

QUEEN OF CANDESCENCE: PART I OF IV

by Karl Schroeder

* * * *



Illustration by George Krauter

* * * *

Being literally thrown into an unfamiliar environment forces a person to adapt—and familiar ways of doing that may not be enough.

* * * *

Prologue

Garth Diamandis looked up, and saw a woman in the sky.

The balcony swayed under him; distant trees wavered in the hot afternoon air though there was no breeze. A twist of little clouds pirouetted far overhead, just beneath the glitter and darkness of the city that had exiled Gareth to this place so many years ago. Well below the city, only a thousand feet up at this point, a single human form had appeared out of the light.

She rotated up out of Garth's view and he had to wait several minutes for her to come back around. Then, there she was: gliding with supernatural grace over the tall, ragged wall that rimmed the world at its nearer end. Behind her, infinite air beckoned, forever out of reach of Garth and the others like him. Ahead of the silent woman, a likely tumble into quickly moving trees, broken limbs and death. If she wasn't dead already.

Someone tried to escape, he thought—an act that always ended in gunshots or bloody thrashing beneath a swarm of piranhawks. This one must have been shot cleanly by the day watch for she was spiraling across the sky alone, not attended by a retinue of blood droplets. And now the spin-gale was teasing the fringes of her outlandish garment, slowing her; bringing her down.

Garth frowned, for a moment forgetting the aches and pains that bedeviled him all day and all night. The hovering woman's clothes had been too bright and fluttered too easily to be made of the traditional leather and metal of Spyre.

As the world turned the woman receded into the distance, frustrating Garth's attempt to see more. The ground under his perch was rotating up and away along with the whole cylindrical world; the black-haired woman was not moving with it but rather sailing in majestically from one of the world's open ends. But Spyre made its own winds as it turned, and those winds would pull her to its surface before she had a chance to drift out the other side.

She would have sped up by that time, but not enough to match Spyre's rotation. Garth well knew what happened when someone began clipping the treetops and towers at several hundred miles per hour. He'd be finding pieces of her for weeks.

The ground undulated again. Frantic horns began echoing in the distance—an urgent conversation between the inner surface of Spyre and the city above.

Watching the woman had been an idle pastime, since it looked as though she was going to come down along the rail line. People with more firepower and muscle than Garth owned that; they would see her in a few moments and bring her down. Her valuable possessions and clothes would not be his.

But the horns were insistent. Something was wrong with the very fabric of Spyre, an oscillation building. He could see it in the far distance now: the land heaved minutely up and down. The slow ripple was making its way in his direction; he'd better get off this parapet.

The archway opening onto the balcony had empty air behind it and a twenty-foot drop to tumbled stones. Garth hopped over the rail without hesitation, counting as he fell. “One pilot, two pilot, three—” He landed among upthrusts of stabbing weed and the cloud-like brambles that had taken over this ancient mansion. Three seconds? Well, gravity hadn't changed, at least not noticeably.

His muscles creaked as he stood up, but climbing and jumping were part of his daily constitutional, a grim routine aimed at convincing himself he was still a man.

He stalked over the crackling grit that painted a tiled dance floor. Railway ties were laid callously across the fine pallasite stones; the line cleaved the former Nation of Arbath like a whip-mark. Garth stepped onto the track daringly and stared down it. The great family of Arbath had not reached an accommodation with the preservationists and had been displaced or killed, he couldn't remember which. Rubble, ruins, and new walls sided the tracks; at one spot an abandoned sniper tower loomed above the strip. It swayed now uneasily.

The tracks converged in perspective but also rose with the land itself, a long graceful curve that became vertical if he followed it far enough. He didn't look that far, but focused on a scramble of activity taking place about a mile distant.

The Preservation Society had planted one of their oil-soaked sidings there like an obscene graffito. Some of the preservationists were pouring alcohol into the tanks of a big turbine engine that squatted on the tracks like an idol to industrialism. Others had started a tug and were shunting in cars loaded with iron plating and rubble. They were responding to the codes brayed out by the distant horns.

They were so busy doing all this that none had noticed what was happening overhead.

"You're crazy, Garth." He hopped from foot to foot, twisting his hands together. When he was younger he wouldn't have hesitated. There was a time when he'd lived for escapades like this. Cursing his own cowardice, Garth lurched into a half run down the tracks—in the direction of the preservationist camp.

He had to prove himself more and more often these days. Garth still sported the black cap and long sideburns that rakes had worn in his day, but he was acutely aware that the day had come and gone. His long leather coat was brindled with cracks and dappled with stains. Though he still wore the twin holsters that had once held the most expensive and stylish dueling pistols available in Spyre, nowadays he just carried odd objects in them. His breath ratcheted in his chest and if his head didn't hurt, his legs did, or his hands. Pain followed him everywhere; it had made crow's-feet where once he'd outlined his eyes in black to show the ladies his long lashes.

The preservationist's engine started up. It was coming his way so Garth prudently left the track and hunkered down beneath some bushes to let it pass. He was in disputed land, so no one would accost him here, but

he might be casually shot from a window of the train and no one would care. While he waited he watched the dot of the slowly falling woman, trying to verify his initial guess at her trajectory.

Garth made it the rest of the way to the preservationist camp without attracting attention. Pandemonium still reigned inside the camp, with shaven-headed men in stiff leather coats crawling like ants over a second, rust-softened engine, under the curses of a supervisor. The first train was miles up the curve of the world now, and if Garth bothered to look down the length of Spyre, he was sure he would see many other trains on the move as well. But that wasn't his interest.

Pieces of the world fell off all the time. It wasn't his problem.

He crept between two teetering stacks of railway ties until he was next to a pile of catch-nets the preservationists had dumped here. Using a stick he'd picked up along the way, he snagged one of the nets and dragged it into the shadows. Under full gravity it would have weighed several hundred pounds; as it was, he staggered under the weight as he carried it to a nearby line of trees.

She was going by again, lower now and fast in her long spiral. The woman's clothes were tearing in the headwind, and her dark hair bannered behind her. When Garth saw that her exposed skin was bright red he stopped in surprise, then redoubled his efforts to reach the nearest vertical cable.

The interior of Spyre was spoked by thousands of these cables; some rose at low angles to reattach themselves to the skin of the world just a few miles away. Some shot straight up to touch down on the opposite side of the cylinder. All were under tremendous tension and every now and then one snapped; then the world ran like a bell for an hour or two and shifted, and more pieces fell off of it.

Aside from keeping the world together, the cables served numerous purposes. Some carried elevators. The one Garth approached had smaller lines draped and coiled around its frayed black surface—some old, rusted, and disused pulley system. The main cable was anchored to a corroded metal cone that jutted out of the earth. He clipped two corners of the roll of netting to the old pulley. Then he jogged away from the tracks, unreeling the net behind him.

It took far too long to connect a third corner of the huge net to a corroded flagpole. Sweating and suffering palpitations, he ran back to the flagpole one more time. As he did she came by again.

She was a bullet. In fact, it was the land that was speeding by below her and pulling the air with it. If she'd been alive earlier she might be dead now; he doubted whether anyone could breathe in such a gale.

As soon as she shot past, Garth began hauling on the pulleys. The net lurched into the air a foot at a time. Too slow! He cursed and redoubled his effort, expecting to hear shouts from the preservationist camp at any moment.

With agonizing slowness, a triangle of netting rose. One end was anchored to the flagpole; two more were on their way up the cable. Had he judged her trajectory right? It didn't matter; this was the only attachment point for hundreds of yards, and by now she was too low. Air resistance was yanking her down, and in moments she would be tumbled to pieces on the ground.

Here she came. Garth wiped sweat out of his eyes and pulled with bloody hands. At that moment the shriek of a steam whistle sounded from the preservationist camp. The rusted engine was on the move.

The mysterious woman arched in just above the highest trees. Garth thought for sure she was going to miss his net. Then, just as the rusted engine sailed by on the tracks—he caught snapshot glimpses of surprised preservationist faces and open mouths—she hit the net and yanked it off the cable.

A twirling screw hit Garth in the nose and he sat down. Sparks shot from screaming brakes on the tracks, and the black tangling form of the falling woman passed between the Y-uprights of a jagged tree, the trailing net catching branches and snapping them as she bounced with astonishing gentleness into a bed of weeds.

Garth was there in seconds, cutting through the netting with his knife. Her clothes marked her as a foreigner, so her ransom potential might be low. He probably couldn't even get much for her clothes; cloth like that had no business being worn in Spyre. Oh well; maybe she had some adornments that might fetch enough to buy him food for a few weeks.

Just in case, he put a hand on her neck—and felt a pulse. Garth cursed in astonishment. Jubilantly he slashed away the rest of the strands and pulled her out as a warning shot cracked through the air.

Unable to resist, he teased back the wave of black hair that fell across her face. The woman was fairly young—in her twenties—and had fine, sharp features with well-defined black eyebrows and full lips. The symmetry of her face was broken only by a star-shaped scar on her jaw. Her skin would have been quite fair were it not deeply sunburnt.

She only weighed twenty pounds or so. It was easy to sling her over his shoulder and run for the deep bush that marked the boundary of the disputed lands.

He pushed his way through the branches and onto private land. The preservationists pulled up short, cursing, just shy of the bushes. Garth Diamandis laughed as he ran; and for a precious few minutes, he felt like he was twenty years old again.

* * * *

1

A low-beamed ceiling swam into focus. Venera Fanning frowned at it, then winced as pain shot through her jaw. She was definitely alive, she decided ruefully.

She was—but was Chaison Fanning also among the living, or was Venera now a widow? That was it, she had been trying to get back to her husband, Chaison Fanning. Trying to get home—

Sitting up proved impossible. The slightest motion sent waves of pain through her; she felt like she'd been skinned. She moaned involuntarily.

"You're awake?" The thickly accented words had the crackle of age to them. She turned her head gingerly and made out a dim form moving to sit next to her. She was lying on a bed—probably—and he was on a stool or something. She blinked, trying to take in more of the long, low room.

"Don't try to move," said the old man. "You've got severe sunburn and sunstroke, too. Plus a few cuts and bruises. I've been wetting down

the sheets to give you some relief. Gave you water, too. Don't know what else to do."

"Th-thanks." Then she looked down at herself. "Where are my clothes?"

His face cracked in a smile, and for a second he looked much younger. He had slab-like features, with prominent cheekbones and piercing gray eyes. Eyes like that could send chills through you, and from his confident grin he seemed to know it. But as he shifted in the firelight, she saw that lines of care and disappointment had cut away much of his handsomeness.

"Your clothes are here," he said, patting a chair or table nearby. "Don't worry, I've done nothing to you—not out of virtue, mind, I'm not a big fan of virtue, mine or anyone else's. No, you can thank arthritis, old wounds, and age for your safety." He grinned again. "I'm Garth Diamandis. And *you* are a foreigner."

Venera sighed listlessly. "Probably. What does that mean around here?"

Diamandis leaned back, crossing his arms. "Much, or nothing, depending."

"And here is ... ?"

"Spyre," he said.

"Spyre..." She thought she should remember that name. But Venera was already falling asleep. She let herself do it; after all, it was so cool here...

When she awoke again it was to find herself propped half upright in a chair. Her forehead, upper body, and arms were draped with moist sheets. Blankets swaddled her below that.

Venera was facing a leaded-glass window. Outside, green foliage made a sunlit screen. She heard birds. That suggested the kind of garden you only got in the bigger towns—a gravity-bound garden where trees grew short and squat, and soil stayed in one place. Such things were rare—and that, in turn, implied wealth.

But this room ... As she turned her head her hopes faded. This was a hovel, for all that it too seemed built for gravity. The floor was the relentless iron of a town foundation, though surprisingly she could feel no vibration from engines or slipstream vanes through her feet. The silence was uncanny, in fact. The chamber itself was oddly cantilevered, as though hollowed out of the foundations of some much larger structure. Boxes, chests, and empty birdcages were jammed or piled everywhere, a few narrow paths worn between them. The only clear area was the spot where her overstuffed armchair sat. She located the bed to her left, some tables, and a fireplace that looked like it had been clumsily dug into the wall by the window. There were several tables here and the clutter had infected them as well; they were covered with framed pictures.

Venera leaned forward, catching up the sheet at her throat. A sizzle of pain went through her arms and shoulders, and she extended her left arm, snarling. She was sunburned a deep brick red, which was already starting to peel. How long had she been here?

The pictures. Gingerly, she reached out to turn one in the light. It was of a young lady holding a pair of collapsible wrist-fins. She wore a strange, stiff-looking black bodice, and her backdrop was indistinct but might have been clouds.

All the portraits were of women, some two dozen by her estimation. Some were young, some older; all the ladies seemed well-off from their various elaborate hairdos. Their clothes were outlandish, though, made of sweeping chrome and leather, clearly heavy and doubtless uncomfortable. There was, she realized, a complete absence of cloth in these photos.

"Ah, you're awake!" Diamandis shuffled his way through the towering stacks of junk. He was holding a limp bird by the neck; now he waved it cheerfully. "Lunch!"

"I demand to know where I am." She started to stand and found herself propelled nearly to the ceiling. Gravity was very low here. Recovering with a wince, she coiled the damp sheet around her for modesty. It didn't help; Diamandis frankly admired her form anyway, and probably would have stared even if she'd been sheathed in plate armor. It seemed to be his way, and there was, strangely, nothing offensive about it.

"You are a guest of the Principality of Spyre," said Diamandis. He sat down at a low table and began plucking the bird. "But I regret to have

to inform you that you've landed on the wrong part of our illustrious nation. This is Greater Spyre, where I've lived now for, oh ... twenty-odd years."

She held up the picture she had been looking at. "You were a busy man, I see."

He looked over and laughed in delight. "Very! And why not? The world is full of wonders, and I wanted to meet them all."

Venera touched the stone wall and now felt a faint thrum, but very slight. "You say this is a town? An old one ... and you've turned gravity way down." Then she turned to look at Diamandis. "What did you mean, 'regret to inform me'? What's wrong with this Greater Spyre?"

He looked over at her, and now he seemed very old. "Come. If you can walk, I'll show you your new home."

Venera bit back a sharp retort. Instead, she sullenly followed him through the stacks. "My temporary residence, you mean," she said to the cracked leather back of his coat. "I am making my way back to the court at Slipstream. If ransom is required, you will be paid handsomely for my safe return..." He laughed, somewhat sadly.

"Ah, but that it were possible to do that," he murmured. He exited up a low flight of steps into bright light. She followed, feeling the old scar on her jaw starting to throb.

The roofless square building had been built of stone and steel I-beams, perhaps centuries ago. Now devoid of top and floors, it had become a kind of open box, thirty feet on a side. Wild plants grew in profusion throughout the rubble-strewn interior. The hole leading to Diamandis's home was in one corner of the place; there was no other way in or out as far as she could see.

Venera stared at the grass. She'd never seen wild plants under gravity before. Every square foot was accounted for in the rotating ring-shaped structures she called towns. They were seldom more than a mile in diameter, after all, often built of mere rope and planking. There was no other way to feel gravity than to visit a town.

She scanned the sky past the stone walls. In some ways it looked right: the endless vistas of Virga were blocked by some sort of structure. But the perspective seemed all wrong.

"Come." Diamandis was gesturing to her from a nearly invisible set of steps that ran up one wall. She scowled, but followed him up to a level area just below the top of the wall. If she stood on tiptoe, she could look over. So she did.

