It didn’t matter.

“Your search has found Ms. Cimi Nuja, Olympon citizen of Aqua Lane 444, Olympos. Would you like to be connected?” asked an automated voice.

“Thank you. Please connect.” Dorf always spoke politely to the voice at the other end, even though it was most often mechanical.

A woman answered. “Dr. Dorf Tzeus, I know you. You’re Ponce Heidon’s chief of genetics. I’m so-o-o glad you contacted me. You must be under a lot of pressure to get a vaccine for this virus, and things aren’t going well outside the PHI. Let’s get right to it. How can I help?”

Dorf wiped perspiration from the top of his head and lowered himself into a chair. His shoulders relaxed. “Pleasure to speak with you, Ms. Nuja.” He sat erect and looked at his shirt to see if everything appeared in order then licked dry lips. “Would you like me to activate the hologram?”

“No. I wasn’t expecting a call.”

“Of course. Will get to the point.”

Their conversation took less than five minutes. Dorf breathed a sigh of relief. He would meet Cimi Nuja, yes, *the* Cimi Nuja, morrow-cycle at eight PA—an hour before the start of work-cycle—as distant Proxi rose above the horizon through the early morning’s pale green glow.

Dorf DB'd for her age. She was four one-twelfth proxi-cycles or four Earth years younger than his twenty-eight, but she sounded much older. Maybe the confidence in her voice reflected maturity beyond her proxi-cycles.

Cimi Nuja had been a celebrity from her early teens. Must have been hard for her growing up in a world where every Authairian except her grew hair only on their eyelashes and brows but never on any other part of their bodies. *That unique tuft of hair at the top of her head most likely toughened her character. Rumors claim Cimi's tuft changes color and curls or straightens according to her mood. To see if that's true, will have to analyze her mood while noting the color and texture of her tuft.*

Dorf shook his head. This pursuit, however intriguing, was not how he wanted to spend morrow-cycle. Raptans were dying. His focus had to stay on saving them. *Somehow, have to break it to this famous, eccentric, and independently wealthy woman that she'll be locked in and on duty cycles unending. Fashion and mood swings won't fit the formula for survival at PHI.*

Dorf's findings still waited for him back in his lab. He hurried to reactivate the file images and continue analyzing the latest series of tests. Hours later, he dozed off.

A startling premise jolted him awake.

"Of course, that's it," he said, sitting up and throwing his legs over the side of the lounge chair. "The ABMR is composed of two benign viruses, the A and the B, commonly found in Authairian blood. But, when the A and B merge, a deadly exogenous retrovirus takes over the body."

Dorf scratched his head at the spot where his DNA tattoo ended. "The virus takes over because the A-B pair has become enveloped by a plasma membrane that allows invasion of the host's cells. Once inside the host, they transcribe their chromosomal RNA into the host's DNA

and disrupt the healthy life cycle.” He shook his head and punched a fist into a cupped hand—over and over. “Why didn’t I see this possibility before?”

Still in yester-cycle’s yellow wrap, Dorf spoke instructions into an audio file. “Conduct three experiments. First, using—”

Ping. “Chief,” the DB addressed him using Dorf’s preference for the informal greeting rather than the *Dr. Tzeus* default, “you have twenty minutes before your meeting with Ms. Cimi Nuja.”

“Yep, okay.” Dorf finished recording his inspiration and jogged to the wraptrap. He thought about his research project while the WRAP sucked up yester-cycle’s film, spinning the golden fibers into tiny openings in the floor around his feet and leaving him in the clothes he wore when he entered the previous work-cycle. His once loose pants and shirt had been plastered against the yellow resin over an entire wake- and sleep-cycle. They weren’t designed to spend time under compression as were common, skin-clinging clothes.

Dorf rushed to his space in the men’s changing area and found blue shirt and tan slacks suitable for introduction protocol. Redressed, he headed to the reception area of PHI. It was quiet—no sounds of protesters—but he had no time to check the outside monitors, for there she waited, Cimi Nuja, standing in the doorway.

Interview

Cimi's smile lit the room. Dorf named his DB's mental note file *Cimi Nuja* and recorded its first entry, confident the MN app would catch at least ninety-eight percent of his thoughts: *Cimi—broad smile, tuft orange and curly.* Dorf noticed a ribbon tied in a bow at the base of her tuft of hair—the same color as her emerald eyes. *Find out now if rumors about her emotions showing as color in her tuft are true.* He greeted her with reserved enthusiasm. “Ms. Nuja, delighted to meet you at last.”

“Oh, the pleasure's all mine, Dr. Tzeus.” Cimi wore bubbly sleeves and a full skirt over striped leggings. Sparkling eyes latched onto his as her words sprinted from one idea to the next, requiring every micromoment of Dorf's attention. “I've heard all about your discoveries of viruses, and now this deadly strain has taken 15,722 innocent lives. Those poor victims.” She threw her arms out as if to embrace every soul then swung her hands into a prayerful gesture, pleading. “Oh, Dr. Tzeus, I'm so thrilled you called me. I want to be of service. Anything I can do, really, anything at all.”

Before Dorf could respond, Cimi took a rapid breath and kept going, wrinkling her brow and cocking her head as she spoke. “I'll review your computer systems. I can customize the mechanics and improve productivity. There's got to be a way the samples you test can be

evaluated more efficiently. Like I said, anything at all. Oh—” She blinked her long indigo lashes. “Also, I was thinking I can put all the researchers onto a communication system that’ll stay active through any cyberattack. Just need to get to work, like, now.

“Oh, yeah. My assistant, Clyde, will put IDs into your laboratory directory, then I’ll randomize them, and only the PNNC security infrastructure will have the capability of verifying them.”

Dorf, of course, realized the Pomegranate Neural Network Computer, Cimi’s invention, elevated the standard for communications across the globe, and he recalled the way she’d acknowledged its predecessors. He’d read of Cimi’s enthusiasm to give credit where deserved and of her interest in philanthropy. Everyone who took an interest in technology was familiar with Ms. Nuja’s mantra: *No new product is without a parent*. However, he’d had no idea the woman was an incessant chatterbox whose words strung together like an endless trail of ants, curving every which way over obstacles great and small.

Cimi kept a bead on Dorf as both arms animated her narrative with bracelets jingling. Abruptly, her speech ended. Dorf opened his mouth to ask a question about Clyde but left enough of a pause that Cimi filled it. “Really, Dr. Tzeus, show me where I can work, and give me a job. It’s as simple as that. I can make a computer learn how you analyze samples. It’ll have your results in picoseconds.”

“Ms. Nuja,” Dorf jumped in, knowing he had to speak up fast but not quite knowing how to formulate his response. “Ms. Nuja,” he repeated, “I, er, we appreciate your enthusiasm and willingness to get right at the job. Let me explain a few things, so you’ll have the big picture of what’s required for you to join our team.”

Having spoken that much without interruption, Dorf decided not to invite Cimi to sit down with a cup of hot brew, which he feared she'd accept. Rather, he'd lead her to the wraptrap as soon as possible while she was eager to get to work. "Let's tour the facility, and we'll be back in time for you to meet with Dr. Heidon and another prospective member of the team."

Smiling, Dorf pointed Cimi in the direction of PHI's laboratory headquarters, mental noting: *Find out about Clyde*. Meanwhile, by this time, Dorf knew better than to throw out Kurl Tszargon's name. With Kurl's reputation—as the grand master of kan-du, not to mention his astronomical expertise—Dorf suspected Cimi would spout out Kurl's many awards, the dates he received them, his famous students, and on and on. They couldn't waste precious time.

While Cimi chattered all the way through the meandering hallways, offices, lounges, gardens, eating areas, and recreation facilities, Dorf—towering over her—observed her bouncy orange tuft. *She must have colored it for artistic purposes. The mood thing might be only gossip.*

Cimi lingered at the wall of windows looking onto the children's activity grounds. When she and Dorf arrived at the fitness center, she sprinted toward the equipment and reached for the pull-up bars. She made a sight in her striped pink-and-white blouse with matching tights under a fluffy, orange skirt—its puffiness rising and falling. Two attempted chin-ups and Cimi, out of breath, let go. Her huge hoop earrings flew up as her orange sneakers landed.

"Hey," Cimi paused to fill her lungs with air. "This is going to be fun. I'll arrive early and get some exercise every wake-cycle."

Dorf—observing that Cimi, a bit overweight, could use a workout or two—said, "Gym's open all wake- and sleep-cycles. Feel free to use it."

They turned a corner and came to a circular hall. In the middle loomed the glass-encased lift. "Wow," Cimi said, "that's big enough for two sisscas."

Dorf nodded agreement. Though he preferred jogging, many colleagues eager to exercise on their daily commute used Stay in Shape Sky Cruisers; nearly all of them also abbreviated the convenient vehicle's cumbersome brand name to *sissca*. This four-meter-diameter elevator had plenty of room to accommodate several cruisers.

“Guess I could use the workout,” Cimi said, “and what a hoot it would be to drop onto PHI's roof and enter this lift.”

Whoops, Dorf thought. *How am I going to break it to her that she won't be able to come and go freely? Okay. Got it.* “You'll have to clear it with Director Heidon.”

Leaving that dilemma in Ponce's hands for the moment, Dorf led the way around to the opposite hallway and slowed his pace as they neared the wraptrap to his laboratory.

“Oh, there's the Wearable Resin Applied Protector,” Cimi chirped. “State of the art. Has my stamp of approval. You know, I think PHI's the only institution that has such technology. Let's go through the other entrance. I'm not doing any research this work-cycle. You can show me around, though. I'd love to meet everyone and see your lab systems.” She sprinted in the direction they'd come.

Dorf caught up with her. “Ms. Nuja, there's one thing about the lab—about all the labs. We have no other entrances but through wraptraps.”

Cimi tipped her head to one side and said, “Wraptraps?”

To Dorf's amazement, her tuft turned bright green. He was too surprised to mental-note the color. “You know, W-R-A-P. Wraptrap. It's the only way we've—”

“Oh, no.” Cimi's tuft changed from bright green to white, and the curls lost some of their spring.

This time Dorf mental-noted: *Tuft white and limp—Cimi just learned wraptrap’s the only entrance to labs.*

“It’s the sanitary, sterile thing,” she said. “I get it. That means my skirt and tuft are going to be all smooshed against my body.” She reached up, patted her limp curls, cocked her head, and creased her brow. Her emerald eyes focused on the ceiling. “No, no, that’s not gonna work. I’ve got to have my tuft free and breathing.” From somewhere inside her mouth, like a chipmunk retrieving a nut from its cheek pouch, she produced a wad of gum and began chewing rapidly.

Dorf mental-noted: *Tuft white—Cimi not happy—says tuft needs to breathe. Looks like she’s solving a problem, chewing gum. Tuft turning purple—blowing bubble.*

The graying bubble hid Cimi’s nose, her eyes, her entire head—and then burst. Dorf jumped back. Her mouth became a gummy charcoal web, which her tongue swiftly maneuvered back into its moist home.

“Dr. Tzeus...” Cimi’s words sounded garbled as she chewed, but that did not stop her from rambling on.

He listened, trying to understand.

Cimi paused to swallow and finally worked the mass of goo out of speech-impediment space. “I’ve thought of a mechanism to enhance your wraptrap. No time to explain now.”

Dorf mental-noted: *Bubble popped—tuft curly purple—Cimi enthusiastic about wraptrap enhancement.*

“I’ll have a demo for you before the end of this work-cycle. Please give Dr. Heidon and his other prospective team member my apologies. Oh, and thank you so much for your time.” She waved a bracelet-jangling goodbye.

“Here, wait, Ms. Nuja. Will show you the way out.” Dorf, eager to help her negotiate the maze of hallways and corridors through which new employees had always appreciated an escort, realized Cimi Nuja obviously did not. He watched her tripping down the hall with her ribbon glittering green against bouncing purple curls. Dorf again mental noted: *Find out about Clyde.*

Before he could add anything more, his DB pinged. “Chief, you have five minutes before your meeting in Director Heidon’s office.”

Dorf activated the playback feature of his *Cimi Nuja* mental note: *Cimi—broad smile, tuft orange—*

He shut it off without listening further. *That’s no help in explaining her absence to Ponce*, he thought.

Sounds of protesters chanting— “Stop this insane research!”—reverberated in Dorf’s head as he neared the reception area. He hoped Cimi had no trouble encountering the agitators as she left the building. The protesters were usually a peaceful bunch, but Dorf feared their patience for a cure may wear thin at any moment; chants might turn to physical confrontation. He glanced outside and saw Cimi skipping past protesters who waved to her in greeting. She clearly posed no threat to them, only an unexpected celebrity appearance.

When Dorf arrived at the director’s office, He saw Ponce and Kurl seated and heard the director speaking. “If you have other needs send them to—” Ponce looked up and smiled. “Dorf, I was about to mention you. Come join us.” Ponce turned, as if looking for someone, and motioned Dorf to come and sit with them.

Kurl took an opportunity to cleanse his hands while Dorf accepted Ponce’s offer and took the chair between the two.

Dorf glanced first toward Ponce and then Kurl. “Ms. Nuja sends her apologies for not being able to meet you both.” Dorf clenched his teeth and wrinkled his brow before explaining, “She’s eager to join our team—wants to innovate and help us move the research along—but left in a hurry to prepare a modification. To quote her, ‘A mechanism to enhance your wraptrap.’ She said she’d have a demo for me to review before the end of this work-cycle. Curious to see what she creates.”

Kurl’s shoulders relaxed, and Ponce spoke. “That’s a good thing. I can’t imagine how our system could better sanitize, but there’s always an opportunity for improvement. Obviously, she’s inspired to help and comfortable enough with PHI to remain here for the duration of our research—even actively working before she’s been given a title.”

Dorf sank deeper into the chair and clasped his hands before explaining the situation. “We-e-ll, Ms. Nuja left with enthusiasm. Had no time to give her the full explanation. When I invited her to tour my lab, she wanted to enter without using the wraptrap. So, she doesn’t know that if she joins the team, she’ll be sequestered until we discover a vaccine.”

As if sensing Dorf’s apprehension, Ponce said, “One thing at a time.”

Dorf wasn’t about to tell the boss that Cimi’s motivation involved her tuft of hair needing to breathe and had nothing to do with the good of the institution. Also, he couldn’t tell Ponce about Clyde because he’d forgotten to ask Cimi about her assistant, who might turn out to be an even bigger problem.

Ponce stood and turned to Kurl. “You’ve got the assignment and know where to reach me.” Then, addressing Dorf, the director continued. “Now, about Ms. Nuja. I’m interested in her proposal. If your review finds this innovation of hers works toward our common goal, get her here first thing tomorrow. Notify Kurl and me when she’s present.”

The director looked at his DB. “I’m on my way to interview a botanical geneticist. We need her expertise. If she looks promising, I’ll notify you to prepare the botany lab and adjoining residence.”

“Sure thing, Boss,” Dorf said as he and Kurl also stood and made a quick exit.

While directing Kurl into an adjacent conference room, Dorf wondered why his boss hadn’t mentioned the botanical geneticist’s name. He and Ponce had agreed that a botanical geneticist with specific expertise was essential to the ABMR team. Some scientists speculated that passersby inhaled virus buds surviving on foliage. If their team could genetically modify a plant to corrupt the virus upon contact, they could reduce the deadly toll significantly. *Ponce never mentioned he had someone in mind for the research. Not like him to exclude me from this type of information.*

The conference room door closed silently behind them. Dorf took a seat and waited while Kurl pressed a bulge under the skin of his sternum, activating a chemical that produced droplets on the palms of both hands. He rubbed them together, carefully spreading the liquid between each finger while he said, “Tzeus, my private space, is it ready?”

Kurl’s abrupt request didn’t offend Dorf. He’d long appreciated Ponce’s reasoning about Kurl’s antisocial behavior: “There’s a unique satellite surveillance system whirring in Kurl’s head, and it won’t do to interfere with the genius of it all.”

Dorf’s DB signaled, and he relayed its message to Kurl. “Your technical equipment requests arrived. Should have the whole project completed by the end of the next sleep-cycle. Have a seat. Let’s review the file together.” Kurl took a seat next to Dorf.

The neural sensors in Dorf's DB analyzed his cerebrum's activity and produced a projected file that scrolled at Dorf's reading pace in his vision's airspace. He lifted his wrist and spoke to the DB app. "Double-edit view."

The image of Kurl's requirements, displayed by molecules of air, flared into the viewing space most suitable to each, and they reviewed the text file's information, editing with spoken instructions. Kurl added a note to make the interior of the observatory dark blue, and Dorf scrolled back to Kurl's nourishment requirements, voicing, "Add TX." Although Dorf wasn't a fan of the viscous liquid, he added the beverage knowing Kurl's proclivity to healthy eating.

Kurl approved.

Both satisfied with the update, Kurl and Dorf saved the file with a confirming *ping*.

Eager to return to his research, Dorf said, "Well, that didn't take long." He stood and nodded to Kurl. "Expect to be paged at half to eight PA in reception. Cimi should be ready to present by then."

Showing no emotion, Kurl responded, "Half to eight, Tzeus," and added, "Thank you, Tzeus," as he promptly left.

A man of few words, Kurl Tszargon hadn't revealed his relief at escaping or his aversion to the planned meeting with Ms. Cimi Nuja. He found social norms, including introductions, outside his realm of comfort.

The astrophysicist revealed his fondness for his two closest colleagues by addressing them as Heidon and Tzeus, a departure from his habit of calling everyone else by their full names. As unaffectionate as using only last names seemed to the average Authairian, Kurl knew his loyal friends received it as a compliment. They knew he even addressed the great-uncle with

whom he studied the universe as Great-Uncle J. K. Elbbuh—never J. K., as everyone else called him. The respected astronomer, who like his great-nephew suffered discomfort in social interactions, had found solace in searching for worlds beyond Authair’s always lit sky.

Great-Uncle J. K. Elbbuh had found Kurl an eager student and his anthropophobia no barrier to studying the unknown universe. Although Authairians hadn’t known of any heavenly bodies beyond their suns—Olym, Valym, and distant Proxi—Kurl’s great-uncle J. K. Elbbuh proved that beyond Authair’s sunspheres waited a universe filled with other worlds.

While Ponce headed toward his interview with the botanical geneticist, he thought about working with his oldest friend on the ABMR team. As children, Ponce and Kurl found one another’s interests fascinating. They spent hours in a makeshift laboratory behind little Ponce’s home. The lab had once been a playhouse crafted for Ponce and his sister-to-be, who never materialized. Meanwhile, Ponce added more and more unfortunate victims of accidents or diseases to his cabinets and shelves—species that resembled ants, toads, spiders, frogs, rabbits, and birds—and made detailed records of each. He’d sketched them showing skin, feather, fur, and musculature, recording every observable injury. Then, he preserved the specimens in formalin and organized each according to species.

When Ponce invited his buddy to see the collection, young Kurl rattled off more questions than Ponce could answer. “What’s that liquid they’re in? Aren’t you afraid of getting poisoned? How did they die? Why don’t they rot? Why don’t they stink? Where can I sanitize?”

Kurl’s compulsive behavior never bothered Ponce. While Ponce hadn’t known anyone else who cleaned hands repeatedly, he also hadn’t known anyone else who shared his insatiable curiosity so fervently. So, as a child, Ponce accepted Kurl’s behavior as a routine that nurtured

his friend's genius—a decision of friendship that eventually would prove the ultimate test of loyalty.

Explosion

A fiery blast ejected chunks of metal and glass into the air. The plaza of the Valympyon state complex was no more.

News of the blast spread in micromoments on glialpathic waves. DBs notified Valympyons throughout the hemisphere of the explosion's epicenter coordinates. An eruption of this magnitude had no precedent. Everyone working or living within a three-kilometer radius of the blast was ordered to remain indoors until further notice—and none within the rule of His Excellency Mumba Zola would dare disobey.

Citizens of the Valympyon military state so feared their dictator that none had ever demonstrated against his rule, let alone attempted to blow up his government buildings—until this blast destroyed half the state compound and killed two employees. These workers had been monitoring 420 botts at the start of work-cycle; 290 suffered full meltdowns, a devastating situation for operations at the facilities.

The airwaves jammed with requests for further details, but ground patrol, air patrol, and government reporters dispatched to the epicenter found no eyewitnesses.

Enraged, His Excellency Mumba Zola, President for Life, Lord of All the Beasts of the Land and Fishes of the Sea, and Conqueror of All Valympya, pronounced a nationwide search

for the perpetrator and ordered the release of the pre-explosion surveillance holoivid to NPTV, which immediately made it to the airwaves of NPTO.

The glialpathic waves of Authair reached citizens of both Valympyon and Olympyon hemispheres. They witnessed a young woman jogging in the pale green of early wake-cycle toward Valympyon state buildings moments before the onset of golden fringe. She appeared to be dressed for business as she ran closer to the statehouse plaza and was seen clutching something at her chest. Viewers clearly saw her stop, bend down, and remove a shoe with her left hand while her other continued pressing a bulge at her chest. She banged the shoe on the ground, put it back on, and stood with her right arm remaining against her body. To the most casual observer, whatever created that bulge held great importance to this young woman.

The holoivid zoomed to a close-up of her face. Citizen observers couldn't agree whether her expression showed anger or worry. However, when she passed by the camera's eye, it focused on the back of her head, immediately revealing her family's identity from the realistic, detailed corn plant tattoo that seemed to grow up the back of her head. It was the last image seen as the explosion ended the video.

From that moment of uninterrupted replay, the story of a young woman's sabotage against the Valympyon government spread with as great an impact as the detonation itself.

The Accused

Ponce Heidon's DB pinged and flashed red. He rubbed his eyes, wishing he'd gone home hours earlier but realizing he'd likely have to stay at the institute well into the start of many sleep-cycles until he'd assembled the ABMR team. He could have turned off the message—it originated from NPTV in the waking Valympyon hemisphere and so wasn't urgent to PHI—but instinct drew him to activate it. He opened the audio and continued his way to his office while listening to an announcer: "There has been an explosion at state headquarters in Valympya. A secure thirty-kilometer area surrounding the city is in place. The public may not enter. Two deaths have been reported. Damage to buildings and operations is being assessed."

Urgency in the reporter's next comment stopped Ponce in his tracks and kept him from turning off the broadcast. "The jogger and suspected bomber has been identified as Chico Quwattle, an award-winning graduate of the University of Villinois, who won the First Authairian President's Award for Young Innovators with her genetically modified corn."

Shocked by the news, Ponce commanded his DB, "Visual." A live, streaming holoivid opened, allowing him to experience the report within his visual airspace. Surveillance video of the statehouse and its plaza appeared. The same clip repeated over and over: a young woman

jogging, stopping, bending down, removing a shoe, standing, and moving on while the whole time holding something against her jacket.

No. It can't be. "Visual playback." Ponce watched the holovid stream from the beginning. Touching the DB, he paused the heads-up shot and zoomed to the young lady's face.

There was no mistaking the woman he saw.

That's CQ. I'm hoping to hire her. CQ. She's not a terrorist. I know her father.

Ponce viewed the video again, this time zooming in on the bulge under Chico's hands. She held both hands over the area covering her hearts.

The director's thoughts raced. *If that were an explosive, why would her hands be cupped as if they're around something soft? No one would carry a bomb in that way. They'd strap it on. And when she stopped to take off her shoe, why didn't she put down the object to more easily remove what was in her shoe? Maybe she injured her arm and had something cushioning the damaged area to reduce pain, but that doesn't make sense either.* Ponce knew he was overanalyzing, but he couldn't help himself. *Chico would seek medical help, not jog with a serious injury.*

He refocused on the continuing holovid as he listened to the message. "Emergency bulletin: Code Red, Chico Quwattle, suspect in the bombing of Valympya government headquarters. Wanted dead or alive by orders—"

Again, Ponce studied the close-up of the young woman's expression as it streamed across his visual space. *It could be worry, he thought. But not anger. Chico doesn't look like someone prepared to kill herself or anyone else for that matter. She can't be the bomber.*

Ponce's stomach tightened as his concern deepened. He and Chico's late father had been friends and colleagues. Ponce respected W. F. Quwattle for his impassioned speeches

denouncing cruel practices by Valympyon's ruler. But the PHI director now feared Mumba Zola would find vindictive pleasure in uttering Ms. Quwattle's guilty verdict and making her death a gruesome spectacle.

If CQ's still alive, she may be seriously injured. I'll get her to safety.

Ponce lifted his arm and DB'd Kurl Tszargon.

Rescue Plan

Chico Quwattle had no idea how long she'd been lying on her back. Pungent air bit its way into her throat. She gasped, struggling to breathe. Her ears rang and head pounded. She tried to open her eyes but shut them to relieve the burning. Her mind felt foggy.

How'd I get here? Did a giant slingshot hurl me through a hail of debris and slam me onto the ground?

She blinked to wash away the air's stinging vapors, then peeked through a slit in her eyelids and noticed a slight amber tinge to Valym's dirtied yellow sunsphere. She normally liked the soft halo of golden fringe at the beginning of work-cycle, but now something worse than smog obscured it.

Chico lay still, closed her eyes, and took small breaths. Mentally putting recent events in order, she recalled meeting with Dr. von Menglebort, but the rest turned to blurry greens and grays. She rolled to one side and tried to lift her torso but collapsed from a sudden pain in her right wrist. A coughing spasm ensued. Then something brushed her eyelid. She reached to flick it away but touched fuzzy movement.

Rolling toward it, Chico squinted and found two amber orbs staring at her. "Sequence."

She wheezed and reached for the long-haired furry mass of gray. Pulling the fur baby close, Chico remembered. It had staggered across her path while she jogged home from her interview. “You must’ve had an awful landing too.”

She hugged him to her chest, but the pain she burned like fire. Letting go, she winced at her palm, the only body part readily visible. Lacerations and blood blurred together.

Chico rolled enough to free her other arm and again drew Sequence close. The head wound she’d found him with oozed pus, and a water bubble clung to one nostril. She broke it and wiped the nostril on her sleeve then whispered, “We’ll get out of here together, Sequence,” wanting to tell him everything would be okay, but it hurt to breathe, much less talk. Instead, she cuddled him the best she could, finding her own comfort in finally having a pet. She’d spent the better part of her life sequencing DNA and had always thought if she ever had the opportunity, she’d call a pet Sequence. So, there she was, lying on the ground, holding Sequence, and wishing to dream away the sleep-mare.

Another coughing spasm brought her to her senses.

She groaned into a sitting position and rested her throbbing wrist in her lap. Sequence volunteered his furry warmth, curling next to her injured limb. Her head still pounded, but the ringing in her ears subsided. The surroundings wavered in and out of focus—but clear enough for her to recognize where she’d landed. Not far from her flat, the formal gardens of the state complex surrounded her. A hedge with broken branches towered above.

With her brain back in business, Chico stared up at the jagged branches. Somehow, she reasoned, she’d been hurled through space and landed on the thick border hedge near her feet. *It must’ve broken my fall, and I must’ve broken those branches on my way to the ground. But I’m*

afraid I broke something else too. The fingers of her right hand closed to a fist but not without pain. When she tried lifting that arm, the searing pain returned.

Maybe my shoulder's dislocated.

Examining the arm further, Chico found a puncture wound where wrist met palm. Wiggling the fingers of her other hand and twisting the wrist, she breathed a sigh of relief.

At least I've got one working arm.

Coughing again produced spasms of chest pain. She spat out phlegm and spotted the familiar Colonnade of Heroes a few steps from where she sat on the ground. She almost smiled, remembering times past when she and her little brother chased each other laughing and weaving among its statues. Now uncommonly deserted, the park was void of childrens' laughter and adult chatter.

Where is everyone? Chico looked skyward. *No aerial transport, either. That's odd. I've gotta get out of here, away from these fumes, contact Grammy—*

Her DB opened an auditory path in Chico's neurons. "CQ, are you there?"

She recognized Ponce Heidon, the only raptan who'd ever called her CQ. Ending a painful spasm of coughing, she answered his glialpath with her own. "Yes, Dr. Heidon, what's happened?"

He ignored her question. "What time is it?"

"I...I don't know."

Why such a stupid question? Chico felt annoyed until she realized. *Of course. He's testing my mental stability. But why? How does he know I had an accident? I'd think him too busy to bother with my problems in the middle of sleep-cycle on the other side of Authair. Obviously, I'm in some kind of trouble.*

She looked above the horizon for distant Proxi's position in Valym's sunsphere. All was blurry. She glanced at her DB. "Time," she ordered the device.

"Nine thirty-two PA," her DB intoned.

Ponce responded as soon as the automated answer signaled. "That will do, CQ. Now, tell me. What were you carrying under your jacket? They think you were carrying the bomb."

"A bomb? Carrying...? They...? What do you mean?"

"NPTV and NPTO are broadcasting a Valympyon security video of you holding something just before the explosion at the state compound. You're the only suspect, and Mumba wants you—dead or alive."

"That's insane."

"What was it, CQ? What were you holding?"

"A cat." Chico wheezed. "Just a poor little hurt—"

"Of course," Ponce said without letting her finish. "We've initiated a plan to get you to safety before you're discovered. The Valympyon Security Patrol has generated a three-kilometer force field radiating from the explosion's epicenter. Anyone attempting to cross through it will be ID'd, immobilized, and taken for interrogation. However, Kurl Tszargon will create a diversion while you make it to safety and out of Valympya. Can you walk?"

"Yes," she lied. Chico had no idea whether her legs could manage her weight after she'd been catapulted onto the privacy hedge and slid unconscious to the ground. But if it took every muscle, she'd make her way to safety. With her throat burning, all she could do was whisper.

"Thank you. What should I do?"

“Kurl will open a hole in the force field for your escape. You’ll have little time before they realize there’s been a breach in the security perimeter. How far are you from the colonnade?”

She estimated the distance. “About twenty-five paces.”

“Good. You’ll have no trouble following my instructions. Walk through the colonnade to the Pedestrian Path of Peace. Do not run.” Ponce stressed those three words. “Running will further weaken your lungs. From there, take the south branch to its culmination at the arched entrance of the conference center.”

Ponce paused while Chico coughed and gasped for air.

“Once you’ve crossed the bridge, the path straightens. Thirty paces from the end of the bridge, the force field intersects the walkway. The field is invisible, but Kurl’s created a safe passage for you. Continue walking until you arrive at the bench nearest the archway. That is your first destination, where you’ll have passed through to relative safety.

“Stop there and sit on the bench. Place your left arm on the armrest, baring your wrist area. A new DB will detect your presence, free itself from under the armrest, and wrap around your wrist. It will identify your DNA in all aspects of Authairian communication yet be undetectable to the Valympyon government. When you lift your arm to allow the ends to connect, the unit will activate. It will flash yellow and glialpath your next set of instructions. Follow them immediately. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Chico wheezed, almost as dazed by the directions as by her injuries.

“Now, remove your DB and drop it before you proceed—like all DBs, its protective default will render it useless once you remove it, but I’ll see that it vaporizes—then pick up that cat and walk. For Olym’s sake, don’t carry it under your jacket. Good luck.”

Before Chico could cough out a thank you, she heard the disconnect tone and shivered. Once she dropped her DB, she'd be alone, unable to contact even Grammy. She couldn't remember the last time she'd removed it but realized she'd put her entire family's life at risk if she attempted any communication now.

Chico pressed the release of her DB. It didn't budge. The band no longer moved freely around her wrist. With pain shooting through the fingers of her injured arm, she grabbed a splintered branch and wedged the stick's thinnest edge between the DB and her wrist, sliding it as best she could beneath the band.

The device signaled a blinking red alert. Chico hesitated but then ignored the warning. She jammed the wood under the wristband until it released and fell to the ground, taking with it tiny bits of flesh. The effort brought about another coughing spasm. She waited until the burning pain and coughing subsided then lifted Sequence to her chest, holding him firmly in her left arm while making a staggering attempt to stand. She caught her breath, balanced, and then felt a rush of relief. *I didn't lie. I can walk.*

The thought energized her. Pressing her throbbing wrist against her chest, Chico staggered forward. Every muscle ached, but thankfully, the pounding in her head had stopped. Acrid air burned her eyes. She closed them, blinked, then squinted as she followed the winding path. The trail, usually a lovely walk through blooming shrubs, now lay obscured by eerie grayness.

Ahead through the haze, someone dashed across the path, taking the westward fork and disappearing. Then two raptans holding hands fled in the direction of the first. More soon emerged, running, all running as if in a race and desperate to win. Chico thought momentarily of

joining them—but Ponce’s warning resurfaced as did the reality that she couldn’t run, cough, and spit at the same time.

As the last of the racing silhouettes faded, Chico’s skin tingled. Little prickles played over her nerves. She crossed the curved footbridge and strained to spot the arch that should have loomed in the distance. All she saw were clouds of whitish gray thinning and thickening, a mist that would not wipe away.

Chico knew the arched entrance waited ahead, but it remained elusive. *According to Ponce, I’ve only thirty more paces to reach the force field.* She counted every step while clutching Sequence firmly against her, his warmth a comfort. The little prickles sharpened. She wondered if he too felt the stinging sensations like charged particles leaking from the air into the bloodstream.

About fifteen paces in front of her, through the fog a broad band of light emerged filled with words slowly scrolling across the air like a newscast ticker: *DANGER—STOP—DO NOT CROSS BEYOND THIS WARNING—KEEP AWAY—THIS IS AN URGENT ALERT FOR YOUR SAFETY—DO NOT DISREGARD THIS MESSAGE—DANGER—STOP...* The instructions continued as before.

Frantic, Chico assessed her situation. *If I go ahead, what will happen? Those raptans were running from something. Had they been warned like this?*

The message again ran across her field of vision, but this time, Chico noticed a gap. It still began as before: *DANGER—STOP—DO NOT CROSS BEYOND THIS WARNING—KEEP AWAY...*

But a cloudy emptiness filled the gap, followed by *...DISREGARD THIS MESSAGE.* The warning recycled with the same missing words.

Chico prepared to rush through the gap in the wording as the message looped again. Crouching, she whispered, “Hang in there, Sequence.”

Hiding the kitten’s head in her hand, Chico dashed through the letter less space. The tingling surged. She ran until the promised bench appeared. The needle-like prickles dissipated, and she bent over to cough and catch her breath, wiping her runny nose on the damp shoulder of her interview suit, its once brown silkiness now a soil of grass and earth.

Sequence pushed his head away from her hand and licked the moisture trickling along Chico’s cheeks.

The exhausted woman pulled the kitten toward her and examined his head wound. Her eyes, still burning, saw matted fur at the edges of a centimeter-long cut deep to the bone. “Poor kitty.” She rubbed a finger along the side of his neck while investigating the injury above his eye. “I’ll get you help as soon as possible,” she said and collapsed onto the bench.

Sequence slipped to the seat beside her. It felt good to rest her pulsating wrist. The injured hand felt numb, its fingers swollen like sausages, almost immovable. She ignored the mannequin hand and scraped the edge of her left jacket sleeve against the end of the armrest. It bunched close to her elbow, freeing her wrist to accept the promised DB.

Like a flytrap closing around its prey, the DB flew from under the armrest and clamped onto Chico’s wrist. It locked in place. She blinked burning eyes to focus on the ancient-looking technology now hugging her arm. *How did this get here so quickly? Have I lost track of time?* The time readout on the ancient DB confirmed she hadn’t, but her first question still stood. *I guess Ponce has tech experts working for him too.* She examined her newly acquired DB.

The wide, dark brown band attached to a square screen face with sculpted buttons on both left and right, their functions a mystery. *In its time, this must have been an innovative*

communication tool—but it's not like recent proxi-cycles' thin and flexible DBs. Not this behemoth. It's surely a relic from the infancy of technology.

“Yuck.” She realized the wide band had sealed over the gouge she'd made while removing her own DB. *Wonder what bacteria are feasting inside that wound. Does this thing even work?*

As if in response, the DB flashed yellow. “Hello, CQ. DB3 is pleased to make your acquaintance and most happy to assist.”

Chico lifted her eyes in surprise. *Hmm. A perky attitude with a proper accent.*

“Please proceed through the archway into the conference center twenty-two paces and eight elevated steps ahead. DB3 has cleared CQ for admittance.”

Chico stood, allowing her right arm to hang free while she shook down the rumpled left sleeve of her jacket—covering DB3—and scooted her good hand under Sequence. She nuzzled his head with her chin, careful to avoid his injury. Her wrist began to throb, so she brought the arm up; the mannequin hand drooped at the wrist. Ignoring the pain, she walked toward the foyer of the conference center.

Alone in the entryway, Chico tried to cover her mouth, but the congestion in her chest won out. Cough spasms echoed through the vaulted space like the croaking of a brittle hen announcing the onset of golden fringe.

“CQ, please take a moment to pause and breathe slowly,” DB3 said. “You will find the pure air in this building healing to your damaged lungs. Breathe once, now twice, and again.”

Chico followed the instructions of DB3's calming voice. She hoped some-cycle to meet its creator.

“Jolly good. Now, cross the foyer and descend thirteen stairs on the left. Please do not use the lift as you may be more easily detected.”

Chico’s footsteps on the marble stairway pounded through her head. She shivered.

No sooner had she placed her foot at the bottom than DB3 connected. “Careful. Your pulse is racing. Please pause ten seconds.”

DB3 counted them out.

“That’s an improvement, CQ. Now, walk slowly to locker twenty-seven. Please hold DB3 over twenty-seven’s bottom hinge. The door will unlock and open. Wait for further instructions.”

Standing next to the assigned locker, Chico placed Sequence on the floor and used the underside of her collar to blow her nose. It didn’t hurt as much to breathe now. She looked down at Sequence. His head rested on his front paws as if he had no idea there was a deep gash over his eye. She removed her jacket with difficulty; the mannequin’s wrist came alive as agony shot to her shoulder. She tried to ignore the pain while settling Sequence on the cleanest part of her bunched-up garment.

Chico opened the locker and found a man’s hunting gear, minus a weapon.

“Brilliant,” remarked DB3. “Now, exchange what you are wearing with the contents of locker twenty-seven. First, remove DB3.”

That was the easy part, Chico soon learned. It unsnapped to her command.

“Right. Now put on the head cover.”

With her good hand, Chico lifted a wrinkly, weathered, sun-bleached green mask that looked like skin but felt like rubbery silishone. It had a split up the back within a design that revealed a river surrounded by rocks.

“Don’t worry, CQ. Once sealed around the back of your head, the river tattoo has no connection to your identity. It’s that of a clan said to have perished before the age of kings. Go ahead and place the mask over your face; the back of the head cover will seamlessly close.”

She examined the face mask. It resembled an old man—a lifelike version of her deceased maternal grandfather but with more rugged-looking creases in the forehead than she’d ever imagined on him. In Chico’s mind, he’d been an honorable man of great wisdom and long life.

The covering fit her face like surgical gloves fit hands. Her eyes and nose functioned with no impediments, so she progressed to the bodysuit.

Chico placed her soiled interview suit and shoes in a storage box at the bottom of the locker. She then stepped into and pulled up the worn-looking hiking suit until it sealed into place—but not before fitting her injured arm into a protective pouch inside the bodysuit’s right chest. “What a relief.” Her arm welcomed the sling-like sanctuary, and the pain subsided, leaving only numbness.

The disguise built up her torso and bulged muscles over her functioning arm. The inflated heftiness of her fake appearance surprised Chico. She blurted out, “I must look twice my weight.”

“Precisely the intention, CQ,” DB3 responded. “Be comforted that the torso is designed to give your injured arm support, and medication suffused through the internal sling will further ease your pain. You’ll receive medical attention when you arrive in Olympya. Now, place your wrist over DB3, and it will reattach.”

Chico did as instructed then looked up as if DB3 was hanging out in her visual space. “What about Sequence? His injury looks serious.”

“Sequence has not been forgotten. If you want to take care of him before you complete your disguise, look on the shelf. You’ll find your backpack includes an attached pouch big enough for the cat.”

Sure enough, waiting for Chico to find it on the top shelf of the locker lay a backpack, weathered and out of date but sturdy enough for its purpose. Chico snatched it down and found first aid supplies neatly arranged inside a padded container. She sanitized the gash on Sequence, spraying it with a medicated protective cover. He seemed to enjoy the taste of the liquid sleep aid she offered and the softness of the cushioned pouch. He licked her disguised hand as it ruffled the fur under his chin, apparently not minding the arthritic fingers of synthetic flesh that provided the friendly touch.

Satisfied Sequence was safely sealed in his breathable home, Chico inventoried the rest of the pack: protein cubes, water, a water purifier, even a flask of gnarlythorn nectar. Then she stood and looked back inside the locker.

“Set aside the big game windstopper, CQ. That goes on last with its fake arm and hand. It has a built-in harness to which the backpack will automatically seal.”

Chico took the huge jacket from a hanger and placed it near the backpack on the floor. Propped against a far corner of the locker leaned a walking staff of heavily burlled wood. She grasped its elbow-shaped handle and allowed it to take her weight. *I have a feeling this will become more than just a prop for me*, she thought as she carefully replaced it.

On the back of the top shelf, Chico found a canvas-like hat that looked to have been smooshed into someone’s back pocket, brim and all. She placed it on her—no, on the old man’s head. It fit well. The brim stayed high enough to protect her eyes from three suns’ wake-cycle light but didn’t impair her view while the back and side covered her disguised ears and tattoo.

Angled in another corner of the locker stood a small scroll of what appeared to be aqua tree bark. Chico reached for it and, using her teeth as a second hand, unwound the object. Her eyes lit up.

Colorful intricate drawings of footbridges, trekking paths, and forest filled the parchment. Chico found a yellow dotted path. *The ralkids, my path goes right between the ralkids. How exciting.* Chico had only seen the ralkid trees' phenomenal display on holoivid. Few had witnessed the flowering brilliance that so many horticulturists had unsuccessfully attempted to replicate. The ralkid forest was the only place in all Authair where this spectacle took place.

Chico sighed and studied the map's legend. There was a symbol for rapids, which began below her walking path and traced a meandering line in the river that ran between ralkids and the Equapyon mountains. *Well, thank Valym the rapids don't begin where I'm to cross the river.* She rolled up the map. "DB3, is this my backup if I lose communication with you?"

"Spot-on, CQ. It is not likely you will need it but keep it safe. There's a cylindrical pocket on the right side of your shirt."

Chico slid the map into the pocket at the same time she saw the boots. "Are these for me?" she asked, thinking they would never secure her feet for trekking.

"Try them on, CQ."

Nothing Chico had ever hiked in—even in her cycles of Valym-ready duty—held to the quality of these masterpieces. Rugged leather, weathered, flexible yet sturdy. She stepped into the left boot.

It fastened with a synthetic material that automatically tightened to the shape of her foot. Unusually light, its heft offered a surprise. Once Chico gave the boot her full weight, leather creases on the perimeter of the sole unfolded like an accordion, activating a diaphragm that

enlarged the boot and filled the space around her foot with cushioning. It raised her seven centimeters and lengthened her foot by at least three. *This will take some getting used to.*

With her right toe, Chico tapped a release button on the heel of the boot. The boot deflated, and straps loosened, allowing her to step out.

Soon, she'd immersed herself in the new identity-wearing costume and backpack. Without knowing the raptan she had become, she must now convince others of his reality—a man at least three times her age, wearing a backpack. Wooden cane in hand, Chico practiced walking with a limp, back and forth in the locker room. She had to get it right for her own safety.

Sequence purred as if enjoying the uneven rhythm.

“Most splendid transformation, CQ,” said DB3. “A piloted stay in shape sky cruiser is waiting for you outside the conference center’s exit to Meadow Landing. The DB you now wear is programmed to activate the address of your destination only when you enter the sisscuber—not before. The pilot is familiar with the route to this remote area. He won’t question your disguise. It’s common among travelers to the ralkids. All is in order. Good luck, CQ.”

Chico wondered as she began the climb up the marble stairs. *Why did Ponce arrange for me to travel to a remote location with a stranger I don’t know behind the controls of a sisscuber rather than reserve me a sissca with autopilot? Maybe the driver is in on the ruse. But then, why would the message say he’ll believe my disguise? I’ve so many unanswered questions.*

Tough Going

Chico breathed more easily as she entered the piloted stay in shape sky cruiser. She bypassed the exercise machine available on all sisscubers and allowed the retrieval arms above her seat to lift her backpack into storage. Walking sticks, common items for hikers, were secured nearby and clamped in an upright position at arm's reach.

Hearing no whimpers from Sequence overhead, Chico collapsed into the chair and scanned DB3 via the receiver on the armrest. The phrases *elder passenger* and *payment for one-way fare* registered on her new DB. Her embellished persona left little wiggle room in the body-fitting passenger seat, so she leaned back, hat and all, and closed her eyes. When the seat's safety brace locked, the vehicle—with its driver, disguised passenger, and stowaway kitten—spiraled like a whirlwind up and away.

A moment later, Chico rolled her head left, opened her eyes, and lifted her arm, allowing the old jacket sleeve to slip from her hand. Resting her elbow on the armrest, she examined the fake skin surrounding the ancient-looking DB. *I can't remember a DB not a part of my anatomy, but this one feels so strange.* She twisted her bodysuit's arm from left to right. *It must be awful getting this old—however old I'm supposed to be—old enough to have seen my skin turn from smooth, spring green to the texture of rough, sun-bleached seaweed.*

Chico dropped the arm and closed her eyes again, feeling inwardly like the successful Valympyon genetic botanist she'd been before the explosion but outwardly like someone too difficult to impersonate. *If this ruse is discovered, I'll be as good as dead. I have to make myself think and act like an old man.*

Tired to the bone, she dozed. It seemed only moments later when a soft whir awakened her. She sat up repositioning the hat that had slipped too far over her head. As soon as her armrest slid beneath the chair, she stood and positioned herself for the robotic assist to lower her backpack, which snapped into position. Nodding a farewell to the pilot, she sidestepped from the aircraft. No sooner had she hobbled a few paces than the sisscuber whirred out of sight.

Alone in this unfamiliar place, Chico stood as erect as she supposed her elder persona should while taking in the country air. It felt good to breathe without exploding into a coughing spasm. In fact, she'd not coughed or wheezed since changing her clothes at the conference center. The aches in her muscles protested, as did the pain in her lungs, but only if she inhaled too deeply, so considering what she'd been through, her body felt fine. She was not so sure about her emotions.

Judging by the clear melon sunsphere of early afternoon, the flight had lasted little more than an hour, yet it seemed she'd flown to the ends of Authair and been dropped off in a land of goblins and fairies. Paranoia set in, and Chico began imagining fairy eyes peeking out from shafts of grass and goblins spreading the word on every passing breeze that a fugitive hid among them.

DB3 flashed yellow. "CQ, a most hearty welcome to the ralkids!"

She couldn't stop the smile creeping from the corners of her mouth. This was the only season of the proxi-cycle when ralkids bloomed, and here was the only place in all of Authair

one could witness their dazzling display. If not for her desperation to escape, this journey should be a dream come true. *I'm supposed to be fleeing for my life, not skipping along the path. Which path is it anyway?* Tears welled up at the corners of her fake skin.

“Where to now, DB3?” she sputtered, wanting anyone, even if only an automated messenger programmed to respond by computer code, to understand her feelings. “I want to peel off this stupid mask, pull Sequence out of his prison, and bawl my head off.”

“CQ, your pulse is racing. Take five deep brea—”

“Get on with it, DB3. I need sleep. What path do I take? That’s how you can help me.” She didn’t know if DB3’s programs understood exasperated idioms like “get on with it,” but that wasn’t going to stop her from using them.

“DB3 understands you are most eager to move ahead. Your path is routed. With no significant delays, you should arrive at your destination by cobalt fringe, allowing for necessary rest along the way. Kindly let me know if you see the route.”

At once, the image projected within Chico’s visual space, reminding her of the heads-up display in a sissca. An arrow pointed the way. She recognized the two-dimensional fixed-image-in-space technology; she had used 2DFIS applications before, so she knew how to test the projection. When she moved, the arrow adjusted to her relative position. Satisfied, she responded, “Yes, I see the route.”

“Good luck, CQ. Do not hesitate to contact DB3 if you need further assistance.”

“Thanks,” she said, somewhat encouraged as she remembered to limp along the earthen path.

The way cut through a meadow whose slender stalks of grain waved an invitation to pass. Not convinced of that invitation's sincerity, Chico paused. She leaned on the cane and watched. Listened. Waited.

Two heads in the distance moved through the tall, yellow grasses and then emerged as hikers on the path. A rainbow wing teetering on a shaft of grain broke into song. A butterdragon, having begun his afternoon foraging, flitted from one tiny yellow blossom to another.

Could this bucolic scene be staged as a trap? Chico's thoughts turned now to gruesome paranoia. *That couple could be spies pretending to be bird watchers assigned to capture and make me a public example.* She crouched to the ground hoping to hide, fearful of being discovered. *They'll tear out one chunk of my flesh at a time until I can no longer bear the pain.* Her head began to pound. *I've heard of even worse before government victims confess then die.*

Chico felt abandoned as never before and reached around, cupping her hand over the soft bulge in her backpack. The little lump stirred, moving toward the silent greeting.

She dared not pet or talk to Sequence reassuringly, though doing so would have soothed her own loneliness. Instead, she inched ahead while adjusting to the weight of her backpack and overstuffed torso. Her boots created a sluggish gait as she had to balance with their added height. One step, then another. She didn't have to imitate the walk of an elder. She had to survive it.

With Chico's impaired arm secured against her chest, the fake arm swung freely from her shoulder. Maneuvering it out of the way of obstacles was a challenge. As she hobbled along, she thought about how her kindness to a wounded cat had created this calamity. *Would I do it again? Would the cries of an injured anything draw me to help or flee in fear?* The reality felt too raw to answer.

Looking around, she also listened. Birds chattered, but she spotted no objects in the sky. *That couple I saw must have headed off in another direction.* She knew any spy fliers would be silent, not invisible, although they could be camouflaged to appear as normal transporters and she'd never know. But it was the drones Chico feared most. She had never seen a military drone yet knew they could be mistaken for birds. They could sweep past a target while taking holovids and spraying paralyzing chemicals. A wave of chills engulfed her. She couldn't escape on foot if poison diffused through the air.

The surrounding grasses soon gave way to bushes and a scattering of leafy trees. Chico stopped to steady her load and examine the cane. As if on cue, she picked up a glialpath.

“CQ, use caution. The walking staff you hold contains two weapons. The first is a stunfire. Once you aim the tip and press your thumb on the handle's raised knot, your target will be paralyzed long enough for you to escape. The victim's organs will continue to function while the effect lasts an average of thirty minutes before paralysis fades. The stunfire can incapacitate a victim up to forty paces, so keep a distance from your enemy. At close range, some waves may deflect and hit unintended targets.”

Chico tightened her grip on the staff, careful to avoid the raised knot. “The other weapon, where is it?”

“Notice the shaft.”

She lifted the staff, turning it to one side and the other. With no opening or seam visible, it appeared to be only a solid branch of oakvyn, the wood Valympyons used exclusively for crafting all manner of weight supports. “I see nothing...not a thing.”

“That is a good thing. In this position, your staff is unable to release the pulses designed to wipe out electronics of aerial pursuers. You activate them by twisting the shaft forcefully until

minute holes show along its length. Then, swing the cane in a wide arc above your head as if signaling for help. Electromagnetic pulses will fan out, creating a one-kilometer wipeout range. Try twisting the handle now until you reveal the line of holes. Do not, I repeat, do not wave the staff to test it.”

From the emphasis DB3 placed on the last few words, Chico understood disobeying would be foolish. She tried but, one-handed, couldn't work up enough leverage to make the shaft budge. Scanning her surroundings, she found a source of help two paces off the path. The vydguard, a nuisance of a tree to most plant-lovers, with low and sprawling Y-shaped branches, reached out as if offering assistance. Chico wedged the cane's handle in the notch of a branch and twisted with a mighty grip until the shaft turned and exposed tiny holes along its length.

“Most excellent, CQ.” DB3's compliment rang with genuine encouragement.

“Thanks,” she responded, smiling and reversing the maneuver that hid the weapon inside the shaft.

“You are most welcome. Job well done, CQ. Now, remain in character. Campers are approaching.”

DB3 had again come to her aid. Chico glanced at the device embedded in her bodysuit's aged skin. It no longer disgusted her; she no longer worried its microorganisms would infect the wound she sustained while removing her former DB. This newly acquired one had become her friend, and she appreciated DB3's precautionary message.

Bright sunlight fringed in Valym-yellow announced the middle of the Authairian afternoon and dappled the path ahead. Steadily making progress, Chico heard rippling water and mentally reviewed the rest of her trip. *That must be the stream I cross before the hill I'm to hike.*

Then down through the forest where the footpath follows a river to reach my ralkid. I must arrive before cobalt fringe. After the ralkids weave their branches closed, it will be too late.

Chico trudged on and too soon noticed Valym's late afternoon spring green fringe emerge. She ached to enjoy a rejuvenating sleep in the safety of her ralkid before six PHB when Proxi tipped below the horizon, and she trusted that food and security awaited her. *But I wish I knew the details of the rest of the escape plan. I still don't understand what kind of ruse Ponce has orchestrated to reserve this particular tree for me as an old man with a pet.*

Ponce's cautionary message—"What you don't know can't be held against you"—had offered no comfort.

The gurgle of rippling water blended with cries of delight from children splashing in the bubbling stream. Chico trudged over the walking bridge, nodding a greeting to one of the adults sitting on the bank who returned the friendly hello. Her mouth smiled at this family enjoying the rugged landscape, but her heart found no happiness. *Their lives haven't been destroyed by the explosion. How lucky they are. Mother and father not needing to escape with their children for fear of government torture or worse...*

As the hill steepened, Chico's pace slowed—until her weary feet paused at the crest. Taking a sweet, deep, breath, she gazed in awe at the valley. "Magnificent!" She thrust her hand above her head and lost her grip on the cane. It fell, bounced once, and rolled toward the cliff's edge.

She threw her old man's body after it. Flat on the ground, she grabbed its tip as the shaft began to tumble out of sight.

"Brilliant catch." DB3's praise came in loud and clear. "You may need that cane to secure your safe arrival."

Rolling onto her side, Chico pulled her legs to a kneeling position. Panting and grasping the cane in a death grip, she stood. Sequence made no sound, but DB3 offered a brief admonition. “CQ, do nothing more to call attention to yourself.”

DB3’s gentle reprimand prodded Chico to worry. *Did my exclamation reach some detection device that can locate my position? I wonder if sound waves can create a hologram of their originator. Maybe a hologram of me would be a good thing. I don’t look anything like the girl I was in the NPTV holoivid, but—oh, no—my voice. I didn’t disguise it.*

She was a jumble of nerves, and the skin inside her mask itched. She wanted to yank it off but feared just as she dug her fingers under the silishone seal, a drone would identify her as the wanted female terrorist.

“CQ, your hearts are racing. Take a rest and sip the nutrient beverage. With a proper break, you will arrive at your ralkid in plenty of time for a full sleep-cycle.”

DB3 had kept track of Chico’s every move, the way her grammy had the first time Chico piloted her own sissca. *Grammy. I must contact her. She’ll be worried sick. She’s surely seen the news coverage of the explosion. And Zak, what will he make of all the accusations against me?* Chico hoped DB3 could help, but she’d wait until sleep-cycle to find out.

Heeding DB3’s advice, she sat and took a protein snack and mineral beverage from her pack. Thoughts of her parents surfaced. She desperately missed them.

Chico’s ailing, widowed mother had often told her grieving daughter, “He’ll always be with you in spirit.” Then Chico had mourned her mother’s death so soon after her father’s. But she understood how deeply troubled her mother had felt about losing the partner of a lifetime to a suspicious accident.

W. F. Quwattle had been working late at the chemical laboratory, alone—no eyewitnesses. Apparently, a malfunction in a fume hood caused a gas leak. A second-shift security bott found Chico’s father unconscious on the floor and notified first responders, but they were unable to revive him. The death doctor’s conclusion went uncontested: asphyxiation by hydrogen cyanide. In the quarter-proxi-cycle since the scientist’s death, his family and the colleagues who mourned him retained fears that W. F. had been murdered. No one, however, acted upon those fears. In Valympya, those who challenged the decision of a registered death doctor would likely become the doctor’s new clients.

Now, in the vastness of the forest, alone as her father had been in his last hours, Chico remembered his advice: “Learn from failure and waste no time before setting a new goal. Great things come of due diligence.”

I’ll not disappoint him, but to survive this escape, I’ve got to trust DB3.

Chico lifted her cuffed arm and examined DB3’s convincingly antique features. She suspected that a product of such an appearance yet with advanced connectivity must surely have Cimi Nuja’s imprint. After all, it had been Ms. Nuja’s invention that revolutionized Authairian communication. Chico had long marveled at the career of the Olympyon woman only four twelfth-proxi-cycles her senior. *If Cimi did create this camouflaged, state-of-the-art DB, maybe I can get Ponce to modify it when I arrive, so I can transmit a secret message to Grammy.*

With her hopes raised, Chico plodded on as Valym’s fringe took on the emerald hue of Proxi’s descent toward the horizon. She quickened her steps, anticipating a long sleep-cycle to rejuvenate her muscles and spirits.

