

DOME ON THE PRAIRIE

Robert Reed

The author tells us: “Years ago, my wife read the Laura Ingalls Wilder books to our daughter. *The Little House on the Prairie* is a pretty important fantasy in corn country. That family of scrappy pioneers charmed the hell out of me when I was a kid. But try as I might, I didn’t remain in the third grade. And a middle-aged man hears stories that the boy couldn’t. For instance, there’s the natives who have to deal with land thieves in their midst. There’s a strong Libertarian message that was inserted by Laura’s daughter—who played an enormous role in writing the best-known books. And there’s Pa, the absolute ruler of his family, who seems to walk a line between perfectly self-sufficient and risking the well being of his wife and kids. ‘Dome on the Prairie’ is just another example of that good SF law: Every story is made better by throwing in a ship full of aliens.”

You have one possession of consequence and that is your future and you refuse to allow others to threaten what is yours. And everyone presents threats, particularly those closest to you. Your mate calls your reasons and methods into question, and the children want to fight against your authority. Yes, every entity has the right of freedom. You tell them so and you believe that. But you are just as free to ignore wrong ideas and laziness as well as the faint sorry fears of babies too young to know what is best, and make no mistake, this family belongs to you.

Every life must prove itself.

The tiniest bug perched on a cold clod of mud must make his way through existence, working toward whatever he calls Paradise.

You are that bug, and you are standing upon an astonishing clod. Invest a moment now. Gaze at this little wild world, allowing yourself to relish everything that you have accomplished here. True, your life’s savings are exhausted. True, there were grave risks bringing your family so far and then enduring all of their stubborn nonsense. But who knew what was best? You knew. Your children have come to adore

this wilderness. The little ones in particular relish the adventure and wonder of it. And your pragmatic mate finally admits that she cannot hate this place, and in particular, she takes pleasure from watching the Sun throw its feral light across the wild waters.

Every group needs its leader, and you are the only leader here.

From the beginning, you are the one who decides what is necessary. Shelter was the first goal. But where to build? The natives are scarce and cold, but the most complicated creatures live together in primitive villages. That leaves great swaths of terrain free for the taking, and being nothing but reasonable, you selected one small parcel to serve as your home. Under your direction, the ground was torn free and shaped into rough useful blocks. Which was the children's work, of course. Setting the blocks on top of one another and fashioning the dome and doorway: That was your mate's duty. And beneath the small dome, inside a deep-water bath, you labored over the family's precious hearth.

Which kind of fire is best inside a hearth? Bottled sun-fire, of course. Steady and fierce and pure. But your savings were spent on the ship. You could bring only a few cheap tools, and the natives have proved even poorer than you when it comes to machinery. Fusion has to wait. Fission was the quicker, easier blaze, and fortunately large numbers of reactors are scattered across the landscape, badly used and often falling into ruin.

You spoke to these natives. Wishing to be honorable, you learned their language well enough to explain your goals and demands. They understood you well enough, and then they stood aside, compliantly watching while you claimed an unused reactor, carrying away its containment vessel and the auxiliary structures that fit nicely inside your half-built dome.

That job done, you returned to the wilderness in search of fuel.

Which was when the troubles began.

You have a rule: Always accept blame for your mistakes, and accept it willingly and gracefully if you can.

But only when the fault is yours.

A wide range of nuclear materials were scattered about the landscape, unused and frequently neglected. Gathering up the bottled wastes was a charity, as was claiming a few of the primitive spears, too. Each acquisition was done for good reasons and always with safety in mind. Yet the natives reacted badly. Perhaps you should have anticipated their sense of property, primitive as it was. But their reactions accomplished little, and then the drama was finished. And once again you explained what didn't require explanations: You are a noble pioneer and the master of your house, and your first responsibility is to your family. That's why you crossed the Great Emptiness. That's why you claimed a tiny portion of this cold unproductive world. And that was why you grabbed up a few bits of trash. What you are building is a better world for everyone. Everyone. And besides, you proved that the natives can't hurt you. So why did they bother fighting against you? Because they are fools. Foolish and simple and very weak, and you made those judgments plain to the silly leaders hiding inside their silly bunkers.