Venera had never known one could feel so small. Spyre was a rotating habitat, like those she had grown up in. But that was all she could have said to connect it to the worlds she had known. Diamandis's little tower sat among forlorn trees and scrub-grass in an empty plain that stretched to forest a mile or more in each direction. In any sane world, this much land under gravity would have been crammed with buildings; those empty plazas and tumbled-down villas should have been awash with humanity.

Past the trees, the landscape became a maze of walls, towers, open fields, and sharp-edged forests. And it went on and on to a dizzying, impossible distance. Diamandis's tower was one tiny mote on the inside surface of a cylinder that must be ten or twelve miles in diameter and half again as long.

Sunlight angled in from somewhere behind her; Venera turned quickly, needing the reassurance of something familiar. Beyond the open ends of the great cylinder, the reassuring clouds of the normal world turned slowly; she had not left all sense and reason behind. But the scale of this town-wheel was impossible for any engineering she knew. The energy needed to keep it turning in the unstable airs of Virga would beggar any normal nation. Yet the place looked ancient, as evidenced by the many overgrown ruins and furzes of wild forest. In fact, she could see gaps in the surface here and there through which she could glimpse distant flickers of cloud and sky.

"Are those holes?" she asked, pointing at a nearby crater. Leaves, twigs, and grit fogged the air above it, and all the topsoil for yards around had been stripped away revealing a stained metal skin that must underlie everything here.

Garth scowled as if she'd committed some indiscretion by pointing out the hole. "Yes," he said grudgingly. "Spyre is ancient and decaying, and it's under an awful strain. Tears like that open up all the time. It's everyone's nightmare that one day, such a rip might not stop. If the world should ever come to an end, it will start with a tear like that one."

Faintly alarmed, Venera looked around at the many other tears that dotted the landscape. Garth laughed. "Don't worry, if it's serious the patch

gangs will be here in a day or two to fix it—dodging bullets from the local gentry all the while. They were out doing just that when I picked you up."

Venera looked straight up. "I suppose if this is greater Spyre" she said, pointing, "then that is Lesser Spyre?"

The empty space that the cylinder rotated around was filled with conventional town-wheels. Uncoupled from the larger structure, these rings spun grandly in midair, miles above her. Some were 'geared' towns whose rims touched, while others turned in solitary majesty. A puff of smaller buildings surrounded the towns.

The wheels weren't entirely disconnected from Greater Spyre. Venera saw cables standing up at various angles every mile or so throughout the giant cylinder. Some angled across the world to anchor in the ground again far up Spyre's curve. Some went straight past the axis and down to an opposite point; if you climbed one of these lines, you could get to the city that hung like an iron cloud half a dozen miles above.

She didn't see any elevator traffic on the nearest cables. Most were tethered inside the maze-like grounds of the estates that dotted the land. Would anyone have a right to use those cables but the owners?

When Diamandis didn't reply, Venera glanced over at him. He was gazing up at the distant towns, his expression shifting between empty adoration and anger. He seemed lost in memory.

Then he blinked and looked down at her. "Lesser Spyre, yes. My home, from which I am exiled for life. Always visible, never to be achieved again." He shook his head. "Unlucky you to have landed here, lady."

"My name," she said, "is Venera Fanning." She looked out again. The nearer end of the great cylinder began to curve upward less than a mile away. It rose for a mile or two, then ended in open air. "I don't understand," she said. "What's to prevent me—or you—from leaving? Just step off that rim yonder and you'll be in free flight in the skies of Virga. You could go anywhere."

Diamandis looked where she was pointing. Now his smile was condescending. "Ejected at four hundred miles per hour, Lady Fanning, you'll be unconscious in seconds for lack of breath. Before you slow enough to awake you'll either suffocate or be eaten alive by the

piranhawks. Or be shot by the sentries. Or be eviscerated by the razor wire clouds, or hit a mine...

"No, it was a miracle that you drifted unconscious through all of that, to land here. A once-in-a-million feat.

"Now that you're among us, you will never leave again."

* * * *

Diamandis's words might have alarmed Venera had she not recently survived a number of impossible situations—not only that, he was manifestly wrong about the threat the piranhawks represented; after all, hadn't she sailed blithely through them all? These things in mind, she followed him down to his hovel, where he began to prepare a meal.

The bird was pathetically small; they would each get a couple of mouthfuls out of it if they were lucky. "I'm grateful for your help," Venera said as she lowered herself painfully back into the armchair. "But you obviously don't have very much. What do you get out of helping me?"

"The warmth of your gratitude," said Diamandis. In the shadow of the stone fireplace, it was impossible to make out his expression.

Venera chose to laugh. "Is that all? What if I'd been a man?"

"I'd have left you without a second thought."

"I see." She reached over to her piled clothes and rummaged through them. "As I suspected. I've not come through unscathed, have I?" The jewelry that had filled her flight jacket's inner pockets was gone. She looked under the table and immediately spotted something: it looked like a metal door in the floor, with a rope loop as its handle. Her feet had been resting on it earlier.

"No, it's not down there," said Diamandis with a smile.

Venera shrugged. The two most important objects in her possession were still inside her jacket. She could feel the spent bullet through the lining. As to the other—Venera slipped her hand in to touch the scuffed white cylinder that she and her husband had fought their way across half the world to collect. It didn't look like it was worth anything,

so Diamandis had apparently ignored it. Venera left it where it was and straightened to find Diamandis watching her.

"Consider those trinkets to be payment for my rescuing you," he said. "I can live for years on what you had in your pockets."

"So could I," she said levelly. "In fact, I was counting on using those valuables to barter my way home, if I had to."

"I've left you a pair of earrings and a bracelet," he said, pointing. There they were, sitting on the table next to her toeless deck shoes. "The rest is hidden, so don't bother looking."

Seething but too tired to fight, Venera leaned back, carefully draping the moist sheet over herself. "If I felt better, old man, I'd whip you for your impudence."

He laughed out loud. "Spoken like a true aristocrat! I knew you were a woman of quality by the softness of your hands. So what were you doing floating alone in the skies of Virga? Was your ship beset by pirates? Or did you fall overboard?"

She grimaced. "Either one makes a good story. Take your pick. Oh, don't look at me like that, I'll tell you, but first you have to tell *me* where we are. What is Spyre? How could such a place exist? From the heat outside I'd say we're still near the sun of suns. Is this place one of the principalities of Candesce?"

Diamandis shrugged. He bent over his dinner pot for a minute, then straightened and said, "Spyre's the whole world to those of us who live here. I'm told there's no other place like it in all of Virga. We were here at the founding of the world, and most people think we'll be here at its end. But I've also heard that once, there were dozens of Spyres, and that all the rest crumbled and spun apart over the ages ... So I believe we live in a mortal world. Like me, Spyre is showing its age."

He brought two plates. Venera was impressed: he'd added some cooked roots and a handful of boiled grains and made a passable meal of the bird. She was ravenous and dug in; he watched in amusement.

"As to what Spyre is..." He thought for a moment. "In the cold-blooded language of the engineers, you could say that we live on an open-ended rotating cylinder made of metal and miraculously strong cables. About six miles from here there's a giant engine that powers the electric

jets. It is the same kind of engine that runs the suns. Once, we had hundreds of jets to keep us spinning, and Spyre's outer skin was smooth and didn't catch the wind. Gravity was stronger then. The jets are failing, one by one, and wind resistance pulls at the skin like the fingers of a demon. The old aristocrats refuse to see the decay that surrounds them, even when pieces of Spyre fall away and the whole world becomes unbalanced in its turning. When that happens, the preservationist society's rail engines start up and they haul as many tons as needed around the circle of the world to reestablish the balance.

"The nobles fought a civil war against the creation of the preservation society. That was a hundred years ago, but some of them are still fighting. The rest have been hunkered down on their estates for five centuries now, slowly breeding heritable insanities in the quiet of their shuttered parlors. They're so isolated that they hardly speak the same language anymore. They'll shoot anyone who crosses their land, yet they continue to live, because they can export objects and creatures that can only be made here."

Venera frowned at him. "You must not be one of them. You're making sense as far as I can tell."

"Me? I'm from the city." He pointed upward. "Up there, we still trade with the rest of the principalities. We have to, we've got no agriculture of our own. But the hereditary nobles own us because they control the industries down here."

The bitterness in his voice was plain. "So, Garth Diamandis, if you're a city person, what are you doing living in a hole in the ground in Greater Spyre?" She said it lightly, though she was aware the question must cause him more pain.

He did look away before smiling ruefully at her. "I made the cardinal mistake of all gigolos: I cultivated popularity among women only. I bedded one too many princesses, you see. I was kindly not killed nor castrated for it, but I was sent here."

"But I don't understand," she said. "Why is it impossible to leave? You said something about defenses ... but why are they there?"

Diamandis guffawed. "Spyre is a treasure! At its height, this place was the equal of any nation in Virga, with gravity for all and wonders you couldn't get anywhere else. Why, we had horses! Have you heard of horses? And dogs and cats. You understand? We had here all the plants

and animals that were brought from Earth at the very beginning of the world. Animals that were never altered to live in weightlessness. Even now, a breeding pair of house cats costs a king's ransom. An orange is worth its weight in platinum. We had to defend ourselves and prevent our treasures being stolen. So for centuries now Spyre has been ringed with razors and bombs to prevent attack—and to prevent anyone smuggling anything out. And believe me, when all else has descended to madness and decadence, that is the one policy that will remain in place.” He hung his head.

“But surely one person, traveling alone—”

“Could carry a cargo of swallowed seeds. Or a dormant infant animal in a capsule sewn under the skin. Both have been tried. Oh, travel is still possible, for nobles of Lesser Spyre and their attendants, but there are body scans and examinations, interrogations, and quarantines. And anyone who's recently been on Greater Spyre comes under even more suspicion.”

“I ... see.” Venera decided not to believe him. She would be more cheerful that way. She did her best to shrug off the black mood his words had inspired and focused on her meal.

They ate in silence for a while, then he said, “And you? Pirates or a fall overboard?”

“Both and neither,” said Venera. How much should she tell? There was no question that lying would be necessary, but one must always strike the right balance. The best lies were built of pieces of truth woven together in the right way. Also, it would do her no good to deny her status or origins; after all, if the paranoid rulers of Spyre needed money, then Venera Fanning herself could fetch a good price. Her husband would buy her back, or reduce this strange wheel to metal flinders. She had only to get word back to him.

“I was a princess of the kingdom of Hale,” she told Diamandis. “I married at a young age, he is Chaison Fanning, the admiral of the migratory nation of Slipstream. Our countries lie far from here—hundreds or thousands of miles, I don't know—far from the light of Candesce. We have our own suns, which light a few hundred miles of open air that we farm. Our civilizations are bounded by darkness, unlike you who bask in the permanent glory of the sun of suns...”

Some audiences would need more—not all people knew that the whole vast world of Virga was artificial, a balloon thousands of miles in diameter that hung alone in the cosmos. Lacking any gravity save that made by its own inner air, Virga was a weightless environment whose extent could easily seem infinite to those who lived within it. Heat and light were provided not by any outside star but by artificial suns, of which Candesce was the oldest and brightest.

Even the ignorant knew it was a manmade sun that warmed their faces and lit the crops they grew on millions of slowly tumbling clods of earth. But the world itself? One glance up from your own drudge-work might encompass vast, cloud-wreathed spheres of water, miles in extent, their surfaces scaled with mirror-bright ripples; thunderheads the size of nations, which made no rain because rain required gravity but rather condensed balls of water the size of houses, of cities, then threw them at you; and a glance down would reveal depths of air painted every delicate shade by the absorption and attenuation of the light of a dozen distant suns. How could such a place have an end? How could it have been made by people?

Venera had seen the outer skin of the world, watched icebergs calve off its cold black surface. She had visited the region of machine-life and incandescent heat that was Candesce. The world was an artifact, and fragile. In her coat pocket was something that could destroy it all, if you but knew what it was and how to use it.

There were things she could tell no one.

A thing she could tell was that her adopted home of Slipstream had been attacked by a neighboring power, Mavery. Missiles had flashed out of the night, blossoming like red flowers on the inner surface of the town-wheels of Rush. The city had been shocked into action, a punitive expedition mounted with her husband leading it.

She explained to Diamandis that Mavery's assault had been a feint. He listened in mesmerized silence as she described the brittle dystopia known as Falcon Formation, another neighbor of Slipstream. Falcon had conspired with Mavery to draw Slipstream's navy away from Rush. Once the capital was undefended, Falcon Formation was to move in and crush it.

The true story was that Venera's own spy network had alerted them to this plot. Chaison and Venera Fanning had taken seven ships from the fleet and left on a secret mission to find a weapon powerful enough to

stop Falcon. The story she told Diamandis now was that her flagship and its escort were pursued by Falcon raiders, chased right out of the lit air of civilization into the darkness of permanent winter that permeated most of Virga.

That had been a month ago.

After that, more things she could tell: a battle with pirates, being captured by same; escape, and more adventures near the skin of the world. She told Diamandis that they had sailed toward Candesce in search of help for their beleaguered country. She did not tell him that their goal was not any of the ancient principalities that ringed the sun. They were after a pirate's treasure, in particular the one seemingly insignificant piece of it that now rested in Venera's jacket. They had come seeking the key to Candesce itself.

In Venera's version, the Slipstream expedition had been met with hostility and chased into the furnace-like regions around Candesce. Her ships had been set upon and half of them destroyed by treacherous marauders of the nation of Gehellen.

In fact, she and her husband had orchestrated the theft of the pirate's treasure from under the noses of the Gehellens and then fled with it—he, back to Slipstream and her, into the sun of suns. There she had temporarily disabled one of Candesce's systems. While it was down, Chaison Fanning was to lead a surprise attack on the fleet of Falcon Formation.

Slipstream's little expeditionary force was no match for the might of Falcon—normally. For one night, the tables should have been turned.

Venera had no idea whether the whole gambit had been successful or not. She would not tell Diamandis—would not have told anyone—that she feared her husband was dead, the force destroyed, and that Falcon cruisers ringed the Pilot's palace at Rush.

"I was lost overboard when the Gehellens attacked," she said. "Like much of the crew. We were close to the sun of suns and as dawn came, we burned ... I had foot-fins, and at first I was able to fly away, but I lost one fin, then the other. I don't remember anything after that."

Diamandis nodded. "You drifted here. Luckily, the winds were in your favor. Had you circulated back into Candesce you'd have been incinerated."

That much, at least, was true. Venera suppressed a shudder and sank back in her chair. She was infinitely weary all of a sudden. "I need to sleep."

"By all means. Here, we'll get you to the bed." He touched her arm and she hissed in pain. Diamandis stepped back, concern eloquent on his face.

"There are treatments—creams, salves ... I'm going to go out and see what I can get for you. For now you have to rest. You've been through a lot."

Venera was not about to argue. She eased herself down on the bed, and despite being awash in burning soreness, fell asleep before hearing him leave.

* * * *

2

Near dawn, the lands of Greater Spyre were lit only by the glitter of city lights high overhead. In the faint glow, the ancient towers and forests seemed as insubstantial as clouds. Garth paused in the black absence beneath a willow tree. He had run the last hundred yards, and it was all he could do to keep his feet.

Silhouettes bobbed against the gray outline of a tower. Whoever they were, they were still following him. It was unprecedented: he had snuck through the hedgerows and fields of six hereditary barons, each holding no more than a square mile or so of territory but as fanatical about their boundaries as any empire. Garth knew how to get past their guards and dogs, he did it all the time. Apparently, these men did also.

It must have been somebody at the Goodwill Free Clinic. They'd waited until he was gone and then signaled someone. If that was so, Garth would no longer be able to count on the neutrality of the Kingdom of Hallimel—all six acres of it.

