

THE GIRL WHO STOLE HERSELF

R. Garcia y Robertson

We are so pleased to have a new story by R. Garcia y Robertson. Rod's last tale for us, "Wife-Stealing Time," appeared in our October/November 2009 issue. The author tells us his new story is one that he's wanted to write for a long time. "It includes a number of real people from my life. The title comes from slave days. Slaves were considered to be property, so running away was actually considered 'theft.' The crime was called 'Stealing Yourself.'" Luckily, you won't have to wait too long for his next story. A tale that shares some of this story's characters, but which isn't exactly a sequel, will be appearing in our very next issue.

Rule number three of the Family:
(3) Don't do no felonies for free.

CLOSET PRINCESS

("Here comes Strider," said the Slaver to the Pimp.)

Almost home, Amanda stepped off the slowpoke sidewalk into full view of the park playground cameras. She wore a white top, and a short red pleated skirt, not to show off her legs, but because she liked to move freely, and red and white were her colors. Her only ornament was a single earring, a mini YIELD sign. Head down, long blond hair half-hiding her face, she cut across her neighbors' neat green lawns, beneath a clear blue sky. Another perfect New Bellingdam afternoon. School was out for the day, and noisy children played in the park, watched over by tiny cold glass eyes, but Amanda knew any dedicated perv could hack into a Parks and Recreation 3V feed. She hated coming home on display.

("Who's that?" asked the Pimp, sounding interested.)

("Just a pretty nobody," replied the Slaver. "Noticed her in the park camera downloads, striding by on weekdays about this time.")

Amanda could not shake the feeling she was watched. Pure paranoia, but even paranoids got kidnapped and raped. Ever since the Vote, she had seen her hometown

attracting unwanted attention. News bloggers, naysayers, commentators, virtual tourists, psychologists, and other psychos, all wanted a look at the hippie space cases of "New Bedlam"—the home of the Damned.

("She's a looker," the Pimp concluded. "Where's she headed?")

("Home to Mom." Wise to the ways of pretty young females, the Slaver summed up her life, "Amanda James, seventeen, born Bellingdam, Washington. Lives at 1099 Fairhaven Drive, high school dropout, no job, no boyfriend, no arrest record. No life at all. We'd be doing her a favor.")

("Total NULL," the Pimp agreed, "not likely to be missed much.")

("Except by her mom," the Slaver noted. Both men laughed. Moms were always the last to give up on lost girls.)

Crossing the last lawn, Amanda ducked into a blue door that opened for her. Happy to be home, she called out, "Hello House."

"HELLO MANDY," House replied, closing and locking the door behind her, resetting the security alarms. Only House called her "Mandy," a glitch in the housekeeping program that Amanda never bothered to debug. Mom was hopeless at reprogramming, despite living a digital existence. Amanda was an October child, the only kid of an aging untrained single mom, and at seventeen already ran the home. She asked, "House, where's Mom?"

"IN THE LIVING ROOM," House answered, "HAVING A VIRTUAL VISIT WITH THE HOWARDS."

Boring. Aunt Jessie and Uncle Frank were serving time on some god-awful prison moon. Speed-of-light delay turned Visiting Day into disjointed, dual monologues. Mostly Mom cataloging the lives of relatives not currently in custody. If you want a real home life, stay out of jail.

("Keep me informed," requested the Pimp. "Can't say for sure, until I see her naked.")

("Soon," the Slaver promised. "We're working on that right now.")

Amanda went straight to her room, sealing the cybertight door behind her. Safe at last, she relaxed. No one could access her bedroom, not even House. Running on internal fuel cells, behind shielded walls, her bedroom had no connections to the greater cosmos. Not everyone respected her privacy. Half dissected on her desk, a plasti-metal dragonfly sat under a microscope, solar cell wings spread wide. Amanda had caught it outside the kitchen window, spying on her and Mom. Dragonflies were the Washington State Bug, but she did not think the Nanny State was watching her, not after the Vote. Deep space Slavers used the dragon symbol, but that seemed a tad extreme for sleepy, boring Bellingdam. More likely it was some boy, better at building bugs than meeting girls, trying to snoop or scare her. He could just message her through House's 3V. That would be scary enough.

Crossing her bedroom, she unsealed the closet, which contained Amanda's sole connection to the cosmos, a fully equipped work station, including sense surround couch, recycler, NET navigator, and comhelmet. Slipping into the form fitting couch, Amanda put on the comhelmet and jacked in, plugging the NET navigator into the socket at the back of her skull. Instantly, she was in another, and better, world. She was in Conway Castle by the banks of the river Con. Her castle, her cyberfortress, where she was an older, taller 3V princess—raven-haired Princess-Regent Katherine of Conway, Sultana of Slutsk, Mistress of the Mongols, and Crown Princess Rylla's ambassador to Down Under and the Damned. She sat in her throne room, wearing a black silk gown, trimmed with tiny silver bells that tinkled softly, making music whenever she moved. Since it was all 3V, she had literally ignored the expense, decorating her high-towered castle with fine fabrics trimmed in silver lace. Above hung her two shields—the black and silver shield of the Princess-Regent,

black Bellingdam bells, quartered with the silver dagger of a Queen's Champion, and alongside it her personal shield, white trimmed in crimson, with her bold challenge to the world writ in big scarlet letters, YIELD.

Slidewalks had no traffic signs, so you had to ride the backroads to get the joke—totally appropriate for Katherine-Amanda, Sultana of Slutsk, the tinkling princess.

Instantly her magic mirror brought her the latest 3V from millions of clicks away. Red-haired, green-eyed Crown Princess Rylla of Callisto sat astride her ancestors' Griffin Throne. Above her hung her crimson shield, bearing two gold letters: RL. These letters stood for "Rylla Lives," the motto Rylla adopted when her father was assassinated by his Space Viking bodyguards, putting Rylla on the Griffin Throne. RL was Rylla's reminder to her friends, and warning to her enemies, that she, the last of her line, had not been beaten.

Born in prison to a mom serving life without parole, then recognized by her royal dad and made heir to Callisto, the twenty-two-year-old ruler of Callisto Colony had humbled the mighty and championed the outcast, becoming a symbol and inspiration to those who wished things were better than they were. The two letters RL had spread throughout the Solar System, spray painted by her teenage fans on the walls of Bellingdam High and on robo-freighters bound for Neptune. Choctaws used them as a gang sign. Martians had dug RL into the red sands of Sirtyis Major, so big that you could eyeball them from Phobos, Mars' outer moon.

"Hi honey." Rylla smiled straight at her, as though they were in the same room. "I miss you dearly." Speed-of-light lag made real conversation impossible, and the Crown Princess of Callisto was talking to empty air, but Rylla had an uncanny ability to look right at you, even in 3V. "Hope things are going well Down Under." Down Under was what Jovans called the inner Solar System, everything below the asteroid belt. "Up here, things are hopeless. Callisto Colony is bankrupt, but luckily we have no currency and everyone works for free—otherwise we would be in real trouble. But our bad news is your good news," Rylla added. "I am giving you all our inner system assets that I have been unable to sell, including extensive properties on Mars, which have not sold because they are on Mars."

Like Callisto, Mars was an independent world with a worthless currency and its own peculiar problems. Unlike Callisto, Mars had been terraformed by humans, who could walk the surface and breathe the air and swim in the canals and shallow seas. Callisto was the outermost Galilean moon of Jupiter, a pitted airless ice ball. But breathable air is not everything. Amanda had actually been to Mars as a kid, and was in no hurry to go back. Offworld property owners got nothing for their Martian investments but useless pesos, or obscene diatribes in Spanish.

Rylla leaned forward, locking eyes with Amanda, denying time and space. "Sorry to dump all this on you, but it's your own fault, your punishment for doing so well. If it makes you feel any better, I love you and miss you very much. Someday soon, there won't be so much distance between us. Nothing good or bad lasts forever; my father's murder taught me that. I will love you always and see you soon." Princess Amanda's magic mirror went blank.

"Love you and miss you too," Amanda replied.

When Amanda was thirteen, Rylla had come to Earth on a goodwill tour and spoken at Amanda's middle school, Explorations Academy. That year the school's summer field trip was to Mars, and everybody was space happy and learning Spanish. Rylla was trolling for starstruck teens willing to serve the Callisto royal family for free. With nothing else going on in her life, Amanda eagerly volunteered. Age of consent on Callisto was thirteen, and promotion was based on how much work you were willing to do for nothing. Amanda shot up from serving girl to First Lady in Waiting, forging Mom's permission to become a NET-head and dropping out of Bellingdam

High to be Rylla's constant companion during the princess' stay in Bellingdam. Amanda's guidance counselor had a fit, but no one in the family cared. Just getting into Bellingdam High made her the family nerd—actually graduating would make her officially an overachiever. Serving Rylla had given her a chance to leave school and enter the real world, at least in 3V. Then at sixteen, disaster struck—Rylla's dad was murdered by the men hired to protect him, and Rylla had to return to Callisto. Amanda came to say goodbye, expecting to be fired. Rylla told her, "Since you cannot be my Lady in Waiting while living on another world, will you be my replacement, Princess-Regent of Conway, and Ambassador to the Damned?"

Amanda was overjoyed, saying, "I would love to be your princess regent and ambassador, but no one could replace you."

"Sad but true," Rylla admitted. "As Crown Princess of Callisto, I am under the same sentence as my mom, life without parole." They hugged and kissed, then Rylla was gone.

Sitting alone in her castle throne room, Amanda raised her arm, making virtual bells chime, saying, "Send in the masses."

Until well after dinnertime, the Princess-Regent entertained all comers, mostly royal creditors aghast to hear that their payment was in transit from Saturn with the tanker fleet, or worse yet, on Mars. She also saw a smattering of paying customers, colonist wanna-bees, and cyber-tourists, who had never talked to a real princess, even in 3V. Just like Rylla would, Amanda welcomed them all with a virtual smile. "Come in, check out the castle, look at me; I used to be nobody, now I am a princess. Callisto can make your dreams come true, if you have a dream." It was easy to be generous when it was all 3V. Only Slavers, looters, and Space Vikings were barred at the virtual gate, by an electronic portcullis of anti-virus programs. Bellingdam thought she was crazy, but that was "New Bedlam," and who listened to the damned?

When she had seen everyone worth seeing, she declared the royal audience at an end, unplugged, and left the closet. House had dinner waiting outside her bedroom door. Mom was "visiting" with cousin Cole, who lived close enough to actually talk back. Amanda ate dinner alone, then passed out.

Like any self-respecting teen dropout, princess-sultana Amanda slept in, awaking barely in time to make Flying School's afternoon session. She showered, bolted down brunch, then hit the slidewalks, already running behind.

"Good, she's leaving late," observed the Slaver. "Hurrying makes her less alert." He signaled his shadow disk to report on the slidewalks ahead.)

(SLIDEWALK TO FLYING SCHOOL EMPTY, replied the disk.)

"Get ready for pick-up," the Slaver ordered. His radar invisible disk had gas grenades and HORNET rounds designed to incapacitate the unwary.)

By now the noon rush was over, and when the slidewalk branched off toward Flying School, there was no one ahead of her, a sign that she was really late. As she exited the main slideway, a lone Jute exited behind her, so they were the only ones on the slidewalk as it wound up a grassy hill toward Flying School. He wore gangsta shades and a 3V jacket that bulged at the left armpit, while whistling an old time tune that Amanda knew the words to, "Slidewalks of New York."

* * *

*"Eastslide! Westslide! All around the town,
Being a drunken dork, on the slidewalks of New York."*

* * *

Amanda sighed and turned around, realizing she knew this hoodlum all too well. "What are you doing here?"

Cousin Cole grinned at her. He was everything she was not—a tall, dark and handsome adult hell raiser and accomplished felon. Cole stopped whistling, saying,

“Folks thought I should check up on you.”

“What folks?” Cole used to babysit her when they were younger, but she had not seen him in years. Not since middle school at least.

“Family mostly.” Cole never named names. Amanda’s family famously had five rules, one for each finger so the males could remember them. First rule of the family was, women and children first. “People worry. You and your mom, living alone. No boyfriend to look out for you.”

That was Cole fishing for personal info. “So if I get a boyfriend, you’ll stop following me?”

Cole replied easily, “Depends on the boyfriend.”

(“Who is this busybody?” asked the Slaver.)

(Programmed to recognize the entire population of Bellingdam, the disk replied: COLE, THE YOUNGER, TWENTY-ONE, JUTE KNIGHT-DEACON, BORN BELLINGDAM, NO FIXED ADDRESS, TWELVE ARRESTS, NO CONVICTIONS, NO OUTSTANDING WARRANTS, MARKED FOR DEATH BY CHOCTAWS)

(“Model citizen,” muttered the Slaver.)

Cole could kickstart her social life. Amanda was not technically a virgin, but darn close. “I should date a Choctaw. That would keep you away.”

Cole laughed. “Don’t torture yourself. I heard you were a closet queen, which would explain a lot.”

“Closet princess,” Amanda corrected him.

“How’s that working for you?”

“Well enough.” Better than having a Choctaw price on her head. Lucky for Cole it was in Martian pesos.

“See much of you-know-who?” Rylla was not a word Cole would use lightly.

“Gives me my marching orders almost every day,” Amanda answered proudly. “Still got that crush on her?”

“Me and every other right thinking outlaw,” Cole declared. “Even the gay guys envy her flaming hair and flamboyant ways, and she’s every butch’s dream date. Choctaws think she’s a saint. Hip Yees and Gung Ho Tongs burn incense before her picture.”

“I have an apartment in Chinatown,” Amanda boasted, another perk she only saw on 3V. China in the Sky was C-deck on Callisto Colony.

“Don’t move in anytime soon,” Cole advised. “Word is the Space Vikings are gonna foreclose on Callisto, get back their assets the old-fashioned way.”

“Word is Choctaws are after your assets,” Amanda reminded him.

Cole found that funny. “Girl, I was carrying a gun when you were still trying to decide which tit to suck. They have not got me yet.”

“You know I was a bottle baby.” Cole used to give her the bottle and sing her to sleep. Mom was domestically challenged. “That would mean you were packing a gun at six.”

“Hell, yes,” Cole assured her. “Daddy did not plan to raise no pacifist.”

Seeing Flying School ahead, she told her babysitter turned stalker, “Inform the family that I am okay and unfucked, then fade.”

“Will do,” Cole told her. “If you really are okay, I’ll go back to being bad.” Turning his pants and jacket to match the slidewalk, Cole faded before her eyes, whistling another old time tune, just for her, “If I Only had a Brain.” Amazingly, Cole meant well. Aside from Mom, he was the only one around who actually cared about her and tried to watch over her.

(“Keep her in sight,” the Slaver ordered. “We’ll try again when we get a clear shot.” He still wanted her, despite this meddling Jute.)

(“WILCO.” Pulling back, the disk tuned its hull color to match clouds overhead.)

Being late to Flying School hurt only herself, cutting into her time aloft. Living under earth standard gravity already limited her flying options. Wings that worked

fine on Luna could not get off the ground in Bellingdam. Still, she preferred unpowered flight, excelling in ultralight gliders and sailplanes. Aloft, no one cared that she was a jobless, friendless, dropout NET-head. In fact she was a star pupil, able to do things her teachers would never attempt. Being a NET-head was a positive advantage. By staying tuned to the weather channel, Amanda could see thermals, pressure gradients, and wind currents ahead, reacting instantly to wind shifts and pressure changes that others didn't even notice.

