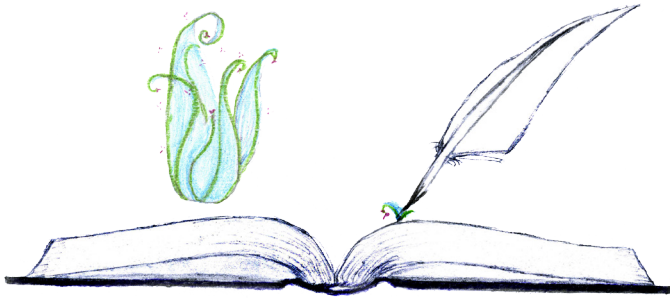




SUB~CREATION

Wheaton College | 2015-2016



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Wheaton College | 2015–2016

In association with



WhInklings



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Editor's Note

To reward you, dear Reader, for waiting through our hiatus last semester, we offer a special WhInklings edition of Sub-Creation! This issue contains one story written by thirteen authors, all members of WhInklings.

WhInklings is a writing group offering friendly input on whatever our members bring in, from poetry to plays to fiction of all sorts. The idea is based on the Inklings, whose members included C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Owen Barfield, and Charles Williams (four of the seven authors of the Marion E. Wade Center, a world-class gem right here on campus). Ever since I learned of the Inklings, I have been fascinated by it, and longed to join in such an edifying, joyful club. Now, WhInklings is that wish come true.

It cannot be stressed enough how important the Inklings' influence on one another was. I know this because of my experiences with WhInklings. Several of our writers, myself included, would not have written their stories but for the group. No better motivator can be found than knowing your friends eagerly await your next installment and will help make your story even better. Few things bring me more joy than listening to someone's story and guessing where it might go next, expounding fan theories of how their world works, or spitballing with the writer and other writers on how to make characters come to life.

Writing is often seen as a solitary endeavor, but, dear Reader, it ought not be. Share your writing with your friends. Your writing will be better for it, and so will your friendships.

Enjoy!

Beth Potterveld

PROSE

Caroline “Chewie” Snyder (’17)

Chewie, a native of the Smaber lobby, enjoys drawing comics and writing fiction. She doesn't remember exactly how she ended up joining Whlnklings, but is certainly glad she did.

Laura Schmidt (’03)

Laura has been the archivist at the Wade Center for eleven years, and she has loved Tolkien and story telling in general for many more years than that. She is an enthusiastic member of Whlnklings and the Wheaton College Tolkien Society, and they are some of the greatest joys of her life, along with the fellowship they bring. The Round Robin story written this year by Whlnklings was a lot of fun, and she looks forward to future writing projects with the group.

Peter Fenton (’17)

Peter Fenton's first loves are talking, listening, and general human interaction, which makes a whole lot of sense that he studies interpersonal communication and writes for the stage and screen. In addition, he sings bass in the Wheaton College Men's Glee Club and has applied to compete in CBS' long running reality competition *Survivor*.

Claire Reck (’18)

Claire is a sophomore English Writing major. Her favorite genre to write is poetry, and her favorite genres to read are poetry and fiction. She can often be found with a blanket and a good book. She enjoys being a part of the Whlnklings, and she had fun participating in this issue of *Sub-Creation* with the Round Robin story.

PROSE

Bryn Phinney ('17)

Ever since she could read, Bryn has been in love with stories and the worlds and characters they create. She discovered Tolkien and Chesterton's works in high school, became an excited member of WhInklings and the Wheaton College Tolkien Society three years ago, and has been writing poems and fantasy stories ever since.

Taylor Schaible ('17)

Taylor is an English major at Wheaton College. Besides participating in WhInklings, she is also the current president of the Wheaton College Tolkien Society and loves reading and writing fantasy. She is appalled that it is 2016 already and we still don't have personal robot servants.

Carolyn Greco ('18)

Carolyn Greco was born in Massachusetts, and lives in a fantasy world. She came to Wheaton in hopes of finding the land of Narnia on the other side of Lewis' wardrobe.

Shinyoung Kim ('16)

Shinyoung is a Korean time traveler from outer space in the distant future. Obsessed with sci-fi, cyberpunk, dystopian fiction and anime, he couldn't resist leaping into the past to join the legendary band of WhInklings writers. In case of anyone interested in futuristic time travel, his future self lives in Jovian cloud city #14. It's the Emeh-nem apartment with the room that has the 忍 sign on it. Can't miss it. Look for the huge knight 3D model. Safe travels. Remember to avoid time paradoxes at all costs.