He moved on cautiously, padding quietly onto a closely cropped lawn dotted with ridiculously heroic statues. It was quiet as a tomb here; and certainly nobody had any business being out. He allowed himself a little righteous indignation at whoever it was that was following him. They were trespassers; they should be shot.

It would be most satisfying to raise the alarm and see what happened—a cascade of genetically crazed hounds from the doorway of yon manor house, perhaps, or spotlights and a sniper on the roof. The trouble was, Garth himself was a known and tolerated ghost in only a few of these places, and certainly not the one he was passing through now. So he remained discreet.

A high stone wall loomed over the garden of statues. Its bricks were crumbling and made an easy ladder for Garth in the low gravity. As he rolled over the top he heard voices behind him—someone exclaiming something. He must have been visible against the sky.

He landed in brambles. From here on, the country was wild. This was disputed territory, owned by now-extinct families, its provenance tied up in generations-old court cases that would probably drag on until the end of the world. Most of the disputed lands were due to the railway allotments created by the preservationists; they had needed clearances that ran completely around the world, and they had gotten them, for a price of blood. This section of land had been abandoned for other reasons, though what they were Garth didn't know. He didn't care, either, as long as the square tower he called home was left in peace.

His intention was to reach it so that he could warn the lady Fanning that they had company—but halfway across the open grassland he heard thuds behind him as half a dozen bodies hit the ground on his side of the wall. They were catching up, and quickly.

He flattened and rolled to one side. Grass swished as dark figures passed by, only feet away. Garth cursed under his breath, wishing there were some way to warn Venera Fanning that six heavily-armed men were about to pay her a visit.

* * * *

Venera heard them coming. The darkness wasn't total—Diamandis had left a candle burning—so she wasn't completely disoriented when she awoke to voices saying, “Circle around the other side,” and “this must be his bolt-hole.” A flush of adrenalin brought her completely awake as she heard scratching and scuffling just outside the hovel's door.

She rolled out of bed, heedless of the pain, and ran to the table where she snatched up a knife. “Down here!” someone shouted.

Where were her clothes? Her jacket lay draped across a chair, and on the table were the bracelet and earrings Diamandis had left her. She cast about for her other things, but Diamandis had apparently moved them. There they were, on another table—next to the opening door.

Venera's first inclination would normally be to draw herself up to her full five foot seven and stare these men down when they entered. They were servants, after all, even if they were armed. If she could speak and make eye contact, Venera was completely confident in her ability to control members of the lower classes.

At least, she used to be. Recent events—particularly her unwelcome dalliance with captain Dentius of the winter pirates—had made her more cautious. In addition, she was sore all over and had a pounding headache.

So Venera snatched up the candle, her jacket, and the jewelry and knelt under the table. The rope ring scraped her raw skin as she yanked on it; after a few tugs the mysterious hatch lifted. She felt down with her foot, making contact with a metal step. As men blundered into Diamandis's home, she billowed the damp sheet behind her, with luck to drape over the hatch and hide it.

The candle guttered and nearly went out. Venera cupped a hand around it and cautiously felt for the next step. She counted seven before finding herself standing in an icy draft on metal flooring. A constant low roar made it hard to hear what was going on above.

This small chamber was oval, wider at the ceiling than at the floor, and ringed with windows. All the panes were flush with the wall, but a couple vibrated at a high speed, making a low braying sound. They seemed to be sucking air out of the room; it was the walls that soaked cold into the place.

Diamandis evidently used the room for storage because there were boxes piled everywhere. Venera was able to make her way among them to the far end, where a metal chair was bolted to the floor. The windows here were impressive: floor-to-ceiling, made of some resilient material she had never seen before.

The candlelight seemed to show a dense weave of leaves on the other side of the glass.

She was going to freeze unless she found something to wear. Venera ransacked the boxes, alternately cursing and puffing out her cheeks in wonder at the strange horde of broken clocks, worn-out shoes, rusted hinges, frayed quills, moldy sewing kits, left socks, and buckles. One crate contained nothing but the dust jackets of books, all their pages having been systematically ripped out. It was a small library's worth of intriguing but useless titles. Another was full of decaying military apparel, including holsters and scabbards, all of it bearing the same coat of arms.

At least the activity was keeping her warm, she reasoned. The faint clomp of boots above continued, so she moved on to a new stack of boxes. This time she was rewarded when she found it packed with clothing. After dumping most of that onto the floor she discovered a pair of stiff leather pants, too small for Diamandis but sufficient for her. Getting into them wasn't easy, though—the material scoured her already-raw skin so that it hurt to move. The leather cut out the wind, however.

Once she had done up the flight jacket, Venera sat down in the metal chair to wait for whatever happened next. This was much harder; it wasn't in Venera's nature to remain still. Staying still made you think, and thinking led to feeling, which was seldom good.

She drew her knees up and wrapped her arms around her shins. It came to her that if they took away Diamandis and she couldn't get out of here, she would die and no one would ever know what had happened to her. Few would care, either, and some would rejoice. Venera knew she wasn't well liked.

More stomping up above. She shivered. How far away was her home in Slipstream? Three thousand miles? Four? An ocean of air separated her from her husband, and in that ocean gyred the nations of enemies, rising, lowering, drifting with the unpredictable airs of Virga. Awaiting her out there were the freezing abysses of winter, full of feathered sharks and pirates. Before the sun of suns had roasted her into unconsciousness, she had been determined and sure of her own ability to cross those daunting distances alone. She had leaped from the cargo nets of Hayden Griffin's jet and soared for a time like a solitary eagle in the skies of Virga. But the sun had caught up to her and now she was here, trapped and in pain hardly any distance from where she'd started.

She climbed off the chair, fighting a wave of nausea. Better to surrender herself to whoever waited above than die here alone, she thought—and she almost ran up the steps and surrendered. It was a pulse

of pain through her jaw that stopped her. Venera drew her fingertips across the scar that adorned her chin, and then she backed away from the steps.

Her heel caught the edge of a box she'd dropped, and she stumbled back against the icy windows. Cursing, she straightened up, but as she did she noticed a gleam of light welling up through the glass. She put her cheek to it—which dampened the pain a bit—and squinted.

The windows were covered with a long-leafed form of ivy. The stuff was vibrating with uncanny speed—so quickly that the leaves' edges were blurred. Diamandis had said that Spyre rotated very fast; was she looking into the air outside?

Of course. This oval chamber stuck out of the bottom of the world. It was an aerodynamic blister on the outside of the rotating cylinder, and that chair might have once fronted the controls of a heavy machine gun or artillery piece mounted outside. It still might. Frowning, Venera clambered over the mounds of junk back to the metal seat and examined it.

There was indeed a set of handles and levers below the chair, and more between the windows. She didn't touch them but peered out through the glass there, as light continued to well through the close-set leaves.

Candesce was waking up. The sun of suns lit a zone hundreds of miles in diameter here at the center of Virga. Past the trembling leaves, Venera could see a carousel of mauve and peach-painted cloud tumbling past with disorienting speed; but she could also see more.

The oval blister was mounted into a ceiling of riveted metal, as she'd expected. That ceiling was the hull of Spyre. Covering this surface in long runnels and triangles was the strange ivy. Its leaves were like knives, sharp and long, and they all aligned in the flow of the wind. Venera had heard of something called "speed ivy"; maybe that's what this was.

The ivy seemed to prefer growing on things that projected into the airstream. Sheets of metal skin were missing here and there—in fact, there were outright holes everywhere—and the ivy clustered on the leading and trailing edges of these, smoothing the airflow in those places. Maybe that was what it was for.

This view of Spyre was not reassuring. The place was showing its age—dangling sheets of titanium whirred in the wind and huge I-beams thrust down into the dawn-tinted air, whole sagging acres just waiting to peel off the bottom of the world. It was amazing that the place kept itself together.

Next to the blister, a rusted machine gun was mounted on the surface. It faced stoically into the wind, and didn't move when Venera tried the controls in front of the chair.

Well. All this was interesting, but not too interesting. She headed back to the stairs, but the light coming through the ranked leaves was considerable now, and she could see more of the blister's interior. So the little passage that opened out behind the stairs was now obvious.

Venera gnawed her lip and rolled her eyes to look at the closed hatch overhead. One hand was on her hip; even here, with no audience, she posed as she thought.

She needed shoes, but she'd recovered the important items, the key to Candesce and her bullet. Venera was quite aware that she was obsessed with that bullet, and who wouldn't be, she usually reasoned, if one like it had flown a thousand miles or more across Virga to randomly spike through a window and into their jaw? This particular projectile had been fired in some distant war or hunting party and missed its target; since there was no gravity nor solid ground to stop it, the thing had kept going and going until it met her. From that encounter Venera had gained a scar, regular crippling headaches, and something to blame for her own meanness. She'd kept the bullet and over time had become consumed with the need to know where it had come from. It was not, she would admit, a healthy need.

She patted the jacket, feeling the heavy shape inside it; then she slipped past the steps and into the narrow passage, and left Diamandis and his invaders to their own little drama.

* * * *

It was more of a crawlway than a corridor. Venera walked bent over, gasping as the old leather chafed her hips and knees. Why didn't these people dress sensibly? Lit only by intermittent portholes, the passage wormed its way a hundred yards or so before ending in a round metal door. It was all so obviously abandoned—stinking of rust and

inorganic decay—that Venera didn't bother knocking on the door, but turned the little wheel in the middle of it and pushed.

She stepped down into a mirror image of the blister she had just left. She half expected to find another maze of boxes on the other side of the steps, with another junk-framed hovel and another Garth Diamandis waiting for her above. But no, the blister was empty save for a half foot of stagnant water and a truly revolting gallery of fungus and cobwebs. The windows were hazed over but provided enough light for a tiny forest that was trying to conquer the metal chair at the far end. The stairs were jammed with soil and roots.

The prospect of dipping her bare feet into that horrid water nearly made her turn back. What stopped her was a tiny chink of light visible in the midst of the soil plug. After wading cautiously and with revulsion through the stinking stuff, she reached up and pulled at the roots. Gradually, in little showers of dirt, worms, and fibrous tubers, she widened a hole big enough for her to shimmy through. A minute later she dragged herself up out and into the middle of a grassy field.

Too bad about Diamandis, but with luck he was still off on his errand and the interlopers wouldn't be there when he got back. Anyway, he'd been more than compensated for taking care of her; that had been a pilot's ransom of gems and faience he'd taken from her jacket. She half hoped those loud burglars found the stuff—it would serve him right.

Venera's own destination was clear. Spyre being a cylinder, it had ends, and one of those was only half a mile away. There the artificial land curved up hundreds of feet in a gesture that would close off the end if continued. The curve ended in a broad gallery above and beyond which the winds of Virga shuddered. She had only to make it up that slope and hop off the edge and Venera would be in free flight again. She would take her chances with the piranhawks and snipers. She doubted any of them could hit one small woman leaving Spyre at four hundred miles per hour.

In this case, wearing leather would serve her well.

Between Venera and the edge of the world lay a chessboard of estates. Each had its tottering stone walls, high hedges, towers, and moats to defend its two or three acres from the ravages of greedy neighbors. Constrained by space and what Venera sensed was deep paranoia, the estates had evolved into similar designs—the larger ones walled, with groves surrounding open fields and a jumble of towers, annexes, and greenhouses at the center; small ones often just a single square building

that took up the entire demesne. These edifices were utterly windowless on the outside, but higher up the curve of the world she could see that most contained courtyards crammed with trees, fountains, and statuary.

The walls of some estates were separated by no more than twenty feet of no-man's land. She ran through these weed-choked alleys, dodging young trees, past iron-faced pillbox gates that faced one another across the minor space like boxy suits of armor. The footing was treacherous, and she suspected traps.

Venera was used to higher gravity than Spyre's. Tired and sore though she was, it was easy for her to leap ten feet to the top of a stone wall and run its length before dropping to the grass beyond. Her feet barely felt brick, root, and stone as she wove in and out of the trees, sprinted around open ponds under windows that were just beginning to gleam yellow in the light of Candescence. As she ran she marveled that such distances could exist; she had never run so far in a straight line and could hardly believe it possible.

The birds were the only ones making sound, but as she ran Venera began to notice a deep rushing roar that came from ahead of her. It was the sound of the edge of the world, and with it there came the beginnings of a breeze.

She heard surprised shouts as she crossed one fanatically perfect lawn, bare feet kissing wet grass. Glancing to the side, Venera caught a glimpse of a small party of men and women sitting on curlicued iron chairs in the morning light. They were sipping tea or something similar.

They stood up—stiff ornamented garments ratcheting into their standing configurations like portcullises slamming down—and the three men howled “intruders!” as if Venera were an entire army of pirates. After a moment, sirens sounded inside the looming stone pile behind them.

“Oh, come *on!*” She was panting with exhaustion now, her head swimming. But there were only two more estates to pass, and then she would be on the slope to the world's edge. With a burst of speed she raced by more lighting windows and opening doors, noting abstractly that the considerable mob of soldiers who had spilled out of the first place's doors had stopped at the edge of their property as if they'd slammed into an invisible fence.

So she only had to outrace the alarm in each particular property. It could be a game, and Venera actually would have enjoyed the chase if she hadn't been on the verge of fainting from exhaustion and residual heatstroke. If only she had the breath to taunt the idiots on the way by!

Gunshots cut the air as she passed the last estate. This was one of the big single-building affairs, all gray asteroidal stone drizzled with veins of bright metal. Its only external windows were murder slits that started fifteen feet up, and she saw no doors. Empty upward-curving fields beckoned on the other side of the edifice; she staggered onto what Diamandis had called 'disputed territory' and paused to catch her breath. "Ha! Safe!"

The wind was now a harsh constant moan, flickering past her in gusts. It spun in little permanent tornadoes over gaps and holes in Spyre's skin. There were more and more such holes as the slope rose to the edge. The edge itself was ragged, a crenellation of collapsed galleries, up-thrusting spars and flapping plates that added to the din.

She heard something else, too. A regular creaking sound seemed to be coming from overhead. Venera looked up.

Six wooden platforms had been lowered over the top of the stone cube and were being winched down. Each was crowded with men in tall steel helmets and outlandish spiked armor. They clutched pikes and rifles with barrels longer than they were tall. Several were pointing at her excitedly.

Venera swore and took off up the rubble-strewn slope. The wind was at her back, and it became stronger the closer she got to the edge. Several gusts lifted her off her feet. Venera noticed that the metal skin of Spyre was completely exposed in the final yards leading up to the edge. Only fair-sized rocks inhabited the area behind it. As she watched, a stone the size of her foot rolled up the metal and spun off into the air. A few more yards and the wind would take her, too.

Her foot sank into the slope and Venera fell in ridiculous slow-motion. As she pried herself upright again she saw that the metal plate bent by her foot was vibrating madly in the square hole it had made. Then with a loud pop it disappeared and suddenly a hurricane was howling into the bright aperture it had left.

Venera was sucked down and slid forward until she was right over the hole. She reached out and braced her hands on either side while the

air screamed past her. It was trying to escape Spyre with even more passion than hers. For a few seconds she could only stare down and see what faced her if she made it to the edge and jumped.

Many long flagpole-like beams thrust out below the edge of the world. They trailed wire nets into the furious wind; anyone caught on those nets would suffocate before they could be pulled up. Far beneath the nets, where scudding clouds spun past, Venera glimpsed thousands of black specks and grayish veins in the air. Mines? More razor wire? Diamandis had not been lying, after all.

