

MATILDA

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USA Today bestselling author Kristine Kathryn Rusch <www.kristinekathrynrusch.com> recently returned to a number of editing projects. The endeavor closest to her heart is *Women of Futures Past*, an anthology that will appear later in 2016 from Baen. “Too many younger SF readers have no idea that women have been influential in the SF field as long as the field has existed.” Kris is trying to correct that lack of information, first with this book, and then with other projects. She has a website <womeninsf.com>, which features guest blogs from women in the field. Readers who have come to expect strong and fascinating female characters in Kris’s own work will not be disappointed by the two who take on an alien battle cruiser in . . .

MATILDA

i

Devi ran for the single ship. It was cradled in the docking bay, like a hammock rolled up against a wall. The single ship liked her the best. Like a ship’s cat—always liking the one that hated it.

But she piloted the single ship better than anyone else. LaFayette said that was because the symbiosis worked with her and the single ship. LaFayette claimed to know. He’d parented half a dozen single ships in his day, raising them from a traumatized nub of consciousness to something large and glorious and thoughtful.

Or at least, that’s what he believed. He loved single ships, and dreamed of piloting one some day. But piloting one permanently meant giving up other relationships for a single relationship—bonding with a ship and not another person, and LaFayette was an extrovert. He loved his crew. He loved his warship, the *Yue Fei*.

He loved Devi, even though she wasn’t supposed to know that.

Devi found single ships creepy. This one rolled itself out of its protective cover the moment it heard her footsteps, sensed her presence, tracked her movements—whatever the hell it did to figure out she was there. She had no idea how it tracked her and she never asked.

Just like she never asked why the thing liked her. She could barely bring herself to say its name when she spoke to it. *Matilda*. Who the hell named a ship *Matilda*?

Devi knew the answer to that: the ship picked the name itself. Single ships had gigantic naming rituals, with champagne and humans in full dress uniforms and—

The single ship's door irised, revealing the dark interior. Devi could smell the talc and humidity, turning her stomach.

God, she hated that single ship. And she had to clear that thought before she got to the ship, because it just might know. Single ships weren't empathic, but some of them had the same level of intuition that other humans did. She never knew if the *Matilda* was one of those, but only because she never asked.

Devi braced herself, then dove into the iris, wincing as she did. The single ship closed around her, cradling her. Good single ship pilots—the ones who actually loved the single ship experience—said it was like being back in the womb.

Not that she could remember being in the womb. Forty-five years from her mother's womb, she had no memory of it at all—and she hadn't opted to have those memories revived. Humans were designed to forget their first few years of life. There was a reason for that, if you believed the Universe had some order to it, which she did.

She did.

The single ship wrapped around her, warm and pulsing and much too soft. She hated all the fake organics, the way that the single ship's interior was supposed to mimic the touch of human skin. Cilia brushed against her face, making her cringe.

She didn't use the thought-link, carefully keeping that off, even though time was of the essence. Nor did she greet the single ship. The damn thing always forgot that Devi wanted nothing to do with the touchy-feely experience, so she had to remind it and take control immediately.

"I need standard ship setup," she said against the pulsing warmth, trying to prevent herself from shuddering. "Now."

The entire single ship rose and fell, almost like a sigh, and then the interior altered. The *Matilda* never formed a standard ship's interior, even though the single ship lived on the *Yue Fei* and could see what an actual bridge looked like.

Instead, the single ship created a gigantic bubble around Devi, round and smooth, a bubble that felt like the interior of a normal ship. A chair rose out of the middle, even though she probably wouldn't use it until she absolutely needed to. A floating visual panel moved from surface to surface, so that she could see the exterior of the single ship if she needed to.

The nav panel rose in front of the chair, last, as if the single ship were reluctant to give over to Devi's demands.

"We've got to move fast," Devi said, more to herself than to the single ship. "*Matilda*, are you ready?"

Devi didn't wait for the ship's response, because if she waited, then she would have second thoughts and flee the damn thing. Instead, she slammed her hands onto the nav panel. It wasn't solid, like a nav panel should be. It was never solid, and she *hated* that.

Instead, it felt like warm jelly. Her hands slipped into it—her entire body could slip into it if she wasn't careful—and she had to hold herself upright to make sure the jelly only enveloped her up to the wrists. The warmth made sweat break out on her forehead almost instantly, and the not-quite-slimy feel of the jelly turned her stomach.

She swallowed against the bile that rose in her throat and made herself concentrate.

And then it came: that sneaky sense that someone was watching her. *Matilda* had entered her brain.

Devi immediately shut down all of the thought links except the one that allowed communication. Over the two years she had reluctantly piloted the *Matilda*, she had learned which links fed the single ship too much information and which links kept the communication pure.

She wanted the single ship to take orders and do nothing else.

Devi sent the entire mission to *Matilda*, along with a memory of the conversation she'd had with LaFayette. She hated doing that: no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't scrub memories of personal stuff. But it was a faster, more efficient way to communicate—information dump at the speed of thought, not in a conversation that brought *Matilda* up to speed.

An image flashed through Devi's brain:

The bridge of Yue Fei, big enough for fifteen, usually piloted by an efficient crew of five. Empty stations scattered around the sides of the bridge (yes, Matilda, the damn thing looks like an elongated bubble: So I'm wrong. So your bubble is somewhat accurate. Shut up and concentrate), LaFayette tall in the center of the bridge, the miniature holographic ships floating around him like toys, blank gray spots where the warship's sensors lacked information.

An entire battle unfolding around them, reds and greens and purples of ships exploding, mostly unmanned scout vessels on a pre-programmed path.

"They're protecting something," he says to Devi. "Those blank spots in our sensors. Even the scouts that have gone in that direction can't report anything back. If they make it back."

He looks at her, gray eyes somber. She feels—

She slammed off the feeling when she realized that *Matilda* was deliberately drawing it out. Instead, Devi flicked her fingers inside the jelly, reminding *Matilda* that there were chips in the pads of her thumbs, chips that had all of the *Yue Fei's* information on the situation.

"We're going," Devi said out loud, partly because the silence inside a single ship sometimes drove her crazy.

Okay—honesty—silence inside *this* single ship drove her crazy.

Matilda acknowledged Devi's order with what felt like a mental bow. Devi couldn't describe that any better. She just knew it was a formal acknowledgement, almost mocking.

