

THE AIRWALKER COMES TO THE CITY IN GREEN

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THE AIRWALKER COMES TO THE CITY IN GREEN

The day Henriette became an airwalker, her mother had taken to her bed for a week. “You’ll die out there,” she’d said. And, “I can’t bear to lose you too.”

“You don’t need to worry,” Henriette had said. “It’s not like it was in the early days of the smog. It’s safer now. And I’ll be careful.” Like most things Henriette said, this was a string of lies, and they both knew it. Her mother had turned her face to the wall, and Henriette had spent the next four years washing the blood of unlucky walkers out of her salvaged suits. The first time she’d put on a new suit—her own air suit, fitted to her body and tailored in every detail—she’d been caught off-guard by how clean it smelled. Metallic, yes, but not like blood. Different.

That was then. Now her suit smelled of sweat and copper and promise. She adjusted the reserve air tank strapped to her back and coiled the thick black snake tube around her shoulder. Leonor watched her nervously. “Are you sure you won’t call down for Junt? I’d feel better if you had a partner.”

"More walkers means less profit from salvage." Henriette tightened the straps on her weighted boots. "If I tell Junt the sector has stabilized, she'll have the news out to her crew by end of watch. And every walker in Frangere will be out there in the mist, picking the sector clean before the official declaration is out."

Leonor frowned. "I'm not the only one who saw the declaration," she said. "Surely some walkers already know."

"All the more reason to get out early." Seeing Leonor's expression, Henriette added, "This is a good chance for us. For our children." They didn't have children, at least not yet, but she could see from Leonor's expression that her words had hit home. Leonor wanted her children to be able to choose their own professions, which meant that she and Henriette needed to secure living quarters in one of the first wards. And that would require more credits than Leonor's diplomat salary could ever supply.

"Credits aren't worth anything if you die out there." Leonor turned the copper helmet over in her hands. She passed it over. "Be careful."

"I'm always careful," Henriette lied. She kissed Leonor, inhaling what she could of her—the smell of salt and perfumed silk—and then the copper helmet descended, its weight imprisoning her behind a pane of glass. A terrible, gong-like sound vibrated through Henriette as once, twice, Leonor rapped the side of the helmet. The seal was good.

Henriette turned her ponderous suit around to face the smoglock. The door spiraled open, and she slouched forward into the first chamber, dragging the snake tube behind her. Leonor would make sure the tube—which the Frangeriens would have called an "air tube," back in the days when the word "air" meant something neutral and invisible and safe—was properly snugged in its place of honor at the center of the door spiral. And then the door closed.

When upper-ward socialites asked Henriette what the most difficult part of a walk was, she would tell the story of being half-buried by an airquake at Shiptown, or the story of how she was chased under the White Bridge by a pack of Cravens (which had actually happened to a different walker, not her, but Henriette told the story better). But the truth—and Henriette never told the truth if she could help it—was that the worst moment came as she stood in the smoglock and waited for the outer door to slide open. She'd seen what could happen when a smoglock opened into a gravity sink. If Henriette was going to die, she wanted it to be out in the mist, doing something balladworthy. Not within the walls of the civitas, where her death would be recorded, and analyzed, and used as a cautionary tale. Not where Leonor would watch her die.

The outer door slid open, and Henriette's world went green. The smog stretched its tendrils around her, but her seals held, and nothing snatched her into the mist. She breathed, in and out, letting the dephlogisticated air—D—flow into her lungs, letting her eyes adjust to the thick, emerald light of outer Frangere.

On a day like this, when the green smog hugged the ground, and the sleek architecture of South Street and the arches of the Rue Navier appeared as what they were—the juxtaposed fragments of long-dead worlds—it was almost possible to imagine these abandoned streets and buildings bustling with people, as they must have been many years ago. But above Frangere's rooftops, Henriette could see the Outer Dark brooding over the city's remnant atmosphere. Against that stark reality, the city of Seintuaire glowed like a white star in the reflected light of the hidden sun. The purple glow of Vestigium was nowhere to be seen; the third city must have already sunk below the horizon.

Henriette scanned the smog for movement, a telltale twitch. Nothing. She listened for another moment, but heard only her own breath damping the inside of the helmet. She tapped the communications patch on her shoulder. "See anything?"

“It looks clear,” Leonor’s voice intoned in Henriette’s ear. “You’ll have about forty feet before we lose audio, about a hundred before I lose visual. If I spot anything before then, start running.”

“In this suit?” Henriette gestured at the heavy snake tube. It limited her mobility, even as it provided her with an unlimited supply of D—an extra bit of security for a solo walker in dangerous territory.

“Try.”

Out of habit, Henriette checked her air gauge before she moved. If something happened to her snake tube, the small reserve tank on her back would keep her breathing for about thirty-five minutes. That sounded like a lot, to the average sedentary, but walkers knew how fast D went when you were in trouble. *Never go into your reserve tank* was a walker rule, and it was one that even Henriette found worth paying attention to.

Today Frangere’s gravity was working in Henriette’s favor, so she was able to trudge across the road rather than climbing the rope ladder that clasped the side of the civitas wall. As she approached the Rue Navier guidepost, Leonor’s voice blurred into her helmet, carried by a wave of static. “I’m about to lose you. *Bonne chance.*”

“I’ll see you soon,” Henriette told the static. She shut off the audio link. The guidepost’s web of ropes stretched in multiple directions: a yellow rope for a thoroughfare, a red rope for an airlock. Henriette touched the post for luck, but did not clip on. Where she was going, there were no safe paths.

The snakewalk began well enough. Henriette found a coil of something that looked like a golden rope lying on the cracked pavement about twenty paces past the sign. Fifty credits of easy salvage. She transferred it to her collecting sack, humming the Ballad of Coulon’s Glory as she did so. “*A walker went out one day, one day, / And found a ship of gold—*”

Her next discovery came at the former corner of South Street and Norfolk, at the site once known as Griffin Park. Once, when South Street had been part of what the old-timers still referred to as the “real world,” there’d been a garden space here, with a picturesque stone bridge and a small lake and summer creatures called swans that had liked to swim across it.

Henriette’s mother had loved that park. She hadn’t been there when her universe had fallen, but nearby, sheltering in a transportation station. The park’s survival—such as it was—had been a symbol for her. When the South Street airquake tore it in half, she’d wept, even though by then the smog had descended on Frangere—the last, poisonous gift of another dying world—and the park had been lost to her anyway.

But not to Henriette. She snakewalked in the direction of the park’s former bridge, which the ballads now called the Spinning Stones. It was still beautiful in its way: an endlessly moving whirlpool of decorously smooth stones and bricks. Pinned at the bottom of the Spinning Stones’ spiral was a flash of silver.

Ducking under the floating fragments, Henriette bent her slow way toward that gleam of light. The snake tube moved sluggishly behind her, giving the occasional jump as a gravity bend caught it, but the current was weak here, the airquake’s energy long spent.

As Henriette approached, the gleam resolved itself into the shape of a self-propelling vehicle. It lay on its back, its wheels pointing toward the Outer Dark, and its metal frame was shining, indicating that it had fallen in the last week or so. A doubt began to flicker at the corner of Henriette’s mind. Maybe this sector was less stable than the Council’s philosophers had thought? But debris could come down anywhere in Frangere, particularly in regions whose gravity currents pulled cityward. And this was a good find.