Another hour behind her. She searched the sky as Valym's fringe faded to aqua. It would soon darken to cobalt. She yearned to reach her ralkid long before the PB sunsphere turned deep violet and the sleep-cycle fell upon Authairians.

The downhill incline drained Chico's strength. She gave up trying to limp. It was all she could do to keep upright. Turning to sidestep, she used the cane for leverage and managed the steepest part. She paused to adjust her backpack and felt a chill. A shadow passed over her and then more. She anchored her weight on the downhill foot and looked to the sky.

Five small fliers circled.

Government spy drones? How can I tell?

With a rush of adrenaline, Chico stumbled down the path, each boot competing for first place. Like vultures hunting their prey, the drones stalked. She tripped but caught herself. *I'll not become their carrion, she resolved. I'm not dead yet.*

The closest ralkid—her best chance to hide—stood only fifty paces ahead. Its vine-like branches swayed over the stream in an umbrella of leaves not yet interlaced. Breathless, she pushed aside a thickness of willowy tresses. Safely beneath the foliage, Chico collapsed onto her old-man knees. She closed her eyes and deeply inhaled the sweet air.

On one hand and two shaking knees, hearts still racing, she peeked through leafy openings. The drones circled again, cut formation, and shot off through the sky. Chico hoped her disguise had convinced them an old man wasn't their target.

If they'd flown toward me, would I have had time to twist the cane's shaft and wave it to wipe out all the drones' electronics? Don't think so. I may have a magic wand, but I'm no fairy godmother. Why can't I just be a biogenetics researcher? My interview with Dr. von Menglebort

seems proxi-cycles ago, not hours. She's bound to believe all this propaganda about her latest—and now not so greatest—interviewee.

In view of the NPTV footage, Chico knew she'd receive no sympathy from von Menglebort, certainly no professional recommendation. *I don't need her anyway. Thank Valym I've still got that job offer at PHI—if I make it out of Valympya alive.*

She hadn't completed the application for the position Ponce offered because she hadn't wanted to leave Valympya. Olympya and PHI were too far away from the family who depended on her: Grammy, Aunt Helyn, and Zak, her young brother. *Now I've no choice. Better alive and useful than dead by decree of Mumba Zola.*

Sequence stirred. She chanced a comforting whisper. “Kitty, you’ve been so good. It won’t be long now. Up we go.”

Chico stood, finding it difficult to create an opening through the mat of branches as their leaves began clasping each other. Soon they'd knit together an impenetrable drapery of vines. *I have to reach my designated ralkid before it weaves me out.* She forced her way through as the first indigo fringe of light framed Valym's rays. The heads-up arrow led her another eighty paces along a twisting trail.

Magical sensations enveloped Chico as she rounded the last curve. A forest of blue and white beckoned her to wait for the ralkids' performance. She almost succumbed to the temptation to linger outside and witness the topmost buds open and reveal their crimson centers. She knew the rest would follow like fingers playing over a keyboard until the bottommost blossom revealed its brilliance. But she couldn't afford this diversion. It was late, and she desperately needed sleep. Doggedly, she staggered on, focusing every few seconds on the heads-up icon. Finally, it flashed: *Destination complete. Prepare for rest and sleep.*

The ralkid stood before her, a majestic dome of blue leaves and closed white petals cascading to the forest floor, its circumference a tangle of vines already fused for sleep-cycle. She circled the tree's perimeter, attempting to find an opening. Tight as a glove and solid as a coconut shell, it forbade entry.

“DB3, DB—” Chico shook her wrist as if that tactic would bring help.

“CQ, DB3 here. You can relax. Your late arrival as an old friend of Dr. Ponce Heidon was anticipated. Place DB3 against a closed blossom, any blossom. An opening in the foliage will appear. Once you enter, the foliage shell will reform to close you in securely. Rest well. You will be awakened and given new instructions at the beginning of wake-cycle's emerald fringe.”

Chico placed DB3 near a closed blossom, and vines unwound from both sides, creating a stage-like opening. Her boots sank into a carpet of moss as she entered, and the foliage reweave with a soft rustle behind her. Inside, a brightly lit, domed interior welcomed her. She scanned the rustic chairs and laden table. Set for two hungry hikers, it offered flasks of water, packages of dried fruits, vegetables, and fist-size portions of chewy protein.

She smiled at what awaited Sequence. This pet-friendly ralkid included a blanket just right for a kitten to scratch into a soft bed. She placed her knapsack on the floor and freed her pet. He lapped water from a critter-size fountain and gobbled an offering of crunchy morsels. Chico likewise wolfed down her nutritious fare.

She understood that ralkids' freshly fallen blossoms tasted delicious, but she'd never been inside a ralkid to try them until now. Under normal conditions, Chico would've taken time to savor a handful, explore the delicately woven shell around her, and ask DB3 to awaken her at the precise fringe of Valym giving witness to the crescendo of opening petals playing throughout the forest.

Instead, full but exhausted, she removed her oversize boots and dropped her hunter's jacket to the floor before sinking into a bed of weightless fluff. She fell asleep to the purring of Sequence curled up beside her.

Rise and Shine

“DB3 here. Rise and shine, CQ.”

The message repeated, but Chico didn't rouse. Movement at her feet didn't awaken her either. She rolled over and opened her eyes only when gentle paws brushed her cheek. “I'm awake. I'm awake.” *Emerald fringe PHA with Proxi not quite above the horizon?*

Chico seldom arose in time to watch the deep sunsphere soften toward Valym-yellow two hours before golden fringe signaled a new work-cycle. She looked around. The ralkid's shell was dissolving, its vines disentangling. Between an open weave of branches, a wisp of white floated to the ground.

I slept through it? Disgusted she'd missed the show of blossoms opening, she jumped up, grabbing Sequence, and hurried to the wall of defoliated vines. Pointing the kitty's head toward the direction of another falling flake, she said, “That's a petal, not a snowflake. The ralkids have bloomed and dropped their flowers. Damn!”

Startled by her own expression, she bit her bottom lip so hard it hurt. *Maybe I can swallow the word like I never said it. But here I am, a student of all things green and growing, and this is probably my last opportunity, ever, to see ralkid blossoms open and watch the white blooms become a blizzard of crimson-centered petals. If that's not swear-worthy, what is?*

“CQ, this is DB3. Please confirm all is well.” The glialpath came in clear and strong.

“We’re okay. I just wish I’d gotten up in time to see my ralkid’s metamorphosis.” Chico doubted DB3 understood that kind of disappointment, but she had to get it out of her system—even though she had more serious problems to solve. “DB3, can you contact my grammy and let me talk to her?”

She waited through a long pause.

“CQ, DB3 has been denied access to CQ’s grammy. Please understand. It is dangerous for you and for anyone in your family to have contact. Your grammy is being questioned. The less she knows, the better for her and for the rest of your family. My job is to get you safely to your contact, Skdjlsjflsjf Ilkjld.”

“Who?” she blurted.

“Call him Phed. He prefers that nickname. You can trust him to get you through the mountains. He’s waiting for you now. It’s a short walk. Please keep your eyes out for spiders and mud ants. Have your rain gear ready.”

She peeked through the opening weave of glistening green and blue leafy vines. Clouds were graying.

“Eat your remaining food as you prepare to leave. You will need the extra nourishment,” DB3 instructed Chico. “Pay close attention to how you will find Phed.” The device on her wrist activated her heads-up map and step-by-step instructions. “Good luck, CQ. DB3 will deactivate once you are in safe hands with Phed. Until then, do not hesitate to contact DB3 if you need help.”

Chico swallowed before she said, “Thanks, DB3.” A sick feeling welled up inside her. She’d lost her family, her home, and her country, and now she’d lose DB3. Worrying about meeting what’s-his-name deepened the emptiness in her gut.

With Sequence tucked in his cavity and the knapsack in place Chico, the elder, separated the loosely woven mat of ralkid branches and stepped outside. Valym struggled to peek through dark, green-tinged clouds.

Chico picked up a freshly fallen blossom and tasted it. Surprisingly juicy, its subtle sweetness lingered on the back of her tongue. *At least I didn’t miss this part of the experience.* She took several more, slowly chewing the petals to a juicy pulp. Stiff and sore from yesterday’s ordeal, her limp felt genuine as she hobbled off.

It must have rained through the sleep-cycle. Pools of water dotted the muddy path. Her boots sank in and sucked out with each step. Fifty paces more and she’d reach the river’s bank with the ryverak moored at the water’s edge. Per DB3’s instructions, she’d paddle the little vessel across the stream to where her contact waited.

Drops of rain rolled down crevices in the old hat’s brim. A clap of thunder warned, and a burst of rain sent her sliding through the mud. Landing on the knapsack, Chico rolled onto her medicated arm to keep from crushing Sequence.

A meow surfaced—and then another.

“He’s okay,” she breathed. *Annoyance cries.* She felt a tear cloud her eye. “Won’t be long, Sequence. Hang in there.”

With mud seeping between her old-man fingers, she maneuvered onto her knees and stood. The jacket sleeve of the fake arm was caked with mud. For a moment, Chico stood still,

allowing the cascade of rain to power away the mud along with any ants who might find her a tasty morsel though she doubted they'd manage to penetrate her artificial skin.

Probing with her staff for obstructions in the path Chico trudged through the heavy downpour. She felt a vibration and lifted her head in time to see the heads-up image flash a red blur—her destination. She took another step and sensed the pressure of water rushing over the toe of her boot. Her cane hit something hard. The rain had obscured the ryverak in front of her. It rocked with the current, straining from its mooring.

She leaned into the gale catching her balance. The stream's current pulled much stronger than she'd imagined, but the water felt warm.

Too warm for a mountain stream.

She struggled to hold steady against the wind and sheets of rain. Then, without slowing, the storm stopped—just like that.

Chico looked up at Valym peeking out from dark clouds edged with yellow-green linings. She steadied herself in the still rushing current. A gust of wind lifted the brim of her rain-soaked hat. She grabbed it to keep it from blowing away. Off to the western sky, a breath of yellow fringe promised better weather.

Holding the floppy brim up, she peered across the stream, now coursing like an angry river, toward her assumed destination—a seawalker grove. From this vantage point, Chico saw no entrance. The haphazardly growing branches made a lush wall of foliage.

Suddenly, two short red flashes and one long burst from the mass of green across the water. The pattern repeated. *That's Phed's signal. I'll have to paddle one-handed against the current to reach him.*

Chico pulled the ryverak partially onto the muddy sand. She removed her hat and scooped out most of the sloshing water. With the mooring pendant, her cane, and the backpack stowed inside and the old man's hat back on her head, she placed one foot into the ryverak, centered her weight, brought in her other foot, lowered herself onto the seat, and grabbed the paddle.

Before pushing off, Chico glanced to the sky for another take on the weather but instead saw an object speeding toward her. The disk slowed and then hovered. An eyeball projection rotated, pinpointing her. Its pupil enlarged as if peering through her disguise.

A fermenting sickness caught in her throat. Her hearts thundered.

They found me.

Dropping the paddle, she grabbed the staff and jabbed it between her boots, clamping them vise-like against the handle. Her good hand gripped the shaft in a mighty twist. The holes appeared. With an iron-tight grasp, Chico waved the weapon in wide arcs above her head until a flash of embers burst into a canopy of fireworks above.

She gasped at the blow she'd wielded, but the final wave of her arm tilted the ryverak. Water rushed underneath, washing out sand and propelling the vessel from the bank into the current. Swept downstream, the ryverak glanced off one rock and another, its stern taking the lead.

The opposite shoreline of thick seawalkers blurred past. Her paddle of no use to a one-handed ryveraker, Chico leaned left and then right trying to stay upright. She ruddered with her good hand until she realized she'd lose Sequence if the ryverak tipped over. Keeping her body low, she knelt forward to reach the knot of the mooring pendant. On the second tug, she freed it and yanked the line from the ryverak's bow. Bouncing and jolting along, she wove an end

through the backpack's shoulder straps, pulling more and more through and wrapping some around her waist. Water splashed at her face and inside the vessel, slowing her attempts, but she managed to coil the remaining length loosely around her fake arm.

The ryverak hit another rock and took in more water. It glanced off a boulder, swept into an eddy, and spun into a whirlpool. The roar of rapids assaulted her ears. Water rushed past the eddy and disappeared below.

If there's a later, I'll panic then.

Gathering the coil with her good hand, she timed the ryverak's spin as it came closest each round to shore. Blindly, in a passion of adrenaline and prayer, she hurled the rope.

Rapids

Phed Ilkjkld watched, helpless, as Chico Quwattle in an old man's garb blasted a spy drone, lost her moorings to the rapid current, and headed stern-first into open water. Not one for the rugged outdoors, he'd agreed to transport the woman and her cat to the other side of the Equapyon Mountains as fast as possible because—until this moment—he'd thought himself well-prepared for the job by his passion and skill for small aircraft competition. When astronomer Kurl Tszargon had requested Phed pilot Kurl's one-of-a-kind cavejet, the obstacle flight champion jumped at the opportunity. But Phed was ill-prepared to rescue anyone from a raging torrent. He couldn't swim.

I've gotta catch up to CQ before she hits the rapids.

Wading knee-deep into the hot water, he pushed his ryverak out to the rushing stream and jumped in. The blades of his paddles flashed like dragonfly wings as they sliced the current. He was closing in on Chico when her boat glanced off a boulder into an eddy. Her ryverak spun in a whirlpool. Phed cut to shore and leaped out. Grabbing his ryverak's towline, he made a split-second decision.

Splashing, leaping roots, and crunching razor-sharp oyster shells, Phed rushed into the swirling water as far as he dared. When he lifted his arm to swing the towline, something flew toward him.

A splash blinded him as he reached out to grab Chico's rope. His foot caught a root, and he stumbled. The looped end of her line pulled away and snagged in a bed of oysters. Phed threw himself onto the mollusks and grabbed the line with both hands. He looked up in time to see Chico's ryverak capsize and disappear.

Chico splash-landed face down in the ankle-deep shallows of the eddy, one arm clinging to the line. Water swirled around her, and the tethered knapsack bounced against her head. At least, Phed hoped it was *her* head dripping as it rose from the water with parched, sun-bleached green skin furrowed around cracked lips. So convincing appeared the ruse, Phed had to remind himself he was attempting to a young woman—not an elder huntsman. Coiling the rope to keep it taut, he dashed over stones toward her.

A bobcat's death cry sliced the air, drowning out the roaring torrent.

Chico reached out for the knapsack. "Sequence, it's okay. We're okay." The cry turned to whimpers.

Phed adjusted his stance as the line shifted, no longer anchored in Chico's hand only around her waist. *She's trying to get to her cat.* "CQ, hold on. I've got the line. Hold on." He gripped the loop of rope with all his wiry strength, pulling one end over the other. "Don't move! I'm coming."

"Sequence, it's okay. It's okay, kitty," Chico murmured. Not waiting for Phed to reach her, she attempted to rise on one elbow but collapsed.

"Stay there, CQ. I'm gonna get your friend."

Phed reached the disguised woman and grabbed the line near her waist. Looping it around one wrist, he unthreaded the backpack—full of kitty whimpers—and hiked it over one shoulder as he maneuvered Chico to a sitting position. He nearly tipped backward as loose stones sank under his boots.

Chico reached a shaking arm toward the bag. “Sequence, it’s okay. We’re safe. Phed’s got you.” Looking at her rescuer, she said, “You *are* Phed, aren’t you?”

“Yes, and you’re not this old man I see, right? I was told to call you CQ.”

She nodded in agreement.

“Steady now, steady,” he said, hoping as he placed his arms under Chico’s shoulders that she hadn’t broken any bones.

She twisted around toward the backpack but winced.

Phed felt her tense up as he lifted her and gently guided her toward shore. “Your cat’s gonna be fine. Show me you can walk. Be careful—the pebbles are slippery.”

“But the kitty,” Chico pleaded. “What if—”

“Don’t worry. He’s good, real good.” Phed turned his head toward the backpack. “Right, Sequence?”

The whimpers ceased as if the animal felt satisfied by the question.

“See? Even Sequence feels better.” Phed held firm to Chico. “I’ve got the line if you fall. Go ahead. Let me see you walk.”

Four paces satisfied him; Chico could hold her own. He let go one hand.

“You’re good, real good. Now, let’s get out of here.”

Phed’s DB flashed. “One spy drone down in your area. What’s your condition?”

“We’re okay and heading toward the tunnel.”

The pair sloshed side by side. Phed pulled his ryverak over the stones in the rushing water while the wet backpack sagged from the weight of an equally wet passenger. Chico strained to keep up, placing her feet firmly with each step. She balanced precariously in the pumped-up boots. Soon, however, her hearts slowed as she managed a rhythm in her stride, and for the first time since dropping her DB in the park, she felt a hopeful calm. Phed, a real raptan, had put his life in jeopardy for her, something she'd never experienced.

Phed's appearance pleased Chico. His height matched her fake stature. Slim, he wore a flexible bodysuit padded at the chest. Its camouflage colors changing as they moved along, mimicking the environment. A thin shell protected his head, it too of camouflage. Fresh gashes marred one side of his face, and short slashes opened the fabric covering his right arm.

"Are you okay?" she asked, examining his wounds. "Looks like a bed of oysters left their mark."

Phed drew his arm around and inspected the damage on his suit. "Didn't feel the cuts. How about you?"

"Glad to be alive, thanks to you," Chico said, noticing that Phed didn't seem repulsed by her disguise. She asked, "What's it like flying through the mountain?"

As they trudged upstream, he described the fantastic crystal galleries they'd fly among on their journey to Olympya. "And you won't believe the snaggle—"

Chico stopped walking as her DB flashed, interrupting whatever tales Phed was about to relay. "CQ, DB3 here. Are you there? Are you there?"

Never had she heard DB3 sound so impatient. Before she could answer, the automated messenger continued. “You are off the route but heading in the right direction. Your heads-up display was destroyed when you disabled the enemy’s signals. Is everything okay?”

Chico straddled a clump of oyster shells as water rippled over her boots. She felt her smile spread from her fake, old-man mouth to her eyes as she glialpathed a reply. “Everything’s great, DB3. I’m fine. Sequence is fine. Phed’s here, and he’s fine too. He saved us from being dashed to pieces when I lost control of my ryverak. It tumbled over the falls, but we’re okay. We’re walking to the seawalker tunnel now. Phed’s pulling his ryverak and carrying Sequence in the backpack, and I’m alongside.”

Surprising herself with how upbeat her message sounded after such a near escape, she wondered whether DB3—being a programmed communicator—could appreciate the glialpathed nuances of her happiness at being alive. When she continued, she spoke out loud. “DB3, you were great. I know I got mad at you, and it wasn’t your fault. Thanks for staying with me.”

“You are quite welcome. It was my utmost pleasure to assist you on your journey. Congratulations, Chico. You wielded that cane like a pro. Good luck. DB3 signing farewell.”

Chico bid DB3 goodbye and watched the screen go blank as the icons disappeared.

Phed too had stopped his upstream trek when Chico took her message. “That’s some DB you’ve got there, CQ. Some DB.”

She looked up at Phed and read an expression of curious concentration as his gaze traveled from her DB to her masked face. She realized Phed must’ve heard her apologizing to DB3, but since DB3’s glialpaths were programmed to receive and relay messages only to Chico’s DNA receptors, Phed couldn’t have known she’d complimented him.

Before she thought of a response, Phed spoke again. “Can I assume your smile means that wasn’t bad news?”

Chico lifted her arm and wiped away a tear. *It must seem weird to watch an old man cry over losing an automated voice.* “This DB was my only hope once Ponce signed off.” She lifted it to give Phed a closer look. “It disgusted me, at first, knowing I had to wear the old thing, but now I don’t ever want to lose it.”

Turning her wrist, Chico showed Phed the cracked leather band. “I wish you could have met him, I mean it, I mean DB3. Its messages helped me escape and find you.” She paused and tipped her head to one side. “You know, I still can’t understand how DB3 got to the arm of a bench in the state grounds, or how this costume—that fits me—made it into a locker at the conference center. Everything happened so fast.”

“Well, I can answer some of that while we walk,” Phed said as he took a step forward and gestured for her to do the same. “My friendly chess rival, Kurl Tszargon, told me you’d be the recipient of Cimi Nuja’s old hunter costume and an antique-looking DB that she’d created for the Olym opera company a while back. Right away, Cimi customized that bodysuit for your injured arm. Ponce gave her the voice narrative link while we set up transporter stealth drones to deliver the goods. We completed the entire operation only moments, just moments, before you reached the bench.”

“That’s amazing,” Chico said.

“We’ve got your back, CQ. We’re a team at PHI, a great team. I’m gonna make sure you arrive safely, and Ponce will be there to welcome you.” Phed’s next words buoyed Chico’s spirits even further.

“Cimi stopped everything when she heard you needed another specially designed suit for our flight through the mountain to Olympya. She’d had one in the works for a new show the opera was planning, and now she’s customized it for you.”

“She’s incredible. I can’t wait to thank her, well, thank both Cimi and Kurl. Let’s get moving.”

Chico and Phed sloshed forward, wading against the warm current. He pointed to a small break between branches a few paces away. “Careful where you step. Careful.” He planted his feet and pushed the ryverak through bushes whose roots, exposed like croquet wickets, appeared eager to snag any unsuspecting boots.

“It’s gonna take us about ten minutes to ryverak through the seawalker tunnel,” he said.

Chico sloshed close behind, pushing aside branches that sprang at her face. “How’d you know there’d be a tunnel here?”

“Coordinates. I came through this way to meet you, but I’d never have found the tunnel without the coordinates Kurl provided. Never. Great hideout, don’t you think?”

Chico looked around. “Yeah...but a little creepy.”

Before her loomed a watery channel of overarching branches dappled in light and with no end in sight. The steamy air smelled of briny vegetation. Chico didn’t have to touch the water to know it was hot, hotter even than the rapids. Her feet felt uncomfortably warm, but Phed gave her no time to complain.

Standing at the stern, he steadied the long, double-seated ryverak as it listed left, then right, accepting the new passenger into its bow. He separated the long paddle and handed her one of the halves. “Don’t use this unless I tell you. A one-armed ryveraker wielding even a shortened paddle can be dangerous with olive orbs above.”

Chico raised her eyebrows and peered up at the arched ceiling of branches.

“They’re poisonous spiders that live high in the seawalker. If you disturb them, they’ll attack.” Phed’s voice grew stern. “No antivenom for their toxin. None.”

Chico shuddered. Glowing, green webs of silken strands stretched across the foliage canopy. Haphazard patterns of barrier silks supported the center spirals to which clung the weavers—oblong bodies with golden stripes ringing each leg—motionless in their snares.

“Well, those webs won’t get disturbed by me. You can be sure of that. Thanks for the warning.”

As Phed began to paddle, Chico stretched out her legs, grateful her feet began to cool. It wasn’t like her to let the other raptan do all the work, but in this case, she felt happy to oblige.

“Duck!” Phed’s warning came as the ryverak took a bend and nearly collided with a fallen branch.

“Yikes!” Chico dipped her head but a sharp scrape on her scalp pierced her disguise. “I should have seen that one,” she said, feeling her head but finding no cut and feeling no pain.

The channel straightened. Thinking all was safe, she reached for her paddle.

“No,” Phed shouted. “No, put it down!”

A web stretched only inches above. Chico doubled over to prevent snagging it. Phed paddled furiously, leaving behind a blur of the woven danger.

The water in the tunnel churned. Phed pushed hard against the current. “We’re close to the end, real close. I’m going to blast this thing through the seawalker barrier. Keep your head down.”

Phed alerted Chico none too soon. Branches scraped the ryverak's bow. Their edges dug into her back where only a shirt covered her silishone torso. The wood caught it, gnashing through to her flesh. She cringed and bit her lip, but in a flash, it ended.

“You can sit up now—but be careful. The water's coming from a magma intrusion. It'll burn. Keep your hands inside.”

The ryverak lurched forward. Chico looked over her shoulder at Phed. His paddle whipped the water into foam—then stopped. A burst of amber sunlight gave way to the shadow of a mountain. Phed ruddered the ryverak through the water pooling at the mouth of the cave, and they glided inside.

Flash's Flight

A briny mist greeted Chico as they swirled through the haze of a cavern whose high vanishing ceiling unnerved her. The ryverak's bow bumped as it settled in a V-shaped crevice of flat rock.

Phed's words echoed—“Sit tight...Sit tight...Sit tight...”—as they faded beneath the rest of his reverberating message. “I'm gonna tie up before helping you out.”

Chico nodded absentmindedly as sights, sounds, and smells bombarded her. She imagined the Valympyon state compound, gardens and all, would fit within this space. However, the compound's water feature was nothing like the bubbling lake beyond her now. Sheeting water as dark as cobalt and smooth as satin blanketed a vast face of obsidian as it thundered onto the lake below.

“One thing at a time, Phed. I'm not moving a muscle. You might have to scrape me out of this ryverak.”

Her own words, a jumble of sound, finally faded. Frightened, with no means to glialpath, Chico raised her head, sending thoughts to a higher power and hoping they'd find their way to the one raptan who gave her strength. *Grammy, I'm okay. All I have to do is ride in a cavejet through this Equapyon mountain. Ponce promised I'll arrive in Olympya as a professional with*

honorary citizenship. Please don't worry. I'll be safe. I love you.

Chico took a deep breath and steeled herself to reality. Looking ahead from where she sat bobbing in the bow of Phed's ryverak, she saw the aerial transporter waiting on a rock platform, lights blinking. Shaped like an oversized ryverak with a transparent bubble-shaped cockpit, it appeared much smaller than Chico had envisioned. *I hope Phed can make this claustrophobic-looking aircraft take the three of us out the same way he flew to get himself here.*

Phed jumped out and secured the ryverak. "I'll take the knapsack," he said, bending over and grabbing it with one hand while the other held the shoulder of Chico's fake arm. He steadied her as she stepped over the ryverak's rim. She took a moment to balance when a shiver up her right leg caused her to wobble.

"Careful. This rock's slippery. Real slippery." Phed's words echoed like watery syllables riding a whirlpool. Meowing cries from the backpack took the same repetitive syllabic ride.

"Sequence, we're in a cave. It's okay...okay...okay..." Chico's attempt at calming the kitten sounded otherworldly.

Phed opened the kitty's compartment as meows that could have shattered crystal echoed all the way to Chico's outstretched arms. She nuzzled Sequence's head with her chin. "Poor kitty. Your wound's still oozing. What happened to the medicated cover I sprayed on?"

"Oh, he's probably scratched it off," Phed said with a we-gotta-get-out-of-here attitude. "No problem. First aid and your clothes are in *Flash*. I'll get them."

Despite the rush of Phed's reply, Chico smiled. During their trudge to the seawalker tunnel, he'd urged her to keep the nickname *Flash* their secret, insisting Kurl Tszargon wouldn't approve of calling his patented aerial transporter anything other than its official name, *Cavejet 1*.

Despite Kurl Tzsargon's genius, it had taken him ages to map the one safe route from Olympya to Valympya through the Equapyon Mountains. He'd obsessed over finding this passage from the time he and Heidon explored the Olympyon cave as kids looking for dead snaggle-tooth bats. Proxi-cycles hence, after sacrificing many drones in the process and while perfecting his flier's echolocation, Kurl completed the route.

He'd flight-tested Cavejet 1 repeatedly in the safety of his private office but never planned on using it to help a fugitive of the Valympyon government evade capture. Nevertheless, Kurl considered it an honor to assist the escape of Ms. Chico Quwattle. His OCD, however, prevented him from flying in close quarters with any passenger in *Cavejet 1*.

He considered only one other raptan to pilot his flier.

The moment Kurl spoke to Skdjlsjflsjf Ilkjkld on this matter remained seared in the astrophysicist's memory.

After summoning Tzeus's intern, Kurl pressed the bulge at his sternum and, like a surgeon before an operation, moistened his hands with sanitizing liquid, rubbing it around and between fingers of both hands. As the pilot others called "Phed" entered the office, Kurl spoke without giving the younger man an invitation to sit, stumbling over the unpronounceable name. "Skdjlsjflsjf Ilkjkld, I've selected you to pilot *Cavejet 1* through the sole Equapyon mountain passage to rescue Ms. Chico Quwattle, the late Dr. W. F. Quwattle's daughter."

Kurl watched surprise, excitement, and concern reveal themselves across the young man's face before he continued, giving the intern no further time to doubt his skill. "I knew Ms. Chico Quwattle's father personally as a kan-du master. Not only is saving her life the right thing to do, it may result in many other lives being saved. Time's running out. She'll be captured if we don't get her here soon." Again, Kurl's pronunciation stumbled. "Skdjlsjflsjf Ilkjkld, you are the

only one I trust to fly her safely through the mountain in *Cavejet 1*. The trip will take one hour, fifty-eight minutes, and seventeen seconds.”

Hours and hours of remote practice flights had paid off for Phed. The outbound flight from Olympya had taken the one hour, fifty-eight minutes, and seventeen seconds predicted by Kurl. So, Phed trusted the inbound flight would also follow Kurl’s adjusted timetable accounting for a two-raptan, one-cat return.

To Phed, Kurl’s *Cavejet 1* was more than a mechanical, predictable means of transportation through dangerous heat and daring twists and turns. He viewed *Flash* as an organism guided by its autopilot in the way the brain guided an appendage. Both operated on energy—the limb’s energy provided by nutrients and *Flash*’s supplied by water. Its thorium nuclear reactor converted water into high-pressure steam emissions. Issued from jets, they synchronized with the route’s every turn and lift to give *Cavejet 1* a steady speed. As long as the autopilot functioned properly, Phed’s job was monitoring *Flash*’s water supply and GPM, the global positioning magnetometer. If any unplanned event occurred, he’d take manual control.

As he retrieved the supplies he and Chico needed, Phed checked his DB. Nineteen minutes until their scheduled departure. He knew PHI Mission Control would be waiting for his first voice message as they neared the exit of the mountain. They had no time to spare. He grabbed a bundle and motioned for Chico to follow as he led her to a cavity of rock behind a massive pillar of cascading dripstone.

“This is for you to...” Phed began to hand Chico a first aid kit but quickly pulled it back when he saw the cat in her good arm and her bewildered expression. She stood motionless as her right arm hung lifelessly at her side.

She's gonna have a hard enough time putting on her clothes one-handed, let alone helping Sequence. “On second thought, CQ,”—Chico blinked attention at Phed’s words—“we’re in a time crunch. A real crunch. I’ll sanitize Sequence’s wound and secure him inside the carrier while you put this on.” He reached out for Sequence and then handed her a compressed package the size of a take-out box and took something out of the first aid kit, placing it on top of the package. “Here’s a pain patch with sanitizer. Apply this to your injured arm. Be sure the skin is clean and dry. You can change here.”

Phed glanced at his DB again. “We’ve less than sixteen minutes. I’ll wait for you by *Flash.*” Phed turned and disappeared behind the pillar, trailing kitty wails.

Sixteen minutes? Hope that’s long enough. Already exhausted, Chico felt thankful Phed left in a hurry with Sequence, giving her privacy to prepare for the flight.

It took little time to pull off the silishone wrinkles covering her face and arms. Her itchy skin absorbed the cave’s warm, moist air like a welcome balm. A couple of dead mud ants fell out beside her feet as she removed the deflated boots. Her toes wiggled appropriately and looked normal in the misty light. She tried not to wince as she placed the pain patch on her injured arm. Then, by pressing the tube of sanitizing spray between her chin and neck, she managed to mist her good arm, hoping some of the antiseptic found its way under the ancient leather strap that held the spirit of DB3.

The flight suit, a flexible, ribbed polymer in hues of lilac, stretched gently as Chico pulled it over her curved hips. She gripped the collar between her teeth to slide her left arm into the suit’s one long sleeve. There was no other. Instead, an inside pouch, designed to cradle her injured limb, allowed Chico to secure it against her chest. *Cimi’s designed compassion into every*

thread. I'll never be able to thank her enough, she thought as she pressed a spot on the zip band. The suit automatically sealed her inside. To her delight, a woven butterfly spread over the outside torso and adjacent shoulder. Its wings of silver sparkled through the misty light.

Stepping into matching flight boots, she toed the zip closures and stood solidly on the ground. Her feminine self so obvious now, she almost hesitated before rounding the huge dripstone pillar. She imagined it loomed taller than four Ursula von Mengleborts standing foot-on-shoulder in stilettos. *Funny I should make that comparison. She's much taller in real life than I ever imagined. Could it have been only yester-cycle I interviewed with her?* Leaning out, she spotted Phed waiting by the cavejet and hurried toward him.

A misty silhouette emerged from behind the pillar. As it approached Phed, a flush of energy rushed through his veins. *Flash's* perimeter lights beamed on Chico's body shimmering in lilac. Like the butterfly that adorned her bodice, Chico had metamorphosed into a woman of ideal raptan beauty with her flat chest, broad shoulders, ample hips, and tiny waist. Phed felt weird all over. He wouldn't have put it past Cimi to have soaked every silver thread of that butterfly in a love pheromone.

Chico came close. Her eyes sparkled under dark lashes crinkling at the corners in a smile. "Thank you, Phed. I feel more like me again." Her voice echoed in his ears. "You saved our lives" repeated above the sheeting water.

She reached out her hand.

Phed stood enraptured, holding his breath, knees trembling as she grasped his arm in what he imagined to be a love grip. He'd never known a real honest-to-goodness love grip, but he assumed it left sensations like the ones he was enjoying. *She's, for sure, the masked damsel in*

distress I rescued, and I'm her knight in shining armor.

Still grasping Phed's arm, Chico turned away, and his doubt surfaced. *I should be so lucky—me, skinny enough to squeeze through slats on a fence, no identifiable family, and a name no one can pronounce.*

He straightened his shoulders, wanting to pull her close, but seeing her turn her head, he resisted the urge.

“Wait,” she said. “I forgot something.”

Phed watched, perplexed, as Chico inexplicably released his arm and dashed away behind the pillar. “Please hurry,” he called, again remembering their tight deadline. No sooner had she disappeared than she reappeared. Like a butterfly, she alighted, handing him a wrinkled sheath.

“Phed, please put this somewhere safe. I want to keep this map as a memento of my trip through the ralkids. It's the path I took to get to you. I'll show it to you later.”

“Sure. For sure,” he agreed in stunned obedience. He shoved the sheath into a long pocket on his sleeve while planning how they could view the map alone together as he opened *Flash's* door. He removed an object and turned toward Chico.

“Now, you're gonna become an official VIP,” he said with a smile as he handed Chico her clear head-bubble and pointed to the inscription curved over the back: *CQ, Distinguished Olympyon Visiting Scientist, by Authority of Ponce Heidon, Director of PHI*. It included an official PHI stamp and date. “Looks like you're held in high esteem...esteem...esteem...” Still outside the cavejet, Phed's emphasized words echoed over the background of sheeting water.

Chico wrinkled her brow and grinned. Before she could say anything, Phed placed the bubble over her head. “Watch me. I'll demonstrate.” He then picked up his helmet, but she grabbed it and turned it to read the inscription on the back: *Skdjlsjflsjf Ilkjkld, Pilot Cavejet 1, All*

Aerial Entry Points Granted by Authority of Ponce Heidon, Director of PHI. The PHI stamp and date were included on his bubble too.

“Don’t laugh,” he said. “It’s a long story, and you won’t ever have to introduce that raptan. Maybe just admit you know him. Maybe.” He raised his eyebrows with a closed lip smile and donned the pilot’s helmet, making sure Chico was watching. Pressing the firm edge of his accordion-style shirt collar into a channel ringing the helmet’s base, Phed seamlessly sealed it to his gray flight suit.

Chico raised her left arm and began to press her collar in the helmet’s channel.

“Oh, I’ll seal it for you at the back,” Phed said. “This job needs two good arms.” He reached out, hands trembling as she welcomed the assistance. He wondered if she realized it came on the wings of Cupid.

“Thanks, Phed. Couldn’t have done it alone.”

Hoping Chico’s words were a romantic approval, Phed replied with gusto. “Pleasure. My pleasure. Let’s get moving.” He motioned for her to step inside *Flash*.

Chico eased into a low seat behind Sequence’s carrier. There was only room enough for her legs to straddle the kitty cage. Making sure she’d properly locked her safety shell, Phed took his seat behind the control deck. He closed the transparent hood, fastening out echoes, water, heat, and briny air, and then performed a system check.

“CQ, confirm passenger status. What’s your position?” Phed knew she lacked access to GPM data, but he needed verification that their voice communication worked.

“Position? I’m sitting behind you in *Flash* and wondering why it smells like berryfruit. Not complaining, understand, but I haven’t eaten in a long time. Sure would taste mighty good right now.”

“Sorry, only berryfruit fragrance for now. It’s a bonus—comes with this model,” he lied, hoping she wouldn’t discover the source of the smell. He’d gotten sick from all the jerky turns on his way in and cleaned it with wipes and the juice of two plump berryfruits, one of which he’d planned to offer her. “Won’t be long before we celebrate in Olympya. You’ll have your choice of whatever you want then.”

Chico had never worn such a suit. She angled her head-bubble down to examine the silver-winged butterfly in the bright light inside *Flash*.

“All systems go,” Phed announced.

Chico snapped up her head as straps secured her shell, and she white-knuckled the armrest as it emerged. Instinctively, she clamped her legs against Sequence’s carrier but needn’t have done so; it automatically locked in place.

“Three, two, one—liftoff.” Phed appeared one hundred percent pilot now, not the blushing boy who’d seemed slightly traumatized by her transformation from an old man to her feminine self. She hoped he hadn’t misread the friendship she’d extended when she touched his arm in a gesture of gratitude. *That’s the least I could’ve done to thank him.*

The jets whooshed *Flash* above the rock platform. They soared vertically along a wall of cascading dripstone. Chico glimpsed its passing pinks and blues in the light of the cavejet. On the opposite side loomed the massive, obsidian waterfall. As they ascended, it flowed over the black mineral, silently glistening down, down, to the lake now visible as only a spot far beneath them.

“Get ready. Sharp turn ahead for sure,” Phed exclaimed as they reached the waterfall’s edge.

Flash banked left, swerving up, away from the flowing river, cutting sideways through a narrow passage. Chico squeezed the armrest with her left hand; her right arm pleasantly numb behind the butterfly. She closed her eyes. When she opened them, *Flash* was skimming a bluish-black rock, dodging its protruding shelves, twisting left and then right through the tunnel.

Huge patches of yellow and orange dotted the wall's rocky surface. *It must be a species of bacterial slime or mineral deposits. What other form of life exists so high and deep inside the mountain?* Then, she thought of bats, the obvious creatures. The snaggle-tooth species had achieved legend status among the Valympyons. Stories about how they hooked their prey on barbs at the ends of up-curved teeth made for sleep-cycle horrors. She shuddered. *Were they merely a myth?*

To take her mind off the sickness creeping into her stomach, she asked Phed, “Did you see any bats on your way in?”

“Just a colony of snaggle-tooths where the passage narrows. Ugly little fellows, real ugly. Wonder how they live with ninety percent humidity at forty-five degrees Celsius. By the time we reach the crystals, it'll be fifty-eight. Maybe it's the heat that makes their wings glow green.”

Chico hadn't heard of a green glow or hot temperatures associated with snaggle-tooths. She wondered whether Phed was trying to distract her with an Olympyon embellishment to keep her from throwing up all over him. Her stomach felt awful. *Maybe I should distract myself. Why not play along?* “Did you see their barb—”

“Hold tight, real tight. This'll be fun,” Phed said as if Chico couldn't wait for the action.

She sucked in air and gritted her teeth, wondering at his choice of words. *Why do guys think yanking the bottom out of your stomach is fun?*

At that moment, *Flash* tilted to the vertical like a rocket then leveled off, flying through a

narrow tunnel. Chico saw no bats hanging from walls, but what she did see messed with her equilibrium. Phed had them flying—no, it was more like twisting, banking, and then rolling—between massive crystals shimmering like diamonds, some pink, others misty green, twenty-five meters long and three thick. One chamber after another, a chaos of multifaceted pillars was strewn at every imaginable orientation. Some spanned from ceiling to floor at precarious angles leaving only a triangle of space for the most skillful of cavejet pilots to negotiate.

Careening through the chaotic dreamscape, Chico feared a crash followed by blistering torture. *Why'd he give me the heat index?*

Torn between incomprehensible beauty and primal terror, she yelled. “What happens when we crash?”

Then she screamed.

“Look out!”

Phed saw the huge crystal break free.

“AP off!”

He grabbed the manual controls, accelerated, and hard-banked to the right, chipping off a selenite dagger that took a souvenir of *Flash* on its way to the gallery floor.

“Whew. Cleared it in time. Lost part of a light, but we’ll manage fine without it, real fine. We’ve gone through the last crystal gallery.”

It was too late for solace. He heard Chico gagging, then retching. Through the reflector on his control panel, he saw vomit spatter inside her bubble. It dripped down her butterfly suit as she pressed the release on the helmet and let it fall, bouncing off Sequence’s shell and bobbling on the floor.

Phed winced, grateful his helmet protected him from the stench. It seemed the smell had already upset feline nostrils as a string of plaintive meows filled the air. He thought of giving her his helmet, but it wouldn't bode well if he too succumbed. Instead, he grabbed a handful of sanitizing wipes and handed them toward Chico. "Here, use these."

"Thanks, but I can only manage one at a time, if you don't mind."

What a way to impress. Can't blame her for being annoyed.

"Sorry. One at a time. No problem."

Holding *Flash* to a steady 64 km per hour with the automatic pilot off, he synced echolocation with the GPM, thankful he'd memorized the route.

"You'll be fine without the helmet. Shouldn't have any more jolts the rest of the trip."

He handed her another wipe. "You okay? Need anything else?"

"Got air freshener? Nose clamps? Suicide pill?"

Chico's humor reassured him—a sign she was okay—but he chided himself that he hadn't thought about the air freshener thing earlier.

Kurl of all raptans must've included that feature. Third-level controls? Maybe that's where I'll find it. Why guess? Kurl's got everything organized by name.

If Phed hadn't been wearing a helmet, he'd have whacked his forehead for being so dumb. "Air freshener, release now."

The voiced command worked. Responding to the request, the little cavejet bathed the cabin in aqua tree-blossom fragrance. He watched as Chico took a deep breath, then another and another.

"Wow, guess it pays to ask," she said, looking a bit relieved.

Phed kept his hands steady on the controls as Chico assured Sequence.

“It’s okay, Kitty. No chance of getting hit by falling debris here. Looks like solid rock on both sides. We had a jolt that upset my stomach, but Phed saved our lives again. It shouldn’t be long before we’ll be on solid ground.”

Phed smiled at her words. She’d acknowledged his prowess to Sequence—the only friend who’d traveled with her from her distant home. He then realized how important it was that Sequence make a safe landing.

“Ready for another wipe?”

He watched her reflection nod in answer. It looked like the pallor of her face had receded.

“Here you go.”

Taking it from him, she asked, “How much longer before we land?”

Phed read the GPM. “Seven minutes and ten, no, nine seconds.” He guided *Flash* out of the tunnel and into a cavern with the river flowing below.

“CQ, check that out!” Curls and streaks of light played over the rock. He’d been impressed by the dance of shadows ebbing and flowing over the cave walls as he traveled through this section on his way to rescue her. “Must be reflections from the water beneath, but I don’t understand the swirls and darting movements.”

“My knowledge of geology is limited, but I recognize the schlieren phenomenon,” Chico said. “Somewhere upstream, a glacier must be melting. Those patterns are created when icy fresh water runoff falls into warm, salty water like the steaming river beneath us. The difference in the mixing liquids’ densities creates the caustic patterns.”

“Interesting. I’ve gotta remember that.” Phed nodded with enthusiasm. “Just needs music for the full effect.”

“Considering all the problems I’ve created for you, I’m glad I could satisfy a degree of

your curiosity. And for the full effect..." She paused a moment. "I'd say we should assign the composer's job to Lednah. He's famous for water music, so why not give him a stab at it?"

"Lednah? He's ancient. I could see Gnits doing it for sure. Hang on. I need to check our position."

Phed's left eyelid began twitching as they entered another tunnel-like path. "See that pinpoint of light?" he asked, ignoring the uncontrollable facial tic. "That's our exit. Might be some snaggle-too—"

A crackling interrupted, and the control panel flashed red. "Destination to MT. Do you read?"

Phed's eyelid relaxed at the sound of Ponce's voice calling him by his abbreviated designation as Chico's *mode of transportation*. "Loud and clear, Destination. MT reads loud and clear."

Phed waited for further communication, but only the crackling of static replied.

Situation Severe

Ponce jumped out of the medtax ahead of the doctor and three botts. His feet landed on something hard and pointy, causing him to careen sharply. He called to the doctor awaiting Chico's arrival. "Be careful where you step. Ground's covered in rocks. You can't see them for the tall grass, and it's sharp. Situate the botts to assess CQ as soon as they arrive. I'll be at the mouth of the cave."

He looked down, pushing grass aside with one foot. *Sure glad I grabbed these hiking boots. Guess we weren't so dumb, Kurl and I. Well, Kurl anyway. Left to me, I'd have worn my walkers.*

Ponce stamped more tall grass aside, inadvertently hitting the edge of another rock. He bent over to rub his bruised shin.

Don't remember all these stones, but I do remember wading through this frightful, waist-high grass. Hard to imagine being that young. All these proxi-cycles later, I've never seen Kurl so animated about any project as when he successfully mapped a route to Valympya through this Equapyon mountain.

Slowly, Ponce mashed the grass and shook his head. *He still baffles me. Kurl's devoted his life to creating the only cavejet that could successfully make the trip—through a cave with*

obstacles no other vehicle has negotiated—and he’s happy to watch the culmination of his efforts from a remote location.

Ponce lifted his gaze. The mountain loomed before him against mid-sleep-cycle’s rich pink fringe. The knee-high foliage he trampled perfumed the air. Using his gloved hand, he lifted one of the slender stalks and sniffed the tiny white blossom adorning its tip. Despite his fatigue he still recalled the name he and Kurl gave these plants when they’d learned of their deadly defense—*one-time wonderweeds*. Their aroma was wonderful, but the razor-sharp leaves left the young raptans in such pain that the experience was a one-time event.

For a moment, Ponce stopped walking and rubbed his leg vigorously against the formerly offensive stalks. The leaves’ sharp edges couldn’t penetrate his protective suit. He picked a tiny blossom. “So sweet,” he uttered, inhaling deeply the once forbidden fragrance.

His positioning app showed the spot from which the cavejet should exit the mountain. It gave a notification: “You have reached your destination.” The arrow pointed straight ahead. Ponce scanned the rocky wall and spotted a vertical crevice in the mountain.

There it is. Doesn’t look wide enough for a ryverak, let alone a cavejet.

Deep furrows appeared in Ponce’s forehead. He feared Phed might have trouble piloting *Cavejet I* back through the narrow crevice. Or he may have already crashed.

Now I understand Kurl’s refusal to be here. If there’s an accident, he knows he’ll fall apart and cause us an additional medical emergency.

Ponce approached where the weeds ended abruptly and water trickled over rocks. *Can this be the huge span of water I jumped as a kid? Bet I can cross it now with one hefty step.*

He jumped and barely made the distance—even teetered a bit on the landing. Leaping back, he found the return easier and the second try a mere hop. Now, at the cave’s entrance, he

studied the vines bordering the crevice. Over the proxi-cycles, cracks in the mountain's facade had sheltered wayward seeds that sprouted into rock-hugging tendrils. Before he'd stepped into the medtax, Ponce had asked Kurl, "Is our warning still visible?"

"You'll be the only one able to read the entire message, Heidon," his old friend said.

Sure enough, there, between a strangle of ivy in the rock face above the cave's opening, Ponce saw enough of the message to fill in the blanks. Eager to warn would-be trespassers of their peril, he and Kurl had spent an unknown number of wake-cycles chipping *BEWARE THOSE WHO ENTER SHALL NOT RETURN* into the mountain face so many proxi-cycles ago.

Kurl had meticulously, painstakingly chiseled his portion—*BEWARE THOSE WHO ENTER*—far into the rock, sculpting a masterpiece of the words. Ponce had carved his *SHALL NOT RETURN* part of the warning in shallow haste, eager to begin shaping his snaggle-tooth bat head.

Ponce shook his head with a smile. *How many times did we tell each other we wished our claws had already grown so we could carve without using awkward tools?*

What now looked creepy—or awesome—was the enhancement nature had made to Ponce's bat head relief. He stood open-mouthed at what he saw.

Above *BEWARE THOSE WHO ENTER*, now the only easily visible lettering at the top of the cave, a deeply sculpted face scowled from the rock. Its watchful eyes glared down from a bony forehead as if searching for intruders. A fleshy-looking nose pointed up, cone-like fashion, with exposed almond-shaped nostrils. From the open mouth jutted an assortment of hooked upper teeth bucked out in all directions. The lower jaw, with teeth equally grotesque, disappeared behind a cascade of vines as if the chiropteran were regurgitating its latest victim.

Nice. Ponce smiled, pleased his childhood accomplishment remained intact, but his smile

faded as he yawned and his attention returned to the task at hand. He'd left Cimi in charge at the remote monitoring station he'd set up at the institute's underground operations room. She'd be observing the rescue team's positions while waiting for the nose of the cavejet to appear at the opening.

The director felt no guilt about overstepping the hierarchy of command when he'd included himself in the culmination of Chico's around-the-clock rescue operation. No one of Ponce's prominent position ever assisted at the site of an emergency recovery, always leaving that to specialists—especially midway through sleep-cycle. But this was different. Chico was more than a good friend and a talented botanical scientist. Her skills made her a possible necessity for Olympyon's survival.

Ponce inhaled slowly, trying to dispel his worry.

As Chico hiked the trail yester-cycle, slept inside the ralkid, and then resumed her trek during the early hours of Valympya's wake-cycle, DB3's signals allowed Ponce's team here on the Olympyon hemisphere to monitor her vital signs. Until she was about to meet her contact, Chico's hearts' rates, body temperature, blood pressure, and respiration had registered only understandable symptoms of moderate anxiety and exertion. But, just before the scheduled rendezvous time, her hearts raced, body temperature plummeted, blood pressure jumped, and respiration became erratic. Some trauma, most likely the drone attack, had evidently activated Chico's stress responses. Under the circumstances, this too seemed predictable. What alarmed everyone on the team was the young woman's rapidly elevating white blood cell count.

Maybe she's fighting off an infection from her wrist injury. Yet, even though Ponce hoped this to be true, he knew that kind of infection shouldn't cause such rapid cell growth.

Maybe it's a flaw in DB3's program. Cimi had to rush to develop it. If that's the case,

she'll soon enough recover from her mistake and Chico from her injury, eliminating one disaster in my list of worries.

As the first warm drops of rain pelted his head, he decided against activating his rain shield. It would only serve as a barrier to the warm welcome Chico deserved. She'd need the strength of friends to carry on after such physical and mental stress.

Ponce checked his DB. According to Kurl's and Cimi's calculations, Phed and Chico were already seconds behind schedule. He tilted one ear toward the cave's opening. Nothing, not even the tiniest whirr. Again, he tried to contact *Cavejet 1*. "Destination to MT, come in MT. Do you read?"

No luck.

I should give Phed the benefit of the doubt. A few seconds late may mean timing was off. He knows what to do in an emergency. I hope.

Ponce lifted his eyes to the orchid-pink sky, his hand massaging away a headache. The rain had stopped, but more clouds were moving in quickly.

PHI's director looked toward his triage team. The botts remained as he'd left them, ready to follow orders. The doctor standing in front of the medtax, selected for this assignment because of his expertise in utilizing the assistance of medical botts, caught Ponce's attention and nodded a confirming *all's well*. Ponce acknowledged in like manner.

I won't have to worry about CQ's treatment or even Phed's if there's an accident. Botts don't slack off unless they haven't been properly serviced. He looked over their tall, gleaming white bodies as rain beaded on their heat- and water-resistant surfaces. Uninterrupted ribbons of green light ran up the outsides of each bott's appendage and haloed its globular head. These medical botts, though recently manufactured, had already received a rigorous operations review

and upgrade from the best-trained therapeutic technicians. Med One stood with its raptan-like hands clamped to the handle of a mobile carrier. Two and Three stood ready to lift the patient into what looked like the transparent stage of a monarch's chrysalis.

Again, Ponce attempted communication, hoping anyone conscious and within hearing range of his message would respond. "Destination to MT. Does anyone read?"

"MT reads loud and clear. Arrival in forty-eight seconds."

Ponce took a deep breath and raised his crossed arms above his head, signaling the doctor to ready the bots.

"CQ requires medical assista—"

"And a dry set of clean clothes." Chico's voice bleated over Phed's. "I don't need the butterfly."

She's conscious—a good sign—but what in Olym's name did she mean by "don't need the butterfly"? Is she delirious?

Tension slid from Ponce's shoulders as the cavejet's nose emerged. Tilting severely, it passed through the crevice with the breadth of four fingers from the wall on either side, swooped over Ponce's head, and landed perfectly positioned next to the medtax in a burst of rain.

Ponce released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding when he saw Phed and Chico begin to emerge from *Cavejet 1*. He called out as he walked toward them. "Welcome to Olympya, CQ. We're—"

His remaining words fled as his friend's daughter took half a step and collapsed.

Awakening

Chico awoke in a strange room to a bustle of bots misting her injured limb. She remembered landing but didn't know how long ago. *Moments? Hours?* She'd seen a fuzzy figure approach outside of *Flash* and heard a pulsating gibberish just before everything around her had spun. The last thing she recalled was piercing pain shooting through her arm.

She looked at it now. Her bare arm, black and oozing puss from the pores, lay next to her blanketed body. *What's happened to me? Where am I? What is this place?* Her eyes darted from one bot to another, all watching her through a transparent tubular shield.

Although free of pain, she shivered. Her survival instincts surfaced, and she played the fingers of her left hand as if practicing a scale of notes on a piano. *No problem.* She tried the same using her right hand. *No success.* Even her elbow and shoulder on that side wouldn't cooperate. Knees, ankles, toes, hips, neck...all else worked. She considered screaming to see if her vocal cords functioned but didn't want to call attention to her absolute fear, so she hummed.

She stopped humming as the bots exited when a tall woman—wearing a workskin of green with a sprinkling of white stars—entered the room, walked over to her, and spoke without introduction.

“Do you hurt anywhere?”

Chico wasn't sure if it was the tone of her voice or the shimmery orange lips and eyelashes that left her feeling wary of this stranger. "I feel no pain, thank you." *Phew, those words came out easily. No problem talking, but I'll wait and ask questions to someone I trust.* Though desperate to know her location and immediate future, she feared too many questions might reveal her identity. Instead, she read the ID on the woman's uniform: *DA Harimata—GMC-1 Olympos.*

A few facts connected. *I must be in Olympos, the capital city of Olympya. I wonder if the G of GMC has something to do with its government.* Chico couldn't help noticing the doctor's assistant's well-defined muscles under the uniform's stretchy fabric. *For a DA, this woman's biceps are unusually pronounced—well, they aren't common for Valympon women. Maybe Olympyon females sport more muscular builds.*

"Ms. Maize?" Chico lifted her head and turned her ear to the DA's question. "You have an incoming call. Do you feel up to communicating?"

Who? She's activating the device and calling me... Oh, of course, it's a code name—or maybe a trick so I'll reveal my identity. I'll play along. "Oh, why, yes, yes, of course, thank you."

The attendant placed a palm-size device on a stand near Chico's bed and tapped its screen. "I've opened the connection. Your voiceprint is registered. You can speak through the shield. If you need further assistance, please push the call button near your left hand."

Chico glanced at the red disk embedded in the wall of her medical chrysalis close to the fingers of her left hand. She waited as Harimata straightened accent pillows on the sofa lining one wall then inched toward the door.

Looking around the comfortably appointed room, Chico wondered if she could speak

freely. The device that registered her voiceprint didn't look familiar. She hoped she could trust its security. She turned her head away from the door. "Hello?"

"Welcome to Olympya, Ms. Maize." Ponce's greeting filled the room. It was more than his voice that acknowledged her; a cheerful countenance appeared in her visual space.

Chico's smile spread wide at the sight of him. *My facial muscles work too, and so do my feelings of relief.*

"We don't normally treat first-time visitors to a medtax ride with an oxygen hors d'oeuvre, but we'll get around to giving you a proper welcoming soon," he said. "How are you being treated by our Government Medical Corps?"

Chico looked back to make sure she was alone and saw the door close. Her hearts raced. *If the DA heard Ponce's greeting, I'm already in danger again.*

Her relief faded to worry and fear. "Thanks for all the fuss—but why the coffin for a broken wrist? I want to get out of here."

Ponce smiled. "Well, Ms. CQ Maize, I see your smart-ass gene still works."

So that's who I'm registered as—Ms. CQ Maize. Not a complete untruth.