Then the *Matilda* oozed away from her storage spot on the wall. Devi could feel *Matilda* bend and slide, like some kind of worm. That bile rose again, and Devi swallowed it back.

"Exteriors," Devi said sharply. It was a reminder, because *Matilda* hated turning on the exterior views. *Matilda* wanted to control how Devi got the information, and Devi didn't want her to.

Devi didn't want a symbiotic relationship. She wanted to pilot a damn scout ship, or remain safely on board the *Yue Fei*, handling navigation or information control there.

But she knew she had to be here. Someone had to slide a single ship into the battlefield. LaFayette believed the single ship was the only scout that would work against the enemy right now. Most of the CeaWayLaV's sensors didn't read single ships as human vessels at all.

The CeaWayLaV read the single ships as alien entities, sentient in their own right, unimportant in the long war that the humans and CeaWayLaV were fighting along the Fringe.

The warship *Greer* had discovered that fact accidentally, when one of its single ships let itself out of the ship storage bay, without waiting for a pilot. The single ship thought itself heroic, and decided to take down a CeaWayLaV battle cruiser all on its own. The single ship had wormed its way inside the battle, not seen, not even noticed, and attached itself to the side of the battle cruiser, about to send a laser pulse, when the battle cruiser emitted cleanser to clear off space debris.

The single ship melted, but not before sending all of its information back to the *Greer*, including some of the sensory data gleaned from the CeaWayLaV battle cruiser.

er in the five seconds before the battle cruiser deployed the cleanser.

None of the warships on the Fringe had more than two single ships. Generally speaking, the military didn't trust them, thought them too touchy-feely for regular use.

Single ships were mostly rescue vehicles, not to get the crew off the warships, but to get word to the nearest base or battalion that one of the ships, or an entire fleet of ships, was in trouble.

But in the last six months, the methodology of single ships had changed. They were being used in situations like this one.

This was the fifth mission that Devi had taken with *Matilda* to gather information usually reserved for scout ships.

The missions excited *Matilda*. They annoyed Devi. She felt like she was fighting the single ship, instead of fighting the CeaWayLaV.

And then Devi realized that thought leaked from her brain to *Matilda*. (Had Devi done it deliberately? She wasn't sure. She was passive-aggressive enough to do so, especially when she was this angry. She tried to tamp down anger when she was on a mission, but dammit, why did *she* have to be the one to pilot the single ship? Why couldn't *Matilda* like someone else? Why did a goddamn ship have to like its pilot in the first place? And what the hell was wrong with *Matilda* that she liked Devi when Devi hated her? And why was Devi calling *Matilda* "her" when Devi knew, *knew* the damn ship was an it. There was nothing female about it—except that ships were traditionally considered female.)

The thoughts lingered, and as they did, Devi could feel *Matilda* brace herself (*itself*, dammit) for argument. Devi shut down the argument before it started with an *I'm not interested* thought so powerful that *Matilda* couldn't miss it, even if she (*it*) wanted to.

Then the exterior screens floating around Devi flattened, creating a two-dimensional image of the warship's bay door opening. *Matilda* knew Devi hated two-dimensional images.

The games had already begun.

"Do it right, or I'll abort this mission," Devi said aloud. She wanted it on the record, not just *Matilda's* records, but the records created as a back-up by Devi's pilot chip, the one inside her elbow—far enough away from her brain so that her thoughts wouldn't touch it, and not in her finger so that *Matilda* (or some other single ship) could remove it when she immersed her hands in the nav panel.

The screens fluttered out, actually disappeared, and Devi took her hands away from the nav panel. She turned, hoping the door iris would open (she had a constant fear that the door wouldn't open one day), and then the screens reappeared, three-dimensional, showing *Matilda* as she approached the bay doors.

The blackness of space beckoned in the distance, but the area around the bay door was bright from the ship's lights. Devi knew that when she traveled into that blackness, space would be brighter than she expected. There was so much ambient light, plus the lights from the ships she would follow or attach to.

But right now, it all seemed dark and sinister and frightening. She frowned, feeling the oddness of her reaction.

She loved space. She loved being out here away from land. She loved the openness and the possibility.

Which meant—

"Dammit," she muttered. "*Matilda*, stay out of my head."

She knew that emotions leached both ways, but she always refused to believe that a single ship's emotions were even relevant. Single ship pilots were taught to calm their ships, but Devi hadn't been trained as a single ship pilot.

Besides, she never calmed her human crew when she was heading into a difficult

situation. Why the hell should she calm a damn ship?

“Fact-finding mission,” she said aloud. “We’re on a fact-finding mission.”

IN A WAR ZONE, *Matilda* sent back in actual words.

“Welcome to military service,” Devi said. “You can be a military scout ship or you can go back to search-and-rescue missions. Your choice, but make it right now. And I’m recording all of this, so you can’t blame me for your decision.”

She could feel the single ship attach to the bottom of the bay. The doors were open.

The damn ship was clinging to the edge like a child preparing for her first space walk. Apparently, the excitement of being a military vessel had worn off for *Matilda*.

“You’re leaving the *Yue Fei* vulnerable,” Devi said, and sent an image of a laser pulse hitting the open bay doors as explanation. “In or out. You can’t be indecisive.”

She was hoping for in. She would take one of the remaining scout ships and find out exactly what was going on then, and she wouldn’t have to deal with the scout ship’s fears and emotions.

Then *Matilda* rolled. The bubble interior remained in place, but *Matilda* had left the edges of the bubble clear. The wall outside of the bubble rotated, making Devi dizzy.

How many times had she explained to this stupid ship that she needed a solid focal point? The human brain was different from the ship’s brain. The human brain needed to remain grounded. The human brain needed—

The clear bubble walls darkened, and Devi couldn’t see the movement any longer. The exterior screens showed the single ship falling into the area outside of the *Yue Fei*.

WE DON’T HAVE WEAPONS, *Matilda* sent. She’d never been skittish about that before. Single ships weren’t supposed to be skittish about weaponry. Single ships went into war zones all the time.

AS APPROVED HUMANITARIAN VESSELS, *Matilda* sent. WE HAVE IMMUNITY FROM HARM.

Devi wasn’t going to argue with *Matilda* any longer. They were underway.

If they got shot, they got shot. It was one of the risks.

When they got back, Devi would recommend that *Matilda* get pulled from active duty. The ship didn’t have the *cojones* for battle.

