

# Opposite Ends Meet Here

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Kyle was alone, as usual, working out with his gyro stick in the small room he rented above the gym where he worked, when he had a premonition. He stopped what he was doing and opened his window just in time to hear a woman cry out in fear and surprise. He poked his head out, blinking in the sunlight, and looked down into the alley below. There was a man with short gray hair and a silver spacer's jacket advancing on a blonde woman dressed in a flowing, flower-pattern dress. In the man's hand was a large, ugly knife. "I'm going to enjoy this, you bitch," he told her. He was advancing, and she was backing away.

"Finney!" the woman yelled. "Finney!" There was the bite of raw fear in her voice.

Gyro stick still in one hand, Kyle swung out the window and hung suspended for a moment, waiting for the man with the knife to move forward a few more steps. The woman saw Kyle, and obligingly took a few more quick steps backwards. "Finney!" she yelled again.

"By the time Finney finds you," the man said, "you're gonna---"

Kyle landed on him, so he never finished his sentence. He collapsed like a rag doll, the knife clattering across the stone walk. Kyle got to his feet, ready to smack the guy in the head with the gyro stick, but he was already unconscious. The woman, with a look of disgust, picked up the big knife and walked quickly to the prone figure. She jabbed it into his back several times.

Kyle stared at her with his mouth hanging open. "Lady!" he yelled.

She pulled the bloody knife out and held it ready. "What?" She was young-looking, thin and blonde and sharp-angled. Her eyes seemed too blue to be real.

Behind them a gate burst open and a small, black-haired man with dark features came scurrying up with a gun. He pointed it at Kyle, but the woman shook her head. "Put it away, Finney. This ape-man just saved my life." She wiped the bloody knife off onto the dead man's jacket, flipped the blade into the air and caught it, then handed it to Kyle handle-first. "Give him a card, and put him on the payroll."

She gave Kyle a cold smile, then turned and walked with gliding steps out of the alley. Finney produced a card and held it out for him. Kyle took it into the same hand that held the knife and stared at it with a stupid expression.

**Debbie Hitler**

*Sorceress*

"She's in the need of a bodyguard," Finney told him. "The job pays an obscene amount, and I can give you an advance." He produced a large wad of planetary currency, holding it out for

Kyle to take. It was a lot --- enough to make him think twice about what he was getting into.

"What happened to her old bodyguard?" Kyle asked, staring at the money in Finney's hand.

Finney glanced down at the body between them, and took a half step away from the widening pool of blood. "He, ah, retired suddenly." Finney looked up into Kyle's eyes. "An honest man wouldn't have to worry about losing his employment in such a way. You are an honest man, aren't you?"

"Reasonably so."

Finney took the knife out of Kyle's hand, and put the wad of money in its place. "We leave before sunrise tomorrow morning. Pack some clothes and a few small personal items and be at the spaceport early."

"Uh..." Kyle looked down at the ex-bodyguard.

"I'll take care of this," Finney said. "You go settle your local affairs and meet us at the spaceport."

Kyle shoved the wad of money deep into his pants pocket and, hefting the gyro stick over his shoulder, made his way out of the alley. It occurred to him to go to the nearest Constable and report the incident, as he was sure it was horribly illegal, but the thought of lots of money and a chance to escape his life of mocking ridicule kept him from doing it.

#

Kyle's dad lived in a nice adobe style home in the Little Mexico quarter, amid sleepy neighborhood stores and a nearby school. This was where Kyle had spent the latter part of his childhood, where he grew up with friends that, until finding out the truth about him, had been dear. There had been summers of stick ball and street soccer, and bittersweet teenage crushes that lead nowhere. His dad, who was actually his adoptive father and not a blood relation, was the only person to which he was still close. Kyle stood for a moment in the front yard, reliving a few memories, before banging on the old graphite door.

"Who is it?" came a dry, old voice.

"It's me, Dad."

"Well, come on in."

Kyle's father was thin, frail, with faded and baggy clothes and long stringy white hair. He was 167 years old, and half his body was artificial. His new heart had been cloned from the old one, both still in the body and working together. He could easily last another 167 years if he wanted to, as long as he took it easy. Kyle gave the old man a gentle hug, then pulled out the wad of cash. "Look at this, eh?"

"What is that?" His father stared at it with suspicion.

"This is an advance on my pay. I just got a new job."

"You quit the gym?"

"Well, not yet, but I have to this afternoon. I'm leaving the planet."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know yet."

"You don't know? What kind of job is this? What are you doing?"

"Taking care of some rich lady. Here," Kyle said, peeling off a few bills. "I'll keep this, you take the rest." He handed his father the bulk of the cash. "This should last you quite a while."

His father held the cash in his hands as if he were unsure of what to do with it. "Kyle, what is it you're doing for this rich lady? She doesn't expect you to...?"

"No Dad. I'm her bodyguard."

"Bodyguard!" His father's expression brightened, a smile coming to his wrinkled old face. "That you'd be good at!" He thumbed through the cash for a moment, then tossed it onto a table. "When are you leaving, son?"

"Early in the morning. I've got to go take care of some stuff and then I'll be back, and we can spend some time together before I leave."

"You feel right about this new job? I mean, in your gut?"

Kyle nodded. "Yes. I've got that feeling."

Kyle's father smiled, nodding, showing him the pride in his eyes that he always had for his adopted son. "Trust that feeling, Kyle. You've got good instincts. What life denied you in other things, it made up for it in your instincts."

Kyle nodded. He'd heard all this before. "I'll be back in a few hours, Dad." With that he headed for the front door.

Returning to his rented room, Kyle sorted through what little possessions he had. He packed them up and took them down to the local pawnshop. They bought it all: a folding bed, a communications terminal, and some clothes. Then he settled with his landlord, paid off some bills, and went to the market and bought some nice leather. Knee pants, a vest, and a long coat in case he ended up somewhere cold. He found a spacer's sack that would hold a few things plus his gyro stick. After that he had just enough to buy some of his father's favorite imported tea, which he took back to his dad's house. Kyle meant to have a long father and son talk with the old guy, wanting to thank him for everything he had ever done for him. The words never did make it out of his mouth, as they sounded too corny in Kyle's head. Instead, the two men silently sipped tea together for most of the night. When the second pot was gone, Kyle gave his dad a long hug, which expressed all the words he'd intended to say anyway, and he left.

#

The spaceport at night had always seemed an eerie place to Kyle. During his years on this planet, he'd watched the town spread out to the hills and up and down the Vendies River, but the spaceport never changed. They would re-pave the surface every once in a while, paint new lines and string brighter landing lights, but the perimeter fence and the buildings within remained the same. Everything was metal, everything seemed to hiss and let off steam. At night, there were rotating red and yellow beacons everywhere, many rising into the air or coming down out of the starry sky.