About this incident, your mate didn't approve. She rarely approves about very much, but particularly that final meeting with the native leaders. Your tone was too bold, too proud, she told you. The natives could and should have been managed differently. But there has always been a timetable, you reminded her. The family's rations were running low. To feed everyone, the old reactor had to be made new again. And while you love and respect her, at least as far as you can love and respect anyone, your mate can't retrofit a reaction vessel. She doesn't know how to burn plutonium and all of its byproducts. Your mate doesn't have half of the necessary skills to

reinforce the containment walls. And she certainly can't assure that every pump and widget runs flawlessly. Only you can do these wonders. Without you, the reactor's yields wouldn't have been sufficient. And they are proving more than sufficient. The reactor has reached the sweet point where a pioneering family prospers, and your mate can plan the next generation accordingly.

That is your success, no one else's. But time is short, and resources remain thin, and the primitive locals are becoming less helpful toward a project that should be welcomed by all.

Letting the natives survive today and into the future. That is a charity on your part, and a bold testament to your basic decency.

Unfortunately the brutes can't see past the ends of their silly hands. If they had vision, they would make every sacrifice to aid you and your good work, rebuilding their world and themselves as a consequence.

But nobody has your vision.

Isn't that what life teaches you and teaches you?

The reactor is reborn, and this cold little world has never known a more impressive machine. There was an incident the other day, yes. Some unfortunate spillage, accompanied by a few, very few injuries among the locals. Which is a point worth making, particularly should some authority or self-appointed tribunal attempt to charge you with a crime.

You have always done what you see as best.

Life offers no other choice.

Yet because life brings freedom and idiots abound, there will be others who will continue to do their worst and stop you.

Which cannot be allowed.

Ever.

* * *

Yeah, I remember Chicago.

We went there on vacation, my family and me. I was fourteen and thought it was nice. I saw baseball played on grass and paintings inside a museum and women working on the corners, and my sister got a fancy American Girl doll that she played with twice before stuffing it inside her giant closet, losing it behind the other expensive toys that she never liked.

My sister was a spoiled brat on her best day, and my dad thought that he was smarter than everybody else, and Mom, poor Mom, suffered every day.

All of that happened before the Scourge invaded.

Chicago as it stands today: I know that, too.

Eleven weeks into the war, and my unit's stationed two blocks from Wrigley, inside a sealed compound. But most of our work is done down by the lake. That's where we watch the Scourge. Keeping tabs on their comings and goings. We're an Intelligence unit. Intelligence is what will win the war. Two years of college and the situation reminds me of a field trip that I took in biology. Standing in a real field, measuring a whole lot of things that I didn't understand. I also have ten years of experience hunting ducks, and this business reminds me even more about sitting in a blind. Except these ducks are ten feet long and flying without wings, and there's about a thousand of them, and any one of them could kill all of us, if only by accident.

But the Scourge that we are watching . . . they don't kill anybody.

Chicago. The city was abandoned for plenty of reasons. Because an alien starship landed across the water in Michigan, north of Benton Harbor. Because we launched three of our nukes at the Scourge, only those missiles were easily shattered, pieces dropping across northern Indiana. And if that didn't convince people to abandon the city, then there was the radioactive piss that got vented. By accident, supposedly.

That's what the main Scourge claims. It was a mistake made by our old pipes, and the wind happened to be blowing toward the west, aiming straight for Chicago, and we don't know anything about how to build good homes.

The radiation is still bad.

But it's Fukushima bad, not Chernobyl bad.

Which is why a young guy who gets tired of wearing too much gear can step out of his duck blind, walking down to the shoreline with his mask under an arm, wanting nothing but to breathe anything that tastes better than his own sour breath.

Is that against orders?

The funny thing is: No.

"We saw you," one officer told me later. "Watched you and watched them. And did you notice?"

"You watching?" I asked.

"No, not that." She had a laugh. A sad laugh, but that was better than most of the officers give us. Considering how miserable things were already, it's amazing anybody can have fun.

"Did you see the two babies studying you?" she asked.

We knew which ones were the babies, and we had pretty good ideas about gender and other parts of the family dynamics. It amazes me how many smart people there are in the world. All of them were focused on a single puzzle. But then again, nobody invaded the Earth before this summer, and humanity mobilized like never before, and I felt good being part of that.

The officer showed me the surveillance video.