After Flying School, she went straight back to her closet and Conway Castle, where she found Rylla waiting for her in 3V, saying they must make a public appearance together in Slutsk. Appearing together in 3V from two different worlds was never easy. Speed-of-light lag required long delays, and careful choreography to make their separate appearances seem simultaneous, but there was no saying "no" to Rylla. In the end, it worked wonderfully, and they were a hologram hit with the locals. Slutsk was a real place, a town on B-deck in Callisto Colony, where Amanda was the Sultana and already popular. Crown Princess Rylla announced to the crowd that their Sultana Katherine-Amanda was now the heiress to Callisto, next in line to the Griffin Throne—as big a surprise to Amanda as it was to the happy throng. Everyone hooted and cheered. Amanda's loyal subjects in Slutsk enjoyed being ruled by a pretty young woman on a distant world, who never gave orders or asked for taxes. Boys and men, her age and older, begged for virtual dates. Choctaws shouted, "Mucha Ropa!" One unexpected perk of being a cyber Princess-Sultana was that half the Solar System wanted to see her naked.

Afterward, Rylla gave the Princess-Sultana a parting gift. "Since you are now my heiress, and a member of the royal family, I am giving you our tanker fleet, the *Tereshkova*, *Tsarina*, and *Tinkerbell*, currently headed downsun from the Saturn system, carrying millions of tons of Titan hydrocarbons. Don't sell the family fleet until we see what the hydrocarbons will bring. Then we will know if the tankers are worth keeping."

Again, Amanda was stunned. Suddenly her free ride with Rylla had become immensely rewarding. Since the collapse of the Ice Trade, Titan hydrocarbons were the Outer System's most valuable commodity. Titan had an unbreathable nitrogen-methane atmosphere, thicker than Earth's, that rained hydrocarbons and rocket fuel. Now Amanda owned a piece of that. Her new wealth and royal station did not change Amanda's life much, which alternated between Mom's house and Flying School, with Cole keeping casual watch on her comings and goings. She only saw him at a distance, when the slidewalks emptied out. Summer vacation loomed, and Amanda was working on a graduation aerobatic routine never before seen in Bellingdam, and sure to astound the Damned. She could do things just overhead that no one else dared, like flying inverted and picking up marker flags with her wing tips. Two days before graduation, she was flying upside down at treetop level when a single word flashed into her head, blanking out the weather channel:

DONNERWETTER

"Thunder weather" had nothing to do with the typically tame Bellingdam afternoon. It was a warning call from Rylla. Trouble was coming, and Amanda had to get to her closet ASAP. With no time to gain altitude and return to Flying School, she spotted a farmer's hay field ahead, bordered by a slidewalk. Calling the farmer, Amanda got her permission to land, then begged the Flying School to come pick up the glider, pleading a family emergency, which this certainly was. Being Bellingdam hippies they all agreed. Sometimes the Damned could be so awfully nice. Setting the glider down in the long soft grass, she popped the canopy, leaped out, dashed for the slidewalk. Halfway there, a gas grenade burst in front of her, and she ran straight into the anesthetic cloud.

("Got her," declared the Slaver. "Send the smart van to pick her up.")

As Amanda fell forward into the long grass, losing consciousness, a second call came in from Rylla:

RAGNAROK

* * *

Second rule of the Family:

(2) . . . *all children are your children.*

OVER THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY

Amanda awoke in a blank gray box, big as a small room, with a dark-haired girl of ten or so, bending over her, holding a medical dispenser in one hand and a white card in the other. Two words were written on the card:

DON'T TALK

Amanda nodded, and her new friend flipped the card over.

THEY LISTEN

Nodding again, Amanda realized she could not hear the NET in her head, so the box walls must have been signal proof. She could not contact Cole or call for help. She looked around for a door, but there wasn't one. As well as the girl bending over her, there were two more young girls sitting hunched against the box walls—one brown-haired, also ten or so, and the other much younger, with black curly hair and big eyes. They both had tanglefoot webs around their feet. Looking down, Amanda saw that she did too. So much for running away. Beside her on the floor lay a pen and a stack of white cards. Holding up the dose dispenser, the girl beside her displayed another card:

ANTIDOTE

Cure for Slaver sleep gas. At near half her age, her fellow prisoner was way better prepared. Picking up the pen, Amanda took the ANTIDOTE card, and turned it over, writing:

THANKS AMANDA

Her remarkable fellow prisoner had a card all ready:

ATHENA

Goddess of war and wisdom, very good company in an otherwise terrible situation. Athena flipped the card over and placed it in front of the other two girls:

<<KALINA

MONKEY>>

Amanda nodded and smiled to her fellow prisoners, trying to hide her mounting panic. Cut off from the NET, in a doorless box, she had no 911, no GPS. She did not know where they were or where they were going. Struggling to calm herself, Amanda picked up a card and wrote:

WHERE R WE?

Athena had another card ready:

BLACK VAN

ATV version of the shadow disks and UFOs that the Bellingdam cops claimed did not exist. Her fear mounted. They were being whisked away in a sealed container, on a nonexistent vehicle, by unknown fiends, to some secret place that Amanda did not want to visit. Thank God for Cole. He was her only hope. As soon as her signal vanished, he would rocket to her last known location, then start searching. Or so she hoped. Deciding to share that hope, Amanda picked up a card and wrote:

HELP IS COMING

Athena turned the card over and wrote:

HOW SOON?

Good question. The further the van went, the harder it would be to find them. Drawing another card, Amanda wrote:

SOON

Then she flipped it over and wrote:

CAN U SLOW US DOWN?

Athena tossed that card to Kalina, then wrote on a new one:

MAYBE

Kalina read the card thrown to her, then sat back, closed her eyes, folded her arms together, and concentrated. Nothing happened. Amanda sat in helpless silence, praying that Cole would really come for them, regretting her snide attempts to get rid of him. Her only comfort came from knowing that he would be eager as hell to prove her wrong. Precious seconds ticked away, and nothing happened, while each passing minute made them harder to find. Amanda's panic grew. She had been chilled, but now she started to sweat, a lot.

At first she thought she was sweating out of fear, then she realized the box was getting hotter. Everyone was sweating rivers, except Kalina, who sat with eyes closed, and arms folded, as cool as could be. Hot turned to sizzling. Amanda could no longer stand to have her back against the burning box wall. Leaning forward, she inhaled scorching air through parched lips. Being kidnapped was horrible enough, but now she was being broiled alive.

Then the box gave a bang and a lurch, throwing her, Athena, and Monkey into a heap. Air conditioning roared into life, and torrents of icy air flowed over them, cooling the stifling box. Looking at Kalina, Amanda saw a circle of frost forming around the girl's tangle-webbed feet. Unable to ask how Kalina did it, Amanda lay in a sweaty shivering pile with Athena and Monkey, as more minutes ticked away in silence. After what seemed like forever, an access hatch popped open above them. Cole called down, "Everybody out, ride's over."

Girls cheered. Amanda righted herself and stood on tottering bound feet beneath the open hatch, hoisting up Athena and Kalina to Cole. Monkey scrambled up Amanda's back and out of the box, using her bound feet to push. Then Cole leaned in and lifted Amanda up into the light, asking, "You okay?"

"Think so." Police alarms wailed in Amanda's head as the NET came back on.

"Good." Cole set her down on the black roof of the van, her legs still dangling into the box. "Cause you owe me one, cuz."

She knew it. Not even the law could have come this fast—if it came at all. Police alarms on the NET were not for their abduction, but for Cole, who had broken several laws to beat the cops to the scene of the crime. Amanda doubted that the Bellingdam police even knew four girls were missing.

She warned Cole, "Cops are coming."

"Oh, really?" Playing tag with the law was a gangsta's life. Smoke poured from the van's open engine compartment. Lying on the ground were two comatose thugs in hooded ninja suits, one of them clutching a big foam extinguisher. Cole's smartpistol fired silent sub-lethal WASP rounds—Weaponized, Anesthetic Smart Projectiles—that knocked you out before you knew you'd been hit.

("Damn that meddling Jute," cursed the Slaver. "I knew he'd be trouble.)

(2 MORE BIKES INCOMING warned the disk.)

("And the law will be right behind them," added the Slaver.)

Cole cut the tangle webs off the girls' feet, as two more rocket bikes landed alongside his. As he freed each girl, he handed her off to a Jute, saying, "Make it quick. Gestapo's coming up fast." Riding rocket bikes in Bellingdam airspace was a no-bail violation, which the Jutes were going to compound by fleeing the scene of a crime,

with material witnesses, adding obstruction of justice to further traffic violations. Jutes could not do good without being bad. Cole tossed Amanda the knife so she could cut herself free, then swung her into his sidecar, saying, “We go three ways, then meet up where it’s safe. Go fast and low, or you’ll be telling lies to the law.”

“Pull back and await instructions,” the Slaver ordered. He sent a signal to his men’s ninja suits, and their color changed to match the ground, fading from police sight.)

Cole took his own advice, and by the time Amanda had cut herself free and strapped in, they were weaving between trees and rocketing down gullies, hiding from radar and infrared. Rocket BIKES—Binary Intelligent Kinetic Engines—mixed two explosive fuels in their combustion chambers and could literally ride rings around police jet copters. Cole detoured around Alger, to get out of Bellingdam PD jurisdiction, while jet copters roared overhead in hot pursuit of windblown heat trails that crisscrossed and circled back, fading under the summer sun. Cole stashed his bike, sprayed with industrial coolant. Then they hopped the nearest sidewalk, posing as honest Bellingdam citizens, hiding among the Damned. The nearest available cyber-safe place in Fairhaven was Amanda’s bedroom. As fugitives drifted in, two or three at a time, gangstas and little girls, Mom was delighted. “You’re finally having friends over! House, fix them lunch.”

While they ate, Amanda shut herself in her closet to answer Rylla’s RAGNAROK call. Soon as she plugged into Conway Castle, Rylla appeared in the magic mirror, no longer astride her Griffin Throne, but still greeting her with a smile. “Hi, honey, sorry this has to be short, but Space Vikings have attacked Callisto with three constellation-class cruisers, backed by the battlecruiser *Valkyrie*, plus a fleet of robo-cargos carrying cyborgs, smart tanks, and what not. I have left you my RAGNAROK files, in a place you know. I plan to repel this absurd assault, but if anything happens to me, you are my heiress, so rule well. I’ll call you again when I get to a safe location, but right now I have to run, literally. No matter what happens, I’ll love you forever. Good-bye and good luck.”

“Love you too,” Amanda promised, “until the day I die.” But now she had nowhere to send her reply.

When she came out of the closet, Cole asked, “How are things in Callisto Colony?”

Amanda winced. “Going to hell in a hurry.”

Cole arched an eyebrow. “And your girlfriend?”

“Already on the run.” Amanda sat down next to Kalina and stared at boiled green algae, soy fungus cakes, and cold seaweed soup, but did not feel like eating. Instead she turned to Kalina, who was not eating either, saying, “You were amazing. How did you do that?”

Kalina smiled, holding out her hands, showing two plasti-metal bracelets fitting snugly around her wrists. “My dad’s a NET-head, and he made these for me—to protect me since he could not always be there. I’m still learning how to use them, but when you put them together, they draw on dark energy. At the lowest settings they can run sensors up and down. At higher settings they can burn out circuits, start fires, and freeze things solid.”

Cole was impressed. “Good thing you’re on our side.”

Amanda told Athena, “You did great too with your card tricks.”

“Got that from my mom. She won’t let me leave the trailer without two pens, cards, and gas antidote.”

“Time your moms knew you’re okay,” Cole decided. Kalina lived in Fairhaven and messaged her mom to come get her. Cole had the Jutes take Athena and Monkey to their homes in Hidden Valley. “Be careful out there,” Cole warned. “You’ll be watched. Remember, it’s RAGNAROK until we hear different, so don’t be expecting rainbows. We got God’s promise, it’s the fire this time.”

Anneke, Kalina's mom, arrived and after hearing her daughter's story, she wanted to go straight to the cops. "Okay by me," Cole told her, "just keep my name out of it. I want to be one of the three unknown Jutes. Police will be looking for me anyway, but at least they won't connect you to my problems."

Anneke agreed that sounded best, thanked them again, and then took Kalina home, leaving Cole and Amanda alone. Sighing heavily, Cole sat down on Amanda's bed, saying, "This is awful, girl. Worst part is, I cannot watch over you now. I have to pull a vanishing act, to stay ahead of cops, Slavers, and Choctaws. What did your girlfriend say?"

"Pretty much the same." All of Amanda's outlaw friends and relations were deserting her. Who was going to lead her into temptation, and more importantly, get her out again? "Rylla's headed for an unknown safe location and has named me as her successor."

"Wow," Cole was amazed. "We're both moving up in the world, cousin. I'm on everyone's most wanted list, and you're heiress to Callisto."

"Hard to say which is worse." Amanda asked, "What should I do?"

Cole looked around the bedroom. "This is your safe spot. I got those girls' addresses in Hidden Valley, but don't go visiting, except in 3V. Right now, I have to go and lead the law in a different direction." He got up, handing her one of Athena's cards with two addresses on it. Then, for the first time ever, Cole kissed her on the lips. By the time she got over the shock, he was out the door and gone. How like a guy to kiss and run.

Mom was totally thrilled that her daughter finally had friends over, not knowing that Amanda had to be drugged, kidnapped, and chased by the cops first. "Who were those cute little girls?"

"Kalina, Athena, and Monkey." A fire starter, a goddess, and a fellow primate. "I just met them today."

"Cole's friends were so nice and helpful," Mom added. "I'm glad you are seeing such good boys."

Currently fleeing arrest. Amanda did not mention that she and Cole had suddenly become kissing cousins. Mom would tell everyone, and the whole Family would be laughing at them, the gangsta and the closet princess. Amanda politely excused herself, retreating to her room, not planning to ever come out, except in 3V.

She could not escape the carnage in Callisto, which was all over the NET, with everyone taking sides. Space Vikings had seized Callisto Colony's hangar deck, cutting the colonists off from outside aid. Cyborgs and smart tanks were sent to subdue A and B decks, but Rylla's people fought back. The invaders learned not to trust parking orbits, drop shafts, slidewalks, and footpaths, all of which turned lethal. Ships were riddled, cyborgs crushed, and troopers were whisked into ambushes, or just blown up. B-deck became a shooting gallery with smart weapons, and A-deck was worse. Space Vikings did not even try to enter C-deck, where Gung Ho Tongs were arming the people, and Mao Say Tongs were denouncing the invaders as imperialist running dogs. With the orbital Colony only half-subdued, secret bases on Callisto itself came as an unwelcome surprise. Dug deep into the moon's icy surface, the bases were invisible to radar and infrared, only revealing themselves by wreaking havoc on the invaders. Mass deportations, mounting civilian casualties, and several futile ceasefires failed to end the shooting, or to find Crown Princess Rylla.

Many of those who could not find Rylla found Princess-Regent Katherine-Amanda instead. Conway Castle was besieged by news mongers, peace advocates, refugees, Valkyries, and professional busybodies, all demanding that Amanda "do something." Her heart went out to refugees, who were homeless and hurting, but there was not a lot the tinkling princess could do. She was a hologram in a 3V castle. Her grand sounding titles were worth nothing until the tanker fleet arrived from Titan. Aman-

da would be a zillionaire at eighteen, if she should live so long.

She only came out of hiding for Flying School graduation, wearing a shocking pink outfit instead of her usual red and white. She thrilled students and parents with her low altitude aerobatics, finishing off with a series of half-loops, both forward and backward, ending in a stall landing, right in front of the judges' box, to thunderous applause. She graduated Summa Cum Laude.

When she got back to Conway Castle, she found Rylla waiting for her in the magic mirror. Amanda recognized the background as A-deck on ALFHEIM, an A-class colony for the euro-rich, in orbit around Europa. Hologram fairies flitted about as Rylla rode up on a unicorn. She smiled, saying, "Sorry for this silly show, but it's better than meeting in a war zone. I dearly hope you are doing well. I am here mainly to let you know that I miss you and care about you. Also I want what is right for you, and you are the best judge of that. Just because I made you my heiress does not mean you must follow in my foolish footsteps. If the Space Vikings get lucky, and something happens to me, you will have a choice—either go on with your life as you will, or take up where I left off."