PROSE

Melody David ('13)

As the Lab Manager of the Chemistry Department, Melody needed a creative outlet and joined WhInklings. Research for a theoretical murder mystery story recently led her to read two years' worth of *Pharmaceutical Journal* issues from 1919-1920 searching for a book review of Agatha Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. Half of the Round Robin authors tasked Melody with killing someone off, the others begged her to show mercy.

Beth Potterveld ('11)

Beth's writing influences range from ancient Greek mythology to *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Her drawing could use more consummate Vs. Having helped found both the WhInklings and *Sub-Creation*, she is thrilled to see this intersection of the two!

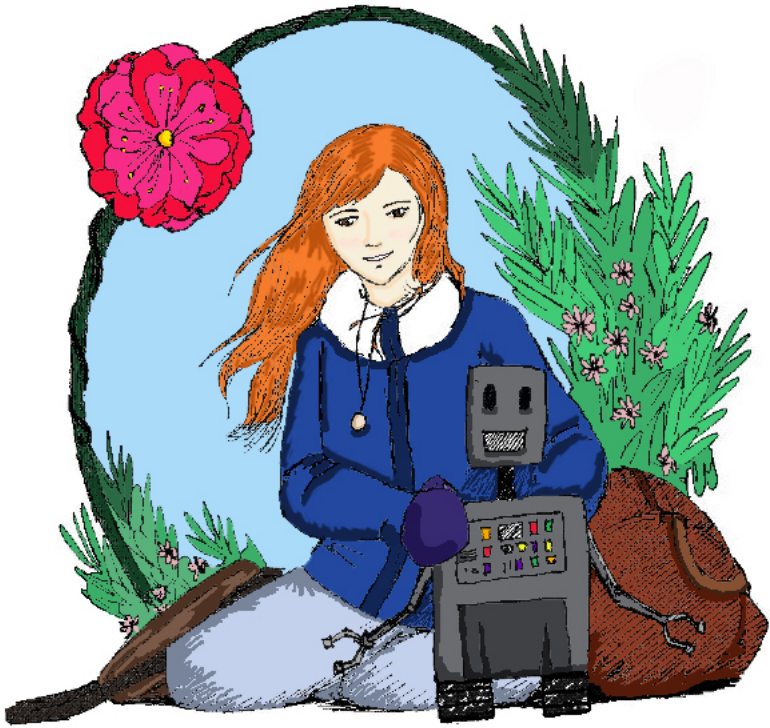
Megan Wilburn ('15)

Megan was born and raised in Wheaton, Illinois. She has always had a love for fantasy and science fiction literature. While attending Wheaton College, she joined the Wheaton College Tolkien Society and WhInklings, and is still an active member.

Luke Major ('16)

Luke loves to... wait, what is love? That's the kind of thing on his mind most of the time. When he's not lost in thought, he spends his time learning new things, reading/watching a new story, creating (usually writing), or eating pie (or at least, wishing he was). His favorite thing is a good story, so be sure to tell him about the best ones. Luke thinks WhInklings is one of the best things about Wheaton and was very happy to be one of the first members. He plans on publishing some of his own novels, so watch for them!

Before Night Falls



by
The WhInklings

Chapter 1

by Caroline “Chewie” Snyder

The bitter winter wind whipped across my face, sunk its icy fingers into my coat and gripped the skin of my arms. There was a sharp sting on the tip of my nose and it felt like a layer of ice had encased my throat. I pulled my scarf to the bridge of my nose and tucked it under my glasses. The warm air of my huffing breath fogged my lenses and melted my throat. My hands throbbed in my gloves. My toes felt numb.

I looked back to see how you were doing. *Poor buddy*, I thought. Your boxy metal body was covered in a layer of icy powder and your wheel tracks were partially jammed with snow. I reached out to grab your hand, the cold metal sucking the heat out of my already-freezing hands. Your shoulder joints had frozen, leaving your left arm sticking out directly and your right arm posed halfway up in the air.

