

PROBE

178



PROBE 178

December 2018

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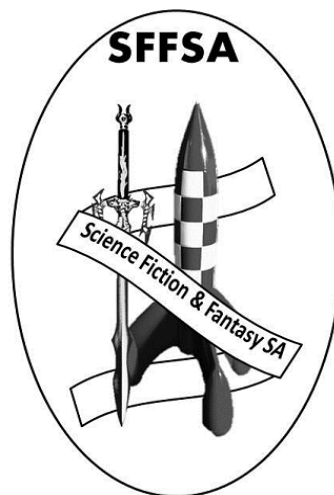
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Editorial

Gail

First of all I need to apologise to Odelle Coetzee, who story, "The Cloaker" won 2nd place in the 2017 Nova Short Story competition. I somehow managed to print the incorrect story under her name in issue 176. I have no idea how I did this and it should not have escaped my notice. I am sorry for this but I have printed it correctly in this issue.



We hear lots of stories of global warming and to be honest, I am not entirely convinced but I have to admit

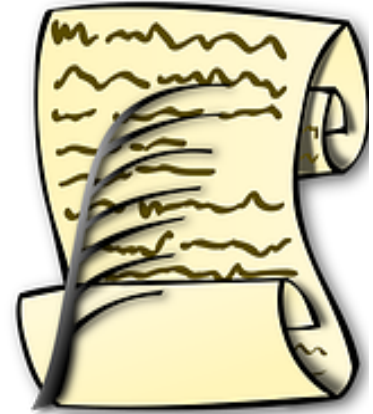
I have felt very warm this last couple of weeks. This afternoon on my way home the temperature in my car went up to 36 Degrees Celsius. In the dry Highveld air that feels very warm, and made my thoughts turn to desert planets like Arrakis!

We had a very good end of year function and our usual speaker Digby Ricci entertained us with a talk that compared the old movie "Forbidden Planet" with Shakespeare's play "The Tempest". It has been a long time since I have read the play or seen the movie but Digby soon brought to our attention the similarities and some differences between the two. Digby told us how MGM had decided to make an upmarket production of the story of how Space men travel to a planet ruled by expatriate Pidgeon who has built a kingdom with his daughter and obedient robot Robby. (Ariel, the spirit in the play). The good doctor is plagued by his mad quest for knowledge through his "brain booster" machine, and by Freudian "monsters from the id" as his daughter discovers other men; although Digby was not very complementary about Leslie Nielsen. We really look forward to these annual forays into the world of SF, made so thought provoking by a really erudite speaker. Only about seven months to go until our club turns 50. Please don't forget to share with us your thoughts of your membership with us.

Chairman's Note

Andrew Jamieson

I have had cats for the past 10 years now (dogs are nice and don't mind being around them, but I'm very much a cat person). I am on my second pair of cats, going from two male cats that passed away due to kidney problems, now with two young female cats. Anyway, for the first time ever, I managed to partially drive on to my one cat and broke her back leg. You think that cats would understand when you are parking your car that they should move... until the day they don't! Anyway, she is fine, but currently in strict quarantine to ensure her leg heals properly (nearly there).



However, I am pretty sure that by now you have all heard or seen something about robotic pets. AIBO (for the English an acronym of Artificial Intelligence Robot, but also a Japanese word for partner) is considered the first robotic pet. I still remember this guy, and cannot believe it actually came out in 1999, almost 20 years ago! It has since been discontinued, but there are a lot more of this sort out there nowadays, however, looking at them I cannot but think they are simply cheap imitations. An AIBO was a very expensive, quite sophisticated machine, the new ones don't really seem to compare.

Anyway, instead of looking at the cheaper more mass market robotic pets that are coming out (I must admit, I really would have thought that by now they would have advanced these things a lot more, but apparently appealing to people who have less money is more important), what if robot pets actually followed what we see movies. What if a robot pet could actually perform a lot of the same functions as a real life pet?

One thing I find odd is just how many robotic dogs there, cats are there, but not nearly to the same extent as dogs (we love them both, so why not have both?) but I guess it is far easier to mimic a loving, faithful dog, than an opinionated, do what it wants cat... hehe. So what if your dog would greet you with tail wagging, let you pet it, go fetch the ball you just threw, etc. Then, since it is a robot, surely you could program it to do more? How about fetching anything you want from anywhere in the house (and no drool to worry about it when it arrives). It would make one awesome guard dog because it could have the same heightened senses as a normal dog (sight and sound), but could not be poisoned by would be robbers, could call the police if something strange is happening, and if all else fails, perhaps even electrocute the thieves long enough for the cops to come fetch them. If they were advanced enough they could even be used in the field to chase down criminals, or even be used to help rescue people in the middle of nowhere as they could run much faster than humans and not tire.

Cats, or perhaps robotic lizards and rodents could be useful as well. Just about everyone ignores cats, so they could be around everywhere, eavesdropping on all conversations making them great for spying. Lizards and rodents are smaller and therefore could do much the same but now able to enter just about any building.

There would also be no need to pick up any... business that the dog or cat left in the garden, no need to worry about making sure enough water and food is around. You only need a wall socket to ensure the battery is fully charged. No worries about them getting sick, about accidentally breaking a leg, they could potentially last much longer than 10 years, and presumably if the AI is sufficiently advanced, they could grow and show affection to the owner for many, many years.

There are an estimated 900 million dogs in the world, and between 200 - 600 million cats, so the real life ones are not going anywhere soon. However not everyone can keep a dog, some apartments are simply too small, you worry about cats if you live 10 or more stories in an apartment building, etc. So perhaps a robotic pet is not such a bad idea, especially if you are lonely, or not a big animal fan but security conscious, or simply like having pets, but circumstances mean you cannot have a real one.

I love my small, furry creatures and have none of the above worries so I won't be replacing them any time soon with a robotic one, but perhaps things may change in the future, or they already are and robotic pets may become more mainstream sooner than you think (the new, updated AIBO start selling in January this year).
Cheers

Andrew

50 YEARS OF SOUTH AFRICAN SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

SFFSA TURNS 50 IN JUNE 2019 AND PROBE ISSUE 180 WILL CELEBRATE THIS MILESTONE.

HELP US TO MAKE 180 A VERY DIFFERENT ISSUE. I HAVE ALREADY STARTED AND WILL CONTINUE TO REACH OUT TO INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS AND FRIENDS OF SFFSA TO ASK FOR THEIR RECOLLECTIONS OF THE CLUB. IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE A LONG MISSIVE BUT I WOULD LIKE TO KNOW HOW THE MEETINGS, THE SHORT STORY COMPETITIONS, THE CONVENTIONS AND THE COMPANIONSHIP OF FELLOWS SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY FANS HAS IMPACTED YOUR LIVES. WHETHER YOU ARE A LONG TERM MEMBER OR SOMEONE VERY NEW WE WOULD STILL LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU.

YOU CAN CONTACT ME DIRECTLY ON [GAILJAMIESON@GMAIL.COM](mailto:gailjamieson@gmail.com)

Nova 2017 Editor's Choice

Anthony Louis Von Zeil

MECH FOR LIFE

Evr sins longevity became comonplase we hav had to endure previous jenerashns poking their noses into our lives. No, don't get me rong. I love my revived great grandfather; a dignified, intellijnt old geezer – somtimes. Al haunch, paunch and jowl, as he woud deskribe himself, despite the many organ replasements he had undergone befor he took the kryojenik treatment that ofered life after death ovr a sentury and a half ago.

He doesnt look too bad, is spry and enerjetik, but has al the iritating traits of a sekond childhood. No doubt the replased nuts, the first he opted for after his re-awakening, trigered this teenaje behaviour. But, boy is he on a learning kurv wile stil sadld with ansient memory. The proses of rejuvenashn was nevr tuned for familiarising the klient with a lost history of mankind wile slumbering, or 'dead to the world in old parlans'. That need has only now arisen and the Barangwanath Deep-Koma research team is already klose to solving the problem.

I, the obvious chois bekaus I too am on the learning kurv, have been akorded the family responsibility to look after his interests and get him jently adjusted to a life so diferent from that wich he new. Adapting to a world that has evolved konsiderably sins his long sleep wil take time.

Wat is diskonserting is that he is wan of the initial batch of kryojeniks – a prosedure so antikwated now – resently brot back to life as per kontrakt. To refresh yor mind, that was the freez treatment ofered to those on the way out befor the Methuselah Projekt gaind akseptans. So he has been kold-kofinated for wel-nigh on wan hundred and fifty years. He is luky to hav survived the atomik wars of 2050, safe in a sekure krypt, but snoozing undisturbed and ignorant of human history and skipping a vital period of konsiderable chanj. Bekauss the history of our kind was a kontinuum we no a lot about the past and revived kryojeniks, but they no damn-al about our way of life now and the paradime shift humanity had undergone.

Wat I kanot stand is the kompetitivnes with wich I hav to put up. He is like a shriveled wet fly and in the way all the time trying to make like a Rip van Winkel of yor and konsiderably mor imature than my advansd aje of seventeen. He is the new *baby* in the home, a rarity these days. The kurent Oxford diktionary tends to either omit the term as obsolete or to re-introduse it for revived kryojenik oldies. I bet the old man wil hav troubl reading my new-spel teksts and aksepting the chanjes now komonplase. Even I batl to keep pase with wat is in and wat is out. New-spel is stil in a state of

fluks and anything goes. We no ther is no return to the past despite skribbels by siens fikshn riters, but I leav these notes for my desendants ... just in kase.

He is wan of the first jenerashin to hav been granted an extenshn of life. The jury is stil out wether future lives wil match that of the mythikl Methuselah. The oldest of the previous pre-kryojenik jenerashn hardly survived past the sentury mark. Faselifts then had been komon for a long time and usualy resulted in tautening of fasial features. In rare kases earlier repeated eksperimentashn relokated hair folikls from the nether regions to the pashints chin and jenerated a welter of komplaints from the females and other interjenders. Now we simply regenerate cels and organs. In his day his hero was a Dr Cristiaan Barnard, who kanibalised the dead for an akseptabl heart to transplant. How disgustingly primitiv!

The prosedure is so antikwated now after introdukshn of the Holywood Kloning teknik. Fortunately, the Mafiosi ar stil stymied by a legal ethikl rekwirement for pashints to retain their orijinl DNA. A Klone Marker chip is stil an enforsd rekwirement, althou the ilegal minds test the resiliens of the law from time to time. And, of kors, down south we have for a long time not subskribed to Colonial legal rekwirements, espesialy from Norte-Amerika and post-Brexit Britain.

So the rekwest ... no the demand is ... to akompany me on a shoping trip to purchase my very first Mek. Hel no, this is a speshl okashin for any young adolesent, a rites of pasage thing for wan of my aje. But he is insistent and I kanot refuse sins he wil hopefully be funding my purchase and geting tips wen his time kums around. Being freez-dried has its kompensashns, if you had deprived yor imediate desendants of their inheritans and deposited it al into a Lazarus interest-bearing akount. Efektivly great grandpa is his own eir.

I suppose life hasnt chanjd that much. No dout he wil admire and desire the flashiest modl, and ignore kwality wen he gets the oportunity I hav today. Youths of today ar more diserning and wil try al on ofer before komiting themselves to a purchase. Trading in a modl is an ekspensiv busines and stiking with yor first chois is finansialy advisabl.

Great grandpa is verbose in relating insidents of his life and ofering tips as we kruise downtown in Joberg. "I remember the first Valiant that came out with sealed-in grease nipples in the nineteen-fifties. Sleazy salesman never told my father about this advanced feature of that model. Fleeced him, and no doubt other customers for quite a while, overcharging for a non-existent lubrication service. Salesmen never change. The accountant eventually refunded all the greasing charges, pleading ignorance and pretending that he was not informed by the manager or mechanic."

As we arive at the glittering, glas and krome showrooms of Viva-Sity Autos, the salesman, al teeth and grining from ear to ear, meets us halfway and aproaches with

mouth. Great grandad, of korsi, has something to say from his vast repertoire of experiences and pre-empted the meeting with "Mark my words, sonny, these salesmen all have jaws. Not above selling you their grandmothers. You are in the market for the best. Don't be persuaded by him. Take your time in choosing the right model. I'll keep your interests at heart, although not familiar with the modern models available. Check whether the second-hand models have had their odometers turned back or undisclosed crash wrinkles ironed out by a panel beater or whatever you call him these days. I am grateful for the opportunity to observe new sales techniques."

"Good morning, gentlemen. Welcome to Hapy Hary's Auto Parlour, Viva-Siiy's finest. Your satisfaction is my guarantee. May I be of assistance? You have come to the right dealer and will be astounded by and appreciate our vast range of models. You will find no better elsewhere in the metropole of Joburg, or for that matter in the entire Republic of Mandelania."