The guard at the gate wore a black and gold uniform with a tiny red fez. His face twitched with the characteristic brain-chemistry imbalance of a cyber-interface; Kyle saw the cables running down from the back of his head and into the terminal beside him. "Can I help you?" he asked Kyle.

"I'm supposed to meet Debbie Hitler here. We're scheduled to leave."

The face twitched, the eyes blinked. Kyle couldn't see much detail because of the shadows. "You are...?" he asked Kyle.

"Kyle Dacron."

"The...?"

"New bodyguard."

A machine in the booth made a low buzzing sound. "You are expected," the guard said, and handed him a freshly printed pass. "Report to the ship on pad area C-5." He pointed.

The ship turned out to be a small passenger shuttle with nobody on board. The door was locked. Kyle stood around for a while, waiting, listening to the hissing and thrumming from the other ships around him. Tired of standing, he sat down on the ground with his back against the cold titanium surface of the ship. Soon he was asleep.

Hours later, an air taxi landed nearby and the pilot got out, walked over to Kyle and kicked him. "Wake up, pretty-boy. Do your job!"

"What? Do what?"

"Your job!" He pointed at the taxi.

Kyle got to his feet and walked over to the craft. When he was close by the door, it opened, and Debbie stepped out. "You showed up!" she said, sounding surprised. "Oh! Leather! I like it." She kissed his cheek, and grabbed him by the front of his pants and pulled him toward the shuttle. Finney stepped out of the taxi and followed, as did several other people. It appeared they had all just left a party. There were paper streamers in their hair, and a few had paper hats and noisemakers. They all stunk of alcohol.

"I want everyone to meet my new bodyguard, Bruce," she announced.

After the drunken chorus of "Hi Bruce" was over, Kyle leaned over to Debbie and quietly said, "My name is not Bruce. It's---"

"Your name is Bruce," she told him. "All my bodyguards are named Bruce."

Kyle frowned, but didn't pursue it. They all crowded into the shuttle as the hatch opened, Debbie still pulling him along by his pants. She shoved him down in the front row of seats, and then reclined across him, using him as a pillow. The others sat around them, laughing and talking. The babble of voices all blended together, and it took Kyle a moment to realize much of it was in another language, one that he didn't understand. Debbie was laughing, and posing, and preening, and all the while her hair was in his face and it was making his nose itch. The pilot sealed the hatch, glanced around nervously at his unruly passengers, gave Kyle an eyebrow-furrowed look of disgust, and then ducked into the control cabin. Minutes later, the craft drifted up into the sky.

It took a while, but gravity finally disappeared and the passengers all began asking Debbie to do magic. "Do some magic!" "Magic!" "Magic, Debbie!"

Debbie produced a small sack of loose pearls, and opened it. The pearls floated out, drifting, and Debbie said an incantation and made complex motions with her hands. The pearls aligned in a circle and began spinning as if in an orbit. She leaned far forward, inserting her head inside the ring so that her neck was the center of the orbit. The crowd applauded.

"Neat trick," Kyle said. "How did you do it?"

The pearls scattered in all directions, bouncing and drifting randomly. All conversation

ceased. Debbie pulled away from Kyle and turned, looking at him with a cold expression. "I do not do 'tricks'," she said. "I am a genuine sorceress. I do genuine magic."

Kyle glanced around at all the glaring expressions, finding only one who seemed sympathetic. It was Finney. Finney cleared his throat, and said, "Everyone, especially Miss Hitler, might want to bear in mind that---"

"Shut up, Finney."

"Miss Hitler, he is new to us, and knows nothing about you."

"I told you to shut up." Now Debbie had a pouting expression on her face, like that of a spoiled little girl. "*Kanna ectuc enau-k-tu*," she said, holding her pouch open. She repeated the incantation several times, and with her free hand made a grasping movement. The pearls all drifted from where they had wandered in the cabin toward the open pouch, and bagged themselves one and two at a time. When it was all over, there was a spontaneous round of applause.

"More!"

"Do more!"

"More magic, Debbie!"

Debbie shook her head, putting her pouch away. She sat, sulking, far away from her bodyguard. She hardly said a word for the rest of the trip.

The shuttle docked at a big orbital station, where gravity was simulated. Finney ran out ahead to make sure that all arrangements were made. Kyle had to walk fast to keep up with Debbie, who seemed to be trying to get away from him. The others lagged behind, walking drunkenly in the reduced gravity and bumping into things.

They caught up with Finney at the boarding airlock of a large interstellar ship. Finney pulled Kyle aside, saying in a low, hurried voice, "Get Miss Hitler settled, check out the other passengers for anything suspicious, then get back to me. There's a lot you need to know, and nobody has had time to tell you any of it."

"Okay."

"Sorry about what happened in the shuttle."

"That's okay. I don't have a problem with it."

Finney stared deep into Kyle's eyes. "It doesn't bother you, does it?"

"Not in the least."

Finney smiled and slapped him on the shoulders. "I'm glad you're with us."

"Thanks." Kyle ducked through the airlock and into the giant ship.

Debbie's cabin was very large, especially for a starship, and looking around the interior Kyle got the feeling that it was originally designed as a meeting room and was converted over to a stateroom because of VIPs such as Debbie. She gave him an odd look as he poked around. "I want to be alone," she said. Kyle nodded and left.

His own stateroom was right across the corridor, but was about 1/20<sup>th</sup> the size. It was barely big enough for a bunk, a fold-down table, a commode and a tiny little sink. Kyle tossed his spacer pack down on the bunk and left.

He wandered the long, narrow corridors for a while, checking out the other passengers. They were all busy getting settled in their cabins. None of them looked particularly threatening, but when he reached the entertainment area at the front of the ship there was one



woman who gave Kyle a bad feeling. She had shock-white hair in a style that fanned out from the center, and her hairline came down to a point in the middle of her forehead. She was older, and had a heavy, pear-shaped body. Her face almost looked masculine. She caught him looking, and her dark eyes widened, her heavy eyebrows lowering. He smiled, nodded, and continued on his way.

He was heading back toward Debbie's stateroom when he ran into Finney. "This way," Finney said in a low voice. He led Kyle into another stateroom, which was no bigger than his own. Finney closed and locked the door. "Sit down," he told Kyle.

Kyle sat on the bunk. Finney remained standing by the door. "Debbie is from a very rich family that has a very dark past."

"I assumed she was rich."

"Very rich. Obscenely rich. She does pretty much what she wants, and it's my job to make what she wants happen."

"I understand."

"The one talent she has, the one thing she did herself and is proud of, is her magic. As you've found out, she's very touchy about the subject. It's best that you watch her do it, applaud, and ask to see more. This pleases her very much. Don't question it, don't say anything about it. That's your best bet."

"I see."