"Damn! Shit!" She tried to scream more curses—every one she could think of—but the air was being pulled out of her lungs. She was about to faint into the hole and die.

Strong hands took her by the arms and legs and hauled her back. Venera was hoisted onto someone's back and unceremoniously toted back down the slope. With every jolting step escape, and home, and Chaison receded past the frame of her grasping fingers.

* * * *

3

Although he was her favorite uncle, Venera never saw much of Prince Albard. He was a mysterious figure on the periphery of the court, sweeping into Hale in his yacht to regale her with tales of strange cities and the outlandish women he'd met there (always sighing when he talked of them). His face was split down the center by a saber scar, putting his lips into a permanent twist that made it look like he was smirking. Unlike most of the people who encountered him, Venera knew that he *was* smirking—laughing inside at all the pointless desperation and petty recrimination of life. In that regard he was the polar opposite of her father, a man with a mind focused by a single lens of suspicion; maybe that was why she clung to Albard's knees when he did appear, and treasured the odd-shaped dolls and toys he brought.

They recognized each other, this vagabond prince in his motley and the pouting princess in clothes she systematically tattered as soon as she was in them. So maybe it was natural that when the time came, it was in her bedroom that Albard barricaded himself.

He only noticed her after he had dragged her wardrobe across the door and piled some chairs and tables around it. "Damn, girl, what are you doing here?"

Venera had cocked her head and squinted at him. "This is my room."

"I know it's your room, dammit. Shouldn't you be at lessons?"

"I bit the tutor." Banished and bored, she had (not out of anger but a more scientific impulse) been beheading some of her dolls when Albard swept in. Venera had assumed that he was there to talk to her and had politely waited, limp headless body in one hand, while he proceeded to move all the furniture. So he wasn't there to see her? What, then, was this all about?

"Oh, never mind," he said irritably, "just stay out of sight. This could get ugly."

Now she could hear shouting outside, sounds of people running. "What did *you* do?" she asked.

He was leaning back against the pile of furniture as though trying to propel it out the room. "I bit someone, too," he said. "Or, rather, I was about to, and they found out."

Venera came and sat down on the fuchsia carpet near him. "My father, right?"

His eyebrows rose comically. "How did you guess?"

Venera thought about this for a while. Then she said, "Does that mean that everybody who makes Father mad has to come to this room?"

Albard laughed. "Niece, if that were true, the whole damn kingdom would be in here with us."

"Oh." She was slightly reassured.

"Give it up, Albard!" someone shouted from outside. It sounded like her father. There was some sort of mumbling discussion, then: "Is, uh ... is Venera in there with you?"

"No!" The prince put a finger to his lips and knelt next to her. "The one thing I absolutely will not do," he said gently, "is use you as a

bargaining chip. If you want to leave, I will tear down this barricade and let you go."

"What will they do to you?"

"Put me in chains, take me away ... then it all depends on your father's mood. There's a black cloud behind his eyes lately, have you seen it?" She nodded vigorously. "It's getting bigger and bigger, that cloud, and I think it's starting to crowd out everything else. That worries me."

"I know what you mean."

"I daresay you do." There followed a long interval during which Albard negotiated with the people on the other side of the furniture. Venera retreated to the window, but she was far from bored now. At last Albard blew out his cheeks and turned to her.

"Things are not going well," he said. "Do you have a pen and some writing material?" She pointed to the desk that perched on top of the barricade. "Ah. Much obliged."

He clambered up and retrieved a pen and some paper. Then, frowning, he dropped the paper. He went to his knees and began hunting around for something, while Venera watched closely. He came up with one of her dolls, a favorite that had a porcelain head and cloth body.

"Do you mind if I borrow this for a minute?" he asked her. She shrugged.

Albard rubbed the doll's face against the stone floor for a while, while crashing sounds started from the hallway. The barricade shook. Holding the doll up critically, the prince grunted in satisfaction. Then he hunched over and began delicately pressing the pen against its face.

He was standing in the center of the room with his hands behind his back when the barricade finally fell. A dozen soldiers came in, and they marched him out; he only had time to look back and wink at Venera before he was gone.

After they'd taken him away, some members of the secret police ransacked her room. (That it looked substantially the same when they left as before Albard had arrived was a testament to her own habits.) They seized everything that could write or be written on, even prying the plaster off the wall where she'd scribbled on it. Venera herself was frisked

several times, and then they swirled out, all clinking metal and bandoliers, leaving her sitting in the exact spot where he had been standing.

Neither she, nor anyone she would later meet, ever saw Albard again.

Eventually, she moved over to the window and picked up a particular doll. Its tunic was ripped where the secret policemen had cut it open looking for hidden notes. Venera held it up to the window and frowned.

So that was what he'd been doing. Albard had rubbed its eyebrows off against the stone. Then, in meticulous tiny lines and curls, he had repainted them. From a distance of more than a few inches they seemed normal. Up close, though, she could see what they were made of:

Letters.

* * * *

The nation of Liris curled around its interior courtyard as though doubled up in pain. Every window stared down at that courtyard. Every balcony overhung it. The bottom of this well would be in permanent shadow if not for the giant mirrors mounted on the roof, which were aimed at Candescence.

Venera could plainly see that the courtyard was the focus of everything—but she couldn't see what was down there. For the first two days of her stay she was shuttled from small room to small room, all of them lined up in a short hallway painted institution green. After a brief interview in each chamber she was taken back to a drab waiting room, where she sat and ate and slept fitfully on the benches. She was startled awake every morning by a single gunshot sounding somewhere nearby. Morning executions?

It seemed unlikely; she was the sole inhabitant of this little prison. Prison it clearly was. She had to fill out forms just to use the one washroom, a cold cube with wooden stalls defaced by centuries of carved graffiti. Its high, grated windows gave her a view of the upper stories of the inner courtyard. They hinted at freedom.

"B-b-back to waking?" Venera sat up warily on the third morning and tried to smile at her jailor.

He was tall, athletically muscled, and possessed the sort of chiseled good looks one saw in actors, career diplomats, or con artists. As dapper as could be expected for a man dressed in iron and creaking leather, he might have melted any lady's heart—provided she never looked in his eyes or heard him speak. Either of those maneuvers would have revealed the awful truth about Moss: his mind was damaged somehow. He seemed more marionette than man and, sadly, appeared to be painfully aware of his deficit.

Just as he had yesterday, Moss carried a stack of forms in one hand, bearing it as though it were a silver platter. Venera sighed when she saw this. “How long is it going to take to process me into your prison?” she asked as he clattered to a stop in front of her.

“P-p-prison?” Moss gaped at her. Carefully, as though they were gold, he placed the papers on the peeling bench. His metal clothing gnashed quietly as he straightened up. “You're n-not in p-p-prison, my lady.”

“Then what is this place?” She gestured around at the sound-deadening plaster walls, the smoke-stained light sconces and battered benches. “Why am I here? When do I get my things back?” They'd gone through her jacket and taken its contents—jewelry, key, and bullet. She wasn't sure which loss worried her most.

Moss's face never changed expression as he spoke, but his eyes radiated some sort of desperate plea. They always did, even if he was staring at the wall. Those eyes seemed eloquent, but Venera was beginning to think that nothing about Moss's looks or demeanor meant anything about his inner state. Now he said, in his intensely flat way, “This is the im-immigration department of the g-g-government of Liris. You were brought here to t-t-take your citizenship-ip exams.”

“Citizenship?” But now it all made sense—the forms, the sense of being processed, and the succession of minor officials who'd taken up hours of her time over the past days. They had grilled her mercilessly, but not about how or why she had come here, or about what her plans or allegiances might be. They didn't even want to know about her peeling sunburns. No, they'd wanted to know the medical histories of her extended family, whether there was madness in her line (a question that had made her laugh), and what was the incidence of criminality among her relatives.

"Well, my father stole a country once," she had answered. She had of course asked them to let her go, in perhaps a dozen different ways. Her assumption was that she would be ransomed or otherwise used as a bargaining chip. With this in mind, she had sat anxiously for hours, wondering about her value to this or that state or person. It had never occurred to Venera that she might be adopted by Liris as one of its own.

Now as she realized what was going on, Venera had one of the strangest moments of her life. She felt, for just a second, relief at the prospect of spending the rest of her life hidden away here, like a jewel in a safe. She shook herself, and the moment passed. Disturbed, she stood and turned away from Moss.

"B-b-but the news is good," said Moss, who looked like he was begging for death as he said it. "D-don't fret. You have p-p-passed all the t-t-tests so far. J-just one set of forms to g-go."

Venera gnawed at her knuckle, each bite sending little pulses of pain up her jaw. "What if I don't want to be a citizen of Liris?"

Moss proceeded to laugh, and Venera swore to herself she would do anything to avoid seeing *that* again. "F-Fill these out," he said. "A-and you're done."

It wasn't eagerness to become a citizen of a nation the size of a garden that made her sign the papers. Venera just wanted to get her things back—and get out of the waiting room. What she'd felt a moment ago was just a craving for anonymity, she told herself. Citizenship of any nation meant nothing to her, except as a sign of lowly status. Her father was hardly a citizen of Hale, after all; he *was* Hale, and other people were citizens of him. Venera had grown up believing she, too, was above such categories.

"Come," was all Moss said when she was finished. He led her out into the hallway, and at its end, he unlocked the great metal door with its wire-mesh window. Before pushing the portal open, he picked up an open-topped box and held it out to her.

Inside were the necklace and earrings he'd confiscated from her jacket when she arrived. Rolling next to them was her bullet.

The key to Candescence was not there.

Venera frowned but decided not to press the matter just now. Moss gestured with one hand and she edged past him into her new country.

Shafts of dusty sunlight silhouetted tall stone pillars. Their arched capitals were muted in shadow, but the polished floors gleamed like mirrors. Save for a wall where the edge of the courtyard should be, the whole bottom floor of the great cubic building seemed open. Filling the space were dozens and dozens of cubicles, desks, worktables, and stalls.

Indeed, it seemed as if all the roles of a midsized town were duplicated here—tailor over here, doctor there, carpenters on this side, bricklayers on that—but all gathered in one room. Bolts of cloth were stacked with bags of cement. Drying racks and looms had been folded up under the ceiling to make way for chopping blocks and flour-covered counters. And working in determined silence throughout this shadow-cut space was a small army of silent, focused people.

Each was isolated at some chair or desk, and Venera had the startled impression that these work stations had grown up and around some of the people, like shells secreted around water creatures. It must have taken years for that man there to build the small ziggurat of green bottles that reared above his desk; nearby a woman had buried herself in a miniature jungle of ferns. Mirrors on stands and hanging from strings cunningly directed every stray beam of light within ten feet at her green fronds. Each position had its eruption of individuality or downright eccentricity, but their limits were strictly kept; nobody's keepsakes and oddities spilled beyond an invisible line about five feet in radius.

Moss led her to an outer wall, where he opened a dim chamber that reminded her of Diamandis's warren. Here were crates and boxes full of what looked like armor—except she knew it for what it was. “You are required to wear four hundred and fifty p-p-pounds of mass during the day,” said Moss. “That will offset our r-reduced g-gravity and maintain the health of your bones.” He stood back, arms crossed, while Venera rooted through the mess looking for something suitable.

It seemed that Spyre's tailors were an unimaginative lot. The room contained an abundance of blouses, dresses and skirts, pants and jackets, but all were done in intricately tooled and hinged metal. Only undergarments—those directly in contact with the skin—were made of suppler materials, mostly leather, though to her relief she did find some cloth. Venera tried on a vest made of verdigrised copper scales, added a skirt made of overlapping iron plates and weighed herself. Barely one hundred pounds. She went back and found greaves and wrist bracers, a

platinum torque, and a steel jacket with tails. Better, but still too light. Moss waited patiently while she layered herself like a battleship. Finally when she topped the scales at one hundred pounds weight—five hundred pounds mass—he grunted in satisfaction. “B-but you need a h-h-hat,” he said.

“What?” She glared at him. He had something like a belaying pin tied to his head; it wobbled when he moved. “Isn't all this humiliating enough?”

“We m-must put p-p-pressure on the s-spine. For l-long-term health.”

“Oh, all right.” She hunted through a cache of ridiculous alternatives, ranging from flowerpots with chinstraps to a glass fish bowl, currently empty but encrusted with rime. Finally she settled on the least offensive piece, a chrome helmet with earflaps and crow's wings mounted behind the temples.

With all of this on her, Venera's feet made a satisfactory smack when they hit the ground. She could feel the weight and it was indeed nearly normal, but spread all over her surface instead of internally. And she quickly discovered that it took a good hard push to start walking and that turning and stopping were not operations to be taken lightly. She had a quarter-ton of inertia now. After walking into several walls and doorjambs, she started to get the hang of it.

“N-now,” said Moss in evident satisfaction, “you are f-fit to see the B-B-Botanist.”

“The what?” He threaded his way among the pillars without further comment. Venera nodded and smiled at the men and women who were putting down their work to openly stare as she passed. She tried to unobtrusively discern what they were working on, but the light here was too uneven. Shadow and glare thwarted her.

Sunlight reflecting off the polished floor washed out whatever was ahead. Venera glanced back one more time before entering the lit area. Blackness and curving arches framed a dozen white ovals—faces—all turned toward her. On those faces she read every emotion: amazement, curiosity, anger, fear. None avoided her gaze. They goggled at her as though they'd never seen a stranger before.

Maybe they hadn't. Venera's scalp prickled, but Moss was waving her ahead. Blinking, she stepped from the dark gallery into the courtyard of Liris.

For a moment it seemed as if she'd entered one of the paintings on the ceiling of her father's chapel. This one came complete with scented pink clouds. She reached out a hand to touch one of these and heard the sharp click of a weapon being cocked. Venera froze.

"It would be very unwise of you to complete that gesture," drawled a voice from somewhere ahead. Slowly, Venera retracted her hand. As her eyes adjusted to the brightness, she saw the barrels of three antique-looking rifles aimed her way. Grim men in iron held them.

The soldiers made a shocking contrast to their setting. The entire courtyard was full of trees, all of one type, all in full flower. The scent and color of the millions of blossoms was overwhelming. It took Venera a moment to notice that the branches of many of the trees were hung with jewels, and gold rings encircled some of the trunks. It took her another moment to realize that a throne sat in the sole bare patch at the center of the courtyard. The woman lounging there was watching her with obvious amusement.

Her gown was of gold, silver, and platinum; on her head was a crown touched with gems of all shades that flashed in the concentrated light of Candescence. She appeared to be in early middle age, but was still beautiful; a cascade of hair dyed the same color as the blossoms wound down her shoulders.

"You seem reluctant to step into sunlight," she said with evident amusement. "I can see why." She tapped her own cheeks, eyes twinkling.

Venera eyed the soldiers, thought about it, and walked over. Since this was evidently a throne room of sorts, she bowed deeply. "Your ... majesty?"

"Oh. Oh no." The woman chuckled. "I am no queen." She waved a hand dismissively. "We are a meritocracy in Liris. You'll learn. My name is Margit, and I am Liris's resident botanist."

"Botanist..." Venera straightened and looked around at the trees. "This is your crop."

"Please." The lady Margit frowned. "We don't refer to the treasure of Liris in such prosaic terms. These beings *are* Liris. They sustain us, they give us meaning. They are our soul."

"Pardon, m'lady," said Venera with another bow. "But ... what exactly *are* they?"

"Of course." Margit's eyes grew wide. "You would never have seen one before. You are so lucky to gaze upon them for the first time when they are in flower. These, Citizen Fanning, are *cherry* trees."