Then Devi smiled at herself. A single ship with a female consciousness didn’t have *cojones* as a matter of course. But Devi knew what she meant.

Matilda didn’t belong out here. *Matilda* belonged in some already settled section of space, doing milk runs.

And, Devi thought before she could edit herself, that way, *Matilda* would be out of her hair.

* * *

ii

He nearly aborted the mission.

LaFayette monitored Devi’s progress in the docking bay. He knew that Devi hated the single ship, but he hadn’t expected the single ship to resist the mission.

LaFayette stood in the center of the bridge, the holographic ships floating around him. His primary staff took their stations nearby, even though they could have just as easily worked elsewhere in the ship. The staff was linked and chipped and augmented to an extent unheard of in most vessels.

Usually he appreciated that and let them work wherever they wanted to, but on this day, as he was trying to figure out what exactly was happening to the other ships in his fleet, he needed his people around him.

He already missed Devi. He didn’t quite regret sending her to *Matilda*. But he was beginning to second-guess himself.

He had thought *Matilda* would love entering battle. He hadn’t expected the delay.

Nor had he expected those thirty seconds of vulnerability as the ship lingered near the bay doors.

His stomach twisted. Devi was one of his best pilots. She was a top-rated navigator, and she had a fighter's instincts. He knew that the delay wasn't her fault.

Matilda was acting up.

Maybe Central was right; maybe single ships didn't belong on the battlefield.

Not that LaFayette had another choice.

If he had to abort the mission, he had to abort it. But he would fly blind from that moment on. The entire fleet would be flying blind.

The *Yue Fei* wasn't really military and they weren't really an official part of the military's squadrons. The military called this particular fleet a band of mercenaries, which was both insulting and inaccurate.

These ships weren't a band of mercenaries. They were a private army, staffed by the Qubing Corporation, which did hire out its services, which probably did make it mercenary in that they made money—but they made money doing things the military would never do, such as protect the Fringe.

This fleet wasn't a band, either. "A band of mercenaries" made it sound like a group of ragtag vessels thrown together by their love of killing and war. None of that was true.

No one in the staff would've failed military tests. None were in it for the money, except maybe LaFayette's chief engineer, who liked the quality of these corporate ships better than anything he got to work with on any other long-distance vessel.

This group was as patriotic as the military troops, maybe more patriotic, since they were on the frontlines, dying for something they believed in. Sure, not everyone believed, but not everyone in the military believed either. And the military got paid. Just not as much as LaFayette's people.

But then, his people were risking their lives in ways that no one else in the entire system would. They should get paid well for that.

LaFayette clasped his hands behind his back. The holographic ships floated around him, that annoying blank spot growing. He raised his head so that he could see the struggle in the docking bay continue, and he was about to give the command to end the mission when the single ship tumbled out of the bay doors.

It wasn't pretty, but as usual, Devi got the job done.

Then why wasn't he feeling relieved?

LaFayette had the awful sense he was sending her on a death mission, and he wasn't exactly sure why.

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iii

The single ship shivered, and Devi was convinced the shivering had nothing to do with the ship's function.

She had a hunch *Matilda* was shivering with fear.

Well, working in a war zone without the protection of a humanitarian mission was dangerous and frightening and never fun.

Time *Matilda* learned that, without being coddled.

Devi had forced *Matilda* to switch the exterior screens to holomages, just like the ones on the bridge of *Yue Fei*. Not only did it give Devi a sense of perspective, so space itself didn't seem two-dimensional, but it also made her feel less alone. She liked having movement in the cockpit, bridge, bubble—whatever she needed to call this thing.

The ships spread around her, encircling her as if she were another ship. *Matilda* had made her own (*its* own, dammit) image look like a cross between a sausage and

a worm. If it weren't glowing a neon blue, Devi wouldn't have noticed it at all. The image looked like a tiny speck compared to the fist-sized scout ships and the boulder-sized warships that surrounded her.

Devi continued to peer at the sensor blankness, which *Matilda* had rotated so that it was in front of Devi's face. A gray nothingness, hovering before her, promising—what? Oblivion? Death and destruction? A large ship with some kind of sensor block?

Devi had no idea and she wasn't going to guess. Guessing often caused errors, because the human pilot had expectations of what she would find.

Devi wanted to have no expectations. *Matilda* had started to nervously speculate the moment they moved toward the blank area, but Devi shut her (*it*) down.

They were still communicating, albeit sullenly. Devi could swear that the nav panel was warmer than it had been before, and the jelly-goo-like substance that composed it had gotten stickier.

She hoped it was her imagination; otherwise, *Matilda* was as passive-aggressive as Devi was.

Devi only had one worry as they approached that sensor blankness. Not too far from it, a CeaWayLaV warship hovered. The ship was a typical CeaWayLaV design: spread out on a dozen levels, with no obvious central core, the ship looked to the human eye like it had already exploded.

No human had ever boarded a CeaWayLaV warship, so no one knew the exact layout. Humans thought they had discovered the layout when they recovered the first abandoned ship nearly fourteen years ago, but they had been wrong. The second abandoned ship had a completely different internal structure.

Scientists who worked for Central believed that the CeaWayLaV could alter the layout of the ship at a whim. The upper levels could move to the middle, the tubing between sections could expand into a full section and a section could become tubing.

That was why, the scientists speculated, the CeaWayLaV warships were so hard to destroy.

Devi accepted that. She even accepted that she personally would never ever harm one of those ships. She didn't want to be the first to board or even to see one of the CeaWayLaV ships' interiors.

She approached the CeaWayLaV ships as a curiosity, and nothing more.

And this one was curiouiser than most.

Larger, more spread out, and newer, if the information *Matilda* provided was accurate. The CeaWayLaV ship was five times bigger than any other Devi had seen.

She was trying hard not to speculate that the large ship was causing the blankness in the sensors, but the thought had gone out. Devi could feel the moment *Matilda* latched onto the idea, and sure enough, *Matilda* made a comment almost immediately.

WHAT IF THE BLANKNESS IS DESIGNED TO LURE US IN? *Matilda* asked.

Devi closed her eyes, felt the annoyance surge, tried to wish it away, and knew it was already too late. Damn working with a single ship.

"If it were designed to lure us in," Devi said, "then the CeaWayLaV don't understand humans. Generally, we run from something we don't know."