"You purchasing?" He says, turning to me.

"Yep! Seventeen and raring to go," I respond. "My auto license was issued by the Ministry yesterday. First time buyer!"

"Fine. All legit then." And then in a whisper out of the corner of Hapy Hary's mouth, a tactful comment, "Why are you dragging the old goat along?"

"Don't insult him. He is not that deaf. He's the money man, the one with the letus. Stashed it away for his progeny and never ate it," I respond, providing proof of the familial relationship and suggesting that great grandpa would also be interested in a deal, but later.

"OK, I'll keep my trap shut about the old goat story," was his reply, now aware that he would have a returning crypto-nick as probably next customer.

"Jimnixon, just check the names of these models on the list. Huge selection to blow your socks off and ... Gracious me, we didn't have such exotic names in my heyday," great grandpa chips in enthusiastically when confronted by a list of model names on a wall plaque.

He continues, dragging up reminiscences. "The first model I bought was an upright, black tin

lizzie, an Austin. We rechristened her Miss Conception for a very good reason. What an abortion! Rusted to hell. The road showed through the floor panels. Passengers were required to keep their feet well clear with heels on the window sills. The prop shaft was visible, threatening to disintegrate. Been around the block many, many times. A proper knock shop model. You could hear her tappets from afar. Sold her to an unsuspecting purchaser after I had stuffed her sump with bananas to dampen the

clatter. Check the second-hand models he shows you for evidence of bananas in the sump.”

“Good grief, great grandpa! That’s downrite fraud and kwite unethikl, unskrupulous and imoral. Bananas in the sump! That is a federal ofens these days.” Disonesty is an inherited streak from the past, I observ.

He goes on unkonsernd, iritatingly lokwashious. “Mind you I had an earlier two-wheeler, a Harley Davidson renamed Harley D’s Dotter. Thundered past everything else on the road and left any traffic cop standing, thinking he was reversing on a kid’s trike. The Harley’s vibrations gave you a permanent hardon ...”

“Gramps!” Embarased, I interjekt wans again. My opinion of an onorable sitizen of yor is being eroded.

“We raced and we diced to wine and dine, but we had proper wheels then, not super doper, magnetic cyber floats to glide along. These modern transporters seem to discourage any speeding. Probably fitted with governors, like some in my time. Our smart mechanics overrode those gimmicks.”

“I am so out of touch with the youngest generation,” he informs the salesman. And adresing me he kontinues, “Are you planning to dice too?”

“No grandpa ther ar ethikal issues involvd. Breaking the law is not smiled upon and diskreshion and privacy are respekted.” The old boy is in need of sykologikal kounseling to hav a measure of integrity instiled, I reason.

“I suppose hot rod, street racing no longer exists, considering all the legal control. Every model that I owned was souped up and personally fine-tuned for maximum performance. Cluster of clucking chickens, you lot,” ar his final words on the subjekt ... for som time.

Eventually, we ar eskorted into the showroom by the beaming salesman.

Great grandpas jaw drops as he enters and finaly observes the aktual modls ekshibited. He is konfronted with a startling aspect of the magnitude of the paradigm shift from his aje to the present.

“Real old timer, yor grandpa,” Hary, the salesman gets a word in at las. Forgeting an oath not to ridikule goats, he wispers to me. “Lecherous old goat drooling on the showroom karpet. Pardon him, but he never had such oportunities of chois in his heyday.”

Wans the salesman gets his foot in the door, and great grandpa has had his say, ther is no stoping him. “Remember each model kums with free servises and a five year

ritten guarantee. Should you not be entirely satisfied with your purchase we can strip it down and refurbish to your specifications for a small extra charge. Other than the regular and sports models we have a few convertibles in stock, if that is your fancy. The roars from their exhausts have persuaded many to switch allegiance from sedans. Gentlemen, we offer the largest range of autos and the finest service in the Joburg metropole. One stop shopping. No need to look further. Let me introduce you to the individual models."

"This model is our most robust, a FordCup. Just check those magnificent thwack-thumpers. Has a solid chassis and boot. The only way to match that is the classic Boobghatti, unfortunately out of stock at present owing to a run by clients from the Middle East, but reorderable. The color, classic racing green, would complement the envy of your rivals," He continues unabated extolling the virtues of an auto purchased for rarity by sheiks with seriously dwindling funds since the demand for liquid fuel had dried up.

"I like the upholstery, the color scheme and feel, but would prefer something less robust and more streamlined," I answer, still stroking the soft fur covering of the Ford, but dreaming of a ride on the exotic Italian model. Even my sponsor has his financial limitations.

"Step over here and check out the MissAnn, imported from the East. Observe her novel glove box, quite unique in the auto market. Runs like a kitten in action and not much different from our German model, the Volkswaglit ride alongside. Still utilizing a fan belt for cooling. That old strap still has its uses in this industry. A super model for the macho man."

"If you are into European continental models I can offer you a Mercidaisy or a BMWifi. Both fitted with fantastic 6-speed dual-clutch automatic transmissions to give you a smooth ride. Preferred models by most buyers, but pricey. They are reputed sure stayers for the long haul."

I am suitably impressed and overawed with the choices available despite having been primed by my peers. Grandpa is totally overwhelmed and lagging behind, his eyes out on stalks.

"And here is the standard and very popular North-American model, the Chevrolay. No other model can match her sound system. She, unfortunately squeals when the brakes are applied, but that doesn't necessarily deter buyers. Would you like to test drive some models?"

The offer to test drive couldn't have come sooner. Eager to compare the respective merits of the few already seen I welcome his offer and respond, "Yah! I want to validate a difficult choice, and probably check them all. For the moment, can I select three for a spin ... on the test track?"

“Sure! Be my gest. Self-drive is easy. Each model instruks usaj as you get on and plug in ... and in the languaj of yor chois. Buton kontrol at yor fingertips. Just divest yorself of yor everyday atire. Boots are not alowed on board.”

“I’ll join you Jimnix.” Great grandpa finally finds his vois again.

“No ... no, Grandad. Testing and final chois of an auto Mek-mate is mine and mine alone. You ar here for a trial run only to view. You wil hav yor day later.”

Grandad ponders the semantiks of languaj that had chanjd much ovr time. Lokal transport now is by hoverkar and shutler, and galaktik travl by mor sofistikated modes imminent.

The arkaik term, auto, is so obsolete ... out-dated; the kurent labl only refering to fleshed, Mekanikal auto-erotik robotik kompanions.

For grandad to eksperiens this sekond rite of passage Hapy Hary and I wil hav to get him to a heart rejenarashn klinik kwikly ... very kwikly.

Magazines Received

Stapledon Sphere (formerly the newsletter of the Middle Tennessee

Science Fiction Society [aka the Nashville SF club]

Reece Moorhead reecejbm@gmail.com

Issue #18 September 2018

Issue #19 October 2018

Issue #20 November 2018

Ansible David Langford

September 2018 374 <http://news.ansible.uk/a374.html>

October 2018 375 <http://news.ansible.uk/a375.html>

November 2018 376 <http://news.ansible.uk/a376.html>

Books Received

JonathanBall*Publishers*

Charlaine Harris An Easy Death Little Brown R330.00

Guillaume Delalande Assassin's Creed Infographics Octopus Publish Group
R295.00

Tamora Pierce Tempests and Slaughter HarperCollins UK R285.00

Deborah Harkness Time's Convert Headline UK R330.00

Bernard Cornwell War of the Wolf HarperCollins UK R305.00

Brandon Sanderson Edgedancer Orion UK R295.00

Richard Mclean smith Unexplained:Supernatural Stories for Uncertain Times
Hodder UK R380.00

Stephen Erikson Rejoice Orion UK R330.00

Stephen Hawking Brief Answers to the Big Questions John Murray R330.00

Marcus Sedgwick The Monsters We Deserve Head of Zeus (No price given)



An image from the movie
“Forbidden Planet” which was
the subject of our Annual end of
year Function, showing the robot
Robby and Ann Francis as the
Mad scientist's daughter, Alta.

Nova 2017 Finalist

NEVER TRUST AN ELF

SHARON ANGUS

The dungeons were dark, and cold, and smelt of rot and stagnant water. Rats scampered away from the flickering torchlight, their eyes glinting ruby-red. Tomas thought he could almost feel the despair that had collected in the stone corridors from the hundreds of prisoners that had been incarcerated here over the centuries.

He suppressed a shudder. He preferred not to think about this particular aspect of his rule as Overlord of the region, much less actually visit here, but circumstances had dictated this visit. He was sure it would be worth it, in the end. He looked sideways at the plump gaoler walking beside him, whistling and swinging his keys, and wondered how the man could stand working here. The place gave him the creeps. By the expressions on the faces of his two personal guards accompanying him, they felt the same.

The four men stopped before a metal door, inches thick and closed by three massive iron locks. The gaoler stopped whistling and fiddled with his keys, eventually producing the huge iron keys that matched the three locks.

But before he could open the door, Tomas held up a hand. "Wait," he said. "You say there's been no change in the week since she arrived?"

"Nothing at all, lord" the man replied in the thick accent of the southern swamps, touching his forehead respectfully. "Won't eat, won't drink, doesn't even use the pot. Wouldn't be surprised if she was dead."

Tomas bit his lip with irritation. It had taken years of planning and a lot of money to capture her, and he would be extremely annoyed if she died without giving him what he wanted. He gestured to the man to unlock the door. A mixture of nervousness and excitement roiled in his stomach. So long he had waited, and now he would finally have his prize!

The heavy door swung sullenly open, allowing a sliver of torchlight to fall across the floor of the cell beyond. It was tiny, barely big enough for someone to lie down, and no window broke the stone walls to let in light and air. Tomas thought vaguely that with the door shut it must be utterly dark in there, but his attention was focused on the single occupant of the cell. In the centre of the stone floor, hunched over and with knees drawn up, sat an elf.

Tomas studied her for a long minute, the sharp ears and lithe body, the hair fine and pale as thistledown. Her leaf-green clothing was torn and mud-stained, and her body

bore the wounds and bruises of a fight. Several of Tomas' best men had died at her hands, and in the end it had taken five men to subdue her and manacle her with the iron chains she still wore, to negate her sorcery. It had taken constant watching to prevent her suicide, but eventually they had brought her to the castle and now she sat in Tomas' dungeons. Unconsciously he licked his lips.

His guards shifted uneasily, hands at their swords, but the elf gave no sign that she even knew they were there. Tomas pushed the door open wider, so that more light entered the cell, and took a few cautious steps inside. He approached the elf gingerly, and stretched out a hand to touch that soft hair, then thought better of it and contented himself with speech. Even shackled, she gave off an aura of danger. He noticed there were no rats in the cell, although they ran freely in the rest of the dungeons. With the innate wisdom of their kind, they knew danger when they saw it.

"Well," he said, almost gently, "We meet again," but there was no reaction from the elf. He tried again, louder, and to his shock, the elf raised her head. Her face was still beautiful, even gaunt and drawn, the skin stretched tight over the delicate bones beneath. Her chin was pointed, and her cheekbones sharp as razors.

But it was her eyes that drew Tomas. Deep set and bruised as they were, still they were large and slanted, the pupils like a cat's and without whites - and green as forest leaves in spring. Incredibly alien - and hypnotically beautiful. He shook his head, to dispel any glamour she might be casting on him in spite of the iron shackles at her wrists and ankles.

The elf breathed softly, a sigh. "What is it you want, mortal?" she asked tiredly, her voice barely louder than a whisper, her accent sibilant so that Tomas had to concentrate to understand her.

"I suspect you already know what I want," Tomas answered. "I want the stones. Give me those and you shall go free."

There was a long pause, and the elf dropped her head back down onto her drawn-up knees. Tomas was about to give up and leave when she spoke again. "I am dying in here, mortal. If that is the ransom I must pay for my freedom, you shall have your stones. But you will not enjoy them."

Tomas didn't even hear her last words. He wanted to dance around the tiny cell, singing, but managed to suppress his excitement. He had not expected it to be so easy, had not expected her to give in so quickly. So much for the legendary strength of elves, he thought.

"What will you need?" he asked, keeping his voice steady with an effort.

"A fire," she answered shortly, and was silent again. Not the chatty type, Tomas thought dryly.

He went over to the guards hovering uneasily at the cell door, too scared to come into the room itself. "Fetch wood," he ordered. "Enough for a fire."

"But lord," one of them protested, "you know what they say – never trust an elf!"

Tomas glared at him. "Yes, I know!" he snapped. "Now go fetch wood!" hiding his own fear beneath arrogance. Reluctantly, the men went and Tomas waited impatiently for their return, hand on his sword hilt in case the elf tried something. After what seemed like hours, the men returned with armfuls of the required wood.