Why was that word so familiar? There'd been a ball once, and her beloved uncle had approached her with something in his hand ... a treat.

"What are cherries?" she asked as guilelessly as she could.

"An indulgence of the powerful," said Margit with a smile. "A delicacy so rare that it evidently never made it to your father's court."

"About that," said Venera. "The court, I mean. My family is fantastically rich. Why make me a ... citizen of this place, when you could just ransom me back? You could get a boatload of treasure for me."

Margit scoffed. "If you were the princess of a true nation then perhaps we would consider it. But you're not even from the principalities! By your own admission during the interviews, you come from the windswept wastes of Outer Virga. There's nothing there, and I find it hard to believe your people could own anything that would be of interest to us."

Venera narrowed her eyes. "Not even a fleet of battle cruisers capable of reducing this place to kindling from twenty miles away?"

Not only Margit laughed at this; the soldiers did as well. "Nobody threatens Spyre, young lady. We're impregnable." Margit said this so smugly that Venera swore she would find a way to throw her words back at her.

Margit snapped her fingers, and Moss stepped forward. "Acquaint her with her new duties," said the botanist.

Moss stared at her, slack jawed. "W-what are those?"

"She knows the languages and cultures of other places. She'll be an interpreter for the trade delegation. Go introduce her." Margit turned away, lifting her chin with her eyes closed so that a beam of sunlight flooded her face.

* * * *

On her seventeenth birthday, Venera snuck out of the palace for the first time, acquired the means to blackmail her father, killed her first person, and met the man she was destined to marry. She would later tell people that "it all just sort of happened."

The capital of Hale was a collection of six town-wheels—spinning rings, each two thousand feet in diameter—surrounded by an ever-shifting cloud of weightless buildings and smaller rings. The main sound in the city was the rumbling of jet engines, as various rings and large municipal structures struggled to keep their spin and to avoid colliding. The scent of kerosene hung in the air; underlying it were other industrial and biological odors, just as under the rumbling of the engines you could hear shouts, horns, and the laughter of dolphins.

Venera had grown up watching the city life from afar. When she traveled between the town-wheels it was usually in a closed taxi. Sometimes one or another of the nobility hosted weightless balls; then she and the other ingenues donned fabulous wings that were powered by stirrups, and flew intricate dances in the warm evening air. But that flight always took place within careful limits. Nobody strayed.

She was of marriageable age now—and had recently come to realize that in Hale, marriageable also meant murderable. Venera had three sisters and had once had three brothers. Now she had two of those, and the once-close girls of the family were starting to actively plot against one another. With the boys, it was all about succession; with the girls, marriage.

Someone had used a marvelous word at a dinner party just a few days before: *leverage*. Leverage was what she needed, Venera had decided. And so her thoughts had turned to old family tragedies, and the mysteries that had consumed her as a girl.

Today she was dressed in the brown blouse and pantaloons of a servant-girl, and the wings on her back were not butterfly orange or feathered pink, but beige canvas. Her hair was tied down with a drab cloth, and she soared the air of the city barefoot. In her waist bag she

carried some money, a pistol, and a porcelain-headed doll. She knew where she was going.

The bad neighborhoods started remarkably close to the palace. This fact might have had something to do with the royal habit of simply dumping waste off the palace-wheel without regard to trajectory or velocity. The upper classes couldn't be entirely blamed for the stench that wafted at Venera as she flapped toward her destination, however. She wasn't disgusted; on the contrary, the smell and the sound of arguing, shouting people made her heart pound with excitement. Since she was little she'd sat for hours with her eye glued to a telescope, watching these citizens and this neighborhood roll by as the palace turned past it. She knew the place—she had simply never been here.

What Venera approached looked like nothing so much as an explosion frozen in time. Even the smoke (of which there was plenty) was motionless or rather, it moved only as quickly as the air that oozed slowly between the hundreds of cubes, balls, and disheveled shapes that counted as buildings here. Anything not tied down hung in the air and drifted gradually, and that meant trash, animal hair, balls of dirty water, splinters, and scraps of cloth all contributed to the cloud. When the doldrums of summer broke and a stiff wind finally did snake through the place, half the mass of the neighborhood was going to simply blow away, like chaff. For now it roiled around Venera as she ducked and dove toward the gray blockhouse that was her destination.

Her business in the building was brief, but every detail of the transaction seemed etched in extraordinary detail—for here were people who didn't know who she was. It was marvelous to be treated as servants and ordinary folk treated one another, for a change—marvelous and eye opening. Nobody opened the door to the place for her; she had to do it herself. Nobody announced her presence, she had to clear her throat and ask the man behind the counter to help her. And she had to *pay*, with her own money!

"The contents of locker six sixty-four," she said, holding out the sheet of paper she'd written the information on. The paper was for his benefit, not hers, for she'd memorized the brief string of letters and numbers years ago. Deciphering the letters Uncle Albard had penned on her doll's forehead had been one of her primary motivations to learn to read.

The keeper of the storage lockers merely grunted and said, “Get ‘em yourself. If you've got the combination, you get in, that's the rule.” He pointed to a doorway at the end of the counter.

She made to go that way, and he said, “Back pay's owing on that one. Six hundred.” He grinned like a shark. “We were about to clear it out.”

Venera opened her bag, letting him see the pistol as she rummaged for the cash. He took it without comment and waved her through the door.

The only thing in the dingy locker was a water-stained file folder. As she stood in the half light, flipping through it, Venera decided it was all she needed. The documents were from the College of Succession at the University of Candescence, two thousand miles away. They included DNA analyses that proved her father was not of the royal line.

She barely saw the tumbled buildings as she left the blockhouse; maybe that's why she got turned around. But suddenly Venera snapped to attention and realized she was in a narrow chute formed by five clapboard structures, on her way down, not up toward the palace. Frowning, she grabbed a handy rope to steady herself and turned to go back the way she'd come.

“Don't.” The voice was quiet, and came from above and to the left. Venera flipped over to orient herself to the speaker. In the gray reflected light from shingle and tar paper, she saw a youth—perhaps no older than herself—with tangled red hair and the long bones of someone raised in too little gravity. He smiled toothily at her and said, “Bad men coming behind you. Keep going and take your first hard right, and you'll be safe.”

She hesitated, and he scowled. “Not shittin’ ya. Get going if you know what's good for you.”

Venera flipped again, planted her feet on the rope, and kicked off down the chute. As she reached the corner the boy had indicated, she heard voices coming from the far end of the chute—opposite the way he'd said the bad men were coming from.

This side way led quickly to well-traveled airspace and had no niches or doors out of which someone could spring. Feeling momentarily safe, Venera peeked around the corner of the chute. Three men were flying slowly up from the left.

"I really think you've gotten us lost this time," said the one in the lead. He was in his late twenties and obviously noble or rich from his dress and demeanor. One of his companions was similarly dressed, but the third man looked like a commoner. She couldn't see much more in the dim light. "The palace is definitely not this way," continued the leader. "My appointment is at two o'clock, I can't afford to be late."

Two o'clock? She remembered one of the courtiers telling her that an admiral from some neighboring country would be calling on her father in the early afternoon. Was this the man?

Suddenly one of the other men shouted, "Hey!" He had barely writhed out of the way of a sword that had suddenly appeared in the third one's hand. "Chaison, it's a trap!"

Four men shot down the chute from the right. They were rough-looking, the sort of thug Venera had watched roaming the neighborhood through her spyglass and sometimes fantasized about. All had drawn swords and none spoke as they set upon their two victims.

The one named Chaison whirled his cloak into the air between himself and the attackers and drew his sword as his friend parried a thrust from their erstwhile guide. After the initial warning from Chaison's friend, nobody spoke.

In a free-fall swordfight, the blade was as much propulsion as weapon. Each of the men found purchase in wall or rope or opponent with hand, foot, shoulder, or blade as they could. Each impact sent them in a new direction, and they tumbled and spun as they slashed at one another. Venera had watched men practice with swords and had even witnessed duels, but this was totally different. There was nothing mannered about it; the fight was swift and brutal. The men's movements were beautiful, viscerally thrilling and almost too fast to take in.

One of the attackers was hanging back. As his face intersected a shaft of light, she realized it was the boy who had warned her. He held his sword up, wavering, in front of his face and ducked away from the embattled older men.

It took Venera a few seconds to realize that two of the men bouncing from wall to wall were now dead. There were black beads dotting the air—blood—and more was trailing the bodies, which continued to move, but only languidly, from momentum. One was the

guide who had brought the two noblemen here; another was one of the attackers.

"Stand down!" Chaison's voice startled Venera so much that she nearly lost her grip on the wall. The remaining three attackers paused, holding onto ropes and bent shingles, and stared at their dead compatriots. The boy looked sick. Then one of his companions roared in anger and jumped.

He spun away, slashed in the face by Chaison's companion. The other man had his sword knocked out of his hand by Chaison, who finished the uppercut motion with a blow to his jaw.

The boy was hanging in midair with his sword held out in front of him. Chaison glimpsed him out of the corner of his eye, spun, and—stopped.

The blade trembled an inch from the boy's nose. He went white as a sheet.

"I'm not going to hurt you," said Chaison. His voice was soft, soothing—in total contrast to the bellow he had given moments ago. "Who sent you here?"

The boy gulped and, seeing that he still held his sword, he let go of it spasmodically. As it drifted away, he said, "B-big man from palace. Red feather in his hat. Didn't give a name."

Chaison made a sour face. "All right. Now off with you. Find another line of work—oh, and some better friends." He reached for his companion's wrist and they locked arms to coordinate their flight. Together they turned to leave.

The man who'd been struck in the chin suddenly snapped his head up and raised his arm. A snub-nosed pistol gleamed in his grimy fist. The boy gasped as he aimed it point-blank at the back of Chaison's head.

Bang! A spray of blood filled the air and the boy shrieked.

Venera peered through the blue cloud of gunsmoke. Chaison's would-be assassin was twitching in the air, and both noblemen were staring past him, at her.

She returned the pistol to her carrying bag. “I-I saw you were in trouble,” she said, surprised at how calm she sounded. “There was no time to warn you.”

Chaison glided over. He looked impressed. “Thank you, madam,” he said, graciously ducking his head. “I owe you my life.”

In her fantasies, Venera always had a perfect comeback line at moments like this. What she actually said was, “Oh, I don't know about that.”

He laughed.

Then he extended his hand. “Come. We'll need to explain ourselves to the local police.”

Venera flushed and backed away. She couldn't be caught out here—quite apart from the scandal, her father would ask too many questions. The papers she had just recovered might come to his attention, and then she was as good as dead.

“I can't,” she said and turning, kicked off from the corner as hard as she could.

She heard him shouting for her to stop, but Venera kept on and didn't look back until she had passed through three crowded markets and slipped down five narrow alleys between soon-to-collide buildings. Cautiously, she worked her way back to the palace and changed in the guardroom while the man she'd bribed to let her out and in again waited nervously outside.

The next time she saw Chaison Fanning it would be two nights later, at a formal ball. He told her much later that his astonishment when he recognized her completely drove out all thoughts of the new treaty with Hale that he was celebrating. Certainly the expression on his face was priceless.

Venera had her own reason to smile, as she had learned who had tried to have this handsome young admiral killed. And as she danced with Chaison Fanning, she mused about what exact words she would use when she confronted her father. She already knew what it was she would be asking him for in exchange for her silence regarding his nonroyal origins.

For the first time in her young life, Venera Fanning began to conceive of an existence for herself away from the intrigue and cruelty of the Court of Hale.

* * * *

4

A thick cable rose from the roof of the Nation of Liris. Venera squinted at it, then at the blunderbusses the soldiers cradled. Another, larger blunderbuss was mounted on a pivot under a little roof nearby. That must be the damnable gun whose firing kept waking her up in the morning.

None of those ancient arms looked very accurate. She could probably just jump off the roof and run for it ... but run where? Chances were she'd be snapped up by some neighbor worse than these people.

She decided—for the tenth time today—to remain patient and see what happened. No one in Liris seemed to have any immediate desire to harm her. Her best strategy was to play along with them until the moment came when she could escape.

"Now pay attention," whined Samson Odess. The fish-faced little man had been introduced yesterday as her new boss. The very idea of a commoner giving her orders without an immediate threat to back them up struck Venera as both bizarre and funny. She had so far done the things he had asked, but Odess seemed to sense that she wasn't taking him seriously. He was becoming ever more defensive as the morning wore on.

"This is our lifeline to Lesser Spyre," Odess said, slapping the cable. Venera saw that he stood on a low platform, at the center of which was a boxy machine that clamped the cable with big ratchet wheels. "By means of this engine, we can rise to the city above, where the Great Fair is held once a week. Visitors from everywhere in Virga come to the Fair. It is the trade delegation's sacred task to ensure that we conduct the most advantageous transactions in the name of Liris." As he spoke, the rest of the delegation popped up through the roof's one hatch. Four heavily armed men bracketed an iron box that must have held pitted cherries. Flanking them were two men and two women, the women veiled like Venera and dressed in ceremonial robes of highly polished silver, inlaid with crimson enamel.

"Is the gravity the same up there as it is here?" Venera asked. If it was a standard *g*, they wouldn't be able to move.

Odess shook his head vigorously. "You can see the spin-rate from down here. We'll shed our heavy vestments for city clothes once we're up there."

"Why not change down here?" she asked, puzzled.

Odess goggled at her in astonishment. He'd stared exactly that way yesterday, when he was first introduced. Moss had taken Venera to Odess's office, a glorified closet that made her wonder if Diamandis's pack-rat ways might not be the rule here, rather than the exception. Odess had filled the small space over the years, perhaps his whole lifetime, with oddments and souvenirs that likely made sense to no one but him. What was the significance of that single shoe, mounted as though it were a trophy and given its own little niche in the wall? Could anyone read the faded text on those certificates hung behind his chair? And was that some sort of exotic mobile that drooled from the dimness overhead, or the hanging mummified remains of some sort of animal? Books were stacked everywhere, and a pile of dishes three feet tall teetered next to a rolled-up mattress.

Odess's first words were addressed to Moss, not Venera. "You expect us to accept this ... this *outsider* in our midst?"

"Is th-that not what you d-do?" Moss had asked. "G-go *outside*?" Startled, Venera had sent him a sidelong look. Was there somebody home behind those glazed eyes, after all?

"B-besides, the b-botanist commanded it."

"Oh, God." Odess had put his head in his hands. "She thinks she can do anything now."

Any slight deviation from routine or custom threw Odess into a panic. Venera's very presence was upsetting him, though the rest of the delegation had been pathetically happy to meet her. They would have partied till dawn if she hadn't begged off early, pointing out that she had not yet seen the room where she was expected to sleep for the rest of her life.

Eilen, Mistress of Scales and Measures, had shown Venera to a closet just outside the delegation's long, cabinet-lined office. The closet

was seven feet on a side—its walls of whitewashed stone—and nearly twelve feet high. There was room for a bed and a small table, and there was no window. “You can put your chest under the bed,” Eilen said, “when you get one. Your clothes you can hang on those pegs for now.”

And that was all. If Venera were inclined to sympathy with other people, she would have been saddened at the thought that Eilen, Odess, and the others accepted conditions like these as the norm. After all, they had likely been born and raised in such tiny chambers. Their playgrounds were dusty servants’ ways, their schoolrooms window niches. Yet of all the citizens of Liris, they were the privileged ones, for as members of the delegation they were allowed to see something of the world outside their walls.