Two babies, yeah. You could tell by their color, which was pale silver. And every baby is quick in the air and instantaneous when it comes to changing course. That's a question of density. One peculiar/funny thing about the Scourge? They're always the same size. Apparently they get born being that big, but instead of growing, age increases their power and mass. That's how we know which two are the parents. Because Mom and Dad were battleship-massive, denser than anything else on the Earth. Which doesn't mean they were slow. Adults can't accelerate like the kids, but they churn the air with lightning and plasmas, laser flashes and I don't know what else.

Like I said, I had only two years of college.

The officer froze the day's video, pointing. "We've dubbed this one 'Laura,'" she told me.

"Okay," I said, laughing nervously.

"For Laura Ingalls Wilder. The girl who went to the prairie with her family, back in the middle 1800s. Ever read those books?"

"No, ma'am."

"Well, somebody in Intelligence did, and they think they're clever. But here's the important thing, Corporal. What really matters. Laura and Carrie were watching you."

"Carrie?"

"That's the other one. But it's the older, denser sister that acted curious about you. And that's why we think she's the best candidate to approach."

Her rambling comments didn't answer much. But I pieced parts of it, on my own. Not doing too badly with my little bit of college.

"You want me back on the beach," I guessed.

"And see if you can get the girls' eyes again."

I had trouble thinking about them that way. The size of cars, shaped like tear-drops, each fueled by energies beamed straight out of a breeder reactor that had been built by the son of a bitch who was living in everyone's backyard. Nothing about that sounded appealing.

I laughed for a lot of reasons.

“Yeah?” the officer coaxed.

“I never read the books. But Mom read them to my sister, something about a sod house and Indians, and there was some girl named Laura in the story.”

“So you have sisters, do you?”

“One.”

“You get along with her?”

“Never.”

That verdict deserved a good long nod. “By the way. If you can catch Laura’s eye—”

“Eye?”

“Or whatever. Let her come close. Don’t run away or act scared. Okay? We have a plan.”

“I’m going to catch her?”

“I wish, but no. No. But we think you can help us talk to her.”

The Scourge language was fiercely quick, and I didn’t see how anybody could have deciphered it in just eleven weeks. But then again, the world had been invaded and nothing else mattered. We were one dumb species, but with every tool and every wit at our disposal, all focused on the same problem.

“I’m going to talk to an alien,” I said, unable to laugh anymore.

“We’ll see,” she said.

Then I said, “‘The little dome on the prairie.’ Is that what we’re calling the Scourge house?”

She looked at me.

She looked down at her hands.

“Fuck,” she said. “There’s nothing little about that fucking monstrosity.”

* * *

You want to understand why you like water. Why do you stare at the cold lake and the bits of cold water living inside the lake, and why are you fascinated by the water that stands on its own, moving by various slow means, struggling to cross the face of this frigid little world?

Every affection has some good reason. Doesn’t it?

“A good reason or you are doing life wrong,” Father would say. If you asked him. But not today. He is too busy to bother with questions, particularly obvious questions. Today and for a lot of days Father has been impatient and focused, and it would be wrong of a child, particularly a child as young as you, to distract your leader with trivial concerns.

But sisters and brothers are always eager to supply answers. Some of them remind you that your ancient ancestors were liquid of one kind or another, and so of course you like the idea of the water. Others claim that young and simple minds, like yours, are drawn to the most useless things. Except water isn’t useless, others say. They talk about the hydrogen mixed with the useless oxygen. Hydrogen is fuel. Fuel is what feeds everyone and warms everyone and makes life possible. That’s why Father is planning to build a new hearth next year. Your oldest brothers are getting ready to help him. To that end, they’re preparing tools and talents, and they are the ones to say that you should worship the water, because that is what will kindle the next thousand years of your wonderful life.

Those are the kinds of answers given to you, and none of them satisfy. So you ignore everyone and ask yourself the same questions instead. That’s when you realize that you prefer walking water to the clean dead water because it is prettier. You see the slight hold life has on those objects, and that makes them a little bit precious. That these simple cold sacks have any resemblance to your ancestors is incredible, which is another reason for amazement. There is an enormous gap between little

them and little you, unbridgeable and ludicrous. Yet isn't it fun to think that they will eventually grow into becoming some good thing resembling you?

Here is the central reason why you like the water-infused life.