The eyes in Ponce's image glanced to one side as if someone else in the room distracted him. "How do you feel? Are you in any pain?"

He's stalling. She knew by the wrinkles in his brow the news wouldn't be good. "Just a little nauseous. Your welcoming team gave me the bed part of a B and B, but I can't say much for the view." She took a deep breath. "I know you'd never treat a bone fracture with this measure of attention. I—just tell me what it's going to take to heal this arm, and I'll be okay with it."

Ponce moved to the side as a young woman's face appeared, pushing into the camera's

view. Her iconic tuft of hair glistened pink. “Look, CQ, you deserve to know the whole story. I’m sorry, but we must remove your arm and replace it to save your life. By the way, I’m Cimi Nuja, and I’m so-o-o honored to meet you. You’re my hero. I can’t imagine going through what you’ve had to endure—”

“Wait. What?”

“—falling under torrents of rain with a bum wrist and a cat on your back while mud ants crawled into your boot and poisoned your blood.”

“Poisoned?”

Cimi threw her arms in the air as if she hadn’t heard Chico at all. “Then you blasted away a spy drone and managed a one-armed rope toss to Phed as you were about to be hurled over rocks into a gorge of pounding water—”

“Cimi, what—”

“—and all the time disguised as a man. I can’t wait to meet you face-to-face and give you a hug. You’re—”

“Cimi, stop. Please, stop!” Chico raised herself onto her good elbow. Despite still feeling groggy from medication, her head throbbed with rapid-fire fear. “Go back to the arm thing—the mud ants. I found a couple of dead ones when I took off my boots in the cave. My arm was numb, but I don’t remember getting bitten. That’s why I’m still nauseated? Not the rough ride? What’s going to happen?”

Chico’s eyes watered up. “Please tell my grammy I love her. And my little brother. And my aunt. Tell them I don’t feel any pain and tell them I didn’t blow up the state buildings. Ask them to take care of Sequence.”

Now her welling eyes widened. “Is Sequence okay? I don’t know what happened to him.

He got all upset when I threw up.” She collapsed onto the bed and began to sob. “Maybe the mud ants bit him too.”

“You’re going to be fine, CQ,” Cimi consoled. “Sequence is well cared for. He’s safe with Dr. Gimmel, who wants you to know your fur-baby is purring contentedly.”

“CQ.” She heard Ponce’s measured, calm voice but couldn’t make out his features through her tear-blurred vision. “When you slipped and fell on your way to the ryverak, mud ants got into your boot and migrated to the wound on your wrist where they injected their poison. The toxin settled in the already weakened part of your body and caused necrosis in adjacent muscle and skin tissue. We have no effective treatment for mud ant venom unless treated before necrotic cell death begins. Spread of the disease into your vital organs can only be prevented by removing your arm.”

Chico stared at a watery version of two heads. Cimi’s bobbed in affirmation of Ponce’s assertion. Her tuft of hair darkened to violet and then radiated a blistering purple as she talked. “Your new appendage will be superior to the one you had, CQ. I’ll design a secret weapon of your choice into the mechanism of your new arm. I can make it unlock vaults, shoot lasers, sense danger. Think about what you’ll want it to do. Only Dorf and the three of us will know its capabilities, and...”

Chico wasn’t following the rapid flow of speech. Her mind only registered one phrase. “Secret weapon?” she mumbled.

“Hold on, Cimi.” Ponce held up a hand in front of the excited woman, whose tuft abruptly turned mauve. His tone sounded stern, with a pinch of frustration. When he spoke again, however, he resumed his calm manner. “CQ, your first question—about getting sick and throwing up—that may have been a combination of your white blood cells scrambling to produce

antibodies while your brain was receiving mixed signals, and...”

She couldn't concentrate on Ponce's words. She was overwhelmed with worry about losing her right arm and with it an important aspect of her sexuality. Part of her was stunned by the news, but the practical side of her mind wanted to accept that this wasn't the end of her life. She'd seen surgeons work wonders with artificial limbs. Their patients recovered to fully active lives—and without the advantage of Cimi Nuja's offer. *What kind of implant could enhance the use of my right arm? Instead of being a weapon, could it maybe save lives?*

Roused from her thoughts, she realized she'd missed the rest of Ponce's explanation. Now, Cimi inexplicably chattered on about someone finding a tattered old hat that a sisscuber driver claimed belonged to one of his customers.

Chico, not interested in the rambling story but seeing that Ponce remained in view, interrupted. “Excuse me. Excuse me, Cimi, but I need to talk to you in private. Dr. Heidon, would you mind giving us a few minutes alone?”

Therapy

Chico had nothing but praise for her surgeons. They'd re-appropriated her nerves to work in conjunction with healthy muscles integrated into a lifelike arm, and through the miracle of state-of-the-art surgery, they'd saved her biopearl. For many wake-cycles since, she'd submerged her mind and body in flexibility and strengthening exercises.

Cimi Nuja had been a constant support, encouraging Chico with nonvisual DB chats, but the two hadn't met face-to-face yet. She and Cimi were the only raptans with access to the women's area inside this subterranean section of PHI's fitness center, and now Cimi was on her way to join her.

Chico stood in front of a reflective wall. In a black stretch suit, she studied her image, all 360 degrees of her trim body. "I know Cimi's going to notice all the details."

She clasped her hands and twisted right to left. "Shoulders—same height," she said with no fear of being overheard before she dropped both arms, comparing the uninjured to the new one. "Arms—same length."

About to flex both wrists, she turned toward the door as it slid open.

Cimi came jingling in but stopped in her tracks, her bright Olym-yellow tuft swaying above her. "What an olymfab transformation, girl!"

“Cimi.” Chico ran to her friend and threw her arms around her. Both hugged then pushed away, delighted to be together at last.

“If it wasn’t for you, Cimi...” Chico’s eyes watered, and she tried to blink away a tear. “I can’t be more”—she swallowed hard— “be more thankful, but...”

She sobbed out a whisper. “Grammy and Zak. I’m so worried.”

Cimi squeezed Chico’s hands and whispered back. “Remember, you can’t help others until you’ve helped yourself.” Cimi grasped Chico’s shaking shoulders with surprising firmness and held them at arms’ length. “CQ?”

Chico lifted her head, trying to blink away the moistness clouding her vision.

“Remember when we first met? You were in the trauma center, and I was just an image. Look at you.”

Cimi spun Chico around and stood back as if to admire her. “It’s incredible how all those muscles, veins, and tendons—the ones they could save and the ones they grafted—work symbiotically. And it’s not just because you had top surgeons but because you have an indomitable spirit. You’re fit as a kan-du master, and you don’t give up.”

Cimi’s tuft flared pink as her eyes met Chico’s. “Oh, I can’t stand the sadness in your eyes. Okay, look, CQ.” Cimi gripped Chico’s shoulders even more tightly. “I know how much you’re worried about the possibility of Mumba Zola taking your Grammy and brother and even your aunt for questioning. We can’t do anything about that now”—Cimi grabbed Chico’s right hand and held her arm palm up—“but you’ve got an arm filled with weaponry that may save your life *and* your Grammy’s and Zak’s”—Cimi gently lowered Chico’s arm—“if you learn to use it without killing the wrong target.”

“Killing the wrong raptan? I could really do that?” Chico wiped her eyes, absorbing the importance of learning to safely handle the lethal weapons at her disposal.

Cimi nodded and removed her cape as her fountain of hair again bobbed an excited yellow.

Despite her concern, Chico grinned at the leopard-patterned bodysuit that clung to her trainer’s plumpness.

“You’re smiling because you think I look goofy, don’t you?” Cimi pumped her shoulders, displaying the bodysuit’s flexibility. “I can bend and touch my toes. See? Well, almost.”

“That’s a good start. You teach me marksmanship, and I’ll repay with fitness lessons,” Chico said with a grin.

Cimi laughed and straightened. “Oh, yeah, well if that’s what it takes to make you smile, I’m all for it.” Her tuft turned from pink to orange. “Okay, let’s get to it. Straighten out that arm.”

An hour passed as Cimi proved her teaching skills, and Chico proved she could touch the nail of her ring finger to her thumb while pointing her index finger at the target in a split second.

“You’re a quick study. Now for the target practice.”

An hour and a half into Cimi’s drills, Chico proved herself an exceptional marksman.

“CQ, I’m psyched. How about another half hour practice?”

“I don’t think there’s time, Cimi.” Chico checked her DB then picked up a towel and dabbed away at perspiration. “Have to run. I’ll just make my post-op exam, providing I leave now. If all goes well, the medical team will discharge me.”

“That’s great news. How about tomorrow, same time?”

“Sure. Thanks, Cim. I need to get the maneuvers and timing synced to build my confidence with this,” Chico said, looking at her outstretched arm. “If I don’t use it accurately, it might be more trouble than help.”

Discovered

Facing the west wall of his spacious office, General Gore Andriol scanned the active virus distribution map of Olympya. His spectra-sensitive satellite showed the first batch of lethal buds as clouds of pink wafting over a popular Olympyon family resort. When he zoomed in, the clouds turned to bright pink dots raining down on sunbathers, children at play, and teenagers challenging each other in their wave blasters. Zooming out, he smiled as clouds of pink dispersed in the wind invaded the area like a swarm of locusts invisible to their prey.

Ping. The sound broke Gore's concentration, a reminder of his holovid conference with an undercover Valympyon spy. The operative assigned to infiltrate an Olympyon hospital had refused to divulge allegedly high-priority information to anyone but the six-star general himself. Such a bold move by one of low rank both surprised and infuriated him. He'd demonstrated to many an unfortunate underling that wasting his time was a mistake they'd not be able to repeat. *I'll not give that presumptuous subordinate another chance at contacting me if her information is not critical.*

"Map off," the general commanded.

It vanished, returning the wall to a portrait gallery of high-ranking military officers. He gazed at his own figure's stoic pose and angular visage exhibited in an elaborate frame suitable

to one of his rank. Next to it, showcased in a more ornately framed portrait, Mumba Zola brandished a four-meter staff of priceless copper, the symbol of the dictator's ranking power. Gore scowled back at the three-meter staff of mere gold in his official portrait. He squared his shoulders. *Soon, Six-Star General Gore Andriol will prove worthy of the incomparable copper staff.*

He glanced at the other walls busy with holovids of military base activity. *Routine maneuvers, just as I've ordered.*

“Holovids one and two off.”

With the office now void of incoming information, the general pulled out the left shoulder of his jacket, twisting his head to examine the gleaming medals, and then repeated the same on his right, admiring the stars lining the shoulders of his military jacket—a habit he'd acquired after achieving his first recognition. His uniform displayed twelve gleaming emblems: six on each shoulder. Three stars were for first-place marksmanship of the claw and three for superiority in the martial art of kan-du. The remaining six, by his own design, balanced the look. Crafted of copper coated in diamond film, they shimmered a pompous salute.

On his lower right chest, he fingered a sizable medallion of the same precious materials. Its inscription read: *Valympyon Superior Leadership Award presented to Supreme General Gore Andriol by His Excellency Mumba Zola, President for Life, Lord of All the Beasts of the Land and Fishes of the Sea, and Conqueror of All Valympya.* The general straightened his back, studied his portrait, and announced, “In the future, His Excellency Gore Andriol will be the one presenting the Valympyon Superior Leadership Award.”

Ping. Ping. Annoyed, Gore yelled at his DB, “Pause reminder,” and in a softer voice said, “She'll have to wait.”

The general sat down at the C-shaped holomeet deck in the middle of the office and reclined to a preprogrammed position in his upholstered chair. Patting a soft bulge on his right jacket sleeve, he slid two viselike fingers inside, closing them onto a long, furry ear. He pulled, and along with the rabbityle-like ear came the threadbare head and body of a once fluffy toy. Limp fur of white and brown covered the head and encircled large black eyes. The nose was a little pink knob of embroidered spider silk. A patch of well-worn leather with tiny stitches of blue at its edge covered the spot where a left ear had been. The toy's crumpled body filled the palm of his hand as he let its lone ear dangle free.

Cupping both hands to cradle the no longer plush rabbityle, Gore spoke into the ear that flopped backward over his pinky. "You agree, don't you, Buster? The copper staff will be mine. Just think. You'll be His Excellency's confidant." Gore's thumb rubbed the leather patch. "You'll even have a custom ear made by the royal weavers. I'll order them to monogram your name: *Honorable Buster Andriol*. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

The toy head bobbed up and down in affirmation, prodded by two of Gore's fingers. He hugged Buster and gently squeezed the dull white pom-pom tail, then, careful to make sure his secret companion couldn't be seen, he shoved the rabbityle feet-first back into the uniform's sleeve, which remained close to his body.

Keeping Buster hidden—Gore Andriol's private obsession since early childhood—was the only accomplishment for which he never sought recognition.

Proxi-cycles earlier, Gore Andriol's grandma fumed over the outrageous rule established by her son-in-law and daughter. Their child, her one and only grandson, was forbidden to own soft, fluffy toys. Their boy, they insisted, would some-cycle achieve greatness and so must be

taught self-preservation and leadership. In his nursery—full of toy weapons, neatly shelved map puzzles, and models of land, water, and air defense vehicles—military marches replaced lullabies.

So, with subterfuge and persistence, eventually Grandma arranged to be alone with her grandson long enough to present him with a plush toy large enough to fill his two little hands. When she held out the fluffy, brown-and-white rabbityle, she said, “Gore, I want you to have all my hugs when I’m not around.”

Lifting the plaything’s furry ears, she wrapped them around the child’s thin arm. “See? Rabbityles have no arms, but their ears can hug you just like Grandma.”

She gave her grandson a squeeze hug with the fluffy toy between them.

“His name’s—well, here, you read it.” She lifted its left ear and held it so the boy could see B-U-S-T-E-R embroidered in bright blue.

Her grandson looked at the letters, touching each one as he spelled them out, “B, U, S, T, E, R.” Although less than half a proxi-cycle in age, Gore knew how to pronounce the unfamiliar name. “Buster,” he said, lifting his eyes to his grandma. “His name is Buster.”

Gore’s smile curved from ear to ear. “Buster is for me?”

“He’s all yours, Gore. Buster will give you lots of hugs, but you’ve got to keep him hidden, or Grandma will get into terrible trouble. You don’t want that, do you?”

Gore’s eyes widened, creating creases in his young forehead. He shook his head slowly. “No, Grandma. I’ll never let you get in trouble. Never.” He reached out cautiously and took Buster, one arm holding him close to his chest as he climbed onto his bed. Then, he carefully placed the precious gift inside an armored tank that held a place of honor on a shelf above the bed.

Ping ping ping. The alert turned into a buzz that automatically raised the general's recliner to an upright position.

“Oh, blast it. She's waited long enough.”

Gore would've rather received a secure audio report than talk to spy H-21, but he'd been ordered by His Excellency Mumba Zola to shut down PHI's operations. The protests Gore had organized against the research facility hadn't worked. As an alternative, he assigned a spy to infiltrate the Olympion Government Medical Corps at the hospital nearest the Ponce Heidon Institute. The spy's instructions were to learn how the virus was affecting any patients who survived exposure, so Gore reasoned it might be worth it to check out her information.

But questions plagued him: *Why would any covert surveillance operative risk meeting with me? How could she possibly possess information that merits her insistence in divulging it directly to Six-Star General Gore Andriol?*

He grudgingly prepared for the holomeet. Entering his bathroom, he relieved himself and then perfected his appearance. As habit dictated, he straightened the hefty gray visor of the cap that never left his head. He flicked an imaginary dust particle from the black ogre-skin top then further turned it to align the military insignia on the band above the brim with the bridge of his nose.

He gave Buster an over-the-sleeve love pat. “You're going to meet someone new this wake-cycle, but don't be nervous. She's only a spy.”

Gore, with Buster safe inside his sleeve, headed back to the general's holomeet deck and reluctantly yelled into his DB, “Open communication.”

“Start over,” Gore ordered the woman in the holovid. Distracted by her shocking appearance, he’d not absorbed the information from the details of her story. With more than an occasional stare at her sparkling orange eyebrows and matching lashes, his eyes kept wandering to her bulging, well-formed biceps beneath the orange bodysuit she’d accented with a silver vest.

I’ll have to keep her in mind for more active duty.

H-21 glanced at her DB and then adjusted her seat. Omitting the respectful “Yes, of course, sir” that she should have said, she repeated the beginning of her story.

“My assignment as Doctor’s Assistant Harimata to the emergency ward of Olympos Medical Center One was to monitor the arriving patients who’d been exposed to some unknown virus. I was to report the number of deaths and details of any survivors. In that assignment, I walked the corridors and observed patients through a transparent wall, reporting minute visual signs of change, even to a new wrinkle in their skin or discoloration on their clothes.” She rolled her eyes.

Gore leaned upright with his forearms resting on the deck and pinched Buster’s tail through the fabric of his sleeve to stay focused on the story. He knew all Harimata could see of him were his head, neck, and shoulders.

“As there were only two who briefly survived, my job was as boring as waiting for the next proxi-cycle.”

Suddenly, Harimata leaned forward so fast that Gore jerked back, fully expecting her face and torso to enter his office. She sat straighter, smirking as if satisfied by gaining his full attention.

“Thank Valym I was soon reassigned to a single patient in the surgeon’s annex. This private patient’s area was beyond the operating room. To reach her, I had to enter a small

chamber they called a *WRAP*. It sprayed a disinfectant suit of film over my body. It not only sanitized but also labeled the sprayed-on skin with my name and job title. My film—a pattern of white stars on a green background, the only one I'd seen with that design—made me stand out from the others, who wore solid colors.”

H-21 smiled. “Fashionable, actually.” She cocked her head to one side, fluttering her eyelashes.

Gore liked the effect but knew he had to keep the tingles it gave him from interfering with concentrating on the elements of her story, which were becoming more and more intriguing. He pinched his sleeve. “Yes, yes. Get on with it.”

H-21 glared at the general and raised her voice, enunciating every word. “This patient held a certain status. She received a communication directly from Dr. Ponce Heidon, the one who runs the Ponce Heidon In—”

“Skip the part about Heidon.” General Andriol made a shooping motion with his left hand. His right arm pressed harder against his side. “I know of him and his work. What is your point in taking up my time for what I already know?”

H-21 slowly leaned forward. “You will want to hear this, General Andriol.” Looking pleased with herself, she stopped talking momentarily.

The general raised his eyebrows at her impertinence.

The spy shifted under his stare and returned to her account.

“I was told to call her Ms. Maize. The young woman appeared to be about two proxicycles in age. She lay on her back in an air lock cylinder. One arm was exposed and braced at a ninety-degree angle and streaked with oozing blackened flesh from wrist to elbow.”

A faint shudder passed over H-21's face as she continued. "I'd never seen an injury like it. The patient exhibited no pain but appeared nervous and worried. It wasn't until I placed a communication device on the table next to her that I saw her face close-up."

The general waited, his impatience simmering, while H-21 straightened again, keeping her eyes focused directly at him. She slowly emphasized each word. "I never forget a face."

The spy paused as if leaving room for the effect of her next pronouncement.

"She is the woman suspected of blowing up the state buildings. Chico Quwattle, the one who's gone missing."

General Gore Andriol clenched his jaws. *If true, this could be Valym-shaking news, but I won't accept only H-21's word.* "Where's the evidence? I demand evidence."

He felt his self-control slipping. His right shoulder twitched. Knowing the holovid's allotted field of vision cut off below the row of military insignia lining his shoulders, he allowed his left hand to slide inside his right sleeve. Both shoulders relaxed, and the edge in his voice softened. "Continue."

Harimata resumed as if there'd been no pause. "The patient's been discharged and returns for regular checkups, but I know her schedule."

Already, the general had a plan formulating in his strategic mind. Eager to put it into action, he spoke matter-of-factly. "Follow this procedure for collecting evidence of your claim. Our med team will embed a camchyp in your cheek. They'll instruct you on how to operate the device with your tongue. It will transmit images directly to my DB. When I no longer need it, I will activate a camchyp-dissolving code, leaving you no ill effects."

The spy made no protest.

General Andriol lifted his wrist, snapped an order into his DB, and addressed Harimata. “The camchyp implant will take place as you enter your residence and secure the door. I expect to receive your first images tomorrow.”

Before dismissing her, the general scanned her physical attributes, imagining the ones he couldn't see, and cleared his throat as a self-distraction. “If your suspicions prove correct, you will be compensated. However, I must warn you. Do not discuss, path, or message this with anyone except me.”

Satisfied he'd successfully set his new plan into action; he closed the conference. General Andriol's mind spun. *If that patient is Chico Quwattle, Valympyon's most wanted suspect in the bombing of the state buildings, this could be...*

Gore yanked the rabbityle out and held Buster with both hands, shaking him in his excitement. “This could be our big break. If the evidence is confirmed, we'll kidnap the fugitive's family and threaten to bleed them for information. If she won't cooperate, we'll torture and kill them one by one until we get what we want. What do you think about that, Buster?”

The toy's head waved in agreement, its ear flopping madly. The general's eyes glazed over, and his hands stilled, the floppy toy held steady. His alter ego took control as chipmunk-like Busterese issued from his mouth. “After H-21 does her job, Daddy Gore, you'll have to arrange an untimely end. She'll know too much. Maybe she'll become a double agent.”

General Andriol's face twitched as Busterese faded away. He raised his friend to eye level. “You're right, Buster. There can't be any witnesses.”

Gore stuffed the companion back up his sleeve, grateful but annoyed he hadn't been the one to think of that possibility.

Accident

Dr. Dorf Tzeus jogged lightheartedly along the winding path through PHI's leisure park as water spiraled from one aqua tree bloom to another. Knowing these would be his last open-air moments for an undetermined time, he slowed to a nimble pace, deeply inhaling the perfumed air and admiring the deep green sunsphere so soon after Proxi's rise above the horizon.

Have to bring the spirit of this environment underground, so Kurl, Cimi, Phed, and Chico will feel less sequestered and more inspired.

He jogged on.

Did I tell Chico she's now a member of the A-plus-B merged retrovirus team? If not, I'm sure Cimi's told her what ABMR means. But have to remember to call her CQ, not Chico, for her protection. She's endured so much, and Cimi assures me Chico's—CQ's—passed her training with accuracy and strength. Quite a compliment coming from Cimi.

Dorf kept his pace as he reread Chico's message on his DB—*Dr. Tzeus, I'm eager to share my plans for developing a plant-compatible virus-killer enzyme*—but his feet lost their stride as the too familiar chant assaulted his ears.

“Stop this insane research!”

Surprised to hear the protesters organized so early in the wake-cycle, he steeled himself

and slowed to a walk while drawing near enough to be viewed by them.

Not usually here this long before golden fringe. Guess I'm their first target, he thought.

Before the beginning of every work-cycle, their demonstration resumed the same way. Participants showed up, waited for a spot on NPTO's daily holovid, demonstrated, and then dispersed. Fortunately, they'd maintained a state of decorum throughout the last three months, despite the one occasion in which a PHI researcher dared fly his sissca through the protesters' fluffy sky-word version of their protest. That researcher's affront destroyed their message and, consequently, his job.

Dorf had worried that terminating the employee might not prevent the demonstrators from turning into an angry mob, but he'd fired the researcher anyway, hoping to calm the activists enough to buy time.

These protesters lining the path into PHI glared at Dorf. Despite their hostile demeanor, the genetics expert offered a friendly nod as each, in turn, swiveled, presenting only a back to his greeting—the highest of indignities.

Can't take this personally. Just their desperate, ignorant attempt to reject the unknown.

The institute's security doors closed behind him, and his heads-up display flashed the time.

Have to review Phed's results before I tour Chic—CQ's lab. Dorf mental noted to Ponce's inbox the increased number of protesters and flagged the information as unusual.

Hope he won't review it until later. Boss doesn't need unsettling news interrupting his family time. May be a while before he sees them again.

Continuing into the lobby, Dorf smiled and greeted the receptionist sitting in the stunfire-proof room she called her transparent blast shelter. "They're keeping the peace, Martha."

“Believe me, Chief, I’ll snap on my hologram at the first sign of unrest and skedaddle.”

Martha’s pithy comment extended the smile on Dorf’s face. The thought of Martha leaving her hologram to greet the intruders and hustling to the employee safe room—likely arriving with armfuls of homemade gnarlythorn cookies—warmed his hearts. *Martha’s one of those rare employees that only a god could have created.*

The chief of genetics entered the tube and wound his way to the subterranean labs—what Cimi dubbed “sub-super village.” He passed through the doorway marked *S-11*—the clandestine lab authorized by Secretary Yesped on behalf of the Olympon government—and entered his new laboratory’s wraptrap. Micro moments later, he stretched his shoulders to loosen the freshly sprayed cocoon of yellow fibers as the door opened.

Hiss. Something pierced Dorf’s leg.

“Yee-ow!” he kicked hard to free himself from the attack and lost his balance, falling shoulder-first against shelves of carefully placed vials of cultures and other paraphernalia. He grabbed at the shelf’s upright brace to keep from landing on the floor, but his thrust dislodged it. Flasks, beakers, crucibles, and spot plates tumbled out, hitting Dorf and crashing all around. His feet slid out from under him. He thudded hard, sliding over liquid, blood, glass shards, and worse.

“Feces,” he blurted as he recognized it amid the goo.

The security alarm sounded.

Ignoring the blare, Dorf inched up onto an elbow. Lying there, he studied his injury. Through the fibrous yellow wrap covering his calf, a double puncture wound oozed a crimson droplet of blood. Around it, a raw egg-like mucous was forming.

Fascinated, Dorf forgot his pain as he watched the mucous absorb blood and turn into a

bright orange, pea-size lump. The viscous blob slid over his bodysuit's leg onto the floor.

It pulsated.

Hmm. Interesting.

Riveted, Dorf scanned the scene with one thought in mind. *How can I analyze this? Thousands of cells everywhere—bacterial and viral cultures mixed and splattered randomly—devoid of identification. Determining which contributed to this pulsating mass could take months and months of analyses.*

He eased himself from the slimy soup, avoiding contact with the glob that seemed to have a life of its own. His leg throbbed, and his head pounded from the screaming siren. Tapping his DB, Dorf deactivated the alarm and then sent a message to all employees: *BIOLOGICAL HAZARD—S-11 CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.*

Then he yelled, “How’d that cat get in here?”

The Blob

Chico Quwattle prepared to show off S-14, her pristine, state-of-the-art botanical lab, for the first time. *Designing this workspace got me through weeks of therapeutic exercise and Cimi's bioweapon training.*

The plant geneticist flexed her recovered limb and smiled. *I may be a fugitive from Valympya, but this lab gives me hope I'll be able to save Authairian lives.*

Her mind raced with thoughts for designing a plant enzyme to destroy the deadly effects of the airborne virus. The supplies and equipment installed were what she needed to do just that. Eager to ensure the lab passed Dr. Dorf Tzeus's inspection, she scurried to complete further adjustments and checked her DB. *Little time before Chief arrives. I've got to get busy and replace that irrigation line.*

Chico pressed the disconnect water icon on her DB when unexpected sound waves from an alarm rushed through her body.

Cimi Nuja smoothed her hands over the new, wrinkle-proof spray covering her poofy skirt. *I knew I could modify the wraptraps to keep my outfit looking olymfab and my tuft floating free. Can't wait to show CQ.*

The networking systems expert light-stepped out of Chico's wraptrap, excited to model the result of her latest modification to the wearable protection system. As she bounded along, her olym-colored tuft happily breathed inside its transparent, flame-shaped bubble.

The blare of an alarm morphed Cimi's tuft to white. It swirled inside the bubble as she glanced at her DB then charged back through Chico's wraptrap toward Dorf's lab.

Phed Ilkjkld hummed to himself as he strolled the brief walk from his comfortable, subterranean quarters to S-11. No one expected him to begin his duties in the lab this long before work-cycle, but he planned an early start at catching up on trials waiting for his review.

If I pace myself, maybe I can complete most of it before Chief arrives.

As Phed approached Dr. Tzeus's wraptrap, an alarm sounded.

Kurl Tszargon awoke from a catnap and resumed his routine of stretches before settling in on his research. *This could be the wake-cycle I'll find the perfect exoplanet.*

He sanitized his hands, prepared a warm cup of TX, and put the cup to his lips as an alarm sounded. He froze in place momentarily then set down his drink and sanitized.

"Excuse me." Dr. Ponce Heidon wrinkled his brow at the alarm notification. "This should only take a minute."

With a reluctant nod to his wife and father, the PHI director stepped away from the breakfast table in the garden. He'd scheduled a few precious hours with them before his departure on a cross-country flight to a planetary genetics conference.

Ponce's posture stiffened as he listened to the automated message on his DB. "Alert

announcement of the emergency closure of subterranean lab eleven. An individual has fallen and knocked over shelves at the entry. No injury or mechanism failure has been reported.”

Before the director could glialpath his chief geneticist for more details, Dorf beat him to it. “Minor disruption, Boss. Situation under control. No need to change plans. Cleanup in progress. Enjoy your family before the conference.”

“Thanks, Dorf.” Ponce’s shoulders relaxed as he pathed his reply. “Have sanitation send me a report, ask the construction engineer to investigate the cause of the accident, and tell them to replace any broken shelves immediately. Make sure no shoddy installation or substandard products disrupt our progress.”

“On it, Boss.”

Satisfied, Ponce returned to enjoy the rest of his breakfast with what little family time remained.

With Ponce taken care of, Dorf Tzeus knew he needed to hurry to get ahead of PHI’s sanitation botts, yet he stared at the lump on the floor. It had doubled moments ago from the size of a pea since he’d first watched it plump up in the goo. He narrowed his eyes and bent closer to examine it.

He blinked. And blinked again. To be certain he saw what he thought he saw, he drew nearer to the gelatinous matter. *For sure, that looks like a pumping movement—like it’s alive—like the beating of a heart. Must get this thing, whatever it is, isolated.*

When his DB pulsed, he groaned at the message: “Bott cleanup crew en route to S-11.”

Trusting his sanitation supervisor wouldn’t question a verbal order from the chief, Dorf spoke directly. “Dr. Tzeus here. Abort. Return crew to the charging station. Wait for further

instructions.”

“We’ll withdraw and wait for your request, Chief,” responded the super.

Already worrying about the next important matter, Dorf didn’t bother to reply. *Have to get CQ here to find her cat before—*

A glialpath intercepted his thoughts. Phed sounded frantic. “Chief, are you okay? I came early to get started, but an alarm locked me out of the wraptrap. What’s happened? Can I help?”

Dorf pressed an icon on his DB. “It’s reactivated. Come through Phed. Yes, I need your help.”

Phed halted at the entrance to the lab, open-mouthed and speechless at finding his boss crouched amid fallen shelves and glass. He’d never seen such chaos. Stains covered the chief’s yellow wraptrap skin. Bruises showed through his clear facial wrap, and blood oozed from a wound on his leg.

“Wh-what happened? You’re hurt.”

“That damned cat you rescued, Phed. He’s hiding somewhere. Left a trail. CQ will have to find him. But never mind that. Need you to prepare an incubator for—”

Phed stumbled forward as someone exploded from the wraptrap and grabbed him from behind for balance. He swiveled to see who’d barreled into him.

Cimi Nuja looked unkempt in a pink, oddly fitted, smash-proof wrap. A transparent, flame-shaped bubble rose over her white tuft.

“Oh, Phed, sorry. I didn’t expect someone to be—” Cimi’s jaw dropped and then hung open an uncharacteristically long moment before it resumed. “What’s happened? Chief, you’re injured. Oh, no. It’s a crime scene. We’ve got to call medical, secure and protect the scene,

initiate preliminary surveillance, evaluate—”

“Not a crime scene, Cimi. An accident.” Dorf thrust an open hand toward the would-be forensic pathologist. His gesture stopped her mid-word, and Phed watched in fascination as her tuft flickered between shades of green.

“But you—”

“Not the problem, Cimi,” Dorf said. He pointed. “That is. Over here. Looks like it’s growing.” Chief’s arm stretched toward an acorn-size, pulsating globule wobbling in a soupy slime and motioned them closer.

“Step over here—careful. Don’t slip. Watch your step and walk to the side. What’s your opinion?”

Phed thought it sounded like a command more than a question. He waited, giving Cimi plenty of room as she tiptoed in Dorf’s direction before following her.

Cimi’s hand flew toward her face. When she spoke it sounded like she was pinching her nose. “Yuck, that’s poop.”

Phed peeked around her to look at the floor. Sure enough, one fully formed stool rested at the edge of a gooey mass with feces smashed throughout. “How’d that get in here?”

Cimi released her nose as she leaned over and sniffed. “It’s fresh.”

Trying not to lose his breakfast while asking himself why he’d voluntarily shown up early, Phed remained silent analyzing the situation.

With her tuft flashing almost as yellow as Olym then fading back to white, Cimi carried on. “I get it, Chief. You were attacked by an animal that pooped from the surprise it got when everything came tumbling down. It scratched you, and now you could have a zoonotic infection—maybe anthrax spores, the worst.”

She placed her hands squarely on her hips. “I’m talking deadly, Chief. You need medical attention.” She lifted her DB to her mouth.

“Ms. Nuja.” Dorf’s authoritative voice stopped her. “That’s not necessary.”

He pointed again to the pulsating blob amid the fecal slime. “The crisis is this.”

Phed sensed movement behind him and turned just in time to see Kurl pivot and retreat through the wraptrap. Kurl’s action was so fast neither Dorf nor Cimi noticed, and Phed smiled to himself. *Kurl and chaos aren’t compatible.*

As Dorf said, “Tell me what you see. Describe it in detail,” Phed remained silent, but he bent over beside Cimi to get a closer look.

“Orange.” Cimi spouted the first trait that came to mind and let her imagination run.

“This little critter’s enthusiastic, friendly, positive, and intelli—”

“Cut it, Cim.”

Startled, she looked up at her boss. She’d never heard Dorf drop the last syllable of her name before.

His voice sounded even sterner when he continued. “No time for speculation. Factually, what do you see?”

Cimi blinked a reality check. “Yuck. It looks like booger mucous from someone who’s been working in a cheese factory, picked their nose, and rolled it in egg white.”

Another glance told her that Chief was smoking at the nostrils. Beside her, Phed emitted a choked, coughing chortle.

“One moment,” she said as she tapped her DB. “I’m beta testing a microprobe app. It’ll show you what video microscopy finds inside this curious lump.”

Dorf rolled his eyes, doubtful, yet hoping Cimi's DB really could record video at the molecular level. He turned his attention to his intern.

"Phed, prepare Habitat Four in the observation pod. Careful where you step."

"H-4 in the OP. I'm on it, Chief."

Dorf watched Phed pick his way through the destruction and rush out of sight.

Cimi's voice pulled Dorf's attention back to the matter at hand. "Chief, I've completed the video. It's only three seconds, but you've got to see this."

Her tuft again radiated a bright yellow as Dorf leaned forward to see what she'd captured.

"Activate a heads-up view so we can both observe."

He studied the enlarged video. *Did it catch the mitotic phase of cell development?*

"Looks like cell division to me, Chief. You're the expert, but I'd say—"

"Run that through again," Dorf demanded.

Cimi obliged, and Dorf once more observed the cell changing from prophase through telophase until the video ended. He ran a hand over his brow.

"Impressive app, but it cut off the cytokinesis. Shoot it again. This time, give it six seconds."

"No problem, Chief." Cimi bent closer, held her DB near the specimen, and then backed up almost imperceptibly.

"Um, look. The little fella's no longer globular but elongated, kind of egg-shaped. Could it be growing that fast? Could this be like a thriller when the blob grows into a monster and destroys the world? Chief, this is weird. I like weird—but not creepy weird."

Dorf frowned at her, hoping she'd interpret it as a *stop jabbering* look while he sent

another message to Chico.

Cimi finished the longer video and sent the results directly to Dorf's DB.

Now Chief can rerun it as many times as he wants. This is crazy cool stuff. I'm gonna mathematically analyze its visible movements.

The blob pulsed a steady 121 times per minute. Cimi's remarkable brain synapses fired in all directions, scanning her memory for heartbeat rates of raptans, mammals, amphibians, birds, and fish.

Nothing seems relevant. This is futile. I need to investigate another approach. Maybe if I try—

A gasp from behind broke Cimi's concentration, and she whirled around.

Chico Quwattle, wide-eyed with disbelief at the destruction before her, bolted out of the wraptrap into the chaos. Cimi raised a hand as if to block her way. Beyond Cimi, Dorf glared.

"It's a crime scene, I mean, there's been an accident, CQ," said Cimi, still holding her open hand up. "Stay put. Can't disturb the evidence. Chief's been injured"—Cimi swiveled her head toward Dorf as she continued speaking—"but we've got a little critter to isola..."

Chico understood at once why her talkative friend's words had tapered off. One look at the chief's expression would have stolen anyone's speech.

Dorf's eyes now bored into Chico's.

"That cat of yours is in this lab, CQ. Find him. He might need medical attention. Have to isolate him."

"You're hurt? And Sequence is hurt?" Chico's hearts raced with worry.

“Follow that trail.”

Dorf’s tone of voice, so unlike what Chico had heard from him before, punctuated her impression of calamity as he pointed at red smudges, some with paw prints. Gesturing toward the destruction on the floor, he said, “Walk around this mess.”

“S-Se-Sequence?” Chico stammered as her eyes darted around the room.

She raised both arms. “I had no idea my kitty wasn’t with Dr. Gimmel. He was supposed to be examining Sequence for how well his injuries have healed. How’d he end up inside here? Did he cause all this? I’m so, so sorry, Chief.”

Overwhelmed by the destruction her cat had caused, Chico scarcely noticed the pulsating mass on the floor as she tiptoed around the wreckage to follow the trail.

“Kitty? Kitty? Here, Sequence. Kitty, where are you?” she pleaded.

Observations

On his knees and wearing gloves to his elbows, Dorf scooped the unknown thing off the floor into a crucible. Oblivious to his surroundings, he studied the little yellowish ball as it flattened then plumped-up in rhythmic fashion.

“I found Sequence,” Chico said, screeching to a halt, bending over beside Dorf, and breathing hard. catching her breath. “I hope I didn’t startle you. You seemed to be in a faraway zone.”

Dorf tightened both hands on the vessel.

“He jumped into my arms from the top of a fume hood and didn’t seem to be in any pain. Phed put him in Habitat One to keep him out of trouble until Dr. Gimmel arrives.” For a moment she paused, studying him. “I’m so sorry, Chief.”

The chief of genetics drew in a deep breath. *Showing my frustration won’t help*. “Quick work, CQ. Didn’t think you’d have much trouble finding him.” He looked at the object in his hands. “Accidents happen.”

He slowly stood and held the vessel out to show her. “Now, we’ve got this specimen to study.”

Chico peered at the pulsating lump. Her eyes widened. “No wonder Cimi’s so excited.

How'd it develop?"

"Follow me. Have to get this into H-4. Cimi should have joined Phed there by now."

As they walked to the observation pod, Dorf explained how the glutinous substance showed up in the aftermath of the accident. Reaching the OP, he said, "Expect this to be a temporary situation."

Dorf led Chico into the crescent-shaped observation pod, a room large enough to monitor the effectiveness of experimental vaccines on ten faketye subjects. These manufactured faketyes mimicked the appearance, thought processes, emotions, bodily functions, and nervous systems of the abundant rabbityle species found on Authair. The advent of the artificial replacements rendered the use of live animals as test subjects unnecessary, a practice banned in research laboratories throughout Authair.

Approaching the observation pod, Dorf nodded toward Habitat One, not wanting to disturb its troublemaking resident, Sequence, who'd curled into a ball and fallen asleep. Continuing his explanation, Dorf walked ahead. "These habitats are installed with system monitoring and nutrition dispensing mechanisms. Your pet will be well cared for in his temporary home."

He left Chico admiring her sleeping pet and quickened his pace toward H-4.

Just ahead, Cimi and Phed stood beside Habitat Four as if waiting for a dignitary of the highest order. No one—not even Cimi—said a word while Dorf approached with the specimen.

The chief of genetics bent near the ground before he let go of one hand on the crucible and gently pressed an entry spot in H-4's flexichem. The double-polymer wall of the habitat gave way to the pressure of Dorf's fist, allowing space enough for hand and crucible to enter.

Cimi, Phed, and Chico sucked in their breath as he tilted the crucible. The pulsating glob

rolled onto the welcoming soft green turf equipped with sensory detectors. The apparent life form wobbled, lengthening and shortening while maintaining a rhythmic motion.

Dorf set the empty vessel next to the active, egg-shaped mass and slowly pulled his hand back through the first layer of polymer, which closed seamlessly, then through the electronic decontamination space between the inner and outer layers of the habitat's wall. The outer layer sealed as Dorf withdrew his hand, leaving no evidence the barrier had been penetrated. He sighed, observed the specimen continuing to pulsate, relaxed his shoulders, and smiled, looking around to catch the others' responses.

Chico and Phed stood transfixed, watching the nameless thing wobble back and forth.

Cimi put her hands on the habitat's side and pressed her head close, causing her flame-shaped tuft cover to crunch inward. When she turned toward Dorf, it popped into shape revealing shades of what he'd learned to recognize as her empathetic pink. Wide-eyed, she exclaimed, "Chief, I'm feeling a strange sensation toward this unidentified organism. And I think this thing's going to burst open." She turned back and pointed, bracelets clanking. "Look at that wobble. It's like something's inside and wants to get out."

Above the habitat, a message flashed on the wall: *H-4 ready for data upload.*

All eyes lifted as Dorf instructed Phed. "Set it to monitor weight, length, respiration, heartbeats, organic release, sound, and movement. Assign a semimoist environment to refresh every hour."

"Whose DB gets the data?" Cimi blurted.

Making eye contact with Cimi, Dorf peeled off the gloves and dropped them in the sanitizer before responding. "Phed's got that task. He'll be monitoring any developments. One observer's enough, Cimi. You've got your assignment with Kurl. That takes priority."

Cimi looked annoyed. Dorf mental-noted: *Cimi displeased—tuft almost red*. At the same time, he motioned everyone to join him at the conference table.

Phed hurried over to the crescent-shaped table at the center of the pod. Chico seated herself, but Cimi remained standing by H-4. She looked on from a distance, alternating her gaze between Dorf and the pulsating mass next to her. Those waiting at the table studied the monitor's moving graph. Phed, showing his impatience, said, "Come on, Cimi."

Dorf eyed Cimi with a *do-not-delay-this-meeting* look that brought results. She double-stepped to her seat and stuffed her fuchsia wraptrap's bundle of skirt under the table's top while apologizing. "Sorry, Chief. What next?"

Dorf leaned both hands on the table, making eye contact with all three while trying to ignore Cimi's tuft. It wavered through the entire spectrum of greens not seeming to know which shade to accept. He cleared his throat then said, "We've got an anomaly in H-4. Gestational growth phases appear consistent with those of animal species. However, growth rate is uncharacteristically rapid."

He paused and stood straight. "Do not speak, path, or breathe a word about this event. No need to fuel the dissidents' flame. If the anomaly survives the sleep-cycle, we'll reconsider options. Meantime, we must identify and archive contents of all broken vials. Hopefully, we'll be able to determine the origin of this pulsating mass. Is each of you clear on keeping this quiet?"

Dorf watched everyone nod assent.

"Good. Phed, I'm assigning you to catalog contents of all missing vials and monitor data from H-4. Cimi, you're to enter geographic coordinates of where each specimen landed before anyone removes them from the floor. CQ, need you to deliver Sequence securely to Dr. Gimmel with instructions to examine him for injuries, perform necessary first aid, and then embed a

territorial chyp to prevent further escapes.”

The four left to begin their assignments. Dorf walked behind Cimi on his way to the scene of destruction in the lab and noticed her tuft had settled on a blue spray of curls. He mental-noted she seemed less talkative and unusually calm as the curls bounced with her lively gait.

Deep into his third hour of much-needed sleep, Dorf was aroused by Phed’s path. “Chief, don’t mean to bother you at this hour but can’t risk sending an image. Need you in OP, asap.”

Moments later, Dorf stood in yellow lab skin, its lower half covering creases of flattened sleepwear. He stared into H-4. Beside him, Phed looked on in silence.

Inside the habitat, Dorf saw zero evidence of the pulsating glob he’d deposited hours ago. Instead, a walnut-size egg with a pale orange leathery shell sat motionless on the green turf.

Dorf studied the monitor above H-4. The weight graph gradually angled up then leveled off. Its time stamp showed the last two hours registered no weight gain. The movement indicator paralleled that of the weight monitor. According to the display, respiration and heartbeats continued inside the shell, each a steady rhythm of peaks and valleys. The organic release monitor, which recorded anything an organism deposited on the turf, read *none*.

Dorf rubbed his chin. “Mmm. Phed, run H-4’s observation video. Let’s find out how the shell formed.”

Phed fast-reversed to the globular mass forming an outer casing. Rerunning the video from there, they watched the mass bob and turn; each turn displayed a more defined casing until a leathery-looking shell remained, unmoving on the artificial turf.

“Nothing unexpected there. Not worth hanging around now,” Dorf said, stifling a yawn.

“Any further changes, contact me.”

The exhausted chief left Phed analyzing statistics and walked out of the OP toward the wraptrap. *Sure hope absence of exterior movement or growth indicates embryo’s approaching demise. Don’t want another crisis. Have a vaccine to develop.*

No sooner had Dorf approached the now-cleared area of destruction than a glialpath entered his brain, stopping him midstride. “Hatching’s begun, Chief. You’ll wanna see this.”

Dorf ran as if his feet were on fire. The graphs above H-4’s monitor danced with data as he skidded to a halt outside Habitat Four. Inside, a tiny, cat-like nose oozed from a broken shell’s inner membrane. More of the creature emerged. Its head, now fully visible, sported feline ears. Between them, a mass of fur, matted like a wet mane, plastered over closed eyelids.

“Hey, Little Fella,” Dorf said, feeling oxytocin kick in as he watched tiny lids open and close against the matted fur. *Don’t understand why my brain’s creating this one-way conversation, but it feels right.*

The little fella cocked its head, rolling blue eyes toward the friendly greeting.

“Come on, buddy, you can do it. You can squeeze yourself out.”

After directing the new habitat data into an ID app for determining species and gender, Phed had focused on the changing results. Now, ignoring the data feed as Chief spoke to the new life form, Phed added his encouragement. “You’ve almost got it. Almost. Don’t give up.”

A head half the size of the shell turned toward the intern. Its blue eyes seemed much too big for its body as they peered up, reflecting the gray of Phed’s as it tugged forward. One leathery leg emerged.

“That’s it, for sure. Keep it up, Champ,” Phed cheered. “Keep it up.”

The creature's lizard-like body squeezed out and squirmed free of the broken shell. Matted fur ridged its back from the clump between its ears all the way to the tip of its long pointy tail.

“Way to go!” Dorf and Phed exclaimed in unison. “Way to go,” Phed repeated.

As if in response, the tiny creature lifted upon its hind legs, using its tail to balance, and looked quizzically from Dorf to Phed and back again.

Phed scratched his head. He looked at Dorf then the monitor. “Looks like it's a he,” Phed said as the gender sensor registered male. “But the ID block still reads *unknown species*.”

Phed's excitement ebbed, and he rubbed his forehead in worry. “Chief, I've gotta find out what to feed him if he's gonna stay alive.”

Boots on the Ground

Ursula relaxed her fist and allowed the membrane revealing her rubellite to close over the biopearl. The power glow it left coursed through her body. “Zee power is Urzula’s. Urzula vill now have zee upper hand with Mumba.”

She had given *His Excellency Blah Blah Blah* one entire sleep-cycle to prepare for the meeting—her meeting.

Ursula sauntered to her shoe closet and tapped a silvery polished toenail on a DNA reader; the copper-embossed door opened to a wealth of neatly arranged shoes. Balancing on one sinewy leg then the other, she slid long narrow feet into her *naughty grays* and strutted out of her private suite, allowing herself a secret smile with every stiletto step.

To everyone but Ursula, an audience with His Excellency Mumba Zola President for Life, Lord of All the Beasts of the Land and Fishes of the Sea, and Conqueror of All Valympya, usually foretold an invitation to one’s last meal. To Ursula, it meant an opportunity to impress—if not frighten—the dictator with her latest raptanitarian creation. Of course, the definition of *raptanitarian* as mutually understood by Ursula and Mumba differed from that of most Authairians. To these two, such a discovery bettered only the Valympyon race to the exclusion of Olympyons and to the triumph of Valympya’s already powerful president, Mumba himself.

His Excellency Mumba Zola, President for Life and so on, watched the news in his strategy room, pleased the source of deaths from an unknown virus hadn't been identified. These 20,000 deaths were only the beginning.

He checked his DB and grinned. *In ten hours and seventeen minutes, Olympyon vacationers enjoying the sun and sand will become victims of My Excellency's second drop.*

Mumba had never shown interest in becoming a virologist, but as a student, he'd done well enough in science to understand that engineered bud membranes encapsulated by dumbbell-shaped viral particles could live many weeks. He also knew any buds that hadn't landed on Olympyon raptans had fallen onto plants and animals; most would find their way to raptans.

The megalomaniac's smile widened, but he straightened his expression in preparation for leaving his office quarters. He tapped his fur beanie, assuring it properly covered the crown of his head, and commanded, "Holovid off."

The live image of a tropical paradise in action disappeared, leaving a display on the strategy room walls showing Valympyon military personnel receiving awards from Mumba himself. Award ceremony events, important for the goodwill of his troops, were the only occasions when Mumba's smile could be seen by the public.

Dr. Ursula von Menglebort didn't appear in any of the walls' displays. She held no military title, yet His Excellency tolerated almost any request from her. Ursula was the vehicle through which he would conquer Authair. For now, he'd see her every wish satisfied. And yet, he relished the power of being able to cut off Ursula's open-ended budget, a trump card only he could play.

Her true work, a state secret, the public knew only as discoveries combating disease. She'd been awarded a Fellow of Mumba Zola's Empirical Scientific Society, the most prestigious award given throughout Valympya for scientific contribution to raptanity. Of course, she was also the only one ever to have received that title.

Mumba had ordered a hidden, underground wave room built for Ursula, somewhat like his own clandestine communication room, for their private meetings such as this. Ursula's, he knew, was accessible only from a lift inside her office.

He spoke to his servant, Jeeves, who awaited orders in the north corner of the strategy room. "I'll be indisposed for twenty minutes."

"Yes, Excellency. Twenty minutes."

As His Excellency passed, he saw Jeeves notifying his DB to set a reminder, as he'd rightly assumed he would. His Excellency had long ago released Jeeves from the requirement to recite his master's full title, a gift bestowed on Jeeves alone as a trusted manservant. No other servant claimed such privilege. Mumba Zola—knowing of the stellar reputation Jeeves had earned as manservant to Valympya's former King Vasistdas—had spared Jeeves after assassinating his predecessor and the king's entire household. Mumba had correctly calculated the manservant would prove exceptionally faithful to the president who'd spared his life.

No other servants had survived.

Two guards flanking the door uncrossed spears and stepped aside as master and manservant left the strategy room. Passing copper-clad sculptures of Mumba's likeness in various royal poses, they silently entered the lift and descended.

"Twenty minutes," Mumba repeated.

“Yes, Excellency.” Jeeves backed away from the wave room’s door as His Excellency’s touch activated it.

Only rarely, in solitary moments such as this, did Jeeves allow his body to sag and his eyes to moisten. He dared not show the sadness, terror, and heartbreak that otherwise he hid from the world.

Despite the devastating loss of his beloved King Vasistdas, Jeeves maintained loyalty to his profession—as had his father, grandfather, and all his family’s first-hatched males for many generations.

Jeeves checked his DB. If, for any unexpected reason, His Excellency didn’t emerge on time, the loyal servant would summon rescue.

Paneled in rabbityle fur and devoid of furniture except for a customized chair that accepted Mumba’s rotund body without complaint, the wave room gave him pleasure. His chubby hands stroked the cat’s paw armrests, and he smirked, thinking of Ursula waiting for him. He imagined her tapping her nails, impatiently planning another insult to hurl at him, knowing both rooms built for secrecy lacked surveillance technology to record the secrets—or insults—they shared.

He expected she’d be disappointed, perhaps even enraged, at the low number of deaths from the first drop of toxic buds, though the death toll continued rising.

Meanwhile, His Excellency would give her bony face one minute longer to stew before he connected the holomeet.

Normally, all meetings with Valympyon subjects were preceded by his royal guard announcing, “His Excellency Mumba Zola, President for Life, Lord of All the Beasts of the Land

and Fishes of the Sea, and Conqueror of All Valympya, will now engage the subject.” The secrecy of his conversations in the wave room with Ursula, however, required Mumba to introduce himself, and he took pride in delivering the full announcement as if he were a guard. *This time*, he decided, *My Excellency will honor the doctor’s contribution by elevating her from a mere subject to a recipient.*

Inside her wave room, Ursula sat stiffly in her gray fitted tuxedo jacket with standing collar, not a thread out of place. Her nails, painted to match, rhythmically tapped on each polished armrest of the room’s sole furnishing, which faced a wall designed for holovid viewing. She again admired her naughty grays before she voiced her code. “Ursula one, three, nine.”

A DNA-reader matched molecule of breath with her sound waves, and a blue screen appeared, displaying *Waiting for Connection*. She waited and waited, continuing to tap her long nails on the arms of her chair while swinging one naughty gray in rapid arcs. Two endless moments later, Mumba came frowning into view, wearing his tasseled brown beanie of royal-weave angora with a cape to match and filling his lion-skin upholstered chair.

She kept up her nail tapping as His Excellency opened the meeting with his usual baritone announcement. Almost usual.

Nail tapping stopped. “Rezipient?” In Ursula’s mind, she merited far above the status of *rezipient*. She sat tall, the camera lens tilting to her height. “Zee One and Only Dr. Ursula von Menglebort, Developer of Weapons of War, requires proper recognition by His Excellency.”

Mumba’s voice grew two decibels. “His Excellency retracts the word *recipient*.” He paused and glared at her. “Is the One and Only Dr. Ursula von Menglebort, Developer of Weapons of War, prepared for her delivery?”

“Mumba get on with it. His Excellency is such a megalomaniac.” Ursula knew only she could get away with calling him this, but impatient with the ruler’s ridiculous formality, the virologist continued. “Seventeen minutes. Now Urzula has just seventeen minutes. Zee buds. They are doing their job but with too few deaths. Your Excellency saw zee broadcazt, yes?”

Mumba looked directly at her through the camera lens, displaying no emotion. “Twenty thousand, six hundred seventy-one. There will be more in weeks to come. I am confident the second aerial drop will accelerate the process.”

Before Ursula could argue, he made a proclamation. “My Excellency, therefore, proclaims the first stage of Project Viral Destruction of Olympos a success. Ursula von Menglebort shall be awarded recognition for these results. However…”

The megalomaniac paused until she grudgingly sat forward with full attention.

“However, this will not be sufficient to conquer the Olympyons. My Excellency needs boots on the ground. The Project VDO ceremony will be delayed until you’ve completed Project Fearless Army. My Excellency has reviewed the effects of the enzyme’s beta test. Impressive, but”—he enunciated his next question with exaggerated emphasis on the last word—“how far along is the development of the enzyme’s *antidote*?”

At Mumba’s orders, Ursula had been working on Project Fearless Army even before she’d finalized the formula for the lethal virus buds. She’d been developing an army of genetically modified individuals who’d seek out Olympyons and destroy them with one touch. Now she reveled in the opportunity to reveal her progress to the only raptan with whom she could discuss this secret.

“Zee genetically modified Project FA orphans are Dr. Urzula von Menglebort’s *notouchims*. One zousand male orphans meet zee criteria for age, weight, and height. Zee

subjects are one-third through their transformation. Their fear receptors have been removed, and they've been given growth-stunting hormones to limit height to one meter, satisfying His Excellency's demand. Their taste buds have been modified to accept a bland diet."

"And the antidote?"

She leaned forward, her bony fingers tightening over the ends of the armrests. "No one will confuse notouchims for Valympyons. Notouchims grow hair on their heads."

She lifted one hand and leaned forward, gray nails tapping her baldness. "Not a stupid tuft like Ms. Cimi Nuja's"—using both hands, she made a circular motion over her head—"but hair zat covers zee entire crown."

She pretended to ignore Mumba's glare glazing over as she continued. "Urzula's procedure limits growth to two inches of white hair. Each strand lives—"

"Stop," Mumba boomed. "Keep to the point. The enzyme's antidote. Where are you hiding it? Where are the trials demonstrating a successful antidote?"

Incredulous, Ursula's face blazed with rage. "His Excellency believes it insignificant to be the first Authairian to learn of Urzula's development of self-perpetuating hair follicle growth? Very well. Raptanitarian developments by Urzula will find a welcome elsewhere."

She snapped off communication.

"Zat will teach him," she spat. "How dare Blood-Beer Belly accuse Urzula of hiding zee antidote? Zee great Mumba Zola will have to wait on zat one." She stomped into the lift and ascended toward her office. "Now Urzula will take her own sweet time developing it. Ha."