While Odess sputtered and tried to explain why tradition demanded that they rise to Lesser Spyre in full ceremonial gear, Venera watched the soldiers deposit their precious cargo on the platform. After the rest of the delegation was on board, they flipped up railings on all sides (to her relief) and one bent to examine the archaic engine. This was what really interested her.

“If we're all ready, we will sing the Hymn of Ascension,” said Odess, portentously.

Venera looked around. “The what?”

He looked as though he'd been slapped—but Eilen put a hand on his arm. “We didn't tell her about it, so how would she know?”

“Anyone in Spyre could see us arise, hear the...” He realized his mistake. “Ah yes. A true foreigner.” Shaking himself, he put both hands on the rail and puffed out his cheeks. “Listen, then, and learn the ways of a civilized society.”

While they sang their little ditty, Venera watched the soldier spark the hulking rotary engine into life. Its chattering roar immediately drowned out the miniature choir, who didn't seem to notice. The wheel turned, gripping the cable, and the platform inched slowly into the air.

The purpose of the railings soon became clear. Only a few yards above the rooftop they caught the edge of the howling gale that swept toward the open end of Spyre. This steady hurricane was produced by the rotation of the great cylinder, Venera knew; she'd seen its like in smaller wheels like those of Rush. A wind came in at the cylinder's axis of

rotation and shot out again along the rim. If she simply jumped off the platform at this point, she would be propelled out of Spyre entirely, and at goodly force.

The four soldiers were here to shoot anyone who tried that. And now that they were higher up she could see other guarantors of obedience: gun emplacements were suspended in the middle air by more cables, and some of them were visibly manned. Hanging in the sunny clouds beyond the wheel were more bunkers and turrets. It seemed a miracle now that she had, unconscious, threaded her way between them all to land here.

"Father would love this place," she muttered.

Chaison Fanning, her missing husband, would probably consider Spyre a moral obscenity, and would want to blow it up.

They rose some miles, through filigrees of cloud, puffballs that hovered like anxious angels between the incoming and outblowing gales; past houses and pillboxes bolted to other cables, whose glittering windows revealed nothing of what might be taking place inside them. The lands of Greater Spyre widened and widened below Venera, their patchwork estates becoming a mesmerizing labyrinth: the blockhouses of a dozen, a hundred and more Nations of Liris, it seemed, painted the inside of the cylinder. Slicing through these, leaving ruin and wildflowers on their sidings, were the railways of the preservationists.

All the while, Lesser Spyre came closer.

Venera had seen a geared town once before—in the dead hollow heart of Leaf's Choir, Chaison Fanning's ships had moored next to the asphyxiated city of Carlinth. But Carlinth's pale grandeur couldn't match the wonder of Lesser Spyre because that other city had been motionless in death, and Lesser Spyre lived. Its great wheel-shaped habitats, each a half mile or more in diameter, turned edge to angled edge like the meshwork of a vast clock. The citizen of one wheel could stroll to its edge and simply step onto the surface of another as their rims came within touching distance. The wheels were kept in configuration by a lattice of giant spars and thick cables, from which black banners fluttered.

For all this cunning and motion, Lesser Spyre did not look inviting. There were some houses and streets, but most of the wheels were dominated on their inside surface by one or two sprawling buildings. The Admiralty at Rush had been like that, as had the Pilot's palace. But also in

Rush there were wheels weeded with taverns, towers, and twisting streets, as organic and inviting as a party.

Lesser Spyre was monolithic, self-contained, and controlled. Almost nothing stuck out.

The cable car eluded gravity entirely after a while, and its passengers clipped their metal costumes to the railing and waited until their destination hove into sight. The cable terminated in a knot of dozens of others, at a complicated cagework that threaded the axle of a town-wheel. Venera could see other people embarking and disembarking there. They moved in small groups that gave one another a wide berth.

She saw something else, though, that gave her hope for the first time in days: ships were berthed here. Sleek yachts, for the most part, of many different designs and flying diverse colors—but all foreign. They signaled the possibility of escape, real escape, for the first time since her arrival.

She tapped Odess's tin shoulder and pointed. "Our customers?"

He nodded. "Pilgrims from all the principalities of Candescce come to us, hoping to leave again with some trinket or token of ours. Do you recognize any of those ships?"

Venera nodded. "That one is from Gehellen." It was the only one she knew, but Odess was obviously impressed. "I know that we'll trade them cherries," she went on. "But what do the rest of Spyre's countries sell?"

He laughed, and just then the platform came to rest at its terminus. As they clambered over to the axle like so many iron spiders, Odess said, "What do they trade? You ask that with refreshing innocence. If we knew what half our neighbors traded, we might arrange some extra advantage for Liris. The fame of many of Spyre's commodities is spread far and wide—but not all. There are sections of the fair no stranger can enter without providing a guarantee of circumspection."

"A what?"

"A hostage, sometimes," said Eilen. They had entered a long cylindrical chamber with many small doors spiraling up its interior. Odess found one of these and, producing a massive key, unlocked it. Inside was a slot-shaped locker, its walls encrusted with rust and

cobwebs, with one incongruously bright mirror at the far end. Odess and the others proceeded to strip off their metal shells, trading them for ornately tooled leather equivalents—except that in place of veils, each costume came with an elaborate mask. Odess passed a kit to Venera, and she turned her back modestly to change. Her mask had a falcon's beak.

"There are nations," Odess said, "that average one customer every ten years. Whatever it is they trade, it is so fabulously valuable that the whole country lives off the sale for a generation. That's an extreme example, but there are many others who guard the nature of their produce with their lives. Liris used to be one such. Now everyone knows what we produce, but that's actually worked to our advantage."

"But what can those others be selling?" Venera shook her head in incomprehension. She was stretching a black jacket over a silver-traced vest, admiring the effect in the mirror. With the mask in place she looked intimidating. She liked the effect.

"*She* is from one of them." It was one of the soldiers who said it. He didn't have to say who *she* was; Venera knew he meant the botanist.

Venera raised an eyebrow. "She wasn't born in Liris?"

The soldier shook his head, glancing uneasily at Odess. "Our previous botanist ... the trees were languishing, m'lady. They were dying, until she came." Odess was scowling in obvious warning, but the soldier shrugged. "Five years now, she's brought them back to health."

"And you don't know anything about where she came from?"

"Of course we do!" Odess laughed loudly. "She's a lady of the Nation of Sacrus. We know who she is ... even if we don't know what it is that Sacrus *does*."

"You need better spies," said Venera. Nobody laughed, but the thought intrigued her. Spyre, it seemed, was an investigator's playground. She would love to develop a network here, the way she had in secret in her adopted home of Slipstream.

They moved from the locker cylinder to the axle of the town-wheel. Here, dozens of yin-yang stairs and elevator shafts ran down to the copper-shingled roofs of the vast buildings lining the wheel. Odess showed their letters of transit to a succession of inspectors and gradually they worked their way over to one of the elevators.

"Stay alert, everyone," Odess said as the wrought-iron doors grumbled shut behind them, and they began to move down. "Watch for any signs of change. In particular, our new interpreter," he nodded at Venera, "is going to cause a stir. We need to stick to our agreed story. You," he said to Venera, "must only speak to the customers, and then only when we ask you to. We don't want to give our rivals any clues about our capabilities or what's been going on inside Liris."

This paranoia reminded Venera of Hale and the darkened corridors of her father's palace. "But why?" she asked in irritation. "Why this skulking?"

"Questions might be asked," said Odess darkly. "About where you came from. About why our people might have ventured outside our walls. Where we might have gone, what we might have seen. What *you* might have seen." He shook his head. "Your story is that you were born and raised in Liris."

"But my accent—"

"Is why you will only speak to the customers."

There was silence for the rest of the ride. Venera adjusted her veil, glanced around, and noted the tightening of shoulders, straightening of stances as gravity rose until it neared the level she was used to. And then the elevator clunked to a halt, and the doors opened.

The trade delegation of Liris edged cautiously into the Great Fair of Spyre.

* * * *

Fabulous beasts swept across the dance floor, their skirts wheeling in time to the deep drumbeat of Spyre's music. The beasts had the faces of monsters, of animals, of gods. They danced in pairs, sometimes pausing in midpose as the music paused. It was during those pauses that business was transacted.

One slender figure with a hawk's face stood at the foot of a gold-chased pillar, her backdrop a blue *trompe l'oeil* vista of wheeling towns. She watched the dancers alertly, aware of the deep strains of paranoia and deceit that must run through Spyre for it to have developed this custom. For this filigreed and gleaming ballroom and its whirling dancers was the Great Fair itself.

True, there were display rooms. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Odess emerging from the doorway that led to Liris's. He was alone, and doubtless his errand had been to check on the disposition of the glass cases and lights there. No customers had passed that door since she had been here.

Venera had spent some hours in the display room, helping the others set up. A solitary cherry tree dominated the marbled parlor; it sat in a broad stone bowl, the glow of its pink blossoms the first sight that greeted a visitor. It was a fake, made of silk and common woods.

While Liris's soldiers played cards behind a screen in the display rooms, the rest of the delegation danced. The music was loud, the dances fast and close; so conversation consisted of quick whispers in your partner's ear, quips at arm's length, or brief nose to nose exchanges. Eavesdropping was impossible in these circumstances—and the soldiers of Spyre watched carefully for any sign of it. Venera had been told that visitors were carefully screened, and the penalty for revealing secrets here was death. Ironically, the whole setup seemed designed for cheating, for who could tell what any two dancers were telling one another?

She had heard that the dances were occasionally interrupted by spontaneous duels.

The denizens of Spyre took their masque very seriously. Not all the visitors did; most eschewed disguises, and so Venera was able to tell how many principalities were represented here. She even recognized one or two of the national costumes they wore.

A gavotte ended and the dancers broke up. Gorgon-headed Eilen headed Venera's way. A waiting footman handed her a drink as she paused, panting. "Is it always like this?" Venera asked her. "Interested customers seem a bit thin on the ground."

"We have our regulars," said Eilen. "It's not the season for any of them. Oh, this gravity! It pulls at my stomach."

Venera sighed. These people were so immersed in their traditions that they couldn't see the insanity of it all. In the brief pause between dances, some of the customers had drifted off with outlandishly masked delegates—salesmen, really. Venera had been keeping track of who went through which doorways. Many of the portals around the vast chamber had never opened. They might be locked or even bricked up on the other side, for all she knew.

She couldn't figure out the architecture of the fair. It seemed that the sprawling, multi-winged building had been renovated, rebuilt, and reimagined so many times over the centuries that it had lost any sense of its original logic. Corridors ran into blank walls; stairwells led nowhere; elevator shafts opened onto roaring air where lower floors had once been. Behind the public walls countless narrow passages twisted their ways to the offices, storage lockers, and panic rooms of the trade delegations. Liris's domain extended several floors above and below their public showroom; Venera had glimpsed in passing a huge chamber, like a collapsing ballroom, its dripping casements lost in gloomy shadows. Eilen had told her that this was where they met customers back when their cherries were a state secret. The ballroom was on one of the high-security levels of the fair; Liris still owned title to it, but had no use for it now.

Venera had scoffed at this. "Has no one had the courage to drill spy holes in the walls to find out what your neighbors are up to?" Odess had sent her one of his disapproving, frightened looks, but nobody had said anything.

Oh, something was happening—Capri, Eilen's apprentice, was leading four people in rich clothes toward the Liris door. The little surge of excitement was absurd, and Venera nearly laughed at herself. Now Odess was bowing to them. He was opening the door. Venera imagined cheering.

"Who are they?" she asked Eilen.

"Oh! Success! That's ... let's see ... the delegates from Tracoune."

Venera ransacked her memory; why was that word familiar? Ah, that was it. It was only a couple of weeks ago that Venera and her husband had attended a soiree in the capital of Gehellen. The event had been unremarkable up until the shooting started, but she did remember a long conversation with a red-faced admiral of the local navy. He had mentioned Tracoune.

"Excuse me, I'd like to watch this," she said to Eilen. The woman shrugged and turned back to the dance. Venera threaded her way around the outskirts of the ball and pushed open the door to the Liris showroom. It was at the end of a long hallway, seventy feet at least in length. Random words echoed back at her as Venera walked down it.

Odess was showing them the tree. Now he was opening a lacquered box to reveal the cherries. Capri hovered nervously in the background.

The visitors didn't seem too impressed. One of the four—a woman—wandered away from the others to stare idly at the paintings on the walls. They seemed to be marking time here, perhaps taking a break from dancing. Even Venera, with no experience in sales, could tell that.

She approached the woman. “Excuse me...” said Venera. She deliberately did not stand or move the way Odess and Capri were—clasping their hands in front of them, darting hesitantly like servants. Instead, Venera bowed like an equal.

“Yes?” The customer looked surprised, but not displeased at being approached in this way.

“Do I have the pleasure of addressing a citizen of Tracoune?” The woman nodded.

“I had the most illuminating conversation recently,” Venera continued, “at a party in Gehellen. We talked about Tracoune.”

An edge of calculation came into the woman's gaze. “Oh, really? Who were you talking to?”

“An admiral in the Gehellen navy, as it happens.” Venera saw Odess notice that she was accosting a customer (his expression said, ‘the new one's loose!’) and then he started trying to make eye contact with her while pretending to give his full attention to his own people.

Venera smiled. “I'm so sorry that you've had to cancel the Feast of Saint Jackson this year,” she said to her prospect. “The Gehellenese are speculating that you won't be able to afford to feed your own people this time next year. Gauche of them, really.”

“They said that?” The woman's face darkened in anger. “The Incident at Tibo was hardly that serious!”

“Ah, we thought not,” said Venera in a conspiratorial way. “It's just that appearance is so important to international relations, isn't it?”

Ten minutes later the visitors were signing on the dotted line. Venera stood behind the astounded trade delegation of Liris, her arms crossed, inscrutable behind her beaked mask.

Odess stepped back to whisper furiously to her. "How did you do it? These people have never been customers before!"

She shrugged. "You just have to know people's weaknesses. In a few weeks Tracoune will throw some minor party for visiting officials, and among other things they'll give away a few cherries ... as if they could afford boatloads of them. A very discreet message, on a channel so private that almost no one on either side will know why when the Gehellens decide *not* to call in their outstanding loans to Tracoune—which they've been thinking of doing."

He glared at her. "But how could..."

She nodded. "The levers of diplomacy are very small. The art lies in knowing where to pry."

Venera chatted with the clients while a soldier loaded a carrying case with dry ice and Odess measured out the pitted cherries. "Speaking of Gehellens," Venera said after a while, "we heard about some sort of commotion there a couple of weeks ago."

The head of the Tracoune expedition laughed. "Oh, that! They're the laughingstock of the principalities!"

"But what happened?"

He grinned. "Visitors from one of the savage nations ... Oh, what was the name?"

"Slipstream," said the woman Venera had first dealt with.

"Slipstream, that was it. Seems an admiral of Slipstream went mad and took to piracy with some of his captains. They fought a pitched battle with the Gehellens navy in the very capital itself! Smashed their way out of the palace and escaped into Leaf's Choir, where it's rumored they found and made off with the Hoard of Anetene itself!"

"But that part's too preposterous, of course," said the woman. "If they'd found the hoard, they would have a key to Candescence as well—the

last one is supposed to be the centerpiece of the hoard. With that they could have ruled all of Virga from the sun of suns itself!"

"Well." The man shrugged.

"What happened to them?" asked Venera. "Did they escape?"

"Oh, they evaded the Gehellen navy right enough," he said with another laugh. "Only to be cut to ribbons in some barbarous nation near the edge of the world. None escaped, I hear."