You can imagine their future. Particularly a glorious future for the two-legged, two-handed beasts. They are the ones likeliest to match the marvels that a silly child like you takes for granted.

These new thoughts need to be shared. You particularly want Father to feel proud of you. But he is busy making plans, and that's why it is smarter to talk to Mother. The best strategy is to approach Mother when she is happy, and her only truly happy moments come when she is lavishing attention on the next generation.

Babies are being built under the reactor. There are hundreds of them and each looks like the parents, except for flourishes and variations that are no one else's. Each baby is intended to be unique. Each will be eager to be born. You find Mother singing to your future sisters and brothers, and that makes you smile.

She notices you and says, "You."

Everyone is named You. Everyone else is someone else, not You. Only tiny codes divide "You" from all of the others, and she repeats your code when she says, "You."

Mother sees a daughter who might be her favorite. But even the despised child feels loved and worshipped, and beautiful, and wise. That is, if that child has a good mother like yours.

You feel important enough to summon your courage, and courage lets you mention these odd fond feelings about the water.

But then Mother says, "I love water too."

"Is that so?" you ask. "And why?"

She describes the dance of sunlight across a lake. But not this lake. That water existed on a distant world, and she brings up the memory of being younger than you. She was such a baby that she weighed practically nothing, and wanting to have baby fun, she flew fast and threw herself against that long-ago lake. The water bent and then pushed back at her. That was how she skipped and danced like the sunlight skips and dances, and she says it is too bad that you are too heavy for that game. But she shares her fun with you, and you appreciate what she gives freely.

You have great affection for this mother.

Father is a different matter. That's why you don't mention him, and maybe that is why she avoids speaking about him too.

You and she hover together, watching the ancient, proven plans build the babies' shells. Speaking to your mother and to yourself, you promise to take your little siblings outside, letting them skip across the cold lake.

"Oh not this lake," Mother says instantly.

You want to know why not.

She says, "As soon as your father has the proper tools, the next hearth will be built. Sun-fire will feed us and warm the world, and the lake's hydrogen will be stripped from its water and stored for later or for never. We need to guarantee that the family has plenty of fuel close, ready to use."

Mother is saying quite a lot.

Does she realize what she is telling you?

"That other lake," you say. "The one you danced across. Did it become fuel?"

"Of course it did, yes," she says.

You listen, and you ache.

Then she says what your siblings say. "The Universe is fuel, and fuel exists to be burned," she explains. "There is no point denying that truth."

Mother doesn't deny any truth, but she isn't happy. In her words and in her careful voice, you hear quite a lot being said.

You thank her for her time and shared thoughts.

Like a good daughter, you leave without troubling her anymore.

It is easy to imagine how the lake will look drained and dry. And what about the water living beside the lake? You hear Father's voice. You hear him telling you, "These beasts are scarce and ride on legs and inside ridiculous machines, and slow as they are, they can go anywhere else. This is an empty wilderness world, and we will take very little, and everything will be better because of us."

One drop of cool but not cold water is standing beside the doomed lake. You recognize its features. The creature was standing there yesterday too. But you stare at him again, as if for the first time.

* * *

Going in, the generals felt they should tell me that I was the priority mission and they expected nothing less than success, and having run out of clichés, they handed me over to the experts. And the first thing the experts said to me, in all honesty, was that they didn't know batshit. That was their combined opinion, hard-won and pure, and I might as well do whatever I thought was best and expect nothing. What I was expecting was trying to talk to an alien we were calling female for a lot of reasons, none of them necessarily smart. I said that. I did. And they laughed, handing me over to the tech boys and girls. Who were the ones who really got me scared, by the way.

"This is your machinery," they said.

I had a high-end stereo system rejiggered to suit the girl's ears. Assuming she had ears and that she was a girl and such. And I had a microphone that would hear every sound I made, including heartbeats and farts. And headphones to feed me everything that got translated, which might be nothing.

One of the techies was standing beside me on the beach. "This is your glass leading straight back to the Internet," she said.

The "glass" was a giant cable covered in rubber. I couldn't believe the size of that business.

"Because there's so much data." She was looking at me but wanting to get away. As soon as possible. "Didn't they tell you, Corporal?" she asked. "Half of the world's computers are going to be focused on the two of you. Nothing else."