Rylla paused, to let that choice sink in. "Think about it. Hopefully you will never have to decide, but if you do, know that I have absolute faith in you. When Joan of Arc was your age, she ended the hundred years war, because God told her to, and because Joan felt it was having a bad effect on the kids."

Right, Amanda thought, then they burned her alive.

"I know what you are thinking," Rylla added. "Yes, they burned her, but that is because men are such poor losers. Joan crushed the English at Orleans and Patay, and they never won again. Besides, they don't burn people anymore. Worst you can get is life without parole, which has done wonders for my mom. So if you must choose, do not choose out of fear or love for me. Pick the path that is best for you. I will love you no matter what."

Rylla straightened in the saddle, and her grin widened. "I saw your graduation exercise. You can already do miracles. Joan of Arc had to burn to get her wings." With that she rode away.

Amanda sat on her 3V throne, wondering if Rylla was really hiding in Alfheim, or just wanted people to think so. Years ago, when she was a mere lady in waiting, Amanda had once asked Rylla how her parents ever met, one being a prisoner and the other a prince. Rylla laughed, saying, "Dad always dated lifers, unless he just wanted sex, and he had a harem for that. When he thought about marriage and kids, he went on virtual dates with convicts. Bifrost brig was the best for that, since the women were all fairly convicted and had no chance of getting out on appeal; plus the navy has great 'kid con' facilities for inmate dependents and juvenile offenders. I know because that's where I grew up. Mom and Dad hit it off right away, had a virtual wedding, and I was conceived on a conjugal visit."

Amanda finally had the nerve to ask, "What's your mom in for?"

"Murder one," Rylla replied cheerfully. "Mom does not even want to get out. She found God in prison, says she took a life, so she deserves life. Prison has been good for her; besides finding God and a good husband—a prince of a guy—she also discovered that she's bisexual, which takes some of the boredom out of incarceration. Dad gets on fine with her girlfriends, not being the jealous type, having that harem and all."

"But, why even date prisoners?" Amanda asked. "He's a prince, with a harem!"

Rylla's smile faded, and old hurt welled up from deep within. "Dad wanted me and mom to be safe. His parents were blown up by anti-monarchists. Navy claims it cannot police the Galaxy, so where I come from you only get navy protection if you commit some heinous crime, and you better do it on navy property, or you're out of luck." All the crimes Rylla was accused of were totally bogus, so no one was protecting her.

Princess Katherine-Amanda of Conway had to totally unplug at times, becoming just plain Amanda James. She was having a late night gabfest with Mom when Rylla's final call came in. Again it was a single word:

GOTTERDAMMERUNG

"Got to go," she told Mom, heading for the bedroom, "just got an important call."

"I didn't hear it ring," Mom protested.

Diving into her closet, she got to her throne room in record time to find that Space Vikings had finally caught up with Rylla, not on Alfheim, but in a not so secret bunker in the ice caves on Callisto, where she stood facing her armed enemies, ridiculing their charges against her, saying, "You have no authority, no proof, no legal warrants. These so-called charges are just an excuse to loot Callisto Colony, driving innocents from their homes, and stealing what my family has built."

Rylla's accusers protested that they had stolen nothing, claiming, "This can all be settled in courts of law."

Wearing a gold gown and her ruby tiara, Rylla smirked at that notion. "What courts? Callisto is a sovereign colony. Here, I am the law."

"Not anymore." Her accusers moved closer.

Rylla arched an eyebrow. "Really? We will see. In the meantime, this audience is at an end. You have my leave to go."

Men in battle armor moved to hem her in. "Alas, we are taking you with us."

That got an outright laugh from Rylla. "My person is sacred. You may not even touch me."

They reached out to prove her wrong. Rylla sighed, as if she were dealing with unruly children, going from anger to sorrow. There was a telltale flash of energy, and transmission ended as the bunker and everyone in it was blown to bits.

Princess Katherine-Amanda of Conway, now Crown Princess of Callisto, dropped her head and cried, huge racking sobs, as loud and hopeless as those of childhood. Now she was truly alone in the cosmos. For almost a quarter of her life, Rylla had been her hope and inspiration, her constant friend and guiding star. Now Rylla was gone for good. Amanda would never see her again, never feel her boundless affection, or get her quirky advice. Amanda was alone, now and forever.

Almost alone. When she lifted her head and wiped her eyes, she found herself facing an armed delegation of Space Vikings in battle armor, just like the ones that confronted Rylla, only these were holograms. Somehow they had broken through the encryption that protected her 3V castle. They had gotten Rylla, and now they meant to get her. Their leader spoke, "Katherine of Conway, so-called Princess Regent and Sultana of Slutsk, we have a warrant for your arrest, on charges of treason, murder, conspiracy . . ."

Amanda did not wait for them to finish. This was a scam, an attempt to hold her attention, while they traced the dedicated connection to Mom's house in Fairhaven. They were not here to arrest a hologram. They were after the living, breathing Amanda James. She broke the connection. Back in her bedroom closet, she punched the red reset button on her NET navigator, ending the dedicated connection, destroying every evidence of its existence. Hopefully she did it in time. She and Rylla had been careful to make this the only link between them. Her cyberlife was now erased, and she was just plain Amanda James, jobless, friendless, dropout recluse in Fairhaven, Bellingdam. With nothing better to do, she cried herself to sleep.

Hours later, she awoke, and lay looking at the cyber-proof ceiling, wishing she were dead, instead of Rylla. She desperately needed to talk to Cole. If the Space Vikings did ID her, could they arrest her here? Could they make any of those absurd charges stick? Her gangsta kissing cousin would know. Cole's twelve arrests and no convictions counted for more than a law degree. Street legal was what she wanted, not an

LLD. Right on cue, she heard the house fabricator chime, and Mom called through the door, "It's for you, Amanda, from Cole."

She went to the living room, where Mom was visiting with some cousins that lived north of Alger. At the far end of the room, the 3V wall opened onto the screened veranda that the cousins used as a family room. Behind them Amanda could see the hills that ringed Fairhaven and a blue slice of Bellingdam Bay. Having been on that veranda many times, both for real and in 3V, she knew that if she looked close enough, she could see the house she was hiding in.

On the fabricator's read out was a message from Cole as short and sweet as a song:

RUN FOR YOUR LIFE LITTLE GIRL

Beneath the words were working fax copies of Cole's 360 gangsta shades and a smartpistol in its power holster. Clear and plain legal advice, from the man with no convictions and a million pesos on his head. Not knowing where to message Cole, she punched out a quick reply on the fabricator:

THANKS RUN WHERE?

Then she retreated to her room and started packing, leaving the door open so she could get a reply from Cole. She was almost done packing when the reply came, not in words but in Cole's unmistakable whistle, another old time tune that she knew the words to:

*When I was young and had no sense,
I bought my fortune for ten cents,
But the only thing the cookie could say,
Was over the hills and far away . . .*

* * *

Giving up her trademark red and white, she dressed in dark French jeans and a forest green jacket in case she had to hide in the woods. Then she went to talk to Mom, who was still "visiting." Through the living room's 3V wall, Amanda could see the hills Cole meant, stretching into the virtual distance. She told Mom, "I'm thinking of taking off for a week or two, maybe going to Hidden Valley, to see those girls I met. If I'm going to stay longer, I'll call you."

"That's great," Mom declared, happy for her, and glad the cousins could hear that her brainy problem child was finally getting a life. "You spend too much time in your room." Mom never left the house but did not notice because she lived in 3V. "Take a month, two months, or all summer. Have an adventure."

"I'll try," Amanda promised. She kissed Mom good-bye, stuffed the smartpistol and holster into her pack, and put on the gangsta shades. Then she was out the door and on the run. House closed and locked the door behind her.

(SUBJECT HAS LEFT THE HOUSE, reported the shadow disk.)

* * *

Fourth rule of the Family:

(4) *If you cannot be good, be quick.*

GIRL ON THE RUN WITH GLASSES AND A GUN

Carrying a backpack instead of a purse, Amanda hit the slidewalks, seeing the world through gangsta glasses, feeling like she was stepping into 3V. Cole's glasses gave her a full wrap-around view of the world, letting her look behind herself without turning her head. Programmed for Bellingdam, the glasses identified every resident, marking outsiders as NULLs. Law enforcement officers and known Choctaws were highlighted, and so were possible tails—anyone who kept reappearing, or who made

the same turns she did. So far the glasses had not spotted a stalker, but Amanda could not shake the feeling she was always being watched.

“Too many people around to risk another pick-up,” the Slaver decided, “but keep her in sight.”)

Amanda kept to the crowded slidewalks, seeking safety in numbers. She could run, but she could not hide. If she tried to stay in one place, even renting a room for the night, she became a sitting target for Slavers or arrest warrants. But how do you run away in a crowd?

She passed a highlighted lawman that the glasses ID-ed as MI-5, British counter-intelligence. He did not even look at her. Amanda knew it was useless to ask any of these highlighted officers for help. Kalina's mom had tried that and gotten nowhere. Bellingdam Police had taken down Kalina's story but showed no interest in finding unknown Slavers that only a child had seen. Instead they were determined to catch the three Jutes that had come to Kalina's rescue, and the cop copters chased to Alger and back. Bellingdam PD's greatest claim to fame was hiring a serial killer on the run from California as a Bellingdam High security officer. It cost the school a couple of students, but damn, the guy was an eager beaver, working overtime for free. For all she knew, the cops would arrest her as a known terrorist and fugitive Sultana. She had a better chance appealing to Choctaws or the man from MI-5.

So she was on her own and on the run—but to where? Over the hills and far away. Beyond the hills south of Fairhaven lay Alger and then Hidden Valley, where Athena and Monkey lived. Amanda got out the girls' addresses and looked at them through her gangsta shades. Slidewalk routes to each address instantly appeared. Both were way up Hidden River, near Bird's View. She said two words, “Rocket Port.” Both slidewalk routes extended past Bird's View to Rocket Port. That was where she should go to get really “far and away.” She stayed on the main I-5 slideway, headed up the pass to Hidden Valley.

At the top of the pass, the slideway turned down toward Hidden Valley, and Amanda crossed the first big boundary in her world. Ever since the Vote, there were new limits to Amanda's world, and this was the first—the line between Bellingdam and Hidden Valley separating rural and urban, darkness and light, past and future. Ahead of her was Hidden Valley, more wild and heavily wooded, more rural and lawless, with Sheriffs, town cops, and tribal police, defending their bits of turf. Nulls and Choctaws increased alarmingly. She started seeing Martians, first in twos and threes, then whole families of them, acting like they lived here. She was entering the fringes that led to Rocket Port and beyond. Already she could hear Callisto calling.

As she passed the Bellingdam rock, she saw that some Choctaw had tagged it with a big, red, flaming RL. Rylla lives. Damn, she wished it were true. Tears welled up. Rylla's death was the worst blow, worse than Slavers, worse than exile. Rylla was the one person working to make the world better—and not just Rylla's world everyone's world, from Terra-Luna to the stars. Sweet, wonderful, beloved Rylla was gone forever. Now it was up to the tinkling princess, Katherine-Amanda, Sultana of Slutsk, and Crown Princess of Callisto. What a farce.

Seeing the Bellingdam rock dwindle in rear view, Amanda realized that she had taken that first step in the journey of a million miles, or at least the slideway had taken it for her. Rylla had told her that to free yourself, you had to go to where you did not want to be, to that heart of darkness, that honest sensible folks avoided. That is where the truth lay. Everything else was safe, comforting denial. Princess Rylla used to always say, “I got a lift up, a head start on everyone, not by being born a princess, but by being born in prison.” Amanda saw that she had to go to Callisto, crazy as that sounded, and be the true princess, born to set everything right. Anything else was denial—denial of Rylla, of the Vote, and of herself, denial of the life she had chosen at thirteen, to break the surly bonds of Earth and live free among the stars.

Reaching into her backpack, she got out the smartpistol and its power holster, personalizing it so it would fire only for her. Then she clipped it to her hip.

“She’s armed,” said the Slaver.)

When the slideway broke out of the hills and flattened out, she got a sweeping view of Hidden Valley with the poppy fields in bloom. Huge swatches of red, gold, and purple half-covered the valley floor and were reflected in the sky by a great arching rainbow, standing astride Hidden River. Tulips in the spring and poppies in the summer turned Hidden Valley into a rainbow bridge, connecting Bellingdam to Rocket Port and the lights that twinkled in the night sky. This way to Callisto, everyone. She stepped into the slow lane to make the turn up river.

“She’s slowing down,” the Slaver noted, “either to get off, or turn up river. If she heads up river, get ready to do a pick-up.”)

Amanda stepped from the slow lane to the Upriver Slideway, headed for Bird’s View, Rocket Port, and beyond. Suddenly, she saw far fewer people around her, an unwelcome change, since she still felt like she was being watched.

“Good, she’s headed our way. Put someone a ways in front of her,” the Slaver ordered. “We’ll grab her as soon as she’s alone.”)

She sped through Skidrow, headed for Hymen, and more folks got off. Then the slideway began climbing the flank of the volcano, entering tribal lands, the Hidden Tribe, that gave the river, the valley, and the county its name. Like Amanda, they had fled upriver hundreds of years ago to hide from Slavers coming down from Canada. Trees crowded right down to the edge of the slideway, a pine canopy that could hide her from stealth drones, shadow disks, and full-sized UFOs. She had found a place to hide—too bad it was in the woods with the wolves and bears and mountain lions. More people got off at Hymen. Ahead of her was a single NULL, a man with his back to her, showing absolutely no interest. She would have preferred a Valley girl. No one was following her, but rather than being left alone with some stranger, Amanda stepped off at the last Hymen slidewalk, which curved around, carrying her into the woods.

“Damn,” the Slaver cursed his luck, “almost had her.” He told his tail, “Backtrack, see where she comes out of the woods.”)

Not wanting to go too far out of her way, Amanda passed a couple of bends, then stepped off the slidewalk into a grove of trees. She spent a paranoid ten minutes out of sight of the slidewalk, sitting on a log. Seeing a single NULL had scared her off the slideway. Was she really ready for life outside her bedroom? If she ran and hid at every hint of trouble, she was never going to get to Callisto. Her power holster hummed briefly on her hip. Someone with a smart weapon had passed close by, probably on the slidewalk. Upriver was Second Amendment country, and a lot of folks went armed. If the weapon were coming toward her, the hum would have gotten louder. Instead it faded away. Feeling foolish, she returned to the Upriver Slideway, which now held a couple of local families.

“She’s back. What was that about?” the Slaver wondered. “Hope she didn’t spot her tail.”)

Climbing toward Bird’s View, the slideway emptied out again. Both families got off, leaving a few stragglers. As the crowd thinned out, the NULL reappeared behind her, highlighted this time. No shit. She did not need gangsta glasses to know the guy had doubled back, looking for her. At the first Bird’s View slidewalk she stepped off the slideway, letting the slidewalk carry her back into the woods.

“There she goes again. See what she’s up to,” the Slaver ordered.)

Again, Amanda went around a couple of bends then stepped off, but this time she hid behind a tree where she could see the slidewalk. Her holster started to hum. She held her breath as the hum got louder. Then, coming around the bend was the NULL, armed and after her. Shit. She froze until the hum faded away. Amanda had

played enough 3V to know this was the time to shift position. Getting back on the sidewalk headed the other way, she waited for a long straight stretch with a clear field of fire, then she got off and took cover, reminding herself to breathe.

She felt a surge of fear as her holster started humming again. Fear turned to panic as the NULL rounded the far bend with his gun out, looking for her. Amanda reached down, and the holster slammed the gun into her hand, safety off. Since she and the gun agreed, she squeezed the WASP trigger. His pistol had no target, so it did not fire, and the NULL tumbled off the sidewalk, felled by a WASP. Landing in a heap at the edge of the trees, he looked like a big lump of road kill.