NOT THE HUMANS THEY'VE ENCOUNTERED, *Matilda* sent. THOSE HUMANS ARE LIKE YOU. STRONG AND BRAVE AND FEARLESS.

Devi paused. *Matilda* saw her that way? Devi did a gut check. She really wasn't afraid. She was annoyed at doing the job without her usual tools. She was angry at the loss of privacy. But she wasn't afraid.

She couldn't remember the last time she was afraid.

"Good point," Devi said. She opened her link just a little, because she didn't want to have a full verbal discussion. Or maybe she just didn't want to say aloud that

Matilda was right.

The people who inhabited the Fringe, who fought against the CeaWayLaV, were a lot more like Devi than they were like the average human. Even the average soldier had to be told to go into battle, and felt a bit of fear while doing so.

Devi had an adrenaline rush, one of the reasons the military wasn't sure she was for them. They felt she might be reckless, might not follow orders, might make really bad decisions for really terrible reasons.

Once she had joined LaFayette's team, she had never disobeyed an order. She followed them with strict precision, even when she disagreed (like she had about the single ship). She got angry—who wouldn't get angry at an order they didn't like?—but she never acted on that anger.

She had behaved professionally, she had done her job, and she had done it with enthusiasm.

Was that what *Matilda* was calling "brave"?

Devi could feel *Matilda*, hovering at the edge of her thoughts. *Matilda* was right; the CeaWayLaV had only seen the mercs, never any regular humans.

Devi peered at the blankness floating before her, a gray area that blocked the solid bubble wall. She could, if she wanted to, touch the entire holographic image of the fight going on around her, and rotate it.

Mostly she ignored it, the little flames of red as another ship got hit, or as a laser pulse crossed the darkness between vessels. The actual fighting felt unreal to her; it had always felt unreal to her. She couldn't hear it or taste it or see it in real time.

She'd been on ships in battle, but her actions had always involved giving and receiving orders. Even when the ship she was on got hit, the damage would happen somewhere other than the bridge.

The bridge was always protected, often a ship in and of itself, and able to flee if things got too bad.

She had all of these thoughts in an instant, turning them over and over in her head, and coming back, yet again, to the sharpness of *Matilda's* analysis.

From the CeaWayLaV perspective, humans rushed toward something they did not understand. They didn't shy away from it.

But what would the CeaWayLaV be trying to lure? They could scan the regular ships. They knew what those ships were and how the ships behaved.

What did the CeaWayLaV need to know?

ME, *Matilda* sent. THEY NEED TO KNOW ME.

"Shit," Devi said. *Matilda* was right. "We need to abort. We need to abort right now."

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iv

The *Matilda* vanished into the sensor blankness. LaFayette felt slightly dizzy, realized he had stopped breathing, and forced himself to exhale.

He had a strong sense that he should have ordered them to return.

But he hadn't, and now he couldn't contact them.

He hoped the trip was going to be worthwhile.

He glanced at his team. Five were bent over their workstations. Three had holographic screens floating in front of them, as if they could see better on their personal devices.

The nav team stood, backs braced against the bar behind them so that their posture remained perfect. LaFayette had learned long ago that a team that stood most of the time got fatigued less than a team that sat.

The nav team monitored movement on their own private screens, but their hands

moved along the panels in front of them, unbelievably fast.

Devi usually didn't use an assistant. Nor did she get lost in her private screen. She would talk to him as the work continued, a running layer of chatter that usually soothed him.

Damn the *Matilda*. He shouldn't have cared who the single ship liked or wanted as a pilot. He should have kept Devi here.

That was where his single ship mentoring got in the way of his command. He hadn't been thinking of what was best for *Yue Fei*. He had been thinking about what was best for *Matilda*.

No one else on the bridge seemed to even notice that the *Matilda* had vanished into the sensor blankness. Maybe no one else even cared.

He shouldn't have cared either—not in this way. This deep emotional moment, this moment of doubt. He'd learned long ago that a commander shouldn't second-guess his own orders. It only led to madness.

And madness did not belong in command.

He squared his shoulders and made himself take one more deep breath.

Devi could handle herself. And the *CeaWayLaV* had no idea what single ships were.

His two crewmembers—woman and ship—would be fine.

Or so he hoped.

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v

WE'RE BEING TOUCHED, *Matilda* sent.

"Touched?" Devi kept her hands lightly in the nav goo. She'd never heard *Matilda* use that word before. "Not probed?"

TOUCHED, *Matilda* sent.

They had turned around. They were headed back to *Yue Fei*, but they found themselves deep inside the sensor blankness. Devi was convinced that the blankness had moved, but *Matilda* told her otherwise. At least that was what her sensors said.

But Devi wasn't sure they could trust the sensors. After all, the sensors had "read" the sensor blankness and now they were in it. Devi half expected *Matilda's* sensors to blank out, but they hadn't. However, a single ship was very different from other ships. More organic, with hardware that could change according to the pilot's preferences.

Rather, Devi suddenly realized, like the *CeaWayLaV* ships. Or, at least, her understanding of the *CeaWayLaV* ships.

Maybe whatever was causing the sensor blankness was altering how they perceived what was going on around them.

Maybe it had something to do with this thing *Matilda* called being touched.

"Show me," Devi said. She braced herself, then opened all of the links to *Matilda*.

It was *Matilda's* turn to do a data dump. Devi got bombarded with sensations she didn't entirely understand.

She felt both rigid and cold at the same time. Information flitted through her mind so fast that it hurt. The back of her tongue tasted like ash and metal.

She was both inside and outside of the ship, and she *was* the ship. Devi could sense herself, small and contained, inside the ship, and see herself standing at the nav panel. She could feel her hands inside the nav panel, feel the goo against her skin and feel her skin against the goo.

She'd had this experience several times before, and early on it disoriented her. She learned to accept it and expect it, but never how to use it.

She knew that single ships with one pilot bonded with that pilot, and that pilot learned how to process all of the information that came through the ship. She also

discovered that those pilots learned how to separate themselves from the ship while still getting that information in real time.

Devi never learned how to separate herself. Devi never wanted to be a single ship's solo pilot. She took the classes but balked at the idea of bonding.

Which was how she ended up with *Matilda*, who had already been on board *Yue Fei*, unbonded, with no hope of bonding. Some ships weren't meant for bonding either.