With the fire kindled in the centre of the stone floor, Tomas ordered his men to leave. The gaoler had long since decided he wanted no part of this madness, and had quietly vanished. Uncomfortably, uneasily, with many glances behind and mutterings, the guards left Tomas and the elf alone.

Tomas knelt on one side of the flickering fire, and looked expectantly at the elf seated across from him. She shook her head. "I cannot do this imprisoned in iron, mortal" she said. The manacles gleamed in the firelight, and the pale skin around them was red as a burn. Tomas was getting a little annoyed at her constant naming him as 'mortal', but it was a small irritation to endure for what he would get. Calmly he produced the key on a chain around his neck, and held it up. "How do I know you won't disappear the moment I release you?" he asked.

The elf shrugged. "How do I know you will give me my freedom when you have what you want?" She gave an ironic smile. "It seems we shall have to trust each other, mortal."

The guard's warning – never trust an elf – floated across Tomas' mind, but he ignored it and carefully handed over the precious key. With a small sigh, the elf unlocked the shackles and ripped them off. They left bloody patches of torn skin behind and Tomas winced, but she gave no sign of pain.

With the iron gone, Tomas shifted uneasily. He was now at her mercy, vulnerable to the powerful sorcery of her kind. She gave him that ironic smile again, as if she knew what he was thinking, and stretched out a slender hand over the fire. She whispered soft, sibilant words in a language Tomas had never heard before, and the fire glowed green, and yellow, and dark red. It contracted into itself, and flickered sullenly as if about to go out.

She continued to speak, her voice rising and falling almost as if she sang. It was hypnotic, and Tomas found himself staring dreamily into the fire. He shook his head irritably and glared at her, sure she was casting some glamour over him, but she

only smiled. “Three drops of blood,” she said, and indicated the fire. Tomas stared at her, surprised and uneasy. He had heard stories of the black sorcery that could be worked with blood.

“Come on, mortal!” she said impatiently. “The moment will pass. Blood is necessary to bind the stones to you.”

Understanding, now eager, Tomas drew his knife and drove it into his finger. He carefully let exactly three drops of blood fall into the fire. The flames blazed up and, startled, he jumped back.

The elf did not seem to notice. She whispered something further, and the smoke from the fire turned red, red as his blood. Tomas coughed as its bitter smell caught the back of his throat. The elf reached into the heart of the fire and brought out three small stones, red as rubies, red as blood, each one glowing as if a tiny fire were caught inside it. The main fire went out as though water were poured on it, leaving them in darkness.

The elf spoke in her language again and the fire relit itself, but now it was only an ordinary fire. It was all over. Tomas was a little disappointed. He had expected sorcery to be much fancier, full of arcane symbols and props. He was amazed, though, at her ability to reach into a blazing fire and apparently not get burnt.

The elf tossed the stones at Tomas’ feet and he stared at them, hardly believing that they were really there, that they actually existed and had been created for him. At last, at last!

The elf spoke. “The first stone will bring you power,” she said, as calmly as though discussing the weather. “The second will bring you wealth. And those two, of course, will bring you any woman you desire.”

She grinned suddenly, revealing pointed teeth. “But the third – the third stone will bring you death should you ever wear it.” She stood up. “And so you have what you wanted, mortal. May they bring you much joy!” And with a swirl of mists, a smell of green growing things and sounds of birdsong she was gone.

Tomas didn’t even notice her departure, or her somewhat strange farewell. He hadn’t even really noticed her warning about the third stone. All he could think of was the power, and wealth, and women that would be his. He had waited years for this moment!

Giggling with glee, he gathered the stones into his hands and tossed them into the air and caught them again like a child playing with a ball, laughing as he thought of his future and the world that lay before him for the taking. He had been courageous and cunning, and had bested the vaunted powerful elves, and now he would have all

that his greed could desire. Excitedly, he began to design in his mind the exquisite rings he would have the goldsmith create to provide the perfect settings for his precious prizes. Or maybe pendants would be better – less likely to be lost or stolen.

But as he placed the fiery, gleaming stones against his fingers, one by one, picturing the jewellery, the elf's third statement began to penetrate his mind. Death! Oh well, he simply wouldn't wear the third stone. Easy.

But a strange feeling crept into his bowels, turned them to water. He stared at the stones. Panic set in. He studied each stone, over and over again, trying desperately to distinguish some mark, some clue.

But the stones kept their secrets. They were absolutely flawless – and identical. He had no idea which was the third stone.

The elf's last words rang in his ears. He was sure he could hear her laughter.

From The Daily Galaxy – The Farthest Galaxy ever seen

The embryonic galaxy named SPT0615-JD existed when the universe was just 500 million years old. Though a few other primitive galaxies have been seen at this early epoch, they have essentially all looked like red dots, given their small size and tremendous distances.

An intensive survey deep into the universe by NASA's Hubble and Spitzer space telescopes has yielded the proverbial needle-in-a-haystack: the farthest galaxy yet seen in an image that has been stretched and amplified by a phenomenon called gravitational lensing.

"No other candidate galaxy has been found at such a great distance that also gives you the spatial information that this arc image does. By analysing the effects of gravitational lensing on the image of this galaxy, we can determine its actual size and shape," said the study's lead author, Brett Salmon of the Space Telescope Science Institute in Baltimore

SPT0615-JD was identified in Hubble's Reionization Lensing Cluster Survey (RELICS) and companion S-RELICS Spitzer program. RELICS observed 41 massive galaxy clusters for the first time in infrared with Hubble to search for such distant lensed galaxies. One of these clusters was SPT-CL J0615-5746, which Salmon analysed to make this discovery. Upon finding the lens-arc, Salmon thought, "Oh, wow! I think we're on to something!"

The galaxy is right at the limits of Hubble's detection capabilities, but just the beginning for the upcoming NASA James Webb Space Telescope's powerful capabilities, said Salmon. "This galaxy is an exciting target for science with the Webb telescope as it offers the unique opportunity for resolving stellar populations in the very early universe."

Nova 2017 Editor's Choice

Roger Layton

Rain Maker

The humming.

The humming.

The Rain Queen leads the clan from the village towards the forest. Walking single file, passing the dry fields, the Queen leading, the four headmen behind, and in descending order of importance, the clan families. The ceremonial clothes, in strong reds and blacks, are worn only for this purpose, with the adornments and regalia prepared during the year, ensuring perfection in the presentation, as a respect for mother nature, the African embodiment of Pachamama, and respect for the unending sequence of the ancestors, ever-present in the earth, and ready to be summoned in times of need.

As they exit the village limits they commence the humming, a hum which will continue until completion of the annual ritual. The humming synchronises with the rhythm of their slow steps, starting long before dawn under the clear, dry sky, towards the dog-star, pointing the way to the forest on this moonless night, to arrive before the first light of the day. The walk is long for the elders, and the younger boys are their packhorses.

Arriving at the forest, the first hint of the sun lightens the canopy. The winding snake of the humming clan take the hidden path to the principal tree, the spiritual centre of the forest, the largest and oldest of the trees, planted by ancestors in time forgotten. Approaching the tree, the tribe splits with the core of 108 members, 54 men and 54 women, creating a semicircle around the tree, facing the rising Sun, men on the right, women on the left. The humming changes as they sit waiting, with the remainder of the clan seated behind the core.

The sun rises.

The Queen and her four male headmen stand and approach the principal tree. The headmen make a small surgical incision into the tree, close to the previous year's cut, exposing the sap, the life-blood of the tree and of the forest. The humming rises as the Queen removes the pack of herbs from deep within her clothing, and place this into the brown, ornate bowl as used for generations of the rain queens of this clan. The chief headman uses clan's sacred Arkstone flint to create the spark, a small flicker enlivens the tinder, protected in the large hands of the headman, the tinder transferred into the bowl, igniting the sacred herbs.

The headman, ensuring that the fire is steady, and that the smoke is rising, holds the bowl ready for the Queen, and both stand before the flowing sap in the new incision. The Queen places the reed in her mouth and sucks up the smoke from the bowl, filling her lungs to capacity, holding in the smoke as the sweat builds up on her brow and as her cheeks redden. Pointing the end of the reed to the exposed sap, and placing her hands on either side of the cut, she forces out the smoke in a gush, allowing it to merge with the sap. The humming of the clan grows and reaches a crescendo, and dissipates as she steps back. She feels the response of the tree, a coordinated deep hum, an unsounding sound, as the tree wakes from the drought-induced hibernation, and as it commences its process.

She repeats this process three times, and each time her movements are reflected by the humming of the clan, all sitting perfectly upright, staring at the tree and at their Queen.

The Queen and the headmen return to their position in the inner circle, and with the rest of the core senior clan members they wait, and they wait. As the sun moves so moves the clan, always facing the sun, and without any break in the humming. They continue, as night becomes day, and as day becomes night, knowing with certainty of the outcome of this ritual, a knowledge beyond mere belief, beyond superstition, a knowledge of a natural law embedded into their culture, embedded into their Rain Queen.

After one full day and night, the buds appear on the seemingly-dead terminal twigs, and from these buds small flowers appear almost instantly, as if with an accelerated growth, and an orange spore is released by the wind, spreading over the forest. At the first sight of the orange spores the young boys start their drumming in time with the humming, and at the tips of the tree the growth rapidly accelerates, and this spreads to the other trees, and within another day all of the trees of the forest have been awakened, and are all releasing their orange spores.

The orange cloud subsides, and throughout the forest, in complete synchrony, a new growth appears as secondary buds appear, with a new flower and a blue spore, appearing simultaneously from all of the trees, the spore combining into a blue whirlwind, rising, rising to the heavens, driven by the movement of the trees.

The Rain Queen bows her head and closes her eyes.

* * *

Alama. I am tree. Alama. I am forest. Alama. I am Principal Tree. Alama. I am as old as the forest, and I my forest is a single, connected unit. We are one. Alama.

I feel the earth, my roots entangling their way down and down, finding renewal and refreshment. I feel the air, the wind, the breathing of our shared planet. I feel touch. To touch and to be touched, my senses awaken, and when touched by humans I feel

the spark of life which moves into my being. I feel the warm and the cold, and I react as needed, protecting my body. I feel the day and the night, and I feel the light from the sun which gives me life. I feel the wet and the dry, and it is now the dry season, and it is time for the rains.

For many seasons, the rain does not come in full, and my trees are suffering, and some are dying. The new trees cannot survive without water, and our seeds fail to germinate. We are losing our health as a forest, and losing our role in nature.

I can help. I can call the rains, but I cannot do this alone. I need help. And I know that the local humans can provide this help. We have done this for many years, for tree years, for more than 400 changes of the seasons.

I hear the humming of the clan from afar, and the ground bears the rhythms of the feet, many feet. I wait. I know what is coming.

The humming rises, and the shade of my branches is the place of attendance. I raise my lower branches to make space.

I feel the cut, not as a pain, but rather as a signal, my time to awake. I bleed my sap and ensure a good flow.

Alama. Alama.

I feel the smoke, ingesting this into my sap, which changes colours from white to green, and then to black, at it merges with the special smoke. The humans know what to do. Alama.

My body changes, and is repurposed. Within a few minutes I am stimulated for growth, as my terminal twigs are broken apart with the new growths pushing out. Special growths, for a single purpose, growths which do not appear in any other way. A secret door into my capabilities.

I hear the humming, which vibrates my body and accelerates the growth, like a massage over my whole being, trunk, branch, twig, and leaf. Humming at the perfect frequency, not too high, not too low, not too loud, not too soft.

My new buds push out, and open with the small flowers which hold the orange spores, immediately taken by the wind, showering these as an orange curtain over all of my trees. The older trees, the tallest in my forest, receive the orange cloud first, and these stimulate the same growth, and then pass this onto each and every tree in my forest. A cloud of orange, an impetus for growth, a wake-up call from our months of sleeping. The humming is coupled with the sounds of the drums, the final part of our wake-up call, and the drums accelerate our growth.

Within a short time, the forest is as one, all growing the new shoots, and the second phase begins, with new flowers and their blue spores, the spores of the rain.

The humming grows louder, and this further simulates the growth, and as the blue spores are released as the drums grow louder.

I send the message throughout the forest, to all my tress, for the fine changes in the movement of the branches and the leaves, creating a whirlwind which contains the blue spores and forces them up and up.

I have done my job.

* * *

The blue spores transform into a spiralling, rising cloud. The eyes of the humming clan turn skyward, seeing the change from blue to turquoise to grey, and then to white, as the cloud expands, pulling in air from around, spreading over the whole forest.

The whiteness of the cloud gathers mass, and turns to a light grey and then to a dark grey, blocking out the sun.