“You look like a cheerleader with your arm up like that,” I teased. A small grin spread across your LCD screen mouth and a quiet, metallic chuckle came from behind. I still don’t know if you were originally programmed to laugh, but I remember the day you figured it out, and now every time I hear that sound of metallic joy it melts my heart.

“Affirmative,” you agreed. “Perhaps if I cheer for the sun, it will melt the snow.”

"I doubt that buddy, but you're welcome to try." I said. Your wheel tracks rolled awkwardly over the fresh powdery snow. I wish I had thought harder about warmer clothes when we left home. I hadn't imagined that I would need more than my winter coat, thick winter gloves, boots, scarf, hat, and warm sweater. It wasn't that cold when I left either, but we'd been outside all night and the cold was starting to sink into my bones. Besides, my mind had been in thirteen different places when we'd left. I'd made sure I had enough money to get us by for a while, enough snacks to eat along the road, made sure I had a few changes of clothes, that I'd left my phone behind (so I couldn't be tracked by GPS); I had to get out as quickly as possible to give us the most ground possible before my parents woke up. And we needed every inch of ground we could get, considering how slow your wheels were able to stumble through the snow.

A train thundered by on the tracks just yards away from the path, and through the trees I watched the dull metal railroad cars pass us one by one. Off in the distance I spotted warm light spilling from underneath the tracks.

"Look! A tunnel!" I cheered, pointing toward the light, "I'll bet it's warmer under there!"

"You can go ahead without me," you offered. "I'll catch up."

"No. I'm sticking with you, buddy."

"I do not want you to catch hypothermia. I will get to the tunnel whether or not you stay with me. Go ahead and warm yourself."

You could be so stubborn. "We're in this together," I said.

"We will no longer be in this 'together' if you are made ill by the cold, Kylie. Go."

There was a seriousness in your voice that I knew not to fight. "Promise me you'll holler if something goes wrong, OK?"

"Affirmative."

I jogged ahead and leaped the stairs three at a time into the tunnel. Inside, the walls sheltered me from blasts of icy wind, and the snow could not reach me. I brushed off the flakes that had piled on every inch of my clothing and shook them out of my hair. Of all the things I'd thought to bring, I was especially grateful for the backpacking sleeping bag. I pulled it out of its tiny container and buried myself inside, leaning against the cold tunnel wall. There were a few minutes of silence, then came the click clacking of your wheels sliding down the snowy ramp.

"Almost there!" you called. Soon you appeared around the bend and wheeled yourself into the tunnel.

"I have arrived."

"I see that," I replied. "Here, let me get the ice off of you." I pulled out a t-shirt from my backpack and began brushing the snow out of your wheel joints. I then worked out the ice around your shoulder joints and breathed warm air into them. Slowly you were able to jerk your arms back down by your sides. As I snuggled back into my sleeping bag, I gently lay my head on your body.

"Do not cuddle with me in that manner," you warned. "I am cold. It will make you colder. If you curl up behind my left side, however, my engine will make you slightly warmer."

You've always been such a good robot.

I never expected you to run away with me. After all, it was written there specifically in your programming: *Always obey your human masters. Never do any action which will cause conflict with them.* And although my parents had never explicitly told you "Don't help Kylie run away from home," I could guarantee this was implied and would create conflict. I was scared to even *tell* you I was running away, but somehow I couldn't bear the thought of leaving without you. I risked my entire plan for the chance to bring you along, and I was lucky enough to have you come with me.

At the bottom corner of your left side, a small fan blew the warm air from your computer system. I put my hands against the metal grating and felt life flow back into my fingers. Then I snuggled as much of my body as I could in the warm spot created by your fan. You gently raised your hand to touch the top of my shoulder, and gently brushed your two rubbery finger ends along my shoulder blade. I smiled, closed my eyes and, without meaning to, drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 2

by Laura Schmidt

"It is morning, time to wake up," I heard your voice say next to me. A train rumbled somewhere overhead and when I opened my eyes I could see the early morning light filtering into the tunnel entrance. The snow had stopped sometime in the night and, unlike our cold walk, we would hopefully have some transportation today now that morning had come and transit lines were up and running. I groaned and could feel the marks on my head where it had been pressed against your metal casing while I slept. My right arm was in need of circulation after being pressed awkwardly against the hard cement floor all night, but at least I was warm. I stood up and slapped myself to get the blood flowing again.