"None..." Venera's pulse was racing, but she chose not to believe this man. His story had too many of the facets of rumor.

"Oh, no, I've been following this one," said the woman, with evident enjoyment. "It seems the Slipstreamers ran afoul of a place called Falcon Formation. The admiral suicidally rammed his flagship into some sort of dreadnaught of Falcon's. Both ships were obliterated in the explosion. Of his six other ships, only one got away."

"Its name?" Venera put her hand out to steady herself. Her fingers met the false bark of the fake cherry tree.

"What's name?"

"The ... the ship that escaped. Did you hear which one escaped?"

The woman looked affronted. "I didn't follow the story *that* closely." Now it was her turn to laugh. "But they foolishly ran for home, and the Pilot of Slipstream had them arrested the instant they came into port. For treason! What foolishness of them to even try to go home."

Venera was glad of the mask she wore. It felt like her heart was slowing and would stop at any second. It was all she could do to keep up appearances until the Tracoune delegation left with their first consignment of cherries. Then she rushed back to the screened alcove, ignoring the jubilant congratulations the others were lavishing on her.

Even though the mask would have hid them, she shed no tears. Venera had learned many years ago never to do that in the presence of another human being.

* * * *

That evening there was a celebration in a gallery overlooking the cherry trees. Amber light poured into the blued central shaft, glinting off windows and outlining shutters and balconies above and below, while small gusts of air still warm from Candescence's light teased the diaphanous drapes. Like everywhere else in Liris, the party room was small, crammed with memorabilia and eccentric furnishings, and reachable only through a labyrinth of stairs and corridors. It reminded Venera of her childhood bedroom.

She had not wanted to come. All she wanted to do was sit alone in her closet. But Eilen insisted. "Why so gloomy?" she asked as she leaned hipshot in Venera's doorway. "You did great service to your country today!" Venera didn't speak as they walked, and she did her best to be the ghost at the wedding for the remainder of the night.

Her sorrow wasn't catching. Most of Liris turned out for the event, and a dizzying parade of strange and neurotic characters passed in front of Venera as she systematically drank herself into a stupor. There were the hereditary soldiers with their peaked helmets and blunderbusses; the gray sanitation men who spoke in monotones and huddled together near the drinks table; the seamstresses and chandlers, carpenters, and cleaners who all spoke a secret language they had developed together in their childhood. And there were children, too—grave, wide-eyed gamins who skirted around Venera as though she had stepped out of one of their fantasy books.

She watched them all go by, numb. *I knew that this might happen*, she told herself. *That he might die*. Yet she had gone ahead with her plan, dragging Chaison reluctantly into it. It had been necessary if they were to save Slipstream; she knew that. But the decision still felt like a betrayal.

"It's so *electric*," said Eilen now, "having a new face in our world!" Quite drunk, she balanced on one foot near Venera, waving excitedly at people she had seen every day of her life. Of those people, a few had approached and introduced themselves, halting and stammering; most stayed back, muttering together and eyeing Venera. Foreigner. Strange beast. New darling of the botanist.

And yes, the botanist was here, too. She glided through the celebrants as though on rails, nodding here and there, speaking strategic words on the outskirts of discussions, the same mysterious smile as always hovering just behind her lips. Eventually she made her way over to Venera. She hove to just this side of Eilen. Eilen herself moved away, suddenly quiet.

"I've always said that it pays to know your customers," the botanist said. "I judged your potential rightly."

Venera eyed her. "Is that what you feel you do? Judge people's potential? Like the buds of flowers that might bloom or wither?"

"How apt. Yes, that's exactly right," said the botanist. "Some are to be encouraged, others cut from the branch. You nod as though you understand."

"I've done a certain amount of ... pruning ... in my day," said Venera. "So I've achieved a great victory for your tiny nation. Now what?"

"Now," said the botanist in a breathless sort of sisterly way, "we talk about what to do next. You see, you've vindicated my methods. I believe Liris needs to be more open to the outside world—that we need to send our delegates farther, even outside Spyre itself."

The fog of Venera's sorrow lifted just a bit. "Leave Spyre? What do you mean?"

"I would like to send a trade mission to one of the principalities," said the botanist. "You, of course, would lead it."

"I'd be honored," said Venera with a straight face. "But isn't it Odess's job to arrange such things?"

"Odess?" The botanist waved her hand dismissively. "Prattling whiner. Take him if you'd like, but I can't see what good he'll do you. No, I picture you, perhaps Eilen, and one or two loyal soldiers. And a consignment of our treasure to tempt potential customers."

"That sounds reasonable." Venera couldn't believe what she was hearing. Did the woman seriously believe she would come back if she got out of this place? But then, everyone in Spyre seemed dangerously naive.

"Good. Say nothing of this to the others," instructed the botanist severely. "It won't do to let old wounds fester."

What did that mean? Venera thought about it as the botanist strolled away, but then Eilen returned and spilled her drink on Venera's shoes. The evening went downhill from there, and so she didn't really

ponder the botanist's unlikely offer until she got back to her closet, near dawn.

She had just closed the ill-fitting door and was about to climb under the covers when there was a polite knock on the jamb. Venera cracked the door an inch.

Moss leaned like a decapitated tree outside her door. "Citizen F-f-fanning," he said. "I j-just wanted to give you th-th-these."

In the faint lamplight of the hallway, she could just make out a tiny bouquet of posies in his hand.

The juxtaposition of his chiseled features with the emptiness of his eyes made her skin crawl. Venera slipped her hand out to snatch the little bundle of flowers from his nerveless fingers. "Thanks. You're not in love with me, are you?"

"I'm s-s-sorry you're so s-sad," he murmured. "T-t-try not to be so s-s-sad."

Venera gaped at him. His words had been so quiet, but they seemed to echo on and on in the silent corridor. "Sad? Why do you think I'm sad?"

Nobody else had noticed—not even Eilen, who had been watching Venera like a mother hawk all evening. Venera narrowed her eyes. "I didn't see you at the party. Where were you?"

"I w-w-was there. In the c-corner."

Present yet absent. That seemed to sum Moss up. "Well." Venera looked down at Moss's present. Somehow she had clenched her fist and had crushed the little white blossoms.

"Thank you," she said. Moss turned away with a muted clattering noise. "Moss," she said quickly. He looked back.

"I don't want you to be sad, either," said Venera.

He shambled away and Venera closed the door softly. Once alone, she let loose one long shuddering sigh and tumbled face-first onto the bed.

* * * *

The next morning, Venera wore the half-crushed posies on the breast of her jacket. If anybody noticed, they said nothing. She ate her breakfast with the members of the delegation in their designated dining room—a roofed-over air-shaft lined floor to invisible ceiling with stuffed animals—and followed them silently to their offices. She had discerned the routine by now: they would sit around for the rest of the day, occasionally engaging in desultory, short-lived dialogs, have lunch and then supper, and turn in.

If she had to live like this for more than a couple of days, Venera knew she would snap. So, at ten o'clock, she said, "Can't we at least play cards?"

One of the soldiers glanced over, then shook his head mournfully. "Odess always wins."

"But I'm here now," said Venera. "What if I were to win?"

Slowly, they roused into a state resembling the attentive. With much cajoling and browbeating, Venera got them to reveal the location of the cards, and once she had these she energetically pulled a table and some chairs into the center of the room. "Sit," she commanded, "and learn."

This was her opportunity to grill her compatriots properly—the party last night had been too hectic and strange, with everyone playing pal in transparent ways—and Venera made the best of it. After ten minutes Odess emerged from his office, looking bleary and cross, but his eyes lit up when he saw her shuffling the cards. Venera grinned sloppily at him and he drew up a chair.

"So," she said as the others examined their cards, "tell me about the botanist."

The Pantry War had been dragging on for five years. Liris and the Duchy of Vatoris both claimed a five- by seven-foot room off one of the twisting corridors of the fair. The titles went back a hundred years, and the wording was ambiguous. Neither side would back down.

"War?" said Venera as she peered over her cards. "Don't you mean feud?"

The other players all shook their heads. No, explained Odess, a feud was a family thing. This was a conflict between professional

soldiers, and it took the form of pitched battles—even if those battles were between a dozen or so soldiers on either side, which was all the manpower the tiny nations could muster. After years of ambushes, raids, firefights, and all manner of other mayhem, it had settled into a war of attrition. Barricades had been thrown up in the disputed corridor; a no-man's-land of broken furniture and cracked tile stretched for thirty feet between them. The entrance to the closet beckoned only yards away, and either side could capture it in seconds. The trick was to hold it.

The two sides dug in. The barricades were ramified and reinforced, then backed up with cannon and rifles. Days might pass without a shot fired, but the other tenants of the fair got used to sudden flurries of gunfire. Rarely was anyone actually hurt. The loss of a single man would constitute a disaster.

These things happened. Even now, the fair was riddled with strange tensions—empty passages paved in dust where no one had walked in generations because of just such disputes as this; neighbors who would think nothing of murdering one another in quiet corners if they had the chance; victims walled up in alcoves; and everywhere, conspiracies.

It was a random bullet that changed everything. The walls around the disputed hallway had never been strong, but the combatants had hired a neutral third party to shore them up at regular intervals. Perhaps it was inevitable, though, that chinks and cracks should develop. One day, a bullet fired from the Vatoris barricade slipped through such a crack, ricocheted sixty feet down an abandoned air shaft, and killed the heir of a major nation as he stood at a punch bowl.

Venera rubbed her jaw. "I can imagine the reaction."

"I'm not sure you can," said Odess portentously. The nation in question was the mysterious Land of Sacrus, a country of "vast size," according to Eilen.

"How vast?"

"Fully three square miles!"

Sacrus traded in power—but exactly how, no one was quite sure. They were one of the most secretive of countries, their fields being dotted with windowless factories, the perimeter patrolled by guards with dogs and guns. Small airships bristling with guns bobbed above the main

complex. The Sacrans emerged from their smoke-wreathed towers only once or twice a year, and then they spoke almost exclusively to their customers. They were one of the few nations that had withstood the full force of the preservationists—in fact, nobody in the preservationist camp would talk about just how badly that particular battle had gone.

Sacrus was enraged at the death of their heir. Three days after the incident, the Vatoris barricade fell silent. The soldiers of Liris fired a few shots and got no response. When they cautiously advanced on the Vatoris position, they found it abandoned.

Discrete inquiries were made. No one had seen any of the Vatorins since the day of the fateful gunshot. In a moment of supreme daring, Liris sent its troops directly to the Vatoris apartments. They were empty.

At this point, rumors of a great stench rising from Vatoris itself reached Odess's ears. "I was sitting in our showroom," he said. "I remember it like it was yesterday. One of the scions of a minor nation entered and told me that his people were walking up and down along the border with Vatoris, sniffing the air and exchanging rumors. The smell was the smell of death."

Odess returned home that night to warn his people. "But it was too late. As I lay down to sleep that evening, I heard it—we all did." A hissing sound filled the chambers of Liris. It was faint, but for someone like Odess, who had lived behind these walls his whole life, it had the effect of a siren.

"I stood, tried to run to the door. I fell down." The others related similar experiences, of sudden paralysis, landings behind desks or next to wavering doors. "We lay there helpless, all of us, unable to even focus our eyes. And we *listened*."

What they heard, after an hour or so, was a single set of footsteps. They moved smoothly from room to room, up stairs and down, not as if seeking anything, but as though whoever walked were taking inventory—committing every passage and chamber of Liris to memory. Eventually, they came to a stop. Silence returned.

The paralysis faded near dawn. Odess rose, retched miserably for a few minutes, and then—trembling—crept in the direction those footsteps had taken. As he went he saw others emerging from their rooms, or rising from where they had fallen in mid walk. They converged on the place where the footsteps had halted: in the cherry tree courtyard.

"And there she sat," said Odess, "exactly as she sits these days, with the same damned smile and the same damned air of superiority. The botanist. Our conqueror."

"And no one has challenged her?" Venera barked a laugh of disbelief. "You fear reprisals, is that it?"

Odess shrugged. "She ended the war, and under her leadership, the cherries bloom. Who else are we going to have lead us?"

Venera scowled at her cards. A pulse of pain shot up her jaw. "I thought you were a meritocracy."

"And so we are. And she is the best botanist we have ever had."

"What happened to the one she replaced?"

They exchanged glances. "We don't know," confessed Eilen. "He disappeared the day Margit came."

Venera discarded one card and took another from the deck. The others did the same, then she fanned out her hand. "I win."

Odess grimaced and began to shuffle.

"She came to me last night," said Venera. She had decided that she needed information more than discretion at this point. "Margit was pleased with the work I did." Odess snorted; Venera ignored him and continued. "She had a proposal."

She told them about Margit's idea of an extended trade expedition into the principalities. As she did, Venera watched all movement around the table stop. Even Odess's practiced hand ceased its fanning of the cards. They were all staring at her.

"What?" She glanced around defensively. "Does this violate some ancient taboo?—I'm sure, everything else does. Or is it something you've been trying to get done for years, and now you're mad that the newcomer has achieved it?"

Eilen looked down. "It's been tried before," she said in a quiet voice.

"You must understand," said Odess; then he fell silent. Knitting his brows, he started furiously shuffling.

"What?" Now Venera was seriously alarmed. "What's wrong?"

"To travel outside Spyre ... is not done," said Odess reluctantly. "Not without safeguards to guarantee one's return. Hostages, if one is married ... but you're not."

Venera was disgusted. "The pillboxes, the guns and razor wire—they really aren't to keep people *out*, are they? They're to keep them in."

"Yes, but you see, if Margit is willing to send you out despite you having no ties here, no hostages or anything she could hold over you ... Then she's obviously willing to try it again," said Odess. He slammed the deck down on the table, kicked his chair back, and walked away. Venera watched him go in startled amazement.

The soldiers were standing too, not making eye contact with anyone.

Venera pinned Eilen with her gaze. "Try *what*?"

The woman sighed deeply. "Margit is a master of chemistry and biology," she said. "That's why she is the botanist. Three years ago she conceived the idea of sending an expedition like the one you're describing. She chose a man who was competent, intelligent, and brave, but one whom she didn't completely trust. To guarantee that he would return, she ... injected him. With a slow poison that was not supposed to begin to act for ten days. If he returned within those ten days, she would give him the antidote, and he would be fine."

Venera eyed the splayed cards. "What happened?"

"The return flight was delayed by a storm. He made it back on the eleventh day."

Venera hesitated—but she already knew the answer when she asked, "Who was it that Margit sent?"

"Moss," said Eilen with a shudder. "She sent Moss."

* * * *

6

"I have to admit I was expecting this," said Margit. Venera stood in the doorway to her apartment; she was dressed down in close-fitting

black leathers. Two soldiers hulked behind her, their meaty hands resting heavy on her shoulders.

"In retrospect," Venera said ruefully, "I should have anticipated the trip wires." The inside walls of the courtyard were just too enticing a surface; freed of her metal clothing, Venera weighed only twenty pounds or so and she could easily clamber hand-over-hand up the drainpipe that ran next to Odess's little window. "There's no other way in or out of the building but up that wall. Naturally, you'd have alarms."

"...I just wasn't anticipating it so soon," said Margit. She twitched a housecoat over her lavender nightgown and lit another candle off the one she was holding. Even in the dimness of midnight Venera could see that her apartment was sumptuous, with several rooms, high ceilings, and tiled mosaics on the floor beneath numerous tapestries.