The drums are faster and louder, and the clan are on their feet, hands in the air, dancing to the rhythms, humming at their loudest, as it becomes darker by the minute.

The first drop of water falls onto the Principal Tree, a mark of thanks, and then a few more spots. Then a massive release, accompanied by a thunderclap, drenching the forest, and also drenching the clan, now dancing and ululating in shamanistic unified mind centred on the Queen who continues to sit, her mind completely focused, her strength fading as her concentration is no longer needed.

The rain spreads over the area, out and out, and small streams become rivers, water captured into the reservoirs prepared by the clan, ready for the next phase of the annual clan life.

* * *

The vid finishes. Prof Jonas Malumba stands. It is the end of his presentation to the annual Climate Conference in New Geneva.

“You have just seen the last vid that we managed to reconstruct from authentic sources, and have coupled this with the simulation of what we have discovered of the biological processes of this forest.”

“This forest is long gone, and the tree species is only available in our DNA archives and seed banks. The clan is gone, having been moved out of their area by mining activities in 2045. This last ritual appears to have been conducted in 2037, and was the only time that anyone was permitted to record this, by permission of the Rain Queen herself, knowing that this knowledge was under threat.”

“It is now, in 2237, exactly 200 years, since that recording, and our approach to simulating the rain through scientific means has failed over and over during this period. We cannot play God, we cannot create the rain, no matter how we try, and yet this Rain Queen did succeed, over and over again, in a small village in rural South Africa. We are already at the tipping point in the planet, the rains are unpredictable and this threatens our crops and our primary food sources. With so much of the planet now under urban and industrial control, the remaining farming areas must be protected, and must be given water. We are now at the limit of our ability to produce food, and there is the possibility of the total loss of our vegetation.”

“This vid shows the only truly case in recorded history of successful, repeatable, rain-making, and since discovering this vid some 50 years ago we have identified all of the parts, and all of the processes, and how they seem to fit together. However, no matter how much we have tried to replicate this process, we have failed.”

“With the loss of the clan, and the lack of records, we could not do much more than experimentation. The researchers at the time failed to identify and record many elements of this secret knowledge, and it is my argument that it was the secrecy of the clan knowledge, coupled with our ethical respect for this secrecy, which was the seed of the loss of this knowledge. No records were kept of the combination of herbs which was used by the Rain Queen, and through extensive chemical analysis we have not managed to stimulate the trees to open up these spores, as seen in this vid. This was a truly symbiotic relationship between man and nature, which we have subsequently destroyed over the past 200 years, and perhaps our only success over this long period has been our effectiveness in inducing, largely through inaction, the loss of this knowledge, rather than in protecting it.”

“We need to change our approach to ethics, given that much of this traditional knowledge is now gone, and there are few active participants anywhere on the planet, this knowledge is now confined to archives and to museums, and to a few expert historians specialising in that period. The records of this knowledge were insufficient to reproduce this effect, since all prior research considered this tradition as merely a curiosity in comparison with the apparent wealth of modern science. However, it is clear that this traditional knowledge was vastly superior in many respects.”

“I am sorry to report that this valuable knowledge is now lost to humanity, and we are all to blame for not protecting this when we had the opportunity. This same message has been given in conferences going back for the past 250 years, as recorded in the academic discourse, but these have never stimulated a call to action, since our second failure was a focus on the production of new knowledge, more and more PhDs, rather than the utilisation of what we have found.”

“We are now closing this project, and confining this to the historical archive, so that perhaps some future generation may find these archives, and from this discover how man and nature can work hand in hand.”

“I bid you all well, and I thank-you for your interest and support over too many years. Good-bye.”

* * *

The Rain Queen is exhausted, the intensity of this long ritual taking a toll on her aged body. She is now 89 years old and should rightly have handed over this responsibility to her eldest daughter Khethiwe—the chosen one—but the lure of the city was larger than the social rituals of the ancestors, and Khethiwe now is a retired partner of a major law firm, and her own daughters do not ever visit the clan, seeing this as a relic of the past, a historical curiosity, with all ancestral links to their past now gone as they have immersed themselves into the global culture.

Khethiwe makes the annual pilgrimage back to the village for the ritual, and sits beside her mother throughout, her guilt exposed every year. She does not, and cannot, participate, having never received the knowledge to continue the traditional line, through the years of apprenticeship required to accede to this title.

The Rain Queen relaxes and reflects on the activities of the past few days. Does this matter? In the modern world of science surely there are better ways to bring on the rain. We must move on as a clan, we must not be held back in the past. She aches inside as she reflects on the loss of this knowledge, knowing that she is the last of the line of Rain-Makers in this clan, and that no other village in this region has continued this ritual for the same reasons. She considers that she may even be the last of the queens in all the country, all the continent, and perhaps all the world. But if this was so important surely this would be collected. This is the first time she has allowed the film-makers to accompany the clan throughout this ritual, but she is not prepared to part with the knowledge, she wants to retain this knowledge in the clan, to be their contribution to the world.

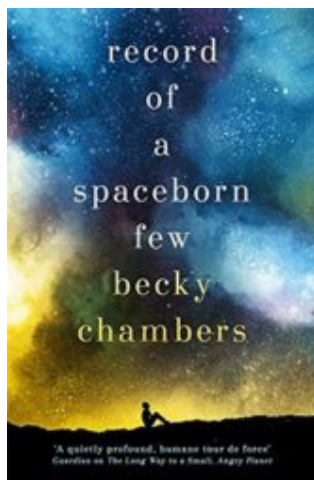
For this annual ritual she has allowed an almost complete recording, from start to end, but she holds back on a few key elements, elements which only she knows, out of respect for her ancestors: her mother, grandmother, and all of the others in her long line.

She smiles and turns to her daughter, her eyes clouded with tears, as she bows her head, closes her eyes, and passes away.

Book Reviews Ian and Gail Jamieson

Becky Chambers.

Record of a Spaceborn Few.



Long after the last humans left earth on a generation ship, humanity has been accepted into the Galactice community and been and many have chose to return to planetary living offered by the Alien community.

But this novel is the story of a few people who have made the decision to remain on the ship and live their lives there. It is the story of what happens to Tessa, Kip and Sawyer and Eyas.

Tessa chose to stay home when her brother Ashby

left for the stars, but has to question that decision when her position in the Fleet is threatened. Should she go or stay and how will her decision affect her family.

Kip, a reluctant young apprentice, itches for change but doesn't know where to find it. We begin his story when he is still a child and go through the agonising decisions he has to make.

Sawyer, a lost and lonely newcomer, is just looking for a place to belong. He is somewhat different as he has come to live on the ship while most people are considering if they should leave. His story is a tragedy.

Eyas is a caretaker, a different name for one who takes care of the dead and returns their bodies to communal use. She sees the beauty of her chosen profession but not all others do.

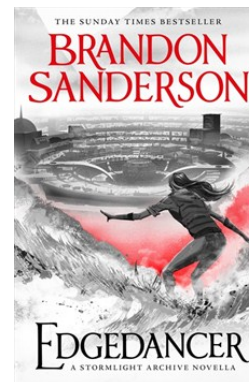
In the background is the question of what is the use of a generation ship that has reached its destination successfully.

This is book three in the Wayfarer series and is really a story about people and their good and bad times and is in my opinion, really more soap opera than space opera. It's well written and entertaining but not really science fiction. It could take place in any community which has an option to remain where they are or move on.

Gail

Brandon Sanderson. Edgedancer

This novella was previously published as part of “Arcanum Unbounded” and now has been published as a separate hardcover selling at R295.00. Besides the fact that it is an entertaining look at a young Knight Radiant who believed that she would not grow any older, it seems to me to be a little on the cheeky side to expect us to buy a story which has already been offered as part of another collection.



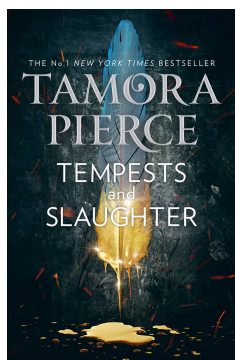
Having inadvertently helped to choose the new Azish Emperor and gaining a place in his entourage, she soon finds that life at court is not for her and she sets out with the spren, Wyndle to go to a place called Yeddaw to try to track down Darkness who is hunting down people like her who are or will develop into Knights Radiant. She is barely adolescent and single minded. She calls her abilities “Awesomeness” She needs to eat to remain awesome and one of her aims is to steal a meal from Darkness. But she is also fulfilling a far more important role and that is to help those who are unable to help themselves.

And she is forced to come to the conclusion that she has to grow up and take her place in the world of “The Starlight Archive”

I enjoyed this filling out of one of the characters from “Words of Radiance”.

Gail

Tamora Pierce. Tempests and Slaughter. The Numair Chronicles #1



This is a prequel to Tamora Pierce’s Numair Chronicles, novels, which I have not read.

It reads a bit like a Harry Potter novel and tells the story of Arram Draper, a young prince, Orzone and their female friend Varice who are students at a school of Magic. Arram is the youngest in his classes and has very powerful magical abilities, Orzone, (the “spare” prince, who it seems to me, will

eventually end up on the Throne, and Varice who has unexpected abilities in making potions.

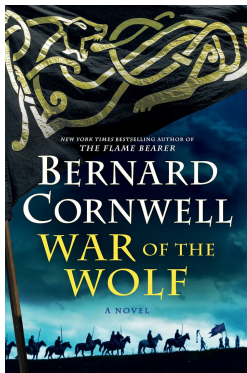
I think that these novels are aimed at young adult readership but I found the novel to have strong opinions on topics such as slavery, murder and lots of magic.

We follow the three friends through 4 years of studies at the Imperial University of Carthak, and although there is not much detail in what the studies actually are we see that Arram's, at times dangerous abilities, are slowly brought under his control and the blurb on the back of the book tells us that Arram will become Numair Salamalin, Pierce's mightiest mage.

Entertaining and if I come across the following novels I will read them.

Gail

Bernard Cornwell. War of the Wolf



Uhtrea of Bebbangburg has finally won back his ancestral home , but is discovering that to keep it will be difficult. He is beset on all sides by both enemies and friends. He is a Saxon Lord, and is a Pagan, and yet half of his men are Christians. The country is at war with itself, with Edward trying to seize control of a large part of it and become King. In Wessex, rival factions battle to see who will be their own next king. In the west the invading

Norseman continue their incursions in their hunger for arable land. And the Scots still come raiding whenever they have the chance.

Uhtrea is an old man for his time. He is over sixty but is still a fearsome warrior. He has his own code of conduct, which allows no abuse of women, very unusual for his time. One of his main enemies is Sköll, another fearsome warrior, but a brutal and savage man. Sköll kills Uhtrea's daughter and Uhtrea swears he will take revenge.

Although there are one or two mentions of magic, the novel is classed as historical fiction, so I suppose it could fall under the genre of "Alternate History".

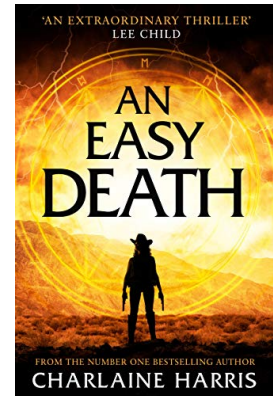
This is very well written and entertaining and if you like graphic violence you will enjoy this.

4/5 Ian

Charlaine Harris. An Easy Death

The blurb on the back of this novel states that it has a main character that you'll love. Well I suppose that someone out there might love a young female psychotic gunslinger who has no qualms about killing various characters. I don't.

Set in the near future in a fractured United States Lisbeth Rose, aka Gunnie Rose, is hired to assist a pair of Russian Wizards. Magic is alive and well and all-round the planet. The Russians are seeking one man whose blood can save their Tzar, but they are getting pretty desperate.



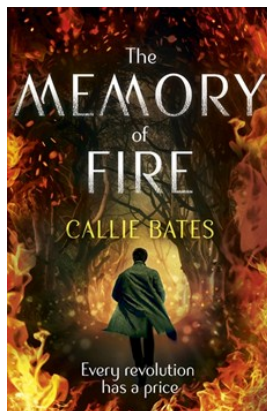
Together the three of them set off from Texoma to find the blood donor so desperately needed. But someone doesn't want them to succeed and they are constantly set upon by various enemies, determined to stop them in their search. Luckily they don't all come at once and Gunnie outshoots and outfoxes all, leaving a trail of dead bodies in her wake.

It certainly makes a change to have a young female killer as the hero, and as the author is well versed in writing it makes a reasonably entertaining novel.

3/5

Ian

Callie Bates. The Memory of Fire



This is the second book in a series and follows "The Waking Land", which I have not read.