"OK buddy, let's get you charged before we get going," I said, putting on my glasses and adjusting the MEHA (Maximum Efficiency High Absorption) light panels on your head to get the best sunlight from the tunnel entrance. Not many personal robots had panels this powerful, but there were advantages to finishing an advanced degree in robotics when you're still in your teens and needed an energy source to keep a robot pal going for an indefinite amount of time on the run.

"I will be fully charged in 11.7 minutes. You need charging too, Kylie," you said, pointing at the backpack lying on the floor.

"You're right," I laughed, moving over to pull a couple nutrient bars from the pack. "Thanks for always taking such good care of me," I said as I gnawed on the tough bar. Your LCD display smile danced across the screen.

We set out soon after with renewed energy from rest and nourishment, but also with urgency pulsing through my veins. I knew my parents would check all the local haunts, neighbors, and friends upon the discovery of my absence when they woke up, and after a few hours of that, they would call the authorities. We had to reach the municipal transportation station before then, or the transit lines would be on the alert looking for us.

The snow was still thick on the ground, but with the morning light and the skies no longer pelting us with snow, the going was easier today. My breath curled out in ghostly puffs before me with every few steps, and your wheel tracks kept their steady whirring and clicking behind me.

We made good time, and had only a few people in line in front of us at the transit station; a worn-looking building with a small waiting area and a few ticket windows.

"Where to?" asked the gruff man behind the cloudy ticket window.

"One way to the interstellar shuttle, one adult and one robot," I said.

"Robot class?" the man asked, peeking over my shoulder to see you properly.

“Personal Companion series DX-4,” I said.

“And I’ll need an ID from you, young lady” he said, which I promptly handed him. He stared at the ID photo of me taken a year ago when I turned eighteen, with frizzy untamable red hair and brown eyes glowing with energy. The image and age on the ID were mine, but the name “Dana Pristell” was not. I couldn’t risk a record of my movements getting back to the authorities or my parents. I saw the image glint at me as the ID was handed back, and garnered strength from that eighteen-year-old in the photo, so sure of herself and what she had to do.

After paying for our tickets, we hurried over to the platform where an idling bus heading for the shuttle site was waiting. They lowered the robot ramp for you and I clambered up the steps, looking into a sea of faces heading for work at the shuttle. It was tight, but we managed to find a couple seats near the back as the bus door clanged shut. I relaxed as I felt the vehicle hover lifts come to life and the bus lurched forward and picked up speed. We still had to make it onto the shuttle, but at least the first part of the journey had gone well.

I could feel your metal frame press close to my leg, either to clear the aisle as best as possible, or to reassure me of your presence. Either way I was grateful for you. My fingers started to trace the bolts of the seat distractedly. To keep them from disassembling the seating fixtures (a natural but bad habit for a robotics engineer), I instead moved my hand to my collar and pulled out the ivory pendant hanging from my necklace. Moving my thumb along the smooth back always comforted me, and I fingered the now well-known carving on the front. I closed my

eyes and was back in my grandmother's study they day she gave it to me when I was twelve.

"What is it made out of, Grandma?" I asked, looking curiously at the seamless white surface and deep furrows forming the intricate leafy carving on the front of the pendant.

"This is ivory," she said, "from the bones of an animal. You don't see much of it these days, and use of it on Tiranova is illegal." My eyes grew wide at those words, absorbing the both intriguing and dangerous concept of "illegal jewelry."

"Kylie, if it were up to me I wouldn't tell you this until you were much older, if ever," she said. The walls of books lining her study, usually so warm and welcoming, seemed to grow colder and the air got very still.

"This pendant is the key to our survival on Tiranova, and tells us something that only Old Earth remembers. My own mother gave it to me, but the full story had been lost when her turn came to receive the pendant. It is handed to each eldest girl in the family, and when your mother's turn came she had no interest in it. That is not uncommon in Tiranova today," she sighed, "with people caring less and less for anything having to do with Old Earth. Only my grandmother's grandmother would remember what it was like to live there before the migrations began. But it still has a part to play in our future, Kylie, and the day is coming soon when we shall need it desperately."

"Why, Grandma?" I asked, feeling frightened. "What's going to happen?" Grandma looked at me with her bright blue eyes, usually full of joy but today as solemn as the sea.