Of course Margit wouldn't live like the people she ruled. Venera wouldn't have, either. She understood Margit enough by now that staying here in Liris had not been an option. So after bidding her coworkers good night, she had retired to her closet and waited. When the building was silent and dark, Venera had crept out and jimmied open a window that led onto the courtyard.

Admittedly, she hadn't been thinking clearly. The revelation about Moss had shaken her and she had acted rashly. If she didn't regain control of this situation she would be in real trouble.

"Come in, sit down. We need to talk," said Margit. "You may leave us," she said to the soldiers. They lifted their hands off Venera's shoulders and retreated past the heavy oak door. They would have a long walk down the winding steps that led down to Liris's ground floor. *Good*, thought Venera.

She sat down on a decadent-looking divan, but she kept her feet braced against the floor, ready to leap up instantly if that was required.

The first step to taking control of the situation was taking control of the conversation. Margit opened her mouth, but Venera spoke first: "What is an heir of Sacrus doing running a minor nation like Liris?"

Margit narrowed her eyes. "Shouldn't I be asking the questions? Besides, what's your interest?" she asked as she gracefully sat opposite Venera. "Professional curiosity, perhaps? You are a noble daughter yourself, are you not? A nation like Liris would be an interesting

playground for someone learning how to use power. Are you interested in rulership?"

"In the abstract," said Venera. "It's not an ambition of mine."

"Neither is assisting your new countrymen, I gather. You were trying to escape us."

"Of course I was. I was press-ganged into your service. And you admit yourself you expected me to try it." She shrugged. "So what could we possibly have to talk about?"

"A great deal, actually," said Margit. "Such as how you came to be here at all."

Venera nodded slowly. She had been thinking about that, and the conclusions she had come to had motivated her to run as much as the facts about Moss. "I arrived here through an odd chain of events," she said. "At the time I wasn't prepared to wonder why there were armed troops sneaking over the lawns of Spyre during the nighttime. I was mostly concerned with evading them. But they pursued me here. Why here? At the time, I didn't know enough to even ask the question."

Margit raised an eyebrow and sat back.

"It's my father, you see," said Venera in a confessional tone. "He's flagrantly paranoid, and he wanted his daughters to be as well. He raised me to disbelieve coincidence. So if I was *herded* here, what could the reason be? The troops who were following me weren't from Liris. In fact, I assumed they weren't after me at all, but were chasing down another trespasser whom I had met. It wasn't until today that I realized that those other soldiers had been from Sacrus."

Margit laughed. "That truly is paranoid. You would implicate my nation in every one of your misfortunes?"

"No, just this one." She sat forward. "Since we're talking, though, I'd like to ask you a couple of questions." Smiling her maddening smile, Margit nodded. "The first question is whether you maintain constant contact with your nation. I've been told you don't, but I don't believe that."

Margit shrugged. "It would be easy. So what if I did? Can't a daughter talk to her parents?"

"The second question," said Venera, "is whether Sacrus itself travels regularly into the principalities." Seeing Margit's suddenly guarded expression, Venera nodded. "You do, don't you?"

"So what?"

"Someone guessed where I had come from," marveled Venera. "More than likely the Gehellens have circulated descriptions of myself and my husband throughout the principalities. They seek us, and it's an open secret why."

Margit grinned in obvious delight. "Oh, you are smart! I was right to bring you into Liris in the way I did."

Venera cocked her head. "What other way was there?"

"Oh, I think you can guess."

"Under duress. Tortured," said Venera. "Why do you think I tried to flee just now? It suddenly made no sense to me that I was walking around freely. And your offer to let me travel outside Spyre ... made even less sense."

"You became alarmed. That's understandable. I was told to learn everything you know about the Key to Candesce," said Margit. "You figured that out, of course."

Venera looked innocent. "Sorry, the what?"

Margit stood up and paced over to a side table. "Drink?" Venera shook her head.

"Something happened a short time ago," said the botanist. She stood with her back to Venera, and in those seconds Venera looked around quickly for anything that might give her an advantage. There were no handy hat-pins, letter openers, or pistols lying on the pillowed furniture. She did spot a battered wooden cabinet that looked markedly out of place compared to the rest of the pieces, but had no time to get to it before Margit turned again, drink in hand.

"Something happened," Margit repeated, "a fight in the capital of Gehellen, rumors of a stolen treasure, and then an event that our scientists are starting to refer to as *the outage*."

Venera tensed. She hadn't expected Margit to know this part of the story.

"Candesce does many things besides light our skies," said the botanist. "We watch the sun of suns closely; we have to, our very lives depend on it. So when one of Candesce's many systems shuts down, even for a moment, we know about it. Even though such an event has not occurred in living memory."

She sat down again. "Only someone with a key could enter Candesce and manipulate it. And the last key was lost centuries ago. You can imagine the uproar that the outage has caused, here and abroad. The principalities are mobilizing, and agents of the Virga Home Guard have been seen nosing around, even here."

Home guard? Venera had never heard of them. But she wanted to kick herself for failing to realize that the gambit she and her husband had played would alert all the powers in the world. *Hit another trip wire*, she mused.

"It was only a matter of days before we had your name and description and that of your husband and others in your party," said Margit. "We pay our spies well. So when a woman fitting that description miraculously appeared in the skies of Greater Spyre, we acted."

"Clearly, I've been a fool," said Venera bitterly. "Then it was Sacrus troops who drove me here?"

"I actually don't know for sure," Margit admitted. "Our men were out that night, I know that much. But there may have been others as well. In any case, once I communicated that I had you, I was told to hand you and the key over. I couldn't very well refuse my masters the key—but you, I declined to part with."

Venera felt a pulse of anxious anger as she realized what Margit was saying. "Then the key is—"

"Locked away in the Gray Infirmary, where Sacrus keeps all their new acquisitions," said Margit with some smugness. She drained her wineglass and tilted it at Venera. "But you're here. I took Liris in order to have a base from which to grow my own power. You provide potential leverage. Why should I give you up?"

"And the offer to let me travel ... ?"

"I increase my leverage and buy some insurance by getting you out of Spyre and to a safe place that only I know about," said Margit. "But you should really be happy that I haven't tortured you for what you know. I'd prefer to have you on my side. You must admit, I've treated you well."

Cautiously, Venera nodded. "It was too risky to keep the key to Candesce for yourself. But a lesser piece of leverage..."

"...Who knows something vital about it that I can trade ... that's useful to me at the moment." Margit smiled, catlike.

It still didn't quite add up. "Why did you let me go up to Lesser Spyre?" Venera asked. "Why risk exposing me at the fair?"

"That was to prove that I had you," said Margit with a shrug. "While I was negotiating what to give up. Sacrus was at the fair. I told them to watch for you, but with the guards and defenses that surround the fair, they couldn't snatch you from me. It was the safest place in Spyre to display you."

Someone unused to being used as a political pawn might have been surprised at these revelations. For Venera, discovering that she had been played was almost reassuring. It placed her in a familiar role.

She knew exactly what Sacrus was going to do now. Venera had fantasized about it herself: you took the key and entered Candesce, and then shut down the sun of suns. As the darkness and cold began to seep into the principalities, you made your demands of the millions whose lives depended on Candesce. You could ask for anything—power, money, hostages, or slaves. Your leverage would be total.

It would help to have enough experienced men to crew a navy, though, because one of your first demands would be that the principalities deliver up their own ships. "Sacrus doesn't have any ships, do they?" she asked. "Surely not enough to run the blockade that the principalities would put in place."

Margit shrugged. "Oh, we have several. Sacrus is a big nation. But in terms of weapons..." She laughed, and it wasn't a pleasant laugh. "I doubt we would have to worry much about any fleet of the principalities."

Her confidence was suddenly unnerving. Margit sauntered over to the battered wooden cabinet and opened the top. "Since you're here," she said, "let's talk about the key to Candesce."

"Let's not." Venera stood up. "My knowledge is my only bargaining chip, after all. I'm not going to squander that."

This time Margit didn't answer. She pulled a bell-rope that hung next to the cabinet.

The gravity was low enough and Venera still strong enough that she could probably make it to the window in one leap. Then she could scale the stonework by the tips of her fingers if she had to and make it to the roof in under a minute. Not, however, faster than the soldiers could climb a flight of stairs to retrieve her.

Margit was watching her calculate her options. The botanist laughed as the door opened behind Venera and a large, heavily armored soldier entered.

"I'm not going to hurt you," said Margit. Something glittered in her hand as she approached Venera. "I just want to guarantee your compliance from now on."

"The way you tried with Moss?" Venera nodded at the syringe Margit held. "Is that the same stuff you used on him?"

"It is. His outcome was an accident," said the botanist as the soldier stepped forward and grabbed Venera's wrists from behind. "I'll be more careful with you."

His outcome was an accident. Venera was familiar with that sort of logic, she often blamed others for the things she did to them. For some reason, the argument didn't work this time.

Margit had to round a large couch as she approached Venera. She took a step to do so, and Venera made fists, bent her forearms forward, and then raised her arms in an egg-shaped curve that Chaison had once showed her. The startled soldier clung tightly to her wrists but suddenly found himself pulled forward and off balance as Venera lifted his hands over her head. And then she turned and her hands were over his as he lost his grip, and she pushed down and he thumped onto his knees.

She kicked him in the face. His helmet ricocheted across the room as Margit shouted, and Venera hopped the couch, snatching up the open wine bottle and swinging it at the botanist's head.

Margit slashed out with the syringe, nicking Venera's sleeve. They circled for a second and then Venera grabbed for her wrist and they tumbled onto the floor.

The wine bottle skittered away, gouting red. Venera pulled Margit's arm up and bit her wrist. As the botanist let go Venera made a grab for the syringe. Margit in turn lunged for the bottle.

"I was just going to kill you," hissed Venera. She landed on Margit's back as the botanist closed her fingers on the bottle. "I've changed my mind!" She jammed the needle into Margit's shoulder and pushed the plunger.

Margit shrieked and rolled away. Venera let her. The botanist had let go of the wine bottle, and Venera took it and upended it over the wooden cabinet.

Cursing and holding her shoulder, Margit ran over to the soldier, who was sitting up. When she saw Venera reach for one of the lit candles she screamed "*No!*" and backpedaled.

It was too late, as Venera touched the candle flame to the wine-soaked cabinet and the whole thing caught. In the orange light of the fire, Venera ran through a nearby arch. She wanted to know whether that cabinet was all there was to Margit's power.

"Ah..." She stood in a large private pharmacy—dozens of shelves covered in glass bottles of all sizes and colors hung above long work tables crowded with beakers, petri dishes, and test tubes. Venera joyfully swept her arm across a table and tossed the candle into the cascading glasswork as Margit clawed at her from behind.

There was fire behind them, now fire ahead and smoke wafting up to the ceiling as Margit pushed and kicked at Venera and tried to get past her. When the soldier finally appeared out of the smoke, Venera stood over the botanist, her nose bleeding but a grin of utter savagery on her face. She brandished a long knife she'd found on the table.

"Back away or I'll cut her throat!" Venera's backdrop was flames. The soldier backed away.

Shouts of alarm and clanging bells were waking the house. Venera dragged Margit out of the inferno and threw her to the floor in front of the smoldering cabinet.

"Ten days." She pointed to the door. "You have ten days to convince your people to save you. I have no doubt that Sacrus has the antidote to your poison, but you'll have to go to them on bended knee to get it. For your sake I hope they're in a forgiving mood."

People were crowding in the doorway—men and women carrying buckets of sand and water, all shouting at once and all clattering to a halt at the sight of Venera standing over the all-powerful botanist.

"You are no longer the botanist of Liris!" Venera raised her arm, summoning everything she had learned from her father about how to intimidate a crowd. "Let no one here ever grant entry to this woman again! *Run!* Run home to Sacrus and beg for your life. This place is closed to you."

Margit staggered to her feet, clutching her shoulder. "I'll kill you!" she hissed.

"Only if you've a mind to do it," said Venera. "Now go!"

The botanist ran for the door, pushing aside the stunned firefighters.

"Get with it!" Venera yelled at them. "Before the whole house goes up!"

She walked through them, and as more came up the stairs, she politely eased to the side to let them pass. She reached the main floor of Liris to find all the lights lit and a confused mob swirling around the strangely decorated desks and counters.

"What's happened?" Odess emerged from the rush of faces. The rest of the trade delegation was behind him.

"I've deposed the botanist," said Venera. They gaped at her. She sighed. "It wasn't *that* hard," she said.

"But—but how?" They crowded around her.

"But *why?*" Eilen had grabbed her arm.

Venera looked up at her. Suddenly she felt tears in her eyes.

"My ... my husband," she whispered through a suddenly tight throat. "My husband is dead."

For a while there was silence, it seemed, though Venera knew abstractly that everyone was shouting, that the news of Margit's sudden departure was spreading like fire through Liris. Eilen and the others were speaking to her, but she couldn't understand anything they said.

Strangely calm, she looked through the rushing people at the one other person who seemed still. He was giving orders at the foot of the stairs to Margit's chambers, putting out his arm to prevent people without firefighting tools from going up, pointing out where to get sand or buckets to those just arriving. His face was impassive, but his gestures were quick and focused.

"What are we going to do?" Odess was literally wringing his hands, something Venera had never actually seen someone do. "Without the botanist, what will happen to the trees? Will Sacrus forgive us for what you did? We could all be killed. Who is going to lead us now?"

Eilen turned to Odess, shaking his shoulder crossly. "Why shouldn't it be Venera?"

"V-Venera?" He looked terrified.

She laughed. "I'm leaving. Right now. Besides, you already have your new botanist." She pointed. "He's been here all along."

Moss looked up from where he was directing the firefighting. He saw Venera, and the perpetually desperate expression around his eyes softened a bit. She walked over to him.

As shouts came down the stairs saying that the fire was under control, she laid a hand on the former envoy's arm and smiled at him. "Moss," she said, "I don't want you to be sad anymore."

"I-I'll t-try," he said.

Satisfied, she turned away from the people of Liris. Venera traced the steps Margit had taken only minutes before, pausing only to arm herself in Liris's barracks. She walked up the broad stone steps over which towered row after row of portraits—centuries of botanists, masons, doctors, and scholars, all of whom had been born here, lived here, and died here leaving legacies that might have been known only to a handful of people, but were meaningful nonetheless. She trod carefully patched steps whose outlines were known intimately by those who tended them, past arches and doors that figured as clearly as heroes out of myth in the

dreams and ambitions of the people who lived under them—people to whom they were the very world itself.

And on the dark empty roof, cold fresh air blew in from the abandoned lofts of Winter.

She threw back the trapdoor and stalked to the roof's edge. These were the final steps of her old life, she felt. Venera was about to mourn, something she had never done and did not know how to do. She stepped onto a swaying platform and began winching it down, feeling the uncoiling certainty of her husband's death in her gut. It was like a monster shaking itself awake; any moment now it would devour her, and who knew what would happen then? Her only defense was to keep turning the wheel to winch herself down. She focused her eyes on the tall grass that swayed at the foot of Liris, willing it closer.

In the dim light cast by Lesser Spyre, Venera Fanning walked into the wild acres of the disputed territories. She moved aimlessly at first, admiring the glittering lights overhead and the vast arcs of land and forest that swept up and past them.

When she lowered her eyes it was to see the black silhouette of a man separate itself from a grove of trees ahead of her. Venera didn't pause, but turned slightly towards the figure. He came out to meet her, and she nodded to him when he offered his arm for her to lean on.

"I've been waiting for you," said Garth Diamandis.

They walked into the darkness under the trees.

To be continued.

Copyright (c) 2006 Karl Schroeder