This story is told by the hero of the first book, Jahan Korakides, who saved the life of his prince in battle, and who has moved to the kingdom of Eren, to hide his magical abilities. Mages, when found, are routinely tortured and then put to death. Jahan is from the country of Paladis, which is now threatening war with

Eren. He returns to his own home as an Ambassador to Eren, and arranges a meeting with the emperor, which does not go well. All his own friends, and especially the prince, simply ignore him.

Jahan is not your typical hero, he has a lot of self doubts, is a coward, and spends a lot of time berating himself for leaving his brothers.

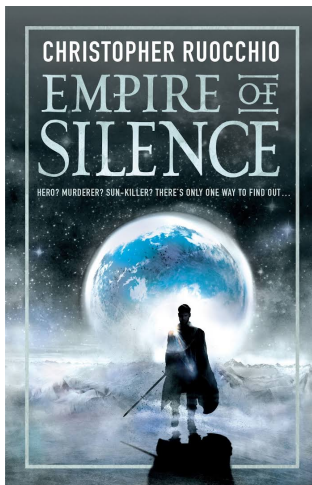
There is really nothing new in this book. I have just finished a very similar one by a different author and I found it becoming more and more tedious.

I believe that most feminine readers will enjoy it but I did not

1/5

Ian

Christopher Ruocchio. Empire of Silence



This is the first book in the “Suneater” series, and the authors’ debut novel.

It is told from the point of the main protagonist, Hadrian Marlowe, who destroyed an entire alien race by wiping out their sun and taking billions of lives. He is either a hero, or a monster, but someone who has saved the human race.

Although a large part of his training is in warrior skills, he

is far happier reading and learning languages. His father realises this and tries to send him off to join one of the galaxies most religious organisations, to become an insider with a major influence for his family. He manages to avoid this fate but ends up broke and on the streets of a backwater planet. He eventually manages to become a gladiator and thanks to his earlier training he wins and wins and achieves a certain renown.

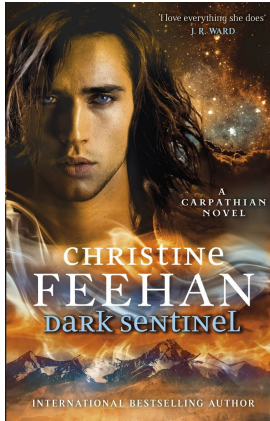
There are sections of the book which really add nothing, as if the author was adding information he felt should be included.

It is far too long at 578 pages, and although well written it should have been trimmed by at least one third.

3/5

Ian

Christine Feeham. Dark Sentinel



Dark Sentinel is the 28th book in the Dark series. The Carpathians are now in America (read USA) and are facing a new super vampire enemy. Ando, an ancient Carpathian, is badly injured during a fight with human vampire hunters, but is rescued by Lorraine, who is in the forest seeking peace after the tragic loss of her entire family. Andor has been fighting vampire hunters for centuries and has now almost given up the hope of finding

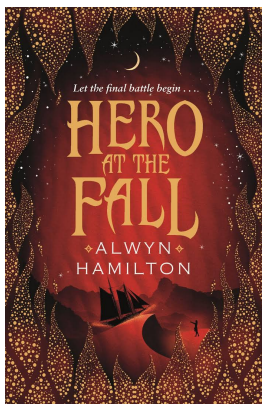
his lifemate. When Lorraine saves him his whole life is turned upside down, and his future is filled with colour again. It is obvious that they belong together and it is rewarding to watch their relationship grow.

This is a love story, or a paranormal romance, but it is not Fantasy. If you are looking for Fantasy....look elsewhere.

Love story 4/5 Fantasy 1/5

Ian

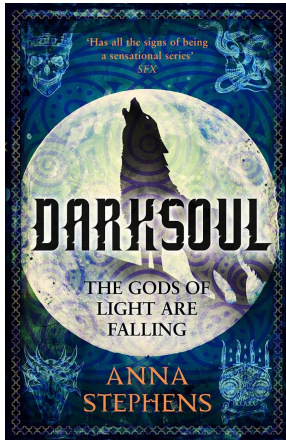
Alwyn Hamilton. Hero at the Fall



The rebellion has been crushed, and most of the rebels are dead, captured or fleeing for their lives. Only one young girl, Amani, is left to save the remaining rebels. It was at about this stage that I realised that this was a book for teenagers, or Young adults (YA) if you prefer. The book get good write ups from various sources, but I am not going to waste any more time reading it.

Ian

Anna Stephens. Dark Soul Book 2



I don't ever remember coming across a woman author who is an expert in describing combat, but Anna Stephens does it extremely well. Most of the book is about fighting, from hand to hand combat, to merciless attacks from wave after wave of screaming hordes, to a city under non-stop bombardment from huge stones catapulted from a Trebuchet. The ruler of the kingdom of Rilpor has just died, and the army of Mireces is

determined to take control of the Kingdom, and only the besieged capital city of Rilporin stands in their way. This novel focuses mainly on this siege.

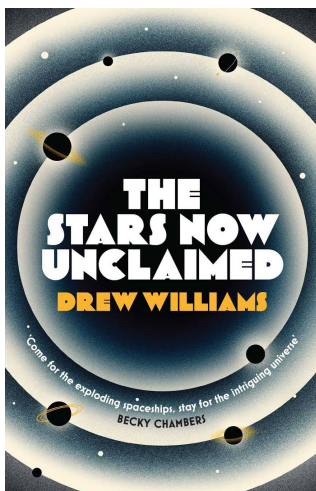
Crys Taylorson continues on his journey of self-discovery, and the nature of his Splitsoul is revealed in an epic fashion, as he becomes the Fox God. And Dom, driven mad by the Dark Lady, has become Godblind, a totally evil character. There are plenty more characters and Gods, all in some way involved in the fighting.

Not your typical Fantasy novel, but Stephens has written an entertaining but very dark novel.

3/5

Ian

Drew Williams. The Stars Now Unclaimed



In the known section of the Galaxy, containing several hundred thousand stars, there are at least seven different species of intelligent aliens. Unfortunately they are almost all extremely warlike, and consider other races as vermin, to be used or exterminated. Over one hundred years ago a large group of humans, called the Justified, sent out a pulse of energy which was meant to bring a new era of peace. Instead in most cases it sent most occupied planets backwards and reduced their technology, often causing chaos.

It also caused a very few human children to develop Psi powers. It is the job of the mercenary Kamali, and her sentient spaceship, Scheherazade, to seek out these special children and bring them to the home of the Justified, called Sanctum. But one of the most warlike races, called the Pax, have been untouched by the Pulse, and they are determined to wipe out Sanctum.

Kamali finds herself in the middle of a vicious race war, with the whole of humanity's Future at stake.

Very well written and enjoyable, especially for a first novel, although it has a slightly protracted ending.

3/5

Ian

Richard Mclean Smith Unexplained- Supernatural Stories for Uncertain Times



Based on the world's spookiest podcast of the same name comes, "Unexplained" a book of ten real life mysteries which might be better left unexplained.

What can a case of demonic possession in 1970's Germany teach us about free will? What can we learn about how we construct reality from the case of a poltergeist in the English Fens? And what can a supposed instance of reincarnation in Middleborough tell us about how we develop a concept of self?

And what do you make of two separate missing persons, one never found and the other found drowned in a water tank on the roof of a hotel?

And the sixty odd schoolchildren who saw a flying saucer and two little black clad beings with huge eyes emerging from it. Mass hallucinations, or a genuine UFO?

The Financial Times called it "A grisly treat."

The Tattler said "All the creepier for being true."

Some of the mysteries go back 60 years and yet the author manages to tell each one with excruciating detail. Very implausible and at times simply boring

1/5

Ian

"That's one small step for Man. One giant leap for Mankind." These historic and timeless words were spoken by astronaut Neill Armstrong when he first stepped onto the Moon.

FIRST MAN (based on Armstrong's Authorised Biography written by James R. Hansen) tells the story of the space-cadet's training and personal life struggles in the years leading up to the Apollo 11 mission. Steven Spielberg served as Executive Producer on the film and it was directed by Oscar winner Damien Chazelle from an adapted screenplay by Josh Singer.

Now whether you believe the Moon-landing actually happened or was instead filmed in a Hollywood studio as part of USA vs. Soviet Union propaganda, *First Man* is truly a remarkable piece of cinematic art. The film portrays the training for the mission not only as something exciting and adventurous but as a dangerous and stressful preparation that had its strain on the astronauts and their personal lives. Space exploration is not for sissies. You would have to accept the fact that even if you do manage to get off the ground in a rocket there is still a possibility that you would not return home.

This is what the film captures so well; unlike Ron Howard's *Apollo 13* film (which had its brilliant suspenseful moments) *First Man* makes you hold your breath and grab the edge of your seat while witnessing the training of one of the most dangerous missions in US history. You connect with the people portrayed in the film as real people who also have hopes, losses and fears. Instead of showing these brave astronauts as giddy boys about to go on a joyride, you can feel their tension and see their weary eyes (with dark circles) as their tiny ship approaches their destination. It's almost as if you are there with them during their trials and finally walking with them on the surface of the Moon.

Nova 2017 2nd Place

The Cloaker

Odelle Coetzee

Blasts of plasma flashed along the main corridor of the Wernilanx Bioengineering and Research Laboratories, dislodging sizable chunks and leaving large char marks on the beige plascreate wall. Security guards backed off, their firepower insignificant in comparison.

Scientists, their assistants and support staff huddled together in labs, storage areas, behind desks and equipment as members of the most feared intergalactic pirate band, the Tecumseh, laid ruin to the research facility. Their black patterned shipsuits and red-scaled skins enhanced by the pale décor of the building.

Garaski again looked at the plasfilm sheet while his accomplices randomly fired along the passageway. He read the lab number on the door and then indicated to continue down the passage. Another blast and a security officer dropped to the ground. The stench of singed flesh permeated the air.

The group moved several paces down the passage before halting.

"Twenty-four twelve, this is it!" Garaski announced, "Crack it Catreski." He ordered, indicating to the iris scanner. Gaeaski looked along the corridor and then pointed to the others. "You lot guard left. You guys, right. Shoot whatever moves!"

Catreski extracted a piece of equipment from his pack and set it up.

"Hurry up! I thought you said that piece of junk works!" Garaski impatiently snapped.

Catreski held imaging device in front of the scanner, allowing it to run a series of images. "It's not instant. It needs a few moments."

"Well hurry it up!"

"Gotcha!" Catreski said as the magnetic lock released.

Garaski and the others pushed past and into the room.

"Arkeh!" Garaski cursed as he looked about the empty laboratory, angrily declaring, "They were tipped off!"

“Do we even know what this device is supposed to look like?” Catreski asked, looking over some of the scattered papers.

“Take anything that looks like it could contain information.” Garaski ordered glancing at some inscriptions on the screen, “Catreski, note that down.”

His command caused Catreski to look towards the screen.

“How? We watched her arrive this morning?” Meyvah said, in disbelief.

“Do you see her here?” Garaski demanded.

“Maybe they moved her to a different lab.” Meyvah said.

“This is the one listed in the Peace Core banks.” Catreski angrily said, turning to glare at Meyvah. “It took us nearly four months to crack that file.”

“Well someone tipped them off.” Garaski said, effectively overruling the others. “Haplight’s going to be pissed about this.”

Catreski removed the hard drive from the remaining computer and the others collected up all the documentation.

They retreated to the alcove outside the establishment’s boundaries, where they boarded their entry shuttle, tossing all the information into a secured crate before making for their respective stations. Moments later the shuttle lifted off the ground and turned towards the Azarian moon, behind which their cruiser was hidden.

A few miles north of the Wernilanx Bioengineering and Research Laboratories, Protection Officer Iroquois Chulm and his charge, Doctor Cherileigh Thais, were in a session with Commander Jeodore Cairngorm, head of the Intergalactic Peace Core’s Research and Development Division.

“We have made arrangements for Doctor Thais to be relocated to a secure facility on the Musjid home world Ormonde,” the Omahadian said. His dark hair neatly brushed to the side while his brown eyes stared emotionlessly from the screen.

Omahadians were the most humanlike of the galactic races, only the small horns on either side of their temple distinguished them.

“Excuse me!” Cherileigh demanded, “And just exactly who asked me about this?”

“After receiving the tip-off, and with recent events, we feel that you are no longer safe on your home world.”

“So you expect me to pack up and relocate to another galaxy, some foreign home world! I thought this meeting was to discuss the specialist I requested.”

“Your safety is our main priority at the moment. We have therefore arranged for alternative accommodations and facilities to allow you to continue your research.”

“Why can’t you do that here?” Cherileigh demanded.