"I don't fully know, Kylie. That part of the story is gone. I only know that the sign when we shall need that help is coming soon." She reached across her desk to pull a worn-looking book from a nearby shelf and thumbed through a few handwritten pages. "My mother told me that the sign we're looking for is the disappearance of the Phoenix Galaxy, and already astronomers are watching it grow dimmer without any explanation of why. When it disappears completely, someone must take the pendant back to Old Earth and find the Starkweather family. The memory of the hope and aid we need remains with them, just as the memory of the pendant remains with us."

My twelve-year-old frame began shaking and grandma pulled me into a hug. "I know, I know," she said, stroking my unmanageable red hair. "It's a lot to take in. I hope it won't happen for many years, Kylie, but if I'm gone and the galaxy goes dark, then you might be the only one to help Tiranova."

I remembered those words as I stood less than a year later at grandma's graveside, and they blazed into a flame in my heart when the Phoenix Galaxy disappeared at the end of my eighteenth year. Astronomers called it an "unexplainable natural phenomenon" and worked tirelessly to detect its current location with every instrument they had available, but I knew that they would not, and could not, understand what that signaled for our life on Tiranova. Within a few weeks of planning following the galaxy's disappearance, I left my home on a snowy night with some provisions, my best friend,

the old worn book from grandma's study, and a pendant that was somehow supposed to save my world. I guess I could excuse some of my anxiety given those sobering realities.

"We're there," you said softly next to me as I opened my eyes and felt the bus come to a halt. I tucked the pendant back into my shirt. The passengers systematically filed off and moved toward their respective work sites. The calm monotony of a regular work day stilled my nerves a bit. I grabbed my backpack and saw you safely down the ramp off the bus, and then we made our way to the steel-sided shuttle departure building.

"Reservation for the 9:30 departure to Old Earth," I said, trying to sound confident.

"That's a long trip for someone your age on her own," the ticket agent said, looking me up and down.

"My family sent him with me," I said, pointing at you. You smiled your best smile. What a charmer, I thought to myself.

"Visiting family?" she asked, processing my reservation.

"Connecting with old friends," I said.

"No extra luggage?" she asked. I shook my head. "Here are your tickets," she said, handing them to me. "Report to launch pad C3, and the staff there will give you further instructions."

I waited in the shuttle, strapped into the seat with you secured to the floor next to me and bracing for the blast of the rockets that would signal our departure. My eyes kept looking out the window, scanning the area next to the launch pad for flashing

lights. My ears listened for sirens; any indication that they were closing the shuttle transport in their search for me. The shuttle began to roar to life around me. My hand once again searched to hold the pendant around my neck, and I felt your rubbery fingers grasp my other free hand. I squeezed them.

"Here we go," I said to you. You turned your head to me.

"I am with you, Dana," you said, already adapting my new name until we were on Old Earth and had disappeared long enough to escape detection. For that same reason in half an hour when we broke orbit, I would be in the bathroom with scissors removing my red hair and dying my remaining short hair brown.

The boosters screamed and I could feel the rocket thrust as my body pressed into the seat. Everything I knew was soon behind with the broad unknown ahead, framed by the darkness of space and speckled with starlight.

Chapter 3

by Peter Fenton

A mother's instincts are usually right. Amy thought to herself as she poured the pancake batter onto the griddle. *Something's just—odd—today.* Granted, things had never felt right since her mother passed, but a nervous knot had tied in her stomach that morning. She awoke before the sun rose because something just seemed—odd. Over and over she pondered this, as if pacing back and forth within her own mind. *Odd morning. Odd, odd, odd. Something's not right.* Yes, the winter chill had made for a bright and sunny morning, with the morning rays reflecting off the snow back through the kitchen window. Christmas had just come and gone, all the family had come in and out of her home with a joyful mix of conversation and relatives. She would return to her anchor desk today, delivering the national evening news to almost seven million people. There was absolutely nothing in Amy's little world to complain about. But something was just so darn odd that morning, and she was going to get to the bottom of—

"Oh, nice! Pancakes." She jerked her head around to see her son, wearing the same weathered green and blue striped t-shirt he had on the day before, now with a pair of oversized gray basketball shorts and his short dark hair in a mess of bedhead.

“Jonathan—” she said, breaking eye contact to flip a pancake. “I didn’t even hear you come downstairs...”