Passing through the empty reception room where employees occasionally found themselves seated while waiting for her orders, Ursula slowed her pace. She entered the starkly appointed outer office—where she allowed only General Gore Andriol to visit as needed—and

headed to a wall of framed awards honoring her various discoveries. Her presence activated a mechanism that separated panels, revealing her inner office haven, which was off-limits to everyone else, including The von Menglebort Genetics Institution's security employees. She stepped through. The wall closed, locking behind her.

The spacious room was lit like an amphitheater with a screen surrounding three sides. Ursula sank into a cushioned swivel chair and kicked off her priceless heels of gray angora, their royal fabric woven exclusively in His Excellency's workshop. They made a muffled landing. Ursula smirked at them as they lay, toes pointing toward each other like two kittens exhausted from a wake-cycle's play. "Naughty kittens," she said, wagging a finger at them.

Mumba had no idea she'd procured the highly prized footwear from his skilled weavers. Her act of defiance in wearing them gave her great pleasure even though Mumba had no way of viewing them during their holomeet. "Power. Ursula owns zee gift of seductive power."

Mumba left the wave room in deep, disturbed thought.

Ursula's red-faced, insubordinate behavior was legendary, but this was the first time her beady black eyes had deepened far enough that she'd cut off His Excellency's private meeting. He'd no patience with her spouting on about creating white hair on notouchims, an unimportant discovery secondary to the project he'd assigned her—creating a bioweapon army and its antidote. The lethal weapon tested successfully, but where was the antidote?

She'd not yet discussed any cure, and every video forwarded from her testing lab documented subjects dying. Not one had survived the grasp of a notouchim's chubby little hand. *Does she have an antidote or not? Did she divert from the question because My Excellency's response angered her, or is she hiding the antidote for her own reasons?*

Mumba Zola looked at Jeeves, who stood waiting for him in the open lift. “I’ll cut off her supply of orphans. She’ll have no more orphans until she’s proven to My Excellency a successful antidote has been developed.”

“Yes, Excellency,” Jeeves responded, though Mumba knew the manservant understood nothing of the subject.

Mumba smiled and continued thinking out loud. “My Excellency will accept proof of the antidote’s effectiveness only when its creator demonstrates her own survival. Ha. Ha ha.”

“Yes, Excellency. Shall we ascend?”

Mumba, still deep in thought, nodded his approval to Jeeves but this time kept silent. *I’ll shut down the orphan recruiting program and install an invisible security force around her building until that miserable Menglebort supplies a successful antidote.*

Before stepping out of the lift, Mumba turned to Jeeves, “Summon Colonel Burdock, head of security at The von Menglebort Genetics Institution. Now!”

Project Fearless Army

Still seething after yester-cycle's infuriating meeting with Blood-Beer Belly, Ursula scanned the holovid collage framing live views of each of her ground-floor labs. From the privacy of her inner office, she zoomed in on the new genetic botanist she'd hired to replicate Chico Quwattle's research in genetically crossed endangered plant species.

This new researcher hadn't been Ursula's first choice for plant geneticist, but Ms. Quwattle, who was, had gone missing after the Valympyon State House explosion. Ursula, of course, refused to tarnish her image with involvement in a fugitive search. When the investigators burst into her lounge the wake-cycle of the explosion, she simply told them, "Yes, Ms. Chico Quwattle was interviewed as a prospective researcher by Dr. Ursula von Menglebort about three hours ago. Zat young woman vill have a promizing future in genetics. Why would she blow up zee building?"

The intruders had then asked, "What do you think she was holding under her jacket, Dr. von Menglebort?"

Ursula'd glared at them. "Perzonal affairs. Dr. Ursula von Menglebort knows nothing about zat woman's perzonal affairs."

Satisfied that her new researcher remained properly occupied after a few more moments of observation, Ursula turned her attention from the left holovid to the center viewscreen where her notouchims were executing daily activities in their subterranean dormitory.

“They’re such sweet little ones,” Ursula cooed. “No one will suspect their touch exudes a deadly enzyme—zee Urzula von Menglebort enzyme—soon to be known as zee Killer-UVM. Heidon will never know Urzula modified his awarded rezeach for this purpose.”

The enzyme she’d genetically altered, when introduced into the genes of an Authairian host, become a lethal weapon. In this case, the hosts were innocent orphans. When these orphans touched any raptan—whether Olympyon or Valympyon—the enzyme oozed from the orphans’ skin, absorbing instantly into their victims’ pores, causing swelling of the throat, bloating of the abdomen, severe nausea, bursting blood vessels, suffocation, and then death.

In many ways, these genetically modified orphans behaved more like the botts operating Authair’s assembly lines and service industries than like organic life forms. In their routine and secure lives, they survived only to eat, drink, work, and sleep. Ursula had programmed them to prepare their breakfast oatmeal, lunch salad, and dinner soup in rotating performance assignments. With similar regularity, they sanitized their own living quarters. Void of emotion, they went about the motions of their imprisoned lives, the younger notouchims learning responsibilities from the trained notouchims.

Ursula frowned as she zoomed onto two newly modified orphans. While activating the bunk-making devices for each row of five double-tiered sleep quads, the pair chatted incessantly with one another. “Zat must stop now.” Conversation, innocent as it seemed between most notouchims, Ursula permitted only during activity time, never during performance, the notouchims’ vernacular for job tasks.

Her eyes narrowed as the tutor supervising the younger two made no attempt to silence them. “How dare zat tutor allow such behavior.” She zoomed closer and rotated the tutor’s hologram to read the number on his badge. *There it is.*

Ursula tapped N-9 into her DB’s Orphan App and voiced instructions. “Silence them. N-Nine, retrain on level one, section five-A, now. Achieve one hundred tezt score. Then, and only then return to performance.”

She’d memorized every section and subsection of the *Notouchim Instruction Guide*, an easy task since she’d patterned it after her own disciplined childhood. The von Mengleborts handed down life lessons generation to generation through the *Menglebort Tome*, their instruction guide for daily living. She ordered her notouchims schooled on similar regulations and rules and expected them to recite any portion of the NIG upon request. She waited for N-9’s trained reply.

“N-Four will sub for N-Nine,” came the emotionless response.

Good. At least N-9 remembered his training to wait for the designated substitute before vacating performance duty—my order perfectly obeyed.

Within three seconds, N-4 arrived at N-9’s post.

“Dr. Ursula von Menglebort vill evaluate N-Nine’s performance at hour five PA.”

She set her DB and turned her attention to the right side of the room to review footage of how the enzyme she’d engineered affected the live subjects for the beta test. Ten panels covered this wall. Each revealed the inside of a small identical room decorated with matching paintings showing children at play. Plush pink fibers carpeted each floor on which sat a white leather couch and chair. Centered in the space between chair and couch rested a low acrylic table with a molded pedestal. Such was the room in which every notouchim met his test victim.

Ursula frequently used prisoners as beta testers even though Valympya's government officially outlawed the practice in all fields of research. She was simply following Mumba's orders. The Raptanitarian Office of His Excellency requested volunteers from ranks of the incarcerated and found many willing participants. After all, they believed they'd be developing social skills by interacting with children hatched with communication impairments, a truly raptanitarian service.

They left their prisons as volunteers, signed over as wards of the Valympyon government. Prison officials saw no need to investigate their absence if such inmates never returned. Family and friends who questioned received a hotline to contact, and its automated voice assured them every effort was being made to examine their concerns. To the present cycle, not one missing prisoner had been located.

Each participant who volunteered for the study had been directed to a room bearing a neatly lettered sign: *Behavior Modification Lounge*. Ursula scanned the panels. One room hummed with activity. Her mouth opened in revulsion. "What a mess zat is." A beetle-bott vacuumed fluids involuntarily released from the latest victim while two others followed, spraying sanitizing solution.

Ursula disliked messes of any kind. Her grimace revealed all but the perfect molars of her lower jaw. She snapped it closed. "Such a pity zat zee prisoners suffer excruziating symptoms before they die, a dizguzting sight."

She advanced the holovid through victim after victim writhing in pain and then falling from the chairs where they'd sat next to the innocent-looking children who'd reached out to hold their hands. Each notouchim remained emotionless while the unsuspecting prisoners doubled over in agony, gagged, convulsed, and died.

“Too bad they ended up incarcerated and then volunteered to help Blood-Beer Belly. Tut, tut.” She glanced through the blur of volunteers choking and vomiting but didn’t slow down to watch their filthy eruptions as they suffocated, unable to expel the vomit welling from their bloated abdomens into blocked esophagi.

She’d seen enough of the live feed and changed the view to data. A rare smile of pleasure spread across her mud-green face as she reviewed the beta test. “Urzula’s genetic modifications work superbly. This will be zee pinnacle of Urzula’s accomplishments.” One hundred prisoners as control subjects had proven the enzyme effective, a perfect score.

Ursula had succeeded. The enzyme she’d created would, through the notouchim army, put boots on the ground for the final sweep of death to Olympyons.

Now I have only to create a way to denature it by unfolding zee enzyme, making it incapable of causing death. The Valympyon army vill then eliminate any surviving notouchims without themselves becoming victims.

Ursula sat back, closed her eyes, and stretched out her long legs, crossing them at the ankles. “Zee antidote. Urzula vill develop zee denaturant in Urzula’s own good time. Blood-Beer Belly vill just have to wait.”

Blackmail

Chico knew the routine. Ponce had hired security to transport and accompany her on these trips not only to hide her identity but assure her safe passage to and from PHI. Her sisscuber pilot's wait should be short. Trailing behind her, the burly bodyguard, Kluh, waited in reception. He, along with everyone else in her new world, called her CQ or Ms. Maize.

The door to 5-A was open. Chico walked through, smiling at DA Harimata despite still not fully trusting the woman. If everything went well this wake-cycle, Ms. Maize would need no further office visits to monitor her recovery from the prosthesis operation.

Harimata's reply seemed more cheerful than usual when she offered, "Good wake-cycle, Ms. Maize, you look quite well. It's been a busy morning here. I'll have your shell ready in a jiff."

"No problem. Take your time." Chico entered the changing room, delighted the DA was in such good spirits. The patient-wear, a disposable full-body cling-on, happily worn by Chico because of its comfortable plant-based fabric, came in two colors. Selecting the blue, not the orange—*too much like Harimata's makeup*—she stepped into the garment and heard a distant *snap* as if the entry door to the vitals room had locked. She'd no way of peeking out to see

without being noticed and didn't want Harimata to know her feelings of distrust. With each micromoment, however, those feelings grew more intense.

Why lock the door? Closed is normal, not locked. She'll have to unlock it soon. The doctor's due to arrive. Should I be concerned that Harimata's behavior is uncharacteristically cordial?

Chico couldn't remember ever getting the "Good wake-cycle, Ms. Maize, you look quite well" routine from Harimata. Usually, she announced, "Your body shell's ready," and then put hands on her hips, showing off those biceps and glaring a hurry-it-up look.

I could path an alert to Kluh. He'd break through with one elbow. Imagining his muscular elbow breaking through the door eased Chico's paranoia. She decided to ignore her misgivings and stepped out of the changing room.

"All's prepared for your final exam, Ms. Maize." DA Harimata affected such a smile the dimple in the middle of her chin went flat.

Chico felt a chill, but she smiled back, hoping her perceptions were patient-nerves. "Thank you. I feel quite recovered and strong now, back to normal, really."

As she sat, the examination chair measured her temperature, weight, and features, and then automatically lowered her into a reclining position.

"Your progress has been exceptional," Harimata said, watching the transparent shell emerge from beneath the patient's chair.

Chico's and Harimata's eyes met as the shell crept over the young plant geneticist.

"It must be rewarding when your patients improve," Chico said, trying to smile through the curved plexi.

The shell completed its journey, sequestering the patient. She must now remain still while sensors sent electrical signals to her vital organs, analyzing their functions. She knew if Harimata had set the system properly, the doctors assigned to her case would immediately learn her physical condition through the patient data relayed to their DBs in real time.

“It’s even more rewarding when my patients reveal their *true* identity, Ms. Chico Quwattle.”

Chico didn’t have to ask those sneering lips to repeat themselves. *Chico Quwattle, Chico Quwattle*, rang out echoing through her brain.

Her identity had been discovered. She broke into a sweat.

“Oh, you’re upset, my dear. Don’t worry about your medical report. It’s been completed. Turns out you’re as healthy and fit as yours truly. In fact, Dr. Krymer signed off and will see you in six months.”

Hearts racing, Chico heaved onto her elbows, and the shell’s safety catch released. She pushed a hand in the space, forcing the shell up.

“I wouldn’t do that my dear. You surely want to hear about the welfare of your younger brother, Zak. That is his name?” Harimata peeled CQ’s fingers from the edge of the elongated dome and pushed down on the shell, clamping it shut.

There was only room for Chico to half-sit leaning on her elbows, hearts throbbing. “Get me out of here, and what do you mean Zak’s welfare?” Despite her panic, emergency training kicked in. *Think clearly, breathe deeply, and listen. Then, plan your escape.*

“I believe your grammy’s daughter is Aunt Helyn. You can be assured your grammy and her daughter are together with your brother, Zak—such a cutie.”

The orange brows raised and lowered in an evil dance of pretended innocence.

“My grammy too?” Chico was incredulous. “What, what have you done with Grammy and Aunt Helyn?” *You evil pervert.* The invisible curse flew silently from the glare of Chico’s eyes.

Harimata two-handedly waved her captive’s desperation away then leaned closer. She peered through the plexi into Chico’s face. “No, no. I’ve done nothing to harm your family. On the contrary, Ms. Quwattle. I bring greetings from General Gore Andriol, who’s entertaining them in his accommodations. He would like some help in this regard and thought you’d be more than happy to oblige.”

Chico stared into the beady, orange-fringed eyes of evil.

“Here, my dear. This should put you at ease.”

DA Harimata tapped her DB and projected a holoivid that filled the airspace outside the shell directly in Chico’s line of vision. Her grandmother came into view.

Chico gasped.

Grammy was wearing an orange and white striped bodysuit damp with what looked like bloodstains. She was held fast to a steel wall, arms above her head in cuffs, feet in shackles, with a large band of plexi supporting her at the waist. Her head drooped.

On Grammy’s right Aunt Helyn, with eyes closed and blood streaming from shackled wrists above her head, weakly hummed a song.

Between them, in similar attire and restraints customized for a juvenile, Zak whimpered.

Grammy said, “I don’t know what’s happened to Chico, Zak. Let’s try not to worry. Valym will care for her.”

Grammy didn't pay homage to Valym on a regular basis; only in dire circumstances did she invoke the name. Chico imagined Zak had become familiar with the God of All Protection only since his sister's disappearance.

This is all my fault, she inwardly wailed.

Tears streamed down Zak's cheeks. With no one to brush them away, they dripped off his chin. He looked up, sniffing and sobbing. "But Auntie Helyn, she's hurt too. I want to—"

DA Harimata stopped the holovid and wrinkled her forehead. "You see, dear, the general could use your help."

Chico restrained herself from pounding on the dome. *Anything to save them*. She had learned to layer fear over anger, hope atop fear, and above that, action. Numbed and sweating, she inhaled then exhaled again and again. Finally, she lifted her head to the enemy, suppressing the urge to aim her weapon and eliminate the foe.

"How can I be of service to the general?" She couldn't believe that question ushered from her lips. From now on, though, her responses would come from her training, not her hearts.

"That's better, my dear." Harimata released the dome and stepped aside while it retracted.

Chico crouched and peeled free of the perspiration-laden chair, not waiting for it to raise and tilt her to a standing position.

The DA pointed to a corner of the room designed for doctor-patient consultation. "Here, let's sit down and discuss your request."

Now it's my request we are going to discuss. Is she for real? Chico's body obeyed, and she sat, realizing just one little table separated her from Harimata the Horrible. She shivered.

Harimata spoke as if it were a routine business proposition. "General Andriol will expect a daily response to his questions concerning activity at PHI. If one wake-cycle passes without a

report, Zak will be the first victim of your failure. His right arm will be ripped off at the shoulder in full view of your grammy and Aunt Helyn.” Harimata demonstrated holding the imagined victim while tearing away flesh and bone.

Chico’s body trembled as bile reached her mouth. “I’d like some water, please.”

It didn’t sound like her voice. She looked in the direction of the door to see if someone else had entered.

“I’m so sorry. Of course, dear, you’re thirsty. Here.” Harimata grinned as she handed Chico a bottle.

Knowing she was in shock and needed nourishment, Chico took the bottle but said nothing, wishing her captor would drink the drugs she suspected must be in the bottle she’d just been handed. The first sip tasted fine and the following two gulps refreshing. She held the bottle in her lap, clinging to hope.

Her head cleared, and she began to understand the power of the gruesome threat. If Zak survived the pain and trauma, his arm could be replaced—but what about its precious claw, the evolutionary remnant from prehistoric time when males thrust their blades into meaty boars for sustenance? It now signaled the coming of age for male Authairians, promising them the disciplined training of kan-du as an honorable defense against injustice.

What can I possibly do to free Zak? Could he ever recover from the psychological effects of such torture?

Chico watched and listened as Harimata’s skinny orange lips formed instructions explaining the method of communication Chico must use between herself and the general. The captor’s words conveyed an added layer of threat. “For now, no Valympyon knows the true

whereabouts of the notorious and sought-after Chico Quwattle—except for you, General Andriol, and me—and it will remain that way, providing Ms. CQ Maize cooperates.”

Harimata opened a drawer in the table that separated them. She removed an opal-covered compact, four centimeters in diameter. Holding it in her palm, she inserted her fingernail between its lips. The top sprang open.

The hateful DA tilted the compact so Chico could view the inside and said, “This is an ancient Authairian coin.” She set the compact on the table and carefully removed a disk from its velvet home. Pointing to an embossed bust, she continued. “The head is that of Simetra. I’m sure you’re familiar with the myth of her prowess in the hunt.”

She turned it to the reverse. “The coin is one of a kind, its carvings worn almost smooth.”

Harimata pointed to a figure holding a long staff. “Here, Simetra holds a bow and arrow, her dogs beside her.” She put it back and handed the jeweled case to Chico. “Take care not to lose it, Ms. Quwattle. General Andriol will give you specific instructions on its use.”

Chico hesitated and then took it.

“One more item.” From a tiny pouch on her uniform, Harimata produced an object the size and shape of a spring green lentil. It was so close in appearance to the actual seed that Chico, with an advanced degree in plant genetics, couldn’t distinguish the object in Harimata’s hand from the tiny nutritious seed.

“This is your contact device. Keep it open to airwaves at all times.” Harimata rubbed off a clear film and—giving Chico no time to resist—pressed the lentil, identical in color to Chico’s flesh, against the back of her victim’s ear.

Chico felt a spark, heard a snap, and then the sensations vanished.

Harimata released her grip and stepped back, grasping the botanist's left shoulder. "You now have a permanent secure line of communication to General Gore Andriol." She let go and tapped something on her DB. "Your DB is recognized. The invisible app is successfully encrypted. You can expect your first assignment in"—she looked again at her DB—"five seconds."

They waited in silence.

"Confirm your aunt's middle name, Quwattle."

The crude message startled her. *It must be the general himself.* She responded, "Furberville."

"You have in your possession an ancient coin. What is its name?" he demanded.

"Si...Simetra," she stammered.

"Keep Simetra with you at all times. You do not want to anger the goddess—or me—by leaving her behind."

Chico'd been so focused on the general's demands, she hadn't heard Harimata unlock the door and leave.

Kan-Du Attitude

Phed rolled to one side and pulled the fleecy cover over his head, glad he'd been given permission to camp next to his attention-seeking charge in Habitat Four. At least now he could sleep between feedings and record-keeping without coming and going through the wraptrap. He had only to roll out of bed, and there was Unidentified Organism One, UO-1 for short, well within view, often peering at him through the plexi, legs balanced on a log with fingers splayed against the clear barrier. UO-1 seemed to enjoy attention.

As an orphan with no experience handling infants of any species, Phed didn't understand their incessant need to eat, sleep, bathe, and bond, yet Chief expected him to make intelligent observations of UO-1's behavior. Phed took this multifaceted responsibility as a challenge.

So, the intern felt pleased with himself as he'd managed in twenty-eight wake-cycles to record all the data Chief had assigned him, and he'd even trained UO-1 to settle on a branch whenever he said, "Time for a nap." Of course, the nap was for Phed. Once he'd gone to sleep, UO-1 was free to climb, bask in the artificial light, and drink from the lagoon that meandered through the tropical forest of his habitat.

Letting his mind rest wasn't as easy as napping. The PhD student had tried not to become emotionally involved but found it wasn't working. Even though the scientific label imprinted on

Habitat Four—*Specimen Unidentified Organism One*—documented the creature’s official name, Phed couldn’t help but call him Fella or Champ when the two of them were together. Even Little Critter worked better than Specimen UO-1.

And there was that edict announced by the Authairian Genetics Society that troubled Phed: *Any new organism resulting from genetic research must be destroyed.* Technically, UO-1 hadn’t resulted from genetic research—he’d resulted from an accident—but Phed doubted the accident reasoning would hold weight with PHI’s director, who already carried a world of worry on his shoulders. Besides, raising an unknown species in his laboratory drained resources he couldn’t spare. Plus, if it leaked out PHI harbored a strange creature hatched in a lab accident, the institution could lose its license and, most importantly, its funding to complete the research and development for an ABMR cure.

Almost smothered by the fleecy cover when he finally drifted off, Phed jolted when a firm hand on his shoulder jarred him awake.

“Hey, Chief. Didn’t hear anyone enter the observation pod.” He tossed the cover off and jumped out of bed. Tapping UO-1’s plexi, he said, “Wanna say hi to Champ, I mean, UO-1?”

Dorf examined UO-1’s habitat with one eyebrow arched halfway across his scalp. “Have to say”—he gestured toward the artistry of the habitat—“this is curious, Phed. Asked you to print out a three-dimensional environment for sustaining a temporary existence for this specimen. Not a tropical paradise.” Dorf scratched his head. “Wonder how much this lush habitat stimulated UO-1’s rapid development. How’d you measure that?”

The intern had no idea how to respond, but Chief didn’t give him a chance when he continued. “Have to talk to you. Can’t sacrifice more time, mine or yours, on this creature.”

Phed swallowed hard as UO-1 climbed onto a log close to Dorf's towering head. The chief seemed not to notice as he faced the younger raptan and pointed to the conference table.

"Have a seat."

Phed followed Dorf to the table and took a chair across from his boss.

Dorf folded his hands on the table and leaned toward him. "Look, Phed. You've recorded incredible gains in UO-1's development, but you can't get emotionally involved." He sighed. "Permitted you to spend sleep-cycles here for *your* health. UO-1 will stay until Director Heidon reviews the data and observes the specimen directly. He'll then authorize euthanasia—as required by law—and you'll be reassigned to assist me in researching the elusive ABMR virus."

Phed felt the blood drain from his face. He knew the edict to euthanize UO-1 was intended to save lives. But hearing the words *authorize euthanasia* pierced his hearts. He didn't want to hear the rest.

Dorf shook his head. "Still, seems cruel to treat an innocent life this way. But contemplated other options and found none. UO-1 will not suffer."

Phed lifted his eyes to Dorf, inhaled and let out a deep sigh. Chief looked so much older to him now. "I understand the little fella's life isn't in my hands, but there's gotta be so much more we can learn from him alive. It doesn't feel right. Not right."

He paused, registered Chief's resolve, and lowered his head in resignation. "I'll catalog the updates until I'm reassigned." *But I dread the work-cycle when Director Heidon meets my little friend. I hope it's a long way away. A long way.*

Phed knew he wasn't the only one who dared think of UO-1 as a friend. Cimi had confided that she too feared the worse.

“How could I not love this olymfab little guy?” She’d beamed at UO-1 and extended one hand toward him and the other toward her tuft.

Phed had never seen it flash between orange, green, and purple before. He blinked and looked back at Fella as she kept talking.

“I mean, with this adorable, irresistible little critter’s mane of black with its darling emerald filaments as green as my eyes, he’s my buddy.”

They’d both fallen in love with the furry lizard not only because UO-1 was, as Cimi said, adorable and irresistible but because he was intelligent, curious, friendly, and even funny.

If a hand came through UO-1’s cage, he’d slither over to smell and lick it and then probe it with his tiny fingers. Once he dropped a pebble in Phed’s hand and pumped his head when Phed closed his fingers over it. UO-1 tried prying each of Phed’s fingers open with his tiny ones. When Phed opened his fingers all at once, UO-1 jumped into the open hand and grabbed the pebble, attempting to hide it in his own little padded fingers.

When UO-1 saw a familiar face in the observation pod, he’d get as close as his habitat’s restrictions allowed and bob until words came forth from the visitor. He’d then lift his blue eyes and cock his black-maned head as if interpreting the conversation.

Phed had no idea what was going on in that little furry-topped head—he even worried the little creature may fear he wasn’t long for this world. But even the H-4 data documented how UO-1’s record of behaviors showed increasing sophistication. Now, when Phed talked to him, he sensed UO-1 understood as well as any fellow Authairian who could neither speak nor glialpath.

So, hoping for a miracle, Phed made a decision. “Okay, Fella. I’m gonna give you an introduction to the real Ponce Heidon.” *If I can get UO-1 to recognize and respect Ponce, the little creature’s behavior may convince the director not to euthanize him.*

“Hey, Champ.” Phed put his hand in the cage and UO-1 climbed on, curling his tail around the familiar wrist.

“Want to hear how Dr. Heidon won the Alfred Wei Authair Award?”

UO-1 blinked his eyes and bobbed his head. It didn’t seem to matter the subject, UO-1 listened like a student soaking in the last gems of knowledge before an exam.

As UO-1 stretched on a log and cradled his small chin in his smaller hands, Phed began. “Ponce had been an intern like me, just like me, working on his PhD when he discovered if he replaced certain areas in the DNA of a virus with a specific protein cluster, it reversed the virus’s effect. This technology is called the CRISPR-H-Nine.”

Phed took the time to define *DNA*, *virus*, and *protein cluster* for the little fella before he continued. “Ponce’s discovery changed the treatment for all raptan viral illnesses, all of them, and saved lives of Authairians on both hemispheres. Ponce is regarded as a hero. Do you know what a hero is?”

It seemed UO-1’s attentiveness knew no end.

Wake-cycle after wake-cycle, Phed continued the lessons, encouraged further by UO-1’s physical reaction to the story about Ponce becoming a kan-du master. As Phed ended the story of the director’s prowess, UO-1 jumped onto a branch and raised himself on his hind legs in a jousting stance—left knee bent slightly ahead of the other and opposite arm stretched out as if extending a claw.

“Yep, that’s how it looks, Champ.” Phed had to chuckle. “You nailed that one, for sure.”

From then on, the kan-du stance was UO-1’s way to ask for more stories.

A couple of work-cycles later, Cimi stopped in as Phed continued teaching Ponce Heidon 101 to his favorite student. She listened while Phed told about the director's childhood backyard lab and—uncharacteristically—she waited for him to finish.

Cimi then leaned over to UO-1. “Hey, little critter. I bet Phed never told you about the time Ponce, as a child, almost suffocated escaping Crystal Cave.” She flashed her indigo lashes at Phed before continuing, and her emerald eyes twinkled.

Oh, no. She's reminding me of my own harrowing escape with CQ. Of course. Cimi probably heard the whole story from her. The whole story.

Cimi's tuft flamed orange, and her eyes sparkled as they took in the coppery heat rising in Phed's cheeks. Her next words only made it worse. “Are you remembering a certain cavejet passenger who ignited a spark of passion, Phed? Oh! It just dawned on me. I haven't heard anything from CQ since yester-cycle. Phed, have you seen her lately? Has she maybe been around to check on UO-1? She canceled a workout in the gym a whole wake-cycle ago. Haven't heard from her since.” By now Cimi's tuft had cycled to a bright green, but Phed spotted white strands threatening to crowd out the rest.

“Nope, she's not been around here. Nope. In fact, she's totally missing out on UO-1's development. Now that I think about it, I haven't seen her in the dining room either.”

“CQ and I usually work out together then sit around after and gossip. This isn't like her. She's the one who got me to go to the gym. Not that it's helping much.” Cimi pinched thickness at her waist. “I do love the cooldown and chat part. I'll have to check in on her later.”

She turned toward UO-1. Phed noticed his feline-iguana charge leaned against an upright branch with legs crossed as if waiting patiently for them to finish their discussion.

“UO”—Cimi often shortened UO-1’s name, preferring the informality—“I didn’t mean to interrupt your story. Let’s see. Where was I? Oh, yes. Well, Ponce was just a little guy when this happened...”

Phed approved of Cimi’s dramatic narration. She made a hero out of Ponce, and UO-1 performed his jousting stance as if convincing her to return with more tales.

Want Out

Two wake-cycles later, Cimi'd just finished entertaining UO-1 with another Heidon drama when Dorf and Ponce entered the observation pod. She glanced at Phed, but his back was turned as he checked the air filtering system. She hurried over and whispered, "Oh, no. Here comes the director. This may be bad. We can't get our hopes up, Phed."

She pretended to examine the stats moving across Phed's screen as Ponce approached her furry little friend's cage.

"Cimi, Phed," Ponce said as he nodded to them. The director towered over Phed, who'd stepped closer to H-4 to make the introduction.

"Dr. Heidon, I'd like you to meet UO-1." Phed gestured toward the feline-iguana who'd already climbed a branch as high as Dr. Heidon was tall. Standing on hind legs with arms behind his back, UO-1 looked every bit the curious student. Phed smiled at the little critter and glanced at his chart. "He's thirty-eight wake-cycles and fifteen seconds old."

Cimi waited for Phed to enact his plan. But instead of rerunning certain data to show Dr. Heidon UO-1's developmental gains, he watched the director with a hopeful expression. Cimi followed his gaze and also witnessed the curious interchange.

Ponce turned his head from one side to the other and leaned in studying the cat-like, iguana-looking creature. UO-1 clung to the highest branch and stretched his neck as his blue eyes examined the tall man with bushy eyebrows. Wrinkles of curiosity formed in the brows of both. Moments passed. No one said a word—not even Cimi.

Ponce looked first to Phed, then to Dorf, and finally to Cimi. “What is he?” Before any of them answered, he repeated, “What is he?” this time catching Dorf shaking his head.

The weary director turned back toward the habitat. A furry mane of black sprinkled with bright green filaments leaned to one side of a tiny head that gave him an unquestionably quizzical blue-eyed gaze. Wanting privacy, Ponce motioned Dorf to follow him to the adjacent lab.

“We can’t turn this unknown thing into a pet and be straddled with that responsibility. The protesters are not going away. If they get wind of its existence, the government will shut us down.”

Ponce tightened his lips and shook his head in resolution. “Summon Dr. Gimmel,” he ordered. “I want his opinion of this unidentified organism by the end of the week. Then prepare living quarters for the doctor and make sure his ID is synced for subterranean entry. Tell him it will be temporary.”

“On it, Boss.”

Phed’s rest remained brief. Sleep-mares of UO-1’s death wouldn’t stop, so he forced himself awake. Agonizing about how to convince Dr. Gimmel to recommend keeping UO-1 alive, he researched the doctor to learn everything he could about him. The retired

theriogenologist's successful work in animal reproduction was much respected. Since his wife's death from the ABMR virus, Dr. Gimmel was the only parent left to care for his daughter, Lisa, who suffered from a hearing disability. Along with this responsibility, Dr. Gimmel volunteered his expertise at PHI; he'd committed to helping the researchers find a cure for the disease that now threatened Olympya.

Phed sat up and threw his legs over the side of the bed before mindlessly chewing a cracker and swallowing a gulp of TX. In the last few weeks, he hadn't eaten a decent meal. Catnaps, nutritional drinks, and crunchy snacks nudged him through each wake-cycle.

He didn't know when to expect Doc Gimmel, but he'd already begun preparing UO-1 for his arrival. *What if Doc doesn't wanna save a life hatched of a lab accident for fear of impeding the other research in progress?*

Phed shoved another cracker in his mouth and lifted his glass for a second swallow.

UO-1 hopped onto the branch closest to Phed, watching his keeper's every movement.

"You're not gonna let me take a second swallow, are you?" Phed teased, then gulped down the last of the TX. "We're gonna have a visitor, Dr. Robar Gimmel. We call him Doc. He works with..." *Hmm. I don't think of UO-1 as just an animal, and I for sure don't wanna diminish what the little fella thinks of himself, assuming he does, indeed, think of himself.* "Doc works with young ones like you."

Phed added a new branch to the little critter's habitat and smiled as the nimble creature jumped onto it before he finished anchoring it. After weeks spent observing H-4's champion, Phed concluded UO-1 preferred activity to lazing around like somewhat-similar species of iguanas. Even the moving water of the lagoon failed to lull him into complacency. When he wasn't exploring, he was cleaning himself; curiously supple, he could lick the fur from his head

to his tail. He slithered like a lizard, climbed like a cat, stood upright like a raptan—though on hind legs—for attention, and slept curled up with his tail in a spiral ready to spring.

But in the five-plus weeks of the little fella's busy existence, the young intern had failed to record one form of observation. As far as Phed knew, UO-1 had emitted no sound—not a meow, purr, croak—nothing. *I don't even know for sure what kind of noises to look for, or if UO-1's species even needs to make sounds.*

“You're a quiet little guy,” Phed said, curious to see if his charge would respond with any kind of acknowledgment. “Real quiet.”

Balanced on a branch close to Phed, UO-1 looked into Phed's eyes while he spoke, clasped his hands together, cocked his head, and lifted his eyes to the ceiling then back at Phed's.

Phed shrugged his shoulders. “Don't know if you're interested, but our ABMR team's gonna have a briefing in a few minutes. I'm hoping to get some help learning about you.”

He gently tapped the plexi near UO-1 and headed to the conference area.

Chief's briefing was short. He updated the team on Chico's progress with the plant-growing lab.

To Phed's disappointment, Chico again sent regrets that she couldn't attend.

Cimi spent most of her update explaining how she and Kurl had found three possible destinations for the team to relocate if they had to abandon PHI. Her tuft bobbed a bright orange the whole time, and whether by mutual arrangement or just her nature, she did all the talking. If Phed hadn't known better, he'd have thought some of Cimi's glances Kurl's way looked almost furtive.

At last, it was Phed's turn to update the ABMR team on his work. He reviewed UO-1's progress then made his request. "Chief, I sure could use some updated technology to log in UO-1's behavioral observations. The vital stats aren't giving the full picture of his development."

Cimi snapped up the opportunity to help. "I can do this," she insisted, standing with hands on hips and leaning into the table as she faced the chief, her tuft suddenly a brilliant Olym-yellow. "Phed's got to record this little critter's outlandish development on files that'll identify the behavior as well as preserve and encrypt it from cyber thieves. He's using technology that can't possibly analyze UO-1's extraordinary spurts of wisdom, let alone encrypt it, which, as you all know, I do best."

Then she quoted one of Director Heidon's House Rules: "If you don't know how to make it, get someone who does." It wasn't a direct quote, but she'd made her point.

Dorf considered Cimi's offer for a few seconds. "Think an additional assignment for you, Cimi, will keep those incredible brain synapses weaving new pathways. Go for it."

As Cimi jumped up and down and began reeling off possibilities, Phed thought he heard Dorf mutter under his breath. "...and incessant chatter to a minimum, at least out of my lab."

It took Cimi less than a work-cycle. She bounced into the observation pod at golden fringe. "Get up, Phed." She tugged on the cover over his head, but he didn't move. "Come on, Phed, hurry up. It's ready, let's try it out."

From her peripheral vision, Cimi noticed UO-1 lift his head and blink as she tried to wake Phed. The little creature's attention gave her an idea. She decided to try a dash of psychology, hoping it would rouse the sleeping intern.

She sang out, "UO, I've got an easy way for Phed to record your behavior."

UO-1 cocked his head toward her and climbed onto a nearby branch.

Phed didn't move.

“See?” she said, holding her DB close to UO-1, whose eyes bulged with interest. “It’s an app. I call it KUWI, for Keeping Up With It. No offense. I used *It* because the app can be customized for any life form. Now watch.”

Cimi raised her wrist and spoke. “Open KUWI.”

A colorful graph appeared.

“Look there, UO.” She pointed to a rectangular image above the habitat and pressed a tiny button on her DB. A lens on the end of a telescope-like projection emerged and automatically focused the graph as a sharp image.

UO-1 climbed the tallest branch in his habitat and stretched his head to see it.

To Cimi’s delight, UO-1’s furry head and shoulders pumped vigorously. “I have no way of knowing what you understand, but I’m guessing you understand much, much more than some might expect from such an adorable unknown species of the animal kingdom.”

Phed threw off the cover and sat up. “What? You wanna get out? What’s going on?”

Cimi, startled, took two steps back, tripped on her own feet, and fell onto the corner of the bed. “Whoops!” Her feet slid out from under her.

The graph flicked off, and they both turned toward UO-1.

The creature stood on his hind legs, forepaws on hips looking from Phed to Cimi. “UO out, UO out,” he glialpathed.

Phed rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands and jumped out of bed. “Did you catch that glialpath, Cim?”

“Catch a glialpath?” she said, attempting to get herself up from the floor. “No, I couldn’t wake you up. I’m sorry, you must’ve been dreaming. I came to show you—”

Phed reached out an open hand first to silence her and then to help her rounded, fluff-surrounded form stand upright as he said, “Concentrate, Cim. I don’t think it was a dream. I was already getting static-like paths from UO-1 before I fell asleep. See?”

He lifted his DB to project his records for her heads-up view but stopped when another message entered his brain. “UO want out.”

This time Phed was sure. That little critter was communicating by glialpathing, but somehow Cimi hadn’t received it. He stared at UO-1 and told him in no uncertain terms. “Okay, Champ, the best way for you to get what you want is to tell Cimi, just like you told me.”

Phed wasn’t sure if UO-1 could direct a glialpath to anyone who hadn’t spent entire wake- and sleep-cycles with him, but he felt certain UO-1 would try. He glanced at Cimi to get a tuft-reading. Sure enough—Cimi’s clump of hair had shifted from orange yellow to the brightest green he’d ever seen. Her eyes widened in surprise, and her mouth held still longer than he’d ever remembered.

“UO, say that again,” she finally blurted while shaking her head wildly.

UO-1 bobbed up and down and then stood on his hind legs, intertwining the fingers of his two hands as if in prayer. He turned his head first to Phed then Cimi. “UO want out. UO want out.”

By the expression on Cimi’s face, Phed could tell the repeated glialpath reached their brains at the same time.

“Look at you, UO.” Cimi beamed at the little fella and then glanced at her smiling colleague. “You really do want to get out. I’m going to do it, Phed.”

“Whoa, that’s not a good idea, not good. I didn’t mean for *you* to do what I said to UO-1, Cim. Not yet. We’ve gotta wait until we find a way to test his immune system.”

Cimi ignored Phed’s pleading and knuckled her hands through the double-layered polymer, the way they’d seen Dorf place the crucible a month ago. “Come on, UO.”

She held out one hand, cupping her fingers. UO-1 jumped into her palm, grasping her wrist.

Cimi squealed, forcing Phed to cover his ears. “I’m getting a UO hug! I’m the first Authairian to get a UO hug. Do you know what a hug is, UO? It’s when someone holds you because they like you. You probably didn’t think about hugging me. You’re simply clinging onto my wrist to make sure the polymer won’t brush you off when I pull you through. But that’s okay. I won’t brush you off. You’re too precious. Do you know what precious means?”

This time UO-1 didn’t give Cimi time to answer. His glialpath came straight from the Dyzzeberry Dictionary, and again Phed could tell Cimi received it at the same time he did. “Precious is an object, substance, or resource of great value, not to be wasted or treated carelessly. Phed precious to UO.”

As busy as Phed was rapidly recording, he saw Cimi look to confirm he’d also received the glialpath that made him smile.

Then she made a small sound of distress. “I’ve just realized...” With both hands still inside UO’s cage, her tuft faded to white. She asked, “He’ll be able to breathe, won’t he, Phed?”

Phed looked her in the eye, pausing his data entry. “Don’t know. I don’t wanna take the chance, Cim. UO-1’s never been without a purified atmosphere.” After only a slight hesitation, he tried to lighten the mood. “And you heard him. He thinks I’m precious but didn’t say anything about you. Bet if you release him and he can’t breathe, you won’t be on his precious list.”

Cimi turned back to UO-1 with her tuft now an apologetic gray. She petted the fur on the top of his head with her free hand. “UO, I want nothing more than to let you out, but we’re not sure you’ll be able to breathe outside your controlled habitat.”

UO-1 let go his arms and sat up in Cimi’s palm. No larger than a Twinkie, he sat unmoving inside her cupped palm. Strands of black, green-flecked fur fell over his eyes. “UO sad. UO sad.” Then UO-1 blinked and shook away drooping locks of fur. He slipped off Cimi’s hand and crawled under a log on the mossy turf.

“You’ll die if you can’t breathe, UO. Do you know what that—”

Cimi stopped talking when UO-1 pathed again. “Die, if UO die, UO perish. UO no perish. UO no go way of all flesh, no go to last resting place or meet maker or cross great divide or slip away. UO stay in habitat until UO breathe like other Authairians.”

As if dehydrated by his efforts, UO-1 crawled out from under the log and took a long drink from the habitat’s water feature.

“Don’t worry,” Phed and Cimi simultaneously encouraged. When he glanced at her, he saw the intense purple of her tuft and felt a twinge of relief. Consulting her DB, Cimi’s brilliant mind was already in the zone of problem-solving.

“Look, Fella, we’re gonna get you out, Phed promised. “We just need some time to figure it out.”

Blood

Fortunately, Dr. Gimmel hadn't yet arrived to assess UO-1, which gave Phed enough time for Cimi to familiarize him with her KUWI app while they waited. After three wake-cycles, the intern finally felt confident running the powerful new technology, a tool that organized all of his previous narrative describing UO-1's behavior. The categories it generated linked vital stats and observation video into a complete presentation of the specimen's daily life. The app recorded every nuance of emotional and physical change and stored the data in an encrypted cloud.

Phed could run through it like a movie. His own verbal narrative and interaction with the subject comprised the soundtrack. The visual component displayed activity inside the habitat with a banner streaming above giving statistics on vital signs and cognitive activity. Together, the audio and video responses made for an entertaining and enlightening experience.

Initially, Phed's lack of confidence hadn't been the only thing slowing him down. UO-1 himself contributed. *Ever since Little Fella evolved to glialpathing status, he hasn't given me a moment of peace. Not a moment.*

"KUWI learn about UO? What happen KUWI when Phed nap? UO awake. KUWI awake? What happen KUWI when UO nap? KUWI nap?"

Phed's research found no cases where any raptans two months after hatching showed anything close to the linguistic and cognitive capabilities UO-1 demonstrated, and UO-1 wasn't raptan. However, he wasn't *only* an animal either. Animal behaviorists across the hemispheres had proven animals' communication and reasoning inferior to raptans'. *UO-1's existence will throw all that research into question—if we can keep him alive. We've gotta do just that.*

The biggest obstacle he saw next was getting UO-1 to glialpath to Dorf and Dr. Gimmel. So far, Phed and Cimi were the only ones who'd received the feline-iguana's paths.

Unfortunately, even Cimi hadn't found a way to prove their communications. Even raptans as young as one proxi-cycle knew glialpaths were only recordable if both sender and receiver used the DB technology in devices that enabled glialpathing through energy waves generated between the aurora tornadoes on Authair's opposite poles.

But UO-1 used no DB.

Somehow, the little fella's glial cells accessed these necessary energy waves directly.

Stop the Video

Phed, seated on the edge of his bed, was reviewing KUWI footage of Izzy's linguistic development while UO-1 slept curled up on a branch, arms crossed over his eyes. When Chief, in his usual yellow wrapsuit, and Dr. Gimmel appeared in the doorway, Phed looked up and smiled. Dr. Gimmel's brown wrap matched the small case he carried. Both nodded a greeting.

Dorf made the reintroduction. "Dr. Gimmel, remember my intern, Phed. Stepped into this assignment with little knowledge of embryo development. But has amassed incredible data of this specimen's development."

Dr. Gimmel smiled. "I've heard nothing but good things about you, young man."

Politely refusing Phed's offer of a chair, Dr. Gimmel set his case on the shelf unit at the head of Phed's bed and walked over to H-4. His head turned this way and that, Phed presumed, searching for its occupant. Phed was about to point out UO-1's location when the doctor bent near the low log.

Doc lowered his voice. "You've prepared a stimulating environment for what looks to be a combination of species." His head lifted toward the banner above the video feed and he stood again. "Impressive technology you've got here. I'd like to see your stats. Can you replay this from the beginning?"

“My pleasure, Dr. Gimmel,” Phed replied with his voice lowered too. A weary looking Chief had not only taken Phed up on his offer of a chair but had dropped off to sleep in it.

For the next two hours, Phed and Dr. Gimmel’s whispered conversation reviewed UO-1’s development while Dorf snored. “See that?” Phed said. “He’s trying to open my hand.”

As their review continued, Doc suddenly lifted his voice. “Stop it. Stop the video. Back it up.”

Phed paused then slowly reversed the action.

“That’s it. Yes, there!” The still image of UO-1 standing on his hind legs, forepaws on hips looking straight at Phed caught Dr. Gimmel’s attention. Doc pointed. “Phed, do you see his posture and the way he’s glaring at you?”

The excited theriogenologist continued without waiting for an answer. “Then, if you move the video forward, you’ll see he looks at Cimi the same way. Phed, advance the frames.”

The intern went from frame to frame.

“There, stop. See? You can tell he wants something. He’s *communicating*.”

The rising energy in Dr. Gimmel’s voice woke Chief, who rubbed his eyes as he stood and looked from Dr. Gimmel to Phed as if their conversation required his attention.

All three watched the replay, in which Phed spoke excitedly, pointing to Cimi, whose half-image silhouetted his. The camera had picked up only part of her, the rest blocked by Phed in the foreground.

“Can you remember what was happening there?” Doc Gimmel asked while Chief continued rubbing his eyes and yawning.

Phed explained. “UO-1 was *glialpathing* to both of us. Really *glialpathing*. And he, he was telling us he wanted to get out.”

“What?” asked both Chief and Doc at the same time.

“Right there. See? Cimi’s tuft of hair turned bright green. I saw it change colors the moment she picked up his path too. Bright green means she’s surprised, caught unaware.”

Dorf’s deep intake of breath briefly distracted Phed. He thought he saw Chief’s lips silently mouth the words *Cimi, green, and surprised*.

Recalling his thought trail, Phed gestured again at the playback. “That’s how I knew the moment Cimi received UO-1’s path. You’ve gotta listen to my narration. It’s all there.”

He ran the video forward again, just long enough to allow it to complete his narration, but he stopped the replay there. He didn’t want Dorf or Doc to hear what he’d told UO-1—*The best way for you to get what you want is to tell Cimi just like you told me*. And he for sure didn’t want them seeing Cimi’s hand pass through the wall of UO-1’s cage.

A shudder coursed through him. *That critical bit of video could for sure cost me my job, Cimi her respect, and UO-1 his life.*

A new path from UO-1 startled Phed. “Animal? UO animal? UO living organism that feeds on organic matter, typically having specialized sense organs and nervous system and able to respond rapidly to stimuli? Phed animal? Cimi animal?”

“He did it again.” Excited, Phed rapidly repeated every word of UO-1’s path while Dr. Gimmel and Dorf studied the description as it streamed across the wall.

Phed seized the moment. “UO-1, that’s a great question for Dr. Gimmel. He’s the expert. Can you path your question to both Dr. Gimmel and Dr. Tzeus? That way, we four can have a conversation. Do you know what a conversation is?”

Dorf and Dr. Gimmel waited, watching. Their eyes showed they both hoped to receive UO-1’s path.

This is good, Phed thought, real good. Looks like they believe me.

“Conversation,” UO-1 pathed but again reached only Phed as he continued. “An informal exchange of ideas by spoken words.” And then he defined *informal* and *exchanged*.

Phed repeated every word for the record.

Dorf and Doc followed along, listening carefully to Phed, not needing to read the content streaming across the wall.

Doc stared at Phed. “Astonishing. I’ve got an idea for UO.”

Outwardly, Phed remained calm, but inside he cheered. *Calling UO-1 the shortened UO is a sign Doc has feelings for Champ. A real good sign.* “Go ahead, Doc. Try it.”

Dr. Gimmel’s gray eyes looked at UO-1. He waited in silence while Phed and Dorf watched. When UO-1 lifted his head and, open-eyed, stared at Dr. Gimmel, he said, “UO, I like you.”

UO-1 blinked his blue eyes and tilted his head.

“You’re a good friend of Phed, Cimi, and Dorf. They’re my friends too. You’re smart and curious.” Continuing with assurance in his voice, Dr. Gimmel enunciated with exaggerated clarity. “I can answer your questions.”

UO jumped on a branch and climbed to a height nearly matching that of the doc. With his hands grasping the branch, he straightened his arms until his head almost touched the side of the cage nearest Dr. Gimmel’s face, now bent over, clearly awaiting UO-1’s next move.

Please, Little Fella, please.

By Doc’s gasp and expression of wonder, Phed knew UO’s path reached the doctor too. “Dr. Gimmel answer UO questions? Dr. Gimmel friend.”

“Yes, yes, UO. You asked Phed if you are an animal. UO is a living organism that feeds on organic matter; you have specialized sense organs and a nervous system and can respond rapidly to stimuli, just like Dorf, Phed, Cimi, and me.”

“Dorf, Phed, Cimi, Dr. Gimmel, and UO animals?” UO’s big eyes blinked in earnest, waiting for the answer.

“That’s right, UO.” Dr. Gimmel affirmed and then turned to Dorf. “He pathed it to me as clear as the song of a wren.”

Dorf shook his head rapidly. “I’m only getting static.”

Dr. Gimmel opened his mouth to speak, but the little critter’s left hand landed on the plexi beside him like a suction cup. He swung back and forth as his other hand grasped the branch.

“UO, did you know Dr. Dorf Tzeus saved your life when you were smaller than my thumbnail?” Dr. Gimmel bent his right thumb and pointed to the nail with his other hand. “This is a thumbnail, and it’s not very big.”

UO-1 drew his head close to view the thumbnail and then lifted one finger from the plexi to examine his own thumb’s claw. Dorf made a small sound suspiciously like a chuckle.

Dr. Gimmel, appearing preoccupied by UO’s cognitive acuteness, continued. “Dr. Dorf Tzeus found you on the floor of his laboratory and picked you up so you wouldn’t get stepped on and smashed to death. He found this safe place for you.”

Dorf watched UO-1 with renewed feelings of kinship—that feeling of a bond the geneticist hadn’t quite understood when he first cheered UO-1 during his hatching and still didn’t

quite understand. UO-1 turned toward Dorf, let go of the plexi, and jumped to a branch closer to Dorf, placing his face against the clear wall.

As they studied one another, Dorf realized, just then, what UO-1 needed before he'd choose to path someone. *Confirmation of trust or, perhaps, any positive energy.* Testing his hypothesis, Dorf bent over, smiled, and looked into the small creature's eyes. "Things had broken all around me in the lab, and I'd fallen on the floor. I saw you then, a little pulsating blob in the goo of chemicals. I knew you were alive because of the *ke-thump, ke-thump* vibration you made."

Dorf told UO-1 how he'd picked up the pulsating mass and taken it to the protection of the regulated habitat. He relayed how Phed, the first to see the little mass begin to make an egg casing, had cheered UO-1 on with Dorf at the first sign UO was breaking through. "Head came out with big blue eyes and fur matted down between them. Shook your head, and silky black fur fluffed up with green filaments. Then scooted out of your shell and ran around looking for a place to hide."

UO-1 absorbed Dorf's descriptions. His developing mind scurried to place events and vocabulary within his infant reality. Every time Dorf said a new word, UO-1's brain searched for an explanation. At the same time, his memory, better than photographic, cataloged each word and definition beamed to it from the cloud. UO-1 didn't need a device like the raptans' DBs to find answers. Retrieving information came as easy as blinking his eyes. Knowing the right questions to ask the right raptan—this challenged his developing neurons. Then, the right answers charged his glial cells. UO-1's world flowered before him, every petal bringing new color to his existence.

He jumped onto the turf and sprang to a corner, climbing as far as his habitat allowed. He pathed to all the raptans. “UO want out. UO want out. Dorf friend. Dr. Gimmel friend. Phed friend. Cimi friend. Cimi friend, Cimi come back. UO want Cimi.”

UO-1 repeated his actions—jump down, climb up, and path message—from the height of each remaining corner of his habitat.

UO-1’s path reached Dorf crisp and strong. His fatigue, almost forgotten, he didn’t need to ask the others if they’d also received the impassioned message.

Doc said, “I wonder why UO so strongly wanted Cimi.”

“I’ve never seen him excited like this,” Phed exclaimed, talking almost as quickly as the absent woman. “Maybe he’s had too much stimulation for one wake-cycle. How about we give him a rest? To be honest, I’m pretty tired myself.” Phed yawned loudly and looked at Dorf as if waiting for confirmation.

With a sidewise glance, Dorf saw that UO-1 had finally settled on a branch nearby, watching as if taking in their conversation.

Dorf nodded agreement at Phed then turned toward the animal doctor. “Doc, feel free to return morrow-cycle if you need more observation. Reach me if I can be of any help. Have to get more sleep.” The geneticist yawned as weariness oozed from his mouth.

“I need only a moment more,” Doc said as he walked to the shelf where he’d set his case. Opening it, he turned to Dorf. “I’d like a blood sample from you and UO. I’ve taken Sequence’s and need to run an analysis on all three. This’ll take a second. I want to be sure UO watches you having your blood drawn, so he’s not afraid when I draw his.”

Dorf looked on as Doc left the case open and walked back to UO-1's habitat. "Hey, little guy." For some reason, Phed grinned widely at Doc's words.

UO-1 responded well too. He raced to the bottom of the habitat, leaped the lagoon, and scurried up a branch close to Dr. Gimmel.

Dr. Gimmel smiled. "You want Cimi here, and I want something from you. Then you can see her. I'd like a sample of your blood. Do you know what blood is?"

UO-1 rattled off the answer in an excited glialpath. "The liquid that circulates in the arteries and veins of raptans and other vertebrae carrying oxygen to and carbon dioxide from the tissues of the body."

Then he defined circulates, arteries, veins, vertebrae, oxygen, carbon dioxide, and tissues.

Dorf, impatient to get on with it said, "Look, UO-1. You don't need to know all that right now. All you need to do is to cooperate with Dr. Gimmel the way I'm going to cooperate. Cooperate means to work together. Now."

Exhausted, Dorf held out his arm and pointed. "There, see? That's a vein, and that's where Dr. Gimmel will extract the blood." The moment he uttered it, Dorf slapped himself aside his head.

"Sorry. Should've said *take* not *extract*." He rolled his eyes and they all waited while UO-1 pathed out the many definitions of extract.

"Good job, UO-1," said Phed. "Good job. Now you'll understand better what will happen."

Dr. Gimmel placed a chicklet-size transparent unit over a prominent vein in Dorf's forearm. UO-1 stared through the plexi, maneuvering to get the best view of the action.

The doctor explained as he removed some of Dorf's blood, thankfully using simple words Dorf hoped were familiar to UO-1. "Inside the unit is a coiled tube. Underneath are things"—Dorf suspected Doc had avoided the word *electrodes*—"that neutralize the sting of the tubular needle I inserted into Dr. Tzeus's vein. That red liquid snaking through the coiled tube is blood."

UO-1 watched wide-eyed.

Dorf, feeling woozy, closed his eyes and yawned again.

Suddenly, UO-1 jumped up and down. "Extract UO blood. Extract UO blood."

Dorf wasn't surprised he got UO-1's path. The little being's eagerness to have his blood drawn was evident as he flew to the invisible door through which Phed routinely delivered his food and held out his arm, waiting for his turn at the bloodletting.

Dr. Gimmel quickly obliged. He changed to a new pair of surgical gloves and removed a much smaller transparent unit. He eased his hand through the double layer of polychem.

UO-1's eyes widened. He supported his stretched-out arm with the other and watched his blood coil through a micro sized tube.

"Look, UO-1's blood isn't green like some reptiles," exclaimed Doc. "Very interesting. It's red."

The process ended in an instant, and UO-1 immediately campaigned to include Phed in the sample-taking. "Extract Phed blood. Extract Phed blood," UO-1 pathed and then scampered up the closest branch to where Phed waited with his arm extended already.

Dr. Gimmel consulted his kit. "This is the last of my sample takers." He held up the case for UO-1 to inspect. "The kit holds four units—two for large patients and two for small ones." He pointed to one unused large. "That one's for Phed."

Dorf had to smile as, anticipating UO-1's next request, Doc said, "See, there are no more receptors for extracting Dr. Gimmel's blood. That tiny one is too small for an adult raptan."