Amanda walked over to look at him, seeing a blond like her with a UV glow-tube tan—like you get from living aboard ship. His smartpistol lay next to his hand. She picked it up and flung it as far as she could into the trees. Then she unclipped his holster, throwing it the other way, since it had a tracking program to help find the lost pistol. Her own holster stopped humming. Seeing the green dragon Slaver tattoo on his gun hand made her feel less like a bushwhacker. Cole used to tell her, “Girl, gettin’ the first shot is what counts, what they give medals of bravery for. Takes guts to pull a trigger.” No lie. Still feeling shaky. She never could have fired if the holster hadn’t handed her the gun cocked and ready.

“What happened?” Getting no reply, the Slaver cursed again, “Damn that little NULL bitch.”

So much for riding the Upriver Slideway. Amanda set off through the trees on foot, guided by her glasses. Monkey’s house was closest, so she headed there first, keeping to the thickest part of the woods where even shadow disks could not find her. Now the dark green canopy overhead felt cool and comforting. There were worse things to fear than lions, and wolves, and bears. As she got closer, the trees thinned out, and she had to get down and crawl through the underbrush to keep out of sight. She was almost to the house when her holster started to hum again.

“Someone’s coming.”

“Is it her?” asked the Slaver.

“Can’t tell.”

“Has to be her. Get ready.”

Amanda stopped and lay still, hoping the humming was a passing hunter and would go away. No such luck. Humming stayed constant, only increasing if she crept closer. She could see the house now through a screen of leaves and branches. Jacking up the gain on her glasses, she could make out the backyard, back porch, and a big living room window. Bedroom windows were curtained off. There was no sign of movement inside, no one coming or going. Kids’ toys were strewn about the yard, and school was out, but even at maximum amplification, the glasses did not pick up kids’ voices. No talking at all. No music playing. No doors slamming, just the humming in her holster. Someone was inside, silently waiting, with a smart pistol. That pretty much screamed, “Trap.”

“Whoever it is has stopped coming.”

Slowly Amanda edged backward. Keeping the house in sight as long as she could, looking for some reaction as the hum faded. No curtains parted. No door opened. Not a flicker of interest in her armed coming and going.

“She’s fading away.”

“Stay in position,” the Slaver ordered. “She may still be watching.”

Smart guns only operated in the presence of their owner. Whoever was waiting silently in the darkened house, armed and ready, was certainly not Monkey. When the hum was gone, Amanda got up and headed for Athena’s house.

“She’s gone. If it was her.”

“Hold your position,” said the Slaver. “We’ll get her at the next place.”

Athena's last known residence had no slidewalk address. It was not even a house, just a broken down, two-bedroom ATV, permanently parked in the deepest part of the woods. You had to use GPS just to find it, but there were few honest jobs upriver, so a lot of folks hereabouts liked privacy. Her holster hummed before Amanda could even see the place.

("She's coming.")

Amanda backed off at once, until the hum was gone. Then she stopped and listened for a reaction. Nothing, just birds calling in the trees, the drone of insects, and the far off hammer of a woodpecker.

("Signal's gone. Probably some passing hunter.")

("Maybe," the Slaver was unconvinced.)

Drawing her smartpistol, Amanda stashed it in the brush, then headed back toward the ATV with just the empty holster, which soon started to hum. Amanda felt defenseless without the pistol, but she forced herself to keep going even as the hum increased. She wanted to get a peek at the place without alerting every gun owner in the area. Finally, she spotted the tall, shiny Travel Home, minus the cab and big balloon tires, resting on its chassis in a clearing, hooked to a small one-bedroom trailer, which had its wheels. Same as before, no sign of life, just the hum of a gun.

Suddenly, her glasses showed a flash of movement behind her, and something light landed right beside her. Rolling over, Amanda reached for her hip, mentally calling for the gun. All she found was an empty holster, which continued to hum. Feeling silly, she looked down to see what had frightened her. Lying next to her on the pine needles was a white card that read:

BEHIND U

Smiling with relief, Amanda crawled backward, keeping a watch on the stranded Travel Home, until she backed into Athena and Kalina, who had come up behind her. Athena had another card ready that said:

DON'T TALK

Athena flipped the card over:

THEY R ALL AROUND US

Good to know. Gesturing that she wanted to write, Amanda was given a card and pen. She wrote:

THANX FOLLOW ME

She backtracked until her holster stopped humming, then found her gun and asked the girls, "What happened?"

"They came in the night," Athena told her. "They got my mom and my little brothers."

"We were camping in the woods," Kalina added, "so they missed us. We've been waiting all day, hoping someone we knew would show up."

And she did. "Good job," Amanda told them. "I'm on my way to Rocket Port. There's a navy station there where you two will be safe and can call Kalina's mom."

"Monkey's house is closer," Athena suggested, not eager to rely on the navy.

Amanda shared Athena's distrust of legal authority, seeing how freely Green Dragons operated, despite the presence of town, county, and tribal cops, as well as the navy and MI-5. "I was just at Monkey's house. Everyone's gone, except someone with a gun."

Neither girl liked the sound of that. Calling for help was hopeless since Slavers would trace the call and find them long before the cops. "Then it's Rocket Port," Kalina concluded. "We can go anywhere from there."

Very true. Amanda had left the decision up to the girls, who had shown the best sense so far. While adults played high-tech hide-and-seek in the woods, scurrying about, setting off sensors, these two children armed with only pen and paper had stayed safe, kept watch on the enemy, and found her. They might easily be safer

without her, but Amanda had to try to help them. All children are your children.

("Try a sweep to the north," the Slaver decided, "keeping between her and Rocket Port. Look for heat trails.")

They set off for Rocket Port, picking their way north through the trees, guided by the gangsta glasses. Athena asked, "What will you do when you get to Rocket Port?"

"Kalina's going to call her mom. I'm sure they would take you in." So far Anneke had shown more sense than all the other adults combined. "I'm going to Callisto."

"Can I go with you?" Athena asked.

"Sure, if you want." Amanda always tried to say yes to kids, unless what they wanted was immoral or impossible. Starting off conversations with "No" just taught them to conceal, lie, and doubt themselves. Rylla had suggested outlandish things from the get-go but always left the decisions up to Amanda, since Rylla only wanted volunteers. "Why do you want to go to Callisto?"

"Wherever they have taken my mom and brothers must be somewhere far away," Athena explained, "so Callisto is a good place to start looking."

Callisto was pretty far and away, but Amanda felt compelled to warn her, "Callisto is a war zone."

"That's good," Athena declared. "My mom has friends in war zones. I can find them, then they can help me find her."

("We found three heat trails, an adult and two kids. They converge and then head north together. Shall we keep looking?")

("No, follow that trail," the Slaver decided. "It's probably her and those two kids we missed.")

"What's your mom do?" Amanda asked. What kind of work got you friends in combat zones? War correspondent? Truce negotiator? Emergency trauma nurse? Conflict junkie?

"Mom's a space pirate," Athena replied proudly. "She's Pirate Jenny, famous throughout the Saturn system. You'd know her if you'd been to Titan. Pirates love war zones, because they have the best loot." Amanda saw where Athena got her escape and evasion skills. Any girl with a pirate mom had to be ready for trouble.

Kalina chimed in, saying, "Her mom has her own UFO, *Umbria*, the black freighter." Which must have made Anneke's jobs sound pretty humdrum. Though motherhood was easily the most dangerous female occupation, more dangerous than crime, joining the navy, or exploring Neptune. Pirate Jenny had just been kidnapped, not for buccaneering, but for being a mom.

"Mom's not a Slaver or a wrecker," Athena hastened to add. "She steals from them. Or from rich folks who have so much that they leave stuff lying around that could be really useful."

"Stealing from the rich makes sense," Amanda agreed. Stealing from the poor was an obvious dead end job.

"There's no law beyond Luna," Athena added, "so it's not even stealing. Mom comes home to relax and stay out of trouble."

But trouble found her. Amanda's holster started to hum, and she told the girls, "Run, straight ahead, as fast as you can." They ran, and kept running, even after the humming ceased.

("Caught a signal, but it's gone.")

("Keep on that trail," ordered the Slaver. "We'll cut them off from Rocket Port.")

Amanda called a halt to let the girls catch their breath, while she studied the route to Rocket Port. By now it was late in the afternoon, and this close to Rocket Port, commuters would soon fill the Upriver Slideway, making it safe to use. She told the girls, "If we can get to the slideway now, we will be whisked into Rocket Port." They set off rapidly to keep ahead of pursuit, but halfway to the slideway, her holster started to

hum. Without being told, the girls started running, but the hum just got louder.

(“Great! They are headed right for us.”)

Amanda reined in the girls, saying, “Hold up, we’ve been cut off.” While the girls got another breather, Amanda consulted her glasses. Luckily, Rocket Port was ringed by emergency EXITS, just in case, and this counted as a dire emergency. “There’s an EXIT right to the west of us, away from the slideway. Let’s go, double time.” They took off running again, and this time the hum faded.

(“Damn, lost them again.” The Slaver was not about to give up. “They have to be headed for the nearest EXIT—there is nothing else out here but trees. Keep following that heat trail. Use HORNETs when you get closer. Just get them.”)

If the girls could keep going, Amanda was sure they’d make the EXIT. It was easy to send men up the slideway, blocking them off from Rocket Port, but the EXIT was close at hand, and they had a head start. One last dash, and they were home free. Or so she hoped.

(“Almost to the EXIT We’re firing HORNETS.”)

(“Do it,” shouted the Slaver.)

With the EXIT in sight, Amanda’s holster began to hum loudly, and she shouted to the girls, “Run faster.” They ran faster, but the hum became a roar of incoming rockets. Amanda sprinted ahead to open the EXIT. She got to the EXIT door, a simple pressure hatch lying on the ground. Amanda undogged the hatch and held it open for them, yelling, “Get in!”

Below her was a round metal EXIT chamber sunk into the ground, with a second hatch at the bottom of the chamber. Looking back at the girls, she saw them coming up fast. Suddenly, three rocket trails burst out of the woods, coming even faster. Amanda watched in horror as the first rocket caught Athena, exploding into a net of sticky fibers that engulfed the girl. HORNET—Homing Ordinance Net—was like a tanglefoot round, only bigger, covering the whole body with a sticky web that allowed for breath, but not movement. Amanda saw the second round burst around Kalina. The third rushed at her.

Waiting for it to hit would do the girls no good. Dropping into the chamber, Amanda pulled the EXIT hatch closed behind her, hearing a loud bang as the HORNET hit the hatch half a second too late. Amanda punched the EXIT chamber’s alarm button, locking the hatch, setting off a loud alarm, and alerting the law. If cops came quickly enough, the girls would be safe, but Amanda could not count on that. She told the EXIT chamber to give her a pressure suit.

(“She got in ahead of the HORNET.”)

(“I can hear the alarm from here. Override the hatch lock,” shouted the Slaver. “Now, before she gets away!”)

Struggling into the pressure suit and sticky boots, Amanda heard the alarm fade. Someone had disabled the hatch lock. Above her the lock clicked open. Bracing her feet on both sides of the door in the floor, Amanda undogged the lower hatch, which opened outward. The hatch flew open as all the air rushed out of the EXIT chamber, trying to drag Amanda with it. Her stickyboots held, and she found herself looking down a hole in the world, light years deep, seeing stars slowly rotating at the far end.

Staring down into the well of stars, Amanda knew she was safe. With the EXIT chamber empty, a couple of tons of air pressure at Earth-normal fourteen pounds per square inch held the upper hatch closed. Slavers had unlocked the hatch, but they could not lift it.

(“No go. She opened the lower hatch.”)

(“Damn that little blond NULL bitch,” cursed the Slaver. “Damn her to hell and back.”)

* * *

“There is no law beyond Luna. Beyond Phobos there’s no God.”

—Popular saying

MONKEY ISLAND

Amanda stood at world's end, talking to the Rocket Port cops on her v-suit comlink, giving them all the information on the girls' kidnapping, praying it would do some good. Then, leaving the lower hatch open—so Slavers could not follow her—she climbed down the EXIT tube into the well of stars, past the layers of shielding that protected “New Bellingdam” from cosmic radiation. It was solar flare season outside. Halfway down the tube there was a revolving airlock that put her onto a sealed slidewalk to Rocket Port. Back under pressure, she lifted the visor on her helmet to wipe tears from her eyes, still shaken by the loss of Kalina and Athena.

When she was twelve, Bellingdam, Washington, and her sister city, Bellingdam, England, were picked for Communities in Space, a centuries-long program to seed the Solar System with “living” communities lifted from Earth. Real families, with real lives, that included babies, kids, and old folks, were going together to populate the void, protected by the navy and subsidized by the Terra-Luna Federation. Most people in the two cities voted to stay on Earth, but those who voted to go got free housing, food, health care, and transport, while training for jobs in the outer system. At Flying School, Amanda was training to be a pilot.

To ease the transition, both Bellingdams were recreated in miniature, aboard a huge B-class colony ship-cum-habitat built in Earth orbit, a series of counter-rotating toruses on a common axle that gave the colonists 1-g spin gravity. Slidewalks moved people between decks under hologram skies that gave the illusion of space and distance. Climate control came complete with days and nights, weather and seasons. That was why Rylla had come to Bellingdam as goodwill ambassador—to win over her new neighbors before they arrived in Jupiter system. Mom voted to go, to get closer to her space case relations. Once Amanda met Rylla, she had every reason to go as well. On a minimum energy orbit, it took almost four years to reach Jupiter system. By then, Rylla had been called home to Callisto to replace her martyred dad, leaving Princess-Regent Amanda as her Ambassador to the Down Under and the Damned.

Port police, Bellingdam PD, Hidden Valley sheriffs, and NCIS officers were waiting for her at the end of the slidewalk. Even the guy from MI-5 was there. By now cops had been to the emergency EXIT, and found nothing. No Slavers. No victims. Not a shred of physical evidence to back up her wild story. Since she still refused to name the three Jutes, her hometown cops wanted to drag her back to Bellingdam, charging her with false reporting and obstructing justice. Port police and county mounties refused, denying Bellingdam had jurisdiction. Mister MI-5 smirked at the “colonials” confusion, telling Amanda, “I’m just here to see you were safe. We had a tip that you were going to be kidnapped.”

“Almost happened,” Amanda admitted. “Two girls were taken.” While local cops argued over her, she gave British counterintelligence Anneke’s address, glad to see that James Bond was on the job and believed her. He wished her luck and handed her his holo-card, saying they would contact Anneke and do what they could to get the girls back. Half of Bellingdam was British, and they took their safety more seriously.

“This is a fine Charlie Foxtrot,” an NCIS officer declared. That was military code for CF—cluster fuck.

Seeing her opening, Amanda told the NCIS officers, “I wish to immigrate.” Naval Criminal Investigation Service was suddenly on her side, demanding that the civilian cops drop all charges, happy to pry a “colonist” away from her climate-controlled free ride—even a deranged teen runaway with paranoid delusions. If only sane folks

went into space, it would take a zillion years to settle the Solar System. Port police and Hidden Valley sheriffs backed the Navy, glad to see their problem go far, far away. Bellingdam still wanted her back, but no one listened to the damned.

As soon as NCIS had her on navy property, they searched and disarmed their prize. Amanda had left her Second Amendment rights millions of miles behind her. Ignoring her protests, NCIS turned their unarmed lunatic over to a friendly immigration officer, Lieutenant Kira, who already had Amanda's school records and spotless rap sheet. Lieutenant Kira gladly accepted a forged permission pad from Mom, and was greatly impressed by Amanda's Summa Cum Laude from Flying School, which counted more to the navy than a college PhD. Kira told her, "You have a talent for navigation, fine spatial judgment, and alert reactions under stress, making you overqualified for most of the jobs I have to offer. Here's the list." Amanda stared at a dozen different versions of her future:

ADOPTION (UNTIL 18)

FOSTERING (UNTIL 18)

SETTLER ALLOTMENT

NAVAL ENLISTMENT

APPRENTICE TRAINING

TECHNICAL EDUCATION

CORRECTIONS OFFICER

TRANSPORTEE

INDENTURED SERVITUDE (7 YEARS)

PERSONAL SERVICES

MERCENARY

Adoption and fostering for a few months were pointless. Amanda already had more family than she needed. She planned to save her one-time settler allotment until she figured out where to settle. As Sultana of Slutsk, and a major Martian property owner, she had plenty of choices. Naval enlistment seemed a bit extreme. Apprenticeship and technical education meant years of study and training and no going to Callisto. So much for the good jobs. "Corrections officer or transportee?" Amanda asked. "Does that mean I can choose to be either a guard or a prisoner?"