Jonathan cocked his head, perplexed. He and his mother both knew that he was not known for his subtlety. Amy, who was also quite the joyful talker, said nothing else and continued flipping pancakes. Even sixteen-year-old Jonathan knew something was amiss that morning, too.

“Mom?” Jonathan’s eyes gazing into hers like a concerned therapist. *Gosh, he looks just like his father. And worries just like him, too.* “Is everything all right?”

Oh, Jonathan dear, you don’t want to see your mother upset. I don’t even have a clue why I feel this way, I just do. I’ll lie. “Sorry, I was just caught up in—I don’t know. I haven’t had my coffee yet. Do you want some?” Amy offered, consoling herself that she didn’t actually end up lying.

“Yeah, thanks.” Amy scooped some coffee into their coffee maker and turned around, taken aback when she made eye contact with Jonathan again. His concerned expression had seemed to freeze on his face.

“Jonathan? Is everything all right... with you?” Amy nervously grinned.

“I mean, yeah—totally—everything’s fine with me—but... you’re not OK. Normally by now, I don’t know, you would’ve given me the informal news report of... everything.”

The master bedroom door opened. Jiang entered the kitchen, dressed in a full suit and tie, carrying a briefcase. “Good morning, dear,” he walked as a man on a mission to give his wife a

kiss. As he broke from the kiss, in one fluid motion he moved to pick up a bagel and his briefcase, and gave a simple “Morning, Jon” to his son.

“Morning, Dad,” Jonathan mumbled, still keeping watchful eyes on his mother.

“Heading in today—I’m assuming?” Amy smiled, as she handed her husband a travel cup of coffee.

“Yeah, I’m way behind on grading. I would’ve just graded from home today, but Dr. Horton texted and told me they need to meet with me—something about the Gen Ed they’re having me pick up next semester. Anyway,” Jiang smirked just like his son, Jonathan, “Zài huì.”

Amy smiled and rolled her eyes as Jiang exited to the garage. Always, always he liked to remind her that she was part of an interracial marriage. “We’ll have the most beautiful babies,” he always said in the early days of their marriage. And he was right as rain. The kids were adorable as babies, but even now they were very attractive from the inside out as they grew older. Jonathan was only sixteen but his whimsical, creative personality was only accentuated by his slender physique and ever-grinning half-German, half-Chinese face. And then, of course, there was her beautiful daughter, Kylie—*KYLIE*. *Where is Kylie?*

“Where is Kylie?” Amy echoed her thought aloud.

For the first time in five minutes, Jonathan’s face reanimated. “She’s not awake yet? Did she take sleeping pills or something?”

That’s what was odd this morning! Kylie’s not awake yet. Amy picked up the spatula and took the pancakes off the griddle onto a plate.

"I'm assuming those pancakes are for me" Jonathan gestured toward the plate.

"Of course—but would you mind making sure your sister's OK?"

"Come on, Mom, don't we have a robot for that?" Jonathan smirked. "I'm kidding. Yeah, I can."

"Wait, wait, yes—that's what it's for, right?" Amy was a little disappointed in herself for asking her son to do such an Old Earth kind of task. *Our home is Tiranova now, Amy! We have a freaking robot to do silly stuff like that. Goodness, pull yourself together, woman.* "DX-4!" Amy called out.

Silence.

"Weird. Where is he?" Jonathan asked, knowing the family's DX-4 responded to its own name better than a golden retriever.

"I don't know. Jonathan, could you just run up and knock on her door?"

"Yeah, I could've done that anyway." Jonathan walked away from his plate toward the stairwell.

"Just knock, she might take a while to get up—and she needs her privacy."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Jonathan dismissively exhaled as he made his way up the stairs.

Amy took her own plate of pancakes and mug of coffee to the table and sat down, looking out into their wooded backyard. They'd moved to this house shortly after she and Jiang were married. They'd been so eager to leave Old Earth then, so eager to finally join the thousands of others who had gone before to colonize Tiranova over generations before her. "A new world, a new start" was the promise that coaxed so many from Old Earth. Was she actually feeling sentimental about it now?

A smile spread across her face. *I just wish Jonathan could've experienced Old Earth for himself. The little things in life like waking your sister up—that's just lost in this new world. I'm so happy we're raising him to have such a good attitude—he doesn't think he's above stuff like that.* But she stopped. Her smile disappeared. The knot in her stomach retied itself—

Kylie never wakes up later than I do. I would've seen her—I would've made her pancakes.