Dr. Gimmel put down the case after removing the last large unit. He fitted new surgical gloves on his hands and motioned Phed to turn his arm so UO-1 could watch as the red seeped around and around.

"See," pathed UO-1, "Phed's blood red like UO."

"Well, what did you expect? All raptans have red blood," replied Phed.

"Dr. Tzeus, Phed, and UO, thank you. I'm all done here." Dr. Gimmel said as the weary geneticist rose from his chair. "I'll have my report ready for you and Dr. Heidon in a few hours. UO's blood color intrigues me." The doctor headed toward the door, and Dorf followed.

Then Doc turned to nod goodbye.

Dorf glanced back too and saw Phed appearing to be in conversation with a sad-looking UO-1.

Dr. Gimmel said, "Phed, you've done an incredible job nurturing UO-1. Please tell him it was an honor for me to have made his acquaintance."

Like a burst bubble, UO-1's path popped into their brains. "Incredible, splendid, magnificent, sumptuous, grand, impressive..." On and on, UO-1 pathed as Dr. Robar Gimmel and Dr. Dorf Tzeus left the pod, not hearing who knew how many more descriptors or UO-1's definitions for nurturing, honor, and acquaintance.

Phed fell asleep in the middle of UO-1's pathed word *distinction*, the first synonym for honor...

Later that sleep-cycle, Phed couldn't rest. He tossed and turned, rerunning events of the past evening. He got up early, dressed, and began reviewing KUWI on his DB, not wanting to activate the screen above his sleeping charge—usually the first of them to awaken.

On his last swallow of TX, his DB blinked, vibrated, and whistled. *Not good. Not good at all.* It was an emergency signal from Dorf.

“What's up, Chief?”

“Dr. Heidon's on his way to observation pod. Now. He's reviewed Gimmel's report and wants to test UO-1 himself. Prepare UO for an early visitor. I'll be along shortly with Dr. Gimmel and, hopefully, Ms. Nuja too.”

“On it, Chief.” *Holy Olym. I've gotta get UO-1 ready to meet Dr. Heidon.*

Vile Bargain

Over a sleep-marish cycle of tossing and turning, Chico had become a different woman. Her grammy, brother, and aunt were being held in chains until she satisfied the most abhorrent of demands from General Gore Andriol. She was no longer the Valympyon genetic botanist with a bright future. Or the old man trekking through the ralkid forest. Or the patient called Ms. CQ Maize. She was Chico Quwattle, spy for the Valympyon military.

To keep this detestable new identity secret from her colleagues at PHI, she needed time alone. It hadn't been easy to disengage from them. They'd all become her friends, and Cimi, her confidant. *I despise this deception with every neuron firing in my body.*

Chico reluctantly resisted Cimi's attempt to get her to join the team to relax after work-cycle in the artfully designed dining room. She'd described the private table behind walls of vines that the two of them could use, but even that, Chico wouldn't risk.

Afraid to delay any longer, Chico pathed Cimi. "Hi, Cim. You up?"

"CQ, that you?" Cimi yawned. "It's early." Cimi lifted onto an elbow and blinked to alertness. "You okay, CQ?"

"Sorry to interrupt your sleep, but I wanted to explain why I had to cancel workout yester-cycle and won't be around for a few more wake-cycles."

“Yea-ah, I do deserve an explanation. You kinda stood me up, but I’ll survive. What’s going on, CQ?”

“Well,” Chico paused, mentally organizing her thoughts. “I’ve got some crazy plants in the growing lab. They’re maturing faster than I’d planned, and I must analyze what’s stimulating their growth, so I’m in a rush to design new equipment for the testing. Don’t know how long it’ll take.”

“Can I help? I can get dressed and be on my way in a micro moment. This will be olymfab, working together. I’m not an expert botanist like you, but you know I’m great at designing equipment.”

Uh-oh. Chico, caught off guard with Cimi’s interest in her falsified dilemma, thought fast. “Oh, uh, umm...it’s not that sophisticated. I just...have to think things through first, but thanks anyway.”

“What about dinner? You need to get out. We could have a girl chat at the cozy table behind the trellis. Or we could join Phed. You know, CQ? For so long he refused to leave his furry little charge, but he seemed to enjoy the camaraderie at the lounge when he finally came yester-cycle. Except, he kept looking around, especially at the doorway. My take on things is Phed was hoping a certain young woman who once wore a butterfly would choose to sit in the empty chair near him. I think he misses you.”

Chico got no further than pathing, “I, uh, umm...” before Cimi continued.

“Or, how about I bring take-out to your lab? I’d love to see what you’re up to. Your idea about fast-growing plants sounds exciting, just like UO-Who was fast-growing.”

“Not right now, Cim.” Panicking as she realized Cimi wasn’t giving up, Chico pathed with an edge of desperation. “I’ve got to concentrate. Shouldn’t take too long, but I appreciate

the offer.” *How can I get Cimi off this subject before my lie gets out of control?* Inspiration struck. “You know, now that I think about it, there is a way you can help me.”

Chico ignored the delighted squeal Cimi pathed back at her. “Cim, you have a good relationship with Phed. This sounds like the perfect opportunity for you to let him know, gently, that I can’t be more than a friend to him. I don’t know how to talk to him about this.” She imagined her bubbly friend’s tuft turning a depressed brown at this request, but she kept going, relieved to be conversing in honesty.

“You know how I’m too preoccupied with other worries. He’s a great guy, and he saved my life. I’m so thankful for that, but I don’t want him thinking we could be more than friends, not now anyway.”

“What? Are you crazy, CQ? I like Phed. I don’t like this idea.”

Chico imagined Cimi’s curly tuft now turning to angry magenta as her friend ranted on.

“Am I supposed to bring this up out of the blue, like, ‘Hey, Phed, in case you happen to like CQ, I’m telling you as a friend that she doesn’t want you goggle-eyed over her?’”

“Look, Cim. You’re right. That’s all it is. He’s never actually said anything to me, but now’s the time. You’ve picked up on his cues. You’re the perfect friend to tell him. Remember, you’re the one who keeps telling me you think he has a thing for me. You’ll know how to do it without hurting his feelings. I know you can. He respects you. Pleeese?” She drew the supplication out as long as she could. “He’s just, well, oh, I don’t know how to say it, especially not to him, but I don’t have the emotional energy for a relationship.”

Cimi sighed. “Oh, all right. I’ll talk to him, especially since he hasn’t said anything to you. He’s certainly asked me where you were and why you weren’t around. I guess that’ll be my excuse to bring up the subject.”

“Thank you. You’re the best, Cim.” Chico breathed a silent relief. “And there’s one more thing—”

“Like that’s not enough, CQ.” Cimi let out another sigh. “Okay, what else?”

“I gave Phed a map to keep safe before we got into the cavejet. Would you ask him to give it to you for me?”

“Ah. I get it now. That was probably Phed’s last hope of having a legit excuse to see you. You owe me one, after this.”

“Okay, I owe you. I’ll path you as soon as I’ve finished. Thanks so-oo-oo much, Cim.”

Chico slumped on the side of her bed, emotionally exhausted. She lingered a while in her room, hoping the general would contact her before she entered her lab. She knew he was tracking her location. Nothing happened, however, so she headed toward the growing lab as if walking to her execution.

Step. Pause. Step. Pause.

About to enter the wraptrap, she caught a vibrating tingle in her left ear. “Stop what you are doing.”

It was the general.

Chico’s hearts raced as she memorized every instruction the general uttered. “Everything you do must look natural. Go outside the institution by choosing the shortest distance from your present position. Walk along the aqua tree path for three minutes. Protesters lining it will be expecting you. Do not make eye contact. Stop. Open your bag and look through it. Then say, ‘Zak’s request must be in my office,’ and walk back. Enter the institution as you normally do. No funny business. Go directly to your growing lab. Contact me from there.”

Click. All went silent.

Hearing Zak's name sent chills through her body. It took her a moment to clear her mind. *Zak's request must be in my office*, she repeated over and over. The rest seemed simple enough—except she wasn't supposed to leave the building unless authorized by Ponce himself, nor was she to appear on ground level. As a member of the ABMR team and a fugitive from Valympya, her entire existence was secret—underground in every way.

If asked, I'll just have to fake permission. I could claim I have an emergency and need the medtax. She checked the time—almost nine PA. Employees should be hurrying through the front entrance. She would make her exit as inconspicuous as possible.

Chico suspected this assignment would inform the enemy of the direct route to labs so they could invade. Immediately after having the lentil embedded, she'd returned straight to her room and figured the system already traced her way there. She must now carefully plan her movements.

She had no idea if the general's lentil could pick up her glialpaths to colleagues, but she'd pathed only lies and gossip to Cimi, nothing incriminating. *I know one thing: They must not learn of UO-1.* She'd block his existence from her mind and find an excuse to stay away from Chief's lab as well as from the entrance to the observation pod.

Despite the pounding of her hearts, the trip to the outside went smoothly. She encountered no one at the lift. Even Martha, who usually greeted her with a smile, didn't notice Chico's slim silhouette as it hurried by the landscaped water feature in reception.

The revolving door opened to the rant of protesters shouting, "Stop this insane research!" The words blasted their message as she stepped into the natural light of golden fringe. Above, puff-cloud letters of the same message dotted the near and distant sky. The crowd of agitators, four deep, lined Aqua Tree Lane, waving red and purple flags to the beat of their mantra. Ahead,

she saw no one on the center footpath. She would be its only passerby. Her demeanor showed outward calm—except for the fingers of her bionic appendage that opened and closed in spasms.

Chico's legs wobbled momentarily. Remembering the torture her family was enduring, she steeled herself and then walked steadily toward the path. For the longest three minutes of her life, she blocked out stares and silent backs turning as she passed scores of protesters. But when she stopped, it was the sudden and utter silence that nearly brought her to her knees. Not a voice sounded, bird chattered, or flag fluttered. It was as if the world had vanished, and she was a solitary living soul.

Steadying herself, she ruffled through her bag and uttered, "Zak's request must be in my office." The only sensation she felt was the sound of those words echoing beyond forever. The rest of her journey left no memories, only a prayerful call for mercy for her grammy, brother, and aunt.

She returned to the institute's subterranean quarters, refusing to go to her lab as instructed. She passed through the staff demonstration lab and walked slowly into the conference room a few steps beyond, built originally as an archive, now an imposing gathering space with a vaulted entrance. It housed a massive conference table and chairs. Here, she'd make her communication to the general.

Exam

“Hey, Champ, rise and shine. We’ve got co—” Phed replaced *company* with the familiar *visitors*. They had no time for dictionary talk. Without looking for his charge, the intern grabbed two ends of the bedcover and threw it like a parachute over the mattress, attempting to straighten the area for the director’s arrival. He heard a rustle coming from the nearest corner of UO-1’s habitat. “There you are.”

UO-1 poised on his lecture branch, waiting for his early wake-cycle lesson. Phed tapped the plexi near the feline-iguana. “Dr. Heidon, Dr. Tzeus, and Ms. Nuja are gonna come see you.”

“UO want Cimi. Cimi friend. Dr. Dorf Tzeus friend. Dr. Ponce Heidon unidentified organism.”

Phed’s eyes widened as a slow grin spread over his face.

So UO-1 is calling Dr. Ponce Heidon ‘unidentified organism.’ That’s interesting. The only time UO-1 met the director, Ponce used the same term referring to UO-1. I don’t think he’d ever heard those words before, so his brain must’ve connected them to Ponce. Phed tilted his head at his little friend, who mirrored the same angle back. Or maybe, just maybe UO-1’s being sarcastic. Could sarcasm now be identified as a developmental marker in that sophisticated little brain?

Phed mental-noted: *Rerun data later to see how KUWI interpreted the “unidentified organism” comment.* Then he made determined eye contact with UO-1 through the transparent wall. “UO, do you remember the stories Cimi and I told you about Dr. Ponce Heidon?”

UO-1 nodded vigorously and pathed. “Dr. Heidon won the Alfred Wei Authair Award when he was an intern like Phed. He replaced...”

Phed listened and nodded as the details he and Cimi had taught UO-1 about Ponce rang out. During the recitation of Ponce’s kan-du mastery, the little critter stopped his pathing long enough to demonstrate the kan-du stance. Then, on two legs with tiny hands clasped behind his back, he continued. As he began reciting the part where Cimi described Ponce’s survival of Crystal Cave, UO-1 abruptly switched topics mid-path. “Ms. Cimi Nuja, friend. Dr. Dorf Tzeus, friend. Dr. Ponce Heidon, unidentified organism.”

Phed repeated UO-1’s path word for word to register it on the screen as usual, but this time KUWI inserted three interpretations for *unidentified organism*: error, sarcasm, or wit. Error, the first of the listed possibilities, received the highest probability.

Behind Phed, footsteps alerted him to the three visitors’ arrival. They entered the observation pod and approached Habitat Four in lab uniforms—Dorf in yellow, Ponce in blue, and a trailing Cimi in fuchsia puff-wrap.

Cimi sprinted ahead to UO-1. Her Olym-colored tuft of waving curls within the flame-shaped bubble gave the appearance of a burning wick. She pointed at Ponce as he neared UO-1’s habitat. “UO, Dr. Ponce Heidon is my friend. Dr. Ponce Heidon is Dr. Dorf Tzeus’s friend and Phed’s friend. Dr. Ponce Heidon is UO’s friend too-oo.”

UO-1 hopped to a higher branch and looked directly at Ponce, who was studying the screen above the habitat. UO-1 waited until Dr. Heidon caught his blue-eyed stare. Balanced on

the branch in school-boy-recitation style, UO-1 pathed. “Dr. Ponce Heidon won Alfred Wei Authair Award by replacing areas in the DNA of a virus with a specific protein cluster that reversed the virus’s effect. His discovery improved treatment for all raptan viral illnesses. Dr. Heidon is a hero. Dr. Heidon is a kan-du master.”

UO-1 then jumped to a horizontal branch, posed in his kan-du stance, and leaped back into recitation position. He completed Dr. Ponce Heidon 101 with his own addendum. “Dr. Ponce Heidon is unidentified organism.”

By the reactions of his staff, Ponce could tell the unidentified creature’s pathing reached Dorf, Cimi, and Phed directly. The director, however, read every word on Ms. Nuja’s KUWI app projection, including the developmental description: error, sarcasm, or wit.

Ponce was in no mood for comments of this sort. When he met a situation for which he was unprepared, his first step was to eliminate distractions and study the basis of the problem. In this case, he needed to find the source of the specimen’s intelligence.

“Dr. Tzeus, there are many unknowns here.” As he’d hoped, addressing the chief of genetics by his formal title resulted in Dorf standing straighter and turning his full attention to Ponce. “I need to get beyond the technology to determine if I can endorse Dr. Gimmel’s evaluation. It looks like...”

Ponce paused and turned to UO-1 then back to Dorf. “Unidentified Organism One, if programmed, has displayed only the capability of suitable response recitation.”

The director then turned and looked at Cimi. “Ms. Nuja, you have a genius for programming nonorganic systems. The record on the screen may be a product of UO-1’s ability

to repeat memorized information, not free-will interpretation. I need to be alone with the subject without programmed influences.”

He turned back to Dorf. “Have the Keeping Up With It app turned off.”

Dorf nodded to Phed, who shut down the app. The screen resolved to its standard record-keeping of systems data and video display.

“Come on, Phed and Cimi,” Dorf said. “Let’s take a break in the lounge.”

More than once, Dorf looked over his shoulder at Ponce as he stepped toward the observation pod doorway. Phed followed but shuffled even more slowly.

Ms. Nuja lagged behind, her tuft fading from white to pale violet as she crept backward after them, furiously chewing and blowing a wad of her infamous black-gray gum. Just before the door closed, he heard an immense *POP* and blinked at the intense purple of her tuft.

Terrified for the adorable feline-iguana she loved, Cimi chewed her Double Trouble Bubble Gum with fervor. She decided to glialpath directly to UO-1, knowing no one else could detect or record her path if she didn’t send it to them.

“UO, Dr. Ponce Heidon is my friend. He’s Phed’s friend. He’s Dorf’s friend. And he’s Dr. Gimmel’s friend. Dr. Heidon doesn’t know you very well. It’s hard to show friendship if you haven’t spent time together. Now you can spend time together. This is good. Phed and I want you to be Dr. Heidon’s friend. Please, UO, this is so-oo-important.”

Phed’s tug on her arm broke Cimi’s concentration, but her bubble popped only after she’d finished her message. “Come on, Cim.” Phed eyed her gum and her tuft with suspicion as he tugged her away from the closing door. “What are you up to?”

“Success, I hope.” She spun away from the door as it clicked shut behind them.

Ponce looked down at UO-1. Despite his scientific outlook, he had a feeling that refused to go away, an inkling that the little creature with big blue eyes wanted to dialogue. Ponce had observed how Cimi went right up to UO-1 and began a conversation—as if UO-1 were another adult in the room—so he decided to duplicate that approach.

“Okay, UO. It’s you and me. You know a lot about me, but did you know when I first saw you, I asked, ‘What is he?’ No one could answer me. I kept asking, ‘What is he? What is he?’ Then I remembered Dr. Gimmel had spent proxi-cycles studying different life forms, and I hypothesized he might have the answer. After he met and examined you, he sent me a report identifying your blood type and DNA as Authairian—but part iguana, part feline, and part raptan. The most surprising part of the report was the way you cooperated and expressed curiosity by your attention to Dr. Gimmel.”

UO-1 blinked his eyes and cocked his head.

Ponce believed he was getting through, so he continued. “I’ve been told you know all about how you were created. It seems the raptan part of your DNA came from Dr. Tzeus’s blood when it mixed with the chemicals on the lab floor. That’s when you started out as a pulsating blob.”

The furry lizard creature stretched one arm out, splaying his hand on the transparent plexi while the other clung to a branch. His head bobbed up and down.

“If all this is true,” he continued, “we now know the answer to *what is he*. You qualify as raptan. A raptan deserves a better name than a laboratory designation like UO-1.”

Again, Ponce’s comments were greeted with vigorous head-bobbing.

“What do you think of the name Izzy?”

At first, Ponce thought a bubble burst inside his head. Almost at once, he realized it wasn't a bubble—it was an honest-to-goodness glialpath from the tiny creature in Habitat Four.

“UO like Izzy. Izzy like Izzy. Dr. Ponce Heidon Izzy friend, Phed Izzy friend, Cimi Izzy friend, Dr. Dorf Tzeus Izzy friend.”

Ponce stared while Izzy paused and then rolled his eyes as if in search of something. Izzy jumped onto the branch and pathed with enunciated energy. “It is an honor for Izzy to have made your acquaintance, Dr. Heidon.”

Izzy topped the glialpath off with a stalwart kan-du stance.

Ponce was dumbstruck. *What just happened? Did I receive an intelligent path from a raptan-like brain inside the body of a banana-size feline-iguana accidentally created from a mixture of blood, chemicals, and feces on a laboratory floor less than three months ago?*

He rubbed his bushy eyebrows. *I'm a scientist, but there's no physical evidence to prove this feline-iguana-raptan, or whatever he is, sent me an intelligent path.* He glanced at the standard data display. *Only the video record of what will look like an excited animal imitating a martial art. I'm tired and alone. Maybe this was all a figment of my imagination.*

Ponce shook his head, hoping to come to his senses. He needed concrete evidence to prove Izzy's intelligence. Bubbling in his mind, one question might settle his doubts about UO-1's, now Izzy's, mental capacity.

The curious blue eyes blinked at Ponce, waiting.

“Izzy, do you know what a test is?”

“Test— a critical examination, observation, or evaluation. Specifically, the procedure of submitting a statement to such conditions or...”

Ponce listened to Izzy's entire definition, all four categories, of *test*.

“Izzy, that’s quite a complete answer.” But the director needed more assurance of the truth about Izzy’s intelligence. “I’m going to give you a test to better understand your intelligence. If you’re not sure what I mean when I ask you the question, that’s okay. Let me know you don’t have the answer, and I’ll find an easier question for you.”

Izzy stood tall, clasping his hands behind his back. He looked eager to begin.

“Your test is to derive the Ingerschröd Wave Equation.”

The director took a deep breath, almost chiding himself for the unfair question. He had no reason to believe Izzy could have knowledge of quantum mechanics. Nevertheless, he figured this would be the upper limit, and he could back down from there to find Izzy’s true level of indoctrinated intelligence.

Ponce waited in silence as Izzy lowered his head for a long moment.

Just as I imagined, he can’t find it programmed, thought Ponce.

The silence broke with Izzy’s crisp path. “Dr. Heidon, do you want the Ingerschröd Wave Equation derived for time-dependent or time-independent conditions?”

Ponce knew the head he was shaking connected to his body, but he wasn’t sure how long it would stay there. Dizzy, he had to lean on the habitat wall for a moment. The little critter’s question was essential to deriving the proper equation. Someone with knowledge of predicting particle movement had to know the specific goal. The director hadn’t imagined Izzy could understand enough to ask.

Maybe it’s a trick. Maybe Izzy was taught to act like he knows the answer. I’ve got to make sure whatever he produces is recorded on video. Ponce tried to keep his voice steady.

“Izzy, you are to derive the time-dependent Ingerschröd Wave Equation. You’ll need to use my DB to record the derivation.”

Ponce pressed the magnetic closure on his DB's custom wristband. It opened, separating the embossed words of his title and leaving a bracelet of sun-starved skin on his pale tan wrist. Removed from its owner, the DB shut down at once, but with a touch, Ponce's DNA revived and resynced the device. He then deactivated the DNA security and called up a chart of mathematical and algebraic symbols.

"Izzy, can you write the equation using these?" Ponce held the reactivated DB against the clear wall of the habitat to show Izzy the screen and pointed a finger at the individual numbers, letters, and mathematical characters. Izzy's eyes scanned each row.

"Izzy derive Ingerschröd Wave Equation, time-dependent." His tiny fist punched at the flexichem as if trying to create an opening for the DB to be delivered.

"Here, I'll bring it through for you." Ponce eased the DB through the recoverable material of the habitat wall and lay the device on the turf near a horizontal log.

Izzy slithered onto the log, lay down, and placed his hands in position to begin deriving the equation. He withdrew the claw on one finger and slid the slender digit's pad over the screen as he had seen Phed and Cimi do. He viewed all the symbols available and looked up at Ponce.

"Izzy need eigenvalue and wave function symbols." Izzy pushed and shoved the device toward the habitat's wall near Ponce. It moved barely a centimeter.

I think the little trickster is stalling. Ponce reached through to take the DB when another path entered his brain.

"Ponce Heidon, Director PHI. Ponce Heidon, Director PHI, Izzy friend." Izzy bobbed his head up and down.

Trickster or not, Ponce found Izzy's enthusiasm irresistible. "You're my friend too, Izzy. You read my title embossed on the DB band, didn't you? Do you know what *embossed* means?"

As he retrieved his DB, Ponce listened to the accurate definition Izzy’s brain appeared to have taken straight from the Dyzzeberry Dictionary and glialpathed directly to him.

Ponce’s hand smacked the top of his head. *Again. I failed to record another incredible interchange.* “Izzy, I’m going to have Phed return and download Cimi’s KUWI app into my DB. It should include the symbols you need, and Phed will be able to recite your paths as you derive the equation. That way, we’ll have an official record of your test.”

I still don’t think Izzy can do it, but I won’t discourage any attempt he makes. And I’m more than curious to see how he’ll try to get himself out of this dilemma.

Dorf’s intern jumped from his seat in the subterranean version of the analytics room and ran for the exit. The chief of genetics heard him say only, “...witness to a fascinating examination...” before the door closed after Phed.

The exhausted Dr. Tzeus rubbed his eyes, unsuccessfully trying to shut out Cimi Nuja’s dramatic pleadings to accompany Phed to watch their tiny friend’s testing in action. *Imagine if UO-1 were defining all the words she’s using now—unfair, infuriating, Ingerschröd, sole app developer, technologically irresponsible, unequivocal denial...*

Then a different thought occurred to Dorf, and he mental-noted: *Cimi furious—tuft screaming red.*

As soon as Phed skidded into the observation pod, he received the little fella’s path. “Phed, happy news!”

The feline-iguana, balancing on a horizontal branch, bobbed his head and pointed to himself with both hands. “No UO-1! No UO, UO Izzy! Izzy, Izzy. Dr. Ponce Heidon Izzy friend, Phed Izzy friend...”

The path completed the entire list of friends who could now call UO-1 by the name *Izzy*.

Phed looked at Ponce, whose nod confirmed he too received Izzy’s paths. “Wow, that’s a great name. I’m gonna like calling you Izzy. Now, let’s see if you can live up to the Izzy I already know.” With a few taps, Phed entered the code to give Ponce’s device access to the KUWI app.

The screen above Izzy’s habitat again burst into activity. Behavioral descriptions and video showed Izzy exploring the functionality of KUWI on Ponce’s DB and pumping his body up and down when he found the symbols that would allow him to perform the test.

Phed voice-recorded every word of Izzy’s path. “Ponce Heidon Director PHI test Izzy—Authairian with DNA of feline, iguana, and raptan—ready to derive Ingerschröd Wave Equation, time-dependent.”

Izzy paused and looked up at Ponce. Phed swallowed then held his breath.

The director acknowledged Izzy with a nod and said, “Go.”

Pathing stopped. The observation pod fell quiet.

The DB screen and the screen above Izzy’s habitat filled with symbols, numbers, signs, and letters. Izzy’s fingers blurred as did the images racing across both displays.

Phed remembered deriving the Ingerschröd Wave Equation as a student in nuclear physics, but Izzy’s derivation was much too fast to follow. Phed looked at Ponce. The director’s head moved from DB screen to data screen and back. *I don’t think even Dr. Heidon can really tell if Izzy’s randomly choosing images or deriving the equation. Not really.*

Almost as quickly as he began, Izzy stopped. He pointed one tiny finger at his last calculation, clearly visible on the screen above his habitat. He lifted his head and pathed. “Izzy—Authairian with DNA of raptan, feline, and iguana—Derive Ingerschröd Wave Equation, time-dependent.” Phed thought the little fella appeared satisfied with himself as he stood on his hind legs anticipating Ponce’s response.

Ponce retrieved his DB, and Izzy sprang to the highest branch, looking expectantly at the director. Ponce adjusted his DB and checked the time stamp.

“You completed your test in 58.7 seconds, Izzy. That’s record time if your calculations are accurate.”

“Calculation.” Izzy pathed its meaning and that of *accurate* then folded his arms in front of his chest. “Izzy calculation accurate for Ingerschröd Wave Equation, time-dependent.” The tiny foot stomp that followed reminded Phed of Cimi’s go-to way of displaying her disappointment.

Ponce must have noticed too. “Izzy, please give me time to review your derivations and confirm their accuracy. Right now, I’m going to give you another test not related to quantum mechanics. After you respond, I’ll be able to fully congratulate you if your answer is correct.”

Izzy pathed with school-boy anticipation. “Ponce Heidon Director PHI, test Izzy—Authairian with DNA of iguana, raptan, and feline—test not related to quantum mechanics. Go.”

Ponce blinked. “Okay, Izzy. What is the symbiotic relationship between the phytophagic flatworm and cloverleaf pulpit fig?” The director checked the time as Izzy put one finger to his cheek and cocked his head.

It appeared to Phed that Izzy was struggling with this one. *I have no idea. No idea at all. What if Dr. Heidon stumped Izzy this time?*

Izzy's little finger began tapping. His eyes studied the ceiling. One, two, three minutes passed.

Phed gritted his teeth and clenched his fists, sending silent messages of encouragement. *Come on, Champ. You can do this.* If he'd known the answer, he'd have been tempted to path the little fella a clue.

At last, Izzy blinked, nodded his head, and pathed. "Cloverleaf pulpit fig enzyme fix nitrogen from air for phytophagic flatworm protein generation. Phytophagic flatworm eat fruit of pulpit fig. Flatworm protein digest. Waste nitrogen excrete, provide fertilizer for fig plant."

Phed had no idea whether Izzy's answer came close. Seeking reassurance in the now looming silence of the observation pod, he looked at the director, and his hearts sank.

Beads of perspiration collected in the creases of Ponce's forehead. His face flushed. Ponce opened his mouth but then closed it and swallowed. Finally, the director glanced at Phed—and smiled.

Ponce nodded to Izzy. "Well done, Izzy. Congratulations. Your answer is correct."

Phed clapped, and Izzy jumped to the turf and then bounded onto the highest horizontal branch for a kan-du stance. Then he scurried onto a lower branch and bobbed while pathing the entire answer over and over.

"Dr. Heidon, I had no idea where that was gonna go. How'd you come up with that question?"

"I wanted a true test of Izzy's native ability, without any means for him to tap into the Dyzzleberry Dictionary for answers via DB technology. And the information, presented at a conference I attended, hasn't yet been published, so none of our team members could have supplied him with such details in advance.

“You’ve got a precocious lifeform on your hands, Phed. Izzy’s mind is indeed raptan and deserves the privileges of all raptans. However, your charge *must* be kept hidden from the public. Keep him safe. I’ll notify Dr. Tzeus of my decision.”

Phed wanted to shout out, jump up and down, and hug Ponce, but he contained his excitement. “That’s wonderful news, Dr. Heidon, wonderful. I’m not sure I’m qualified to continue as Izzy’s teacher, but I’m honored to be entrusted with the responsibility, and I’m gonna do my best, my very best.”

As soon as Ponce was out of sight, Phed interrupted Izzy’s pathing of synonyms for *precocious*. “Izzy, how’d you figure out the answer to Dr. Heidon’s question?”

The little critter dangled his legs from the branch. “Izzy ask Izzy question. Solution pop into Izzy head. Izzy ask more question and more question. More answer. More question deeper. More answer deeper. Izzy ask until he conclude how phytophagic flatworm and cloverleaf pulpit fig help each other survive.

Wow. With the little fella’s brain, this advanced, I wonder about the part that could strategize and outwit an opponent.

Phed placed both hands on Izzy’s habitat and looked directly into those bright blue eyes. “Izzy, do you wanna learn how to play a game called chess?”

Bumbling Idiot

General Gore Andriol stood in the privacy of his office, admiring the medals adorning his uniform. He patted a vacant spot below his right shoulder. “That’s where it’ll go, the Defense Superior Service Medal—all six sides trimmed in copper.” He sat down at his desk to formulate a plan of attack, anticipating the invasion of PHI would earn him the metal he had so long coveted.

A video of the invaders’ route to the researchers’ underground headquarters, compliments of his spy, the fugitive Chico Quwattle, ran across his visual space. He played it over and over to become familiar with the turns, hallways, and lift his invaders would negotiate.

Seeking approval, Gore pulled out Buster and peered at his button eyes. “What do ya think about this, Buster? Remember Spy 21, Harimata? She’ll memorize their route, and I’ll quiz her until she knows it by hearts. I’ll not accept anything but a perfect score. If she passes the test, she’ll apply for a job as the chief security officer at PHI.”

Buster’s head bobbed in agreement then suddenly stopped. Gore picked up Buster’s one ear and dropped it over the toy’s face. The general stared into the distance.

“Yeah, that’s right. With her physical prowess, she should have no trouble getting the job. They won’t know who she really is until it’s too late.”

Gore picked up Buster's ear and whispered, "Okay, Buster. I've got to make contact, and you must go into hiding."

With Buster safely tucked away, Gore activated the holovid. Spy 21 came into view, standing ramrod straight at perfect attention. Gore, seated in his office, raised one eyebrow at her posture but said nothing about it as he explained his plan.

"I'm ready to play that role," she said. "With an impressive falsified resume, the Olympon government will be eager to put me in charge of PHI security."

Then Spy 21 cleared her throat and frowned, diminishing the effect of sparkly orange makeup. Her eyes bore into the general's as she brought her face close to the lens. "Sir, I consider it an honor to protect the researchers and make it possible for them to create a vaccine that will save my nation."

She remained at attention and repeated *save my nation* while flexing her arm, emphasizing mighty biceps. Then, in a display of fealty, she lowered her arms, clasped hands behind her back, and bowed.

Hmm, convincing act. The only thing missing is my applause, but I'll not bolster an ego that could as easily turn on me.

The general also lowered his head, not to acknowledge Spy 21's performance but to tap a message into his Andriol-crest-shaped DB outside the holovid's view field. When he raised his head again, he spoke to his spy's image. "An agent will contact you shortly. Follow his instructions on how to apply for the position. I expect to hear from you in three wake-cycles."

Gore found more and more to like about the multitalented woman. At another secret meeting, this time in his chambers, he had found Spy 21's martial art prowess equal to that of

any male's—except, of course, that of his own. There he witnessed firsthand her offensive strike. It needed no claw to defeat the opponent.

As well as things were going with Harimata, the opposite was true with Chico Quwattle. Initially, Gore found Quwattle's responses to his demands timely and thorough, but she soon wearied him with relentless insistence on information about her family. She wanted to know their diet and how often they were fed, did they get proper sleep, were they given time free of shackles, when would she be able to see and talk to them...

Gore needed her alive to complete his mission, so he placated her with lies about her relatives' safety and well-being, telling her that when she produced the PHI director's schedule, he would release them unharmed. He planned no such clemency, but he needed that schedule to assign the best wake-cycle for attacking PHI's laboratory.

The general became dogged in his demand.

He pathed her once again. "Ms. Quwattle, the director's schedule. Where is it?"

This time, the aggravating woman ignored his question. "General Andriol, I must know how my family is surviving. Certainly, you have family—a son, daughter, or brother? What about your mother? Surely, you have a grandmother. My brother is young, and Grammy's the most important raptan in Zak's life. I've got to hear her voice to know Grammy's health isn't in trouble and that she can give Zak hugs to comfort him. I'm sick with worry. My hearts are beating erratically. You need me alive, and Zak needs hugs from his grammy."

The young raptan's emotional pleadings were too much for Gore.

SNAP. His right hand tapped off communication as his left clutched inside his jacket sleeve. Buster's ear crinkled in his tight grasp and led the way as the rest of the toy rabbityle

popped out. Gore held the soft toy, cradling it in both palms. In desperation, he asked Buster for help.

“Buster, we don’t want Grammy in trouble. What should we do?”

The general studied Buster’s black eyes. Gore’s hearts slowed to soothing beats, and his eyes glazed over as his alter ego offered a solution.

“We can’t risk having our source die before the attack. All we have to do is order a change of living conditions for the captives. Grammy will be able to hug Zak all she wants. She won’t be in trouble then, and Chico’s hearts will beat normally. Give Mumba’s nephew the job. Leachim won’t ask questions.”

Buster’s only ear flopped as the toy’s head nodded to manipulation, and Gore agreed with the advice of his trusted companion. “That’ll solve this problem. You’re right. Leachim can be trusted to keep the secret. Buster, sometimes you’re just plain brilliant.” Gore stuffed Buster back up his sleeve and placed a secure glialpath to Mumba’s nephew.

“At your service, Six-Star General Andriol. How can I be of assistance?”

Leachim Ztulk listened carefully to Gore’s orders and promised, “I will take care of this matter immediately.”

Closing the conversation, Gore snapped, “You have two hours to complete your assignment.” *There aren’t many tasks I can trust to Mumba’s bumbling nephew, but this one should be simple enough.*

Chico stood still, tapping the embedded lentil on the back of her ear, hoping the signal’s loss between her and the general had been a connection glitch and not vengeance toward Chico for begging to hear Grammy’s voice.

What have I done now?

She felt sick, worrying she'd sealed Zak's fate. She feared the weakened bodies of her grandmother and aunt couldn't take the pain and emotional stress much longer. Zak was strong and courageous. He had her stubbornness and endurance too. But he was young. He would suffer long, much longer than she could bear to imagine.

She wanted to tear off her left ear and flee to the hidden Valympyon dungeon, wrap Zak in her arms, and never let him go. Where had her strength been in the face of evil? She had fallen to the weakness of her own fear. *I need someone to talk to, or I'll go mad.*

She'd pathed Sequence's keeper each wake-cycle to receive kitty updates, but that wasn't much, though it was better than not having any link to her cuddly friend.

The one friend she wanted to trust with her awful secret was Cimi, but could she? *Wouldn't Cimi feel—and impulsively act on—the need to tell Dorf? And Dorf, Ponce? And Ponce...?*

Her left ear vibrated. An automated message said, "You have forty-five seconds to listen to a live conversation of your captive family."

Chico heard Zak's familiar voice at once. She froze.

"It feels weird to stand. Don't try it, Grammy and Aunty Helyn. Wait till I get steady, and I'll help you."

Chico listened, blocking out the world. *It's Zak. Is he free to stand and walk around?* She recognized her little brother's trying-to-be-strong voice. *He's acting brave for Grammy and Aunt Helyn.*

"The floor's a seethin' pool of bacteria, Zak. Don't slip in that stinkpot of filth." *That's Aunt Helyn, talking attitude.* Chico clung to every word. "Walk around the edge and loosen up

those muscles first. I'm in no hurry to get movin'. It's that warm bath I need to scrub the crusty shit off—maybe then these cramped legs'll start workin' right. Look there at Zak. He's limbered up already.”

Chico almost smiled. *Aunt Helyn's tapped her inner strength, but what about Grammy?*

“Zak, you'll be the first to clean up.” *It's Granny—thank Valym and Olym.* “Helyn, dear, it's not a bath they promised, it's a shower. Don't get stuck on thinking you'll have warm water either. Though wouldn't even a cold shower be a pleasu—”

The connection went dead.

Tears streamed down Chico's face, but her hands clenched into fists.

When the general's next request came, Chico responded with an in-your-face enumeration of Andriol's guilt according to the global court of Authairian justice with regard to the treatment of prisoners.

She gave the general no chance to speak as she recited word for word, the forty-five-second interchange overheard between her family members.

Then Chico drove home her case.

“My grandmother, brother, and aunt are being tortured. You're holding them hostage to force me to provide information for you. I cannot physically take this stress. I passed out at work. The cardiologist warned my hearts are behaving erratically. The muscles aren't receiving adequate oxygen—a condition that may cause sudden death. Without knowing the source of my stress—because you've forbidden me to tell anyone—the doctor has prescribed bed rest. That means I'm not to leave my room.

“I’m certain my condition will improve only when you provide ongoing proof that my grandmother, brother, and aunt are sufficiently nourished in a safe, clean, and comfortable place. Then, and only then, will I be able to get you the director’s schedule.”

General Andriol’s curt reply ended their communication. “The matter will be investigated.”

Chico could only hope she’d helped and not further hurt her family.

General Andriol seethed. He couldn’t risk losing this spy. Not yet, anyway. Mumba’s nephew had screwed up the one job that’d seemed impossible to get wrong.

“Leachim, you bumbling idiot! The captives were still in their dungeon when you sent the live audio to my contact. Get all three captives sanitized, fed, and in a decent place to stay—no stinging stroaches. Set up a full sleep- and-wake-cycle bott-watch to report unusual activity. Do not send live audio to my contact until I have seen the results of your assignment. Do you understand?”

“Yes, yes, Six-Star General Andriol. I’ll make better mistakes next time. I, I mean, I’ll fix it. You’ll see. Am I dismissed?”

“Three hours. You have three hours to get this mess straightened out. Now get it done.”

Gore shut off communication and pulled out Buster. He held Buster in his right hand while nervously pinching the stuffed rabbityle’s ear. “Leachim’s driving me mad.” Gore’s face heated as he enumerated Leachim’s failures to Buster.

“He’ll be my downfall, Buster. I can’t trust he’ll get anything right. And Mumba doesn’t want to know when his nephew screws up. ‘Keep him busy,’ he says. ‘Leachim needs discipline

and routine,’ he says. ‘Give him a full schedule with high expectations and more work. Expect nothing but the best from my nephew.’

“Buster, that narcissistic, self-righteous dictator refuses to accept the fact that the son of his deceased sister is a failure, a total, complete poopinnoop. Leachim’s an impossible klutz. He needs a babysitter, not a six-star general, to oversee him.”

Gore stopped pinching Buster’s ear then shook him violently. He looked at Buster with disgust. “You’re not helping, either,” he said, scrunching Buster and jamming him up his sleeve.

Just then, his DB voiced a message. “Six-Star General Gore Andriol, you are to appear immediately in the private office of His Excellency Mumba Zola, President for Life, Lord of All the Beasts of the Land and Fishes of the Sea, and Conqueror of All Valympya.”

The Target

Mumba Zola drained the final drops of blood-beer from his goblet. He'd designed this auspicious office space for functionality—to plan war campaigns as well as find spiritual renewal. Its west, north, and east sides formed a concave wall programmed for image-enhanced work sessions. However, when he deactivated the technology of governance, the walls transformed into a rain forest. Holographic images immersed the royal viewer in the tropical world found near Authair's poles. Jybbons swung from vine to vine. Brilliantly plumed kyrebirds feasted on sylurpapples while intermittently trilling love songs. Freeliogs hopped through moist undergrowth in search of waterwugs.

Nodding to his servant, Mumba waited as Jeeves's gloved hands silently removed the dictator's goblet and lay a lightly woven blanket of green angora over his master's shoulders. With no more than a whispered shuffle, the servant departed the room. All was quiet but for the forest's soothing sounds.

Mumba placed his hands, palms facing up, on his knees. He lowered his eyelids and began his daily meditation. Breathing deeply, he wiped his mind free of Ursula's insults, Leachim's calamities, and Gore's attack strategies. The entire dominion of Valympya faded as Mumba focused his auditory senses first on a freeliog scrounging in the underbrush, then the

zreep, zreep of a kyrebird. He strained to hear the slightest movement—maybe a jaguaary following its prey—and then from the canopy of trees came the high-pitched rapid notes of a strawarbler. In this way, the dictator’s body and mind eased to a state of calm.

The fifteen minutes of meditation renewed Mumba’s spirit. He lifted his eyelids and, ready to begin the strategy session with his next in command, summoned Jeeves.

The servant bowed. “Excellency, General Gore Andriol is awaiting your approval to enter.”

“Admit the general and wait in the atrium.”

“It will be my pleasure, Excellency,” the faithful servant offered as he backed through the jungle, exiting through the doorway’s expertly crafted rain forest–themed carvings.

The exquisite door swiveled again, this time opening to admit Gore Andriol. He stepped through, medals glittering, and strutted forward. Fifteen confident strides brought the general face-to-face with his leader.

“I bring valuable information for His Excellency Mumba Zola, President for Life, Lord of All the Beasts of the Land and Fishes of the Sea, and Conqueror of All Valympya.”

Mumba, comfortable in his iconic forest green blanket-cape and brown beanie, remained seated, elevated in the middle of the crescent of comfortable swivel chairs that allowed an audience of ten to participate if desired. He greeted the general with a nod and explosion of air, offering no apology for the belch. He waved Gore toward a seat.

This strategy session required only two strategists, the usual number of participants in Mumba’s shared work events. In fact, his strategy sessions always included just the two of them, His Excellency and General Andriol, but Mumba meant to impress his six-star general that others filled the chairs at times when the general wasn’t invited.

“Your valuable information can wait, Andriol. My Excellency will now demonstrate Valympyon Surveillance Reality. You’ll now experience VSR’s one-of-a-kind advanced surveillance technology.”

Mumba pressed a spot on the armrest of his ornately upholstered lion-skin chair. The jungle disappeared, and a thin panel covered in rectangular icons lifted from the chair’s side. It tilted for tapping convenience and locked in position above his ample lap.

The general leaned forward as if to look more closely.

“You may be wondering how My Excellency has managed to improve on the powerful system that visually puts the observer at any point specified with coordinates.”

His audience nodded with obvious eagerness.

The dictator tapped his DB. A flash of light cut across both observers’ vision, and they found themselves immersed in a live hologram outside the Ponce Heidon Institute in Olympya. There they were, beside the protesters lining Aqua Tree Lane. The chanting seemed to fill the room in which the two sat while the heat of Olym’s sun warmed their bodies. Mumba zoomed them to a shaded path where dappled light from overhanging tree branches played over the room. Perfume wafted through their air.

Gore lifted his head and sniffed. “That’s fragrance from the aqua tree blossoms! Amazing.” He turned to see if Mumba agreed.

“Humph!” Mumba dismissed Gore’s observation and shut down the system. They sat in silence surrounded by stark white walls. The dictator swiveled to face his six-star general. “Now, you may divulge that valuable information you claim to have.”

Oh, wow. Sweating, his nerves on edge, General Andriol realized Mumba would now be able to feel, hear, even smell the attack on PHI. Gore reached over to his right sleeve as if straightening the cuff and gave Buster's ear a squeeze that momentarily eased his anxiety. He nodded at His Excellency and then began. "I have a PHI employee who sympathizes with the protesters and has been spying for our cause. She's in the process of procuring the director's schedule. Once I have the record, Your Excellency will be notified of the date of invasion."

Gore dared not identify the spy as Chico Quwattle. He planned to divulge that gem of knowledge when presenting the lovely young female personally to Mumba Zola once the laboratories had been destroyed and she'd been captured.

Feeling more confident, he straightened his shoulders. "I've employed an additional spy of proven loyalty with mastery of martial arts who's been hired as chief security guard for PHI. To make the rank of chief security officer, she had to pass their rigorous training program. She'll be leading the raid on the laboratories. His Excellency Mumba Zola, President for Li—"

"Get on with it." Mumba dismissed the recitation of his entire title with a wave of his arm, obviously more interested to learn about the female spy who would lead the charge.

Gore paused a moment, befuddled over the interruption. He risked making eye contact with Mumba's impatient stare. "Oh yes, the spy, Harimata. I believe we'll be able to see her now at the entrance to PHI in a uniform of the Olympyon Special Services Division. If Your Excellency permits, I'll be happy to point her out on the VSR." *Now maybe I'll be able to play with this new system.*

Mumba activated a panel that rose from the side of Gore's chair and demanded, "You find Harimata."

Gore zoomed in on Aqua Tree Lane and maneuvered alongside the protesters. Their chanting—*STOP THIS INSANE RESEARCH*—came in stronger the closer he brought them to the dissidents. Fascinated with the tactile sensations, Gore drew them closer and then moved them away from the chanting crowd. He took them to the shade of the aqua trees where a coolness enveloped his body and fragrance entered his nostrils. He tapped the panel again and moved them onto the path. Here, Olym's heat brought droplets of perspiration to his temple.

Mumba wiped his forehead. "Stop playing, Gore! Find Harimata."

Mumba's baritone order jolted the general back to the task at hand. He set a straight path to the entryway. Searching near the head of the group, he finally found the bulging biceps whose owner stood at attention, scanning the raptans entering the revolving doors. To each individual, Harimata nodded and smiled as if giving permission to proceed through the security check.

"There she is, Your Excellency, dutifully performing her surveillance."

Gore zoomed them close enough to see the dimple in her chin and orange lashes glittering under the gray uniform's hat brim. The insignia on her sleek polyfiber bodysuit advertised her position of authority. She stepped to one side, appearing to study the protesters, her serious demeanor indicating she'd be a force to challenge if violence broke out.

A group of chanters stepped back, convinced by her ruse.

To Gore's relief, Mumba's eyebrows raised as high as the rim of his beanie.

"Demonstrate how you plan to shut down the laboratories."

Gore drew them away from the entrance to PHI and along Aqua Tree Lane to the last of the protesters. Some of the raptans there weren't chanting but instead talking among each other.

"There's one of our soldiers posing as a protester; he's going to bring up the rear."

Gore zoomed them close enough to eavesdrop on a burly man in workman's clothing. He was telling another how he'd lost a son to the mysterious disease and wanted to see the lab rats in that institute hang for making it happen.

The general faded the audio. "I've had the infiltrators, acting as concerned citizens, integrate themselves among the protesters and suggest ideas of how to dismantle the laboratory operations. When the appointed wake-cycle comes, they'll be pumped up. Everyone will join the raid."

Mumba tapped his chubby fingers on the lion-skin armrest. "Raise the audio."

Gore zoomed in on individual faces and voices as the sound picked up. Interspersed among those chanting were participants in conversations. Some angrily shared ideas of physical attacks; others discussed bringing more friends and family to break through the entrance and demand the cessation of genetic research.

Mumba observed quietly before he spoke again. "I studied crowd psychology in military academy. This crowd appears beyond the submergence stage where they lose their individuality. It seems your insurgents are effectively setting up the contagion phase when the participants will unquestioningly follow the ideas of a charismatic leader."

Gore released a deep breath and fingered his right cuff. *My plan might just work, Buster.*

“Checkmate!” Izzy’s path couldn’t have been more enthusiastic. He bobbed up and down with glee.

“Wow, I didn’t see that coming, Champ. Either you’re some kind of wizard, or you’ve got a great instructor, a really great instructor.” Phed smiled, and Izzy, after reciting the many definitions of wizard, put his right hand out for a high five.

“I’m glad you’re being monitored with KUWI. It documents how quickly you learn.”

Izzy, who was standing on all fours over a borrowed DB Cimi had loaned him, raised his head and blinked. The screen displayed Izzy’s triumphant checkmate. “Izzy learn chess from Phed. Phed play Dyzzleberry Communicator chess with KT. Phed not easy to beat Kurl Tszargon.”

Phed lifted one eyebrow, looking suspiciously at his charge. “Hey, how’d you know I was playing chess with Kurl? You were supposed to be asleep, Izzy. That’s the only time I’d play with Kurl. The only time.” Phed detected an Izzy smile.

“KT, Kurl Tszargon initials.” Izzy lifted onto his hind legs and spread both arms wide. “Izzy challenge KT to chess.”

Phed locked eyes with Izzy in a concerned look. “Not anytime soon, Iz. Kurl’s busy with Ponce’s assignment, and it’s gonna be difficult for him to perform if he doesn’t feel safe. He’s got OCD, obsessive-compulsive disorder. His brain’s warning system doesn’t work like yours and mine. It tells him he’s in danger even when he’s not, so he’s not comfortable around someone he doesn’t know.”

“Kurl different. Izzy different. Kurl, Izzy, both different.”

“Let’s give Kurl time to get to know you, Iz.”

Phed wouldn’t let Izzy know that Kurl Tszargon had refused to have anything to do with what he called “a creature hatched from an unsanitary lab accident.” Kurl found talk about everything to do with Izzy obnoxious. “That unidentified organism is just a mutant lizard,” the astrophysicist said to anyone who brought up the subject while he sanitized with vigor.

After Izzy’s test, Dorf had pulled Phed aside. “As you can see, Kurl’s got a problem with Izzy. Director Heidon asked Kurl to meet Izzy, but he refused. So, Ponce told Kurl about Izzy’s understanding of the Ingerschröd Wave Equation and the cloverleaf pulpit fig symbiosis, figuring that would convince him.

“Instead, Kurl sanitized, then said, ‘Don’t let it fool you, Heidon. Creatures that precocious can’t live long. It’s not worth investing resources in that mutant lizard. I don’t want any part of it.’”

Phed’s hearts sank as he listened.

At the end of Dorf’s story, Chief put his hands on Phed’s shoulders. “Difficult to change Kurl’s mind. Don’t talk about Izzy when Kurl’s around. Distracts him. Have to have Kurl focused, especially now. Inform the rest of the team to keep Kurl out of any conversation involving Izzy.”

Dorf's warning about Kurl struck a rough blow to Phed. Kurl, his favorite pilot and chess player, was rejecting an opportunity to meet, Izzy, Phed's favorite raptan.

First-Degree Blood Relative

The wake-cycle after Izzy's triumphant win, Phed faced more important problems than worrying about Kurl's negativity.

"Protesters are showing signs of impatience," Dorf announced to the team at an unscheduled meeting. "Prepare to move to a new location. You have two wake-cycles to pack up. Phed, make sure Izzy can breathe normally outside his habitat."

Dorf looked across the table. "Doctor Gimmel, you and Cimi give Phed support on this. Have to keep Izzy hidden while we make the move. Any problem, the three of you must solve it. No time to waste."

Doc and Phed hurried directly to Izzy's habitat. Cimi excused herself and promised to join them shortly.

"Maybe there's some hidden chamber in the Equapyon Mountains the government will loan us," Phed said, trying to figure out where they might be transferred.

Doc looked grim. "Wherever it is, we've got to get Izzy accustomed to breathing outside his habitat."

Phed looked toward a rustling in H-4. Izzy slithered out from loosely piled leaf cover and lifted his head, blinking.

“You finally woke up, Champ.” Phed’s greeting sounded on the exaggerated side of cheerful even to his own ears. “Guess our tournament wore you out, and speaking of out, welcome to your coming-out! We’ve orders from Ponce that we’ve gotta move all operations. You’re gonna join us, so this wake-cycle you get to breathe outside your habitat.”

Izzy scanned his surroundings and climbed on a high branch examining the room outside.

“No. Izzy happy with branches, lagoon, turf, and logs. No, thank you.” He sprang to the ground and began eating a breakfast of hydrated protein powder.

This isn’t gonna be easy. “I’ll make you a habitat wherever we go, Iz. Wherever we go. But right now, it’s urgent you practice breathing out here with us.”

Izzy slithered to a hollow log and scurried inside. He peeked his head out and looked up at Phed. “Izzy happy in habitat.”

Dr. Gimmel turned to Phed. “We have little time. Let me do my best to ease his concerns.” Then he squatted near the hollow log. “Izzy, you’re an Authairian, remember? Raptan, feline, and iguana. You have Authairian lungs like us, so you can breathe Authairian air like us.”

Doc took a deep breath to demonstrate. Phed did the same.

“Your lungs do the same thing as ours. Dr. Tzeus’s blood gave you Authairian raptan genes. You and Dr. Tzeus are blood relatives. You’ll be fine. If you don’t feel comfortable breathing outside your habitat, you can go right back in.”

Izzy slithered out of the log and jumped onto a branch near Doc, balancing on all fours. “Izzy has Dr. Dorf Tzeus genes,” he pathed and lifted his head to the ceiling.

Doc looked at Phed and Phed looked at Doc in the moment of silence that followed. *I wonder what the little fella’s thinking.*

“First-degree blood relative includes parent, siblings, and children.”

Oh, he’s been researching blood relative in the Dyzzeberry Dictionary.

“Is Dr. Tzeus Izzy’s first-degree blood relative?” Izzy asked, looking at Dr. Gimmel.

Phed noted his little friend’s accurate use of the verb *to be* and the possessive form of a proper noun.

Doc nodded. “Yes, there’s a high probability that you are a first-degree blood relative to Dr. Tzeus. You think and act with raptan intelligence. That should make you first-degree.”

Izzy’s eyes grew huge. He raised to a standing position and clapped his hands. “Dr. Tzeus is Izzy’s parent. Izzy happy. Izzy call Dr. Tzeus Daddy. Daddy Tzeus.”

Stunned, Phed turned to Dr. Gimmel. “Did Izzy really just say what I think he said? Daddy Tzeus? Really?”

“Sounded like that to me too. I’ll ask him.”

“Ask him what?” Cimi’s voice made Phed and Doc jump as she rushed into the room.

Dr. Gimmel didn’t have a chance to explain—Izzy’s path interrupted. “Daddy Tzeus is Izzy’s parent, first-degree. Male parent is dad, daddy, or father. Izzy call male parent Daddy Tzeus. Daddy Tzeus take son, Izzy Tzeus, out of habitat.”

All three stood stupefied, not knowing how to react. Even Cimi, her tuft a shocking shade of green, stayed speechless.

Phed found his voice and responded first. “Izzy, Dr. Tzeus asked Dr. Gimmel, Cimi, and me to get you accustomed to our environment so you can join us when he moves our research operations. He’s gotta prepare our exit strategy now and can’t afford time to personally see that you make the transition safely, so he’s gonna depend on us. Millions are depending on him to save their lives.”

Izzy lowered his head and slithered on all fours away from his friends. “Daddy Tzeus is Izzy’s parent, first-degree. Daddy Tzeus take son, Izzy Tzeus, out of habitat.”

With his hands and legs, Izzy hugged a log on the mossy turf. His head scanned as far left and right as he could turn it. “Izzy happy in habitat. Izzy OCD like Kurl Tszargon.” He slid off the log and headed to the lagoon. Reaching the water, he washed his hands, carefully rubbing each finger.

“Izzy, you’re not going to die if you come out of your habitat,” Cimi promised. “Try it. Please. It’ll be olymfab, and I’ll be right here with you and Phed and Dr. Gimmel. If you feel frightened or have trouble breathing, you can go right back inside. It’s so-oo-oo very important that you try. We’ll show you where we eat and sleep, our habitats, as long as you’re comfortable outside your habitat.”

“Izzy will not go the way of all flesh, will not go to last resting place, will not meet maker, or—”

Cimi interrupted his path. “Remember, Iz, you are precious. We’ll protect you. You will not cross the great divide or slip away. Dr. Gimmel and Phed and I are your friends.”

She stopped talking momentarily and removed her bracelets, handing them to Phed. She slid her hand inside Izzy’s habitat. “Here, hop on.”

Her rings sparkled as she wiggled her fingers, beckoning Izzy. “I’ll take you out carefully. It may feel a little cooler out here, but you probably won’t notice.”

Izzy looked up from the lagoon’s bank. He raised on arms and legs. The fur on his mane fluffed, and he dashed to Cimi’s side of the cage. “Ten minute. Izzy Tzeus will go outside his habitat for ten minute.”