"She learned this talent from a mathematician several years ago. The guy is now a hermit living on an island off the coast of Terra Marka, on Summerland. We're on a sort of pilgrimage there now, so she can resume her studies."

"Does she have many enemies?"

"There are people out to get her. Your job is real, though she treats her bodyguards as show pieces. There have been more than a few attempts on her life. You of course know the outcome of the last one."

"Why did her old bodyguard decide to turn against her?"

"I don't know. Either he was paid off or just couldn't take the abuse anymore."

"Paid off by who?"

"I don't know. Debbie doesn't have any enemies specifically, but her family does. *Powerful* ones."

Both fell silent for a moment, then Kyle said, "How *does* she do her magic tricks? Were those specially made pearls, or what?"

"No, it's not the pearls. I guess you could call it telekinesis -- of course, *she* prefers to call it magic. From what I understand, she creates a point of gravity, gives the pearls kinetic energy and adjusts their virtual mass. That puts them in orbit around the point of gravity. She can only do that one in freefall conditions."

"Interesting," Kyle said. Then he shook his head. "To tell you the truth, you've totally lost me, but forget it. I'm not going to question it. I'll simply applaud and ask to see more." He smiled, standing up. "Unless there's anything else ...?"

"Go ahead." Finney opened the door and stood aside as Kyle left.

The starship's departure was uneventful, as was the first several days en route. Kyle kept his cabin door open so he could see if Debbie left her stateroom. When she did, he would always follow, standing in the background as she and her friends lived it up. Since the ship had a controlled gravity environment, Debbie wasn't able to perform her magic involving levitation. She was able to show off her skill at spontaneous combustion, by chanting incantations and setting people's drinks ablaze. Kyle couldn't help laughing when she inadvertently set off the fire alarm. She flashed him a cold look for this, but it only lasted a second, then she actually smiled and laughed herself.

Several hours later, after Debbie had retired to her cabin, Kyle was working out with his gyro stick in front of his open door. He moved slowly, carefully, working up a good sweat. He didn't notice when Debbie's door opened a crack. She watched him for several minutes before she opened the door the rest of the way. When Kyle saw her he froze for a moment, losing his rhythm. He looked her up and down, his face betraying surprise. Then he went back to his workout without saying a word.

"You can come in and do that in here," she said. "There's a lot more room."

"Thank you, but I'm fine here." Now he wasn't looking at her at all.

"Something wrong?" she asked.

"No."

"Does it bother you that I'm naked?"

"No. I just wasn't expecting it."

"Why do you ... move ... like that?"

"The gyro stick is intuitive. You can feel where you're weak and work it."

"Work it?"

"It provides constant resistance, so you have to use constant force to move it. Where ever it is that's harder to move, you move that part more, using more force, building up your weak areas."

Debbie imitated his movements, gyrating her body. He couldn't tell if she were mocking him or trying to seduce him. People were approaching from down the hall, so he pushed her into her cabin and shut the door behind them. "Here," he said, "you try it." He put the gyro into her hands, then stepped back.

She held it awkwardly, a puzzled look on her face. "I can't move it. It's stuck."

He helped her until she began to get the hang of it. Debbie worked with it on her own for a few minutes, then frowned. "This is boring. It was more interesting watching you do it." She pushed it toward him. "Take it."

Kyle took it from her.

"Well," she said. "Do it."

"I'm finished for now."

"Then do me." She slid up against him, pressing herself close, and tilted her head back for a kiss.

Kyle's eyes narrowed. "I don't 'do' my employers."

She smiled. "It's a condition of your employment."

He pushed her away. "No it is not."

"It is if I say it is!"

"I'm here to guard your safety. That's all I agreed to do. If I'm not the type of professional you were looking for, then hire someone else."

"Why? Do you think I'm ugly or something?"

"Not physically. But inside you've got a lot of problems, and I'm not going to get tangled up in them."

She laughed. "I don't have any problems. What makes you think I have problems? You're the one with problems. I can make so many problems for you, you'd think the entire universe has turned against you. It will turn against you. You. I will make it turn against you. You you YOU."

Kyle shook his head. "You're soul sick."

"... I'm what?" Her eyes were narrowed and her mouth was open.

He leaned his head close to hers, looking right into her eyes. "When I look at you, I see a little girl who didn't get the attention she needed, and who's very angry, and who has never known the true value of anything because she's never had to go wanting. Mixed in with all that, some ugly things you never want to speak about has happened to you, and you blame yourself for it, but you're angry at everyone else because of it."

"You don't know anything about me."

"I can see it. It's right in front of me. I knew you two seconds after I first met you."

"You see an illusion. You see a stereotype I created myself, a fiction, a phantasm. I'm far more ugly than you think. I'm pure evil. I can suck your soul in, chew it up, and spit it back out. I eat men like you like candy."

Kyle sighed. "You're right, I have to admit it. I mis-judged you. I thought you were just troubled, but you're beyond that. You're psycho."

"Yes. I am."

"I'm still not going to do it with you." He smiled. "Good night." Gyro stick in one hand, he turned to leave.

"You hate me, don't you? You want to kill me, just like Bruce did."

"No, not at all." He opened the door, and stood in the doorway. "I never would have accepted the job if I thought you could affect me that way. You can't."

"Then you love me."

Kyle grimaced. "No."

"You hate me!"

Kyle sighed again and left, closing the door softly behind him. Even before he'd made it across the corridor to his cabin, he could feel a tingling in his scalp and the back of his shoulders. Debbie was casting a spell, he could feel it. Kyle dropped his gyro stick, knelt down, and put his fists to his face. He concentrated furiously, throwing up a mental block. It worked -- it killed the spell before it could take effect. He heard the exclamation of surprise and anger, muffled by Debbie's closed door. The door opened, and she stared at him, and then just as suddenly it slammed shut. His gyro stick sat smoldering right where he'd dropped it, like it had been on the verge of bursting into flame. The scent of hot plastic was all he could smell.



Feeling a sense of wonder, Kyle sat on his tiny bunk and tried to figure what had just happened, and how he'd known what to do. This had never happened to him before. All night he was unable to sleep, running it over and over again in his head.

The next morning, Debbie had breakfast by herself in her stateroom. Hours later, she had lunch sent in. Kyle looked the food over before it was served. There were lots of chocolate junk food. "You should eat better!" he called out to her as it was being taken into her room. She didn't respond, not even with a retort.

Figuring that Debbie would remain reclusive for a while, Kyle took a stroll down to the observation deck. People sat quietly at little tables, sipping expensive liquors and watching the psychedelic light show of hyperspace through the large, thick windows. Beside the windows was an exposure warning, and a reminder to take anti-radiation medications if you spent more than a few minutes there. The medication was available at a little bar, along with the drinks. Kyle took some, downed it, and chased it with a tumbler of Scotch. He had the tumbler refilled and took it to one of the tables and sat down.