See why I got scared? Everything was riding on me now.

She wasn't pretty or anything. Just a woman looking tiny inside a radiation suit. But I didn't want her with me when I pissed my pants. So I said, "Leave," and then I said, "Please," and bless her, she started to run as best as she could.

Laura.

I kept telling myself that was the alien's name. Except it wasn't.

"Laura," I said quietly, as if I might throw out the name in conversation.

What in hell would I talk about? I didn't have one good clue. But I pretended to work at the problem, right up until my new girlfriend came flying in from Michigan, low and quick.

Supersonic, then dead still.

I got knocked over by the air being pushed ahead of her. She was red from friction and then she turned silver again. A teardrop or a raindrop or whatever. I didn't know what to say. Silence seemed like the reasonable strategy. But all of a sudden, on its own, my mouth said, "I like your shape."

Idiot words, but an army of computers jumped to work, translating my gibberish into something she would understand.

A couple seconds later, my stereo system gave one little bark.

The Scourge live a thousand times faster than us. Even their little kids are quicker than our best machines, at least as far as thinking processes go. But my girl sure took her time coming up with a reaction.

Ten seconds later, she made a sound. And after a couple second delay, I heard the translated words, "Thank you."

I started to laugh, relieved to get this far.

But then she asked, "What about my shape attracts you?"

Shit, I didn't expect that.

"When I was a kid," I muttered.

And hesitated.

Out from the speakers came a growling rasp and a wild squeal, both finished in an instant.

This wasn't helping. So I made myself talk. My plan, which wasn't any real plan, was to yabber hard for as long as I could manage. "When I was young, very young," I said, "I would watch the rain running down my bedroom window, and I wished I could flow like the water and all. You know?" The stereo was belting out noise, and I kept pushing out the words. "I wanted to be a raindrop flowing down, merging with my neighbors, becoming something bigger in the end. Like a river, an ocean. Something huge and neat."

That's when she interrupted.

"Age makes you larger," she said.

"Yeah, we grow a little bigger when we grow older," I said.

"Which is normal for what you are, being water," she said.

"And you're a little weird to us," I said.

Underplaying her strangeness. That felt best.

Then she said, "Life." Nothing else.

I waited.

If she was thinking quickly, then we marched through a very long silence. Several seconds passed before she spoke again.

"Life is usually more like me than like you," she said.

"Is that true?" I asked.

Her body changed color. Not so that I noticed, not at the time. But later, watching the recordings and the tiny accurate and very quick measurements of color, I could see what the experts thought was important.

"I am always honest," she said.

My new girlfriend.

"Fact destroys the lie," she said.

"Good rule," I offered.

She said nothing.

So I said, "My father taught me some rules. And my mother, too."

"When you were smaller," she said.

"Yes," I said.

I said, "Family." For no reason, except that seemed to be the subject of the moment. Then I said, "The others, the lightweight raindrops . . . we think they're your brothers and sisters. Is that right? Is that how I should look at them?"

"Yes," she said.

At least that's what our computers decided she had said.

"I am one part of a family," she said.

"It's a huge family," I said.

"No." That word was important. She repeated it several times and then added, "We are a tiny family struggling to make a home for ourselves."

Funny how you look at things. Everything seems obvious and plain, yet at the same time you can't see anything from anybody else's point of view.

That's what I was thinking.

Or maybe I wasn't thinking at all. Maybe I was tired of this game and I wanted to

play it differently. Looking at my Laura who wasn't really called Laura, I decided to offer up a nice lie. Maybe she would catch me lying, I thought. Then the liar would be tossed aside, and I could go back to my life.

"I had a mom and a dad," I said. "Like you do."

"Not like me," she insisted.

"I had a sister too," I said. All true. Even when I added, "And I loved my sister very much."

Laura said nothing.

So I asked, "Do you know what I mean by love?"

"Yes, love is important to all of us, yes," she said.

"My family and I lived here," I lied.

"On this world," she said.

I said, "No. Here. In this city. In Chicago. But my sister and parents died after you arrived here, and that is because of you."

"I did nothing to them," she said.

"And yet my family is dried out and dead."

Silence.

"I am an orphan," I lied.

The computers had to wrestle with that word, and maybe she did, too. Or maybe she just took her time before saying, "I'm sorry for them and for you."