Inside the vehicle she saw one—no, two—dark shapes. They looked human

enough. The driver seemed to have died on impact; the mossy splatters of blood could have reflected its original color or been greened by the smog. The figure in the back seat seemed to have survived the initial impact. Her brown hair floated free, trying to join with the upward swirl of stones from the bridge. But the woman's eyes stared blindly, and her open mouth showed that she had died gasping in the smog. If Leonor were here, she'd insist that the proper rituals be observed. But she wasn't. Henriette unfasted her crowdbar and tackled the door.

The vehicle proved a good find. The driver wore a kind of short canvas coat with shiny buttons, the woman a magnificently transparent purple scarf. Both of them wore shoes made of an alien fabric, well-shaped and good for resale—at least twenty credits' worth. Several galvanic devices were on their bodies, gleaming objects rendered inoperable by their plunge into a new universe, but still valuable for the rare metals they contained. She slipped the smaller ones into her collection sack. As she did, the light reflected on them changed color.

Quickly, Henriette was out of the vehicle, raising her eyes to the sky. Above her head, in the upper reaches of the Outer Dark, an orange glow was elongating, bending over an unseen fold in space. It quivered there for a moment, and then—plunged.

A shiver traced its way down Henriette's back as she watched the universe fall. Unwanted, the images from her mother's story flashed into her mind: an orange crack splitting a blue sky, the sound of people screaming. Somewhere in that universe there was life, and now that life was dying.

The universe burned brighter as it plunged. Its boundaries frayed, tattering into a trail of light. From that trail spat what seemed to be tiny white sparks, but which Henriette knew to be fragments of solar systems and nebulas, stars and planets. These larger masses would eventually form new orbits at the top of the Inner Dark's spiral. But the smaller debris—fragments of planet, of gas cloud, of rock—would wildly seek their former wholeness.

Kin seeks kin, the ballad said, *twin seeks twin*. At the moment of versefall, when the boundaries on a universe sheered away, objects would be drawn to the fragments of similar selves in other, parallel universes. Stone to stone, tree to tree, city block to city block.

Henriette had to get out of the park. The gravity currents might be weak here, but if debris began raining down on the outer districts, this would be one of the more hazardous places to occupy. She began to retrace her steps, following the wind of her snake tube back through the dance of stone. Haste made her less careful. A fragment of rock slammed into her helmet, making her ears ring. She ducked lower, following the black tube through a cloud of brick dust.

The first piece of debris slammed down behind her. Another large dark shape whirled overhead—perhaps another universe's version of the vehicle she'd just searched. *More credits*, part of her thought. But that was only if she lived.

Feeling the gravity weaken around her, she jumped forward, sailing a good twenty feet before the ground caught her again. This was good. She was clear of the Spinning Stones, clear of whatever gravity sink might have opened up behind her.

And then something went wrong.

She saw the object as a black shape in the corner of her eye. She didn't hesitate, but flung herself forward again, trying for whatever momentum she could muster. The object missed her, but something seized her by the small of the back and jerked her backward with savage force. Her snake tube. It was pinned.

This was the kind of moment that separated live walkers from dead ones. Henriette breathed in on a four count, as she'd been taught. She reached behind her neck—*did I ever tell you about the time my snake tube got pinned under debris?*—and closed the valve. Detached the tube. *I figured my suit had about three minutes worth of D in it,*

she told her future audience. *Plenty of time.* Something dark flew past her head. *So I just switched to my reserve air tank.* But there was something wrong with the reserve connector. It wouldn't attach. Henriette let out her breath for a count of four. She checked the line. Traced her hand up the tube. Adjusted the angle. Connected.

Air flowed back into her lungs, and her vision widened. She was surrounded by tree branches. Time to move.

Part of being an airwalker was thinking in three dimensions, particularly in conditions of low visibility. Henriette shifted backward and forward, feeling where the gravity flow had changed. She moved her arm slowly, feeling where a large branch ran along her side, threatening to snag her gear. She shifted the heavy suit into an upward gravity current and she stepped diagonally away from the branch. Up and out.

Now she was truly airwalking, free of all ropes and tubes tethering her to safety. The weak gravity let her sail for a while through the gritty air before it pulled her down to packed earth. Behind her, the gravity currents of the Spinning Stones were looping all kinds of debris into its never-ending whirlpool.

But debris wasn't the only danger posed by versefall. If a universe fragment was large enough, it would carry its physics with it. And if its landing site had a different set of physical laws, the integration wave would expand outward with ferocious force, pummeling the area around it. Airquake.

Henriette glanced at the line of South Street buildings opposite her. If an airquake happened, and she was at ground zero, there'd be no chance for her. Her metabolism, respiration, and brain activity relied on a consistent set of physical laws; at ground zero, the quake would scramble her like an egg. Further out, the shock wave would pose a more traditional threat. The buildings of South Street might offer shelter from flying debris, but an airquake would tear through them in a heartbeat. Henriette remembered waking up in the rubble of the Hangar Quake. She wouldn't chance that again.

Instead, she folded herself into a ball and waited on the open ground. If debris killed her, they'd find her body, salvage her suit, pay a cut to Leonor. And she'd never see Leonor again, never get a ballad named after her, the way she'd always dreamed. Better to live, then.

She lived. The air stayed as it was: green and poisonous. The debris continued to fall, and then to slow, and finally the sky was deceptively clear again. Henriette checked her air gauge. Twenty-five minutes left. Time to move.

As she rose, a sound thrummed into her. Henriette scanned the green seethe of South Street, thinking worriedly of Cravens, though everyone knew that Cravens emitted sweet, flute-like sounds as they hunted. It was the most beautiful thing about the ugly beasts.

The sound was shaped like human music, like a set of rapid notes being played. It seemed to come from the building opposite her, though of course that was impossible. The Outer Dark had long ago ripped away the insides of the South Street Church. Airwalker Cinder had marked the ancient door with a giant red X—As a *warning to those who might open its door*, her ballad said. Still, the music seemed to come from that direction.

Henriette's air gauge showed twenty-three minutes remaining. She had no time to investigate this. She needed to get back to the smoglock, to Leonor. But *I heard music and turned away* didn't make for a good story.

Henriette advanced toward the sound, one hand poised over the grip of her ardegunna. The music intensified as she walked, seeming to vibrate in her very bones. And yet the sound was not painful; not alluring either. Just different.

Now she was at the foot of the giant church door, a mass of wood studded with large brass nails and splattered with red paint. The airquake that had sheered through here in Cinder's day had crumpled the church's reality like a piece of tinfoil.

In its wake reality had unfolded again, but did not, could not, return to the way it had been. Gravity had played with the painted warning, ripping off the flakes and letting them waft upward, and so Henriette had to wade through a red mist to the resonating door. She raised her gloved hand, and, tentatively, pushed.

The door swung open.

Inside, Henriette saw what she had expected: a column of darkness rushing upward, a whirling sea of stone and wood and scraps of paper. The warp of the church's gravity sink pulled at her, but the iron in her boots held her firm. Henriette felt her teeth clench as she stared into the vibrating darkness. *You might get me one day*, she told the Outer Dark, *but not today*.

And then something strange happened.

Far off, on the other side of the whirling current of stone and paper and music, a blue light flashed on and off.

Henriette stared. It was an illusion. A trick of perception brought on by the endless swirl of terrible darkness and the humming noise, which seemed to have intensified. It couldn't possibly be a signal.