There was something to the experience. He felt a sort of odd, subconscious connection as he stared out into hyperspace. The longer he stared, the tenser he felt. He hadn't realized he'd drained his tumbler until he tried to take a sip and found nothing there.

"Can I get you a refill?"

Kyle looked up to see the pear-shaped woman with the shock-white hair, the one who'd given him a bad feeling when he'd first boarded the starship. "No thank you," he said. "I don't really drink, and I've already had too much."

She sat in the chair across from him, and leaned far over the tiny table. "How much is the little Hitler bitch paying you?"

"That's none of your business."

"I can double it. I can triple it." Her eyes didn't blink, her face showing only disgust. "Name your price."

"For what?"

"Your services." Still the eyes didn't blink. They were shiny and deep blue, but they didn't seem wet. "I want your services, and I'll give you anything you want to get them. Just tell me what you want, and I'll make the arrangements. Right here, right now."

Kyle stared into the eyes, leaning closer. "Who's in there?" he said. "You're a damn machine! Who's in control?" He grabbed the lady's ears and shook her head. "Don't send a machine to me. I don't talk to machines!"

There was a chorus of exclamations from others around him. Kyle took a breath and let go of the woman. He wasn't used to the alcohol. "I'm already employed, and that's that," he said. "From now on, I'm watching you." Kyle left the table, a little unsteady on his feet. He made his way back to his cabin, turned on the gyro stick, and worked with it until he felt more sober. A headache came, but he didn't take any pain killers -- he wanted to remind himself why he didn't drink.

Debbie emerged for dinner, but it was a quiet one, and she didn't perform any magic. She kept stealing glances at Kyle, but said nothing. Finney was watching both of them, and later, after Debbie had retired to her stateroom, he approached Kyle and asked him how things were going. Kyle told him about the argument, and about the confrontation with the white-haired

woman with the fake eyes.

"Why did you wait until now to tell me," Finney said. "You should have told me immediately. That's your job, that's what you're supposed to do."

"Sorry."

"No sorry. There is no capacity for sorry. Don't do it again. You tell me anything like this, and you tell me the moment it happens."

"Okay."

"We'll be arriving at Summerland in eighteen hours. I can't imagine them trying anything on a starship, but who knows. Be alert, don't leave her sight. I'm going to go bribe the communications officer and try to do some checking on the woman."

Kyle resumed his place in his cabin, door open, working with his gyro stick and watching Debbie's door. Every once in a while Debbie opened the door a crack and peeked out at him, then closed the door quickly when he caught her looking. Kyle kept expecting his hair to suddenly burst into flame, or for his gyro to turn red hot in his hands, but it didn't happen.

Later, when he was cat-napping, Debbie opened her door and slipped out. She took a couple of quick steps across the corridor and into Kyle's room. The sound of the door closing woke him up. "You know magic," she said.

"What?" Kyle sat up, rubbing bleary eyes.

"You know a form of magic."

"Umm. No."

"You used it. It was powerful, it was fast, and I want it."

Kyle shook his head. "I don't believe in magic."

Debbie whipped out a long, thin blade and put it against his throat. "Don't play with me. You know what I'm capable of."

Kyle grabbed the slender wrist of the hand which held the blade, moved it away from his throat, and squeezed until she cried out in pain and dropped it. Enraged, she began changing a spell, so his other hand went to her throat and squeezed, cutting her words off. Debbie's eyes bugged, her face betraying fear. She couldn't breathe. "When are you going to learn," he asked her, "that it's not wise to make your own bodyguard want to kill you?" He relaxed his hand on her neck, and she sucked down air with a desperate wheezing sound.

"Bastard!" she whispered, gasping.

His face somber, he took her into a bear hug and held her. At first she accepted it, still gasping. Then she began to struggle, trying to break away. He held tight, his arms like bars of steel. "Let me go," she demanded. "Let me go! Let go of me! Damn it, let me go! You big stinking ape-man! Let go! LET GO!" She hit, bit, and screamed out, but still he held on. It went on and on, her little fists battering his broad shoulders and back. He held her as she went through hysterics, her curses no longer making sense, her body writhing as if she were in convulsions. The shouts at one point became sobs, and she stopped struggling. She cried in earnest, her arms slipping around his neck, holding on to him as hard as he was holding onto her. This went on and on. It seemed that once she got started, the crying was not going to stop, she had too much pent-up inside of her.

The crying finally slacked off, leaving her limp and quiet. Kyle thought at first she was asleep, but she wasn't. He took her shoulders in his hands and pushed her back so that he

could look at her, but she wouldn't look at him. Her eyes were downcast, with dark circles and tear-streaked face. The years had melted away; she looked like a sad little girl, an actual touch of innocence in her expression. She drew a deep, shuttering sigh, finally looking up at him. "Don't let me go, not now." Her arms went back around his neck and she held on. He carried her across the corridor to her stateroom, put her into her bed, and then took the space next to her. He held her as she drifted off to sleep. After a while he drifted off himself.

#

They reached their destination, the town of Isbane in Terra Marka. What served as their spaceport was a weedy field at the edge of town next to a couple of hotels. Kyle and Debbie waited in the shuttle as Finney braved the rain and wind to get some rooms.

The three stayed there a few nights while the storm continued. Debbie's entourage caught up with them, minus the woman with the shock-white hair. Debbie entertained the group in a big downstairs room with a large wooden table. They feasted in front of a huge fireplace. Debbie unveiled new magic after the meal, spinning cups, glasses and silverware like gyrosopic dancers across the big table.

The locals didn't approve, being religious and all.

#

The storm finally blew itself out, and the local sun broke through the clouds. It was still very windy, but from what the locals kept telling them this wind hardly ever ceased. A large air barge arrived and they boarded for the final leg of their journey. It lifted ponderously into the air, turning and flying toward planetary north. It rode with the wind, canceling out the wind-chill factor. It was still cold up on deck, though. Debbie kept below.

The barge carried them up the rocky coast of Terra Marka, passing over steep sea cliffs and peninsulas of tall brown grass that rolled in wind-driven waves. Kyle stood on the deck by himself, leaning against the rail under the large, fluttering white tarp. The old barge looked like it had once been a heavy construction hoist, a huge rusting hunk of metal that should be alien to the air. Its top speed was maybe 70 KPH.

To the starboard side Kyle saw tall, ragged white-capped mountains surrounded by dark-green forests. To the port side was the gray-green sea, still harsh and angry looking. The air was quite brisk, and his breath came out like smoke. His mind felt sharp and clear, and he was strangely exhilarated. Deep seated feelings stirred within him, feelings with no names. It felt as though he was about to tap a great power source and light up like a glow-bulb. He was right on the verge of it.