All of that information—the thoughts, the visions, the sensations—were jumbled into one moment, the moment that *Matilda* had sent her. But Devi still didn't understand “touched.”

She let *Matilda* know that, and *Matilda* isolated a sensation. It came in hard technical knowledge, like computer data—number streams, temperature gauges, changes in chemical composition, an audio map. It didn't come to Devi in any way that she could process, and as she had that thought, she felt a light wind lift all of the hairs on her body. All of them, even those inside her clothes.

Then the hair on the back of her neck rose.

That second sensation, the hair rising on the back of her neck, had nothing to do with the light wind. The wind was *Matilda*, telling Devi what “touch” felt like.

The hair rising was an involuntary reaction to that sensation, an undercurrent of sheer terror that Devi had never experienced before.

It took another minute to realize that the hair-rising sensation wasn't her reaction. *Matilda* had felt that touch, and had responded with deep terror.

Devi wasn't sure why, and again, as she had that thought, she got an immediate answer.

There was more to the wind than that sensation of air. It felt like a conscious wind, like fingers brushing against an arm, the way that someone would touch deliberately, even after being told to back off.

The wind felt sentient, and it felt wrong.

“We have to get out of here,” Devi mumbled, then realized she had spoken aloud. She wasn't even sure those were her words.

TRYING, *Matilda* sent.

That sensation of being touched grew. Now it felt like the wind was inhaling Devi's scent, as if it lifted part of her out of her pores. She shuddered, trying to remember that this was *Matilda's* reaction, not her own.

Still, lifting an essence of her through her pores? That meant what exactly?

Then she got an image—a visual image—of a repulsive man leaning into her. He put his hands on her shoulders, and she felt them, sweaty and meaty and so strong she wasn't sure she could wriggle away. He shoved his face into the area between her neck and her chin, and took a deep breath of her.

She couldn't help but smell him, the stench of his unwashed clothes, the sharp tang of his sweat, the onion-and-coffee odor of his breath. His hair smelled of rancid meat.

She tried to pull away, but his hands held her tightly, and he inhaled again, even more strongly this time.

Her stomach was turning, and she was shivering, and she suddenly remembered that this was an image, an example, something *Matilda* was *showing* her.

“I got it, *Matilda*, I got it,” Devi said, breathlessly, the taste of this man and all of his odors on her tongue, overlaying the ash and metal at the back of her mouth.

He vanished, and she staggered backward, nearly falling against the solidity of the bubble wall.

Her heart was pounding. She ran a hand over her face.

She shoved her hands into the nav panel again, and the goo closed around her like fingers gripping her for comfort. She lifted her palms slightly, and with her right

hand, patted the goo on her left.

Now that *Matilda* wasn't giving her a firm example, Devi was calming down. That terror was doing neither of them any good.

She felt *Matilda* grow defensive, as if *Matilda* knew Devi thought something was wrong with the single ship for having such a reaction. Devi didn't care about what was right or wrong with the ship. All she cared about was leaving this sensor blankness and returning to the *Yue Fei*.

But *Matilda* wasn't moving.

WE CAN'T, *Matilda* sent. IT'S HOLDING US.

Devi couldn't process all of the information that *Matilda* was sending her. Funny that Devi was getting information in real time, but she still had to ask questions.

"Like a grappler?" Devi asked. "Or is it something else?"

I DON'T KNOW, *Matilda* wailed. Devi had never heard a ship wail before. I'VE NEVER ENCOUNTERED ANYTHING LIKE THIS BEFORE. AND WE HAVE NO WEAPONS.

That thought made Devi pause. A ship was never weaponless. It might not have conventional weapons, but it always had weapons.

Devi moved her hands before she even thought about it. She moved them as if she were working on a traditional nav panel, not the goo-encrusted thing *Matilda* made her work on.

Something had engulfed them. All it would take was a single change to break the hold.

Like the *CeaWayLaV* ship had done when it jettisoned the single ship six months before.

Devi activated the external cleaning protocol, and she made sure it didn't work in a cycle, but covered every part of the ship's exterior at the same second.

She felt the relief before it registered. *Matilda* believed the thing—the wind, the breathing man, *whatever*—was gone. The second Devi knew her trick had worked, she pushed *Matilda* forward, almost like a girl trapped in a hallway shoving the girl in front of her out a door.

The ship wobbled, then stabilized. As far as Devi could tell, they were moving forward or backward, or however she wanted to count it. Away from the blankness.

WE DID IT! *Matilda's* entire being was vibrating with joy. WE DID IT, WE DID IT, WE DID IT.

"Don't celebrate yet," Devi said. She wasn't superstitious about most things, but about this one she was. Never celebrate until victory was assured.

But *Matilda* was having none of it. She was celebrating and fleeing and probably not paying attention.

Devi had no idea how to make her pay attention. Screaming at her wouldn't work.

They just had to move, and move fast.

* * *

vi

LaFayette stared at the sensor blankness on his holomap and willed it to change. He was checking the sensor information himself, even though the members of his team had more information than he did. They could compile it faster, but he'd been asking them often enough that Avalon, his weapons specialist, looked at LaFayette sideways, one of those measuring looks that made him feel he had already been tried and convicted.

The only bad thing about a team like this, the only bad thing, was that command rank held as long as the team perceived the commander as competent and strong.

The questions LaFayette kept asking about Devi's mission made him seem weak,

at least in the eyes of part of his team.

Maybe he was weak. He was worried about one team member, although he commanded hundreds of others. And he had made a mistake with the single ship; he knew that now.

LaFayette wanted Devi to return so that the mistake wouldn't be compounded, so it wouldn't be one of those moments he would regret for the rest of his life.

He stared at the gray blankness, but it remained unchanging.

And no little blinking dot appeared, showing that the *Matilda* had escaped.

Nothing was changing at all.

* * *

vii

From what Devi could tell, based on the sensors and her own sense of distance, the *Matilda* was almost to the edge of the sensor blankness. They were almost out of it. Devi felt that trembling edge of joy, wondered if it was her emotion or *Matilda's*, and decided at that moment Devi wasn't ever going to pilot a single ship again, no matter what the orders.

The mix of emotions made it almost impossible for her to think clearly, and clarity was what a pilot needed, more than anything else.

In fact, when she got back, she'd let LaFayette know that she didn't believe anyone should take a single ship into a hostile situation without protection. The humanitarian missions worked, but they were probably a push too.