It couldn't, and yet there it was again. Blueness, blackness. Half unconsciously, her free hand strayed to the signal lamp at her belt and she twisted its lens On / Off. Yellow light jumped across the room, before being devoured by the flow of destruction.

The blue light flickered more intensely. On / Off. On / Off. Henriette mimicked it, though an uneasy feeling was crawling up her spine. *You get in trouble*, Leonor had warned her, *starting things you're not prepared to finish*.

Incredibly, a figure emerged from the darkness. Out of the swirl of dust and stone, a heavy golden suit stepped forward, apparently untroubled by the rocks that tumbled past its faceplate. The figure approached, nearer, nearer, until Henriette could dimly make out a face behind the glass. A woman, lit from above by ghostly lights. A face like her own. Her own face, framed by gold.

"Hi," the other Henriette said in a voice like old coals. "I knew you'd come."

* * *

In the humidity of the smoglock, they spoke in quick bursts, the words tumbling after each other.

"We stayed there for two years, until Mother was transferred to the Seventh Ward."

"That's where I saw my first walker. Cinder. She opened my school."

"I remember she wore a red coat—"

"Double-breasted, with shining buttons. And I thought—"

"—look at her. She gets to leave this place. She gets to have adventures." The other Henriette—who insisted that she be called "The ambassador"—grinned at the memory. She wore a small diamond stud in her nose, and her right eyebrow was uncreased by the scar Henriette had earned in the Hangar Airquake. But her other features—the woman's too-long nose, her pocked skin—were disconcertingly familiar. Henriette wondered whether their seeming strangeness came from viewing them outside the reversals of a mirror.

"Cinder," Henriette said. "I'd hoped to work on her team one day. But she died in the evacuation of South Street."

"No." This time the ambassador shook her head. "She died seven years ago. The Hangar Quake."

Henriette pondered this information. "So, again, after the smog?"

"I guess." The ambassador spoke like a woman from one of the lower wards, like the kind of person Henriette might have become, if not for the charity scholarship she'd won when she was thirteen. "We never had a smog. When I was twelve, Vestigium was sideswiped in a versefall. Its atmosphere changed to something they call the *haar*. A quarter of the city choked to death before they sealed the locks." She

paused, thinking it through. “That happened here?”

Henriette nodded. For a dizzying moment, she could imagine a Frangere without smog. Her Seventh Ward classmates might still be alive. She might never have been sent to Miss Parsons’ etiquette class. She might never have met Leonor. “Looks like the Smogfall is our divergence point.”

The door behind the ambassador spiraled open. Leonor gave a hard look at Henriette—she must have been listening to their conversation via the kamaras—then her face softened into the vague smile she wore at diplomatic functions. This meant trouble.

“Greetings,” Leonor said to the ambassador. “I gather my partner found you in the smog?”

“More like we found each other, really.” The ambassador executed a clumsy bow. Her golden suit moved quickly, but it seemed to weigh awkwardly on her body, as though she were too small for it. The ambassador looked speculatively up at Leonor, and Henriette felt the first pang of something—*anxiety?*—thrill through her.

Leonor was a big, broad-shouldered woman, completely unlike most people’s idea of a diplomat. Her face had a tendency to relax into a placid, sleepy expression, which some fools—including Henriette, when she’d first met her—mistook for dullness. And the ambassador seemed—well, rougher than Henriette. More like the Seventh Warder she’d spent her teenage years polishing away. This could go badly.

“Leonor Durand,” her partner said.

“Henriette Cros,” the other Henriette said, grinning like an idiot, “but I guess you already knew that.”

Leonor gestured inside the lock. “Please,” she said. “Come in. Take your gear off. We are so interested to know all about you.” She was carrying a greasewrench in her hand, which normally Leonor—who came from a Sixth Ward clanger family, and spent her weeks smiling back at the Fourth Warders’ snide remarks about where she belonged—would never do. Henriette could easily imagine Leonor clocking the ambassador with it the instant she stepped over the threshold. Henriette stepped forward, and gently took the hand with the wrench. “It’s good to be back.”

Leonor hesitated, then smiled, and leaned forward to kiss her. “Welcome back.”

“Please don’t club her unconscious,” Henriette whispered in her lover’s ear.

“Only if she tries something,” Leonor whispered, nuzzling Henriette’s neck. “Don’t trust her.” She turned back to the ambassador with a smile, the wrench still ready in her hand.

“So,” she said. “Let’s hear your story.”

* * *

Of course the ambassador had a story. She told it more rapidly than Henriette would have, sacrificing opportunities for dramatic flourishes. A just-the-facts version, or at least as close as a walker story ever got to that.

“So this philosopher, Marie Daniels—do you have a version of her? I guess she was one of those killed in your Smogfall—she figured out that the same tangle that brings objects together in *versefall* could be harnessed for travel beyond the three cities.”

“Not a bridge then,” Leonor said. She looked sleepier than usual, which meant her mind was racing.

“Not a bridge. A slingshot. It takes a lot of energy. And the entry and exit points need to be in the outskirts of a city. Places where reality is already bent.”

“That sounds dangerous,” Leonor said admiringly. Henriette almost rolled her eyes. The ambassador wasn’t going to fall for that, was she? But of course she was.

“*Vraiment dangereux*,” the ambassador agreed. “The passage felt like someone ripping my skin off and replacing it with fire. Then, bam—” she slammed her fist into her palm. “I was there.” This was more like the story as Henriette would tell it, which meant the ambassador was veering from the truth.

"And you found Henriette," Leonor said.

"She found me," the ambassador said. "I was stuck there, complete darkness, gravity sinks tearing at me from all directions. I figured my double had to be around somewhere, or else I was deader than a game of Volt in a quakezone. So I cranked up the radius at my belt, pumped out some music. A Vestigium airballad. Figured if I was about to die, it'd at least be a good tune."

"Next thing I know: it's another version of me! Coming out of the black! Down to her last minutes of air, too. She'd been slammed out of her snake tube by a versefall, at death's door, but sure enough, when she heard the music, she came to check it out."

Inwardly Henriette was screaming at the ambassador to stop talking. Leonor gave her a sideways glare that meant—*we're going to talk about this later*—and then relaxed into an expression of adoring amazement. This was when she would stick the knife in.

"Why send a person in a suit?" Leonor asked. "Surely a ship would be better, offer more protection from debris. Why send you alone?" The ambassador's face froze—Henriette could practically hear Leonor taking mental note of the ambassador's hesitation—and then tightened into another, even more strained smile. This woman had never taken one of Miss Parsons' classes. She couldn't control her face.

"Call it an experiment. Better to risk one life than many, right? And the suit would transmit data as it traveled, so if I died on landing—" she shrugged—"they'd still get their info. And I'd get a named ballad."

That part sounded plausible. A versewalk! They'd sing that ballad at every market corner in every city. In that 'verse, her name would be remembered for as long as the three cities lasted.

Henriette shook her head enviously. She looked again at the ambassador's marvelous suit, now disassembled and bound together for transport. What an amazing piece of atmotechnology it was, golden and gleaming, with galvanic circuitry she didn't recognize. But the patch on the ambassador's shoulder—the place where an airsuit's name patch would be—read "*Bolohan*," not *Cros*. Henriette kept her expression raptly attentive. Unlike the ambassador, she knew how to control her face.

"What do you do now?" Leonor said. "Do you swap out your D supply and try to get home? Do you investigate our city?"