Reaching the edge of the continent, they passed out over the gray-blue sea and into a bank of fog. The pilot increased their elevation so as to ride over it, and they emerged over a sunlit sea of white mist. The sun made its way slowly across the sky, and Kyle was just finishing a lunch of hot grilled seafood when he had sudden guilt feelings. He was not doing his job. He

had not even checked up on Debbie since they'd boarded the barge. Something was telling him to do it now, and in a hurry. Startling the passengers around him, Kyle dropped his plate and bolted for the stairway leading below decks.

The main corridor below was long, wide and dimly lit. He was just in time to see a distant shadow of a figure turn the far corner, way up at the bow end. Right by Debbie's stateroom. His running footsteps made booming echoes through the ship, and as he rounded the corner he saw the white-haired woman with the mechanical eyes swing on him, snarling. She was right at Debbie's door, her hand on the handle.

"What do you want?" Kyle demanded.

The woman's answer was to pull out a lethal dart gun and fire at him. Kyle heard the "thwang!" of the spring mechanism, and felt the dart rushing toward him. The dim light grew even dimmer. Time stretched, like it got caught on something that slowed it down. He saw the blur that was the dart. Tightening his stomach, clenching his fists, he made a low guttural sound, and somehow changed the trajectory of the dart. It angled away just enough to miss him, and even as it was passing he was pushing with both legs, forcing himself through this slow molasses of time and space toward the woman. He reached out, jumping headlong for her. She fired off a second dart in panic, aiming above his head. It passed through his hair nanoseconds before he collided with her, smashing her into the door which gave way. They both tumbled into the room beyond, startling Debbie.

Debbie had candles burning, and had hung strands of colored cloth from the ceiling. She had been sprinkling some brightly sparkling powder over the flames. She whirled in slow motion, backing away, her blond hair tangling in the strands of cloth.

The woman got both feet against Kyle's chest and pushed with unnatural strength, sending him flying in a long arc across the stateroom and against the steel wall. The slow motion effect was wearing thin; time was pulling free. One moment he was looking at the situation from near ceiling level, the next he was seeing the floor rushing toward his face. Before he could even register the shock of pain he was scrambling across the floor toward the woman, his footing insecure and balance out of whack. The woman was leveling the dart gun at Debbie as he fell against the assassin's legs. The shot went wild, the dart sinking into the bed. Kyle rolled and got to his feet, regaining his balance, and launched himself again. He caught her gun arm and pushed it back, which had the odd effect of swinging the rest of the woman's body. She struck at him with her other arm, and he caught it, painfully. The feel of her arms were wrong. They were too hard, too light. They weren't flesh and blood, they were metal and plastic. The body was too strong, the joints having too much torque -- he couldn't fight the thing on its own terms. Kyle spun it around, pushing it off balance, then grabbed the clothing at the back and lifted it off the ground. He could feel the familiar resistance. There was of course a gyro spinning inside the thing's body. Holding it off the ground, moving it to-and-fro, Kyle kept it disoriented and kept it from being able to grab him or anything else. In its confusion and panic, the dart gun flew out of its hand and clattered across the stateroom floor. Debbie picked it up and followed Kyle as he maneuvered the thing out the door and carried it, with its arms and legs flailing wildly, down the hall and up onto the main deck. As the other passengers looked on in mute horror, Kyle hurled the white-haired thing over the side and into the mists below.

While all of the crew and passengers rushed, in reflex, to see the white-haired woman fall, Kyle noticed one man who was at the back, moving away, trying to get to the stairway below without being noticed. He was a tall, thin, balding man. Kyle rushed over and grabbed him, lifting him over his head like he did the robot. A control device dropped out of the man's coat and clattered at Kyle's feet. "You idiot!" the man said, enraged. "You big, stupid steroid head! Put me down at once."

"My pleasure," Kyle said, heading toward the edge. He hesitated as he heard Finney yelling for him to stop. Finney took the dart gun from Debbie and pointed it at the man Kyle was holding.

"Put him down, Kyle. I'll take it from here."

Kyle put him down hard enough to give him a bloody nose.

#

Early the next morning, Kyle came on deck as Drapier Island became visible through the mist. Black, rolling smoke poured out of the active volcano. The island seemed harsh, brown, and jagged, but Kyle thought it looked beautiful. The island seemed to have a gravity that pulled at him. Just the sight of it gave him the feeling of endless inner strength, like the stone and fire were feeding him.

Debbie approached him, looking at him with an unsure expression. It was almost timid, which was so unlike her that it caught his attention, pulling it away from the island. "I'm no longer at the center of the universe," she said.

"Um ..."

"I've *always* been the center of the universe. Always ever since I could remember. Now, I'm not. I don't feel that way at all." Her eyes narrowed and she aimed a thin finger at Kyle. "You have something to do with it."

"Me?"

"You have something to do with it," she said, still pointing. "It makes me feel ..." She seemed hesitant about finishing the sentence.

"You feel frightened."

Her eyes widened. She was still pointing at him. "See!" she said. "It has something to do with you."

"What would make you feel less frightened?"

"When you held me ..." She stopped pointing, and drew her cloak tighter around her shoulders. Turning to face the ocean, she said, "Something happened when you held me. You did something, you cast a spell on me." She whirled on him, face accusing. "Didn't you?"

Kyle shook his head.

She turned back toward the ocean. "Yes you did. You did something. You held me and you made me vulnerable."

"Vulnerable?"

"I don't like it!" she yelled at him. Then she looked down. "Would you hold me some



more?"

"Would it make you feel safe?"

"Yes." Her voice was small, ashamed.

He put his large arms around her and held tight. She pressed in against him, losing herself in it.

#

There was a landing at the base of the mountain. Only Debbie, Finney, and Kyle got off. There was no one there to meet them, and no machine to carry their bags. Kyle bundled it all together and heaved it up over his huge shoulders, and they set out on foot up the trail that led to their destination. Much of the rock underfoot was razor sharp, black obsidian -- Kyle kept reaching out and grabbing Debbie's arm as she'd slip or lose her balance, because simply falling down could cut her to shreds. The fact that the whole island was constantly being hammered by volcanic tremors didn't help.

"There," Finney said. "Not far to go." He pointed to the tops of some structures that could be seen among the trees ahead. The structures turned out to be pods from an old one-way colony ship; big, round metal huts with conical roofs. One featured a crudely built wooden porch, on which a man with a vaguely Asian look sat and sucked a flavo. He saw them but made no greeting. Instead he watched them silently as they made their way up to his porch and stopped in front of him.

"Opposite ends meet here," he said, touching his fingers together. "I see you've returned for more pearls of wisdom." *How much have you learned on your own?*

Kyle's eyes widened. The man had not spoken the last part. He glanced at Debbie and Finney to see if they'd heard it as well, and it appeared they had not.

"A substantial deposit was made in your account," Finney said. "The same amount as last time. I assume that is sufficient ... ?"