Lieutenant Kira looked a little alarmed that they were already more than halfway through the list. "Yes, whichever makes you more comfortable."

Neither sounded comfortable; Amanda was just amazed that she had the choice. Indentured servitude was silly—she was fleeing Slavery. She asked Kira, "What are personal services?"

"That's a polite word for prostitution," Kira explained. "We have a number of really nice Navy approved brothels, right here in the Jovans." Finally, a woman's profession where her inexperience was a plus. Amanda was sure she could pass for a virgin, for a while at least. "Plus we have the names of respectable private clients," Kira added, "both male and female, with possible marriage options." Plainly this was a don't ask, don't tell navy. Amanda hated to reject any job you could do lying down, but . . .

They were at the dead bottom of the list. Amanda asked, "Can I combine mercenary with a trip to Callisto?"

"Absolutely," Kira informed her happily. "Callisto is a war zone."

"That sounds best to me." At least she would get her smartpistol back.

"Battlecruiser *Valkyrie* is going back to do peacekeeping duty in Callisto and is seeking female recruits. I could message them right now," Kira sounded eager to please her picky teen dropout on the run.

That would mean becoming a Space Viking, about the last place anyone would look for Rylla's runaway heiress. She would get a free ride to Callisto while being paid to spy on the enemy. "Sounds great, give them a call."

Obviously relieved, Kira dashed off a message. *Valkyrie* was in Europa orbit, just a couple of light seconds away. In less than a minute, the answer came back:

ACCEPTED

Kira gushed. "You'll like the *Valkyrie*. She was built to be a woman's ship, with a flight of real Valkyries on board, who are already enforcing the truce in Callisto. Of course you'll have to start out as a midshipwoman marine. Do you have any experience with Mongols?"

Not in Bellingdam. "I have a cousin who's a Jute."

Kira winced. "Jutes are too pushy and sticky fingered," Kira confided. "Mongols are much more fun and carefree. They love women and kids and fight for the sheer joy of battle. Do well with the Mongols, and you'll be a Valkyrie in no time. And no dye job needed. You're already blond."

"All my life." At last Amanda had found a job where being a blond space cadet was a plus—too bad it was aboard a nuclear armed battlecruiser, crushing the life out of Callisto. Nothing she learned at Bellingdam High prepared her for real life in the Jovans. Only the things she had done on her own mattered. Flying School impressed the navy and the Space Vikings. Rylla had given her a purpose and a place in the void. She was issued a blue mercenary uniform with her name in gold letters on the left breast and got a free ride to *Valkyrie*, but without her smartpistol. Navy regs did not allow armed lunatic civilians on navy property. From C-deck on the shuttle, she watched *Bellingdam* dwindle in the rear view screens, spinning slowly in the void. Saying a silent good-bye to the damned, she heard someone with a British accent say, "That's an interesting choice."

Amanda turned to see the man from MI-5 standing right beside her—or rather his hologram, since he had not been aboard when the shuttle lifted off. "What choice?"

"To become a Space Viking. I would have expected you to go for technical training or to claim your settler allotment."

"I thought they would give me my smartpistol back," she explained.

"I'd be lost without mine," he tapped the bulge beneath his left armpit, "though it ruins the fit of my suit. So you're the one who left a Green Dragon gunman sleeping by the slidewalk in Bird's View. Nice job there. That's who has your two friends, the Green Dragons, but we don't yet know where. Hang onto that holo-card, and I'll tell you when we know more."

"Thanks." Amanda was glad someone was looking out for her.

"Thank you, and good shooting." He vanished, leaving her to face the enemy, alone and unarmed.

Approaching Europa, she spotted Asgard and Alfheim, the two A-class colony habitats orbiting the cracked cue ball ice moon. Closer up, she could see *Valkyrie* as well, a "delta" shaped like an equilateral triangle, seven miles at a side, and mostly empty space, with the decks at the angles, so one or two hits with nukes would not destroy the whole ship. Like the colony ships, *Valkyrie* rotated to produce one-g spin gravity at the angles. She was greeted on the battlecruiser's hangar deck by a real Valkyrie named Gunnhilde, big, blond, and very happy to see her. "Welcome aboard, midshipwoman Amanda. I'll show you to B-deck where we have a Mongol arban short a trooper."

"What happened to him?" Amanda was curious about her new career.

"IED," replied the Valkyrie cheerfully. "Improvised Explosive Device. Happened in Callisto, but we won't be going back there right away."

"Too bad." Amanda had come aboard mainly to get there.

"Not really." Gunnhilde thought she meant too bad that guy got killed. "Death in battle is what we live for." *Valkyrie* meant "choosers of the slain," which gave them a whole different slant on KIA. This friendly death angel led her down a dropshaft to

B-deck, the berth deck, built to resemble an Alpine valley with hologram peaks and quaint little chalets.

Nine overarmed Mongol marines were waiting for them, immediately applauding their new recruit—first time Amanda ever got a live standing ovation from a group of guys. Gunnhilde winked at her. “See, you’re a hit already.”

True to their name, the Mongols were a mixed lot, ranging from their new blond midshipwoman to four blue-eyed black brothers, Batu, Berke, Baider, and Buri. A couple of the others might have been true Mongols, but most were wanna-bees, like her. Batu declared, “Our arban is now complete, and we should elect a new squad leader.” Mongols voted the old-fashioned way, with pens and slips of paper. Amanda faced another first; she had never before been asked to vote on anything that mattered to other people, so she made sure she got at least one vote. They gave the slips to Batu, who barely glanced at them, saying, “Wonderful, we are unanimous. You are now squad leader, Amanda James.”

She got her second live standing ovation from guys. Midshipwoman marine had been a mouthful compared to Squad Leader, but she never expected to be promoted so soon. Sure, she had shot up from serving girl to Crown Princess in less than three years, but that was 3V. Amanda protested, “I just came aboard. I’m hardly qualified. . . .”

Mongols laughed at her modesty. Grey-haired Chepe growled, “Quit whining. You were a midshipwoman marine, now you are a Mongol arban commander, act like one.” “You must be qualified,” Batu insisted, “you voted for yourself.”

That she did. Pulling herself together, she gave her first order. “Someone give me a smartgun.”

Batu had a smartpistol on each hip, and another in a shoulder holster. Reaching behind his back, he produced a fourth pistol and power holster, giving it to her. Amanda personalized the pistol and clipped it to her hip, where the holster started to hum.

Gunnhilde congratulated her. “I said you were a winner. Report for duty on D-deck at 0800.”

As the Valkyrie turned to go, Amanda asked, “Why did you vote for me?”

Gunnhilde grinned. “Never hurts to back a winner.”

Amanda gave her arban its second order, “Show me to the Squad Leader’s quarters.” They did, taking her to a big two-bedroom chalet, with a fine view of the fake alps. *Valkyrie* ran on Baltic time, making it 6:33 A.M., halfway through the morning watch, giving her a jump start on the day. She dismissed her arban, saying, “Report to me on D-deck at 0800.”

Batu tried to buck her up. “When Genghis Khan was your age, he had ten people and ten horses, and he conquered half the world. You’ll do great.”

He sounded like Rylla. Amanda had picked mercenary, so she better damn well be Joan of Arc.

Entering her new quarters, she stepped straight from a Swiss valley onto the African Veldt. Her workstation and recycler sat in a small wadi shaded by a fever tree. Her bed was in a big tent, divided in half by mosquito netting. Hyenas laughed at her over a fresh kill, until a pride of lions emerged from the long grass, chased the hyenas off, then looked hungrily at her. Someone had left the 3V on. She found the switch on the fever tree, and turned the Transvaal back into a ship’s cabin. Africa vanished, but her workstation and recycler remained, and the tent turned into a two-room suite. Nice. Much better than her bedroom and closet in Bellingdam. Settling into her workstation, she put on the combhelmet but did not jack in. No one knew she was a NET head, and she planned to keep it that way. As a new lieutenant junior grade, she decided to make a virtual report to the ship’s executive officer. Her hologram shocked the XO’s aide into wide-eyed disbelief. “Lieutenant Quarterman?”

“Actually, I’m Amanda James, reporting for duty.”

"Thank God," replied the relieved lieutenant commander. "I thought Lieutenant Quarterman had come back to life as a teenage girl. You are a midshipwoman, what are you doing in Quarterman's quarters?"

That explained the Veldt and also meant that she was wearing a dead man's comhelmet. Resisting the urge to tear it off, she tried to put this nitwit in his place, saying that she had been elected Squad Leader, "Unanimously."

This snooty XO's aide found that outrageously funny. He finally managed to stop laughing long enough to say, "I'll inform the XO. Dismissed, Lieutenant James."

Ripping off the comhelmet, she called supply, ordering a whole slew of personal effects and a new comhelmet. Then she went through her quarters throwing away everything that wasn't a part of the ship. Quarterman was the guy killed in Callisto. If she was so squeamish about death in combat, was she really going to make it as a merc? Mongols thought so. Joan of Arc used to cry over the enemy dead.

At 0800, Amanda met her arban for the forenoon watch inspecting prisoners in D-deck detention. Having become a corrections officer after all, Amanda ordered her arban to go to work, since they knew what they were doing. Good thing she was in command, or she would have been completely useless. First rule of the family was women and children first. So she went to check on the kids and moms in juvenile detention.

Entering through a double airlock, she stepped out onto a tropical atoll with a blue lagoon, pounding surf, tiki huts, and towering hologram thunderheads that promised rain. She could smell the seaweed and taste the salt spray, though there was not enough real surf to drown a toddler, and "shark" nets kept you from swimming off into the 3V sea. Not exactly Dachau, but still depressing, though Rylla had grown up as a "kid con" and claimed to be the better for it.

At 0800, the only kid in sight was a small dark-haired girl playing by herself in the sand. Amanda strolled over, saying, "Hi."

Looking up, the little girl asked, "Are you a Mongol now?"

"Afraid so." Amanda was stunned—the little girl was Monkey, whose empty house in Bird's View was staked out by Slavers.

"That's good," Monkey congratulated her. "Mongols are nice."

Mongols' love of kids had won Monkey over. Amanda asked, "How'd you get here?"

"Slavers got me," Monkey admitted, looking back down at the fine white sand. "My mom and sister too."

Whole darn family was just not fast enough. Now she knew where Monkey had gone. Space Vikings and Slavers were closer than Amanda had ever imagined. "Where's your mom?"

"I'll show you." Monkey got up, saying to empty air, "Come on, Missy."

Seeing only surf and sand, Amanda asked, "Who's Missy?"

"My friend," Monkey explained, "you just can't see her. She only came to play. I don't need a babysitter, because I'm already in jail." Monkey seemed a little old to be having invisible friends, but kids in confinement often regressed, acquiring invisible playmates or becoming closet princesses.

Monkey led her to a palm grove, where older sister Alexi was cooking smelt over a fire, and her small blond mom was rolling a breakfast joint. Mom looked enough like Amanda to be related. Grinning up at her, the convicted mom sealed the joint with her tongue. "You're Cole's closet cousin, aren't you? That makes us cousins. I'm Lisa Dalton. Thanks for getting my kid back."

Oh, that Lisa. Family in custody was no surprise; Amanda could pretty much count on that. Embarrassed to be on the other side of the virtual bars, Amanda asked, "How are we treating you, Cousin?"

Lisa rolled her eyes. "Aside from jailing me and my kids, *for no good reason?* Not so

bad. Food's decent. Weed's smokeable. Are you a Mongol now?"

"Guess so. First day on the job, and they voted me arban leader."

"Sweet." Lisa smirked, stifling a laugh, as she lit her joint on the breakfast fire.

"Why do people find my promotion funny?" Amanda asked.

Lisa took a big toke, holding it in, and shaking her head, then said between her teeth, "Hey, no, Cole would be proud of you. Always said you had the makings of a great gangsta." She blew out a huge billowing cloud of smoke. "Monkey likes you too."

"Nice to know. Monkey's a real trooper." To show she took her position seriously, Amanda added, "Any other complaints?"

"Besides being locked up by guards who keep begging me for blow jobs?" Lisa took a long thoughtful toke on the joint, then blew more smoke. "Yeah, I want to know what happened to the kids who disappeared."

"Disappeared? Do you mean like Missy?"

"Missy's not a kid, and she's not gone—just invisible." Lisa took another toke. "Right before GOTTERDAMMRUNG a bunch of motherless kids vanished. Teens like Boy Toy, Tatiana, and the twins Indica and Sativa disappeared, along with a slew of younger siblings. I'd like to think they broke out, but I doubt it."

That sounded grim. "Can you make me a list?"

"Already got one." Lisa produced a list of names, with approximate ages. "I tried to ask the Mongols, but it takes at least a hand job to get their attention, and that's way too touchy feely for me."

Someone needed to tell her arban about the no sex with prisoners regulation. Promising to find out what happened to the missing children, Amanda left as the first raindrops began to fall. Finally, she had something that needed doing, funny that it should come from family. She met her smiling inmate molesting arban at the D-deck dropshaft. When they were back on B-deck, she privately showed the list to Batu. He frowned, saying, "We should go to your quarters."

First he showed her how to shut down the cabin cams and sensors. Nice to know. Amanda wanted to shake off the sand and shower without an audience. Then Batu cheerfully admitted he had taken the kids, erasing their names from the detainee roster. "What did you do with them?" Amanda demanded.

"Sold them," Batu replied. "There's a lively kids' market on Asgard's hangar deck these days."

Amanda barely believed what she was hearing. "Sold them to who?"

Batu laughed, "That's the really funny part." Amanda was finding none of this the least bit amusing. "We sold them to another kid, a sharp little eight-year-old girl, with a gangsta bodyguard."

Incredible, a girl and a gangsta. "Why?"

"These kids weren't happy in jail; they were all homesick and crying a lot, afraid they'd be sold as slaves or sent to the Saturn system. They wanted to go and look for their families. This girl who bought them was some child genius, who swore she knew where their moms were and would take the kids to them. Believe me, those kids were glad to go. Her gangsta seemed reliable, and I got his ID and thumbprint. He knows that if anything bad happens to those kids, we'll hunt him down and skin him slowly, with a dull knife."

Mongols hated to be double-crossed, especially when it came to kids. Amanda believed those kids were happy to go, and she was not about to file a report and have the children hauled back to D-deck. All she could think to ask was, "What did you get for them?"

Batu tapped his shoulder holster. "All these smart guns, like the one you are wearing, and the gangsta's rocket bike, that nice BMW RaumRocket down on the hangar deck."

Made perfect sense. Kids needed their moms, and you could never have enough weapons. She would bring up the no blow jobs from prisoners at a better time. "Well done, dismissed."

Amanda needed desperately to shower and sleep. Last time she had done either was in Bellingdam, but first she used her new status as lieutenant JG to send a message to Mom. She had to keep it as innocent as she could, since someone aboard was sure to read it:

HI MOM,

GOT A GREAT NEW SUMMER JOB AND HAVE ALREADY BEEN PROMOTED. COUSIN LISA IS HERE TOO, WITH HER KIDS. SHE'S DOING FINE. KIDS ARE FINE TOO. I AM FINE, BUT BUSY. YOU MAY NOT HEAR FROM ME MUCH. DON'T WORRY. EVERYTHING'S FINE.