The ambassador's expression flickered again. "Actually, I need to talk to your council." Henriette and Leonor glanced at each other. "A moment while I talk to my partner."

They stood in the outer tunnel to talk. Leonor kept the tunnel door spiraled open a crack so that she could watch the ambassador hover by the smoglock.

"I think she stole her suit," Henriette said. "The name on the patch isn't mine, and it isn't custom fitted. They'd never turn a prototype over for salvage, so—"

"Interesting," Leonor said. She closed her eyes, absorbing the information. "But if they needed to send her quickly, they might put her in an ill-fitting suit." She shook her head. "By my count she lied at least three times in the course of that conversation. But if she really is another version of you, then she could be lying for all kinds of reasons, most of them stupid."

"Hey," Henriette said.

"Most of them to do with ballads or stories or short-term profits," Leonor amended. "If she's you. There's an outside chance she's a shapeshifting alien."

"Not everything's aliens, Lee," Henriette said. "We're not on Vestigium. Our versefall debris are mostly human. Besides, she knows all about me, so if she's an alien, she'd have to be psychic, too."

"*L'habit ne fait pas le moine*," Leonor said, "And the Crowmind has its tricks." Leonor's rotation on Vestigium had left her with an abiding wariness of non-humans, particularly of the avian intelligence that ran the city's spy network. "But," she

admitted after a moment, “I think Ockham’s razor is on your side.”

She paused, considering. “Does her story sound plausible to you, as a walker?”

Henriette shrugged. “The verse-crossing part is plausible. We already knew about the other universes, about objects falling into our atmosphere. The only thing we didn’t know was whether parallel universes keep forming even after ‘versefall.”

“Heresy,” Leonor said sadly. She had been raised a Fatalist, and while she’d shed her religion long ago, she retained an instinctive dislike of theories suggesting the three cities were not unique. “The Fatalist faction will hate that.”

“So you’re thinking of taking her to the council.”

“I don’t think we have much choice,” Leonor said. “She may pose a threat. They need to be alerted.”

“Hmm,” Henriette said. Leonor’s words had reminded her of the reward for “finds of vital importance to the community.” The ambassador was worth at least the thousand credits, Henriette figured. If she could get the council to treat the suit as a separate discovery, that could be worth five thousand more.

“I know you don’t want to do this,” Leonor said. “But even if she *is* a version of you—however that is—our duty to our civitas comes first.” She looked pleadingly at her partner. “You see that, don’t you?”

Henriette tried to appear as though she was pondering the dilemma. She looked intensely at the floor, wondering how much she’d ask the council for. Thirty thousand. Let them knock the reward amount down. It’d make them feel better.

Finally she raised her eyes to Leonor. “You’re right,” she said somberly. “It’s the only way.”

Leonor looked relieved. “We’ll need to come up with a reason you were out there that doesn’t involve me giving you early notice of the stability declaration.”

“I had a strange dream,” Henriette said promptly. When Leonor raised her eyebrows, Henriette said, “Look, nobody knows how this verse-crossing works. And it’s a good story. A good story will stick better than some lie about an overheard conversation. You’ll see.”

“You’re in charge of the bullshit,” Leonor said. “Try not to get carried away.”

They walked back to the ambassador, who was studying the floor with the same intensity Henriette had been practicing earlier. *You’ve been listening the whole time*, Henriette thought.

“We’re going to take you to the council,” Leonor said. “Regulations. And if that’s where you want to go . . .”

“Great,” the ambassador said. “*Ça marche*. But first I want to know who’s on the council this year, and who’s really in charge.” Her unscarred eyebrow arched. “You know how politicians are,” she said to Henriette. “They talk too much. And I’m here to get things done.”

“Really?” Leonor said, the sweetness back again. “What are you trying to get done?”

This time Henriette felt like rolling her eyes at Leonor. She could tell that the ambassador was sitting on something, another story to tell, another chance to increase her self-importance.

“You didn’t guess?” The ambassador looked up at Leonor and grinned. “I’m here to save the world.”

* * *

The council meeting began as tradition demanded, with a hymn to the Vanished God. A few delegates openly studied Henriette and her alien doppelganger, but many more pretended to be occupied with other matters, chatting to their neighbors, studying the vellum sheets in their hands. Henriette glanced at the ambassador and saw that her double had folded her arms and was tapping her fingers against one elbow, a sure sign that she was annoyed.

Henriette looked questioningly at Leonor, who was seated with the trade negotiators. Civitas politics was her specialty, after all. Leonor shifted her orange sleeves, discreetly tapped one hand on the other. *Wait.*

Finally, someone rapped a gavel on their desk, and a hundred glittering eyes seemed to turn toward Henriette.

"Found," the reader said, "An apparition from another world, a double, seemingly, for Airwalker Cros, of Ward Four. The apparition claims to be a delegate from another universe—"

"False worlds!" a Fatalist delegate shouted.

"—from another universe," the reader said, "which she claims is similar to our own. She comes with a proposition for us." At this the delegate turned back the corner of his heavy blue stole on his shoulder, signaling that the time for speech had come.

When one of the Order Keepers nodded at the ambassador, she stepped forward, raising her palms before her in a gesture Henriette didn't recognize.

"Greetings," she said. "As he said, I'm from a different universe. I've already explained how I came to be here about nine different ways to your lovely interrogators, and they've got a report for you to read if you like that sort of thing. But they thought you'd want to hear this part from me. So here I go.

"A few days ago, something happened. A large field of debris hit our city, in an area where the Versewalk was being tested. A large object fell right through our world to yours, creating a bridge that nobody wants there. From what Philosopher Sands says, it looks like this object fell on the Eastern outskirts of your city, around the area of Menotte Point."

She held up her hands at the murmur starting in the room. "I know, versefall debris is nothing new, right? But this piece of debris didn't stop on the surface of Menotte Point. It fell through—straight into a gravity flow leading to the Inner Dark. And that would have been fine if it had fallen through cleanly, but it didn't. It's snagged on something from the city."

At this, several members of the council stirred in alarm. Henriette herself felt a cold chill run down her back. That could not mean what she thought it meant, she told herself, knowing it did.

The ambassador paused, letting the information sink in. "That's right," she said. "The object is slowly dragging your city into the Inner Dark, or the Void, or the black hole, or whatever your particular alligantia calls the verse-devouring thing we're all in orbit around. And since our two universes are now entangled, my city is going with it." She spoke clearly above the roar of noise in the room. Henriette knew by the set of her double's face that the ambassador had practiced this speech in a mirror.

"But we've got a chance," she said. She lowered her voice, and a thought flashed into Henriette's head. *Whatever she says next will be a lie.*

"My universe has sent me over to warn you," the ambassador said. "If you can give me a team of walkers, I can lead them to the entanglement. Together we can investigate it, and, if things look right, set some charges. Blow it clean off the city, before it drags us down."

The council chamber was full of shouts and questions. Henriette glanced at Leonor, who was studying the faces of the First Warders. She frowned and nodded. She thought the council would support the plan.

Henriette had to work hard to keep the smile from her face. This was worth more than credits. It was worth a ballad. She needed to find a way to get on the team.

Raising her eyes to the ambassador, she noticed that her double, too, was trying to keep a smile from her face. But she surely already had her ballad. She'd won something here that she'd not been sure of winning.

Liar, Henriette thought, with some admiration. *Liar*. But she did not know when

or why the lie had been told.

* * *

"You don't have to go with her," Leonor told her later that night. "If even you think she's lying, that's not a good sign."