“The Musjid have stricter approaching restrictions, they will fire at unknown vessels.”

“The Musjid? Who are opposed to any other race of humanoids remaining on their planet for more than a few days! You think they will agree to this?” Cherileigh demanded.

The Omahadian looked at her for several moments, “The Musjid tribunal has already agreed. They are preparing your accommodations as we speak.”

“I find that difficult to believe.” Cherileigh challenged.

“They have agreed because your new research assistant is Musjid. You are also female and no threat to their ways.”

“And what if I don’t want to relocate?”

“Satrisk and the Azarian Galaxy are too vulnerable. You are too close to the Psidium galactic home, while Musjid policies protect their home world from foreign visitors and ships.”

“And the specialist I requested? This Musjid you have supposedly selected?”

“He is a cellular and DNA specialist.”

“And his name is?” Cherileigh demanded.

“No names will be given over communication channels. He has not yet been briefed as to the extent of the research, only that it involves cellular mutations.”

“That’s as good as telling him he’s going to look at nuked cells.” Cherileigh said, in disbelief.

“If he is not suitable we will find another, which is why he has not yet been fully briefed.” Commander Cairngorm said, but looked towards Officer Chulm, when he demanded, “How is it then that word of our location got out?”

“We are still working on that.” Commander Cairngorm gruffly replied, “Our security specialists have identified a breach. They are looking into it.”

“When do we travel to Ormonde?” Officer Chulm asked.

"You have been booked on the Voligeur. It arrives at Imperieuse in two days."

"We will never make it by shuttle, even if we left now."

"You will be teleported from Aliga station."

"But a galactic travel ship?" Iroquois asked. "Why not a Charger?" Iroquois asked, his fingers irritably tapping on the tabletop.

"We considered it. However the Tecumseh would expect it."

"But the Voligeur travels into the Psidium Galaxy from here and docks at Callacombe. We will be flying right towards them!" Iroquois said, in disbelief.

"Which is exactly why they will not suspect it." the Omahadian insisted.

"Not if she travels on her own name."

"Doctor Thais will be travelling under the name Sayajirao Bitalli. Her cover is that of an author travelling to the Tulyarian home world Ebor. She is to remain in her cabin while the ship is docked at stations. You will accompany her as an assistant and ensure her safety." He stressed, before turning his attention to Cherileigh, "Doctor Thais, would you give us a moment."

"I guess I'll go pack." Cherileigh threw back, with attitude, while getting up from her seat.

"Doctor, just one more thing," the Omahadian halted her, causing Cherileigh to cock an eyebrow. "Do you have any idea what documentation they have taken?"

"Nothing important." She flatly replied, "Most of the notes were calculations and variables. Without the research data, any reputable scientist would consider them whimsical."

"So nothing regarding the prototype could have been taken?"

"No." Cherileigh said and left the room.

An irritating ping woke Baynardo. He rubbed his hand over his face and looked about his cabin, before sitting upright and looking at his watch. It was not time for him to report to the medical deck.

"Yeah, I'm awake, what's so urgent?" He demanded.

The flat electronic tone of the central computer filled the room. "Good morning Doctor Firdaussi, you have an urgent message from the Intergalactic Peace Core, flagged for immediate attention."

“Have we dropped out of hyperspace already?” Baynardo asked, while turning and placing his feet on the floor.

“Yes, we are approaching the Alistradora Space Station. Estimated docking time is twenty-two hours.”

Baynardo shook his head, even with the advances in intergalactic travel, galactic travel remained slow. “Access message.”

“Accessing message,” The computer said, before a baritone voice filled the cabin. “Doctor Baynardo Firdaussi, I am Lieutenant Ragusta Poitrel of the Intergalactic Peace Core Research and Development Division. A recent security breach at the Wernilanx Bioengineering and Research Laboratories on the Azarian home world Satrisk has necessitated an amendment to your agreement with us. Due to this occurrence, you are to remain on the Voligeur and return to your home world Ormonde. Once there, you will be provided with a laboratory along with relevant information and samples to conduct the necessary research. The Intergalactic Peace Core will cover all relevant expenses concerned with these arrangements and apologizes for any inconvenience.” The cabin once again fell silent before the Central Computer articulated, “End of message.”

“Computer, what’s my accommodation arrangements for the rest of the trip?”

“The Intergalactic Peace Core has secured your current accommodations.”

“Well then I guess I’m going home.” Baynardo said, nonchalantly.

“Do you want me to submit an acknowledgement and acceptance?”

“Yes, thank you.”

The arrival of a Galactic Core Cruiser and the subsequent search of the station and docked ships led to numerous speculations and lively conversations, amongst both boarding and boarded passengers. With their departure delayed by nearly fifty hours.

The hum of conversation was audible throughout the dining deck, with the periodic clink of cutlery against china as Baynardo made his way to the refectory. A multitude of scents from various food presentations caused his stomach to rumble as he selected his breakfast. He returned to the seating area and perused the room’s occupants, searching for a vacant spot. There were several, but from the animated

actions of the other occupants not the type he would chose to occupy. An Azarian rose at the back of the room and made for the table.

Two occupants remained there, the first a crewmember, the other an Azarian woman, who's back was turned towards him. He expected her to rise and follow her companion but she remained seated, which caused him to hesitate. Azarians were gregarious by nature, rarely electing to remain on their own.

He perused her as he advanced. The teal patterning on the back of her hands were vivid. He halted and cleared his throat, causing her to turn and look at him. The patterning on her face also vivid, her eyes bright blue.

In all his years, he had only seen Azarians with faded patterning. He had not noticed her on any of the other decks, which caused him to frown.

"Something the matter?" she asked, lifting her hand to her face.

Baynardo hesitated for a moment before replying, "No, sorry, it's just..."

"Just what?" she demanded.

"I've never seen an Azarian with such vivid colouring."

"Oh!" She said, her voice more relaxed.

"I don't think I've seen you before." He could see her guard rise, adding, "...on any of the other decks I meant. I would have remembered your colouring."

"And you came all this way to tell me that?" She questioned, disbelievingly, causing him to remember the tray he held.

"Sorry, no, I was going to ask if that seat is taken, but then..."

"My colour distracted you." She said tipping her head "You're Musjid," She said to no one in particular, "Strange for you to be on a cruise ship. Your universe has direct routes.... Unless you are heading to Valoris."

He shook his head, "I doubt any sane humanoid would go there."

"Unless you're Psidium."

"Of course." He said and gestured to the vacant spot with his tray, "May I?"

"Help yourself." She said, placing the stray items on her tray.

"Don't go, you haven't even finished your meal." He said as he sat down.

She sceptically looked at the food. "I think it will take a while for me to get used to protein paste."

"You're used to fresh, planet bound food."

She nodded

"At least they try to make it appetizing."

She cocked a brow, "It still leaves a lot to be desired."

"You'll get used to it."

She shrugged her shoulders and made a disgusted face.

He laughed at that, "Name's Baynardo Firdaussi."

"Sayajirao Bitalli." She said, casually.

"I always thought Azarians were gregarious in nature, but I really can't remember seeing you about."

"You keep track?" Sayajirao asked, her voice restrained.

"I observe things, humanoids."

Sayajirao nodded, "That's not uncommon for Musjids, you're an inquisitive race."

"As yours is gregarious."

"Not all of us, but I needed to get out of my cabin." Sayajirao said.

"You don't like crowds?" Baynardo said before starting on his meal, also pulling a face

"Something wrong?" Sayajirao asked.

"It's gone cold." He said pushing his tray to the side. "Where are you heading?"

"Ebor."

His forehead furrowed, before he spoke, "You're wanting to see if the rumours are true? I can tell you that they are." He scolded himself the moment the words were out, knowing that he should not make such assumptions.

"Excuse me?" Sayajirao asked.

"I'm sorry, I should not have said that."

"I'm not sure if I should be offended, seeing as I have no idea what you implied."

Baynardo shrugged, "I should not have assumed... What do you do for a living?"

"I'm an author."

Baynardo nodded, "And your trip to Ebor?"

"Research," She answered, flatly, then added, "For a book... What do you do?"

"I'm a doctor."

"Going on or coming off duty?" Sayajirao asked, adding at his confused expression, "You don't have your guild-issued shipsuit on."

"I'm not on the service list, I'm on my way home." Baynardo explained, adding, "But I'm on standby."

"Makes the trip cheaper."

Baynardo nodded.

"So what is your specialty?" Sayajirao asked.

"Am I being interviewed now for a possible part?" He playfully asked, sitting taller, mockingly shifting his hair back.

His actions made Sayajirao laugh. "Who's being the Azarian now?"

He made an effort to look affronted but instead ended up laughing. "I deserved that... DNA."

"Interesting field. Are you also looking into the genetic incompatibility between species?"

"When I was at Aurora, it made up a large part of my research. But I'm not planning to pursue that sphere of genetics."

"Why not? I think it would be gratifying to make it possible."

"Let's just say I find it difficult to understand the proclivity for some to seek partners outside their own species." Baynardo said. He noticed how Sayajirao's body stiffened and quickly added, "It's not that I think anyone lesser important, I mean I know some brilliant individuals from other species; I just fail to understand the reason why some seek a partner outside their own genus."

Sayajirao looked at him for several moments, "I will take that as an outlook your culture conditioned you into having. I just always thought that some simply could not find a suitable match within their own species."

"That's such a cliché answer." Baynardo said, shaking his head.

"Cliché or not, it is something that's increasingly occurring. Besides, I can understand how difficult it is for some to find a suitable partner within their own race, or a partner who's not threatened by one's intelligence and erudition."

"So you approve of the practice?" Baynardo asked.

"I think we have no right to judge others on their choices. Everyone has the right to be happy with whichever life companion they've selected." Adding, when she noted his questioning gaze, "...as they say; *'when the heart is embroiled, logic and reason falls by the wayside.'*"

“Spoken like a true writer.” Baynardo said, “You’d need to be impartial to make a story work. So what are you working on?”

“The story is about an interspecies couple who wants a child. They’re considering the IU treatment, however everyone is against it, and them.”

“And you’re going to Ebor?”

“To establish Tulyarian beliefs and practices. I know that like Musjid they do not welcome foreigners on their soil, particularly women, where your species are more opposed to men.”

“For a reason,” Baynardo flatly stated.

“Yes; the intricacies surrounding your procreation.” Sayajirao said, nodding.

“Ever thought that maybe the species are not supposed to interbreed, which is why they can’t.”

“I think everyone should have the choice as to whether or not to have children. And those who cannot have their own should be allowed to provide a caring home for a child in need of one. It should not be left to society or science to dictate it.”

Baynardo remained silent for several moments and then looked about the deck. “Well if you’re interested in interspecies relationships, you should speak to the couple over there.” Baynardo said pointing to an Azarian and Kauai couple.

Sayajirao turned and looked in the direction he pointed. “How do you know they’re together?” she asked, returning her attention to Baynardo.

“We’ve travelled together from Diperian, they’re inseparable.”

Sayajirao turned her attention back to the couple, “Thank you. I’ll speak to them later.” She said while watching their interactions.

“You finished eating?” Baynardo asked, reclaiming her attention, then pointed at her tray. She nodded and he extended his arm towards it. “I’ll take that back.”

“Thank you.” She said, rising with him.

“Same time tomorrow?” he asked as they moved from the table.

“You want to meet up again?” she asked, her brow marring.

“You’re the first humanoid I have met that can speak their opinion and not force others to agree. It’s amusing.”

“I don’t think anyone else has ever seen me as amusing.”

For the better part of the following week, they fell into a routine. Meeting up over breakfast to discuss, or argue, their respective points of view. Baynardo answered all her questions on genetics, cellular structures and possible causes for mutation and was comfortable in her presence. She was the first female humanoid from another species that did not press for intimacy, whereas on Aurora, the females had considered it a contest. It had made him weary of interacting with them.

The presence of her companion may also have had something to do with it. And when he had questioned her about the male, she had dismissed him as an assistant; that her allowance on Ebor was only approved because she had a male companion. She had not offered more and he had not pressed the matter.

The Voligeur dropped out of hyperspace closer to Callacombe than usual. The captain had shortened their approach to several hours to try and make up for time. Even so, they were still thirty-seven hours behind schedule.

Several Psidium passengers boarded the ship. Few trusted their appearance, since they all looked the same with only slight variations in their colouring and build. Only facial recognition, or close study, could identify individuals. Their presence brought discomfort to many, including Baynardo.

That morning Sayajirao failed to put in an appearance. The occurrence unsettled Baynardo, who at first thought she had been delayed. Having received no word from her by mid-morning, he sought her on the other decks, but failed to find her.

She also failed to make an appearance the following morning, although he noticed her companion. The male's appearance appeased his concerns, but only momentarily.