She unhooked most of the links, so that *Matilda's* emotions wouldn't bleed through, and took a deep breath, then shuddered. The deep breath made Devi think of that image, that man that *Matilda* had created, maybe from Devi's deepest memories, from her darkest fears, to let her know what the ship was experiencing.

Devi resisted the urge to brush off her shoulders. Instead, she reminded *Matilda* to put all the information back into the holoscreens. Devi liked seeing the ships ahead, in three dimensions, but silent and scentless, like little toys floating in zero-gravity. Even though the ships were still fighting, they seemed more welcoming to her than this grayness she was stuck inside.

The *Matilda* was right at the edge of the sensor blankness, almost outside of it, when Devi heard a *whoosh*. She wasn't sure where the sound came from. She heard (felt?) the sound, and the lights flickered and the bubble momentarily lost its shape.

A strange tingling sensation ran up her spine, and she was about to ask *Matilda* about it when she slammed backward against the solidity of the bubble wall, knocking her breath out of her. Devi inhaled just as the interior filled with the same goo that was in the nav panel.

Only this goo was caustic, burning, making her eyes water, and her entire body ache.

She tried to tell *Matilda* to stop it, to fix the goo, but Devi's mouth was filled with the goo, she was choking on it, she couldn't get any air, and couldn't speak, and that was when she remembered that she could contact *Matilda* through the links.

Devi slammed the links open, mentally screaming at *Matilda* to restore the interior. AIR, GRAVITY, ENVIRONMENT, WE NEED ENVIRONMENT, I NEED ENVIRONMENT, NOW *MATILDA*, NOWNOWNNOW—

But Devi wasn't getting any, not a response, not anything, except a long slow scream, a cry of anguish so painful to hear that Devi wondered for a moment if it came from within.

It didn't. It was *Matilda*.

The ship had been damaged, somehow.

Devi couldn't tell *Matilda* what to do. There were lights at the edge of Devi's eyes.

She'd experienced that before. Her vision was narrowing as her brain focused, trying to compensate for the lack of oxygen.

She was going to pass out.

Normally she would regulate her breathing, calm herself, but she couldn't breathe at all, and that thought created a huge panic inside of her. She knew that panic was hers, and it wasn't a logical panic. It was a survival panic, an about-to-die panic, and she couldn't let that win.

She couldn't let it win.

So she imagined herself regulating her breathing, calming herself without actually physically making the motions, and she opened a link to *Matilda* at the same time. Devi looped *Matilda* in, sent the images like *Matilda* had sent images of that creepy man to her, so that both she and *Matilda* could calm down.

CAN'T SOLVE ANYTHING WITHOUT CALM, Devi sent. BE CALM. CALM. WE'LL GET OUT OF THIS, IF YOU LET ME BREATHE . . .

The grayness clawed at her vision. She couldn't feel any response from *Matilda*.

Devi's heart felt like it was going to burst out of her chest, and her entire body willed her to breathe. It took the last of her strength to prevent herself from inhaling more goo.

Then she realized she was shivering against the bubble wall. Shivering. Cold. Damp. The bubble wall against her, not floating in goo.

She raised a gray goo-covered hand to her face, pinched her right nostril closed, and blew the goo out of one side of her nose as she spit the goo out of her mouth. Then, before she could blow the goo out of the other side of her nose, her body forced her into a deep life-affirming breath.

Only she choked on the goo, feeling it burn in her throat and nose. She spat again and again, then cleared out her right nostril. She took another deep breath, slowly this time, cautiously, so that she wouldn't choke on the goo.

She was alive. She hadn't expected to be alive.

She almost felt like *Matilda* had when they got rid of the whatever it was that had touched them. WE DID IT, WE DID IT, WE DID IT . . .

NO CELEBRATING, *Matilda* sent. But the words sounded wrong, warbly, as if *Matilda* were inside of some kind of echo chamber. BAD LUCK TO CELEBRATE . . .

YOU'RE HURT, Devi sent. She didn't want to ask it as a question. She didn't want a litany of *Matilda's* wounds. Just an answer. CAN YOU FUNCTION?

That low scream started again. Devi could feel it, inside her, as if the scream were coming from her.

YOU HAVE TO CALM DOWN. CALM OR WE DON'T GET OUT OF THIS. CALM.

BURNED, *Matilda* sent. NEARLY RIPPED OPEN.

Devi focused on the "nearly," not on all the questions she had, including the first and maybe most important—could single ships feel pain? She blocked the question as best she could, blocked *Matilda's* answer if there already was one, because Devi just didn't want to know. She couldn't know. She didn't dare know.

ALL RIGHT, Devi sent, making sure she felt businesslike, because if she felt businesslike, she would sound businesslike. KEEP MOVING. WE HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE.

CAN'T, *Matilda* sent. CAN'T, CAN'T, CAN'T . . .

YOUR DRIVES ARE FAILING? Devi sent. She couldn't find anything in their link to show that, although that low underlying scream was starting to drive her crazy. *Matilda* didn't breathe, so she didn't pause. She could make the sound continually.

DON'T KNOW, *Matilda* sent. CAN'T ANALYZE.

Devi cursed, and wished for an unemotional hunk of equipment. She could do that. She could yank the control from *Matilda*, run the single ship like it was a scout vessel—

No, *Matilda* sent. DON'T ABANDON ME. DON'T—

Matilda was right; the effect would be to cut the ship's consciousness from its equipment. But *Matilda* was useless right now, and Devi didn't like her choices. She could stay with a creature half crazy with pain and panic, or she could pilot the ship herself as a ship.

NO, *Matilda* sent. PLEASE . . .

Devi ignored her, separated out the thoughts, and wrested the navigational panel from *Matilda's* control. Then Devi blocked *Matilda* from any communication with the working parts of the ship.

Matilda screamed and the entire ship vibrated. Devi shut down all of her links.

She had to concentrate.

She needed to know where they were and what was happening, and she needed to know it now.

* * *

viii

"There they are!" LaFayette did not like the relief in his voice. He could see the tiny blue dot he had used to designate the single ship. It appeared at the edge of the sensor blankness, moving much too slowly.

Everyone jumped into action without him giving commands. He monitored it all, the messages sent asking for updates, the messages sent asking if they needed assistance, the queries to nearby scouts to see if they were free to assist the *Matilda*, the responses—yeses, nos, and we'll-tries.