"I'm not sure what I saw," Henriette said. They were sprawled under Leonor's ancient quilt, the one that smelled of a warm farmhouse in a long-dead world. "Besides, the council has given me orders." This wasn't true. She'd volunteered for a place on the team, suggesting that, as her double, she was the best person to keep an eye on the ambassador. But there was no need to tell Leonor that.

"You're willing to overlook the council's orders all the time when it comes to salvage duties," Leonor said. "Why not now?"

Henriette sighed. "Duties are different."

"I just don't think this is a safe mission. There are too many unknowns. And you're being led by someone whom we both think is lying about several things."

"But as you said, her lies aren't necessarily harmful," Henriette said. "She's not an agent of the Crowmind, or a Wardbreaker, out to bring the city down. She's—"

"I said her lies weren't *smart*," Leonor said. "That doesn't mean they're harmless."

Henriette rolled over. "I'd never do anything to hurt the city," she said.

"That's not—" Leonor sighed. "One, she's not you. She had a different life than you after the Smogfall, even if you both did end up becoming walkers. Two—she might have not thought through how the story she's telling is going to affect people."

"If you're ticking off your fingers again, I can't see them," Henriette pulled the quilt higher on her head. "So you don't think she's telling the truth about the city being dragged into the Dark."

"I'm not sure," Leonor said eventually. "She's a little prone to exaggeration—as all walkers are. The philosophers say that the energy readings from Menotte Point bear out her story."

"If she's telling the truth—and I think she is," said Henriette, who thought the ambassador was probably exaggerating for effect, "then our city might be destroyed. The entire city, Lee. That's a good reason to go."

"If she's telling the truth," Leonor said. But her voice was muted. At the end of the day, Leonor believed in serving the city. Henriette was willing to serve the community, too, if it didn't ask too much of her. But Leonor was willing to give all of herself, all the time. It was unfair, bringing the fight to Leonor's home territory. Henriette felt slightly guilty.

"So let's say you go," Leonor said after a while. "Why does she want you to have extra tanks of D?"

"Safety," Henriette said. She could hear the stubborn ring to her voice, and hated it, and couldn't figure out how to stop doing it.

"Safety? Hen, I love you, but safety is not your highest priority. And it's clearly not hers." Leonor sighed. "Look. Every time you go out there, I worry. I wait here, polishing your old suits, and think, maybe right now she's trapped under some debris. Maybe an airquake is tearing her apart. Maybe a Craven pack—there are so many ways you can die, Hen, and they're all in my head, *tout le temps*."

Reluctantly, Henriette turned over. "I'm still here," she said quietly.

"For now," Leonor said. Her face had gone perfectly blank, but her skin was red and blotchy, which meant she was trying not to cry.

"Even for a walker, you take too many risks," Leonor said. "And on this mission? There'll be two of you. Two Henriettes, both chasing ballads, both taking chances you shouldn't be taking. Don't you see how that's worse?"

"I'll be careful," Henriette said. "I promise."

"Please don't lie to me about that," Leonor said.

"I'll be as careful as I can be," Henriette said, which was more honest. She took

Leonor's hand. "Promise. I'll come back to you."

"You'd better," Leonor said, and turned away.

* * *

As Henriette exited the Eastern smoglock, she saw a shadow fall across the ambassador's face. Stripped of her glorious airsuit and stuffed into one of the drab scout suits provided by the Forge, the ambassador looked ordinary, more like Henriette.

"Did you not think I was coming?" Henriette shouted. Her voice sounded odd inside the scouting helmet. She was also wearing a scout suit, as the ambassador had advised, albeit one that was custom fitted. Some walkers preferred the light scout suits to the heavy armor, but Henriette didn't. The *resistere* fabric felt insubstantial against her skin, like a piece of paper could slice her through.

The ambassador's face cleared as she processed Henriette's words. She must have shouted back, but the words were muffled by her helmet. "Figured you wouldn't miss it."

"Well, you're right," Henriette said. She glanced at the sky—a rotten emerald color lurked in the upper atmosphere, indicating that a smogstorm might be in the offing—then at her air gauge. Seventy-five minutes, if she kept her breathing rate steady. A third of the tank to reach the beach and free the debris. A third for return. A third to be kept in reserve. The other air tank, the one the ambassador had insisted they all carry, hung awkwardly beside her main tank. In a scout suit, it made her feel overbalanced.

The two other team members lunked up in behind her. Junt nodded to her. Henriette liked Junt—a small terrier of a woman, who led a salvage team in the notorious sector known as the Tatter. The other team member—the only one wearing a heavy, bronze-colored armored airsuit—was Enzo, who'd be serving as the team's anchor. He was a council selection, and probably, in Leonor's estimation, an enforcer sent to clobber the Henriettes and haul them back to the *civitas* if they tried anything. But Junt had said he was a good walker, and that meant something. Male airwalkers were rare—larger bodies used up air tanks faster—and Junt was not easy to impress.

Junt handed out the magnetic communication patches. Henriette clamped hers to her shoulder, so that she could keep an eye on the blue glow of its energy meter. The ambassador took a few tries to get hers placed properly; Henriette suspected she was used to some other form of *atmotech*. When she tapped her patch, the other airwalkers winced.

"Dial it down," Junt said, her voice thin and hollow, like a ghost lost in the smog. "The range on these is fifty feet with stable physics. But once we reach the Point, the range will drop. If you get in trouble, don't assume anyone can hear you. If you have a visual, use hand signals for backup. If things go to shit, you're on your own. Walker's rules."

She looked around at the others. "This is a good day for walking."

It was the traditional greeting. "A good day for a walk," they chorused back.

"Today we're going to stop Frangere from sliding into the dark," the ambassador said. It sounded like she was speaking inside Henriette's head. "Thank you for coming with me." She squinted at them. "This will be worth a ballad or two."

"The Airwalkers at the Edge of the World," Junt said. She grinned at the ambassador. "Of course, ballads don't mean nothing if we die out there."

"So let's stay alive," Henriette said. She rubbed the top of the Eastern post for luck.

The first part of the journey went smoothly enough. They clipped onto the eastern rope, letting it take them closer and closer to the edge of the city. The air was still, its green the same color as the *ficaleaves* growing in the *agritanks*.

The guideline ended at the beach crossroads. The tarnished post held an empty loop for a Menotte Point rope, long since removed.

"Here goes nothing," Enzo said. He unhooked his carabiner from the rope-post, and

stepped away, into the enveloping smog. Airwalking. He uncoiled his anchor rope and passed it to Henriette as she unclipped.

It had been a while since Henriette had airwalked like this, in a group, with another suited figure a few feet away. It was safer, she knew; they were less likely to be separated in the smog, or sucked into a gravity sink. And yet she couldn't help but wonder how they'd fare if a pack of Cravens appeared. She wouldn't be able to run, not only because of the rope, but because the others would be watching her, and she'd feel obliged to put on a performance of bravery. It was discomfoting. She glanced over at the ambassador, who was fumbling with her own rope, and wondered if she was thinking the same thing.

Menotte Point was rarely trodden by walkers. A shard of one of the first worlds to form Frangere, the point had steadily eroded over the centuries, forming long columns of stones and tumbling red earth that rose and fell in endless, colorful streams. Once, four sailing ships had been moored at the edge of its old-world pier. One by one, they had disintegrated, ripped apart by the Void, until only one remained, floating far above the pier, a skeleton still fastened by rope and chain to the edge of Frangere.