LOVE, AMANDA

Too bad Cole was lying low and out of contact. But if he called, Mom was sure to share the message. Mom probably would not remember that FINE was family code for "Fucked over, In trouble, Need Explosives," but Cole would. Then she shut down her cabin sensors and took a long, lovely shower. Stepping out wet and naked, she slid back the recycler door, shrieked, and grabbed a towel.

Mister MI-5 was sitting at her workstation. "Don't get dressed for me," he told her amiably, "I'm just a hologram. All I can do is enjoy the view."

Amanda pulled the towel tight around her. "What are you doing here?"

"Sorry, I had to wait until you turned off the sensors. Can't let the Space Vikings know we've broken their security cipher. Leave the shower running," he suggested, "so they won't think you're keeping secrets."

She left the shower running but insisted on going into her bedroom and getting dressed. When she stepped out the second time, he laughed and saluted. "Bravo, an officer already. Took me years to make lieutenant. Guess it's to be expected. . . ."

"What's that mean?" Amanda asked suspiciously.

He stifled his smile. "Well, I always thought you were officer material. Mongols were bound to notice. But I came to tell you that the Green Dragons smuggled your friends off Bellingdam. We're guessing they are close by, still in the Jovans, but we don't know where. . . ."

"The third girl from Bird's View they targeted is very close by," Amanda informed him, "she's on this ship, a transportee on D-deck. With her mother and sister."

"Really?" Mister MI-5 leaned forward, clearly intrigued.

"And they are not the only ones," Amanda added, showing him Lisa's list.

"You are officer material," he declared, pulling out a note pad and punching in the list. "This is our first proof of links between Asgard and the Green Dragons. Until now we had no idea how they spirited their victims away." He looked at her with new respect. "Ever considered working in espionage?"

Amanda smiled demurely. "I already am."

"Right." He pocketed the note pad. "Glad we have an agent in place. But for God's sake, be careful. If your employers find out . . ."

Amanda nodded, "I know."

He grinned, "See you at your next shower." Then he was gone.

Having done all she could, for everyone she could think of, Amanda turned off the shower, flipped on the cabin sensors, and collapsed. Sleeping through the Noon watch and both Dog watches, she did not get back to D-deck until almost dinner time. Bursting with good news, she found Cousin Lisa getting set for a luau by sharing a joint with another blond named Jeannette. Amanda had memorized the prison roster in case anyone else vanished. Lisa proudly announced, "This is my Cousin Amanda, who came aboard yesterday as a midshipwoman marine, and has already been voted a junior officer by the Mongols."

Both women got the weed giggles, turning into outright laughter. Amanda had enough of this, asking, "How come everyone finds my promotion so outrageously funny? Am I that unqualified?"

Jeannette stopped laughing to look her over. "No, you look plenty qualified."

Lisa agreed, "I'd say over qualified." Which sent both women back into hysterics.

"What's that mean?" Amanda hated to be the only one not getting the joke.

Lisa stifled her laughter. "Mongols all voted for you because they want to fuck you."

"Afraid so." Jeannette passed the joint to Lisa, saying, "Mongols want a BJ way more than a CO." Lisa tried to comfort her. "It's actually a compliment, in a sick sex maniac sort of way."

Amanda protested, "Then why did the Valkyrie vote for me?"

"Let me guess," said Jeannette. "Big, tall, hippy blond called Gunnhilde?" Amanda nodded, which started them laughing again. Jeannette just said, "If you won't ask. I won't tell."

Damn, despite fusion drive and universal rights, it was plain that naval "affairs" had not gone much beyond Winston Churchill's "Rum, sodomy, and the lash." Amanda sat down beside the other blonds, feeling very abused. "I'm off duty. Blow some of that smoke my way."

"Yes, sir, Officer." Lisa blew smoke in her face. Her prisoners were having way too much fun with this.

"I am seventeen," Amanda pointed out. "Jailbait."

Lisa laughed some more. "Wake up and smell the coconuts, cousin. You're in jail." Surf pounded on the coral reef, and children played in the sand, but it was still the brig. "And inside, it ain't who you know, it's who you blow."

"FINE with me." Amanda meant that in a family way.

Blowing more smoke, Lisa agreed, "I'm real FINE here too."

Amanda breathed deep, then exhaled. "As a lieutenant junior grade, for whatever reason, I got a message through to Mom, saying that you are here and doing FINE. Four times."

"Thanks, cousin." Lisa blew more smoke, glad to hear that Family knew she was in trouble that only fireworks could fix. Nitro worked quicker than a court order when the nearest real court was a hundred million miles away. "I also found out what the Mongols did with those kids," Amanda added.

Jeannette took a toke. "Traded them for those new smartguns they're wearing?"

"That's not even the weird part," Amanda told them. Just standard operating procedure for Mongols. "They sold them to an eight-year-old girl genius with a gangsta bodyguard."

"Outstanding." Jeannette grinned and high-fived Lisa. "That's my Jazz. She'll get us out next."

"You know this girl?" Amanda was amazed that transportees locked down on D-deck knew more than ship's officers and MI-5.

Jeanette beamed, "She's my daughter Jazmyne, the chess champion."

"That girl who lost to Mimir?" A third grader had beaten every chess master in the Jovans, except for Mimir, the supercomputer on *Asgard* that ran Jupiter system. "The human chess champion of the Jovans is your daughter?"

"Not just the Jovans." Jeannette passed the joint to Lisa. "She's human chess champion from here to Neptune."

"You bet Uranus." Lisa blew more smoke at her.

Amanda breathed deep. "Damn, that's wild. What do you think she'll do with those kids?"

"She'll find their moms," Jeannette insisted. "Then come and spring us. That'd be

Jazz's plan."

"Should we be talking like this?" Lisa asked. Every word spoken in detention was recorded and used against you.

"Sure, I rerouted the beach sensors," Amanda reassured her. "All they are hearing is waves on the shore. We're on family time."

"Praise the Lord." Lisa blew more smoke at her.

"Rank does have its uses," Amanda told them smugly.

"Mongols still want to fuck you for that," Lisa reminded her.

Amanda grimaced. "Fat chance."

When Amanda got back to B-deck, Batu was waiting. She looked him straight in the eye, saying, "I know why you voted for me."

Batu's smile widened, happy his vote was not wasted. She shook her head. "You sick prick. I am seventeen. You should not even be having those thoughts."

Batu was unashamed. "You will not be seventeen forever."

Too true. "Thanks, you just ruined my next birthday party. Now I know what all my presents will be."

"Before that an arban will be sent on a reconnaissance mission to Callisto Colony. Use some of your popularity to make sure it is our arban that goes to Callisto," Batu suggested. "First in battle, first to the booty." Amanda wanted to be on that reconnaissance too, and go straight to Slutsk to grab Rylla's RAGNAROK files. Heaven knows what booty Batu was after.

"I will try," she agreed. "If you read the regulations banning sex between troopers and transportees aloud to the arban. Dismissed." Amanda found it incredibly unfair that she had to somehow defeat the Space Vikings and at the same time make them decent and responsible.

To ease the strain of this double-duty and get herself ready for Callisto, Amanda put herself through some really wicked 3V recon scenarios, with various smart weapons; by jacking in she could see threats coming in real time and run up some impressive scores, with zero hits on her and zero civilian casualties, since the guns only fired when she and the weapon both agreed the target was "hostile." She got invitations from various ship's officers to go one-on-one with them but routinely passed them up, not wanting to risk getting known as a NET-head. When she got one from the XO, Amanda unplugged to think about it. According to naval tradition, a casual invite from the XO ranked somewhere between a royal command and the Second Coming. Of course she had to accept, but . . .

As she sat in ulfith thought, alarm bells wailed around her. *Valkyrie* was hit with a realtime attack: EMERGENCY, EMERGENCY, HOSTILES ON THE HANGAR DECK, EMERGENCY, EMERGENCY, HOSTILES . . .

She immediately hit H-deck to see what was happening. Amanda was aghast to find one of the ship's own Scorpion cyborgs running amok, firing on the crew. Someone must have broken or stolen the ship's weapons encryption and was using it against *Valkyrie*. Her arban was already engaged. Batu and Buri were down, felled by HORNET rounds. Chepe was in charge, battling back with riot guns and grenades. They had jammed the rogue cyborg's stinger array with HORNET rounds but had nothing that could penetrate the cyborg's armor. So many gas grenades had gone off that anyone on the hangar deck without a gas mask was asleep. None of the other hangar deck cyborgs or smart-tanks were responding, another sign of broken encryption. What on the hangar deck could take out a cyborg?

Amanda remembered the bike Batu had gotten in exchange for the children—a quick search showed it parked in hangar bay 33. Now Amanda wished she was jacked in, but there was no time. She called Chepe, ordering him, "Retreat to hangar bay 34."

"WILCO." No Mongol ever hesitated to retreat. They fought to win, not to impress

the enemy with their bravery. Her arban fell back, firing HORNETs at the cyborg's balloon tires, trying to slow it down. LOL, the cyborg came tearing after them behind a barrage of HORNETs and gas grenades. Three more Mongols went down. But not old Chepe, who led the retreat firing as he ran.

Luckily, the bike was a BMW just like Cole's, and she had Batu's command codes. She turned the bike around and opened bays 33 and 34. Half her arban was down, but the rest came racing around the last corner, diving into bay 34. Amanda closed the bay and the blast doors behind the Scorpion, then she ignited the bike and brought it out of bay 33 in a big sweeping turn toward the cyborg. Flame filled the empty corridor as the rocket engine roared. HORNET rounds jammed the bike's tires, but the bike was already airborne and slammed into the armored cyborg. Bike parts flew in all directions, then the fuel tanks exploded. Batu would be pissed, but his bike stopped the cyborg.

Fire retardant foam poured out of overhead vents, while fans sucked up gas and smoke. Silence descended on H-deck. She could see through the thinning smoke that the cyborg had lost its front tires, and its forward guns were jammed, but the armored body was intact. Batu's rocket bike had made a dandy Improvised Explosive Device. The hangar deck had been FINE but now was secure. As Amanda sat congratulating herself, she was shocked to see a hatch open on the broken cyborg. Her XO stepped out, looked right at the camera, saying, "Lieutenant JG Amanda James, report to my office."

It was all 3V. Amanda felt foolish. There was no hostile attack, no rogue cyborg gone wild on the hangar deck. Her arban was not engaged. That had been her challenge round, played against *Valkyrie's* executive officer. She arrived at his office, still feeling silly. Space Viking ships in the Jovans did not have captains or sailors, just all officer crews and an XO. Mimir, the supercomputer that ran Jupiter system, was their commander, issuing operational orders that executive officers carried out as the highest-ranking officers aboard ship. Her XO had short-cut steel gray hair, thin straight lips, and he stood looking her over coolly, not the least amused by her marine officer's uniform. Amanda started off by saying, "I'm sorry, sir."

"Sorry for what?" the XO asked. "You played that round perfectly."

"But I thought it was real," Amanda explained.

"You were supposed to think it was real," he told her. "That's why I set it up aboard ship, with your arban already engaged. You were given no time to question. You had to react or call for help. You reacted wonderfully. I thought there was nothing on the hangar deck that could take out a cyborg. Where did that bike come from?"

"Belongs to a member of my arban, sir,"

That got a slight grin. "He'll be glad it was not real. Your 3V skills are amazing. You are an ace glider pilot, and you have a spotless police record. What can't you do, lieutenant?"

"Lots of things, sir." Her 3V skills were so good because she had spent the last four years living in 3V helping fight a losing war against him and Mimir.

"I am glad to see that at seventeen, you still have something to learn." He paused, then asked, "I set up a heartbreaking, unbeatable situation, and you beat it. What reward do you deserve?"

"To lead my arban on the Callisto recon, sir," Amanda immediately replied.

"Thank heavens. I feared you might ask for another promotion." That was as close as he came to making a joke of his new junior officer. "Quartermaster was killed on Callisto."

"I know." That was Amanda's ace. Marine tradition always gave you a chance to redeem yourself in the place where you suffered a loss. "I want to take up where he left off, sir." Only on the other side.

"Permission granted," he replied. "We will have a classified meeting with a survey ship on the way to Callisto, under complete communications blackout. After that, you may take your arban to Callisto. Dismissed."

"Thank you, sir." Amanda saluted and left elated. She was actually going to Callisto to take up where Rylla left off, with the backing of a Space Viking battlecruiser. For the first time since RAGNAROK, things were going her way, making her wish all the more that Rylla was alive. Now that she might really be of help, Amanda had no one to help but herself.

Valkyrie went through turnaround, starting to decelerate, and passing close by Ganymede, using the big moon's gravity to swing the ship into a more circular orbit to match up with Callisto, still more than a million clicks away. Amanda and Batu took the *Ulan Bator*, a stealth ship docked on the hangar deck, to meet the survey ship *Soryu* on the farside of Ganymede, pick up passengers, refuel from *Soryu*, then return to *Valkyrie*. Farside Ganymede was nowhere squared, the backside of a lifeless moon, invisible from the inner Jovans or any other inhabited spot in the Solar System. Amanda's first surprise was to discover that *Soryu* was not a standard survey ship but another stealth ship, masked with black radar absorbing material, utterly invisible, with the radar image of a baseball. Two ghost ships meeting on the farside of a dead moon. Why?

She got a greater shock when she saw who they picked up. Captain Draco of the *Soryu* brought aboard a dozen "suspected rebels" including Kalina, Athena, and a woman who looked so much like Athena that she must be Pirate Jenny. By now, everyone knew enough to show no sign of recognition. Clearly the *Soryu* was a Slaver UFO, doing secret business with the XO.

"What's going on?" asked the Slaver. "That girl Mongol you sent is Amanda James, the NULL who screwed me over in Bellingdam."

"She's a new recruit," replied the XO. "Did she ID you?"

"She's never seen me, but she knows two of the girls I'm bringing. That NULL is trouble," the Slaver warned. "She's in with the Jutes and maybe Callisto—check it out."

"Just don't let her talk to those girls. I'll deal with this when you get here."

"WILCO. I'm not exactly new to this business."

Captain Draco, a dark-haired, dark-eyed felon, was open and friendly but blocked every attempt to talk to the prisoners. Halfway back to *Valkyrie*, Batu took Amanda aside, saying, "I found something strange stuck in a ventilator near the prisoners' quarters." He handed her a white card, blank on one side. "Any idea what this means?"

Amanda turned the card over. There were three words written on it:

HE KNOWS U

She gave Batu back the card. "Destroy this. It means trouble. Our XO is in business with Green Dragon Slavers."

Batu nodded. "*Soryu* means Green Dragon, in a dead language." Green dragons hunted the richest, most dangerous slaving grounds of all—the green hills of Earth.

"Did some checking," the XO reported. "We got a partial trace on Lady Katherine of Conway, so-called Sultana of Slutsk, before the line went dead. Somewhere in Fairhaven, Bellingdam. Watch your back."

"WILCO."

When they got to *Valkyrie*, Amanda wanted to talk to the girls at once, but instead got a call from the XO. Telling Batu to take the prisoners to D-deck, Amanda reported to the XO, who invited her into his C-deck quarters, asking, "Where did you get that smartpistol you're wearing? It's not standard issue. Let me see it."

Amanda handed it over, trying to think up a story that did not include Batu. But there was no need to lie; as soon as the XO had her pistol, he told her, "You are under

arrest, Katherine of Conway and Sultana of Slutsk, for fraud, conspiracy, terrorism, murder, treason, and other crimes too numerous to list.”

“Sir, that’s crazy,” she protested, “I’m Amanda James of Bellingdam. Katherine of Conway and the Sultana of Slutsk do not even exist. They are 3V characters. You cannot arrest a hologram.” But they certainly arrested her. Captain Draco came up behind her, handcuffing Amanda before she even knew he was there. She wanted to say, “He’s the real terrorist Slaver,” but thought better of it.

“Since she’s underage, take her to Juvenile Detention,” the XO ordered, trying to make his latest crime seem legal. “Do not talk to her on the way. I’ll interrogate her later.”