Not a single answer from the *Matilda*. Not even an automated ping of acknowledgement.

He didn't like that. He didn't like it at all.

Then a strange movement caught his eye.

The holoimage of that giant CeaWayLaV warship shifted. It didn't leave its portion of space, exactly, but its entire shape changed. The levels altered, flattened. The tubes recessed, except for the section nearest the *Matilda*. That section pushed outward, heading toward the single ship as if it were going to capture the *Matilda*.

He sent a warning himself, then ordered his team to continue to repeat the warning message, not that there was anything he could do. The CeaWayLaV hadn't targeted a single ship before.

Something had changed, and he didn't like it.

He didn't like it at all.

* * *

ix

Devi had done something wrong. The entire communications system was down. She didn't know if she had caused that when she separated herself from *Matilda* or if whatever it was that had "burned" *Matilda* had caused it. And the ship's internal sensors were too linked to *Matilda's* consciousness to be any good without it.

Devi was screwed.

She was going to have to hope that the single ship was so small nothing noticed it, nothing wanted it. She had to hope that the attack on *Matilda* wasn't an attack meant for them, but an errant laser pulse meant for someone else.

The *Matilda* didn't have a lot of forward thrust. Whatever hit her damaged a lot of essential systems. No wonder the ship was screaming.

Devi was going to have to reroute everything, and do it fast.

She made mental priorities. She needed speed first. The ship had no weapons, as *Matilda* kept saying, but it had the ability to maneuver, if Devi could just repair that.

Or reroute it. Rerouting it was key.

The first thing she did was make all the systems visible on the nav panel, and get rid of the goo. She remade the nav panel to look like the nav panel on *Yue Fei*, just so that she could see what she was doing.

All the time she worked, *Matilda's* scream played in the background, like a particularly grating discordant note, half-in and half-out of tune. The sound made Devi's nerves raw.

Then a holoiimage appeared before her. She didn't control it; it just appeared, so she knew it had come from *Matilda*.

That giant CeaWayLaV warship was shifting. Every bit of that ship was moving to a different plane, like a hungry creature reaching for food.

Devi couldn't see what it was reaching for, and then a tiny blue dot appeared just in front of her nose.

It was reaching for them.

Or in *Matilda's* paranoia, she had redesigned the sensors to make it seem like the CeaWayLaV warship was reaching for them.

Devi shook her head, wondering if it was a distraction or —

IT'S COMING FOR US, IT'S COMING FOR US, IT'S REACHING FOR US. Somehow *Matilda* had rerouted one of their links, and she could communicate. She was communicating, and she was still screaming, or maybe that sound was a moan. A horrid, terrible moan.

Reaching for us, reaching for us . . . Those words played in Devi's head. She could disregard them, or she could accept them.

And if she accepted them, then she had to accept that the damaging laser pulse hadn't been meant for someone else; it had been meant for them, to disable them, to bring them to the CeaWayLaV warship to study.

"Help me divert everything to the engine," Devi said and thought at the same time. She gave *Matilda* a mental image of the plan—or at least, she hoped that was what she was doing.

For the first time, Devi wished she had gone for the advanced training that pilots received for their own personal single ship. Or maybe that wish wasn't hers; maybe it was *Matilda's*.

Somehow the links between them were open again, and the emotions were bleeding through, which was going to hamper Devi's work. She was trying to build new connections, only to have them altered, shifted, moved.

Devi was losing track of what she was doing—or what *Matilda* was doing. Devi thought of breaking the links again, but *Matilda* stopped her.

NEED BOTH OF US, *Matilda* sent.

Devi nodded but didn't reply. *Matilda* was probably right, which made this even harder.

Devi glanced up, saw that the CeaWayLaV warship had converted some of its connecting tubes into tendrils, and they were extending toward the *Matilda*. Those tendrils probably worked like grapplers, and they would probably take *Matilda* for study.

Panic seared through Devi at that moment, and she knew the emotion wasn't hers. "Calm," she said, but she didn't sound calm either. She sounded angry.

She probably was angry. They had gained no information in that sensor dead zone, and now, she and *Matilda* were either going to be captured or they were going to die.

NO, *Matilda* sent. SELF DESTRUCT IF IT COMES TO THAT.

And at that moment, Devi got the sense of the self-destruct mechanism and real-

ized that it reserved not just some computer space, but some power.

It was the weapon, if she wanted to use it. But she didn't, because the self-destruct didn't have enough explosive capability to take out the CeaWayLaV warship.

But it had energy, and she needed energy.

Matilda nodded, or did something that felt like a nod, or maybe she said something in agreement. The link between the two of them had become so deep now that Devi was feeling herself inside the machine.

And she realized that, even with the self-destruct, they still didn't have enough power to evade that CeaWayLaV warship.

Well, *Matilda* didn't have enough energy.

But Devi did.

Noooooooooooo, *Matilda* sent, but Devi ignored her. The shout went on and on, and Devi couldn't quite ignore it, so she had to speak, even though it would take precious seconds. *Matilda* had to *hear* her.

"They can't capture you," Devi said. "Whatever happens, you have to get back to *Yue Fei*. You're too valuable. If they compromise your systems, they can compromise more than our ships. They might be able to compromise *us*."

She wasn't sure *Matilda* understood that, so she sent a sense of it at the same time.

Noooooooooooo, *Matilda* repeated.

Devi let that long word wash over her. She imagined herself as part of the ship.

YOU'RE DOING IT WRONG, *Matilda* sent, but Devi knew she lied.

This had been part of Devi's training, albeit on the last day, as a kind of you'll-never-need-this-but-just-in-case bit of information.

I WON'T BE ABLE TO REVERSE IT, *Matilda* sent.

"I know," Devi said, and sent herself and all of her energy, her LIFE FORCE [NOOOOOOOOO!] into *Matilda*.

Devi felt her body crumple—not from the inside, but from the outside, her small frame collapsing on what she had perceived as the floor.

She felt a momentary pang, or maybe *Matilda* felt a pang, and then Devi set to work.

* * *

x

LaFayette watched as the newly formed tentacles from the CeaWayLaV warship waved their way toward the *Matilda*. He had no ships in the area, nothing he could do to help. He could only watch the holoprojection and hope like hell that something would interfere.