"That's where we're going," said the ambassador. Henriette swallowed, automatically checking the air currents between them and the crumbling pier. The smog had thinned here, only to gather in vibrant green threads at the places where the pull of the Outer Dark was strongest. She pointed at the nearest concentration of radiating green, at the dull black patch at its center.

"Gravity sink," she said. "We'll have to step carefully. Parts of the beach are eaten through."

The airwalkers stretched out in a line, with Enzo leading the way. He held a thin, flexible rod that he used to test the sand before them, in case the Void had eaten it away.

Their progress was slow. Some portions of the red beach seemed almost solid. In certain hollows the remnants of salt water would appear, the ghostly face of an ocean peering up at them. Once they even passed a series of rocky tide pools, with a cluster of purple and blue anemones stretching their arms up at the thin trickle of water that ran between them.

An orange glow tinged the sky above. Henriette's head jerked up. But the falling universe was a small oval against the Outer Dark, and it was falling toward Seintuaire. Today it would be the other city's turn to catch debris.

Henriette's foot hit an old salt rake, no doubt abandoned during the airquake that had closed the beach for good. The scout suit absorbed some of the blow, but the pain still shocked her. She missed her armored airsuit. As she bent down to shift the rake out of the team's way, a shadow passed by on her right. Something small and fleet. Not one of them.

She slid her hand up to her communication patch. But the shadow, whatever it had been, was gone. *Craven*, part of her mind whispered. But on an edge like this it was more probably a Lisp, one of the shamle-shanked herbivores that liked the alien foliage that grew on beaches. They'd be slowed down if Junt wanted to check it out. And if there was nothing to be seen, they'd think Henriette was a coward, jumping at shadows. She put her hand back on the rope.

Not long after that, Enzo held up his arm and the party halted. Peering around him Henriette could see the slope of the wooden pier, now a tatter of loose boards and brick.

"We should anchor ourselves before going further," Junt said.

They cast around for a post that looked firmer than the others. Junt found a solid-looking post still wearing its coat of long-dead mussels and anchored her anchor rope to it.

"The pier or the beach?" Enzo asked.

"The beach," Junt said.

"The pier," the ambassador said. Henriette hesitated, feeling the same word in her mouth, wondering if she wanted to agree with her double. Then she remembered the shadow. If it was a Craven, the height would help. "The pier," she said.

"The pier it is," Enzo said.

Their footing on the pier was trickier. The gravity was weak here, which was useful, given how many of the pier's boards had been ripped away during the airquake. Enzo—who was an excellent jumper—sprang ahead periodically to set up the guideline.

Henriette disliked jumping. She could never quite manage the landing, and sure enough, she missed her mark on the pier, descending with frightening rapidity into a swirl of green that might or might not contain a lingering patch of ocean. But the ropes twanged her backward, and Junt reeled her in, putting out an arm to steady her. "Okay?"

"Not good at the jumping, huh?" said the ambassador, who evidently was. Henriette hated her a little for that.

The skeleton ship wafted above them. From this angle Henriette could see that someone had evidently tried to keep it anchored to Frangere with a web of ropes and chains. Some lashed its side to the pier; others descended into the smog, and still others, torn free, floated overhead.

"There," the ambassador said, pointing downward. Following the line of her arm, Henriette saw the faint flicker of an orange glow in the mist below them.

"Shit," Junt said. Looking closer, Henriette could see something—a darkness—at the center of the orange glow. Some of the skeleton ship's chains—about seven of them—followed it down. The chains were pulled taut in the direction of the glow.

"Looks like whatever fell got tangled in the ship chains," Enzo said. He tapped the bolt cutters strapped to his thigh. "Good thing we have these."

"Not like that," the ambassador said. "There may be more connectors we can't see. We need to climb down to the object to be sure."

There was a moment of silence. "Well," Junt said eventually. "Who's going down?"

"I will," the ambassador said, a bit too quickly. "My mission, after all."

"I'll follow," Henriette said. She didn't like the idea of dangling over the Inner Dark, but she wasn't going to be left out of the ballad, if a ballad this became.

They decided on parallel descents on three chains: less chance of one person bringing down the rest of the team if something went wrong. Junt would lash herself to the pier to help belay the jumpers. The ambassador went first, aiming herself at one of the central downward chains, her anchor rope streaming behind her. The chain barely quivered as she struck it—whatever was at the bottom was providing strong tension. The ambassador unclipped her anchor rope, hitched it to the chain, and set up her climbing rope. She descended confidently, hand over hand, until she was swallowed by the mist.

"Your turn," Junt said, and Henriette nodded. She handed Enzo the coil of her anchor rope and unclipped from the group line. She stepped forward, trying to concentrate not on the swirling cauldron of green and black below her, but on the thick tarnished chain immediately beside the one the ambassador had descended. Here went nothing.

As soon as she jumped, Henriette knew it was wrong. She'd pushed too hard, at the wrong angle. The chain she'd intended to grab drifted past her, out of arm's reach. Enzo shouted something. The broken hull of the sailing ship rose to meet her, then began a slow, dreadful retreat against the sky. She was falling.

Something dark crossed the corner of her vision. She reached after it and missed, but it was there. A smooth length of chain, floating loose in the smog. Something heavy struck the back of her left leg, and she folded her knee around it. The hard links of a

chain ground into her leg as her descent slowed, the thin resistere fabric giving her barely any protection. Her knee stabbed with pain, but she was no longer falling.

And then, slowly, she began to rise in the gravity current. She saw an upside-down image of the dock, small figures waving their hands, and then the skeleton ship, and then, wonderfully, a sway of loose chain. She clutched at it with both hands. Unclasping her left hip rope, she forced the tip of the hook between the chain links. She had to jiggle it to make sure it closed. Then, and only then, did she release the chain clasped behind her knee.

The shouts were still continuing behind her. She pulled herself around the chain. There were multiple dark figures on the pier. One of them—Enzo?—was raising his hands up and down rapidly, as though trying to scare something off. And one of the smaller dark shapes—something large and bent low to the ground—slunk forward.

Heart thudding, Henriette wound her legs around the chain and slid her right hand up to her communication patch. “Enzo? Junt?” But she didn’t have to hear the fluting notes through the mist to guess what was happening. Cravens.

Junt’s ardegunna crackled and spat, blooming haloes in the smog. The dog-like shadows sprang back, and for a moment Henriette hoped they’d fled. But then, inevitably, the shadows reappeared. The smog was thickening, the emerald light intensifying. Cravens loved to hunt at the front of a storm. She didn’t need to hear Enzo to know what his flailing arms meant. They needed to go, now.

But the ambassador was still below, with the tangled fragment she alleged could pull the entire city into the abyss. There was no “leave no person behind” rule in the walker code; quite the opposite. There was only so much air, so much time, and the precious seconds spent freeing a trapped walker could kill an entire team. Henriette knew the code. Even so, it was a queasy thing, leaving someone else to die. More so, when that person was herself.

Not that it was Henriette’s choice to make. Junt had Enzo by the arm and was leading him back down the pier. There was no careful testing of boards this time, just desperate low-gravity leaps and the sudden flash of Junt’s ardegunna. If Henriette was going to survive, she needed to get out of here herself.

She clutched her chain tighter as it swayed in some unfelt breeze. Landing on this tensionless chain was better than falling into the Inner Dark, but if she stayed here, the chain would flail her around dangerously when the storm hit. She needed to get back to solid ground, where she at least had a chance at shelter.