By the third morning, he queried the medical deck but they had no record of any treatment. When he thought about it, he realized that she had not shared much information about herself, and there was the matter of the strange bracelet she always wore. He had meant to question her about it, but always seemed to be answering her questions instead.

The morning after the Voligeur entered hyperspace, Baynardo entered the dining hall and looked at their usual spot. Not expecting to see Sayajirao, he was taken

aback by her appearance. Uncertain whether he should feel angered or relieved by her presence, he made his way over to her. He knew he had no right to feel angered, but that did not stop him from feeling so.

On approach he noticed her fatigue and instead asked, "The usual?"

She looked up at him and nodded. He turned to collect their meals, placing hers in front of her before sitting down to his own.

When he noticed how she kept her gaze on her plate he asked, "Are you alright?"

"I had not realized there would be as many Psidiums onboard.

Baynardo looked about the dining deck, noticing several present, before turning to her, "You don't like them?"

"They make my skin crawl." She said, barely above a whisper.

Baynardo moved his head closer to hers, also lowering his voice. "I think they have that effect on most humanoids, with their scaly skins and beady eyes."

"That's the first time I've heard you discuss another race's features as diplomatically." Sayajirao said, smiling.

Baynardo looked at her and smiled, "Well I don't think it would sound too good if I told you they creep-out most humanoids."

"It would have been more your style."

Baynardo nodded at that. It had crossed his mind that it could have been the reason why she might have been avoiding him, that he was too direct. The thought caused him to peruse her. "You look tired." He stated. "So what have you been up to, or shouldn't I ask?"

She seemed hesitant for several moments before finally shrugging her shoulders "My muse took hold and I kinda lost track of time."

Baynardo nodded, he knew how it felt to be on the point of a breakthrough, how one's work it could consume one.

They easily resumed their routine, with Sayajirao questioning and him answering.

Baynardo again took notice of her bracelet but did not question her about it.

The Voligeur was about halfway to the Betelgeuse Space station, when Sayajirao again failed to put in an appearance. Baynardo however was not alarmed, since his

research had confirmed her identity. He had even come across one of her works and had contemplated reading it.

Shortly before midmorning, the Central Computer announced, "Doctor Firdaussi, the ship's security officers are at the door and demand immediate access."

The door slid open and half a dozen sentries entered his cabin. They looked around, with the one pronouncing it clear. The senior officer indicated for Baynardo to accompany them.

He was marched through a series of corridors, with many fellow passengers glancing at him, suspiciously, and shown into the captain's assembly cabin. They had barely halted when the senior officer announced, "Sir, we found him in his cabin, Sir."

Baynardo looked over the room's occupants. He recognized the Azarian male, who stood in the far corner. His arms folded across his chest, his body taught with tension. An unwavering disquiet settled over Baynardo as he looked from the Captain to the man, both Azarians.

The Captain dismissed the officers with a curt, "That will be all." and waited for them to leave. He then turned to the Azarian male and tensely said, "If she's not with him, it means she could have been taken and he's at risk."

"I don't think they know who he is or his connection to her." The Azarian dismissively said, as if Baynardo were absent from the room.

Baynardo clenched his hands when the man glared at him, outright demanding, "Have you seen Cherileigh this morning?"

"Cherileigh?" Baynardo asked, confused, "I don't know anyone – " he started, but was cut short by the Azarian. "You know her as Sayajirao Bitalli."

"What about her?" Baynardo demanded, his heart racing anew.

"She's missing." The Azarian flatly stated. "She left her cabin for breakfast this morning and never returned."

Baynardo swallowed several times, still the bitter taste of bile filled his mouth. Shaking his head he said, "She wasn't at breakfast this morning." Then firmly demanded, "Who are you anyway?"

"My name is Iroquois Chulm; I'm Cherileigh's protection officer."

“Protection officer?” Baynardo questioned, perplexed, remembering the bracelet she wore. “Is she in some sort of trouble?”

“I’m an officer with the Intergalactic Peace Core,” Iroquois started, “You were commissioned to do research for them; research that’s related to Doctor Thaïs’ work.” Baynardo brow marred as the Azarian continued. “However, due to a security breach, she was removed from the planet and, like you, is bound for Ormonde.”

“But...” Baynardo started, irked when he was again cut short.

“Sayajirao Bitalli is her cover. She has no idea who you are.”

Baynardo remained silent for some time before murmuring, “That makes sense.”

“We have reason to believe she has been abducted.” The captain said.

“We’re on a ship,” Baynardo stated, disbelievingly. “There can’t be that many places to hide her without someone noticing.”

“More than you think.” The captain said, flatly, “The only benefit is that they cannot communicate or launce a pod while we’re in hyperspace. But once we drop out at Betelgeuse...”

“We need to find her before then.” Officer Chulm said.

“I can lock down all pods and have the communication channels monitored once we’ve dropped out of hyperspace, however there’s passengers and cargo to offload at Betelgeuse.”

Baynardo remained silent for several moments before turning his attention to officer Chulm, “What about the bracelet she wears? Can’t you track her with it?”

“It’s not a tracking device.” Officer Chulm deadpanned.

“What’s it then?”

“The reason she’s been taken.” Officer Chulm said. “Have you seen anyone suspicious, anyone hanging around you?”

Baynardo thought for a while, before finally shaking his head, “No, not that I can recall.”

Officer Chulm started pacing. His actions caused Baynardo’s disquiet to increase. The man then turned to look at him, demanding, “What did you discuss?”

“Genetics, recent discoveries in the fields of stem-cell treatments, food. Honestly, whatever came up at the time.”

"That doesn't sound like something that could have blown her cover," The captain said.

"Which means they know what she looks like." Officer Chulm said.

"Who?" Baynardo demanded.

"The Tecumseh."

Baynardo's blood ran cold. A nauseous sensation settled in the pit of his stomach.

"Which is why it is important that we find her before the ship drops out of hyperspace," Officer Chulm continued, oblivious of Baynardo's discomfort.

"I'll have every available officer search for her." The captain said.

"No!" Iroquois suddenly cautioned, "That will only make them more vigilant, and possibly aggravate this into a hostile hostage situation. Rather have the officers report the presence of any Azarian woman seen in the company of a Psidium."

"Can't the central computer search for her?" Baynardo asked.

"It's not allowed," the captain said. "It would infringe on the privacy of the other passengers."

"But..." Baynardo started only to be cut short by Officer Chulm.

"We need authorization from the Galactic Court to do that..." his voice trailed off. "...I can only communicate with Galaxy Core once we have dropped out of hyperspace." Officer Chulm said, then angrily mumbled something in his native tongue.

Footfalls scraping against metal grating pulled Cherileigh back from the darkness. The moment her eyes opened, a jolt of pain shot through her skull. She moaned, but the gag in her mouth muffled the sound. The air was stifling, the space surrounding her dark and restrictive.

She blinked a few times and then identified the holes in the side of what felt like a plascrate. She tried to determine how long she could have been missing.

She tried to grip her head, only to discover that her hands and feet were bound with crude cargo-ties that bit into her wrists whenever she tried to move them. The unyielding surface and size of her makeshift prison made movement almost impossible. Her head throbbed and she shook it, immediately regretting the action.

"Befaro glee patrogh." A strange voice said, causing her heart to race.

“Hada pena beloth befaro aku opatha. Garo talope Gulnare befaro aku patrogh.” Another said, allowing her to identify the coarse, guttural language as Sphilaka, the Psidium native dialect.

Footsteps moving within her vicinity grew more pronounced, elevating her breathing to short gasps. She twisted her wrists, in an attempt to establish whether she still had the bracelet on, relief coursing through her when she felt it.

She shifted in the crate, resetting herself several times, several times biting down on the gag when the pain of her bounds became unbearable. She moved her face closer to the holes in the crate and peered through one. Numerous plascrates were stacked together, tied down with cargo nets and ties.

The air coming through the holes had a smell to it, like oil or some other industrial lubricant and caused her stomach to turn churn. Leaving her uncertain whether the mechanically processed air or the drugs used were responsible for her nausea. She vaguely remembered getting into the elevator for breakfast, with several questions for Baynardo, but from that point on things were hazy.

The Voligeur dropped out of hyperspace. With communications re-established, Officer Chulm requested a meeting with the director of the Intergalactic Peace Core and then ran the records of all Psidium passengers against the Intergalactic Database of Known Felons, eager to find a match.

Officer Chulm continued pacing irritated Baynardo, who had remained in the conference cabin. He had no idea what else he could do. Both men were tired, frustrated and overly annoyed and by the lack of progress.

Officer Chulm suddenly stopped and demanded, “Computer, has there been any sudden changes of a passenger’s health status?”

A frown marred Baynardo forehead when he looked at Officer Chulm.

“Negative. All passengers are stable.” The computer replied.

When Iroquois shook his head, Baynardo asked, “Why the query?”

“If she had used it...” The Azarian said, his voice fading.

Baynardo felt a tightening sensation around his heart. There was no mistaking a possible outcome when he considered Cherileigh’s questions and the man’s

demeanour. The panel before them lit, the flashing light indicative of an incoming call.

Captain Ellangowan entered the room with his second in command, nodding his head before indicating for them to take their seats at the table.

All those present turned their attention to the screen as the image of Colonel Chamossaire Thordan, Director of the Intergalactic Peace Core, appeared onscreen.

"Captain Ellangowan," the Tulyarian acknowledged, nodding his head, before looking over the others, finally addressing Iroquois, "Officer Chulm."

"Colonel Thordan," Iroquois said, respectfully.

The Colonel then turned his attention to the captain, "Captain Ellangowan, according to Betelgeuse Space Station's arrival schedule, the Voligeur is scheduled for docking in approximately nine hours." The Colonel's piercing blue eyes fixed on the Captain. His fiery red hair was neatly groomed, with the reddish mottles on the back of his neck just visible.

"That is correct, Colonel." The Captain said, inclining his head.

"Has Doctor Thais been located?" the Colonel asked.

"No, we have been unable to establish her whereabouts." The Captain said.

"And there's no time to apply for search permissions," The colonel mused, more to himself, before sternly looking at the Captain, taking a deep breath, "I had hoped this would not be needed" The colonel paused for a moment then firmly commanded. "Captain Wershaun Ellangowan, in accordance with Section B, sub section hundred-and-thirty-six, of the Intergalactic Peace Core's Code of Command, The Voligeur has been allocated an Amber Alert. The ship will be escorted to the Betelgeuse Space Station under guidance of the station's security shuttles. These shuttles have also been instructed to shoot and destroy any pod or shuttle launched from the Voligeur. All passengers are to return to their accommodations and the ship is to be locked down before docking." The Colonel voice remained ominously neutral as he continued, "Docking shall commence as per agreement, however no passengers will be permitted to disembark until their identity has been verified and cleared."

"Yes, Colonel," the Captain said, inclining his head.

"Moreover," the Colonel continued. "In accordance with Section forty-two of the Ship Control and Conduct Policies; in the event of an Amber Alert, it is mandatory to

gas all lower levels and cargo holds before docking. You are also to identify and detain anyone on those levels found not to be staff. These humanoids will then be removed by either Station Security or Core Officers, whichever are available at the time.”

“Is all this needed?” Captain Ellangowan asked, concerned.

“This is a matter of Galactic safety, Doctor Thais or her abductors may not leave that ship!” The Colonel emphasized. “The Galactic Peace Core has redirected two battle cruisers to ensure the safety of your ship, its passengers and cargo while docked at the Space Station. Their ETA is in twelve hours.” The Colonel took a deep breath before concluding, “These orders are to be initiated immediately. Failure to do so will result in all ranking officials being stripped of their ranks.” Then the screen went blank.

“Officer Waylice,” the captain said, turning to his second in command, “How much cryogenic preparation gas do we have?”

“Gas levels are full, Captain.” The Kauaitan replied.

“Then gas the lower decks.”

Cherileigh listened as several humanoids moved within the cargo hold, when an unknown voice said, “We’re docking in a few hours. Check that all the off-loading cargo is in position and secure.”

She tried to sit upright, the ties around her wrists and ankles again bit into her flesh. Just then, she heard a Psidium, “Nema peko petrag befaro tela beroklap.” He was close, possibly next to the crate.

Another replied, “Napa bonka pa petrag pareke, nama heplag petrag gambo.”

A moment later, both were visible through the holes in the crate. Her heart raced, blood rushed in her ears, Iroquois had taken too long.

A heavy sensation settled over her. She took a deep breath and clenched her jaw against the pain. She twisted her hands and managed to reach the activation switch on the bracelet. She pressed it and closed her eyes as a tingling sensation engulfed her body.