Suddenly, her husband hurried back in through the door. "I forgot my ID," Jonathan heard his father explain, followed by Amy's request for him to wait a moment before leaving again. Jonathan paused to rap on his sister's bedroom door.

Knock, knock.

"Kylie?"

Silence.

KNOCK, KNOCK.

"Kylie? You up?"

Silence.

BANG! BANG!

"Kylie?"

Kylie certainly would've woken up by that point. Jonathan jostled the door open and stepped inside his sister's room. It looked like a crime scene—the covers were strewn off of her bed, the drawers in her dresser were all left open.

Jonathan ran down the stairs and nearly knocked over his mother, who had made her way to go upstairs. Amy's eyes welled up. "She's not in her room" Jonathan said, surprisingly cool.

"What do you mean 'not there?' Where would she be at this hour?" Jiang asked in disbelief, joining them at the bottom of the stairs.

Amy hyperventilated, but managed to eke out an intelligible sound—

“Call her.”

Jonathan pulled out his phone, realizing the gravity of his mother's worry and adopting a bit of it for the first time as he uttered, “Call Kylie.”

The phone sat, dialing.

Chapter 4

by Claire Reck

"Brrring, brrring, brrring!"

Jonathan jumped in surprise at the answering response to his call to Kylie filtering down the stairway from her room. He had not been expecting her phone to still be in the house, but he should have guessed that she would not bring along a device with GPS on it while she was running away. Kylie was clever. *Stupid, Jonathan, stupid*, he thought. *Why didn't I see this coming?* He should have known better. He should have warned his parents when he saw that passage in the book Kylie kept hidden in her room. Instead, he had told no one. And now this.

"I'll go look for her phone and see whether she left anything else," Jonathan said aloud to his parents. He did not tell them that he knew where Kylie had gone. Seeing his mom's worry reinforced his decision to stay silent. Perhaps he should have told his parents, but now it was most decidedly too late. If they knew where Kylie had gone and that Jonathan had known she might leave, he would be in trouble, and they would be even more worried about Kylie's safety.

Taking the stairs two at a time, he arrived in Kylie's room before he had decided what he ought to do. Taking a closer look at the belongings strewn throughout the room, Jonathan noticed the

phone which Kylie had left sitting on her dresser. The screen lit up with the words, "Call from Jonathan Lee." Jonathan clicked to refuse the call so that he could hear his own thoughts instead of the buzzing of the phone. As he stood in silence, he heard his parents' voices coming up from downstairs.

"We have to start looking for her immediately." This was the voice of Jonathan's mom. "Perhaps she went to one of the academic buildings to catch up on her studies. Or to a friend's house without telling us. Are the robotics supply stores even open this early? Maybe she and DX-4 went out for a spare part. I'll phone in to the news station to let them know I'll be late. Jonathan will be fine here."

Jonathan smiled at the disparity between her chatter and his dad's short reply: "We'll find her, Amy. My grading can wait; let's go."

Jonathan had no idea of what to do. He knew where Kylie was and he could guess what time she had boarded the shuttle: 9:30. She would have traveled through the night and that was the earliest shuttle that would leave for Old Earth. She would not risk missing that shuttle to take a later one because she would know that their parents would find out she was missing before the morning was old and report her disappearance. That was the difference between Kylie and Jonathan; she methodically planned all of her actions, whereas he made spontaneous decisions or didn't act at all.

"Jonathan! We're leaving to search the neighborhood for Kylie, and we'll be back soon!" his mother shouted up the stairs to him, not realizing that he had heard every word of their conversation.

"Ok, I'm sure you'll find her! I'll stay here in case she comes back to the house," he shouted back, feeling a sharp prick of his conscience at lying to his parents. He was certain that they would not find her, and he had no intention of waiting in the house for Kylie's return.

Once he heard the door slam shut and the whirring of the transportation pod start up then slowly get quieter as his parents went in search of Kylie, Jonathan hurried downstairs trying to decide what he should do next. On the table he saw the answer he was searching for. The ID card lying there and the photo beneath the name "Jiang Lee" gave Jonathan a brilliant idea. Brilliant or maybe insane.