"It is kind of you to provide me with a living." *You're wasting your money, spoiled girl. You don't have the patience or understanding to accomplish your childish desires.*

Kyle tried to answer his silent words, thinking them as loud as he could. *She might surprise you, old man. Give her the benefit of the doubt.*

His gaze slowly, purposely shifted to Kyle. "I don't believe we've met." *Who are you?*

"This is my new bodyguard, Bruce," Debbie said.

*She calls all her bodyguards 'Bruce.'* My real name is Kyle. Kyle held out his hand.

"Pleased to meet you, Bruce." Kyle. "My name is Savonah Rieh." *Dr. Savonah Rieh, formerly of Technica, formerly considered a theoretical mathematician, now generally viewed as a crackpot by practically everyone in the known universe. It appears you have some telepathic abilities.*

*I guess so.* They shook hands. *I've never noticed it before.*

"Interesting," Savonah said slowly.

Debbie gave Kyle a suspicious look, but said nothing.

Savonah Rieh provided them with a large room in one of the metal huts. They had bundles of old padding for beds, seawater for showers, and food they had to scrounge for themselves. Finney and Kyle took care of getting food for Debbie. There were large red fruit pods in some of the trees, and Kyle proved resourceful at fishing. Unless they built a fire, there was no cooking after dark since Savonah's only oven was solar powered.

Debbie disappeared for six hours a day with Savonah for her lessons. Four days went by before she came back and showed Kyle and Finney a new trick. She waved her hands around, chanting some incantation, and the whole hut vibrated with an oscillating tone that rose and fell in pitch. It struck Kyle as a particularly useless piece of magic, but he applauded none the less. Debbie was very proud of herself.

Savonah's loud, distinct thought-voice reached Kyle that night. He sat bolt upright, taken by surprise. The other two, already bedded down for the night, hardly took notice. "I think I'll take a walk," he whispered to them, then left.

He met Savonah down by the shore. The huge waves crashed like monsters beating on the rocks, sending up a continuous spray and lighting the beach with agitated luminescent plankton. The island rumbled, the ground giving an occasional lurch as the volcano seemed even more active than usual this evening. In the distance, there was a clear view of a lava stream running down into the ocean, creating a great plume of steam. "Isn't this wonderful?" Savonah said to him. "This is about as chaotic an environment you could ask to live in."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"The ocean is eroding the shore almost as fast as the volcano can produce it. Look at this violence, this conflict! Fire against water, ocean against rock. This island itself could explode at any moment. This is reality in constant flux. You couldn't ask for a better place to study magic."

"I can feel the power in the island."

"Can you?" Savonah gave him an appraising look, his face lit by the eerie luminescent light from the waves. "Let's try something." He looked around on the ground until he came up with a small piece of dry driftwood. "See this? I want you to picture in your mind that it is full of tiny spinning wheels. Absolutely convince yourself that this is the truth." He carefully put the wood down at their feet. "Concentrate, now. Feel the wheels spinning. Feel it. Tell me when you can feel it."

Kyle stared down at the wood, thinking of tiny gyros spinning. After a few minutes he nodded. "I can feel it."

"Can you? Yes? Now speed those wheels up. Speed them faster and faster. No upper limit, they can go as fast as you can imagine them. Speed them up to the---"

There was a bright flash, and both of the men took an involuntary step backward. The piece of wood was consumed in fire. Savonah laughed. "You have a natural born talent for this!"

"I did that?" Kyle said. "No, I didn't do that. You did that."

"No, you did it, Kyle."

"I don't know any spells or incantations!"

"An incantation is only a mnemonic tool to bring the right set of thoughts together for a certain piece of magic. A talented sorcerer doesn't need them, or can shorten them down to a few words." He patted Kyle on the back. "You have talent." Savonah concentrated a moment, and another piece of driftwood burst into flame. "Incandescence is one of the most simple and useful pieces of magic."

Kyle stared at the flames, his mouth open. "What makes it work?"

"What makes what work?"

"Magic. What force is it that makes magic work?"

"Perception of reality."

"Perception?"

"One of the earliest quandaries of particle physics was that perception affects reality. Normally it's only at a quantum level. But the fact is, reality as we know it is made up of information. Solid matter is made up of particles, and those particles are made of fields, and those fields are nothing but information. It's very much like living in a giant VR program -- nothing is actually here." He moved closer to Kyle, his voice lowered. "This is what got me kicked out of Technica. It's my theory that thought is as real as matter, and our perception of reality can, in and of itself, affect external reality. That's how I began my studies of applied telekinesis, then of ancient books of magic. And that..." he said, raising his voice again and gesturing to the island around him, "is when I found out it actually worked."

Another piece of driftwood burst into flame, began spinning around frantically, and suddenly shot like a fireball out into the sea.

#

Three weeks on the island followed, with Debbie taking her lessons in the day and Kyle taking his lessons quietly at night. It became clear to Kyle that Savonah was teaching Debbie only simple, relatively harmless things, whereas Savonah took Kyle to the very heart of magic theory. The man was excited and pleased by Kyle's natural feeling for the art. Kyle had never thought about the Universe or reality before, but now it was on the top of his mind every waking hour. It all became very clear to him, how science and magic were the same thing, just approached from the opposite ends of the spectrum.

Savonah kept reinforcing the point that, while reality can be changed and altered by the mind, basic laws of nature still held true. The universe always demanded a balance. Disturbing any balance in reality could bring about immediate and total disaster.

#

It was during the fourth week that Debbie followed Kyle out of the hut while Finney was sleeping. He was almost down to the beach when she caught up to him. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"Down to the beach." Kyle kept his voice casual, not wanting to let on that he was startled.

"I'll go with you," Debbie said.

"Why?"

"Well..." she took a step forward, pressing her body against his, tilting her head way back and resting her hands on his shoulders. "We haven't been alone together for weeks."

He put his arms around her. "You're feeling lonely?"

"I'm feeling horny." She smiled.

Kyle frowned. "I told you before. I don't have sexual relations with my employers."

"Okay. I'll fire you, and you can be my kept man."

"No."

"Oh, Kyle." She pressed her face against his chest, kissed him, then bit him gently. "Please."

Kyle shook his head.

"Kyle please. Please. I'll say anything, I'll do anything." She had one of his legs in between her's. "It's driving me crazy. I have to have you."

"What about Finney?"

"What *about* Finney?"

"Why don't you do it with him?"

"I don't want him. I want you." She pulled at his shirt, got it open. He felt her hot breath on his stomach, and saw her trying to pull down his pants with her teeth. Kyle gave up, let her do it. He took a deep breath and held it as she got his pants un-done and they slid to his knees.

Debbie's eyes grew wide and she made a surprised sound. She pulled away from him, turning her head as if she'd seen something forbidden. She seemed to draw into herself, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

Kyle was red-faced and humiliated. He hurriedly pulled up his pants and fastened them with fumbling, inept motions. "You just had to do that," he said.