When she was safely in detention, Draco cut her handcuffs with that wavy bladed knife favored by Slavers and made her change into prison coveralls while he watched. Happy to finally see her naked, he could not resist a parting slap in the face, adding, “Bitch, you have been no end of trouble, but that is all over now.”

Tears welled up, and her face stung, but she said nothing, glad at least to be in the same lock-up as Kalina and Athena. Cole liked to quote Napoleon to her—his idea of home schooling—“When your enemy is making a mistake, do nothing to disturb him.”

* * *

Fifth rule of the Family:
(5) *There are no other rules.*

THE FIRE THIS TIME

False dawn broke over “Monkey Island” as a fusion powered sun rose out of the 3V sea into a hologram sky. Early risers found Amanda sitting alone in the white sand, her blue marine officer’s uniform replaced by gray prison coveralls. Lisa asked, “What happened, Cousin?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Amanda sank deeper into despair. Misery definitely did not want company.

“Don’t take it so hard,” Lisa advised. “It happens to the best of us.” Yep, that’s for sure. Amanda James, aka Miss Goody-Goody with the spotless rap sheet, the family brain, who went to Bellingdam High long enough to drop out, was finally behind bars where she belonged. Invisible bars, with a sea breeze, sand castles, and tiki huts, but still a flying jail. For what? Posing as a 3V princess was not a crime. Everyone in 3V was richer, prettier, entitled, and age appropriate—that was expected. Real fraud was virtually impossible. Every transaction of credit or real property went through the same computers that did your banking and figured your taxes. If you lacked the credit or were not the legal owner, transactions did not go through. Conspiracy was just as silly. Her 3V conversations with Rylla were one-off coded and unrecorded. With Rylla dead, Amanda was the only living witness. Laws against self-incrimination made conspiracy an unprovable absurdity. But being totally innocent did not matter a whit. That’s what they all say.

So she sat there blaming herself, because there was no one else to blame. Rylla was dead. Cole had come and gone. Her career as a closet princess and Mongol marine had crashed and burned. And she had not hit bottom yet. Amanda had that to look forward to. Turning to Lisa, Amanda confessed her biggest mistake. “Worst thing I did was finding a real job in the real world that I was really good at—that’s what landed me here.”

Lisa laughed. “Well, you won’t be making that mistake again anytime soon. I’m here for being a mom.”

“Me too.” Athena’s mom, Pirate Jenny, strolled over wearing a billowing black

dress, making her look like she had stepped out of a Renaissance masterpiece by Rembrandt or Titian. Behind her came her youngest boys, Bacchus and Joe. "After a life of crime, I'm busted for the one honest thing I did well—being a mom." Slavers had come to retake their daughters. Jenny and Lisa made the mistake of being there for their kids and got grabbed too. Jenny asked Amanda, "Weren't you a Mongol officer on the way here?"

Amanda shook her head. "Not anymore."

"How come?" Black-haired Pirate Jenny sat down among the blonds.

"Space Vikings have joined the Green Dragons." And Amanda was out of a job.

This was old news to Jenny. "Thanks for helping rescue Athena."

Amanda shrugged. "Too bad I locked both of you back up again."

"Not your fault," Jenny told her. "Athena thinks you're great. Only adult who can keep up with her."

That got a smile out of Amanda. "You have an incredibly resourceful daughter. Always a step ahead of me until that HORNET got her. She actually warned me on the way here."

"Yep," Jenny agreed proudly. "Raised her to be a model prisoner."

At 0800 Batu arrived with her old arban to inspect and proposition the prisoners. He told Amanda, "We must talk. I know a tiki hut that is sensor free."

She followed him into the grass shack, where he asked her, "Why did you not tell us you were the Sultana of Slutsk?"

Amanda smiled grimly. "Afraid I'd land in detention."

Batu dropped to his knees before her. "Let me be the first to swear fealty to my Sultana."

"What?" This made no sense whatever, unless it was some wild attempt to get into her prison pants.

"You are the Sultana of Slutsk," he insisted, "Mistress of Asia Higher, Rylla's rightful heiress." Asia Higher was A-deck on Callisto Colony, original home of the Mongols.

Amanda groaned, "Give it up Batu, I am no one's mistress."

Batu actually looked ashamed. "This is bigger than sex. You are our rightful leader, if you were nine or ninety-nine." Bigger than sex? Amanda was astounded. Batu pressed his palms together, as if he were praying to her. "Put your hands over mine." Amanda recognized the ancient oath of fealty, having done this when Rylla made her princess-regent. She pressed her hands over his, rendering Batu powerless, literally taking his life in her hands. Batu swore, "I vow to serve my Sultana, now and forever, being her man, from here to world's end, and beyond."

She vowed to be his true Sultana, to lead him to "victory, peace, and freedom, Siegfried. So help me God." Her first command was to keep this a secret among Mongols. "My second command is that you go to Slutsk and bring me Crown Princess Rylla's RAGNAROK files."

Batu looked pleased and surprised. "You know where they are?"

Amanda smiled down at him. "Am I not Rylla's true heiress? Bring me those files, and together we will do great things."

He rose and left to bring the good news to his brothers. Amanda emerged from the tiki hut a new person, empowered, no longer a prisoner. For the first time since leaving Earth, she could see daylight in a 3V sun. Rylla was right, you must go into the darkness to see the light, and only prison could set you free. Lisa saw the changes in both of them, saying, "Okay, what happened in there? Did Batu finally get his blow job?"

Amanda beamed happily. "Even better."

Jenny scoffed at that notion. "To a Mongol nothing's better than a blow job."

"Come, Cousin, give me your hand." Amanda held her hand out, and Lisa turned it palm up, sniffed, and smiled. "Well, howdy do, your highness. Batu swore fealty to

you.”

Amanda grinned. “How’d you know?”

“Batu was the one with sand on his knees, and I smell him on your palm.”

“Could be a hand job,” Jenny suggested.

Lisa let go of Amanda’s hand. “No, he swore the oath.” Amanda wondered where Lisa got such sudden certainty. Self confidence must be contagious. Or maybe . . .

Amanda looked askance at the two convicted moms. “We’re never going to break out of here if we keep secrets from each other. We should all go into that tiki hut and play a round of truth or dare. Let Missy watch the kids.”

“Sounds like fun.” Jenny got up and headed for the tiki hut. Amanda saw that Jenny was not wearing a billowing dress, but a black flag wrapped around her with a white skull and crossbones tie-dyed on the back.

“Missy’s not much of a babysitter,” Lisa warned, “but I’ll go, as long as we don’t get all touchy-feely. I hate that.”

“You’re the one who wanted to hold hands,” Amanda reminded her.

“I’ll tell you all about it in the hut,” Lisa promised.

Inside the grass hut, Amanda went first, hoping to inspire the others. It felt wonderful to finally tell people about her 3V life with Rylla, rising from unpaid servant to closet princess, heir apparent to Callisto. She could feel her 3V life and real life finally coming together in a prison tiki hut. Pirate Jenny was impressed. “Heiress to the Griffin throne, Mistress of the Mongols, all without leaving your closet.”

Lisa shook her head. “We all thought she was just a terminal nerd. Weird and anti-social Cousin Amanda, who no one ever saw. Kind of like Missy, except even the kids could not see her.”

“Watch out,” Jenny warned. “Space Vikings could easily decide you were better off dead.”

“That’s why I’ve been depressed,” Amanda admitted. “Being locked away on a tropical isle is the least of my worries.”

“They might just sell you to the Green Dragons,” Lisa suggested hopefully.

“Too risky,” Jenny insisted, “they’d surely kill her.”

Lisa rolled her eyes. “Just trying to cheer my cousin up.”

“We’re prisoners aboard a nuclear armed battlecruiser at the tender mercy of rapist killers,” Jenny reminded them. “Anyone who finds that cheerful needs a brain transplant pronto.”

None of this cheered Amanda in the least. “They are not going to kill me until I decode the RAGNAROK files for them. You two moms in custody could get tossed out an airlock this morning just for shits and giggles. So tell me your secrets, while you still have air to talk in.”

Lisa eagerly went next. “You’re not the only NET-head in the Family. I am peace bonded, like in the Peace Corps.” Terran diplomats were hardwired for lie detection, able to read breathing rate, heartbeat, brain waves, and Galvanic Skin Response. “That’s why I held your hand—makes it easier to get pulse, EEG, and GSR.”

“Isn’t that mucho illegal?” Amanda asked. “Unless you are actually in Foreign Relations?”

“Probably,” Lisa supposed, “but my most important foreign relation is my Beloruss husband. In Beloruss nothing’s illegal, and he was constantly hoodwinking me. It was lie detection, or a divorce. But it’s fun, like mind reading. And I can’t be lied to.”

Jenny sighed. “Crown Princess-Sultana. Mind reader. I’m just an ordinary space pirate, though my kids are semi-divine. I do have a UFO, the black freighter *Umbria*, waiting to whisk us away—if we ever get out of here.”

“And Kalina is a fire starter and flash freezer,” Amanda added, “but none of this screams get out of jail free. Until Batu returns with the RAGNAROK files, this is go-

ing to be a waiting game.”

“Good morning, ladies. What’s a waiting game?” They all looked up to see the hologram man from MI-5 standing at ease by the door.

“Who the hell are you?” Lisa asked. “And what are you doing here?”

“I’ve been trying to see Amanda alone, with the sensors down,” he explained. “But that’s plainly mission impossible, so I decided to chance it with you two. I’ve got a vital message for her.”

“We are telling all our secrets,” said Amanda, “so you might as well spill yours.”

“Just here to warn you that your XO is definitely in league with the Green Dragons, so watch out, he might be onto you.”

Amanda grimaced. “We already know.”

“That’s why you’re wearing prison fatigues instead of your uniform? Sorry about that. We’ll do what we can to get you out.” He vanished.

“Who was that hologram?” Lisa demanded.

“British counterintelligence,” Amanda explained. “MI-5’s on our side, but don’t count on them getting us out any time soon.”

Lisa shook her head. “For a princess recluse, you have the weirdest friends.”

Amanda agreed, “He’s one of the saner ones—got a paying job and a good tailor.” When they emerged from the tiki hut, Batu’s three brothers were waiting outside on the sand. One by one the brothers went inside to swear fealty to their Sultana.

Batu came back for one more visit to the tiki hut, before taking the arban to Calisto in the *Ulan Bator*. The high boost U-ship would get there faster than the low-g fusion-powered *Valkyrie*. He promised to send a coded message as soon as he found the files. In return Amanda told him their exact location, thanking him for all his help. Whatever his motives, he and her holo-guy from MI-5 were the only men always on her side since she’d left Bellingdam. By now she was used to Mongols doing right for all the wrong reasons. Batu brushed aside her thanks, saying, “I was born to serve you, my Sultana, Shalom Aleichem.”

“Aleichem Shalom.” As Batu got up to go, she gave him a good-bye kiss, surprising herself as much as him.

Lisa laughed when she heard about the kiss. “That will bring him running back with those files. You have a way with Mongols. All I get is lewd suggestions.”

“Pays to be a Sultana.” Or so she hoped. Days passed while Amanda plotted what to do when she had the RAGNAROK files. Most of all, she wanted the nine-character control code for *Valkyrie*. Amanda could read the RAGNAROK files, because she had the random list of code keys fed into her memory chip when she became Princess Regent of Conway. Rylla’s family had stolen some of the shorter nine-character, one-off control codes for some Space Viking warships. She just prayed *Valkyrie* was one of them.

Her good-bye kiss did not bring Batu running back for more. As different arbans did duty on D-deck, their leaders swore fealty to their Sultana, including Sartak, the company CO and senior Mongol. Next time he came on duty, Sartak told her, “Good news, my Sultana, Batu reports that his reconnaissance was completely successful.”

Good news indeed. “Completely” was the code word that meant Batu had the RAGNAROK files. Amanda felt a step closer to freedom. “Alas, there is bad news as well,” Sartak added, taking a steel slave collar out of his uniform jacket.

Amanda was aghast. “What’s that for?”

“For you, my Sultana. Our executive officer bought you.”

Amanda had no idea she was for sale. “From who?”

“Green Dragons.” Sartak raised the collar to put it around her neck.

Knowing it was useless to resist, Amanda asked, “When will Batu be back?”

Sartak shrugged, “Maybe soon, maybe not at all. Batu found something else in

Callisto. Something that could keep him there or even send him somewhere else.” As Sartak fitted the collar around her neck, he held one hand in front of her face so only she could read the two letters inked in blue on his palm—RL. Rylla Lives.

Amanda looked Sartak straight in the eyes, asking, “Really? Is that true?”

“Batu swears it.” Sartak snapped the collar shut around her neck, then wiped off his hand on his blue uniform pants. Rylla alive! Amanda felt a wave of joy that almost lifted her off her feet. Her whole world was lighter, brighter, happier, and suddenly limitless. She said cheerful good-byes to her horrified fellow prisoners, then went off to Slavery with a song in her heart, a song that Cole used to whistle, the Ode to Joy, from Beethoven’s 9th Symphony:

*“Joy, beautiful goddess child,
Bright daughter of Elysium,
We are all fire drunk,
With thy holy light . . .”*

Good feeling carried her all the way to C-deck, only dampening when she got to the XO’s quarters and saw him grimly waiting for her, a slave remote in hand. After he dismissed Sartak, she asked, “Sir, can you tell me what this is all about?”

“It’s about saving your life,” he replied coolly. “You’ll be happy to know I have gotten the charges against you dropped.”

“Thank you, sir.” They were completely bogus to begin with, but with Rylla alive, she was in a wonderfully forgiving mood.

“Unfortunately, there has been a battle in Callisto orbit,” the XO informed her, “someone hijacked our supply fleet, and two of our cruisers, *Virgo* and *Volans*, were destroyed. The third cruiser, *Vixen*, does not respond and may have been taken by the enemy.”

Rylla was alive and running amok. The entire Space Viking invasion fleet was destroyed or missing. Mimir must be in meltdown. *Valkyrie* was the only major warship left in the Jovans.

“Sir, what about Batu and my arban?”

His eyes narrowed. “Batu and his arban are MIA.”

Batu and Rylla were running amok, probably with the RAGNAROK files. How else could *Vixen* have been hijacked? Amanda could honestly say, “Sir, I wish I had been there with them.”

He grimaced, “That was not possible. You are already suspected of collusion in all this. Our people in Callisto are desperate, and they want you immediately interrogated and brain scanned, or if that’s not practical, executed.”

Amanda could well believe they were desperate, cut off in Callisto Colony, vastly outnumbered by a hostile population, with no back-up, and all their heavy weapons and ammunition in enemy hands. All the navy had in system were two star-class light cruisers, *Polaris* and *Procyon*, attached to Bifrost station. Neither was a match for *Vixen*, much less *Valkyrie*. Her XO had suddenly become the most powerful man in the Jovans. It was mildly flattering that the first use of his enormous new power was to seize and enslave her, but Amanda could have done without the honor. “Sir, I was in the brig the whole time, how could I conspire with anyone? What does Mimir say, sir?”

“That does not concern a slave.” He looked her over coolly. “All you need know is that I made you my property to protect you. You are Rylla’s heiress, that’s enough reason to kill you a dozen times. I am your only hope.”

Poor me, Amanda thought. So Mimir and the navy were both out of the loop, and she was now the only item up for discussion. He stepped closer, laying hands on his property, pulling her to him, saying, “I deserve something for saving your life.”

Ten guesses what “something” was. “You have my eternal gratitude, sir.”

"I was thinking of something more substantial." He felt her breast through the blue uniform fabric. "This does not have to be rape."

"I'm afraid it does, sir. I am seventeen," Amanda reminded him. "I cannot legally give consent, even if I wanted to." When it came to adult sex, the law had long ago taken away her right to say "yea" or "nay."