"How many of us are you going to kill?" I asked.

This was no little girl. Not like any I knew. She seemed tougher than anything that I expected. Because instead of being hopeful, instead of making polite, comforting noises, she told me, "My father will not stop working until he remakes this cold little world."

"Remakes us how?" I asked.

"With heat and light born from a thousand hearths," she said. "He doesn't admit it to anyone, but he thinks about nothing else."

That sounded nothing but ominous. So I asked, "What about us?"

Silence.

"What about my life?" I asked.

"I do not think you will endure for long," she admitted.

Which I sort of figured out anyway. You know?

"Your father," I said. "He isn't a happy camper, is he?"

I have no idea how the machines could have translated that. I don't know what she understood inside my question. But then she admitted to me, "No, he has never been happy, no."

That's when she floated a little closer to me. Close enough that I felt her residual heat.

"Which is why we move from world to world, making homes," she said. "My father has many talents, and one of those talents is to believe that there is a better life waiting in the next home."

* * *

Love is what you trust. But the objects you love and the souls you love aren't trustworthy. This is inarguable. You have seen and seen and seen what happens when adoration is aimed at anything that isn't You. Disappointment is inevitable, pain is frequent, and though reliving the past is a waste of time, you will do little else afterward, regretting every love that cared nothing for you.

Love itself is the only emotion that remains strong and true, and it always finds a new aim, leaving you helpless in its sway.

One of your daughters is younger than most of the children, and at present, she is brighter than all of your children ever were. Yet she is so odd. She believes in the

most peculiar ideas. But what scares you are the ordinary thoughts that she refuses to hold. The common and accepted ideas. And for some reason this is the offspring that you love most.

Say it.

She reminds you of yourself as a little girl.

But only in limited ways. The enthusiasm for life, the passions about beauty. Otherwise she is nothing like you, but instead she is very much her father's daughter. The two of them have no common beliefs, but each is capable of the same devotion toward what they do believe.

That is what you think in your secret places, and it happens every time that you speak to her.

Today the two of you talk about water.

You talk about fire.

Then you return to working with the empty shells, and the daughter returns to the wilderness, presumably to play. Each shell wears a unique name. But when they are made alive, in a few days, names will be cast aside, and all will wear the common You.

All of them are lovely, like unfinished babies should be.

Then in the next moment, the shells have turned repulsive, vile.

Something is wrong.

What is so terrible here?

You look about the lake, finding the favorite daughter hovering above the far shore and the abandoned village. One of the living waters stands on the shoreline, and he is trying to speak to her. Which is just like her, being patient with a simple beast. You want to interrupt the meeting. But she drifts away on her own, which seems good. So you return to the shells, making plans that felt happy just yesterday. A great deal of time passes before you look for the daughter once more. But she is hiding, or is she past the horizon. Neither answer means anything. You hope. Then your thoughts leap to your mate, and you find him in another part of the home, building tools that will build the next hearth, and what are you thinking now?

What is wrong is growing worse.

You know this. But not because of anything you see. Instinct whispers to you. Instinct and the expectation of trouble. Yet if a threat is lurking, your mate is oblivious, working as he always works, shaping machines around machines that any world would be proud to possess.

This wilderness should love a talented creature like him. That notion offers itself to you, and you believe it, feeling your love shifting its aim for a moment that ends when you forcing your attentions to all of those carefully named shells.

One baby is missing.

Which is amusing, in its fashion. The shell cannot fly, and you want to laugh. Even as you realize that someone has used your wandering mind to come and go again, taking what she needs for whatever is next.

Which is happening now.

The daughter you love most has carried the shell into the high atmosphere, and both of them accelerate. The daughter is light and the shell even lighter, and it is a baby's trick, passing the velocity of sound twenty times before one of them stops her furious descent.

The shell is more durable than diamond. Momentum lets it pierce the dome wall and the reactor's outermost skin, and that is as far as it gets. The shell fails, shattering into dust. No real damage done, and that's how the daughter wins everything.

She is perhaps more stubborn than her father. Arriving a moment later, she watches her father's panic, which fades, and then she watches his rage. Which doesn't

reach far enough. In the end, he might control his emotions. But then she says, “I will do this again.”

She says, “We are doing wrong and we must stop. And when I am older, I’ll do wicked tricks to save this world and its good water.”