"I don't understand," Debbie said, her voice small.

"Nobody does," Kyle told her. "That's why it's nobody's business."

"I mean, you ... you don't have anything there at all. What happened to it?"

"I'm what's called a eunuch. I was created in a genetics lab to attend some rich guys harem back on Earth. My father says his name was 'His Supreme Eminence Sheik Mohammed Julmaar'."

"A harem guard," Debbie said, with a bit of wonder in her voice. "How did you get away?"

"I didn't get away. They seized me in a raid. Apparently my creation was an illegal act, and my brothers and I were all confiscated and most destroyed. They spared a few of us that were near full term, and put us up for adoption."

"But you're male, right? A guy."

"I've got a male body. I feel male. I identify with males, yes---"

"And you're attracted to women?"

"I'm not attracted to anybody."

"You don't do any sex at all?"

"Never. No. I think the whole issue is repulsive."

"Sex is *repulsive*?"

"I was engineered that way!" Kyle said, very agitated. "I can't help it."

"Why didn't you tell me any of this before?"

"It was none of your business! I let you know right up front that I was not going to be your lover. You forced the issue."

"This is not fair."

"Not fair?"

"No, it's not," Debbie said. "This would happen to me! Somebody like you would come into my life, then turn out to be a *eunuch*."

"I am someone like me because I am a eunuch. It takes a eunuch to be someone like me."

"I want someone like you who would be my lover. I ..." Debbie made strange, confused gestures with her hands, like she was out of words but was still trying to say something. "I'm going back to the hut," she said suddenly.

Kyle watched her go. He waited until she was out of sight, then continued on his way to the beach.

#

That night Savonah noticed Kyle was distracted from his studies. "Perhaps," Savonah said, "it's time to review some of the things you already learned."

Kyle squinted, staring at the bonfire they had built on the rocky shore. "Okay," he said.

"What are the five basic levels of magic, in order of easiest to hardest to master?"

Kyle cleared his throat. "Mental telepathy," he said. "Excitation or sedation of atomic activity. Manipulation of mass and gravity. Compression, expansion, or shaping of space/time. Conversion of matter from one form to another." Staring into the fire, he bit his lower lip, concentrating.

"You have a question?" Savonah said.

Kyle raised his eyebrows and looked at him.

"You have a question," Savonah said. "I can see it in your head."

"Can magic be used to ... grow ... a part of anatomy? Say if I wanted another finger on each hand. Could that be done?"

"That would entail manipulation of your genetic code. I suppose it's possible, but you're talking about something so complex that it would be much easier approached through science, not magic." Savonah shook his head. "It would be too dangerous. You could make a mistake and turn yourself into a blob of protoplasm."

Kyle nodded grimly.

"Why don't we try something easy, like launching some of these boulders into outer space?"

Far off down the beach, Debbie stood with a half-awake Finney, who was shivering in the midnight breeze. Debbie was pointing, and saying, "Look! *Look!*" Things that looked like falling stars were shooting up from the ground around Kyle and Savonah and burning up into the night sky. "I want him fired tomorrow morning," Debbie said. "I want to leave."

Finney nodded, mumbled something, and turned and shuffled back toward the huts.

Debbie continued to watch with angry eyes.



#

Debbie had Finney summons Savonah into their hut the next morning. Kyle knew something was up because Debbie wouldn't talk to him, and Finney wouldn't look at him. The doors swung open by themselves, and moments later Savonah came walking in, looking like he was prepared for a confrontation.

Debbie didn't waste any time getting to the point. "I wasn't paying you to teach my *bodyguard* magic!" she shouted at him.

Savonah raised his chin defiantly. "You were paying me to teach you magic, Miss Hitler, which I have. I wasn't charging you anything to teach your bodyguard magic."

"He has no business learning magic on my payroll!"

"He has a natural talent for magic. He has the potential to become twice the sorcerer I am. He has the ability to reach the level of the great primeval sorcerers of Earth's past. I can't charge him or you for that. It's my privilege to even know him." He pointed at Kyle. "In six weeks, he'll be teaching me."

All eyes turned to Kyle. He didn't know what to say. It was the first time he'd ever been good at anything other than bodybuilding.

"Just great," Debbie said. "I've got a muscle man who looks like a Greek god, who's a master of magic, but it all adds up to nothing because no matter what he still doesn't have a penis. As a man, you're worthless."

Kyle felt his face go red. She'd said it. She'd said it out loud in front of everyone. He clenched his teeth, shaking, feeling tears welling in his eyes. Seeing the affect her words had on him, Debbie laughed.

"He's not a man," she said. "I don't care how good a sorcerer he is."

Kyle walked out of the room, out of the hut, and away. Following him was Debbie's voice, shouting, "Go on, eunuch! Go on! You're fired! You hear that, Bruce? *Fired!*"

#

The feeling of shame and humiliation was so powerful that it almost seemed like a radioactive force that was burning his face bright red. It was like a dark angry sun shone from within, burning him with a harshness that made his arms quiver and tears streak his face. It was just like when he was a teenager, and all his friends were going through puberty. All everybody thought about was sex. All the girls wanted from him was sex. When the word got out, they called him a freak. Even his closest friends stayed away from him in public.

It was a horrible time in his life, but it was years in the past. He thought it was gone, put behind him. But here it all came back up again, just as grating and painful as before. His differences stood out, his inadequacies. The falseness of his manhood.

Kyle was far down the beach, part the way around the island. He walked in long, angry, painful strides. Then, abruptly, something made him stop. It was his instinct again, his intuition, and for one very brief moment all thought and sound stopped. Even the constant

sound of the surf faded, and he had one long, quivering chill. He looked up and saw the black attack craft flying in from the sea, three of them, and they were heading right toward him. He looked back and forth, but there was nowhere to hide.

Instinct led him up to the face of the lava cliff, where he threw himself down on the sharp obsidian shards just as energy bolts began to rain down around him. Several blasts hit the cliff above, and he curled up and thought of a big turtle shell as the rocks began to fall on top of him. Soon it was dark and all he could hear were the sounds of rock hitting rock. Through the rock he could feel the throbbing of gravity engines as three craft hovered above him. After a moment they receded, moving off in the direction of Savonah's home.

Kyle turned inward, reaching out with his dark senses, seeing himself huddled under a mass of black stone. He was protected from the weight by an invisible umbrella of energy. Kyle soaked the stones around him with his thoughts, feeling the forces of gravity weaken then reverse. Getting his legs under him, he pushed himself up through the stones like they were feathers, shaking them off. The attack craft were still visible down the beach. They were firing into the metal huts. Kyle ran toward them.