"Enough talk." He gave her an evil look, then pressed MUTE on the remote. Amanda had nothing to say anyway. She thought of the looks on the kids' faces when their beloved Mongols hauled her away. Kalina and Athena were appalled. Monkey looked horribly frightened. No matter what that happened to her, the XO had already lost the children. Lose them, and you lose the future. Saying that would probably just sound silly to him, and it would be giving aid and comfort to the enemy.

"And as an added incentive." Her XO opened the door to the adjoining bedroom in his suite. Lying motionless on the floor was Gunnhilde, the blond Valkyrie, staring wide-eyed at the deckhead above. Amanda would have thought the woman was paralyzed, except she was not wearing a slave collar. "She's not dead," the XO explained. "Captain Draco's WASP rounds are loaded with enough curare to knock you down but not enough to kill you. She can still see, and hear, and feel pain. Flight commander Gunnhilde was the one officer who objected to enslaving you. And if you do not cooperate to my satisfaction, she will die as painfully as possible."

Her heart went out to Gunnhilde, but there was nothing to say and little she could do. Closing the adjoining door, he pushed Amanda back onto the bed. Landing on her back, Amanda felt herself shutting down, going into survivor mode. Somehow, she must get through what was coming. For her sake as well as the Valkyrie's. Struggling was useless. He would just hit PAUSE, and she would be paralyzed as well as mute. Her cerebral implants allowed her to shut off pain, going numb, even comatose, conserving strength for a counterattack. Logically, she should go along with him, just smile and start taking off her prison coveralls, which she did not like anyway. But she could not bring herself to do that. No worry. Her new master unzipped the coveralls for her, liking what he saw. Sitting down beside her on the bed, he unhooked her bra and tossed it on the floor. Immediately alarm bells rang, and the cabin communicator started wailing—"FIRE, FIRE, FIRE, C-DECK O2 REGENERATORS, FIRE, FIRE . . ."

"Shit!" shouted the XO, standing up and staring down at her, wanting to blame this on her too. Giving in was not enough for him, and he pressed PAUSE, paralyzing her anyway, leaving her able to think and breathe but not do much else. Setting down the remote, he warned her, "I will be back."

"Don't hurry on my account," Amanda thought, hearing the cabin door click and lock. Immobilized and helpless, she wanted to cry, like when she "saw" Rylla die, but she could not even do that. She had been pushed beyond sorrow to a place where only truth mattered. Powerful people wanted her dead, because they were scared—afraid of what she and Rylla might do. So what? We are all born dead. It is only a matter of when, and how. Rylla had shown that you could even rise from the dead and come back stronger than ever. Retreating into 3V, Amanda used the C-Deck cameras to check on the fire. Foam retardant filled the O2 regenerators, smothering the blaze. C-deck had plenty of air, so there was no danger there. Alarms started wailing again. Heat had spread the fire to adjacent fuel cells, which were now almost impossible to get to as the surrounding compartments filled with foam and smoke, blanking even the cameras.

Switching to D-deck, Amanda searched juvenile detention, looking for a dark-haired girl, sitting alone, somewhere on Monkey Island. She found Kalina sitting with her back against a coconut palm, eyes closed, ignoring the crash of virtual breakers, feeding the flames. Amanda wished she could thank her, but seeing her

was enough. Cole was right—It's the fire this time.

Kalina's firestorm continued through the noon watch and the first dog watch, with fires in arms lockers, recyclers, missile silos, even freezers and cold storage. Not enough fires to harm the ship, but enough to keep her officers busy. All but one. At the start of the second dog watch, the XO burst into his quarters smelling of smoke and fire retardant. He stood staring hatefully at her, with soot on his face and a big extinguisher tank in one hand. Captain Draco was with him, the poisonous smart-pistol on his hip. Nodding toward the adjoining bedroom, the XO told the Slaver, "Dispose of the Valkyrie."

Draco went into the adjoining bedroom, and came out with Gunnhilde slung over his shoulder, disappearing in the direction of the flames. Setting down the heavy canister, Amanda's owner turned and carefully closed and sealed the door, shutting off the cabin sensors and communicator. Alarms ceased, except in Amanda's head. Turning back to glare at her, he declared, "This sabotage is your doing, and that foolish woman will be the first to suffer for it. Draco is going to toss her into a burning compartment, and her murder will be added to your crimes. By the end of this dog watch you will tell me how you started these fires, and how to stop them, or I'll start feeding your friends on D-deck to the flames. But first let's have some fun." He bent down to begin where he left off, pulling her panties down past her knees.

Mute, paralyzed, and nauseated, Amanda had no say in the matter. She could not help thinking about Gunnhilde, and what she said on the day they met, that Valkyries lived to die in battle. Now Gunnhilde would get her wish and a viking's funeral as well. It sickened and angered Amanda to think that was because of her. She had never hated anyone before, not the way she hated her murderous XO. She was going to make this guy suffer, even if it killed her. Too bad she had to fuck him first.

Grinning wide, the XO began to feel overdressed for the occasion, taking off his soot-stained shirt and kicking off his shoes. As Amanda James she had gotten almost zero male attention. Only Mongols hit on her, and they hit on everyone. But as the Sultana of Slutsk, she had fans from Phobos to Neptune eager to see her naked. Now the most powerful man in the Jovans had taken time out from saving his burning ship to do it. Too bad he was a sadistic maniac who preferred his women unwilling and immobilized. Amanda did not think for a nanosecond that he was "saving" her. This was too much like necrophilia to be anything but an undressed rehearsal for her inevitable murder.

Loosening his pants, the XO let them drop, enjoying himself immensely at her expense. Then he lifted one leg to take his pants off. Amanda watched in amazed fascination as the heavy fire retardant canister rose up behind him, defying *Valkyrie's* spin gravity. Balancing on one leg, he pulled the other leg out of his pants. Just the pose the canister had been waiting for. It quickly came crashing down on his head.

Astonished and delighted, Amanda watched the fire extinguisher set itself down again. Then a voice from nowhere said, "Sorry. I had to wait until he turned off the cams and sensors, then got in that exact pose. With guys like him you don't get second shots." Amanda's savior flipped on the cabin communicator, then said a single word into the D-deck speakers: "BRENNENSCHULSS."

Fire time. Alarms faded. Cabin air-conditioning came roaring on, pouring cool air over her naked body. Then the remote rose up and pointed at her. Suddenly, she could move and speak. "Thank you, thank you." She sat up on the bed. "You're Missy, aren't you? Sorry I ever doubted you."

Monkey's invisible friend laughed. "You were supposed to." Amanda's steel slave collar snapped open, floated through the air, then closed around the XO's neck. Then the remote floated over and settled in Amanda's hand. Missy told her, "Your call

now.”

About time. Wishing there was a XTRA PAIN button, she pointed the remote at the XO and pressed SLEEP instead, not wanting him alert at an awkward moment. Then she called Sartak on the cabin communicator, saying, “My master wants more company. Bring Lisa Dalton to his quarters. Only use a slave collar if she resists.”

Amanda just had time to dress before bemused Mongols delivered a reluctant Lisa to the XO's door. Amanda told Sartak, “Now he wants Pirate Jenny too. Right away.” She did not want the Mongols seeing the XO in a coma just yet.

Mongols hurried off, impressed by the XO's sudden ravenous appetite for women. Amanda then dragged her wary cousin inside. Lisa stared at the XO, lying felled in mid ravish, pants half off. She told Amanda, “When the Mongols came for me, I expected he'd have his pants down, but I thought he'd be much more active and that you'd be naked.”

“Why does everybody picture me naked?” Amanda demanded. “When I do nothing to encourage it.”

“Maybe that's why,” Lisa suggested. “Modesty is such a tease. I'm just glad it's not me.”

“Actually, I was naked,” Amanda admitted, “until Missy put an end to the party.”

“Hi, Missy,” Lisa said to the air. “Nice job on the XO. Looks much better this way.”

“Thanks,” came out of nowhere.

Amanda had a lot to do before the dog watch was over and officers tried to report to the XO. She asked Lisa, “Can you truth test him in his sleep?”

“Sure.” Lisa knelt down next to the XO. “It's better this way. His resistance is down, but he can still hear, and his brain is awake even if he's asleep.”

“We need the nine-place access code for *Valkyrie*,” Amanda explained. “Characters can either be numbers or letters, in an unknown order.”

Lisa nodded, grabbing the XO's wrist and saying in his ear, “How many characters are there in the *Valkyrie*'s access code group? Six? Seven? Eight? Nine?” She looked up at Amanda. “You're right, nine.” Then she turned back to the sleeping XO. “First character, number or letter? All right, letter. A . . . B . . . C . . .”

While Lisa recited the alphabet, Amanda searched the XO's quarters and found her smartpistol, checked to see it was loaded, then tossed it on the bed. She did not want anyone to see her armed until she had control of the ship. She also found her YIELD earring showing the XO had searched her quarters. She pocketed the earring, and threw the XO's pistol down DISPOSAL. Before Lisa had the first letter, someone was at the door. Assuming it was the Mongols with Pirate Jenny, she opened the door and found herself facing Captain Draco instead.

Shoving her back inside and drawing his poisoned gun, Draco saw the XO lying on the floor and Lisa bent over him reciting the alphabet. He snarled at Amanda, “Still making trouble, bitch.” Then he pointed his pistol at Lisa. “Stop doing that. Leave him alone, and stand up. Now!”

Lisa looked blankly back at the angry Slaver as if she did not understand English, though she must have known he meant it. Amanda felt something nudging at her gun hand. Without looking she knew it was the smartpistol she had left on the bed. This time she had zero hesitation. Taking the gun, she pointed it at Draco and pressed the WASP trigger. Captain Draco crumpled to the deck beside the XO. Amanda heaved a huge grateful sigh. “Thanks again, Missy.”

“No problem,” Missy replied. “That's why I'm here.”

“That was really, really scary,” Lisa told them, shaking with relief. She had held Draco's attention just long enough for Missy to get the gun. The man who took women for fun and profit had ended up with one too many.

“He's a scary man,” Amanda assured them, picking up Draco's poisonous pistol

and tossing it down DISPOSAL too. “Followed me for a million odd miles, with murder in his heart.”

Lisa shivered. “That must have been fun.” Then she went back to work on the XO. Amanda looked down at Draco, seeing karma at work. He had been wrong to kidnap her, and that wrong led naturally to other wrongs, and now he would wake up in a navy brig—if he was lucky. And no matter what courts and regulations said, the navy never let guys like him back out again, since the navy was stupid but not insane.

The next person at the XO’s door was Sartak with Pirate Jenny. Amanda thanked him and dismissed the Mongols, saying she would call if the XO needed more women. Then she dragged a reluctant Jenny inside. Seeing Draco and the XO lying side by side, and Lisa reciting the alphabet, Jenny asked, “Why did you invite me? The party’s already over.”

“Thanks to Missy,” Amanda told her. All she had done was pull the trigger.

Jenny nodded. “Nice job, Missy.”

“Thanks.”

Five more letters, with numbers in between, and Lisa looked up, saying, “It’s SIG3R5U7N.”

“Sounds like it.” Amanda sat down at the XO’s workstation, handing Lisa the thumbprint pad. “Has to be something the XO could remember, since it cannot be recorded or written down. Sigrun is a Valkyrie, and 357 are the first odd primes, which could mean *Valkyrie* CO. I’ll enter it, you press.”

Plugging in, Amanda entered the code, and Lisa pressed the XO’s thumb to the pad. Amanda exclaimed happily, “We’re in.” Cheers erupted from those not passed out on the floor. Amanda entered a quick update order to *Valkyrie*:

COMMUNICATIONS LOCK. EMERGENCY COMMAND TRANSFER TO LIEUTENANT (JG) AMANDA JAMES.

Then she told Lisa, “Press.” Lisa pressed, and Amanda was now commanding *Valkyrie*, without anybody off-ship knowing. Mimir, *Asgard*, Terra-Luna, and the navy were all out of the loop. She put her YIELD earring in her ear, prepared to meet the cosmos on her own terms. Her first official act was to call Sartak and inform him that his Sultana was now running the ship, and she had discovered a criminal conspiracy between ship’s officers and Green Dragon Slavers. No big news to the Mongols. “We do not know which officers are involved in the conspiracy, so arrest them all while they are still groggy from fighting the fires.” Later, Lisa could sort the innocent from the guilty.

Mongols eagerly obeyed, glad to be led by a young blond Sultana who ruthlessly did the right thing. They took the officers down to D-deck and brought up Lisa and Jenny’s kids, plus Jeannette and Kalina. Amanda thanked Kalina wholeheartedly, “Without those fires, really horrible things would be happening to me.”

“I know,” Kalina replied. “That’s why I lit them.” Kalina had that uncanny child’s sense of right and wrong that a lot of adults somehow lost.

Amanda had not told anyone about the Valkyrie, to keep Kalina from feeling bad. “As soon as I can get a coded message through, I’ll tell your mom you are safe,” Amanda promised.

“Good,” Kalina replied, “she misses me.” Kalina did not need speed-of-light messaging to know that was true.

Before the dog watch was over, they had complete command of the ship. Pirate Jenny approved, “For a captain kid just starting out, you show a real talent for piracy.”

“Runs in the Family,” Amanda confessed. “Our clan makes its own rules. For all my life I fought that, trying like hell to stay within the law, even when there was no law, sealing off my bedroom, hiding in my closet, burying myself in denial. Slavery set me

free. They are not going to let me be a good girl, no matter how hard I try. I had to own up to that or be owned by them. Now I have stolen myself and compounded that felony by stealing my master's ship, but there is no going back to Slavery. Freedom is too addictive. Free yourself, and you feel like freeing the whole damn Solar System." She was starting to sound like Rylla—but doing the right thing, without having to plead and ask permission, felt wonderful.

"We all started out trying to be good girls," Lisa told her, "but it's not that easy. Keep trying to be good, and you'll end up dead, or in detention."

"Or just fading away," Missy added, surprising those who did not know she was there. Turning off her full-body 3V suit, she suddenly became visible, pulling back the ninja hood to reveal yet another blond.

"You'll like being a pirate," Jenny insisted. "Less work, more rum, better booty."

"I'm afraid I will," Amanda admitted, "but before that rum and booty, there's work to be done. We live in a lawless system run by cops and crooks preying on the weak then blaming the victims. That cannot be patched up or rigged to work. Like Cole says, it's the fire this time. We need to burn it down and start anew, taking responsibility for our lives, by doing the right thing, and doing it now. Fourth rule of the Family is, if you can't be good, be quick. Right now I'm putting a call through to *Vixen*, to find out who's in command of her."

Asimov's and I

"In the mid eighties I was teaching at Villanova University (working for God always looks good on your resume) and married to Michelle, a beautiful blond witch, and our eldest daughter (Anneke in this story) was two years old. I was offered my dream academic job at the Philadelphia Art Institute, an all women's college facing the Rocky steps, to teach Western History in terms of women and art, instead of men and politics. But I realized I could not be a full-time dad and also teach college, so I decided to raise Anneke in the woods and write science fiction.

"First thing I did was go out and buy a copy of Asimov's, because that was a magazine I really wanted to sell to. I vividly remember turning to the title page, seeing there were only two authors whose names I did not recognize, and thinking, 'Only two slots for nobodies like me.' We settled in Hidden Valley, had another daughter Erin, and a grand daughter Kalina, plus a few foster daughters, including Missy and Jazmyne, while I wrote fantasy and SF.

"It still amazes me how many stories I wrote for Asimov's, and how many doors Asimov's opened for me. Both my science fiction novels began as Asimov's stories. One Asimov's story 'Gypsy Trade' (November 1992) got me a great New York agent and a movie contract. It was a very personal story, based on a hitchhiking trip that Michelle and I took to Holland, so we wondered who would play 'us.' I decided Richard Geer should play me, but Paramount was sold, and the new owners dropped the project. Later Hollywood did make a movie about me, starring Richard Geer, but that is another story. . . ."

—R. Garcia y Robertson