Phed made a quiet note in KUWI about Izzy's awareness of time concepts while Cimi slowly pulled her hand, with Izzy clinging to her fingers, out through the first and then second layer of the self-healing polymer.

Phed's eyes noticed one change right away. The KUWI data images above Habitat Four stopped recording.

Izzy's fingers clung to Cimi's hand; his tail ringed her wrist like a python's. He lifted his head and looked at Phed, Dr. Gimmel, and then Cimi.

"Look at you. You're breathing, Iz." Cimi pointed to his pulsating skin. "Your lungs are there and taking in oxygen. Olymfab, just like I said!"

"You're looking well, Izzy. How do you feel?" asked Dr. Gimmel.

"Izzy feel like going on tour of PHI underground."

Phed grinned, relieved for his little friend. "We're for sure gonna do that, Iz, but we gotta connect KUWI."

"You can let go of my fingers now." Cimi set Izzy on a shelf next to Phed's bed. "Hold still. I'm going to put a collar around your neck. It's got a receiver to pick up your live data while you're outside the habitat."

Izzy allowed Cimi to snap the thin collar around his neck. Instantly, KUWI reactivated, and a line on a graph spiked and moved along the no longer blank screen above H-4.

Dr. Gimmel voiced a ten-minute time request on his DB then tapped his shoulder. "Come on, Iz. Climb up here where you're able to see all around. We'll take you on a tour of our secure recreation room and common areas."

Izzy scurried up Dr. Gimmel's waiting arm and clung to his shoulder, curling his tail as far around the doctor's neck as it would go.

Phed thought they made a curious parade. Dr. Gimmel led the way wearing his wrap of brown; a black-and-green feline-iguana clung to his shoulder with a fur-ridged tail like a scarf around Doc's neck. Cimi followed in fuchsia with her bubble-flame displaying a curly tuft of orange that Phed recognized reflected her dramatic and friendly mood. She double stepped to keep up while tapping on her DB. Phed brought up the rear in gray, narrating Izzy's behavior along the way.

Passing through Chief's lab, Cimi pointed to a spot on the floor. "Look, Iz, your egg-place. There's where Daddy Tzeus carefully removed your embryo and took it to the habitat that became your hatchplace."

The spot was ringed with a green circle, nothing more. Everyone stepped around it, but Doc paused and leaned over so Izzy could inspect the spot.

Izzy examined the circle then looked to the ceiling briefly. "Izzy has an egg-place and a hatchplace. Where are hatchplaces of Doc, Phed, and Cimi?"

Phed made a note of Izzy's language development to KUWI. "Correct use of plural noun *hatchplaces* and preposition *of*." *If only Izzy could talk.*

"Izzy, we were hatched under different circumstances and in different places," Doc explained. "Those stories are for another time. Right now, we're going to the wearable resin applied protector. We call it a wraptrap. Izzy doesn't wear a wrap like Izzy's friends."

Izzy's head drooped, looking dejected.

"You'll fit through the small equipment door and won't need a wrap," Cimi added. "Chief—er—I mean, Daddy Tzeus has authorized access for you, Izzy."

Of the many places they visited on the tour, Izzy seemed to like the fitness center best. He was free to explore the equipment, and there were a variety of things to jump on. Phed spoke as quickly as he could to record Izzy's fast-moving glialpaths of excitement.

"Your ten minutes are up, Izzy," Doc said. "You can go back now."

Izzy skittered back up to Doc's shoulder and balanced with all four legs. He looked into the surprised doctor's eyes. "Izzy Tzeus requests ten more minutes, please."

Doc laughed. "Okay, Iz. You've got it. I'm very pleased with your successful venture out of your habitat."

Phed was nearly as pleased with Izzy's language development.

Cimi smiled too and, looking up from her DB, said, "Watch this, Iz."

She jumped high, reaching for a bar, and missed. Puffy legs of pink wrap flew up as she landed on her butt. "Ow!"

On her second try, she grabbed the bar and swung wildly. "See, I'm learning to lift my weight by..." She let go and landed on the forgiving artificial turf, safe but winded. As soon as she caught her breath, she picked up her conversation where she'd left off. "...strengthening my biceps."

Izzy jumped from Doc's shoulder onto a high bar then to a machine next to Cimi. He stood tall on its seat and placed his arms on hips as he had seen Phed and Cimi do. "Izzy Tzeus want feline-iguana fitness center."

Phed had been voice recording all of Izzy's paths for KUWI, but he stumbled over the words "feline-iguana fitness center," imagining such a place.

"We'll give that some thought, Izzy," Doc said, shaking his head.

Cimi spoke up. “What a great idea, Iz.” She popped a cube of Double Trouble Bubble Gum in her mouth. “When we unpack and settle in our new location, I’ll take your measurements and design The Izzy Tzeus Fitness Center.”

Izzy bobbed up and down with delight. He jumped onto Cimi’s shoulder, put his head through the hoop of her huge earring, then slithered all the way through and around again.

“Iz, stop that,” she said between chews. “It pulls on my ear.” She tried to grab him, but he was too quick and wrapped himself around her neck.

They reached Cimi’s private living suite with its walls full of interactive images. “This wake-cycle’s wall images are cities around the planet. Here, let’s go to Port Whyn.”

Cimi zoomed them from an ocean to a cliffside resort town. “I spent vacations here as a kid. It’s this adorable little village.” She brought them to a road at the top of a cliff and pointed to a stone house. “That’s where my life was saved.” Cimi froze the image. “Look at this.”

She sank onto a chair and tore the wrap near her ankle then pulled off her orange sneaker and sock. Once her foot was free, she wiggled her toes and pointed to a one-centimeter depression on her instep. “See that hole? That’s from mud ants.”

Doc gasped, and Phed sucked in a deep breath, immediately remembering Chico’s close call.

Izzy jumped off Doc’s shoulder and landed on Cimi’s pink toenails. He stretched out one arm and reached into the depression. It was the exact size of his hand. He looked up at Cimi and blinked sadly.

Phed couldn’t remember ever seeing Cimi’s tuft turn such a dark, somber green.

“Izzy, I was young like you, only four, and I thought it’d be fun to squish my toes in the mud. My foot caught fire—well, it felt like fire when they bit. I screamed and screamed. Mom and Dad whamzaggled me to Doc Martyn’s. It’s this building here.”

She zoomed in on the two-story structure. “I must have passed out because I only remember waking up in the hospital. They all told me Doc Martyn saved my life by cutting out the infection.”

She looked up sadly at her three friends. “CQ wasn’t as lucky with mud ants. I’ve wondered if the loss of her arm has something to do with her depression. She’s gone through an awful lot emotionally.”

Phed shifted uncomfortably, looking away from Cimi’s gaze and not wanting to dwell on Chico’s emotions.

Cimi tugged her sock on and stuffed the torn piece of wrap inside her shoe for disposal later.

Izzy crept onto Dr. Gimmel’s shoe and quickly climbed all the way to his shoulder, wrapping his tail around Doc’s neck and holding tightly to his shirt.

Doc met Izzy’s eyes. “Iz, I have an idea. What do you say I ask CQ to create you a nutritious snack? She’s an expert with plants and herbs. Maybe she’ll find it an intriguing challenge to use her background to give you something healthy to eat.”

Before Izzy could path his response, Cimi piped up. “Olymfab! That’s the greatest idea, Doc. With only two wake-cycles to get it done, I know she’ll jump into the project and get out of her blues.”

“Izzy Tzeus needs TX like Phed. Izzy wants feline-iguana TX.” He slapped his tail back and forth against Doc’s neck.

“Easy, Iz. Easy,” Doc said.

Not a bad idea, Phed thought.

They left Cimi’s place and finished the tour. Izzy pathed question after question about what Chico might make for his treat as Cimi placed him in his habitat. “Now, get some rest. You’ve had a big day, and I’ve got to pack. Bye.”

Phed handed Cimi her bracelets. “Thanks for your help, Cim.”

He looked at Dr. Gimmel. “Well, Doc, I guess you’re gonna get to explain to Chief his new title. Good luck.”

“Oh, so you’re leaving that up to me.” Dr. Gimmel rubbed his chin in thought and then said, “Wonder what he’ll say? Well, I must talk with CQ first. Not much time.”

“CQ first, CQ first!” Izzy climbed the tallest branch and stretched his neck to watch as Dr. Gimmel left the habitat.

Phed noted another behavior he’d add to Izzy’s list of developmental firsts: Izzy’s apparent eagerness for a treat.

Treat

Two wake-cycles after Izzy's tour, Phed checked to make sure he had everything packed, including Izzy's favorite log. Izzy was busy exploring under Phed's bed wearing his KUWI collar. His heart rates and other vital signs displayed on the wall above his habitat, but Izzy wasn't in view of the camera. Only Phed's words describing the little critter's activities scrolled on the screen.

"Iz, you've got a visitor," Phed announced. "Oops, looks like two."

Izzy scurried out and up the bed's base to its soft top and then leaped onto Phed's shoulder. With hands and feet clinging, he stretched out his neck as Cimi and Doc entered the observation pod.

Cimi skipped ahead of Doc, her sneakers coming to a squeaky halt smack-dab in front of Phed. "Hi, guys!" She bent around Phed, peering at Izzy's habitat. "No more hideout log. I see you two are packed."

She looked from Phed to Izzy. "CQ sends her greetings and can't wait to see everyone. And, Iz, CQ sent something super exciting for you. She wants you to test her new recipe before the briefing this wake-cycle. I think she's feeling better now that she's made something special for you."

“CQ made something special for Izzy.” Izzy jumped on top of Phed’s head to get closer to Doc, who’d just reached them.

“That’s right, Izzy,” said Doc. “She’s created a culinary treat for a growing feline-iguana-raptan—a congratulatory goody for passing Dr. Heidon’s test. She apologizes for not giving it to you herself. She’s still packing, but she’ll see you at the briefing.”

Dr. Gimmel pulled a small envelope from his pocket. Izzy leaned over. His little fingers pressed wrinkles in Phed’s forehead as he craned his neck to see what was in Doc’s hand.

Cimi grinned broadly as Dr. Gimmel pressed gently on the edges of the envelope and held it up for Iz, who backed onto Phed’s head and peered inside. Cimi had already seen the five thin and fragile-looking greenish-brown wafers.

Izzy sniffed with his cute little nose.

“Take one,” said Dr. Gimmel. “Taste it and let us know what you think.”

Izzy sat on the top of Phed’s head and curled his tail. He took the top wafer and held it with both hands, turning the disk around and around between his fingers. He took a nibble, looked at it, took another, and then continued nibbling until only a few crumbs lay on Phed’s head, which he retrieved with the pad of his finger, licking it clean.

“Are you done eating up there?” Phed asked. “I don’t wanna destroy this moment’s delight, but I’m ready for you to find another dining venue.”

“Izzy want more treat. No, Izzy wants more treat.” He leaped from Phed’s head to Doc’s shoulder. “CQ creation pass Izzy taste test. No, CQ’s creation passes Izzy’s taste test. Izzy wants more. Please.”

Cimi clapped while Phed brushed his head and said, “Great job, Iz. You corrected your grammar and licked my head clean. I’ve gotta make a KUWI note of your self-correcting speech.”

“Izzy, can I have a bite, just a little taste? Please?” Cimi asked.

“Izzy Tzeus is happy to share with Izzy’s friend Cimi.” Izzy handed her the second of the crisp delicacies.

Cimi broke off a piece and put it in her mouth. “Yu-umm-y.” She handed Iz the leftover, but he was already giving one to Dr. Gimmel, so she held it out for Phed.

“What’s in it?” Phed asked.

“CQ’s mixture of tuna fish, broccoli, gnarlythorn nectar, aqua tree water, and some other stuff. Go ahead, try it,” she said, moving it closer to Phed’s mouth.

He pulled away. “Tuna fish and broccoli, hmm, that’s okay. Thanks anyway. I’m gonna take your word it’s yummy.” Phed retrieved a sanitizing wipe and cleaned his head.

Cimi gobbled up the rejected morsel.

“I agree with Cimi,” Doc said. “It’s surprisingly tasty. The combination of tuna and broccoli doesn’t sound inviting, but CQ made it work.”

Dr. Gimmel looked at Izzy, who happily nibbled where he sat on the empty shelf by Phed’s bed. “Thanks for sharing, Izzy.”

Phed picked up the envelope with one wafer left. “We’ll save this for later, Iz. Let’s thank CQ for the...what does CQ call them?” He looked at both Doc and Cimi.

“Tuna-broccoli treats,” Cimi said, licking a tiny crumb from her fingertip. “Mm-mm, good!”

Izzy suddenly balanced on his toes, twirled around, and burst into a sing-songy path. “Tuna-broccoli treats, nutritious, delicious, crispy sweets. Izzy loves tuna-broccoli treats.” He high-stepped and repeated the act.

“Maybe we should limit you to one, Izzy,” said Doc as he headed for the door.

Cimi giggled as Phed gave up trying to sing Izzy’s lyrics and instead narrated the poem for KUWI. She laughed and waved. “See you at the briefing, guys.”

Security Breach

“Follow me.” Harimata led the many ranks of protesters four abreast into the reception area of PHI. She led the chant, “Stop this insane research,” adding a rhythmic six-step march. Her followers drew energy from her lead, raising fistful arms high and pounding right feet to each repetition of *stop*. The mantra bounced off the vaulted ceiling of reception and echoed through the halls of the Ponce Heidon Institute of Genetic Research.

Back in Valympya, Mumba and Gore, virtual observers in a war game like none other, comfortably hunkered down in their operative seats within the dictator’s private office. The smells, sounds, and temperature of the live action at PHI, provided by Mumba’s spy technology, stimulated their senses. Gore, at the VSR controls, navigated their way behind Harimata as she and the protesters passed the receptionist’s reportedly fireproof room.

“What’s this? No live raptan to greet international visitors at the famous PHI, only a female hologram? No class. Those Olympyons have no class,” boomed the dictator. Mumba sneered as he lifted his mug of blood-beer and gulped a half liter.

Moments before, Martha had sighed with satisfaction. She’d stayed beyond the end of work-cycle to complete the monthly report she’d now finished. About to secure her office, she

glimpsed through the transparent doors and saw protesters congregating behind PHI's new officer of the special services division. *I still don't trust that female with her huge biceps and orange makeup. If she's such a great security chief, it's odd she hasn't been dispersing that mob. It looks like they're moving closer to the formal entrance.*

Martha regularly activated her fake self, a receptionist hologram, at the end of work-cycle and left through that same, now overly crowded entrance. Not this time. Something made her uncomfortable, though not enough for her to sound an alarm. She snapped the hologram into view, grabbed her personal items, and whamzaggled through a hidden passage.

Moments after Martha left, Harimata rushed in, leading her parade of protesters.

Gore and Mumba followed the invaders, feeling the air thicken with excitement.

“That Harimata is bus—” One loud belch blew away the rest of Mumba's sentence. He ignored the impropriety. “Business. She's all business.” Mumba guzzled more blood-beer.

Gore, encouraged by Mumba's favorable comment toward the spy he'd appointed, kept a steady hand on the controls. They followed close, winding left then right through hallways, passing a fitness center and dining room.

“Where's her weapon?” Mumba glanced at Gore. “Don't tell My Excellency she's not armed.”

Perspiration ringed Gore's head. He zoomed them around the female leader—a full 360 degrees—as she continued marching. Her uniform, tailored to the accentuated waist and full hips of her body, showed no signs of a weapon. Her chest appeared as flat as all Authairian women's, although hers looked uncharacteristically muscular.

“Her stunfire’s well hidden, Your Excellency.” Fortunately for Gore, who had no idea how or where Harimata hid her weapon, the leader of the procession stopped and signaled her followers, forestalling further questioning. Harimata raised both arms in a descending arc as if issuing a prearranged command. Chanting ceased, and the protesters closed rank. They’d reached a lift with a curved door that opened to an amphitheater-size space.

“That lift’s large enough for all the protesters and a sissca,” Gore said excitedly, glancing at Mumba, who appeared caught up in the action as his hands squeezed the claws on the ends of his armrests.

Spy 21 stepped inside, and Gore maneuvered them close behind her. They were being squeezed shoulder to shoulder. Suddenly, his stomach took a free fall.

“Get me out,” shouted Mumba.

Briefing

Twenty minutes before Martha whamzaggled through a hidden passage at PHI and Spy 21 invaded, leading the protesters through reception, the ABMR virus team assembled for a meeting.

Ponce arrived first to lead the briefing in the underground conference room. He checked the security video ringing the room's upper wall and paused at the live view showing the entrance to PHI. His bushy eyebrows pushed almost together. Protesters lined the path as far as the camera lens showed. Their mantra continued the same as before—"Stop this insane research"—but louder than he remembered. He shook his head as a chill coursed through him.

"No different than yester-cycle, Boss, except they arrived earlier than usual," Dorf said as he entered and walked to the far side of the spacious room.

In the east garden's camera view, raptans chatted and birds sang.

"I see no tangible sign of trouble yet. Now's the time before things get dangerous. Turn off the sound, Dorf," Ponce ordered. "I need quiet for the briefing."

Dorf muted the security video; the upper wall and ceiling displayed a silent movie as the remaining team entered without Kurl Tszargon, the only member not present.

Ponce looked around at his team. *I wish Kurl's meeting with the head of the Authairian Space Agency Secret Service could've been held at another time.* Izzy, he knew, hid inside Phed's shirt in accordance with Ponce's instructions to stay out of sight and eliminate distraction.

Cimi patted the chair next to her and smiled at Chico, who lowered herself into it and whispered, "I'm a bundle of nerves, Cim."

Cimi placed her hand over Chico's. "It's okay, CQ. This is your first time with the team in weeks. It's so-oo-oo olymfab to have you back. Don't worry. You can be sure we'll get to a safe place. If Plan A doesn't work, we've got Plan B and then G-1. I've been helping Kurl with the research." She faked a small cough to cover the grin she knew she couldn't repress. "You don't have to worry. If you still need medical attention, we'll get it for you. No matter where we are."

Cimi looked up when Ponce cleared his throat—twice. "Oh, guess this is it." She sat up and let go of Chico's hand as Ponce nodded.

The director glanced around the room at everyone, pausing at Cimi's dear friend. He smiled briefly. "Welcome back, CQ. It's good to know we can count on your expertise."

Then he began his solemn address. "You're a loyal, talented, and efficient team. You must have a safe place to work. Your personal supplies and laboratory materials are being delivered to their secure destination as we speak."

He gestured toward Chief, who adjusted a control in the far corner of the room, and then Ponce pointed to the live image on the ceiling. Cameras focused now on the landing pad of PHI's roof and displayed a government transporter taking off. "Tomorrow, we depart at two-point-five

hours before golden-fringe, getting a head start on the beginning of work-cycle and our usual protesters.”

Ponce paused and searched everyone’s faces in turn. “At that time, you will be on the lift-off pad headed for Olympon Space Station 176. I’m sorry, CQ, but we must leave Sequence behind, for his safety, at Dr. Gimmel’s hospital.”

Cimi—too surprised by the unexpected news to say anything or look elsewhere—stared at Ponce while he further scanned the room.

At first, Phed wondered if he’d heard the news correctly. Then his shirt bobbed in and out as Izzy pathed him. “Izzy will be astronaut like Kurl Tszargon.”

“Cut it out, Iz,” Phed whispered. “No glialpathing during Dr. Heidon’s presentation.” Phed reached inside his shirt to grab the source of the disruptive motion.

Izzy slipped under Phed’s hand and wriggled free, leaping across the table.

Chico lowered her head in her hands then, catching herself, lifted her face and glanced around at her colleagues. Cimi’s tuft glowed an excited Olym-yellow as she messaged in something with her DB. On the other side of Chico’s best friend, Dr. Gimmel inhaled, and his shoulders relaxed. Across the table, Phed sat on the edge of his seat, leaning forward and beaming with joy while his shirt pumped like a bellows. An odd expression crossed his face as he reached inside the shirt.

Almost as soon as she saw the feline-iguana face emerge, it leaped.

Izzy landed on her shoulder.

His movements had been so quick, no one saw him except Chico and a wide-eyed Phed. If she hadn't been watching, she might have cried out in surprise.

The distraught but now distracted botanist turned her attention to the two eyes studying her. *They're so much bluer than I imagined.* She hadn't seen Izzy since he was a pulsating blob rolling from Dorf's crucible onto the turf of Habitat Four. The entire time he'd been developing, growing, learning, and communicating, she'd made excuses to stay away. Chico knew how dangerous it would be for Izzy if the general discovered him. *Somehow, for his sake, I must conceal his presence.*

She pulled an envelope of tuna-broccoli treats from her pocket, waited for Izzy's nose to twitch in anticipation, and tossed it across the room toward Dorf's feet, hoping to lure Izzy there.

Please, let that be far enough away that anyone speaking at in this conference won't talk about him and be picked up by my chyp.

Blasting Through

The lift full of invaders, half of them insurgents intermingled in the ranks of unwitting protesters, had descended to the subterranean level of Heidon's ABMR team's laboratories at PHI.

Perspiring, Gore wiped a sweaty hand on his pants. Then, a tickle at his wrist brought him back to reality. Steadying his right hand on the VSR controls, his left hand reached over to the sleeve of his uniform and tucked in the furry edge of Buster's only ear.

Gore glanced at Mumba, relieved to see His Excellency so captivated by the experience he'd not noticed a furry edge at what should have been his six-star general's crisp uniform cuff.

"We're out. I'll bring us around to the back of the protesters," Gore said, noticing the dictator had removed his beanie and was wiping his head with a royal napkin. The general looked ahead in time to see Mumba Zola's Valympyon troops discarding their disguises, revealing fake PHI security guard uniforms. The nonmilitant invaders cheered, convinced their mission was supported by the institution's full security force.

"Won't feel so claustrophobic now." Gore maneuvered them to the side as the protesters organized and quickened their pace to Harimata's lead through the hall.

"Where in the zarking pit-bowels of vell are we, er, they, going?" Mumba shouted.

“Research labs were moved underground for secrecy, Your Excellency, on Heidon’s orders. The director has no idea his location’s been discovered.” At last, Gore announced, “We’re getting close.”

They followed centimeters behind the chief security officer. A laboratory entrance came into view behind plexi and glass doors.

Harimata signaled, thrusting her arms high. An explosion blew up the demonstration lab and crumbled the arched entry into the conference room. As the hail of glass shards and flying debris settled, the invaders stormed through the depth of the conference room.

From the safety of Mumba’s office, the explosion felt so powerful Gore lurched back in his chair before his hand returned to the controls and redirected them to the rear where civilian protesters attempted to flee. An alarm blared loud enough to hear over half-deafened ears.

His Excellency raised a hand to each side of his head as if attempting to block out the earsplitting sounds. “Shut that brain-blasting sound off, you incompetent clod.”

Invasion

After Dr. Heidon's announcement about the ABMR virus team's relocation destination, their emergency planning meeting was about to begin in the underground conference room.

Izzy jumped from Chico's shoulder to the tiny envelope on the floor at Dorf's feet and slid two fingers inside the veggie wrapper. He pulled out a treat and sat back nibbling happily. When a loud rumbling sounded, followed by the blare of an alarm, Izzy scurried up Dorf's leg and scrambled onto his back.

Chico dashed out of the conference room.

The rest of the team shifted into disaster mode.

Dorf, busy sending lockdown signals, ignored Izzy. "Secured records for ABMR research and deleted them from all work centers, Boss." Then he checked to make sure his stunfire was ready.

Ponce, too busy to acknowledge Dorf's path, tracked the invaders' movements on the security wall video. Beads of perspiration ringed his head. "They've destroyed the samples lab and are heading to the demonstration lab," he announced. With a voice Dorf recognized as measured alarm, Ponce added, "It's the only space separating us from the invaders." He pointed to Dr. Gimmel. "Doc, Phed, secure the conference center."

A *pop* drew Dorf's attention. Cimi's tuft flashed from blue to purple as she spit out, "KUWI records encrypted and sealed, Director."

At her words, Izzy stiffened then leaned over Dorf's shoulder. The tiny forearms strained as the small creature looked as closely into Dorf's eyes as he could manage without losing his balance. "Daddy Tzeus, Daddy Tzeus, Izzy can help. What can Izzy Tzeus do?"

Dorf heard Izzy's path as clear as if he'd voiced it and turned to Izzy's unblinking stare. "Who, me? Daddy Tzeus?"

Izzy's head bobbed up and down.

Can't allow curiosity about that parent title to interfere with this emergency. He softened his voice. "Have to hide you, Little Fella. They're breaking in. Here, get inside." He pulled back the neck of his shirt. "Flatten against my back. Keep your tail hidden. We've got trouble."

Izzy scuttled in backward and kept his head low.

Cimi scanned the room for Chico then tapped Chico's code on her DB.

No response.

Cimi needed no mirror to know her tuft faded to white. She tried again and again.

"Where's CQ? Did anyone see where she went? She's not responding to—"

An explosion of glass, metal, and plexi crumbled the entrance to the conference center, throwing Doc and Phed across the room. Phed's thin body slid down the silishone-surfaced table, and Doc bounced off the cushioned wall, landing on the floor with a thud.

Cimi dashed under the table. Sensitive to loud noises, she tore off two chunks of well-chewed Double Trouble Bubble Gum and covered each ear. When she saw Phed's foot sliding toward her, she grabbed it, pulling so hard he flipped over, falling beside her under the table.

Dorf and Ponce, engulfed in a piercing hail of shards, didn't see the intruders enter until the dust thinned.

Someone shouted orders as five uniformed shapes appeared.

Dorf froze. At his side, Ponce appeared equally stunned.

Behind the strangers dressed as PHI security guards, a throng of ordinary-looking protesters blocked the rubble-strewn entrance. Some tried to flee while others pulled them back inside.

The uniformed intruders pointed small weapons at Ponce. Dorf recognized the death lasers, designed to vaporize organic material with one well-placed shot.

A woman in a PHI security uniform stepped forward, addressed Ponce, then raised her weapon at him.

Dorf rushed to Ponce's side.

Virtual Players

General Andriol and His Excellency ducked as glass, metal, and concrete shattered on the floor, sending crystals of debris through the air—their virtual reality all too real.

“We’ve broken through!” Gore exclaimed. “There they are. That’s Ponce Heidon, the tall one near the back of the room.” He cheered on his personally trained spy. “Go get him, Hari.”

Mumba, glued to the action, said nothing.

“Wow! See that kid slide across the table and flip over?” Gore laughed, pumped. “That has to hurt.”

“What’s Harimata saying?” Mumba bellowed. “Turn the sound on. She’s aiming her stunfire at Heidon.”

The broad-shouldered female had stepped forward, pointing a weapon while addressing the PHI director. Gore turned up the sound as Harimata said, “...Ponce Heidon, that is, the *great* Ponce Heidon.”

Both virtual observers sat glued to the action as Heidon faced the muscular woman. His unwavering stare and set jaws revealed to Gore that Heidon, at last, recognized her as the security chief he’d hired to protect his precious institute.

The director spoke. “I see you’ve no tolerance for peaceful demonstration and seem to be an imposter. Were you not hired in good faith to protect this institution, so we can develop a vaccine for this deadly virus? Now, it’s evident you’re a turncoat loyal to the Valympyons.”

Harimata shouted, “This virus came from your lab, and we are here to shut you down.”

Cheers rose from those behind her, joined spontaneously by Mumba and Gore urging her along.

Harimata ordered her soldiers. “Drag him over here.”

“Ha! She’s not messing with the great Ponce Heidon. Look at that, Mu—Your Excellency. She’s going to have him forced through that shit on the floor.” Gore was deep into the action.

Harimata’s goons grabbed Ponce’s arms, forced him to the floor, and pulled him facedown through the shards of debris.

Ponce’s screams filled every molecule of air in Mumba’s strategy room. The unseen observers were bounced back and forth behind the intruders as Gore, clenching his teeth, grabbed Buster’s body over his sleeve while Heidon, dragged facedown, left a trail of blood in the rubble. Gore released the bulge in his sleeve and steadied fingers of both hands on the control panel, correcting their position. “That Harimata, I knew she had it in her. Look at Heidon now. No more a pompous bastard highfalutin geneticist.”

Gore turned in hopes of seeing approval of the invasion on His Excellency’s face. If approval showed, Gore wasn’t to know.

A burst of stunfire sent both raptans teetering in their seats with the near-reality of the blast.

Agony

The burst from Dorf's stunfire grazed Harimata's hat, but a blow to Dorf's head toppled him.

Izzy streaked from inside the shirt onto Dorf's fallen body. Humping his back and raising his head as if obeying a primordial signal, his skin puffed and unfolded a newly discovered dewlap. Power pumped through every cell. The ridge of shiny black fur along his body raised, each slender strand of fur strong as steel, the needle-sharp tips now peppered with brilliant green spear-shaped filaments that stood erect among the stiff, black hairs like iridescent emerald daggers. His dewlap raised an orange, fiery, flashing sail.

Iz raised his head, opened tiny jaws, and bared his teeth. A web of skin fanned out from both sides of his mouth, creating a chasm that magnified a sound from deep within. It began as a low gurgle but raced to a hissing roar then elevated to a siren of torturous pain.

The sound shocked every nerve fiber and muscle of all raptans—both the good and the bad. Any who'd been standing fell. They lay struggling for breath. Their bodies shivered uncontrollably. Their minds conjured up visions of violent deaths, each more horrifying than the next, cycling without end while throat muscles paralyzed. No screams of agony could manifest their terror—only agonizing silence.

Pain Beyond Virtual

“What the crappin’ snaggle-toothed bat?” cursed Mumba as the lizard-cat’s horrific sound pierced his eardrums.

He reached for the stop icon, but his body froze. Gravity brought him crashing to the floor. Blood-beer spilled, seeping into his cloak while the muscles of his large intestine contracted, pushing out their fetid contents. Every breath was a struggle. His mind fired images and sensations of being burned alive. Then, stripped naked, his body lowered slowly into a cauldron of boiling oil. His Excellency Mumba Zola, President for Life, Lord of All the Beasts of the Land and Fishes of the Sea, and Conqueror of All Valympya, opened his mouth to scream, but no sound came forth.

General Gore Andriol’s fingers blurred in spastic moves, no longer in charge of controlling their experience. His body shook and heaved violently. Waves of nausea brought up stomach contents that burst out, splattering the uniform that had never hosted even a speck of dust. Gore’s muscles cramped, his head exploded with pain, and his ears absorbed the terrifying unknown creature’s siren.

The tiny monster's paralyzing sound waves had turned Gore's virtual experience into reality.

Run

For the longest of moments, not a sound could be heard in the ruins of the underground research facility.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the rigid forms of the once angry protesters came to life. Blood sluggishly pumped into withered veins. Throat muscles began to flex. A shriek broke the silence.

“A monster,” yelled Harimata, the previously emboldened head of security. “They’ve created a monster. There might be more. Run for your life!”

She, the first to attempt escape, trampled over the mass of fallen bodies, stumbled, and fell. Focused on Heidon, her would-be victim, she’d seen no monster but had imagined one huge enough to inflict such a din. Her only thought was to save her life.

Others followed, voices cracking. “It’s a monster. They’ve created monsters.”

Cimi’s tuft drooped, limp with perspiration. She leaned out from under the table and witnessed the last of the protesters stagger away. The air smelled of chemicals and sweat. Her hearts beat overtime. She took a few deep breaths, realizing her gum-covered ears muffled sound and may have been the reason she could already move without pain. *Duh*. She pulled the black mass off one ear. The second was stuck to her hoop earring, tugging on her earlobe. “Ouch!” She

plastered each wad securely under the table and crawled out then DB'd for emergency aid. "I'm okay, but send medevac for five—two, maybe three serious, one missing." She dared not include Izzy for fear of losing him to the authorities. She'd find some way to hide him.

"Phed, you okay?" Cimi jiggled his shoulder.

"Ugh." Phed groaned but didn't move.

"Stay here. I've called for help." *Like he is really going to get up and leave*, Cimi thought as she hurried over the debris to Dorf. His unconscious body lay sprawled on the floor; it heaved with every breath. A knot on his head was turning dark blue.

Izzy, splayed on his back where he'd collapsed atop Dorf's body, gave no signs of life. Cimi bent over, slipping her hand under the limp form. "Oh, Izzy, you sweet little thing. You saved our lives, Iz." She held him to her chest, nuzzling his head, hoping to bring life back into each strand of flattened fur. Then, probing his underbody gently, she felt the faintest of heartbeats. "You're going to be okay."

Feeling encouraged, she looked down at Dorf. The knot on his head seemed a little larger. "Hey, Chief. That was some father-son act. Hang on. I'm going to get you both out of here."

Cradling Izzy against her body and treading cautiously, Cimi made her way to Ponce. He lay curled on his side with knees drawn up, face and chest covered in blood. She knelt and felt his pulse. Faint, but steady.

"Won't be long, Director. Help's on the way." She patted his shoulder then hurried to Doc, who appeared to have suffered little. The blast had thrown him against a carpet-covered wall. Though still unconscious, he breathed peacefully.

Micro moments passed, but no one arrived to help. Every moment without medical attention counted for Ponce, Dorf, and Doc. *Where is everybody?*

Then Cimi had a brilliant idea. She knew Kurl would come through for her in an emergency.

He picked up her path at once. “Kurl Tszargon here.”

“PHI’s been attacked. We need medevac *stat*. The director’s losing blood, and Chief has a head wound. Doc’s not responding, but he’s breathing. Everyone’s unconscious but me. Oh, and CQ’s missing.”

She knew not to mention Izzy.

“Done,” he responded. “Medevac’s on the way. Activate Plan B.” He paused, then with a solid firmness added, “Now.”

Cimi blinked. In the hierarchy of command for the ABMR team, Ponce came first, Dorf second, Kurl third, and she was fourth. With Ponce and Dorf both incapacitated, Kurl now commanded. She trusted that as they’d spoken, Kurl already would’ve been messaging the info to his personal contact at the Olympyon Space High Command Center.

She checked the ceiling security monitor. A dot in the sky high above the roof grew to a recognizable medevac aerial transport. Its landing gear unfolded as she watched.

Izzy stirred. She looked down, surprised to see his big blue eyes wide open. He pathed, “Daddy Tzeus. Where’s Daddy Tzeus?”

“Iz.” She hugged him and squished her fingers into his mane. “You’re conscious. Look at that. Your fur’s all fluffy again.”

“Why Cimi’s tuft white then yellow? Where’s Daddy Tzeus?”

“I’m happy you’re okay, Iz. And Daddy Tzeus will be okay. You saved his life, Iz. All our lives. You’re our hero. But we’ve got to keep you hidden.”

Movement out of the corner of her eye drew her attention to Phed sitting up. She ran to him. “You okay, Phed? Good enough to hold Izzy? I’ve got to find CQ.”

Phed positioned himself Buddha-style on the floor. “You bet I am. Hey, Champ. That was some battle cry.” Phed held out his arms for Izzy. “I’ve got a whopper of a story about you to document for KUWI. Wanna hear the first draft?”

He held Izzy close and began the story of the raptan-feline-iguana’s secret weapon that saved Ponce and his team from the deadly attack of invaders.

On the fifth try, Cimi reached CQ.

“You’re alive! Are you okay? What? I can’t make out what you’re saying. Of course, you’re upset. Listen, can you walk? Medevac just landed. When they get here, I’ll come for you. It’s okay, CQ, don’t worry. We’ll get you out of here.”

Cimi assumed she understood the reasons why poor Chico’s emotions were so fragile—her separation from family, the loss of her home and limb, and now this break-in. *I need to get CQ where she’ll feel safe*, Cimi thought.

She tapped her DB and opened Plan B.

Death of a Spy

A few hours later, Chico woke to a splitting headache, sprawled on the floor in her underground room at PHI, not sure why she was there. Then she remembered.

I ran. I got out of there just before Harimata the Horrible and her protesters broke into the demonstration lab. When I got here and closed the door, I couldn't move a muscle. Nerves, I guess. Must be why I passed out.

Her mind blurry, she sat up and checked her DB. Missed messages from Cimi, who was again trying to contact her. Chico began forming a reply as her DB flashed a news update displaying an official NPTO facial image that made her shudder: *The chief security officer of the Ponce Heidon Institute of Genetics was found dead in front of her home. It appears she stepped out of her sissca and was viciously attacked from behind. Rumor has it she's been killed by a monster. Stay tuned for more updates.*

Chico hugged her body, calming the chills that suddenly engulfed her. *If this news is true, I must attach the coin of Simetra onto the space station as soon as we arrive, or Zak—Oh, I can't think about it.*

She refocused. *But what happened, where is everyone?*

With her thoughts still fuzzy, she struggled, planning what to say to Cimi while the news segment reran. Footsteps near her room stopped her.

“There you are!” Cimi dashed to Chico and wrapped her arms around her, almost toppling them both. She pushed away and stared into Chico’s face while her tuft shifted from yellow to pink. “CQ, you’re pale as a ghost. What’s wrong?”

Chico grabbed her friend’s arms. “Cim, I don’t know what happened. I must have passed out before I could answer your path. My DB wouldn’t work when I came to. I refreshed it, and the first thing I get is this stupid breaking news about the PHI security chief, and the picture is Harimata. It’s crazy. Remember the DA I told you about with the big biceps and orange makeup? Well, she’s the one who’s dead.”

“Dead?” Cimi’s eyes bulged. “She’s the one who gave you the creeps. What’s the story?”

“They found her outside her house, but the weird thing is they said she was chief security officer here and may have been killed by a vicious attack from a monster created in PHI’s lab.”

Chico put a hand on Cimi’s shoulder and said, “Does that make any sense? Was the big-biceps and orange-lashes-weirdo working here as a security officer? Maybe there’s another raptan who looked like her.” Chico let go of Cimi.

“Later, I’ll explain later,” Cimi said, eyeing Chico’s packed bags. “Come on. We’ve got to get out of here, now. Grab your backpack. I’ll take the duffel. Medevac’s already transporting Ponce and Dorf to OSS-176.”

Cimi threw a strap over her shoulder and led Chico to the lift.

“Why medevac? What’s happened?” Chico asked as she followed Cimi down the hall.

“Oh, I remember...there was a blast.”

Chico, still feeling sick, now felt even worse, mentally riddled with guilt and fear.

Harimata's death's a bad omen for my survival—and my family's. The general must've ordered Hari the Horrible killed. Are we next?

No way could she share her fears with Cimi, especially now.

Fake News

NPTO live: “There’s been a break-in at the Ponce Heidon Institute of Genetics in Olympos. The situation is chaotic. At this moment, we have only one witness’s account that ‘a monster’ paralyzed everyone in sight. Watch this segment as the witness, fearful of being identified, speaks to a reporter from behind a screen. Pay close attention to the scrolling narrative. Some of the witness’s comments are unintelligible as he attempts to control his emotions.”

The announcer faded from view, leaving a silhouette of a raptan seated behind a screen.

“Yes, yes, I’m a protester. A peaceful protester. All I want is for this virus that killed my wife and son to be stopped. I joined the movement to shut down the laboratories, not to invade with weapons. Our leader turned traitor to that promise.”

An interviewer seated in full view asked, “What happened when you found yourself in that situation?”

“We reached the laboratories, I think, then there was an explosion. We had nowhere to escape, *nowhere*. I saw a monster with green and black spears all over it standing on the back of a geneticist who’d fallen to the ground. An orange flag waved madly under its neck. Its huge mouth could have swallowed a wastersmelon. Then I heard a noise like a turbine firing up so

loud it pierced my head. My legs gave way, and I fell to the ground. I, I guess I passed out. I had terrifying sleep-mares of strangers torturing and killing me. I'd die and come alive again and then be killed all over."

The witness bent over and sobbed, his head in his hands. Someone handed him a tissue. "Thank you," he whispered. "I'm sorry. I can't go on. It's too painful."

He stood and shook a fist in the air. "We've got to get rid of those geneticists. First, the deadly virus, and now they've created a monster."

The interviewer rose and nodded to the victim's shadowed image, and the camera panned to the reporter's face. "Thank you so much for your time. You've survived a harrowing experience, and more importantly, you've brought a witness's perspective of what has been going on at PHI to the raptans of Authair."

Kill Them All

Jeeves, standing stiff-backed behind his master's private office door, heard two thuds—the loudest unmistakably His Excellency hitting the floor. Jeeves rushed in and thrust his gloved hand to his mouth to subdue the stench.

The faithful servant scanned the room. Sprawled unconscious on the floor lay both his master and General Gore Andriol, their breathing labored and faces contorted. Blood-beer soaked His Excellency's angora cloak, which also sunk into thick feces staining the carpet around the ruler's body. Vomit oozed over the general's uniform as he rolled over in a spasm of pain.

At once following protocol in case of His Excellency's incapacity, Jeeves requested the immediate attention of Mumba Zola's personal physician. Jeeves then called for the clean-up crew of botts, ordered clean clothes brought for his master and the general, and requisitioned two portable beds with bott assistants.

In mere moments, all was in place. The office smelled like it had been anointed with Golasace Raptan, the trendiest of Authairian male fragrances. Jeeves waited at the side of His Excellency's bed for the physician's arrival.

The dictator's right foot moved. Mumba sat up, tilting the newly installed bed to one side.

“Excellency, how are—”

“Get this half-assed hazard of a bed out of here, and cancel the doctor you no doubt summoned,” Mumba yelled. His feet hit the floor, and he kicked the fallen comforter out of his way.

“Yes, Excellency.”

Mumba, satisfied his doctor would not intrude, accepted the replacement angora robe Jeeves handed him and permitted the servant to place a fresh beanie on his head. He wobbled over to the six-star general, who tossed and turned in restless sleep on the portable bed.

The dictator shook Andriol’s shoulder. Although the general too had been cleaned in his unconscious state, that didn’t stop Mumba from yelling, “Get up, you stinking wreck. You’ve got orders.”

He pushed Andriol’s shoulder so hard the general almost rolled off the bed.

“Douse him with ice water, Jeeves. That’ll wake the sleeping princess.”

“Yes, Excellency.” Jeeves headed for the tap.

Gore grunted. He rolled over and pushed up from the bed. The tiniest part of a furry ear showed at the edge of an unfamiliar sleeve. Hearts slamming, he yanked that arm close to his body. *Who dressed me in this clean pajama shirt and bottoms? They must’ve found Buster inside the sleeve of my uniform and then tucked him into these clean pajamas. If it was that old Jeeves, I hope his confidentiality applies to his master’s guests too. Or maybe, I hope, it was botts. They’d be following standard procedures of putting everything back the way it was found.*

He sat up, surreptitiously pushed Buster back inside, and shook his head. “What, what happened? Those sleep-mares. I wanted to die.”

Gore withered under Mumba’s burning stare.

Jeeves entered the room carrying water. He looked directly at Gore, then turned to go.

“Stand at attention, you creeping curd of a general,” Mumba ordered.

General Andriol shot to attention in his bare feet and the borrowed military-issue sleeping shirt.

“Douse him!” commanded Mumba.

Gore jerked his head to Mumba’s angry glare and sputtered as icy water spilled onto his head and body.

“At ease, you imbecile,” Mumba said.

Gore widened his stance and put hands behind his back as he clasped the cuff of the drenched sleeve, hiding Buster.

Mumba pointed to the door.

“Find Harimata and make sure she has an accident. A fatal one. She knows too much. Catch her before the Olympyons do!”

Gore turned to go.

“One more thing. Find out where those freaking monster-makers are hiding and kill them. Kill them all!”

“Yes, I will obey His Excellency Mumba Zola, President for Life, Lord of all the Beasts of...”

Even though His Excellency stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him, the barefoot six-star general spoke the entire title before he dared to leave, fast-stepping to his office.

Gore, in a clean uniform, hurried to his desk while pulling the damp toy rabbityle out of his sleeve. “That was a close call, Buster.”

The general wagged a finger at Buster’s face. “You can’t let your ear slip out like that.”

The head nodded in agreement, obeying the general’s two-fingered puppetry.

Gore lifted the floppy ear and rubbed it against his cheek. “It’s okay. We’re still buddies.”

He dropped himself into his chair. “Look, Buster, we’ve got to find and eliminate Harimata.” He lifted the lid of a box and placed Buster inside, his lone ear hanging over the edge. “Now think!”

In the pause that followed, Gore played with Buster’s ear then touched the toy’s face.

“That’s it. The tracking device in Harimata’s cheek.”

He tapped his DB, sending orders to his first officer. That completed, Gore patted the top of Buster’s head. “Good job. Now, let’s find out where those researchers are hiding.”

The general puzzled over the problem, his chin resting on clasped hands.

When he looked down at the toy rabbityle, Gore said, “You know, I think that’s a possibility, Buster. I didn’t shut off our connection the last time I spoke to the lovely Ms. Quwattle. If that blasted sound didn’t destroy the recording, I should be able to learn Heidon’s plans.”

The general reviewed the recent audio transmissions from Chico. His face lit, and he smiled at Buster. “We have some good news, little guy.”

He pinched Buster’s nose.

“Ponce is moving the whole operation to Olympyon Space Station 176.”

“What’s that?” He picked up Buster. “What did you say?”

Gore put his ear to Buster’s face.

Buster’s head moved wildly. His ear flopped to the excitement of Gore’s fingering. “Yes, yes, that’s it. Leachim can spy on the comings and goings of the famous Dr. Heidon. I’ll order him to record every detail of the PHI director’s movements from the telescope of the Valympyon Royal Defense Monitoring Station.

“No, Buster, he can’t screw up that. All he needs to do is put in coordinates, press D for detect, and sit there recording his observations. One thing about Leachim—he always *wants* to do a good job.”

Gore thanked Buster and pushed him deep into his right sleeve, careful to make sure his ear stayed tucked in.

Then, Gore summoned Leachim.

Unfortunate Event

NPTV live: “There’s been an attack on Olympyon Space Station 176. A missile of unknown origin blasted two solar wings on the station’s west orientation. Commander Selrach A. Ecaps of OSS-176 reported a solitary and violent vibration but no loss of power. Operations on the space station continue as usual. Technical astrobotts are making repairs as of this broadcast.”

The announcer paused to check his DB and then returned his attention to the cameras.

“We’ve just received an update from Commodore Trebor Draddog of the Valympyon Royal Space Agency stating the missile came from Defense Monitoring Station VRSA-64-E. Commander Ecaps and Commodore Draddog will hold a joint press conference to discuss this unfortunate event. Stay tuned.”

A running ticker read: *Commodore of the Valympyon Royal Space Agency confirms damage to OSS-176 due to accidental missile launch. Press conference pending.*

“You. Gave. My. Nephew. *What?*” His Excellency’s eyes bulged from his reddening face, and he thrust his chubby fist hands at the six-star general.

General Gore Andriol stood at attention despite his shaking knees. “His Excellency Mumba Zola, Presi—”

“Answer the question, you boggle-headed snark fish.”

“I learned Ponce Heidon planned to r-r-resettle his t-t-team to Olympon Space Station 176. I ordered Your Excellency’s n-n-nephew to observe m-m-movements of Heidon’s t-t-team as they entered and left OSS-176. His j-j-job was to activate our t-t-telescope VRDMS-64-E to view and r-r-record the comings and goings of the t-t-team. With that information, I could p-p-prepare for their accidental d-d-demise.”

The general threw his shoulders back and stiffened both arms against the sides of his uniform. “The j-j-job was straightforward, but Leachim ended up in the wrong b-b-building. The exterior of b-b-both telescope and m-m-missile launch buildings are identical except for building n-n-numbers. The control panels of the t-t-telescope and m-m-missile launch look identical. Even the spaces in which they operate look the s-s-same. So, thinking he was activating the t-t-telescope, Leachim entered the coordinates and thought he pressed D-D-D for *detect*. Instead, it was D-D-D for *destroy*. Luckily, he m-m-messed up on the coordinates, and the m-m-missile only grazed OSS-176.”

Mumba’s angry cheeks puffed and further reddened, about to explode.

The fingers of Gore’s right hand squeezed the cuff of his sleeve, choking Buster. This moment required a suffering partner.

A massive rumbling let loose from beneath Mumba’s cloak.

The evil stench took the general’s breath away. He gagged and staggered backward. To salvage his reputation, Gore suffered small breaths and continued. “Commodore Draddog is presenting an official apology from the Valympon Royal Space Agency. He’s hosting a press conference as we speak.”

Not daring to ask or wait for permission, Gore switched on the holo vid of the NPTV broadcast just as Valympyon Commodore Draddog stepped behind a podium.

Gore listened intently, scarcely glancing for His Excellency's reaction.

Commodore Draddog began. "This has been a sad wake-cycle for our two hemispheres." "Valympyons want nothing more than to set the record straight and apologize for our innocent mistake. We are thankful no lives have been lost and that OSS-176 is continuing operations as usual. We have put into motion a..."

The message faded beneath Gore's thoughts. *I hope the previous news of Harimata's unfortunate death will overcome His Excellency's anger—due to his nephew screwing up his assignment—and abate his flatulence.*

Gore raised his eyebrows hopefully, glanced at Mumba, and sniffed lightly. To his relief, the air felt more breathable.

"You're one for three, Andriol. Now, get out of here. Take care of Heidon and those virus-vultures.

Plan G-1

Cimi and Chico met Doc Gimmel and Phed at the lift.

“Where’s Izzy?” Cimi asked as they ascended.

Phed grinned, turned his back, and showed a raised section of shirt.

Cimi stroked the part that was Izzy’s head. “That’s good, Iz. Stay there. You’ll be safe.”

“Izzy is safe inside Phed’s shirt.” The shirt bobbed a few times and lowered as Izzy attempted to lie flat.

Cimi bent over, about to tell Izzy that Chico brought some treats for him, but an emergency path stopped her. She turned away, concentrating.

Kurl had been directing the relocation of laboratory and personal supplies that escaped damage from the invasion. “Plan B averted, Assistant Commander Cimi Nuja. OSS-176 hit by missile. Plan G-1 activated. You will be delivered to *Graviton-1*. Did you locate Ms. CQ? Is she with you?”

“Affirmative, Commander,” Cimi pathed back.

Dr. Gimmel watched Cimi stiffen her shoulders and raise her head as if trying to appear more authoritative. He raised his eyebrows and looked at Chico, who shrugged.

By now, Doc had observed that when Cimi's tuft turned bright green, she'd been surprised. It all but glowed now. *Maybe it's Kurl. Maybe Kurl found out about Izzy's heroism. Maybe he's finally accepted the little critter as a team member.*

Kurl continued his path to Cimi. "Transporter driver notified. Four passengers to board. Assistant Commander Cimi Nuja, confirm destination."

Cimi couldn't contain her enthusiasm. "Destination *Graviton-1*. Yippee!"

Kurl's solemn reply lacked a reciprocal *yippee*. "Affirmative. Notify team members of destination."

"Roger." Cimi wanted to path something friendly like *see you there*, but Kurl ended the connection before she could.

She turned back to her companions and made the announcement. "That was Commander Tszargon. With Dr. Heidon and Chief under medical care, Kurl's in charge. There's been an attack on OSS-176. Plan G-1 is in effect. All is in place for our transportation to *Graviton-1*. Commander Tszargon will meet us there."

Reactions to her news varied.

Izzy scooted up Phed's shirt and poked his head out, looking side to side and bobbing with excitement. Phed managed to restrain him and brought him around to the front of his shirt. "Take it easy, Iz. We're not there yet."

Dr. Gimmel, usually almost as cheerful as Cimi, wore a preoccupied frown.

As next in command, I'll have to ask him about that when I get a chance.

Chico looked confused. "Cimi, what's *Graviton-1*?" she asked as the lift arrived on the rooftop.

“Later, CQ,” said Cimi. She led the team through the transporter’s armored jetway.

An officer of the Olympyon Space Administration hustled them to their seats as Kurl pathed to everyone but Izzy.

“The following are your assignments. Skdjlsjflsjf Ilkjkld, you are to pilot the transporter to Graviton-1. Coordinates are set. Any questions?”

“N-n-no. At your service, Commander Tszargon. And please call me Phed.”

Cimi grinned at Phed’s jubilant yet embarrassed expression and covered her mouth as he felt inside his shirt for Izzy.

Dr. Gimmel pathed to everyone but addressed Kurl before the commander issued his next instructions. “With all due respect, Commander Tszargon, I must request to return to my home in Olymopos. I cannot agree to stay at such a remote place, even if it is temporary. It’s much too far from my daughter. I won’t let so much of our hemisphere separate me from Lisa.”

“Granted, Dr. Robar Gimmel. The team can use your expertise in a remote fashion if there’s a medical emergency. It is urgent that the ABMR team aboard the transporter leave PHI immediately. You must therefore travel to the location of *Graviton-1* with the ABMR virus team. During the trip, Assistant Commander Cimi Nuja will create your private line for remote communication. As far as the public is concerned, you are now assigned as medical consultant to PHI with remote operating privileges. From *Graviton-1*’s location, on arrival you will be flown home by Skdjlsjflsjf Ilkjkld, whom you call Phed. Do you understand your new assignment, Dr. Robar Gimmel?”

“Yes, Commander Tszargon. I understand my assignment as well as the urgency to transport the ABMR virus team to *G-1*. I’ll be happy to assist you and the team remotely,

Commander.” Dr. Gimmel looked at Chico. “CQ, I’ll take good care of Sequence until you return.”

Chico nodded and swallowed. Cimi recognized her friend’s sincere appreciation of Doc’s help despite her forced smile.

Cimi pathed, having anticipated Kurl’s order. “Dr. Gimmel’s personal code for his private line has been sent, Commander Tszargon.”

“Code received,” Dr. Gimmel acknowledged.

Kurl continued issuing assignments. “Ms. Chico CQ Quwattle, you’ll be continuing your biological research as before. Inform me if you require additional equipment.”

“Okay,” Chico replied. “But—”

Kurl, however, resumed his instructions. “Skdjlsjflsjf Phed Ilkjld, once you land the transporter, load Dr. Robar Gimmel’s personal items into *Sky Sport 1*. You’ll fly Dr. Robar Gimmel home. Assistant Commander Cimi Nuja will set the coordinates for that trip. Then return immediately to *Graviton-1*. The flier’s GPS is programmed to direct *Sky Sport 1* onto *Graviton-1*’s loading ramp when you return. We’ll be waiting for you, Skdjlsjflsjf Phed Ilkjld. Do you have any questions?”

“No, Commander, all is clear, but feel free to call me just plain Phed.”

Kurl completed his orders.

“Doctors Ponce Heidon and Dorf Tzeus have received medical help. Their medevac has delivered them to the site. I remain your commander until further notice and will join you shortly. Dr. Robar Gimmel, Skdjlsjflsjf Phed Ilkjld, and Ms. Chico CQ Quwattle, your immediate superior is Assistant Commander Cimi Nuja. Address her as such and follow her orders. Safe journey.”

Cimi had worked with Kurl closely during the last two months. Though he was generally a raptan of few words, his instructions always came across as detailed and thorough. *For CQ, Phed, and Doc, those were probably the longest moments they ever spent listening to Kurl Tszargon, but I've loved working with him.*

She'd learned to chew her gum quietly in Kurl's presence and leave the lab whenever she nurtured a new idea since he abhorred her bubble pops. *I'm determined not to damage the relationship we're developing. At least, I think we're developing a relationship. Commander Kurl Tszargon has authorized the team to follow my orders as his assistant commander. How olymfab is that?*

Cimi shook herself from her reverie and stood. "Listen up. I have a very important announcement."

But Phed jumped to his feet too. "Sorry for the interruption, Assistant Commander, but I've gotta get this transporter in flight." He held out Izzy to her. "Here, take Iz. He refuses to keep hidden. Too curious and excited. Right, Iz?"

Izzy squirmed in Phed's grip and pathed, "Izzy is excited, jubilant, and hungry."

Cimi, not so miffed now at Phed's disrespect of her authority, took her hands off her hips and proposed a diplomatic solution. "Phed, I bet Izzy would like to see what CQ's got for him."

Phed handed Izzy to Chico, and Cimi said, "Everyone shell up."

Assistant Commander Cimi checked that all passengers were secured then locked her own restraint and nodded a go-ahead to Phed.

He activated the maglev, and the transporter rapidly ascended. It took only seconds to level. Cimi detached her restraint and stood again.

“As your assistant commander,” she said, her voice uncommonly serious, “I’m ordering everyone, except for Izzy, to take three cubes of Double Trouble Bubble Gum, place one in your mouth, and chew until it softens. Keep the others handy.” She glanced at Izzy, who raised himself on Chico’s shoulder seemingly attentive to Cimi’s every word. “In the event our friend here finds it necessary to save our lives, you’ll need this. Observe carefully.”

She pinched off half of her own gum, already well kneaded with saliva. Placing the substance over one ear and stretching it to fit, she covered the entire opening and pressed it to seal around the ear’s rim. When she finished, the gum stretched across her ear.

Phed said, “Hey, Cimi, your ear looks like a black drumhead membrane, for sure.”