The first step in that direction was to jump to a more stable chain. The thought made her heart race. Her anchor rope was still trailing in the air current, but at this distance there was no way to see whether Junt had lashed it to the pier or let it drift when the Cravens arrived. Assume it was drifting then. No help there.

At least she’d seen the ambassador make the jump earlier. *That’s you*, Henriette told herself. *A more obnoxious, alternate world version of you, but someone with more or less the same physique as you, the same capabilities, the same luck.*

Maybe the ambassador is dead, her mind helpfully suggested. *Maybe she slid into the smog and fell off the chain.*

She steadied herself and looked at the chains that dangled between her and the pier. She could see the ambassador’s climbing line tracing its way down the taut chain she’d descended and the fixed anchor line leading to the pier. That chain she knew was stable, and if she missed catching hold of it, the ambassador’s rope gave her something else to clutch at.

The wails of the Cravens had faded, as had the cracks of Junt’s ardegunna. Junt’s and Enzo’s flight had likely drawn off the pack. That would be good for her, if she could reach the beach.

This will be a good story to tell Leonor, she told herself, *if I make it out of here.*

It wasn't. Leonor would be horrified. But thinking it made Henriette feel better. She could almost picture that future moment, out there, becoming tangible.

She pitched her weight back on the chain, trying to give it a slight swing. Mistake. The tensionless chain buckled underneath her, and the pier drifted further away. Then, slowly, it began to drift back toward her. Henriette latched her gaze on the ambassador's chain. She needed to be patient. After she survived all this, she'd tell them how difficult it had been, the crawl of the pier, the fierce stab of pain in her leg, the jump. Especially the jump.

The moment came, Henriette told the listeners in her head, when I knew I had to jump, no matter what. This was as close as my chain was going to come. I needed to ride the drift. I unclipped my hip rope—

(She unclipped her hip rope)

—and aimed my entire body at the ambassador's chain. And then I—

Jumped.

She could see everything very clearly, the grit on the rusted chains, the beautiful luridness of a smog vapor, her outstretched hands. She could see that she was going to miss the spot she was aiming at, fall lower, but she was close, so close—

The taut chain caught her across her chest, jerking up painfully under her chin. Her arms and knees and body caught the chain and circled it. The links clanged menacingly on her faceplate, but her fall stopped. She was here.

Henriette felt a prickle of tears and blinked them back. She was gulping air—dangerous—and so she started a four count. The world steadied. She raised her head.

The pier was in reach. An easier jump than the one she'd just made. And there was the ambassador's tightly secured anchor line to clip onto, a backup just in case. But there was also the ambassador somewhere in the mist below, working on whatever she was working on, oblivious to the Cravens and the aborted mission.

Henriette checked her air gauge: forty-five minutes left in her main tank. Enough time to get back to the Eastern airlock, but not if she had to take shelter from the smogstorm, or from the Craven pack still lurking in the mist.

She knew what the walker code said. And she knew what Leonor would say. *Come home.*

The chain below her quivered, as though someone—the ambassador—had accidentally brushed against it. Henriette hesitated, then clipped her climbing line to the chain. All she had to do was descend and warn the ambassador. Surely that would not take long.

Henriette's knee pained her as she clambered downward. The weaker gravity made the climb easier, but it would also speed up her air consumption. She needed to be quick.

The smog below her thinned to reveal a large, dark shape. It was a metal airship of some kind, triangular, hanging upside-down, its belly facing Henriette. One long chain was wound around a set of wheels. Another stretched around what seemed to be the vehicle's nose. The chain Henriette was on, like most of its companions, appeared to be looped around the vessel, suspending the ship in an ill-woven basket of metal.

There was no sign of the ambassador. Henriette hesitated, then touched her communication patch. "Ambassador?" She should be in range. "The mission has been aborted. Craven attack. Enzo and Junt have returned to the civitas."

Still nothing. Henriette hung on her chain, studying the craft below. Maybe the ambassador's communication patch had shorted out. Maybe she had fallen to her death. Maybe the ambassador could hear her and was remaining silent, for reasons of her own.

The ardegunna on Henriette's hip had been secured for her climb. Now she snapped open the strap preventing the ardegunna from leaving its holster. It wasn't

that she didn't trust herself, exactly. But she didn't trust the ambassador.

When she reached the vessel she set a foot down and tested the metal. It felt solid. But she could see no opening on its surface, at least not on this side of the vehicle.

Henriette pulled at her climbing line and clipped on to the chain beside her. A little extra security wouldn't hurt. Carefully, keeping her weight as close to the chain as possible, she eased herself down the side of the vessel.

It took her a moment to understand what she was seeing as she descended alongside the vessel. A bunch of crumpled metal. A rectangle that had once been a window, leading to something that might have been a cockpit. A strip of red fabric streaming into the Outer Dark, which loomed up below her now, undisguised by the green smog that plunged in agonized rivulets into its black, cold heart.

Dragging her gaze away from the Void, Henriette reached an arm over to the jamb of the broken window. She gave herself some slack on her hip rope and slid sideways. Inside the broken vessel she could see the ambassador, sitting cross-legged on what had once been the vessel's ceiling, staring straight ahead.

The empty window was large enough to climb through, but the glass that remained jagged out dangerously. There was blood on it. Henriette unrolled her empty collecting sack and pressed it to the less wicked-looking edge, then flattened her body against the sack and squeezed through.

The ambassador's chin patch glowed blue, indicating that her communicator was working. Henriette pressed hers again. "I know you can hear me," she said. "We've got to go."

The space inside the vessel was eerily quiet. The usual buzz inside Henriette's helmet seemed to have gone still. She looked at the mess of metal and floating debris between her and the ambassador. Her mind couldn't help but catalogue the gleams of gold and platinum—*that circuit board is worth fifty credits at least*—but this was not a good salvaging situation. They shouldn't be here. Reluctantly, she unclipped her ropes and fastened them to a bar beside the window. Then she advanced in the ambassador's direction.

There were at least three dead bodies in the room. One of them lay in the bottom corner, a free arm bobbing up and down in an air current. It was wearing a gold suit, like the ambassador's, but a jagged piece of metal was sticking out of its chestplate. A spray of old blood on the wall showed where the current swept upward. Henriette tracked it with her eyes, noting the small whirlpool of papers and glass it had formed on the ceiling, noting also the golden versesuits bundled against the far wall—*say three thousand credits apiece to the council, more to a private buyer*. The other two bodies were strapped onto cushioned chairs of some kind. The ambassador sat directly below one of them. Skirting a floating sheet of metal, Henriette approached her. Put a hand on her shoulder.

"It was supposed to be me." The ambassador's voice was unexpected after the long silence.

Henriette waited. Finally she repeated the words. "It was supposed to be you."

The ambassador's shoulders slumped. "It seemed like a sure thing. A mission to save the city. Best atmotechniks credits could buy. I volunteered. Why wouldn't I? A walk to end all walks. It would make a good ballad." She laughed bitterly.

"Ioana only volunteered to keep an eye on me, you know? We were both sure we'd both be on the team, but on the day? The Assembly decided they'd go with Vasile instead of me, the fucking idiot."

"So there was a mission to save the city," Henriette said carefully. "But the council didn't send you."