By the time he reached the huts, the raiders had accomplished what they had come for and were racing off across the sea. The first thing Kyle saw was Finney. His torso and one leg lay half-charred on the ground, and pieces of him were scattered everywhere. His eyes and mouth were wide open, frozen in an expression of surprise and horror. For a long moment Kyle was afraid the man was still alive.

*Kyle. It was Savonah's thought-voice.*

He looked around, unable to tell from where it was coming.

*Kyle.*

"Where are you?" Kyle shouted.

*Kyle. Help me.*

The guest hut was on fire. Savonah's hut, which had holes blown through the roof, seemed safe enough to enter. It was dark inside, so Kyle picked up the broken leg of a table and willed one end of it to burn. Inside the hut was total wreckage. He found Savonah in the back, his torso a mass of bullet holes. He blinked in the light of Kyle's torch, but was unable to move.

*There's a spell in a book that could save me, Kyle.*

"Where's the book?"

*It's over to your right, in that pile. The irony is, Kyle, you don't understand the language it was written in. I'd have to translate it for you, and I'll be dead before then.*

Kyle searched through the pile, found several old volumes sealed in protective covers.

"Which one?"

*Doesn't matter, Kyle. Take them. Learn.*

Kyle propped the fire against a piece of wreckage and fed it more oxygen, brightening it.

"Which book, Savonah? Which one?"

*Go save your employer, Kyle. They took her. She's still alive.*

"You first, Savonah."

*Too late. Too late, I see it ending. I see the...the chaos.*

"Which book, Savonah? Let's at least try!"

Staring into the man's eyes, he saw the gleam had gone out of them. They were beginning

to dull over. Savonah was silent.

Kyle took the books outside, found one with Savonah's notes in them. Translations of spells, in his handwriting. Translations, and a key to translating. The book itself dated back thousands of years. Kyle thumbed through it, searching for something, anything, that would give him an idea. A red tab caught his attention, slips of paper in the book with the words, "Spells to manipulate space/time."

#

The high-powered assault craft thrummed as it made its way back to the mainland. The weather was sunny and clear, with large puffy white clouds overhead and the ocean relatively calm below. The rich-bitch captive lay bundled on the floor, unconscious. She was bleeding here and there, but nothing major was damaged. It didn't matter much to the mercenary commander, as there was only a slight bonus if they delivered her alive.

The pilot saw his instruments flicker, and felt a bit of disorientation as it seemed the clouds ahead stretched and receded. His head cleared after a moment, and he checked to make sure they were still on course. They were, so he thought nothing of it, passed it off as a side effect of the drugs he'd taken the night before.

It was one of the turret gunners who suddenly yelled out. They had been flying in a delta formation with two other gun ships, and now the gun ships were gone. The commander himself went forward and checked the instruments. The gunships were not on the screens at all. He double-checked to make sure they were on course, which they were. Not knowing what else to do, he ordered them to stay on course.

The trip continued for hours with no further incident. The hostage began to stir at one point, and the commander -- having been warned the rich bitch had some sort of dangerous psychic powers -- ordered one of his men to pop her with another tranquilizing dart.

Another twenty minutes passed, and the commander's grumbling stomach woke him from a half-sleep. "Where the hell are we?" he shouted at the pilot. "We should be there by now."

The pilot was sweating. "We're still on course. I don't know what's going on." According to their instruments they'd traveled thousands of kilometers. Their speed was constant. Their course was triple checked and true. Never the less it seemed like they were standing still. They were no nearer their destination than when the two gunships had disappeared.

Another hour passed. Angry and trying to hide the fact that he was frightened, the commander ordered a course change. More hours passed. The commander ordered another course change. By now they were all starving, and there was no food on board. They passed a canteen of water around, and continued on with grim expressions. The sun sank in the sky. The hostage stirred again and was hit with another tranquilizer. It was dark when the commander finally ordered them to halt and hover. They sent out a distress signal, and got no reply.

In the eerie light from the instruments, the commander saw a stranger, a heavily muscled man in civilian leather, crouching over the hostage. As he reached for his gun, the instrument lights went out. When the lights came back on, the man and the hostage was gone. "What the

hell?!" he yelled.

"Commander!" the pilot yelled back in panic, like a child calling for his mother. "The power is failing!" Even as he yelled this, they were falling. The metal craft dropped like a stone into the ocean, made a big splash, and was gone.

#

Debbie sat up suddenly. She was on a thick blanket next to a campfire, with stars shining above and the booming hiss of ocean waves colliding with a nearby shore. There was also a buzzing sound, and she turned to see Kyle bending and flexing with his gyro stick. "Where are we?"

"Somewhere on the southern edge of Terra Marka. We're safe."

"Where's Finney?"

"Finney didn't make it."

"Oh." She fell silent. Closing her eyes, she listened to the ocean and to the buzzing sound of Kyle's gyro. After a moment she began to cry.

The buzzing stopped. Kyle sat the gyro down on the sand and came to her. He held her as she cried, held her tight. She cried a long time, crying herself back to sleep.

In the cold foggy morning she woke up again, snuggled against his big warm body under the blanket. She turned and looked with bleary eyes at the smoldering remains of the fire. Concentrating, she marched animated pieces of driftwood across the sand. The wood jumped clumsily onto the coals, and she set them ablaze.

She shook Kyle. "You saved my life, didn't you?" It was like she just realized it. "How did you do that? I was on a mercenary launch, they had me shot up...I remember you being there, coming to get me. How---?"

"I expanded the space fabric around them, looped it on itself. It bought me enough time to find a traveling spell and use it."

"What happened to them?"

"They drowned."

"Drowned?"

"In the ocean."

Debbie stood up, moving closer to the fire. "We've got to get to town," she said. "I need access to my account. I'll have my family arrange transport off this planet, and get a replacement for Finney."

"If that's what you need to do."

"What else is there to do?"

"Savonah is dead. Someone needs to continue his work."

"What? I can't continue---" She broke off, frowning. "Of course. You're the golden boy, the one with the talent."

"If you really have a passion for magic, we can study it together."

"I'm sick of it."

Kyle shrugged. "Okay, I'll take you to town."

"You're coming with me, right?"

"You fired me, remember."

"I didn't mean it. I didn't. Really." She threw her arms around him. "I'm sorry about all that. I am."

"That doesn't matter. I'm not ready to leave yet. I'm going to go back to the island." Kyle concentrated a moment, running a long incantation through in his head. A doorway through space/time opened in front of them, and through it they could see downtown Isbane. "I'll see you safely off the planet. Then, when you feel you're ready, maybe you can come back."

"Maybe," she said. She stared at the doorway with an uncertain expression.

"Maybe I'll give you lessons," Kyle said. He gathered their belongings, killed the fire, and they stepped through.

The doorway closed behind them, leaving a smoldering fire, a few footprints, and the constant crash of ocean waves.

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