She listened as they opened the crate. The sudden rush cooler air, welcoming. “Petrag noda botela!” the first one exclaimed, looking about in surprise.

“Neras peratop! Petrag belope had fortashe!” The second reciprocated, gripping the lid from his companion and looking into the crate, adding, “Petrag farad de lopalog.” Haphazardly he dropped the lid on the crate, causing it to balance precariously on the edge before falling to the ground.

“Thabe ora pepabligh!” The first exclaimed, shaking his head and turning from the crate.

Cherileigh’s stomach tightened, she swallowed repeatedly at the lump in her throat, hoping that they would not think to reach into the crate. Concurrently, she kept count in her head, knowing the threshold was soon approaching. Her eyes started to feel heavy as the two Psidium males finally moved from the crate. She tried to fight the lethargic sensation that overcame her, but failed.

Once the gas levels had stabilized, a fully suited team of officers inspected the lower decks. All humanoids found were placed in rows in the main cargo hold.

Iroquois and Baynardo looked over everyone, but grew increasingly restless as time wore on.

As they identified the last of the humanoids, docking procedures were initiated and the instruction to shut off the gas flow given.

Baynardo and Iroquois returned to the bridge.

“Anything?” the Captain asked as they entered the command bridge.

Iroquois shook his head, “No.”

Every disembarking passenger was checked against the passenger manifest and underwent facial scans to confirm identity.

“Red alert, red alert! Lower cargo bay four. Critical vital signs detected. In need of immediate medical assistance.” The Central Computer announced, jolting everyone from their seats.

“That bay was cleared,” The Captain professed, “Recheck.”

“One occupant detected. Critical. Unstable pulse and respiratory.”

“That will be her.” Officer Chulm said, making for the door.

“How can you be so sure?” Baynardo demanded, following a few steps behind.

“Trust me, that’s the alert I’ve been waiting for, for the last twelve hours.” The Azarian said as the door woodshed open.

Baynardo and Officer Chulm entered the cargo bay and looked about. An officer beacons them to the far corner, "I've found something, but I don't think it's humanoid."

They rushed over to the crate and Baynardo looked into it, grateful he had not eaten that morning. Translucent skin covered the skull and hands, enabling him to see the sinews below. He recognized the shipsuit and bracelet and tentatively asked. "Cherileigh?" He got a soft moan in response. Her eyes shifted under the almost translucent lids, before they lifted and cleared. Her eyes a dull blue, devoid of their usual sparkle.

"For the love of Ormonde, what have they done to you?" he asked as he reached to tug the gag from her mouth. Without thought he slipped his hands under her and lifted her from the crate.

"Sir! You cannot do that! She's contaminated, may even be contagious." The officer cautioned, his hand landing on Baynardo's arm.

Baynardo shook off the man's hand and turned for the elevator, Officer Chulm following.

"Computer notify Doctor Florcarline of my imminent arrival, have them prepare a regeneration tank and saline drip," Baynardo said as he indicated to Officer Chulm to select the medical deck. "I need half a CC of atropine and," he looked at Cherileigh as the doors closed. "Cherileigh, are you in any pain?"

"You know my name?" She weakly croaked.

"Long story," he quickly dismissed, "Are you in any pain?"

"My head and muscles are sore." She said, moaning when he repositioned her.

Baynardo nodded and looked towards Iroquois.

They stepped from the elevator and were met by an emergency medical crew with a stretch-float. He carefully placed Cherileigh on it and watched as the medics cut and removed her bonds. They jogged to the medical bay.

"I want a full body scan." Baynardo instructed as they entered the emergency suite. "Along with a full tox screen, including her bilirubin, ALT, AST, Albumin, Gamma GT and electrolyte levels." he continued as they positioned her under the scanner.

The moment the scan was completed, a nurse inserted the catheter for the drip and administered the atropine. The catheter was fastened and blood drawn.

Once done, Cherileigh's shipsuit was cut from her body.

"I need a scalpel and slides. We also need to get her into a regeneration tank, stat." Baynardo said, distressed by the fact that he could see most of her vital organs through her translucent skin.

Once Cherileigh was stabilized in a regeneration tank, Iroquois drew Baynardo aside, "Those tests are not going to give you the answers you seek."

"What do you mean?" Baynardo demanded, stating, "They are the most likely to tell me what is wrong with her."

"The Core approached you to do research on cell mutations," Iroquois started.

"Yes." Baynardo replied, with a firm nod of his head.

Iroquois indicated to Cherileigh with his head. "You're looking at an advanced case of that mutation."

"That," Baynardo said pointing towards Cherileigh, "... is no cellular mutation. As far as I know there's no known condition that causes that."

"That's because the condition has only been witnessed in laboratories, under test circumstances." Iroquois asserted.

Baynardo glared at Officer Chulm, a frown marring his forehead as he irately demanded, "What do you know about the condition?"

"I'm her protection officer," Iroquois said, stepping back and lifting his hands, showing his palms "What I know of science is how to clean my plasma gun. But she might be able to answer your questions, so don't drug her to the point of induced coma."

Cherileigh woke, her body tingling. She tried to move but her attempts were quickly halted by a familiar voice. "Lie still, you're in a regeneration tank." Baynardo softly said.

"Why so heavy?" she weakly whispered.

"You're in PLV4CH fluid, it seems to be restoring your skin tone. You've also been sedated."

"How long?"

"Four days, we've just left Betelgeuse."

Cherileigh's eyes enlarged, her entire body tensed, "The bracelet!"

"Relax," Baynardo said, placing his hand on her shoulder, "I have it."

Immediately her eyes closed and her body went lax.

"Officer Chulm said you might be able to tell me what's happening."

Cherileigh looked at him, "You know then?"

Baynardo nodded, "Later. I've done everything I possibly can to stabilize you. And although you look better, your system is deteriorating."

"The problem is cellular." Cherileigh whispered, "Dividing cells were mutated, causing the change."

"How?"

"Not sure how it works, but extended use of the bracelet causes mutations in cellular DNA. They then become hyperactive."

"What is that bracelet?"

"It's a personal cloaking device. It renders its wearer invisible to anyone or system."

"Then how could the Central Computer pick up your condition?"

"I turned it off when I woke, I don't even know why I went to sleep."

"They gassed the lower chambers...but why do you have it?"

"I developed it."

"Why?" Baynardo asked, confused.

"Initially, I wanted to see if it could be done. Then The Core found out about it and here I am."

"I'll fix you."

"I'm a scientist, I know I will not recover from this."

Baynardo swallowed against the lump in his throat. "What does this device do, exactly?"

"It works on the same principle as a ship's cloaking shield, in that it creates an energy field." She paused for a moment, "There's a five minute threshold where only cellular wall structures are affected, increasing the chances of widespread, simultaneous infection. My argument was that if you could somehow program a polymerase to correct the distorted cell's DNA sequence, the body could reverse the damage."

“Essentially a switch that reverses the effects.”

Cherileigh nodded.

“Do you have any unaffected DNA samples that can be used for comparison?”

“There’s a DNA sample back at home, but it will take too long to get it here.”

“I won’t let you die, not without a fight.”

“It’s not for you to decide.”

“Rest now, I’ll have a look at the biopsies again.” Baynardo said, his hand remained on her shoulder for a while longer.

Several hours later, Officer Chulm entered the medical bay and looked at the regeneration tank then Baynardo. “Any luck?”

“She’s stabilized; for now. You?” Baynardo said, without lifting his gaze from the microscope.

“We’ve captured Gulnare Malvolio. He’s believed to be the brains behind her kidnapping. He’ll stand trial at Aurora.”

“That’s not going to help her.” Baynardo deadpanned, lifting his gaze from the microscope.

“That bad?”

“Her cells are deteriorating at about four hundred times the normal rate.” He nodded towards the tank, “It appears to be irreversible.”

“She’s awake?”

“She’s cognizant at times, but it exhausts her to talk or think.” Baynardo watched as Iroquois made his way to the tank.

“She didn’t deserve this, moods or not.” Iroquois said and turned to face Baynardo. “I’m releasing her notes to you.” Iroquois said walking towards him and handing him a data chip.

“What’s on here?”

“Everything she’s done to date.”

The following morning, Baynardo lowered his face into his palms and released a heartfelt sigh. He had gone over all her notes, several times, but none of them addressed her condition.

Just then, Iroquois arrived, visibly irritated, "How is she?"

"Not good."

Iroquois halted next to Baynardo's desk. "Clarify."

"How important is she to The Core?"

"Quite." Iroquois said, without hesitation.

"Enough for them to foot the bill for suspended animation?"

"Do you think it will help?"

"It won't stop it, but it will slow it down, significantly."

"Isn't your race opposed suspended animation?"

Baynardo didn't reply and instead responded with, "We drop out in Musjid space in two days. At the current rate; she won't make the trip to Ormonde."

Iroquois looked towards the tank, "Is that the only option?"

"Short of flicking a switch and undoing it all, yes."

"I'll put a request through as soon as we drop out of hyperspace."

Several hours later Officer Chulm again entered the bay, visibly agitated.

"Problems?" Baynardo asked.

"I just can't get what you said earlier out of my head, and I'm not a scientist..."

Iroquois turned to look at Baynardo, "...but it makes sense to me and might work."

"What?" Baynardo asked turning his full attention to the man.

"What if you could bring her back to before all this happened?"

"Time travel is not an option here, there's a whole ship, and if we were off by just a fraction... No. Fooling with quantum physics is never a good idea."

"I'm not talking about that that."

"Then what?"

"Teleportation."

Baynardo shook his head, "Teleportation only rematerialize the body exactly the way it was, there's no telling what will happen if one altered the data file."

"But what if you have a recent data file that could bring back an unaffected version of her?"

"If they have not cleared the extensive memory banks used for teleportation, and the

file still exists, I don't know of any chambers this far out, or how to reprogram one."

"Imperieuse has one."

"No it doesn't, my people won't allow it. "

"Galaxy Core has a powerful one in the lower sub-station."

Baynardo remained silent for several moments, "It's risky, we'll have to ask Cherileigh's consent."

Baynardo pulled a lab chair next to the tank and sat down. He reached for Cherileigh's hand, causing her to wake.

She looked at him and weakly asked, "What is it?"

"We, I mean Officer Chulm had an idea... and it might work."

"But from the look on your face...."

Baynardo took a deep breath then looked at Officer Chulm, who nodded and left. Baynardo turned his attention back to Cherileigh. "Teleportation."

"What?"

"We want to try and use teleportation to undo the damage, if there is still a file."

"But you are not so sure."

"There are so many variables andif done incorrectly you could..."

"Die."

Baynardo nodded.

"I'm already dying."

Baynardo made to say something but then shook his head.

Cherileigh looked at their hands, "That's not the reason for your hesitation."

Baynardo also looked at their linked hands and released a heavy sigh, "It's difficult to explain."

"As is most matters close to the heart."

Baynardo closed his eyes and took a deep breath, "In my culture, we believe that one should not change a person or their memories before death. Nor to prolong their suffering."

"And if you do this I will not remember the trip or us meeting and becoming friends."

Baynardo nodded.

"Our culture is simpler. We value life and quality of life above all else. We consider it selfish to place our own desires above the welfare of someone else. We believe

that if there's a way of maintaining or restoring one's quality of life, that it should be attempted – even if it fails.”

“So you are willing to try it?”

“If I gave you the option, what would you do?”

“That is not fair. You could die or something could go wrong. We don't know what could happen and I could not live with it if something did. I would go mad.”

“Which is why it remains my decision.”

“So you want us to try?”

“Yes, but I need you to promise me something.”

“What?”

“If this does not work, that you will destroy the bracelet and all the documentation... if it ended up in the wrong hands...”

Baynardo nodded

“So what do you need to do now?”

“I have to prepare you for kyro, to give us some time to get everything together.”

“But your species don't believe in kyro...”

Baynardo shrugged his shoulders, “It is what is needed.”

Cherileigh nodded her head.

A bright flash caused Cherileigh to blink several times. She pinched her eyes as a stabbing pain erupted behind her eyes, stumbling to maintain her balance. *This is the last time*, she promised herself as a weird tingling sensation rippled through her body.

A few moments later the pain and tingling subsided. She opened her eyes and identified four occupants in the teleportation chamber. One, a Musjid dressed in a medical guild shipsuit, ran a scanner over her.

“Did it work?” Iroquois asked.

“Looks like it.” the Musjid said, then looked into her eyes, holding her gaze for several moments. “It worked.”

“What worked?” Cherileigh demanded, then watched as the others left the room, “Iroquois, I have had more than enough for one day!”

“We have a lot to discuss.”

Only once the door closed behind Baynardo did he allow his shoulders to droop.

ORIGINS- 2.SHEPHERDBOY



TO BE CONTINUED...