"They made contact with the object—at least that was the last communication out. But then we didn't hear anything else. For three days. The council wouldn't send a

rescue party. Too expensive, they said. They needed to do more studies. You know."

"So you stole the suit and made the trip yourself?"

"They said it was theoretically possible to cross just in a suit," the ambassador said. She smiled, wanly. "Guess I proved them right. That should be worth a ballad." She shook her head.

"But I was supposed to be here," she said. "And they decided on the day to go with Vasile instead, because they wanted an additional mechanic. In case something went wrong." She looked over the shredded room. "Lot of fucking good that did."

What was Henriette supposed to say? "I'm sorry," was inadequate. "You couldn't have done anything," was worse. If Leonor was here, she'd know what to say. But she wasn't.

And if she was. Henriette looked at the dead stranger above her. Her head was tilted slightly back, allowing Henriette to see the pale gleam of her brow behind a wave of dark hair. A pretty woman. An airwalker.

Henriette had never had to worry about Leonor on a mission, because Lee was always back in the *civitas*, safe, or at least safe as anyone could be in Frangere. She'd never thought of that being an advantage before; had even thought, in some dark corner of her head, about how much easier it would be if Leonor understood the wonder of the smog. Staring up at the dead woman, at Ioana, she felt the shape of her world shift around her, the things Henriette tried not to think about pressing closer.

There are things that are too large to deal with.

There are things that are too large to deal with, and things that are small enough to think about, to act on, to repair. She thought of Leonor waiting for her in the airlock, her hands twisting with anxiety. She thought of her mother, mourning her lost world.

"Do you remember what Mother said about the day her world ended?"

The ambassador didn't answer.

"It was the sound of the baby crying that brought her out of the shelter. Me. *Us*, I mean, crying in the rubble. Do you remember that? She could have thrown in the towel and lain there with the rest of them. But she realized someone had to do something. And no one else was willing, so it had to be her."

"I remember," the ambassador said dully.

"She didn't want to get up, but she had to. And we have to do that now. This vessel is sliding into the Dark, and it could take both of our cities with it. I need your help to cut the chains."

It was risky, Henriette knew. The ambassador might want to go down with the ship, might try to do something stupid. But fundamentally, Henriette always preferred action to reflection, and the ambassador probably felt the same way.

After a moment, the ambassador uncrossed her legs. "Okay," she said. "*Ça marche*." But she still wasn't looking at Henriette.

Henriette fumbled free one of the suits from the wall. "Salvage," she said, when the ambassador looked at her. "Here, take my extra tank."

"Are you sure?" The ambassador looked alarmed. Henriette checked her air gauge. Thirty minutes left. She could make it.

She focused on trying to slow her breathing as she climbed back up the chains, the extra suit—thankfully lightweight—strapped below her D tank. Back on the top of the undercarriage she set her bolt cutters to the chains and placed her rubble-clearing charge beside one of the wheel sets. On the other side of the vessel she could see the ambassador doing the same, a red glow illuminating her face as each charge was activated, its automatic timer beginning to count down.

"Time to go," Henriette said. When the ambassador hesitated, she said, "You're the better climber. You need to go first." When the ambassador didn't move, she added, "If I don't make it, you need to make sure both sets go off properly."

She handed the ambassador her backup detonator, its switch carefully sealed

under a hard plastic cover. A ruthless gesture, this passing of responsibility, but she needed to get the ambassador away from the ship and the lure of an easy death. The ambassador hesitated, then took the detonator.

The ambassador was indeed the better climber. Henriette, following behind, was much less graceful. Her knee stabbed with pain every time it made contact with the chain, but she forced her legs to grip whenever the gravity intensified. When she reached the anchor line she clipped in, and half jumped, half-slid back to the pier.

Junt and Enzo were nowhere to be seen. Neither were the Cravens, but the sound of the detonation would attract their attention. She grabbed the ambassador by her arm. “We’ll be too close to the explosion here. We need to get to the beach.”

The ambassador pulled her arm away. “I know,” she said. She cast a last glance back at the swirling mist. “Let’s go.”

The explosion, when it came, was a scream of metal in the distance. A sudden wind tossed remnant sand in their faces. Henriette tried to brush it out of her screen as she checked the detonators in the ambassador’s hands. The lights glowed green.

“Successful,” the ambassador said. “Whatever that means.”

“It means the council will send another mission to check that the vessel has been separated from the city,” Henriette said. She tossed the versesuit at the ambassador’s feet. “You’ll need this.” When the ambassador looked at her she said, “You’ll need to get back to your verse to tell Ioana’s story properly. And the council won’t give you back your suit, at least not anytime soon.”

The ambassador took it. “My people won’t be happy to see me.”

“Just tell the story,” Henriette said. “You can do that, right? How you crossed over to rescue the team, and found them dead, and did what you could to finish what they started and save the world—”

“I don’t know if we did save the world,” the ambassador said bleakly. “I checked the sensors. They’d already managed to clear the object. And I don’t know that our vessel was a threat to Frangere. I just made that up, so I could get you lot to come with me.”

“I figured as much,” Henriette said. “I’d leave that out of the story, if I were you.” She hesitated, and then, because she felt she had to tell the truth, if only to herself, she said, “None of this really matters anyway. One day the Outer Dark is going to consume us all, like it consumes everything else. Maybe we bought our cities some more time today. That’s all.”

“That’s all,” the ambassador said gloomily. “Might as well focus on the small stuff. Tell a good story.”

“Exactly. As far as anyone knows, you just took a heroic trip to save your partner, and when that didn’t work, you finished the job she started and helped save the city. It’d be balladworthy. They’ll never forget Ioana’s name. Or yours.”

The ambassador was silent, turning matters over in her head. “The Airwalker Comes to the City in Green.”

“Well, hopefully something with a better title,” Henriette said. “With our names in it? But sure. *Ça marche*.” She pointed at the old Menotte Point airlock, visible in the distance. “You can tap into that lock and travel to South Street via the disused corridors. The extra D tanks should help get you back to your verse.”

“Thanks,” the ambassador said. She picked up the suit, and looked oddly at Henriette. “Are you going to be okay?”

“If you pass me back one of those reserve air tanks, I will.” As for the rest of it—Henriette gestured to the Outer Dark, the sputter of dying universes surrounding them, to the things she and her double preferred not to think about. “*Ça marche*.”

The ambassador raised her hand, awkwardly. “It was a good day to walk,” she said. Henriette did the same. She watched the ambassador turn away, watched her form dissolve into the green smog. And then she turned back to the west.

"A walker went out one day, one day, / And found a ship of gold—" she sang as she walked. The wind was rising, the storm coming in, and the Craven pack was still out there somewhere. But she had an extra tank of air now, and she had a story to tell.

* * *

"Took you long enough," Leonor said, after Henriette removed her helmet. The eastern airlock was crowded with bodies, walkers and med-aids and councilmembers. Henriette saw Junt and Enzo sitting against the wall. They looked exhausted, and a plastube was attached to Enzo's arm.

"It takes time to save the world," Henriette said loudly. She stepped in to kiss Leonor, hugging her awkwardly through the flex suit. For a moment Henriette thought of the woman in the vessel, her hair waving.

"Where's the ambassador?"

"She set off for home, to bring them news. Let them know the mission was accomplished."

"So it worked?" Leonor whispered.

There was a lot Henriette had to say that needed to be said, that wasn't a story, that was honest. But that could wait. For now she said, "It worked. *Ça a marché*," And she thought it was true, and that was enough.