“Okay, sure, drumhead’s a good description, Phed. I’ll use that one.”

She turned for all to see. “I hypothesize the natural black color of its carbon nanotubes plays a critical role in its protective powers.”

She pulled the black drumhead of gum off her ear and popped it back into her mouth, ignoring her team members’ half-voiced sounds of disgust. “Remember, if you hear Izzy’s low rumble, you’ll have to work fast.” She then handed out the gum, first to Phed, then the others.

Chico took her cube of gum and began to chew, but as soon as Cimi sat next to her, she said, “Cim, I don’t understand what this is all about.”

With broad gestures, Cimi told her. “When I heard the crashing noises in the conference room, I dashed under the table. I covered both ears with my Double Trouble Bubble Gum to dull the noises from the invaders just moments before Izzy let go with his siren. The only logical explanation for my being the one person not affected by that sound is this black gum. So-oo-

oo”—Cimi smiled wide—“I bought it all.” She held her arms far apart to emphasize *all*; they almost touched behind her.

“There’s no more Double Trouble available anywhere on planet Authair, so we’ll have plenty to analyze and prove my theory. Okay, back to what happened. Since I was under the table, I didn’t see the woman threatening Ponce. You know, the one we think is the weirdo Harimata. Phed said he heard her order her goons, ‘Drag him over here.’”

Chico had never seen Cimi’s tuft turn blood red before.

“Well, if she’s the dead one, she got what she deserved.” Now the tuft flashed from a nearly black green to a pale yellow. “At least Ponce’s facial wounds will heal, and Dorf’s going to be okay.”

Chico lowered her head. *My complicity in this catastrophe nearly killed my friends. I knew nothing about plans for an explosion or an invasion by the protesters. I thought General Andriole planned to lead a military invasion.*

Reliving her guilt, she remembered running from the conference room, hoping to interrupt Andriol and his invading force.

But in the chaos, I found no one resembling the general, so I fled like a coward while my friends stayed and suffered.

“CQ, are you okay?”

Tears threatened to spill from Chico’s eyes as she lifted her face to Cimi. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know. I thought I could help.” She ran a hand over Izzy’s body.

He lifted his head.

“You’re really the hero.” She looked down at the little creature on her shoulder with his tail wrapped around her neck. “You did all that, Izzy. You saved our lives.”

He cocked his head and blinked his blue eyes.

Chico squeezed her brows together. “But that sound of yours must be why I passed out. Those sleep-mares were awful—that’s some powerful weapon you’ve got.”

Cimi reached over and patted Izzy’s head too. “We’ve got to make sure this little fella is safe. For now, don’t let him out of your sight, CQ. Once we settle onto *Graviton-1*, Phed will again take over Izzy’s care.”

“You said you’d tell me later about *Graviton-1*. How about now, before we get there?”

“Oh, you’re going to love it, CQ. It’s a massive spaceship with Authair’s most advanced technology. It can even travel through space and time.” Chico winced slightly—and maybe Izzy too—either at Cimi’s squeal or the manic orange of her tuft. “But, because of the ABMR virus crisis, the Olympton government canceled *G-1*’s maiden voyage. The budget once allocated to sending a crew to the farthest reaches of the galaxy is now funneled into annihilating the ABMR epidemic. For the last four months, this exquisite craft, the pride of all Olymptons, has sat mothballed. It’s tragic.”

“Wow.” Chico turned and looked at Cimi. “And no one knows where we’re going, right?”

Cimi leaned toward her friend. “Only Kurl’s government contact knows. CQ, do you have any idea what this spaceship looks like? It’s so massive, they built a mountain to hide it in. A mountain. Really! The mountaintop opens, and the ship ascends vertically without a sound. Well, at least that’s how the simulations work. No one’s actually flown it. But wait till you see. Inside, it’s state-of-the-art everything.”

Chico wondered whether a mountain surrounding a spaceship would be dense enough to block General Andriol’s communications with her. And what that might mean for her family.

Cimi took only a quick breath before continuing her description. “CQ, even in flight, you can walk around like you do at your lab. Although we’ll be staying on the ground, it’s got a replenishing atmosphere, so we’ll be breathing in a closed system. But you won’t even notice the difference in the normal air you breathe. You’ll have your own luxurious suite. Kind of like a vacation, but without the view. Well, a working vacation. But the labs are stocked with the latest equipment. And there’s a fabulous fitness center and an olymfab pool and—”

“Feline-raptan-iguana fitness center?” Izzy pathed.

Chico jerked her head down at Izzy and back to Cimi. “What was that? I think I received a path from Izzy.”

“Of course, CQ. You’re one of Izzy’s trusted friends. Right, Iz?”

“CQ, Izzy’s trusted friend,” came the happy path as Izzy’s head bobbed up and down.

“But I don’t understand this fitness center thing, Izzy,” Chico said.

Cimi laughed and stroked the tiny creature’s head. “I promised Izzy his own fitness center. You can help me, CQ. We’ll start on it as soon as we’re settled in *G-I*, but there’s much more I want you to know about the spaceship. We can guzzle down frothies, drink TX, eat fruity puffs, perk up with hot brew, and enjoy it all in a fancy lounge. Oh, yeah. There’s this crazy kitchen stocked with all sorts of grains, seeds, and spices. They’ve even got a growing lab for fresh veggies. You can make more tuna-broccoli treats.”

Izzy pathed a two-line rhyme about her nutritional creation over and over while Chico tilted her seat back and elevated her feet. She tried to relax, then sat up abruptly.

Oh, no. Is my implanted communication device providing the general with the position of our team’s relocation?

Cimi reached over and squeezed Chico's clammy hand. "I'm worried about you, CQ. We've got to have Doc check you out. Why don't you close your eyes and rest?"

At Chico's side, Cimi's fingers *tap-tap-tapped* her DB. "There. You're first on Doc Gimmel's list, once we get settled."

Secret No More

“Excellency, General Andriol says it’s urgent.”

Jeeves waited silently for a response while Mumba swallowed a juicy chunk of beating heart, washing it down with a swallow of blood-beer. He preferred eating in private, relaxing with the jungle that played on the walls of his office. None but his trusted manservant dared interrupt his dining solitude.

“Tell him to wait.”

Mumba burped and, meticulous about cleanliness, wiped his mouth with the third royal napkin. He’d already dropped napkins one and two in the receptacle beside his chair that sent them into the laundry where presidential linens were sanitized, inspected, and stored. Before his meal ended, the bloodied linens could expect to enjoy the company of five more royal companions.

“Yes, Excellency,” Jeeves persisted. “The general has been informed you are dining, but he insists Your Excellency will w—”

“Take it away.” Mumba flicked his hand over his half-eaten plate of meat.

Holding the plate, Jeeves asked, “Shall I refresh your beverage, Excellency?”

Mumba motioned for the mug to be removed. “A dolomite and water. And send in the disrespectful duffhead.”

Jeeves bowed and backed out of the room.

General Andriol appeared inside the door of His Excellency’s office.

“What’s so confounded important, Andriol?” Mumba boomed.

“His Excellency Mumba Zola, Pre—”

“Cut the title crap.” Mumba’s face felt as hot as an orange flame.

Gore rattled on without taking a breath. “Heidon’s team is fleeing to *Graviton-1*. I’m receiving signals from a spy in their midst. They’ve just left PHI on an aerial transporter, and they’ve got the monster aboard with them. When they take off in the spaceship, we can follow them in *Ragnarock* and blast them out of existence.”

“What? Are you out of your pea-size boggle-brain? *Graviton-1*’s been mothballed. The crew’s been furloughed. My Excellency knows all of the enemy’s secrets. How do you think we built *Ragnarock*? You think a bunch of pamdy-damdy genetic researchers know how to pilot a spaceship? Not on your life, Andriol.”

“Your Excellency might wish to be informed that Kurl Tszargon is on PHI’s ABMR team.”

“Holy Valym. He’s the worst of those surreal scientists. Get yourself over there and stop them before that crazy astronomer tries to blast off and that monster opens his mouth again. Kill every one of them. Leave no trace evidence. And remember this. I’ll be watching your every move, Andriol.” *Not even My Excellency’s royal neural engineer knows of all the new technology still under development, and neither he nor Andriol needs to know it can only work for a short time.*

Camouflage

Buster sat in his box on the general's desk until Gore lifted the toy rabbit's ear and brought its ear close to his mouth. He whispered, "This is important, Buster. We've got to kill every one of them. Now, listen with me to Nuja talking with Quwattle. It's the only part that got recorded after that monster attacked and the lentil was destroyed. Everything else is scrambled. Pay close attention to the bubble gum part."

Gore held his DB up to Buster's ear. The garbled conversation between Gore's spy and Nuja played out.

"That's it," Gore said. "Here, listen again."

He replayed the message, draping Buster's ear over his wrist.

It was Nuja talking, but her words were scrambled. "...I'm ordering every...present except Izzy...take three chunks of Doub...Bubble Gum...your ears..."

Gore pushed the toy's ear onto his DB. "Ignore the static. Pay attention, Buster."

The audio played again to the end.

"That's all there is, but that was Nuja. And I think I know what she's doing."

Gore held Buster close to his face with both hands. "It seems Nuja stuffed bubble gum in her ears and wasn't affected like the others. Right, Buster?"

Buster agreed, his head nodding.

Gore abruptly stopped the puppetry. “Oh, yeah. Never thought of it that way. That friend she mentioned didn’t get the gum. Listen again.”

He lowered Buster back into the box but held up the toy’s only ear while replaying the segment.

“...I’m ordering every...present except Izzy...”

The general let go of Buster’s ear and patted his head. “Yep, you figured it out. That friend of theirs they call Izzy, he’s the monster. We’ll take care of him first before he can open his big mouth.”

Gore stood up from his desk and paced back and forth then stopped. He’d have made eye contact, except the rabbityle’s head had fallen back, pointing the little pink nose toward the ceiling.

“That’s it, Buster.” He tapped Buster’s nose. “Pink—Pink Peace Power, the perfect disguise!” Gore righted Buster so that his ear didn’t drape the desk. “There. One of these wake-cycles, you’ll get a medal, little friend.”

The nongovernmental Pink Peace Power organization ranked high with Authairians from both hemispheres for exposing and resolving global environmental problems. PPP’s thorough investigation of problem situations led to peaceful protection of endangered species’ habitats.

“I’ll order Major Branderholt to prepare the troops. This time, General Gore Andriol will be there to make sure things go down right.”

Without bothering to sit, Gore lifted his wrist to make DB contact.

A self-assured voice answered. “Major Branderholt.”

“This is Six-Star General Gore Andriol of His Excellency’s Royal Command.”

“At your service, General Andriol.”

“Equip one hundred forty of your best sharpshooters with death lasers. Disguise each soldier as a member of Pink Peace Power from helmet to boot and paint *VRAT-1* to imitate a PPP transporter, logo and all.”

Heidon and his researchers will, at the least, have their curiosity aroused by the appearance of the PPP at the site of their mothballed Graviton-1. The foolish Olympyons might even welcome their presence.

The general continued his orders. “Your sharpshooters’ mission is to annihilate the creators of the virus ravaging the Olympyons before it spreads to Valympya. Your troops must also kill the monster the geneticists created to defend their evil cause. Once that part of the mission is completed, your troops are to clean up and eliminate any trace of conflict.”

Major Branderholt dared not question his general’s orders directly, but he hoped he’d misheard what General Andriol said about *VRAT-1*. The entire fleet of Valympyon Royal Aerial Transporters, most often used to haul troops and supplies, served as the barracudas of the sky, capable of quick bursts of speed in the well-trained hands of expert pilots. But *VRAT-1*, the first and finest in the fleet, sometimes delivered the Valympyon dictator himself when he desired to make his power apparent.

“Forgive me, General Andriol, but our connection may have briefly faltered. May I ask you to please clarify what it is you’ve ordered done to one of our many VRATs?”

“You will transform *VRAT-1*’s appearance into that of a common PPP transporter. Observers will not be concerned when they see it approach in that guise.”

“*VRAT-1*?”

Gore sharpened his tone. “Disguise it and the troops as instructed. I will present final orders to your company and lead them into battle. Await my arrival.”

The major swallowed. *General Andriol will lead my troops into battle? The monster must be of much greater size and ferocity than rumors led me to imagine. And the researchers—our enemy must comprise a much larger and more heavily armed contingent than NPTV has reported if they’re prepared to defend their monstrous research with deadly weapons.*

“Yes, sir. I will see that all your orders are carried out. Is there anything else, General Andriol, sir?”

“Distribute to all troops three cubes of black bubble gum. The preferred product is Double Trouble. I will give instructions on its use when I arrive.”

“Yes, sir,” Major Branderholt said. “All shall be in order for your arrival, General Andriol, sir.” *I’ll make sure of it. But, black bubble gum?*

Access Blocked

Phed loved piloting, but the cabin of the transporter heading to *Graviton-I* was quiet. Too quiet. He confirmed the flight was on track, then scanned the passenger monitor. Doc snored, and Chico snuggled under a blanket with Izzy at her chin. Cimi, blue-tufted, studied something on her DB.

As if she'd sensed his attention, the assistant commander pathed, "Phed, you awake?"

He played along. "Nope. You?"

"Everyone's asleep here but me. I'm too psyched. How much farther?"

"We're about midway. Don't start counting. I'll get us there safely. You might wanna check out *G-I*'s surroundings in live time. You know, make sure no beasts of the forest are gonna devour us as we step into the unknown."

Cimi didn't respond for a moment. Then she pathed, "Hmm. Not a bad idea. If it's a fake mountain, why not fake beasts to frighten away unwanted intruders? Or maybe a decoy landing pad. I'm going to check it out."

Cimi linked her DB to the transporter's navigation system and searched for the location of the mothballed *Graviton-I*. She'd seen the inside, at least what the Olympon Space Agency

revealed to the public. She'd even watched a classified OSA simulation of the mountain opening to allow liftoff, but she'd never bothered checking out the surrounding terrain.

The base of a rocky mountain came into view on her DB, and she surveyed the territory around *G-I*'s camouflaged home. A craggy mountain that mimicked similar surrounding landforms in the area filled her screen. She panned out and spotted a tiny clearing among trees on the south side; all else was mountain and forest. She moved the image, zooming around the massive fake mountain. Rays of sun cast shadows from protruding fake rocks; branches of live water birch swayed in the breeze. A raging torrent coursed a path along the north side of *G-I*'s home, separating it from the Equapyon Mountain cliffs.

Cimi grinned. *I hadn't realized the spacecraft's location offers such a spectacular backyard mountain view. Well, not quite backyard view.* She sighed. *A spectacular, distant mountain view.*

As she gazed at the scene, her mind wandered into fantasizing. *If for any reason we must escape across that river, I'm hopping into Kurl's ryverak.*

Then she checked the time and felt her cheeks grow hot. *He should be arriving soon.*

Zooming the image over the tiny clearing, Cimi now searched for the landing area. A dot, almost swallowed by the forest, appeared. *Could that be the medevac?* Focusing on the roof of a transporter, she saw the unmistakable image of two hearts with vine intertwined.

That's it. Can't mistake the Olympyon medical symbol. Ponce and Dorf must be inside waiting for us.

Anticipating a tough landing from her view of the surrounding terrain, she pathed Phed. "Looks like we might be in for trouble. Lots of foliage. Medevac's arrived and is jammed against

the trees on the west side of the clearing. Not much room for our landing. You might want to test your descent sensor.”

“Copy that, Assistant Commander,” Phed replied.

A small flier appeared on Cimi’s DB projection, perfectly skimming tops of trees in the forest. Her hearts beat faster. *That’s my Kurl. I’d recognize his Black Lightning anywhere.*

The sun flashed off Kurl’s one-of-a-kind flying craft, highlighted three clean white lines against its otherwise black finish. Flight enthusiasts on both hemispheres easily identified and fully respected *Sky Sport I*, the sporty two-seater’s official name, for its speed and maneuverability, but almost everyone called it *Black Lightning* unless its pilot was nearby.

The flier dropped out of sight. Cimi zoomed in and found it resting centimeters from the medevac. Kurl jumped out and jogged toward the mountain. Cimi’s pulse raced in a ripple of excitement as those gazelle-like legs took him to the clearing that ringed the mountain’s base. He checked his DB, then lifted his head and waved an arm in a wide arc.

A burst of flashing lights surrounded the mountain like a gyrating scarlet web.

Cimi drew in a quick breath. She knew about *Graviton-I*’s hololaser security fence, but seeing it confront Kurl put a new dimension to its frightful efficiency.

Phed pathed Cimi. “Got a hololaser signal. Must be Kurl’s arrival, for sure. He said he’d land before us to get us into *G-I*.”

“Yep. *Black Lightning*’s parked next to the medevac. We’ll need a pinpoint landing. I caught the hololaser show on my scope just as the government’s security system picked up on Kurl. He’s locked out.”

She refocused on Kurl’s predicament. Suddenly, a blur of red, white, and blue shot in from the east side of the mountain, its path a few meters above the flashing web. Animated, Cimi

narrated for Phed. “There’s a small aerial craft, looks like a flying bug, hovering near Kurl. Now it’s dropped down inside the fence. The web of lights went out. Poor Kurl’s just standing there like he doesn’t know what to do. Oh! A little door opened, and something flew out really close to Kurl. It looks...hmm...it actually looks like Clyde except for the color. He’s all silver. Oh. Of course. That must be the government bott I designed with components like Clyde’s.”

“Cimi, who is Cly—”

“Mm-hmm. Yep.” Cimi’d already zoomed in to inspect this government bott’s components. “Standard body of red silishone, multijointed white arms, each hand with four fingers and an opposing thumb...even its globular blue head’s the same proportions as Clyde’s. Wonder if this one’s businesslike personality does the job? I’ve programmed Clyde with a little mischief, but he stays on task when given an assignment. He’s the best bott I’ve ever built.”

She zoomed out to observe Kurl’s next move and continued her narrative. “Kurl’s turned away and the bott’s gone. Oh, hold that thought. I’ve got contact.” She grinned with delight.

“Assistant Commander Cimi Nuja, this is—”

“Commander Tszargon, how can I be of assistance?” Cimi drew a big K in the air for Phed to let him know she had Kurl on her DB.

“A security bott is preventing my access to *G-1*. Replace its control chyp as soon as you arrive. It needs to recognize and admit our team members, every one of them. That bott is our key to entering. Only the Authairian Space Agency’s Secret Service Chief knows of the PHI ABMR team’s emergency move into *Graviton-1*. For our safety, he gave me the go-ahead without consulting other ASASS members—not even the Central Security department that monitors the perimeter. Any questions, Assistant Commander Cimi Nuja?”

Cimi detected Kurl's impatience. "Only one issue to resolve, Commander. I designed this government security model without encryption privileges that enable remote changes to its specific transponder on the government's orders. If it picks up suspicious movement, temperature, or light, the perpetrator will be struck with nerve-kill. It never misses its target. I can prepare a substitute chyp, but it will have to be physically replaced. Any thoughts on how we can insert this baby in the OSA's bott?"

"Find a way to trick or disable it. I'm deferring this task to you. Notify me of your plan, Assistant Commander Cimi Nuja. I'll be in the medevac with Heidon and Tzeus."

"On it, Commander."

Cimi got to work, allowing herself only one micromoment—or two or three—to watch that muscular body and those long legs reach the medevac and step inside before she rifled through her knapsack. "Aha. Here it is."

She opened the hand-size box holding numerous control chyps resembling moth antennae, selected one, and inserted it into a port on her DB. *Just a matter of re-encrypting a copy and giving it a new identity. Even if temporary, it'll be a buddy for Clyde.*

Cimi liked her botts. She always kept them serviced and updated. Some detractors had claimed the extra attention she gave them was a waste of her precious time. To her, the mental diversion she invested in their personalities demonstrated the specialty of her techno-builds.

Yep, Clyde's going to have a trustworthy friend. I'll call her Botty. She'll get the socially responsible personality version. Should be interesting to see how Botty and Clyde get things done.

Cimi had programmed Clyde's mischievous behavior not as a prank but as an intentional element of his program. She'd modeled his behavioral parameters from her own working

standards after calculating that 48.9 percent of her accomplishments were spin-offs from unplanned adventures.

“Done,” Cimi pathed to Phed, still the only other soul awake in the transporter.

He glanced her way briefly before returning his attention to the controls. “Turquoise? Gotta say I’m not sure I’ve seen that in your tuft before.”

Cimi found the others’ fascination with her tuft colors amusing. “I’m feeling communicative, Pilot Phed. Since Kurl didn’t give me any specs, I’ve modified the chyp for OSA’s bott to my preferred bott specs. I’m ninety-nine percent sure it works. We won’t know until this chyp”—she held it up for Phed to see— “replaces the original one.”

She tucked the essential chyp in a pocket of her blouse. “How much longer to touchdown?”

“Nine minutes and four seconds, Assistant Commander Nuja.” Phed emphasized her title with a lilt in his voice.

“Not much time to figure out a plan to insert this replacement. Kurl can’t switch it out, and I sure can’t.” She looked down at the fullness of the green skirt covering her plumpness, then over at Chico and chewed her gum even faster. “Even CQ’s petite body mass would be detected as a foreign intruder. None of us can risk being zapped with nerve-kill and carried off.”

“You designed the OSA bott, so there’s gotta be a way to trick or disable it.” Phed’s path carried no more trace of teasing. “You can do it, Cim.”

A movement from Izzy distracted Cimi. She hadn’t meant to wake him. Even though he lifted his head and nuzzled Chico’s chin with the fur above his eyes, Cimi noticed that Chico still hadn’t stirred.

Not wanting to wake the others, Cimi pathed, “Hey, Iz, want to help me solve a problem?”

The adorable, intelligent little critter cocked his head and blinked. “Izzy Tzeus is happy to help Assistant Commander Cimi Nuja solve a problem.”

He leaped onto Cimi’s lap and steadied himself in the folds of her skirt. Standing on two legs with arms crossed, Izzy’s blue eyes sparkled enough to reflect her green ones. “Ready to help, Assistant Commander.”

“Here, sit, and I’ll explain my dilemma.” Cimi was grateful she no longer had to ask Izzy if he understood new words like *dilemma*. If he didn’t, he’d search for and process the meanings faster than she could define them.

She stroked Izzy’s mane while explaining what they needed to do. “Given the rules I programmed into the OSA bott, I think your body mass is small enough to avoid being detected if you move fast enough. Here, I’ll show you the chyp.”

Izzy bobbed his head vigorously as Cimi removed the minuscule device from her pocket.

“I think you’re just the one to get this chyp into the security bott. Watch this.” She inserted the flat side into the port on her DB, and a tiny antenna burst out with a light on the end. “The light signals it’s working and will only glow when the chyp is inserted properly.”

Izzy held it between the pads of his thumb and forefinger and examined the device, turning it over and over. “Izzy wants to practice insert the chyp. No, Izzy wants to practice inserting the chyp.”

“Okay, Iz, and good grammatical correction. You’ll make Phed proud. But the chyp will dock automatically to the bott, unlike my DB, as long as you get it near enough to the opening. To do that, you’ll have to remove the old chyp first. So let’s have you practice both moves.”

Cimi watched as Iz inserted the chyp. When the tip lit, he bobbed his head. Then he removed it and practiced over and over.

“Does saliva damage the chyp?” Izzy asked.

“No, no. Temp—”

Before she could finish telling him that temperature and moisture wouldn't affect the chyp's operation, Izzy jumped on her shoulder and climbed through her earring hoop. Trying not to laugh, she caught him on the flip-around and held him gently yet firmly enough to not let him escape.

“Okay, Iz, why'd you ask?”

Izzy pathed his idea, then demonstrated how he'd help.

A bubble grew over her upper lip and popped.

Izzy bobbed up and down and pathed, “Purple tuft, bubble popped,” over and over again.

While Cimi tongued the black mass into her mouth, she mentally reviewed how she and Izzy, with Kurl's help, would trick and disable the bott.

Follow the Tassel

Shoulder to shoulder, 140 skilled marksmen stood in rows of twenty under Valym's rays. Troops uniformed from helmet to boot in hot pink stood beneath a cloudless turquoise sky atop a mountain mesa of the Equapyon range. Their attention focused on the empty podium from which General Gore Andriol would soon deliver orders of battle.

The six-star general stood square-jawed at the open door of his aircraft and saluted the troops. Though his features didn't reveal his approval to the soldiers standing at attention, the general was pleased to see their convincing uniform disguises. He, of course, wore his military uniform sporting medals indicative of his rank.

The newly pink-painted *VRAT-1*, the Valympyon Royal Aerial Transporter, sported an emboldened, authentic-looking PPP across its fuselage. Even though the Pink Peace Power organization traveled throughout the planet using various vehicles, all were painted the same striking pink with this identical three-letter icon emblazoned in bold white letters fringed in green. General Andriol stood with confidence, assured this disguised aircraft wouldn't be—indeed, couldn't be—suspected as a vehicle of war carrying the bloodthirsty special forces of Mumba Zola's army.

The troops remained at attention. All eyes focused on their commander as the engines on *VRAT-1* revved. General Andriol strode to the podium, medals glistening with his gold staff in hand, fully aware that Mumba was virtually participating in this operation by way of the chyp embedded in the cleft of Andriol's chin. He hoped the sight of these special forces bedecked in PPP uniforms would heighten the dictator's opinion of his six-star general's battle-ready creativity.

Perspiration welled at the edge of Gore's hat as he stepped onto the platform. He stiffened his back and scanned the audience of soldiers while reaching for the familiar lump. Gore squeezed his jacket sleeve. *We're in this together, Buster*. Emboldened, he lifted his chin to his troops, emphasizing the magnitude of his forthcoming orders.

"I am Six-Star General Andriol of the Valympyon Royal Army and your commander for Operation Mountain Monster. You will address me as General Andriol VRA."

He paused.

"At your command, General Andriol VRA," voiced the synchronized response of 140 troops.

"At ease," shouted the general.

With bott-like precision, each trooper stepped to the right, pinched the brim of his pink helmet between thumb and forefinger, removed the helmet, bent over, and placed it one centimeter from the heel of his left boot. Straightening in unison, they clasped hands behind backs and stomped their right feet once into an at-ease stance.

Gore removed three cubes from his pants pocket, each wrapped in black paper with a silver label. He held them up. "This," he boomed, not noticing the product name, "is for your safety. You have three. Put two in your concealed pocket for emergencies."

He returned all three to his pocket and continued. “Unwrap the remaining cube and place it in your mouth. Chew twenty times.”

A breeze wafted over the cliff as the perfect cadence of *chomp, chomp, chomp* filled the air. After the twentieth *chomp*, only the rush of wind could be heard.

One trooper from the front row, a young raptan who disliked the flavor of licorice and found it difficult to keep a straight face, widened his eyes as the general singled him out, pointing a steady finger at him. “You, there!” shouted General Andriol. “Advance.”

The startled trooper stomped his foot twice—such orders demanded an attention stance—before he picked up his helmet and placed it on his head. “General Andriol VRA, sir,” he said in crisp obedience and marched to the podium.

“Face your comrades.”

The trooper did a one-eighty to face his fellow troops.

“Remove the gum from your mouth and wait for further instruction.”

Feeling the flush of reprimand and fearing impending doom, the trooper removed the sticky wad with a shaking hand. He hoped not a sign of emotion appeared across his face.

“Separate it into two equal parts,” the general bellowed, “and plug each ear cavity. Now!”

“Yes, sir, General Andriol VRA, sir.” Feeling foolish but obeying orders, the soldier plugged both ears.

“Take your position, trooper. Remain at attention.”

“General Andriol VRA, sir.” The trooper stressed the word *sir*, marched to his place, and stomped his foot twice in attention stance—hoping he had interpreted the general’s muffled orders correctly.

Gore stared sternly in silence, standing erect like an automated statue whose only movement was its head while making eye contact from left to right. All but the shamed trooper stood in the at-ease position. None dared look away.

At last, Gore spoke. “Among the enemy is a monster of their creation, a monster with the power to destroy you in one piercing scream. I repeat. This monster has the power to destroy you with its siren. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir, General Andriol VRA,” responded the men in crisp chorus.

Satisfied, Gore continued his orders. “Five minutes before touchdown, you are to plug both of your ears as demonstrated by your comrade.”

Gore held up a wrapped cube and began to read the label, “Doub—” The label didn’t say *Double Trouble Bubble Gum* as expected. He cleared his throat and started again. “This black Bubble Licorice gum will neutralize the monster’s sound and save you from agonizing peril. Do not fail to place this in your ears. Plug your ears.”

He repeated, “Plug your ears.” Then he shouted, “What are you to do?”

Roused to action, the troops responded. “Plug our ears. Plug our ears.”

They continued the chanting until Gore lifted his gold falcon staff high. At the top, under the falcon motif, a flaxen mohair braid ended in a vivid red-and-black tassel. This tassel swung in the breeze as Gore said, “With your ears plugged, you won’t hear verbal commands, so look for the tassel to point the direction of charge. This will be your call to action.”

He aimed the staff at the reprimanded soldier. “Then, fire!”

As Gore’s words left his mouth, he thrust the staff forward. Had the tassel been free to follow its trajectory, it would’ve hit the hapless trooper between the eyes.

With his instructions made clear, General Gore Andriol positioned himself behind the podium, lifted the staff to the vertical, and ordered all troops to stand at attention. He’d have heard the resounding double-stomp even if he’d plugged his own ears.

“Our mission is to destroy the monster and the Olympyon enemies who created the virus. We must prevent the virus from spreading to Valympya.” He pounded his fist on the podium. “Six-Star General Andriol VRA orders you to take no prisoners, leave no trace.”

He squared his jaw and yelled, “Repeat your orders!”

“Take no prisoners, leave no trace.” Over and over, they repeated his command, each time articulating *leave no trace* with earthshaking foot stomps.

On the general’s signal, the pilot, seated above the massive nose of *VRAT-1*, opened the front-loading ramp. Gore stepped from the podium, holding his staff upright, its red-and-black tassel swinging with every step as he led the chanting troops into the carrier.

His company of pink-uniformed soldiers resembled the receding tongue of a monstrous dragon.

Chyp Switch

“Prepare for landing,” Phed announced.

Dr. Gimmel pathed his reply first. “I’m fully awake and shelled up.”

“CQ’s shell sensed its still sleeping occupant and already closed automatically,” Cimi pathed, “so she’s locked snugly in place. Since Izzy has no custom-size seat, I made room for him to lie on my shoulder. His tail’s encircling my upper arm like a cuff to hold him in place. I’ve already secured my protective shell with Izzy safely inside.”

Speaking in her voice of authority, Assistant Commander Cimi Nuja announced, “Pilot Phed, cabin occupants secured.”

Phed activated the descent mode and suddenly, the transporter rocked violently out of control. He switched on the air jets and jammed the maglev to full power. The transporter shot up like a geyser, far above the highest tree.

Chico screamed.

Doc passed out.

Cimi grabbed Izzy and held him against her chest, their four hearts pounding together.

Their excited pilot hadn’t bothered to shell up, so he flew out his seat and thudded against the floor. When Phed reached for the emergency stabilizer, he pulled on the lever so hard it lifted

him to standing. The vehicle responded, jolting to a hover, and jettisoned the pilot up. Phed smashed his head on the ceiling before landing back on the floor of the craft.

Ignoring his pain, Phed announced, “Is everyone okay? We hit a CAT.”

“A kitty in the sky?” wailed Chico.

“No, no, CQ. It was a C-A-T, a pocket of clear air turbulence, too sudden for auto controls to correct. Our altimeter reads good for landing now, real good. Sit back and relax.”

Phed, breathing deeply through his throbbing headache, reactivated descent mode and dropped the transporter to a feather-perfect landing. The passengers’ shells unlocked, and the *Free to Deplane* light blinked.

Phed swiveled around toward the cabin and blinked in surprise. *Why aren’t they leaving?*

Chico, still reclining, took deep breaths.

Dr. Gimmel slowly revived.

Cimi sat up but kept clutching Izzy to her chest.

“Hey, guys, aren’t you gonna exit?” Phed asked. “It’s safe to get up. We’ve landed.”

Cimi now stood but still held Izzy in both hands. She said, “Hold off on that. We have to reset the government’s security bott before it’s safe to move around and get access to our new headquarters.”

Then she eyed Phed. “Wow! That was some carnival ride you gave us.” Lifting one hand from Izzy—who made no effort to leave the comfort of her grasp—she pointed to Phed’s head and stood on tiptoe to examine him. Her tuft faded to a worried white. “Ouch! Looks like you didn’t shell up. You’d better have med check this lump out.”

“I’m okay, Cimi. Sorry for that rapid ascent. Really sorry. Something like that hits unexpectedly.”

Still on tiptoes, she pressed lightly on the bulge.

Phed tightened his jaws to hide the pain from her.

“Phed, I’m telling you not as your friend but as your assistant commander. Get that lump checked.”

He gently touched the tender spot and nodded, then looked at Izzy. Phed stroked the fur over Iz’s forehead with his fingertips. The little fella’s eyes stayed closed, but he trusted Iz was okay. Cimi’s tuft, now a calm focused blue would have cycled through all the hues of the sunsphere if she thought Izzy was hurt. Instead, the queen of algorithms concentrated her attention on her DB.

“Can I help by taking Izzy off your hands, Cim?”

“Oh, thanks, Phed, but Izzy’s already helping me right now.” She placed a hand over their little friend’s unusually docile back. “He’s memorizing the maneuvers of our plan to get us safely into *Graviton-1*. We’re lucky he’s able and willing to remove and insert a chyp in the government’s security bott.”

“You can do it, Little Fella.” Phed then turned his attention to Dr. Gimmel. “It’s not gonna be a problem getting out of here to return you home. We’ll be able to outmaneuver any CATs better on the return trip in Kurl’s *Bl—er—Sky Sport 1*.”

Whew. Caught myself in time. Whether or not Dr. Gimmel would approve of calling the sporty flier anything other than *Sky Sport 1*—Kurl’s official name for his personal two-seater—Phed didn’t know. But he couldn’t risk angering Kurl by having the words *Black Lightning*—his flying colleagues’ familiar nickname for the flier—show up in any official reports Doc might file.

Dr. Gimmel nodded and gripped an armrest as he slowly stood. “I passed out on that upsurge. Blood pressure problem. I can’t ignore it anymore.”

Cimi turned to address her colleagues as the door to the transporter’s passenger lift opened behind her. “Remember, stay inside the transporter and wait while we reset the security bott. I don’t expect anything to activate Izzy’s siren, but moisten some Double Trouble in case there’s an emergency.”

She put a fresh cube in her mouth, gave it a couple of chews, and positioned the wad under her tongue. She lifted an eyebrow at Phed until he unwrapped a square and plopped it into his mouth. “Good. I’ll send you a message when it’s safe to begin unloading.”

Before Cimi stepped into the lift, she tugged her huge hoop earrings to make sure they were secure, smoothed out a fold in her bright and bouncy green skirt, and checked that Izzy rode not only comfortably but aesthetically across her shoulders. She liked the feeling of presenting an artful look, and she hoped the curves of her long indigo eyelashes, which never changed color the way her tuft did, would properly frame her emerald irises as she worked with Kurl outside the lab for the first time.

She stepped into the transporter’s passenger lift and on the way down whispered, “You ready, Iz? Remember to ignore Kurl’s negative comments. He’ll need time to appreciate your value to our mission. Any questions?”

Izzy turned his head in all directions and pathed, “Where’s Daddy Tzeus?”

She ruffled the fur on Izzy’s tail as they reached the ground. “He’s in the medevac waiting for the all clear to enter *Graviton-1*. You’ll see him soon. But first, we need to find Kurl.”

Commander Kurl Tzsargon's head scraped a branch. The overgrowth of foliage left little room for him to greet Assistant Commander Cimi Nuja's arrival in *Graviton-1*'s landing area. He stood only a step away from where the lift deposited his assistant commander—and the lab accident. Kurl at once massaged sanitizing droplets into his hands and scalp.

He blinked. His assistant commander's hair tuft glowed an energetic yellow. With the garish hues of her clothing and the odd-looking creature drooped over her shoulder, she looked more like an actress in a comedy skit than the expert mathematician he'd been counting on to help break the code of the Olympyon government's security bott so they could enter the secure and sanitary environment of mothballed *Graviton-1*.

Cimi'd never seen Kurl in person outside PHI, and her passion ignited when she faced him standing tall in his gray bodysuit and black vest. *Wow, he looks olymfab. But this is business. Lives are in danger. Poor guy. He's sanitizing as a coping mechanism to help him manage this surprise situation. Or could he maybe feel a bit of positive nervousness in my presence? I can only hope so.*

But she had her doubts. From Kurl, it was always *Ms. Cimi Nuja this* and *Ms. Cimi Nuja that*. Never a *Hey, how are you?* or even eye contact, although they worked side by side every wake-cycle.

Cimi, you've got to stay focused on business.

"That outfit of yours, Assistant Commander Cimi Nuja, is a distraction not welcome here," Kurl said. His eyes fixed on the boa cuff around her upper arm.

Commander Tzsargon's greeting doused Cimi's hots like a bucket of ice water.

Izzy lifted his head.

Kurl raised his eyebrows then quickly averted his stare. He now focused on the space above her head and calmly continued. “I expect you to concern yourself only with the task at hand, not flaunting a mutant lizard accessorizing your shoulder. It’s certain to cause disruption.”

Disruption? She opened her mouth to disagree but realized she couldn’t afford to shut-down his cooperation.

Instead, Cimi channeled her self-restraint into what she wanted to shout at the insufferable, handsome genius. *You pompous nitwit. You haven’t done your homework on Izzy, or you’d never call him a mutant lizard. He’s got the power to save his friends’ lives—and that includes you, you blindsiding, name-calling, antisocial, hand-washing stargazer. Apologize to Izzy for your ignorance, and accept the fact he’s the only one who can get us into Graviton-1, you poopinnoop.*

After taking a deep breath, she lifted Izzy off her shoulder, allowing him to coil his tail around her arm. She held Izzy’s body in front of her, facing Kurl, and spat out, “Commander Tszargon, Izzy Tzeus and I are prepared to do the job together. That security bott cannot be reprogrammed without Izzy’s help.”

She gazed down at Izzy, whose arms tightly grasped her wrists. With one finger, she nuzzled his furry mane before settling her glare on Commander Tszargon’s gray eyes.

“This small but mighty *raptan*”—she emphasized the word *raptan*—“will be able to flatten his body and slither near the bott undetected. You and I will distract the bott while Izzy jumps to its shoulder and replaces the chyp.”

Mad as hell, Cimi wasn’t about to give Kurl a chance to further alienate her friend. “Now, Commander Tszargon, you lead the way to the security fence. Izzy and I will follow.”

Cimi was used to taking directions from Kurl, not the other way around, but this time, *she* was giving the orders.

“What is your plan, Assistant Commander Cimi Nuja? Are you prepared to insert the chyp?” Kurl asked without showing a hint of irritation, which further annoyed her.

Softly placing Izzy on the ground, Cimi continued. “There’s an order of events that must take place to disarm this bott. Izzy and I will wait behind you while you activate the security fence. When the hololaser fence appears, Izzy will jump to the ground. When the security bott leaves the flier and hovers facing you, I’ll say, ‘Now.’ Immediately, Commander Tszargon, you and I will turn away from each other and take three paces forward. Then we’ll turn and take six paces back, passing each other. When we cross paths, that’s Izzy’s cue to slither toward the security bott. Meanwhile, we must turn and repeat the pacing as long as it takes. This maneuver will temporarily confuse the bott’s programming and give Izzy enough time to reach it and replace the chyp.”

She smiled down at Izzy, who had his eyes glued on her, “Right, Iz?”

Izzy bobbed his head.

“Oh, I almost forgot, Commander Tszargon.” She thrust out her hand with a cube of the Double Trouble Bubble Gum she knew he detested. “This will protect you in case Izzy feels the need to use his weapon. Chew it, and if you hear a low rumble, take it out and stretch half over each ear, sealing them like drumheads.” *I’m not taking the time to demonstrate for this unappreciative raptan. The genius will have to figure it out himself.*

“No, thank you, Assistant Commander Cimi Nuja.” Kurl put up his hand to block her offer. “I have created my own protection.”

She waited, but he didn’t offer to explain what it was or how he’d use it.

Well, that does it. Let him suffer.

She unwrapped another cube and popped it in her mouth, adding it to what she'd been chewing—oddly satisfied when he looked away—the whole time wondering what concoction he'd made. *The ungrateful gnarlyhead.*

They advanced toward the synthetic mountain. Kurl stopped ten meters from its base and positioned his feet on a metallic-looking plate in the ground. He turned and quickly nodded when Cimi stopped slightly to his right and behind him.

“Not yet, Commander,” she said, purposely dropping Kurl's last name. She took in a deep breath and patted the fur on Izzy's head. “You okay, Iz?”

The little critter looked up at Cimi and blinked. “Izzy is okay. Izzy is a small but mighty raptan.” His next action surprised her more than his response. He jumped free of her grasp, landed on the ground, and positioned himself in a kan-du stance.

Kurl heard Assistant Commander Cimi Nuja's question, but not counting himself among the creature's purported pathing recipients, he had no idea whether it attempted to answer her. Out of scientific curiosity, he glanced down to observe its behavior. His eyes widened. *Why does this mutant lizard display a kan-du challenge? It clearly lacks the musculature or claw of a mature male Authairian. It does not even have an opponent to challenge.*

The commander pressed the lump on his sternum, rubbed sanitizing droplets into his hands, and dismissed the whole thing as nonsense. At the same time, he frowned at the newly offensive, bright green color of Assistant Commander Cimi Ninja's tuft. *That raptan's plume of hair with its ever-evolving hues imposes a ridiculous distraction of the highest order. And her insistence on the unsanitary method of using chewed bubble gum...*

The thought made Kurl shudder and sanitize again. *I have far greater confidence in my secret, sterilized combination of spyne tree gum homogenized with a powder of fermented gnarlythorn sap—even if the fermentation is more than most raptan livers could process on an empty stomach.*

“I think it’s a great stance, Izzy,” Cimi pathed, “and Kurl may soon be impressed by it too.”

Izzy flattened to a slither pose and cocked his head toward her.

Cimi knelt and placed the chyp in Izzy’s mouth, which closed gently around it.

“Good. That’s the way to hold it, Iz. Keep the antenna out. Now, don’t jump when the flashing fence appears. Remain still. Wait for my cue before you move. And remember. You’ll have less than sixty seconds to insert the new chyp once the OSA chyp’s disabled. If a minute lapses, Central Security will send out more investigator botts, and we’ll all be done for.”

Izzy nodded his understanding. He looked like a lizard ready to take the last gulp of a moth whose antenna still protruded from its captor’s lips.

Cimi turned toward Kurl’s calm, focused posture. In this business-only moment, she had no intension of flashing her indigo lashes for Kurl’s benefit. They both needed to follow her instructions, and she trusted he would, stickler for protocol that he was. She pathed, “We’re ready.”

One waving arc of Kurl’s long arm triggered the security system. A dome of pulsing red lights covered the mountain.

Witnessing the appearance of this hololaser’s vast web was unlike any experience Cimi could recall. A flashing essence ringed the mountain as sparks hit every part of her body. They

didn't hurt or even itch, but she felt their warning: *Come any closer, and trespassers will be immobilized and captured.*

Cimi shivered. She'd no idea where trespassers ended up and didn't want to find out. She made eye contact with Izzy. Seemingly unfazed, he remained crouched, ready to dash forward.

Out of the corner of her eye, zooming from the east side of the mountain, an object approached with such speed she flinched. It neared and hovered so close, she feared it'd suck them into its dragonfly-like casing. *I have to keep my wits about me. Our timing's crucial.*

The flier dropped to the ground. Its flashing lights vanished. A door opened, and a security bott buzzed out. It hovered directly in front of Kurl.

"Now," Cimi commanded. They turned on cue and walked toward each other, then turned again at the end of their allotted paces and repeated the pattern.

The bott attempted to follow both trespassers. It turned back and forth like the agitator of a laundry bott, its arms swinging with each turn.

As Cimi and Kurl crossed paths, Izzy acted on his friend's cue. Izzy Tzeus, the small but mighty raptan, slithered left then right, his tail sidewinding behind. As he approached the base of the hovering bott, loose soil gave way under his feet. Sinking fast, he coiled his tail like a spring and bounded up, blindly reaching out for anything to grab. One hand latched onto the middle joint of the bott's arm.

"Iz, look out!" screamed Cimi.

The bott's right appendage grabbed for him, but Izzy squeezed free just as its fingers clamped shut, detaching a few strands of Izzy's fur.

Aiming for the tiny port at the base of the bott's neck, Izzy leaped to its shoulder. Balancing on his feet, with the claws of one hand grasping at the bott's tough silishone, he yanked out the perilous chyp.

The bott's head dropped and wobbled against its chest, its arms fell limp, and the entire automaton, with its antigravity disabled, hit the ground with a thud.

On impact, Izzy's body launched up and away from the bott, but he stretched out his free arm and managed a two-claw hold on the bott's shoulder.

Cimi gasped. *Those two claws are Izzy's only possibility of inserting the chyp in time.* She wanted to help but didn't dare move closer and trigger additional security bots.

Her mind raced. "Steady, Iz. Steady."

Izzy, frantically clawing to secure himself, turned his head toward Cimi's instructions.

"Drop the old chyp, Iz. Get the new chyp close to the port any way you can. It'll dock automatically. Trust me."

Izzy opened the fingers holding the old chyp and allowed it to fall away. With that hand free, he grabbed the upper joint of the bott's limp arm.

"Go ahead. Spit it out," Cimi yelled.

Izzy's mouth opened and his tongue hurled the chyp in an arc. It flipped toward and locked into the port, lighting a tiny bulb.

Cimi's tiny team member, shaking both fists in triumph, lost his grip and fell to the ground, but his blue eyes blinked a bright smile.

"You did it, Iz!" She ran to him and held out an imaginary award. "Izzy Tzeus, Master of Chyp Replacement."

Izzy jumped to her shoulder and balanced a kan-du stance.

Cimi turned to smirk but saw Kurl's eyes opened so wide they formed creases in his aristocratic brow. She spun around to face an alert-looking bott hovering inches from her, its head held high, hands clasped in front of its chest, and face displaying the latest of Cimi's robotic innovations—eyelashes growing above sparkly gold orbs.

The eye mechanisms blinked as the bott's stare settled on the creature whose tail now ringed Cimi's neck in a furry collar.

Transformation

“Good wake-cycle, Izzy Tzeus. My name is Botty.”

Cimi craned her neck to watch Izzy’s reaction to the former Olympton Space Agency security bott’s friendly greeting. Izzy double blinked and leaned out from her shoulder toward the now reprogrammed version of a robotic helper. From her government work for OSA, Cimi knew as long as the bott remained within the security perimeter of *Graviton-1*, it wouldn’t be missed, and no alarm would sound.

“As Master of Chyp Replacement,” said Botty, “you deserve a tuna-broccoli treat.”

Izzy pumped up and down then pathed, “Botty is Izzy’s friend. Master of Chyp Replacement is happy to accept a tuna-broccoli treat.”

Cimi raised her arm so Izzy could curl his tail around it. She ruffled his furry mane and handed him a wafer. “Here’s the last of CQ’s first batch.”

Iz lay over her shoulder and nuzzled her neck, holding the reward in his hands, surprisingly, too exhausted to eat.

Botty flew toward Kurl but hovered at a programmed safe distance. “How can I be of assistance, Commander Tszargon?”

Kurl paid no attention to the bott as he tapped his DB. “Everyone, follow me,” he ordered and proceeded toward the transporter.

Cimi interrupted. “Wait, Commander. Security will be alerted if Botty is detected out of *G-I*’s perimeter. Don’t activate the door until she’s in a safe place.”

“It is ridiculous to anthropomorphize a programmed bott.” Kurl’s face reddened as he worked sanitizer into his hands. “Nevertheless, Ms. Botty, do not follow,” he commanded.

Witnessing Kurl’s discomfort, Cimi voiced a global positioning command. Botty instantly soared away several meters to the west and hovered near the synthetic facade of the mountain. “She’s a safe distance now,” Cimi said.

“Step over here, Assistant Commander Cimi Nuja.”

At Kurl’s last tap to his DB, a trapezoidal section of the synthetic mountain, several stories high, revealed long, massive collapsing downward slats, one on top of the other, stacking five meters above the ground. One by one, each slat flattened next to the other, morphing into a conveyor belt.

Before them loomed the underside of the magnificent *Graviton-1*. Its four support pillars dwarfed even their transporter. The metallic surface gleamed in the sunlight.

Cimi shivered in awe. Izzy’s tail tightened around Cimi’s neck, and the tuna-broccoli wafer fell from his hand.

“Wow! How’d they do that without making a sound? The ground didn’t even shake. Must have taken some olymfab fancy hydraulics, Iz.”

She smiled as Izzy cocked his head, guessing *hydraulics* made it into his vocab file.

“It’s okay, Iz, relax. You’re cutting off my blood supply.”

His tail's grip on her neck relaxed until its tip *tap-tapped* on her collar bone. "That's better," Cimi said, loosening her shoulder muscles, "but I'm sorry you dropped your treat."

"Not matter to Izzy. Master of Chyp Replacement is overwhelmed by magical mechanics of *G-1*."

"See here, Iz." Cimi showed Izzy the large platform spanning the distance between two of the four pillar-like legs on which the spacecraft stood. "We won't have any trouble fitting our supplies on this lift. It's large enough to hold a government transporter and high enough to stack four atop one another. This is a lift that will transport us and our supplies into the spacecraft. Right, Commander?"

She glanced at Kurl as she stepped back to take it all in.. He remained absorbed in something on his DB. *Nothing fazes him.*

Cimi forgave Kurl's nonresponse because he looked worried. *Maybe he just received an important path*, she thought.

Then Kurl spoke to his DB. "Connect conveyor to OL-1 transporter. Ready *Sky Sport 1* and depart."

Cimi watched the conveyor from the Olympyon transporter attach seamlessly to the lift. *I wonder why Kurl ordered his personal flier to depart. Something unexpected has happened.* She wanted to ask but hesitated to interrupt the commander's focus with questions.

Kurl stared at Botty, who continued to hover in position near the entrance only a few meters away. "Stand by as supplies arrive," Kurl directed. "What did you say your designation is?"

“My name is Botty, Commander Tszargon. I will stand by as you wish.” With a flick of lashes and clasping of hands, Botty retreated to what Cimi hoped was a comfortable distance for Kurl.

He shook his head and then pressed the bulge at his sternum. His shoulders relaxed as he massaged the sanitizing droplets into his hands, but the wrinkles in his brow deepened.

“Assistant Commander Cimi Nuja, doctors Heidon and Tzeus have been given medical approval and wish to be on hand to assist with the move.”

Before Cimi could say what olymfab news that was, Izzy stood up, balancing on Cimi’s shoulder. He pumped up and down, pathing, “Daddy Tzeus is feeling better. Daddy Tzeus is on the mend ...” He stopped, Cimi supposed, only when he ran out of expressions describing recovery.

Kurl couldn’t understand why Assistant Commander Cimi Nuja grinned so broadly at the inexplicable creature’s head bobbing up and down on her shoulder. Neither could he understand why her already distracting hair tuft flashed with flamboyant yellow.

Annoyed at the interruption to his concentration, he raised his voice for all to hear. “Dr. Robar Gimmel’s daughter is in trauma unit three of Olympya Medical Center. Skdjlsjflsjf Phed Ilkjkld is piloting Dr. Robar Gimmel in *Sky Sport 1* to the Olympya trauma unit. Assistant Commander Cimi Nuja, I need you to assist in the transporter. Ms. CQ will oversee the lift operation here.”

Botty, floating in a figure eight close to the opening, caught Kurl’s attention. “That female version of an automated servant can assist Ms. CQ,” he said.

Kurl lifted his head to the sky west of the massive mountain shell just as *Sky Sport I* made a quick turn and vanished from sight. He drew in a deep breath, then pressed the lump on his sternum again. *Sky Sport I* had never been piloted by anyone other than Kurl. He must trust his judgment that on return, the young pilot he'd permitted to fly *Cavejet I* would be able to taxi Kurl's sporty favorite onto the lift and maneuver it into its garage at Level 1 of *G-1*.

Over and over, Kurl massaged the soothing drops into his hands.

Cimi signaled Botty to wait for orders from Chico. The bott tipped its head in agreement and cruised down, hovering over the lift's floor to await Chico's arrival. With that taken care of, Cimi looked at her shoulder-riding friend. "Okay, Iz. Let's find Director Heidon, Daddy Tzeus, and CQ."

Izzy tapped the tip of his tail and pumped his head up and down. "Daddy Tzeus, Director Heidon, and CQ."

With Izzy coiled around her neck and clasping her shoulders, Cimi hurried in search of the others.

Inside the transporter, the PHI director towered above luggage and boxes in the back of the baggage hold. Ponce braced himself as Cimi rushed toward him with arms outstretched and bracelets jingling, but she stopped short of hugging him. Her yellow tuft faded to white, and her huge smile diminished when she looked at him up close.

"Director Heidon, you're all bandaged up," she said in a softer-than-Cimi voice while lowering both hands gently onto Izzy's tail. "Oh, and you look so much better than I imagined, but it must be difficult for you to talk."

Ponce looked down at her and tried to smile, but his skin pinched. The gel bandage covering his lacerations acted like a facelift gone wrong, restricting the use of facial muscles. “Talking is tough, but my injuries are healing, and I’m feeling much better now that you and Izzy are here.”

Izzy loosened his tail and pushed up, away from Cimi. He pathed, “You don’t have to talk, Director Heidon. You can send paths through your DB.”

Ponce attempted another smile and patted Izzy’s head then tapped a message on his DB. “Well, okay. I see you’re as quick as ever with a solution.”

He pulled out a block of Double Trouble Bubble Gum and entered another message into his DB. “I’m taking the advice of experts.”

He unwrapped the cube and cautiously placed it into his mouth, slowly chewed a bit, then swallowed the juicy gnarlythorn blossom flavor before sending another path. “I’m not taking a chance of going through the pain of your attack again, Izzy, even though this should be the last place we’d be discovered by angry protesters.”

Ponce pointed a finger at Izzy and pathed, “One must not ignore an opportunity to be prepared.”

Cimi looked at her DB. “Olymfab! CQ’s on her way. Her breathing’s returned to normal, and she’s eager to help.”

“Izzy Tzeus wants to help. What can Izzy Tzeus do?”

Just then Dorf entered the luggage hold. “Hold on, Iz. You already saved my life. All our lives. You’re my hero. I’m proud to be Izzy’s daddy.”

“Daddy Tzeus, Daddy Tzeus!” Izzy’s tail unwrapped from Cimi’s neck, and he leaped onto Dorf’s chest.

“How can Izzy Tzeus help?”

Dorf tilted his head. “See this?” Ponce winced as Dorf pointed to a patch covering the injured part of his head. “I’d probably have many more of these if you hadn’t overwhelmed the villains. And now, you’ve replaced the chyp in a security bott so we can enter *G-I*. That’s powerful stuff.”

Cimi bobbed below them on her tiptoes, trying to check out Dorf’s head. “Hmm, looks like that knockout blow left you—”

“Good as new,” Dorf said. “Maybe even better.”

Izzy stood on Dorf’s shoulder stretching his neck to see. He grabbed Dorf’s cheeks to view the knockout spot. “Daddy Tzeus, stay out of trouble.”

Ponce’s enjoyment of the others’ laughter from Izzy’s path was short-lived. When Ponce’s DB flashed red, he turned away from the fun of the moment to concentrate on the urgent message from Kurl, still at the lift.

“Heidon.”

Kurl’s normal greeting, though only one word, conveyed an edge of importance. “Skdjlsjflsjf Phed Ilkjkl just informed me that a transporter of the Pink Peace Power is heading in our direction. He estimates at their rate of speed, if their course doesn’t change, they should be above our position in twenty minutes. Do you see cause for concern?”

“There’s nothing in this vicinity for miles,” pathed Ponce. “Either they’re lost, going to change their course, or we’re in trouble. They may be protesting *G-I*’s location for upsetting the natural environment. We don’t want to be in a position where we must explain who we are or why we’re here. Kurl, track the PPP flight and give me three-minute updates. I’ll ramp up our loading operation. The medevac just left, so the only vehicle they’ll find, if we get this operation

completed, is the transporter. Hopefully, by then, we'll be safely inside *G-I* with no sign of our presence. Tell Phed max speed on return.”

Dorf kept one hand on Izzy's back as Ponce announced the situation. Everyone accelerated their pace, with the exception of Cimi, who fidgeted with her DB and then waved him over toward a sleek, fast-moving bott.

“Chief, I'd like you to meet my assistant, Clyde. But, as you can see, I've got him on high speed, so he can't stop right now.”

Dorf, relieved to discover Clyde was only a bott, nodded his approval as the automaton loaded small parcels rapidly, one after the other. Its assistance was invaluable in their emergency.