Her father is blue-white with fury.

You know that color well.

But what follows is a light so intense that the air burns and every nearby surface bakes, and in that chaos, the daughter does nothing, knowing what will happen or not knowing. Who can guess what is inside that very peculiar mind?

Change the circumstances, and you might help to kill your daughter.

But not today. Not during this awful moment. Not with every wisp of your love aimed at the two of them. This is why you act in ways you couldn’t have envisioned. Like a watcher of events, you see a furious mother who streaks out of the nursery and collides with her mate just as he is about to launch his assault.

Every object withers under love. But you save what you love most by carrying your mate through the dome’s wall and through the sky, both of you plunging into the middle reaches of that cold clean lake which boils agreeably around you, choking the rage until you are cool and he is cooler than you.

And now you know what both of you have long suspected:

You are the stronger one.

Which is the perfect moment to inform him how life will be now and until the end of time.

* * *

We were talking, and then what happened?

She flew away, leaving me standing there, eating radiation, steeling myself for the long wait before my generals decided to invite me back inside again. A lot of craziness was happening, but I didn’t see it. My first clue was the giant mushroom cloud rising out of Lake Michigan, followed by earthquakes and thunder. Then the ground had barely stopped rolling when word arrived. Every sensor and every drone was telling the same story. The Scourge were moving fast, loading up their starship, and in two minutes they were gone.

I was the hero or I wasn’t the hero. It seemed possible that what happened between those two aliens—the battle and the aftermath—happened for its own good reasons. In that case, nobody needed to be thanked. But people like heroes and that’s why I got good at shaking hands and throwing out smiles, plus fielding all sort of invites to bed. And there were meetings with presidents and scientists, and I sat through a lot of news programs where I was expected to offer good words for the brave generals who sent me off to die.

And yeah, I was one of the first ten thousand to get a tour of the famous dome.

By then it was pretty much established that my conversation with Laura triggered everything. Whatever “everything” was. And I have to say, the dome was way better than I imagined. A palace and a marvel. Just the walls themselves, earth and stone pressed into a kind of glass bricks that glow with their own light and that are going to be used in human buildings, soon as we figure out the trick. And the interior was stuffed with machines that still worked and machines that were half-done but begging to be finished, and there were plans for what looked like multiple fusion reactors. Meanwhile the breeder reactor was chugging along at about 8 percent capacity, yet still cranking out enough juice for half of North America. And in the basement beneath, in that place we dubbed the Nursery, sat almost a thousand empty shells.

What did I think about the alien house?

I get that question a lot. At Thanksgiving, for instance. Back home with the family, not more than fifty cameras watching us through the windows. My sister was my

best friend ever, asking her famous sibling what it was like to stare at those empty shells, knowing how the aliens would have been born sooner or later, our world on its way to being obliterated in a flood of fire.

That's the way she said it.

"Obliterated in a flood of fire," she called it.

I said nothing for a minute.

Then I said, "That doll of yours."

"What's that?" she asked.

"The doll our folks bought you in Chicago," I told her. "Where is it now? Do you have any idea?"

She gave me a funny look, wondering why the conversation had moved in an unexpected direction.

"But it doesn't matter where the doll is," I said. "Because really, it's just plastic with a plastic face. No matter how many hundreds of dollars it cost."

"Okay," she said.

Then I said, "It's a real girl I'm worried about. So why don't we talk about something else, okay?"

* * *

You slept during the long journey, and Mother woke you when you arrived. Your new home is a civilized place inside the atmosphere of an old star. Accommodations are small. Your family is close, and trillions of neighbors are nearly as close as your siblings. Father doesn't like this life and says so, and Mother often tells him to be quiet and he can do that, too. For a little while he will say nothing, doing the routine work that pays nothing beyond what it takes to feed so many children who won't be grown up for a very long time.

You were never Laura.

Explained to you, the name would seem useless and preposterous. But certain portions of the human girl's history might ring true.

In this new realm, surrounded by so many children, you come across a few who are curious and adventurous and smart. Like you. And learning how you once lived in a wilderness, they ask if you ever think about that place.

When they ask, you think about nothing else.

And when you tell the stories, nothing matters to you but the wild sun and the water that talks and the house you helped build beside the cold lake.