And then, the little blue dot that marked the *Matilda* zoomed away from the CeaWayLaV warship so fast that for a half-second, LaFayette thought the *Matilda*'s signal had vanished.

He saw her, a tiny streak of blue light, weaving her way through the scout ships and warships and the battle, still going on at the very edges of the Fringe.

He clenched a fist, willing her here.

"I didn't think single ships had that kind of speed," said one of the security team.

"They don't," said Avalon.

LaFayette bit his lower lip hard enough to taste blood.

"Are we sure that's the *Matilda*?" one of the engineers asked.

"Yeah," said Avalon.

LaFayette held his breath as the little ship's image drew closer. He glanced at the CeaWayLaV warship, still in its place near the sensor blankness. The tendrils were

floating around the area of space where the *Matilda* had been.

The CeaWayLaV warship had no idea she was gone. It couldn't read her on its instruments. Somehow it had sensed her when she was close, but now that she shot away, it couldn't follow her.

He let out that breath.

The *Matilda* was safe.

* * *

xi

Devi was surrounded by SORRY. The word popped up everywhere, as sound, as feeling, as a visual. SORRY SORRY SORRY SORRYSORRYSORRY . . .

"Stop," she said or sent or felt or thought. She wasn't sure what she was doing any longer. She only knew that the ship itself was sending a signal to *Yue Fei* to open its docking bay doors.

She had brought the *Matilda* home.

SORRY SORRY SORRY, *Matilda* kept repeating. I CAN'T FIX YOU.

Devi finally understood what *Matilda* meant, although whether or not Devi got the message through a communication or through some sense, she wasn't sure.

Her body was too far gone. It had stopped for too long. Its systems had failed.

Wait. That was computer-talk. Ship-talk. In human terms, her heart had stopped too long, she hadn't breathed in nearly an hour, and the decay had already set in. *Matilda* had no human medical training, and Devi hadn't thought to tell her to keep the body's systems pumping.

Although with all of the energy they had expended, they might not have had anything in reserve for that.

"It's all right," Devi said, thought, felt.

IT'S NOT, *Matilda* sent. I CAN'T PUT YOU BACK.

"I know," Devi sent.

AND YOU CAN'T STAY HERE. I DON'T KNOW HOW TO MAKE THAT WORK EITHER. There was an edge of panic under *Matilda's* words (or thoughts or images). She felt like she had failed. She felt like she was killing Devi.

Devi smiled, or would have smiled. She looked at her body, crumpled in what had been the bubble inside the single ship, and willed it to smile.

Of course, it didn't.

"You didn't kill me," Devi said, sent, thought. "I always wanted to die in space. In service. In action. I never wanted to grow old."

Growing old terrified me. She didn't say that last, or tried not to, but she had lost control of her own thoughts.

And she had finally found the source of what LaFayette had called her "remarkable courage." She hadn't been afraid of anything she had done here.

She had been afraid of losing her abilities, of growing old, and lonely, and useless.

I DON'T WANT YOU TO DIE, *Matilda* said, sent, felt. PLEASE. DON'T DIE.

"Everything dies," Devi thought. *Everything. And this is dying, this fading away, this loss of self, of consciousness.*

YOU CAN'T DIE, *Matilda* sent. PLEASE. YOU CAN'T DIE.

But Devi did.

* * *

xii

The *Matilda* entered the docking bay to huzzahs and triumphant music. Parts of the

ship dripped on the bay floor, and LaFayette waved the music quiet.

He watched from outside the bay as the ship curled up into a gigantic ball rather than returning to its hammock.

Its sides were raw and gray. Something had sliced through them.

He waited until the atmosphere returned to the bay, then opened the door. He walked to the ship, seeing it shake.

He place a hand on its exterior and it jerked away from him, then rolled. He sent for the engineers, then crouched beside the ship.

"*Matilda*," he said softly. "Let *Devi* out."

She would hate being trapped in there. She never wanted anything to do with *Matilda*. He had forced this, and now, *Matilda's* injury had forced her to do something strange.

"*Matilda*," he said. "I know you're hurting. But let *Devi* go."

The ship shuddered, then uncurled, nearly hitting him. Its insides opened outward, and *Devi* floated on top. Gradually, *Matilda* lowered *Devi* to the floor.

Then *Matilda* curled up and started shuddering again.

LaFayette reached for *Devi*, then stopped. Her face was dotted with dried gray dirt, her clothing was damp, and her eyes were open.

Glassy.

Empty.

He looked at *Matilda*, not certain what had happened. Had she accidentally harmed *Devi* in the attack? Or had the ship been so badly damaged that *Devi* couldn't survive?

It didn't matter right away. He needed the story from *Matilda* first.

He gently touched her exterior, keeping his hand away from the damage, so as not to irritate her. He was about to say something, when he got a series of images and sense impressions—

Devi struggling, Devi fighting, Devi reworking the interior of Matilda so they could survive, Devi saying, You didn't kill me. Everything dies. Everything . . .

He looked at *Devi*, and then at the ship. Yes, everything died in its own way, in its own time, but he had sent her out there. He had made the mistake. He had—

Devi's voice: "They can't capture you. . . . You're too valuable. If they compromise your systems, they can compromise more than our ships. They might be able to compromise us."

The story came to him, the events came to him, in broken shards of images, and overlaid with that *CeaWayLaV* warship, the tendrils clutching at emptiness where the *Matilda* had been.

Emptiness, after the *Matilda* had shot forward.

After *Devi* had given her all.

He leaned against *Matilda* and felt shudders run through her weird softness. Shudders ran through him as well.

Shudders. Tears where there could be no tears.

"It'll be all right," he said to *Matilda* and as he spoke, he heard the emptiness of words, the way that sound couldn't convey all of the meaning he wanted, the way that the words brought out the lie rather than concealed it.

It wouldn't be all right. Not for him, not for *Matilda*.

But for the battle, for the *cause*, sure. It would be all right. It would be good.

They wouldn't misuse single ships again. They would continue the fight. And they had learned one of the *CeaWayLaV* warship's vulnerabilities.

Something to exploit—by people other than him, other than *Matilda*.

He would remain on the floor of the bay, leaning on the ship, until the shuddering stopped.

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Or until it became something he didn't notice anymore.

Just part of his everyday life.

A life without Devi

A future both bleak and better. And filled with shudders, that would, deep down,
never ever end.