Then, in his role as Daddy Tzeus, Dorf pulled a tuna-broccoli treat from a pocket. “Here, Iz,” he said, holding the wafer in front of Izzy's hands, which draped over his shoulder. “It's a fresh wafer. Your first job is to enjoy this.”

Izzy pushed away the treat. “Izzy will work now and eat later. What can Izzy do?”

Dorf put away the treat and turned toward Cimi, who'd been explaining their rush to Chico. “Any ideas on giving Izzy a job, one he's specially adapted to?”

“Sure.” Cimi tilted a shoulder toward Dorf's arm. “Hop on, Izzy. We need you to be our secret agent.”

Izzy jumped down to Cimi's level and sat dangling his feet over her shoulder, leaning on his hands while pathing. “Izzy will be secret agent. Izzy will be mole. Izzy will be intelligencer...”

Cimi stopped Izzy's string of synonyms at *spy*.

“You're not a spy. You're more like a sentry. We need you to keep a lookout for anyone trying to harm us. But you must stay hidden. If you see an enemy approaching, immediately path the warning ‘DANGER, DANGER’ to everyone here.”

Carrying Izzy, Cimi walked outside to the east of the conveyor belt, ignoring Izzy's round of synonyms for *sentry*. Stopping midway beside the busy conveyor, under a tree with thick-leafed branches, Cimi lifted Izzy as high as she could reach. “Go for it, Iz.”

He sprang from her hands and scurried to a topmost branch, so well hidden by the foliage that she could no longer see him, but Cimi picked up his path.

“Kan-du sentinel Izzy Tzeus prepared to signal if enemy threatens.”

“Okay, Iz. Stay there and keep a steady lookout. I'll check in with you every few minutes. When we're all loaded, we'll go inside together.”

Satisfied with Izzy's hiding spot and determination, Cimi hurried back to supervise Clyde.

Signal for Action

As the pink tank of *VRAT-1* slashed through the sky, all was quiet within the shiny gray interior. General Andriol sat ramrod-straight in the closest thing there was to a dignitary's seat on this military aircraft when it wasn't fitted up for His Excellency's use. Half-shelled, only his upper body was restrained by a padded, shell-like enclosure. In an emergency, the shell's other half would rise from the floor to cover the lower body and emerge from the back to cover the head.

There were two seats to Gore's left and right. In one on the left sat HERNE, His Excellency's Royal Neural Engineer, an unexpected and unwanted member of the crew by Gore's standards. The other three seats remained empty. Behind the general sat his soldiers, similarly half-shelled, in fourteen rows of five seats on both sides of a wide aisle, pink helmets held fast between their pink-booted feet.

Operation Mountain Monster belonged to Six-Star General Gore Andriol. The massive, empty cargo hold below waited to receive the dead bodies and any material evidence of a conflict. He'd anticipated every aspect, and all would proceed precisely by plan—his plan.

The film covering his face, however, had not been part of his plan.

Gore turned a stern look at HERNE but decided not to laser the life out of him. Instead, he slid his hand into his sleeve and squeezed Buster. Calmed, Gore reviewed what had happened.

After Six-Star General Gore Andriol VRA led the troops into the passenger section of the disguised craft and waited for them to find their seats, he gave the order to half-shell. Everything went as planned, so he secured himself.

Then his DB flashed red. “Andriol!” The demand came from Mumba Zola, himself. “My Excellency’s Royal Neural Engineer is aboard *VRAT-1*. Follow his instructions. He will spray your face with a transparent nanobiomaterial. This film of electrodes will interface with your brain, transmitting images of your visual perception through your DB to My Excellency. Under no circumstance are you to remove the film. Do you understand?”

Gore had hesitated briefly, only to be blasted with, “Well, Andriol, speak up!”

The general hated these moments. The loyalty he’d given to his dictator and the sacrifices he’d made for the advancement of the Valympyon empire meant nothing to Mumba Zola. *That bulbous beastly blob didn’t bother to consult me or offer a heads-up. He just ordered my face to be covered with some electrical mask. This could disfigure me for life. But I’ll take disfigurement over death.*

“Yes, I understand, His Excellency Mumba Zola, President of—”

“Enough, enough. Remember, take no prisoners, only bodies, dead ones. My Excellency will be following Operation Mountain Monster as your virtual commander.”

The path ended.

The next thing Gore knew, HERNE approached and said, “General Andriol VRA, sir. I’ve been instructed by His Excellency to provide you with a communication polymer. The first

procedure will be to protect your eyes. Please remove your hat, hold your head still, and close your eyes.”

Gore held his hat in one hand and slipped the other beneath his sleeve to grip Buster’s ear as a soft covering adhered to each eye. He tried not to react.

Then HERNE said, “General Andriol VRA, sir. I’ve protected your eyes from the spray. The next procedure will only take a moment, and you’ll not feel discomfort.”

A cool mist covered Gore’s face as if he’d walked through a cloud. Moments later, the eye protection was removed.

“You may replace your hat now,” HERNE said. “The film activates chemicals emitting live-action sound, sight, and smell to the authorized recipient, who, in this case, is His Excellency. In three minutes, the activation process will finish, General Andriol VRA, sir.”

During the two minutes and fifty-five seconds remaining, Gore asked, “What about the video chyp embedded in my chin?”

“This new technology overrides the single chyp program,” HERNE said. “His Excellency’s scientists have undoubtedly taken all factors into consideration.”

When the procedure had been completed, Gore couldn’t stop perspiring. *What if the signals from the facial cover can be directed at angles severe enough to pick up my habit of squeezing and petting Buster?* Making sure he turned his head and eyes away from Buster’s direction, Gore pulled his right arm close to his body. *That’s better. This electrically activated facial film has no way to detect Buster’s presence.*

Now, as Gore continued glaring at HERNE, he noticed the raptan’s eyes were closed after accomplishing his dastardly duty. The general checked the time. He and his pink-clad soldiers were only twenty-one minutes from their destination.

Far from *VRAT-1*'s passenger area, in the cramped cockpit, the pilot noted something picked up on the radar. A small craft traveling at high speed was flying in the opposite direction of the disguised transporter. He wondered briefly if the flier fit the profile for the famed *Black Lightning* built by the legendary Olympon pilot and kan-du master Kurl Tszargon. However, since the craft clearly headed away from *VRAT-1*'s destination, the pilot dared not disturb Six-Star General Gore Andriol VRA over such trivial speculation.

Gore looked at the time again. Fifteen minutes to arrival. Stiff from sitting, he unlatched his shell. Hoping to impress Mumba, he decided to review the troops and stepped into the middle aisle.

“Ah-ten hut!” he commanded at the first rows as he paused between them.

The men released their half-shells and stood at attention, chewing their black Bubble Licorice as ordered. With the first row's inspection complete, General Andriol gave the command to be seated before he stepped to the next row.

By the end of his inspection, five minutes remained before arrival. Gore faced the soldiers while holding his three-meter staff. He tongued his own wad of Bubble Licorice snugly in the cavity of his cheek before he spoke. “Remember, this staff is your signal for action.”

He lifted it as high as the transporter's ceiling allowed. The red and black tassel swung freely. “You will charge the enemy when the staff is raised. Look for the tassel to point the direction of the charge.”

Gore set the staff aside and removed the wad of Bubble Licorice from his mouth. “Follow this procedure as you have been instructed.” He pulled apart the gum, holding equal amounts in

each hand. “Once the gum is placed inside your ear, you must rely on your vision to follow orders.”

He stuffed each wad of gum into an ear canal. The troops followed his example. Gore steeled himself, nervously aware Mumba could be watching his every move.

Then a siren blared. The pilot spoke. “Descending area blocked. Prepare for rough landing.”

Anti-Izzy Concoction

Olym's rays speckled Ponce's body as he ducked branches looking for Izzy on his way to meet with Kurl. Ponce had to satisfy himself that the young raptan was safe. Leaves above rustled, and he received a pathed update of Izzy's observations.

"Report number twelve. All is clear."

Ponce scanned the tall tree in front of him. He saw the slightest movement on a branch at the top. Then a leaf lifted with the help of a lizardly tail.

"Stay alert, Izzy. While you're watching for intruders, you'll probably be the first one to see Phed returning on *Sky Sport 1*. Send a path as soon as the flier is visible."

The top of the tree sprang up and down with Izzy's newfound energy. Limb and leaves tipped toward the west and south. "Izzy will scan horizon for intruders. And for first sighting of Phed flying the legendary *Black Lightning*, the fastest, smallest, and most advanced sporty flier in all of Authair."

Ponce smiled at Izzy's enthusiasm but kept the tone of his pathed reply serious. "You will report first sighting of *Sky Sport 1* out of respect for its owner, who does not approve of the craft's nickname, no matter how appropriate."

Satisfied Izzy understood his duty, Ponce touched his ears to make sure the drumheads were secure. He hurried to *G-1*.

A path from Phed targeted Ponce and Kurl. “Delivered Dr. Gimmel to hospital. Doc’s gonna update on his daughter’s progress. At full speed to *G-1*. Will arrive in seventeen minutes.”

The director acknowledged. “All in order, Phed. Awaiting your arrival.”

Ponce prayed those seventeen minutes would allow Phed time to land and secure *Sky Sport 1* inside *Graviton-1* before the PPP arrived. *I should confirm my calculations with Kurl.* Ponce looked around the site.

The proud owner of *Sky Sport 1* stood apart from the others beyond the western-most leg of *G-1*. A chill ran through Ponce’s body when he saw Kurl pressing his sternum for one cleansing balm after another.

Cimi saw Ponce in the distance studying something on his DB as the last items loaded onto the conveyer. His bushy eyebrows lifted so high the wrinkles in his forehead showed up from there. *Am I missing out on some important information? I should path him, but—oh, I have to complete this immediate task before I attempt to find out.*

She tapped the disconnect icon on her DB, and the conveyor separated from the empty transporter.

“Last package,” Clyde’s automated voice announced.

“Well done, Clyde.” Cimi followed behind the bott as he whirled along toward the lift and took his preprogrammed place inside next to Botty. Cimi sat on the lift’s broad threshold. About to path Ponce, she noticed him and Kurl seemingly in a planning mode. Their body language said they wouldn’t welcome interruption.

She motioned for Dorf and Chico to join her. “Come on. We might as well rest until Phed arrives.”

Chico sat next to Cimi and Dorf on Chico’s other side. Cimi smiled and tapped her ears’ black drumheads.

“Make sure your drumheads are taut, just in case.” She looked at Chico’s then leaned over, checking Dorf’s. “Good job.”

Chico turned toward Cimi. “What was that? Can’t hear you.”

Cimi saw Dorf’s broad, thin-lipped smile emerge. “First time I’ve heard you crack a joke, CQ.”

“Me too,” Cimi agreed then added, “Well, sort of a joke.”

She gave Chico a little push on the shoulder. “Looks like you and Botty hit it off.”

Chico nodded. “She’s an assistant with a positive attitude. I like working with her.”

Botty’s easygoing personality and friendly mechanics weren’t the only reasons Chico felt better. She’d secretly attached General Gore’s coin of Simetra to one of *G-I*’s legs and now planned to explain her compromised position to Cimi—if only Chico could get Cimi away from Dorf.

I’m sure Cimi can alter the tracking device’s signal to transmit incorrect coordinates. As soon as we’ve accomplished the reprogramming, I can finally confide in the rest of the team. They’ll help me figure a way to rescue Grammy, Zak, and Aunt Helyn.

It was the most hopeful Chico’d felt in a long time.

“Dorf, let’s see where Kurl’s tracked that PPP flier,” Ponce said, approaching the genetics chief and nodding hello to Cimi and Chico.

“Sure, Boss.” Dorf jumped from his seat on the edge of the lift and walked with Ponce toward Kurl. “Strange to have the PPP in this neighborhood. Probably changed course by now.”

Dorf put his hand on Ponce’s shoulder. “Want to bet Kurl’s tracking *Sky Sport 1*? Bet you a gnarly froth he knows to the microsecond when Phed’s expected to arrive.”

“You’re on,” Ponce said, “even though you may be right.”

When they neared Kurl, he was leaning against the western edge of the open lift, fully engrossed in something on his DB. A green substance covered his ear.

Dorf looked at Ponce, who returned his look with raised eyebrows. *Must be Kurl’s sanitary version of an invention to survive an Izzy attack. Hopefully, that means Kurl finally believes in the power of Izzy’s audio weapon.*

Kurl appeared just as absorbed in his DB readings, so Dorf leaned behind the astrophysicist’s head to check his other ear. It too was covered like a sagging drumhead in freeliog-green slime. Dorf looked at Ponce and pathed, “Yep, Boss. Kurl developed his own anti-Izzy protection.”

Ponce only raised an eyebrow and shook his head. They both knew better than to question the concoction Kurl had invented.

Ponce said, “Kurl, what’s the status on the PPP ship? Where are they?”

Kurl whirled around and again pressed the lump on his sternum. “Heidon, Tzeus, didn’t see you.” He rubbed the sanitizing moisture into his hands. “Oh, the Pink Peace Power?”

Kurl lifted his arm to check his DB.

“DANGER! DANGER!” shot through Dorf’s glial cells. Ponce’s alarm told him he’d received Izzy’s path too, but Kurl, who’d never befriended Izzy, showed no reaction.

Chico and Cimi gasped as Izzy’s warning path accosted them.

The forest exploded with branches flying everywhere. A plummeting pink beast from the sky slammed onto the Olympyon transporter, smashing it to the size of compacted trash and burying all but its winged tips into the ground beneath.

Cimi, wide-eyed, pulled another wad of Double Trouble from her pocket and ordered Chico, “Get inside the lift.” The nose of the PPP imposter blasted open. Pink bodies fell, rolled, or ran out helter-skelter toward them.

Chico refused to follow Cimi’s order.

A flash of green caught their attention as Izzy leaped to the ground between the intruders and the path to *Graviton-1*. He stood as tall as he could, teeth bared with fists thrust forward in a menacing kan-du stance.

Cimi popped the cube of gum in her mouth, called out, “Kurl!” and jumped off the platform. Then, for a moment, she stood as if transfixed while Izzy crouched and humped his back.

Chico had never seen Izzy’s green and black spikes emerge into a forest of iridescent spears from head to tail. As he lifted his chin, he shot out a brilliant orange and red dewlap. As if spurred on by Izzy’s show of color, Cimi, her own tuft now a neon flash of red and white, bolted, running toward Kurl and the others.

Chico watched in horror as a pink-clad invader turned a death laser toward her best friend. She raised her own bioweapon and aimed.

Cimi focused all her energy on reaching the doubting astronomer before Izzy's siren shattered his nerves. Izzy had only begun his low gurgle, but she knew Kurl's OCD would give him heightened sensitivity to any nerve attack. She reached him just as he staggered and collapsed at the feet of Ponce and Dorf.

Cimi knelt by Kurl's head, quickly turning it until one ear faced her.

"What's this?" she exclaimed as she bent over, grabbing an edge of the slime with her teeth and peeling it away. Despite the danger, she enjoyed the erotic experience of nibbling Kurl's earlobe.

But it tasted disgusting. "Yuck, this stuff's fermented." She spat out the green muck, then quickly molded a drumhead of Double Trouble Bubble Gum over the famous astronomer's ear from half the freshly chewed wad in her mouth.

Izzy's gurgle seized the air in waves.

Out of the corner of her eye, Cimi saw a uniformed body catapult from the pink behemoth, a long pole in its grip.

She tried turning Kurl to reach his other ear, but he began convulsing. Ponce pushed Kurl toward her while Dorf pulled off the second green mass. While Cimi appreciated their help, she couldn't fully dismiss her disappointment at not nibbling Kurl's other ear. Her hands worked feverishly molding the rest of the damp Double Trouble into a drumhead over Kurl's second ear. His tremors abated.

Dorf and Ponce lifted Kurl, locked steps, and hurried off, dragging Kurl with his head bobbing and the toes of his boots leaving ruts in the ground.

Cimi dashed toward Izzy, racing as fast as her hearts allowed. Above Izzy’s rising gurgle, Ponce yelled an unusually loud command. “Activating Plan G-L. Everyone inside the lift, stat.”

Pink Flamingos Down

The great pink transporter rocked violently. Lights went out, and all the shells burst open. Gore grabbed his right sleeve, holding it against his chest as he tumbled to the floor shouting, “Prepare to invade,” his orders unheard by ear-plugged troops rolling, bouncing, and scrambling to save their lives.

A boot hit the general in the chest as the PPP-disguised transporter splintered trees, crashing to the ground. The ramp door broke loose, flooding the passenger cavity with Olym’s orange brightness. Pink helmets rolled and wobbled onto the ground.

The Valympyon troops, like a stampede of pink flamingos, scrambled down the cracked ramp as it dug into the earth. The troops chased helmets, their pink uniforms splotted with dirt, some with footprints. The first trooper to exit the transporter with his death laser poised aimed his weapon at a female fleeing the invasion. Another female, instead of running, lifted her arm toward the trooper, who suddenly convulsed and fell from the discharge of some unseen weapon.

Gore fumbled for his staff dangling from the broken wall clamp. He yanked it free, jabbing the tasseled end into the bare head of a soldier who fell to the floor, unconscious. The general stumbled over his victim and rushed toward the opening, but the cumbersome staff caught in the open ramp’s ragged hinge and bent under his weight.

Like a one-armed pole vaulter, the general flew out of the transporter clinging to the staff with one hand while his lower arm hugged his body, keeping Buster safely hidden. He flipped over in the air and landed on a soldier aiming his death laser to fire at the female enemy who'd just shot one of his comrades.

With the air knocked from Gore's lungs, it took all the general's effort to roll off the hapless soldier onto the ground. He stared up, wide-eyed, at a creature's flashing dewlap while struggling to suck in a breath.

In the split second he recovered from loss of air, Gore began suffering from the creature's siren. A single thought flashed through his brain—*Why isn't the gum working?*—before delirium overtook all reasoning. He wanted to scream the pain, but his body doubled over in one huge muscle cramp, paralyzing his vocal cords.

The Bubble Licorice Gore and his troops placed inside their ears was worse than ineffective against the creature's sound; it amplified the torture.

Naked Reality

Cimi reached Izzy only to find him collapsed on the ground. The stress of the attack had nearly drained him of life, but under his arm she found the faint but rapid and steady beats of his hearts. She picked him up and held him close, nuzzling her chin on his drooping furry mane. “We’ve got to leave this world, Iz,” she whispered.

Her own words of survival brought the naked reality of leaving Authair to her frontal lobe. Perspiration dripped all around the quivering ringlets of her tuft. “If we stay, they’ll find us no matter where we go on Authair.”

Her chest heaving, she breathed through a moment in silence to calm her beating hearts. Izzy’s body felt comforting against her chest. “You’re safe, Iz. We’re all safe because of you.” Tears welled in her eyes.

She glanced around at the motionless pink lumps littering the ground. Not one invader moved. *The healthier ones will revive first*, Cimi thought as she hurried between crumpled soldiers looking for any signs of life.

She noticed something black plugging the ears of those without helmets. *What’s that? Can’t be Double Trouble. I’ve got it all.*

A groaning startled her. She placed both hands over Izzy's body and looked around. All appeared deathly still. *Just nerves.*

She stepped over a fallen trooper, his face a mask of gray. A pool of blood spread on the ground from a ten-centimeter death laser hole in his chest. Cimi knelt beside him.

He's lost too much blood. So young. She felt for the soldier's carotid artery. *No pulse.*

She tried again.

He's gone, poor thing. He'd no idea we're not the enemy.

She stood and scanned the scene through tear-drenched eyes, ignoring Ponce's repeated orders for her to hurry. *When these guys revive, their weapons will work. Not good. I can prevent more deaths.* She spoke into her DB. "Botty."

"Botty here."

"Scramble electromagnetic pulse of all light-emission weapons. Stat."

There was a *ping* and flash of green, followed by Botty's affirmation. "Pulse scrambled."

Cimi ran clutching Izzy while offering a silent prayer for the attacker who'd not survived. Ponce dropped Kurl's arm and raced toward her.

General Andriol could not move, but his blurry eyes witnessed the famous Cimi Nuja carrying away the lifeless body of the small but fearsome monster.

Take Your Positions

Director—now Commander—Heidon shoved Cimi inside the lift and grabbed Kurl’s free arm to steady the semiconscious astronomer whom Dorf was struggling to keep upright.

Assistant Commander Dorf activated the ascent to the third and highest level of the enormous ship—its control center.

The five scientists, with Botty and Clyde whirring near Cimi, huddled like a football team waiting for instructions from the quarterback.

Chico broke the silence as the huge lift rose. “Dr. Heidon, I don’t know where we’re going, and I’m almost afraid to find out, but what’s happened to Phed?”

“He had to turn back, CQ. We’ll manage without him.”

Ponce gave them no time to absorb the news that Phed wouldn’t be a part of their team now. He looked at Cimi and said, “That one,” as he pointed with his elbow at Botty hovering next to Clyde. “Cimi, program that one to assist CQ in the growing lab.”

Then, with full authority as the commander of *Graviton-1*, Ponce announced, “Lives of all Authairians are dependent upon the success of this mission. As you have rehearsed, these are your assignments for Plan G-L: Dorf Tzeus, assistant commander; Kurl Tszargon, pilot; Cimi

Nuja, navigator; CQ, mission specialist for nutrition and fitness; and the two bots will act upon orders programmed by Navigator Nuja.

Ponce looked at Chico. “CQ, you are the only one who hasn’t rehearsed this situation. Once the auto-navigator takes control, Ms. Nuja will bring you up to speed on G-L.”

The lift door opened.

“Kurl, wake up.” Ponce lifted his pilot’s arm from around his neck and motioned Dorf to do the same. The semiconscious astronomer moaned and steadied himself.

Everyone remained in the lift watching Kurl blink himself awake and press the lump on his sternum. He scanned the shining new control center and raised his head to its rotunda-like ceiling as he rubbed the sanitizing liquid into his hands.

“At your command, Heidon,” he said, and walked straight to his deck at the controls as if nothing incredulous had just changed the course of all their lives.

The scientists had no time to contemplate the awesome brilliance of *Graviton-1*’s control center nor to worry about the consequences of commandeering the grandest spacecraft Authair had ever built, so grave was their mission to develop a vaccine.

Ponce Heidon, their undisputed commander, ordered, “Take your positions and shell up. CQ, over there.” He directed Chico to the seat at the growing lab monitor.

Cimi instructed Botty and Clyde to lock into charging stations, and she gave Izzy another hug before handing his limp body to Dorf. “Here, Daddy Tzeus, keep him safe.”

Dorf gently laid Izzy over his shoulder and headed for Chico. “I need you to care for Izzy for now.”

Chico smiled. “You bet. Here, come on, Iz.” She took Izzy and wrapped his tail around her neck then laid him over her shoulder. “He’ll be fine,” she said, feeling his heartbeats slow to a healthy pace against her neck.

Dorf hurried into position next to Ponce, who was tracking movement on the video monitor.

“See those?” The commander touched tiny dots moving toward *G-1*, zooming them as large as possible. “Government defense drones heading our way. Must have detected disturbance at *G-1*. We’ve got to get out of here.” Ponce quickly secured himself.

Beside him, Dorf viewed the control room’s monitor while lowering himself into the assistant commander’s chair. “All passengers secured, commander.”

“Pilot Tszargon, are all systems prepared for liftoff?” asked Ponce.

Kurl turned toward his navigator. Cimi smiled and nodded her affirmative. “Navigation on target,” she said while curls of bright yellow bobbed her optimism.

“All systems go, Commander Heidon,” came Kurl’s composed response.

“*G-1* mountain peak, open,” Ponce ordered.

Dorf pulled a lever, and the mountain top opened like the iris of an eye. Olym’s yellow rays filled the control center’s dome. “*Graviton-1* clear for ascent.”

Ponce felt a chill creep through his body as he gave the final command. “Countdown, assistant commander.”

Dorf followed orders. “Three, two, one.”

Kurl released the maglev, and the great ship lifted silently up the mountain shaft on its path through time and space toward MBG21, its Earthly destination.

Dyzzleberry Dictionary

Numbers in parentheses indicate chapters where quotations appear.

2DFIS. Two-dimensional, fixed-image-in-space technology. The 2DFIS acts like a virtual monitor with zoom capabilities. It produces an image from an app purchased for a Dyzzleberry Communicator. The technology ionizes a patch of air and projects the designated image onto that patch of air anywhere within a specified distance of its operating hub or DB. The distance of projection is determined by the strength of the product purchased. A less expensive one would have a shorter display zone than one more costly. *At once, the image projected within Chico's visual space, reminding her of the heads-up display in a sissca. An arrow pointed the way. She recognized the two-dimensional fixed-image-in-space technology; she had used 2DFIS applications before, so she knew how to test the projection.* (7)

ABMR. A deadly retrovirus found in the Olympyon hemisphere of Planet Authair. Dr. Dorf Tzeus identified it as an A-plus-B merged retrovirus. *The budget once allocated to sending a crew to the farthest reaches of the galaxy is now funneled into annihilating the ABMR epidemic.* (44)

APA. Authairian President's Award presented annually to a citizen of Authair who has developed a process, product, or plan that has proven beneficial to raptankind. *The jogger and suspected bomber has been identified as Chico Quwattle, an award-winning graduate of the University of Villinois, who won the First Authairian President's Award for Young Innovators with her genetically modified corn.* (5)

Apium. Authairian equivalent of celery. *He took the last chug of TX, a potent vegetable cocktail, and picked up a firm stalk of apium.* (1)

ASASS. An organization like the United States Secret Service, but ASASS is specific to Authair's Space Agency. *Only the Authairian Space Agency's Secret Service Chief knows of the PHI ABMR team's emergency move into Graviton-1. For our safety, he gave me the go-ahead without consulting other ASASS members—not even the Central Security department that monitors the perimeter.* (47)

Aurora Tornadoes. Electromagnetic fields at the poles on Planet Authair. They funnel in cosmic radiation from Authair's nearest suns, Olym and Valym, creating a spiraling rainbow of colors beautiful to see but deadly to approach. The aurora tornadoes generate a unique energy field that Authairians use in communication. *Even raptans as young as one proxi-cycle knew glialpaths were only recordable if both sender and receiver used the DB technology in devices that enabled glialpathing through energy waves generated between the aurora tornadoes on Authair's opposite poles.* (23)

Authairian. An advanced species of intelligent beings who evolved from reptiles on the fictional planet Authair in books written by DDWLEM. Authairians are hatched, not born. The Authairians, both male and female, generally look like Earthlings of 2000 CE. They have small ears and no hair on their bodies, although some may have eyebrows and lashes.

Both males and females are bald, with a few exceptions like Cimi Nuja, who has a tuft of hair on the top of her head.

Male Authairians have a total of nine fingers—four on one hand and five on the other. Where the middle finger would be, on the four-fingered hand, there is a joint, which develops into a hinge that grows a claw-like weapon as the male matures.

The female Authairian has five fingers on each hand. Her arms are like those of Earthlings, except on the right arm, just below the wrist joint, a biopearl, hidden by a sheath of skin, develops as the female matures.

Authairians socialize much in the same way as present-day Earthlings. *Valympyons vill hide nothing zat would be for zee benefit of all Authairians.* (1)

Biopearl. The Authairian female sexual attractant develops fully at the culmination of puberty. It is a pearl embedded on the underside of either the left or right wrist. Hidden by a nictitating membrane, the biopearl can only be revealed by the female creating a specific movement of her fist accompanied by her emotional consent. *A drop of blood oozed onto a protruded tendon as the double nictitating membrane concealing her biopearl opened.* (1)

Black Lightning. The nickname given to Kurl Tszargon's one-of-a-kind flying craft, respected for its speed and maneuverability but officially named *Sky Sport 1*. *I'd recognize Kurl's Black Lightning anywhere.* (47)

Bott. Intelligent machine designed to assist Authairians at varied tasks. For instance, Cimi Nuja programmed one of her botts for performing high-level mathematics as well as menial tasks with a personality combination of mischief and manners. Botts have two appendage-like arms with multiple joints from shoulder to wrist and grasping hands of

four fingers and an opposing thumb. Sensory receptors on their globular heads receive 360-degree signals for sound, touch, and odor. Three eyes, two in the front and one in back, create panoramic vision. Auditory response emits through a small mouth-like orifice. Botts do not have legs or feet. Magnetic levitation with a gravity ring at the base of a hip-like section facilitates movement. When levitating, botts can appear to be variable heights, but from a bott's head to the base of its gravity ring measures approximately 1.2 meters (four feet). *A door opened, and a security bott buzzed out. It hovered directly in front of Kurl.* (49)

Buster. A toy rabbityle. General Gore Andriol was given the toy as a gift from his grandmother when he was a toddler. Since Gore is a schizophrenic, he uses Buster as his alter ego. The general imagines that Buster assists him with critical decisions. Buster resides inside the general's right uniform sleeve. *The toy head bobbed up and down in affirmation, prodded by two of Gore's fingers. He hugged Buster and gently squeezed the dull white pom-pom tail, then, careful to make sure his secret companion couldn't be seen, he shoved the rabbityle feet-first back into the uniform's sleeve, which remained close to his body.* (14)

Busterese. A chipmunk-like voice coming from Gore Andriol when Buster takes over Gore's consciousness. *General Andriol's face twitched as Busterese faded away.* (14)

Camchyp. A device designed for spies working under authority of the Valympyon government. Camchyps are embedded in one's cheek for secret communication. When pressed by the tongue, the camchyp takes images and sends them to a file for review and storage. General Gore Andriol ordered his spy, Harimata, to accept a camchyp. *Our med team will embed a camchyp in your cheek. They'll instruct you on how to operate the device with your tongue.* (14)

CAT. An acronym for *clear air turbulence*, sudden severe turbulence occurring in cloudless regions that causes violent buffeting of aircraft. *We'll be able to outmaneuver any CATs better on the return trip in Kurl's Bl—er—Sky Sport 1.* (49)

Cavejet. A two-person flying speedster. Kurl Tszargon designed the prototype *Cavejet 1* to traverse the narrow passages of the Equapyon mountain caverns. *When astronomer Kurl Tszargon requested Phed pilot Kurl's one-of-a-kind cavejet, the obstacle flight champion jumped at the opportunity.* (9)

Central Security. The organization that secures all aspects of the Olympyon Space Agency. *If a minute lapses, Central Security will send out more investigator botts, and we'll all be done for.* (49)

Claw. The claw develops in Authairian males, triggered by DNA messaging, as they mature. It is usually found on the right hand where the middle finger would normally be. In that place, a callused, knob-like hinge activates the embedded claw blade. A tough enclosure of skin similar to a zipper opens the length of the forearm to expose the claw. When the male activates his claw, it whips out similar to the action of a switchblade and locks in place at the joint between the fingers, which then stiffen around the base of the claw to provide aim and force. At this point, the claw's appearance is like that of a sword. *If Zak survived the pain and trauma, his arm could be replaced—but what about its precious claw, the evolutionary remnant from prehistoric time when males thrust their blades into meaty boars for sustenance?* (20)

Coin of Simetra. An ancient coin concealing a tracking device given to Chico upon orders of General Andriol. *If this news is true, I must follow the general's instructions and attach the coin of Simetra onto the space station as soon as we arrive.* (40)

DA. Doctor's assistant. *Chico walked through, smiling at DA Harimata despite still not fully trusting the woman.* (20)

DDWLEM. The initialism of the authors of books featuring IZ, a little creature named Izzy from Planet Authair. The initials are for D. Duayne Whitehurst and Lucille E. Mayton. It is pronounced by spelling each letter: D-D-W-L-E-M.

Death doctor. An Authairian coroner. *The death doctor's conclusion went uncontested: asphyxiation by hydrogen cyanide.* (7)

Death laser. A handheld Authairian weapon. *Equip one hundred forty of your best sharpshooters with death lasers.* (46)

Double Trouble Bubble Gum. This is the black gum Cimi Nuja chews to calm down and focus. She claims it gives her a creative edge. In each creative moment, she pops a bubble. The bubble gum is naturally black because it contains multiwalled carbon nanotubes to give it extra strength. Cimi accidentally discovered its lifesaving properties during Izzy's first attack. *Terrified for the adorable feline-iguana she loved, Cimi chewed her Double Trouble Bubble Gum with fervor.* (26)

Dyzzleberry Communicator. Authairians wear a device called the Dyzzleberry Communicator or DB. Its name comes from the dyzzleberry plant that develops a vivid red berry and grows near the poles on Planet Authair. The DB's indicator light glows red when in communication mode. Its owner texts or speaks a message, which the DB relays any distance to the intended recipient's brain. The recipient receives this mental message through the unique field created by the aurora tornadoes. Authairian neuroscientists discovered that energy created by this field could be harnessed through the DB technology and used for planetary communication.

The DB is programmed to activate the glial cells of the recipient's brain. Each DB owner must have his or her brainprint programmed into the DB for these glial cells to pick up the transmission. Anyone communicating in this way is said to be *glialpathing*.

The DB has an embedded unit that can be retracted or exposed when activated, transforming into a powerful telescopic camera as well as a projector. The DB has evolved to a micro-thin, flexible, quasi-organic device that is attached by a gel glue to a convenient spot on the body such as the wrist. Once adhered to the body, the device instantly reads that body's DNA profile, allowing it to operate only for the authorized wearer. *Her black, pencil-thin brows pinched a V over eyes that darted from one side of the empty hall to the other and then cut to the Dyzzleberry communicator cuffing her bony wrist. The DB flashed the time.* (1)

Dyzzleberry Dictionary. The cloud source of all knowledge on Planet Authair. It can be accessed with the Dyzzleberry Communicator. *This time UO-1 didn't give Cimi time to answer. His glialpath came straight from the Dyzzleberry Dictionary.* (22)

Equapyon Mountain Range. The mountain range that encircles Planet Authair at its equator, defining the geographic border between the Valympyon and Olympyon civilizations. *Phed agreed to transport the woman and her cat to the other side of the Equapyon Mountains as fast as possible.* (9)

Faketye. A robotic substitute for the rabbitye species found on Authair. Faketyes are used for biological experiments. *Dorf led Chico into the crescent-shaped observation pod, a room large enough to monitor the effectiveness of experimental vaccines on ten faketye subjects.* (17)

Flash. The nickname Phed uses for *Cavejet 1*. *During their trudge to the seawalker tunnel, he'd urged her to keep the nickname Flash their secret, insisting Kurl Tszargon wouldn't approve of calling his patented aerial transporter anything other than its official name, Cavejet 1.* (10)

Flexichem. A material designed to integrate with a plexi wall of an animal habitat. When a hand or object presses through it, the flexichem seals around the protruding object while items are deposited to or removed from this double-walled, flexible, self-healing polymer. *The chief of genetics bent near the ground before he let go of one hand on the crucible and gently pressed an entry spot in H-4's flexichem. The double-polymer wall of the habitat gave way to the pressure of Dorf's fist, allowing space enough for hand and crucible to enter.* (17)

Glialth. Direct communication to brain cells of Authairians through a unique field created by the aurora tornadoes at Planet Authair's poles. The Dyzzeberry Communicator facilitates this messaging system. *He realized it wasn't a bubble—it was an honest-to-goodness glialth from the tiny creature in Habitat Four.* (26)

GMC. Initials signifying the Olympon Government Medical Corps. *Though desperate to know her location and immediate future, she feared too many questions might reveal her identity. Instead, she read the ID on the woman's uniform: DA Harimata—GMC-1 Olympos.* (12)

Gnarlythorn. A dense, tree-like shrub that covers large areas on Planet Authair. It's feared because of its sharp thorns that protrude from every imaginable angle. However, its blossoms produce a nectar that is among the most sought-after plant substances on

Authair. *Chico inventoried the rest of the pack: protein cubes, water, a water purifier, even a flask of gnarlythorn nectar.* (6)

Golden fringe. A term used on Planet Authair to signify the sunsphere color at the time when a new work-cycle begins for most Authairians, equivalent to approximately 9:00 a.m. on Earth. Authair's sunsphere changes hues throughout the planet's revolutionary path between its two nearest suns at each pole, Olym and Valym. *Chico seldom arose in time to watch the deep sunsphere soften toward Valym-yellow two hours before golden fringe signaled a new work-cycle.* (8)

Graviton-1. An advanced spaceship developed by the Olympyons on Planet Authair. It is capable of traveling through the dark energy field faster than the speed of light. *The scientists had no time to contemplate the awesome brilliance of Graviton-1's control center nor to worry about the consequences of commandeering the grandest spacecraft Authair had ever built.* (55)

Hatchplace. The place where an Authairian emerges from his or her egg. *There's where Daddy Tzeus carefully removed your embryo and took it to the habitat that became your hatchplace.* (30)

Hearts. Authairians have two hearts. One pumps blood to the lungs to receive oxygen, and the other pumps oxygenated blood around the body. *The victims display no signs of early trauma or disease. They suddenly lose consciousness, their lungs collapse, and their hearts stop.* (1)

Hololaser Security Fence. A fence of flashing red lights that creates a web of protection. *A burst of flashing lights surrounded the mountain like a gyrating scarlet web. Cimi knew*

about Graviton-1's hololaser security fence, but seeing it confront Kurl put a new dimension to its frightful efficiency. (47)

Holomeet. A conference hosted by an individual or group involving any number of people located remotely from the host and whose live images appear as holograms to all participants. *The general sat down at the C-shaped holomeet deck in the middle of the office and reclined to a preprogrammed position in his upholstered chair. (14)*

Holovid. A display apparatus like a TV screen that displays images in holographic form. *She dug her ruby nails deep into a chair back's plush fibers, impatient for National Public Telepathy Valympya's update of deaths to scroll across the holovid at the front of the room. (1)*

House Rules. Ponce Heidon established Rules of Organization for his employees at The Ponce Heidon Institute of Genetics. He called these the House Rules. *Then she quoted one of Director Heidon's House Rules: "If you don't know how to make it, get someone who does." It wasn't a direct quote, but she'd made her point. (22)*

Instantizer. A food dispensing machine embedded in a wall of all employee lounges at the Ponce Heidon Institute. *It was a fully equipped lounge with instantizers offering snacks and drinks made on the spot with fresh fruits, veggies, and protein products. (2)*

Kan-du. A form of martial arts popular on Planet Authair. Kan-du is performed exclusively by Authairian males who are trained to use their claw as the weapon of defense only in the event of threat to life. Kurl Tszargon, Ponce Heidon, and Gore Andriol are kan-du masters. *With Kurl's reputation—as the grand master of kan-du, not to mention his astronomical expertise—Dorf suspected Cimi would spout out Kurl's many awards. (3)*

Killer-UVM. An enzyme Ursula von Menglebort developed for her notouchims to secrete. It causes death to anyone a notouchim touches. *“They’re such sweet little ones,” Ursula cooed. “No one vill suzpect their touch exudes a deadly enzyme—zee Urzula von Menglebort enzyme—soon to be known as zee Killer-UVM.”* (19)

KUWI. Conversational acronym for Keeping Up With It, an app created by Cimi Nuja that collects and organizes data for Izzy’s development. It interprets his behavior and presents the data in an easily understood manner. *“I used It because the app can be customized for any life form. Now watch.” Cimi raised her wrist and spoke. “Open KUWI.”* (22)

Lentil device. A spying device implanted behind the ear. *Chico suspected this assignment would inform the enemy of the direct route to labs so they could invade. Immediately after having the lentil embedded, she’d returned straight to her room and figured the system already traced her way there.* (25)

Medical symbol. The Authairian symbol representing medicine—two hearts with vines intertwined—is similar in meaning to the caduceus on Earth. *That’s it. Can’t mistake the Olympyon medical symbol.* (47)

MN app. Dorf’s app for recording mental notes in his DB, a process called mental noting. *Dorf named his DB’s mental note file Cimi Nuja and recorded its first entry, confident the MN app would catch at least ninety-eight percent of his thoughts: Cimi—broad smile, tuft orange and curly.* (3)

NIG. Initialism for *Notouchim Instruction Guide*, which forms the rules for Ursula’s notouchims’ behavior and training. *She ordered her notouchims schooled on similar regulations and rules and expected them to recite any portion of the NIG upon request.* (19)

Notouchim. Male orphans whose growth and behavior have been genetically manipulated by Ursula von Menglebort. When touched by other raptans, their pores exude a fatal substance. Dr. von Menglebort manipulated genes so that the fear receptors in the brains of notouchims are turned off. In physical appearance, notouchims are stunted in growth and have curly white hair. *She leaned forward, her bony fingers tightening over the ends of the armrests. “No one will confuse notouchims for Valympyons. Notouchims grow hair on their heads.”* (18)

NPTO. National Public Telepathy Olympya is the public news broadcasting network available to Olympyon citizens of Planet Authair. *Participants showed up, waited for a spot on NPTO’s daily holovid, demonstrated, and then dispersed.* (15)

NPTV. National Public Telepathy Valympya is the public news broadcasting network available to all Valympyons of Planet Authair. *In view of the NPTV footage, Chico knew she’d receive no sympathy from von Menglebort, certainly no professional recommendation.* (7)

Olym. Planet Authair’s southern sun. The people on Planet Authair who live under Olym’s sun rays are called Olympions. *Your mission is to ensure the survival of not only your fellow Olympions but the whole of raptanity. Our government is at your service. May Olym be with you.* (2)

Olymfab. An Olympyon expression that means fabulous or of Olympic standards. Cimi Nuja uses *olymfab* when she finds something truly awesome. *“Olymfab! That’s the greatest idea, Doc.”* (30)

Olympos. The largest city in the Olympyon hemisphere on Planet Authair. It is the home of the University of Authair. Izzy Tzeus was born at PHI, which is in Olympos. *Breaking news: A virus of unknown origin has spread to the suburbs of Olympos.* (1)

Olympya. The Southern hemisphere of Planet Authair. *Fear of biological weapons targeted on Olympya jump-started the Ponce Heidon Institute's rapid construction.* (2)

Operation Mountain Monster. The mission assigned to General Gore Andriol to destroy the monster and the Olympyon enemy scientists who supposedly created the deadly virus. *Operation Mountain Monster belonged to Six-Star General Gore Andriol.* (51)

OSA. Initials of Olympyon Space Agency. *She'd seen the inside, at least what the Olympyon Space Agency revealed to the public. She'd even watched a classified OSA simulation of the mountain opening to allow liftoff, but she'd never bothered checking out the surrounding terrain.* (47)

OSHCC. Acronym for Olympyon Space High Command Center (pronounced *osh-ka*). *She trusted that as they'd spoken, Kurl already would've been messaging the info to his personal contact at the Olympyon Space High Command Center.* (39)

OSS-176. Designation of one of Olympyon's space station satellites. *Luckily, he messed up on the coordinates, and the missile only grazed OSS-176.* (43)

PA. Initials for hours of wake-cycle with Proxi above the horizon. *Expect to be paged at half to eight PA in reception. Cimi should be ready to present by then.* (3)

PB. Initials for hours of sleep-cycle with Proxi below the horizon. *Chico yearned to reach her ralkid long before the PB sunsphere turned deep violet and the sleep-cycle fell upon Authairians.* (7)

PHA. Period at the beginning of a new wake-cycle as Proxi crosses from below to above the horizon, approximately equivalent to 6:00 a.m. in Earth time. *She rolled over and opened her eyes only when gentle paws brushed her cheek. “I’m awake. I’m awake.”* Emerald fringe PHA with Proxi not quite above the horizon? (8)

PHB. Period at the end of work-cycle before the beginning of a new sleep-cycle as Proxi crosses from above to below the horizon, approximately the equivalent of 6:00 p.m. in Earth time. *She ached to enjoy a rejuvenating sleep in the safety of her ralkid before six PHB when Proxi tipped below the horizon, and she trusted that food and security awaited her.* (7)

PHI. The initials of the Ponce Heidon Institute for Genetic Research on Planet Authair in the city of Olympos. *Cimi’d never seen Kurl in person outside PHI, and her passion ignited when she faced him standing tall in his gray bodysuit and black vest. Wow, he looks olymfab. But this is business.* (49)

PHIMC. Initialism for Ponce Heidon Institute Mission Control. *Phed checked his DB. Nineteen minutes until their scheduled departure. He knew PHI Mission Control would be waiting for his first voice message as they neared the exit of the mountain.* (10)

Planet Authair. The planet Authair (pronounced *out there*) is the home of characters classified as The Good and The Bad on The Izzy Story website. Authair resides on the outer rim of the Milky Way Galaxy and revolves in orbit between two stars of a three-star system. On Planet Authair there is no night. The suns always shine, though clouds and rain do interfere. The Equapyon Mountain Range circles the entire planet at its equator, separating the Olympyon hemisphere—which faces its sun, Olym—from the Valympyon hemisphere—which faces its sun, Valym.

Each pole of Authair points directly to one of the two nearest suns, Olym and Valym. Two cultures evolved that hold their respective suns in reverence. Thus, Authairians living on the hemisphere facing Olym call themselves Olympyons, and those living on the hemisphere facing Valym call themselves Valympyons.

The poles of Authair always face one of the two suns. It is never night on the planet, so Authairians never experience planetary darkness. They are naturally afraid of the dark. If an Authairian resides on one of the poles, the nearest sun never appears to move. Near the equator, an Authairian observes the sun travel in a small circular path each day but still never experiences darkness.

Ponce wound his way to Dorf's WRAP, thankful that PHI had been the first facility on Planet Authair with such a sterilization system installed at the entrance to each lab. (2)

Plexi. An extremely strong polymeric construction material used on Authair. *The furry lizard creature stretched one arm out, splaying his hand on the transparent plexi while the other clung to a branch. (26)*

PNNC. Initialism for the Pomegranate Neural Network Computer invented by Cimi Nuja. *My assistant, Clyde, will put IDs into your laboratory directory, then I'll randomize them, and only the PNNC security infrastructure will have the capability of verifying them. (3)*

Polyfiber. A resilient fabric of which clothing is made *The insignia on her sleek polyfiber bodysuit advertised her position of authority. (28)*

Ponce Heidon Institute. Also known as the PHI, this genetic research institution on Planet Authair was created by Ponce Heidon through the request of the Olympyon Center for Disease with assistance from the Olympyon Government. Its purpose is to develop cures for all viruses threatening the existence of Authairians. *Geneticists at the Ponce Heidon*

Institute have isolated an unknown virus from the victims' blood. No source has been established for this deadly strain. (1)

PPP. Initials of Pink Peace Power, an Authairian nongovernmental organization that exposes global environmental problems. *Gore thought: Heidon and his researchers will, at the least, have their curiosity aroused by the appearance of the PPP at the site of their mothballed Graviton-1. The foolish Olympions might even welcome their presence. (46)*

Proxi. The third and most distant of Planet Authair's suns. *Although Authairians hadn't known of any heavenly bodies beyond their suns—Olym, Valym, and distant Proxi—Kurl's great-uncle J. K. Elbbuh proved that beyond Authair's sunspheres waited a universe filled with other worlds. (3)*

Proxi-cycle. The time it takes Authair to revolve in its orbit from one close approach to Proxi to the next. That cycle takes approximately twelve Earth years. *As there were only two who briefly survived, my job was as boring as waiting for the next proxi-cycle. (14)*

Rabbityle. A furry, ball-shaped animal indigenous to both hemispheres of Planet Authair. It fits snugly inside the hand of an adult raptan but doesn't like being there unless it receives soft scratches inside its thick fur. A rabbityle has no need for arms; it gives hugs with its long, furry ears. It keeps a lizard-like tail coiled up inside a rump-pouch exposing only the puffball of fur on its tip. If a predator appears, a rabbityle makes like a spinning ball; its tail uncoils and slings through the air, its ears stiffen into wings, and it flies to safety.

Although shaped like a ball of fur, a rabbityle doesn't wobble when it's sitting. Two thin legs folded underneath its body rest on sturdy four-toed feet. If a rabbityle likes you, it'll pop up to standing by bending its legs backward like a heron and follow you around until you feed it veggies. If it really likes you, it'll wrap its tail around your wrist or ankle and tap,

tap, tap its puffball. Rabbityles come in shades of brown, white, black, blue, or a mottling of any combination. *Don't know, but she's been having a run on rabbityles—deliveries every other work-cycle. Guess she's testing a new vaccine. You'd think she'd involve me in the study...probably doesn't want my opinion on using live animals for test subjects.*

(1)

Ragnarock. A spaceship built by the Valympyons using blueprints stolen from *Graviton-1*. Its interior was customized for the needs of Mumba's crew. *How do you think we built Ragnarock? You think a bunch of pamdy-damdy genetic researchers know how to pilot a spaceship? Not on your life, Andriol.* (45)

Ragnon's Peak. The highest point of the Equapyon Mountain Range in the Valympyon hemisphere of Authair. An earthquake occurred at its base, and subsequently, Mumba Zola had *Ragnarock* built in the pit left by the earthquake.

Ralkid. Trees whose cascading branches, in season, burst forth with daisy-like flowers. Before each Authairian sleep-cycle, the vine-like branches entangle, creating a hard shell. This provides protection from weather and beasts for anyone who chooses to rest under the tree's canopy. Ralkids are found primarily in the Valympyon hemisphere of Planet Authair. *But here I am, a student of all things green and growing, and this is probably my last opportunity, ever, to see ralkid blossoms open and watch the white blooms become a blizzard of crimson-centered petals.* (8)

Raptan. Authairians call themselves raptans, as Earthlings call themselves humans. The word has its basis in evolution. Millions of years ago, Authairians evolved from raptors such as the dromaeosaur. The following are examples of how forms of the word *raptan* are used: Ponce Heidon seeks to find a cure for the virus for the good of *raptanity*. Cimi Nuja is

known to her fellow Authairians as a *raptanitarian* for her charitable service to education. The Ponce Heidon Institute was established to develop cures for diseases for the benefit of *raptankind*. “*This small but mighty raptan*”—*she emphasized the word raptan*— “*will be able to flatten his body and slither near the bott undetected. You and I will distract the bott while Izzy jumps to its shoulder and replaces the chyp.*” (49)

Ryverak. A water vessel similar to a kayak with. *Fifty paces more and she'd reach the river's bank with the ryverak moored at the water's edge.* (8)

Safety shell. The device attached to each seat on *Graviton-I* that secures the occupant in a safe position during liftoff and landing, through portals between normal matter and the dark energy field, and in other potentially hazardous travel conditions. *Making sure she'd properly locked her safety shell, Phed took his seat behind the control deck. He closed the transparent hood, fastening out echoes, water, heat, and briny air, and then performed a system check.* (10)

Seawalker. A hardy plant that grows on Planet Authair in salty warm water. Its appearance is similar to the red mangrove that grows in tropical climates on Earth. The walker part of the name comes from the way the roots appear to be walking. *She peered across the stream, which now seemed more like a river, toward her assumed destination—a seawalker grove. From this vantage point, Chico saw no entrance. The haphazardly growing branches made a lush wall of foliage.* (8)

Silishone. A polymeric construction material used on Authair. *Phed's thin body slid down the silishone-surfaced table, and Doc bounced off the cushioned wall, landing on the floor with a thud.* (35)

Sissca. Nickname for the Stay in Shape Sky Cruiser, a small aerial vehicle used for short commutes on Authair. It's powered by the passenger peddling. *Though he preferred jogging, many colleagues eager to exercise on their daily commute used Stay in Shape Sky Cruisers; nearly all of them also abbreviated the convenient vehicle's cumbersome brand name to sissca.* (3)

Sisscuber. A sissca with a pilot. The passenger may choose whether or not to peddle. *Her sisscuber pilot's wait should be short.* (20)

Sleep-cycle. The period of time designated by Authairians for rest. Planet Because Authair has perpetual daylight, Authairian eyelids have adapted to blocking out high levels of illumination. *His once loose pants and shirt had been plastered against the yellow resin over an entire wake- and sleep-cycle.* (2)

Stunfire. A weapon that immobilizes the victim. Used for protection by The Good and The Bad on Planet Authair. Chico Quwattle was cautioned on the use of a stunfire she'd been given for protection: *The stunfire can incapacitate a victim up to forty paces, so keep a distance from your enemy. At close range, some waves may deflect and hit unintended targets.* (7)

Swiggle. An Authairian liquid measure equivalent to 37 cm³ or 2.50 US tablespoons or 2.08 UK tablespoons. *Snickering, Gnarly sweetened his hot brew and took a swiggle.* (1)

The Bad. Except for Jeeves, those listed as The Bad deserve that designation. Jeeves finds himself a captive of Mumba Zola and so must do the bidding of the evil dictator. Others included in The Bad are Ursula von Menglebort, General Gore Andriol, and Leachim Ztulk (another innocent who must live under the horrific demands of his uncle Mumba).

Harimata is a female spy hired by Gore Andriol and certainly deserves her place among The Bad in CREATION.

The Earthlings. These characters live on Planet Earth and have adventures with Authairians.

The Earthlings' adventures with Authairians begin in-IZ~THE IZZY STORY:

ENCOUNTERS, and they will find their way into later episodes of IZ—THE SAGA.

The Good. Ponce Heidon, Dorf Tzeus, Izzy Tzeus, Cimi Nuja, Kurl Tszargon, Robar Gimmel, and Phed Ilkjdkld are The Good. They are native to the Olympyon hemisphere of Planet Authair and are being pursued by Mumba Zola, dictator of the Valympyon hemisphere. Chico Quwattle is an innocent Valympyon who is implicated in the bombing of the Valympyon state office complex and has escaped to Olympya.

Time on Planet Authair. Authair revolves around the center of gravity between its two nearest suns, Olym and Valym. The measure of time for one revolution is determined by the annual approach to the third sun, Proxi, of the three-star system. It too revolves around the other two suns but has an extremely long period of revolution. To determine the length of an Authairian year, the Authairians mark the year's beginning when Planet Authair is at its closest to Proxi.

Authair's orbit between the two suns is like a Ferris wheel. Authair is not circling any planet. It circles the center of gravity of the two suns and that keeps Authair stable in its orbit. Each time Authair is at the top of the imaginary Ferris-wheel, that is the closest approach to Proxi and that takes the equivalent of twelve Earth years or one Proxi-cycle. The closest approach of Planet Authair to Proxi has a biological significance for life on Authair like the biological significance that the lunar cycle has on Earth.

Authair rotates on an axis that is parallel to its axis of rotation around the center of gravity between its two suns. The direction of rotation is the same as that of its revolution.

On Authair, when an Olympyon sees Proxi rise above the horizon, a Valympyon will see Proxi set below the horizon. All this time, the suns Olym and Valym are shining. When an Authairian sees Proxi rise two times, that is equivalent to one of their days, equaling one full wake- and sleep-cycle.

Tuna-broccoli treats. Izzy Tzeus' favorite food. Chico Quwattle created the recipe that includes tuna fish, broccoli, gnarlythorn nectar, and other ingredients to tempt Izzy's taste buds. *Izzy suddenly balanced on his toes, twirled around, and burst into a sing-songy path. "Tuna-broccoli treats, nutritious, delicious, crispy sweets. Izzy loves tuna-broccoli treats."* (31)

TX. A health drink made from pulverized vegetables. *He took the last chug of TX, a potent vegetable cocktail, and picked up a firm stalk of apium.* (1)

Valym. Authair's northern sun. The people on Planet Authair who live under Valym's sun rays are called Valympyons. Valym's rays shine over the Valympyon hemisphere through work-cycle and sleep-cycle on Planet Authair. *Shoulder to shoulder, 140 skilled marksmen stood in rows of twenty under Valym's rays.* (48)

Valympyon. A Valympyon is a citizen of the hemisphere on Planet Authair that faces the sun Valym. *Speaking to other raptans was not something Ursula enjoyed, so it seldom happened. When it did, however, she spoke about herself in the third person, elevating her persona—she imagined—to the prominence deserving of Valympyon's preeminent virologist.* (1)

VSR. Virtual Surveillance Reality is Mumba Zola's system that virtually embeds the observer into live action of a chosen geographical location. It allows the operator to feel temperature, experience smells, and hear environmental sounds as if he or she were there. *My Excellency will now demonstrate Valympyon Surveillance Reality. You'll now experience VSR's one-of-a-kind advanced surveillance technology. (28)*

Wake-cycle. The time on Authair when Authairians are usually not sleeping. *Don't know why I bothered to say good wake-cycle to her. She clicked by me in those stilettos like I didn't exist. (1)*

WRAP. Acronym for Wearable Resin Applied Protection, a device that sprays a protective covering, which is also referred to as a wrap, over all adult-size raptans entering any laboratory at PHI. *You'll fit through the small equipment door and won't need a wrap. Chief—er—I mean, Daddy Tzeus has authorized access for you, Izzy. (30)*

Wraptrap. Dorf Tzeus's nickname for the device that sprays a protective covering over all raptans entering any laboratory at PHI. *At least now Phed could sleep between feedings and record-keeping without coming and going through the wraptrap. (21)*

Selected Bibliography

These works informed the world of Authair, embellished our characters, and provided a scientific basis for much of the technology used in the story. They in no way compose a complete list of research, nor do they include our interactions with strangers, friends, and family that complemented the literature.

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