The remaining transportation pod in the launch portal of the house sputtered to life as Jonathan inserted his father's ID card into the key identification slot. Jiang must have forgotten to bring his ID card along in the chaos of this morning, since they had taken Amy's pod. Jonathan gave himself an internal pep talk to keep up his courage. *Ok, ok, ok. This is it. Here goes nothing. Come on, I can do this. I've been training to drive the pod. I may not have my license yet but that doesn't matter. After all, I'm sure Kylie would have taken a pod if she had access to one of our parents' ID cards. If Kylie could do this, then so can I. No one will recognize that it's my father's ID card because I look so much like him. I've got this.*

The pod jerked into motion as Jonathan pressed down on the accelerator, coming dangerously close to crashing into the left side of the launch portal. Jonathan yanked the controller to

the right, overcorrecting and nearly plowing down the mounds of snow concealing his mother's perfectly square bushes, genetically designed for easy coverage when watering.

However, after Jonathan managed to steer the pod out of the portal and into the public road system, there was more space to operate the vehicle, and Jonathan was able to navigate to the station without any further mishaps besides missing one turn and accidentally zooming through a red light. These were not major concerns considering the situation. *After all, thought Jonathan, it should take at least a couple hours before my parents return to discover the missing pod. And when they also discover their son hopped onto an interstellar shuttle...yeah, no need to think about that just now.*

Hurrying up the curving steel steps leading to the bus station, Jonathan went through a mental checklist of the items he'd hastily acquired before leaving the house. Borrowed suit and tie belonging to his father which he had changed into in the station's sanitary room. Check. An ID card with a picture on it taken several years ago closely resembling himself even though it said "Jiang Lee" instead of "Jonathan Lee." Check. Enough money to ease the suspicions of any officials who might question him. Check. And finally, the knowledge of what time the next shuttle for Old Earth would leave (11:00) and the courage to search for his sister. Check. And maybe not check. But too late now. Was there anything else? This plan had been concocted so quickly, in the moment... What if he had left something out? What if he was forgetting something important that would get him instantly

caught? No. He had to believe this would work and bluff the rest.

"One adult ticket to Old Earth, please."

The girl working the ticket booth looked down at him dubiously. Jonathan was suddenly conscious that the suit sleeves were too long and that his hair was probably still in a terrible state of bedhead, and that coming here had been a stupid idea. The girl at the window smacked the gum she was chewing and eventually nodded her head though she still looked doubtful.

"Yeah, alright. Here ya go, Mr. Lee. Head to launch pad B2."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Jonathan hurried onto the bus she indicated, and took a seat near the back and out of notice. It was one seat away from where Kylie had sat an hour and twenty minutes ago, had he known it. Jonathan crossed and then uncrossed his legs. He set down the briefcase he had borrowed from his dad onto the seat next to him and then picked it up again. He combed through his hair with his fingers. He glanced at all the strangers around him who wore business suits and blank stares. None of them glanced back at him. He tried to stay calm. *Halfway there*. He leaned back and thought about the moment when he first saw that passage in Kylie's book. The one he had told no one that he had seen, not even Kylie.

When Jonathan was nine, he had gone into Kylie's room to borrow one of her textbooks for his science and engineering class. Kylie had stacks of books about robotics and engineering, so he knew she would have something useful.

“Kyyylieeee!” he had called before walking into the room. She hadn’t responded, but the door was open so he thought it would be OK if he just walked inside. After he grabbed the book he needed, he saw part of the gold lettering of another book behind it. Curious, Jonathan had removed the books in front of it and opened the old, worn pages. It looked like a catalogue of Old Earth plants and stories. Disappointed, Jonathan almost put it back, but then the book fell open to a page that had Kylie’s bookmark in it.

At the top of the page was a description of a material called “ivory” and something about the coming destruction of Tiranova. Below the description was a passage written in his grandma’s spidery handwriting recording a conversation between her and Kylie. Jonathan skimmed the passage, noting the most important parts. *Kylie has a pendant? One that she has to take to Old Earth? But why?* However, reading further Jonathan saw no explanation, just more plant descriptions. At that moment he heard the floor creak downstairs. Hurriedly, he put the old book back in its hiding spot and the book about robotics in front of it. He left Kylie’s room and never mentioned the incident, even to his sister, partially because he had been prying, and partially because he was afraid of what the information could mean. So he tried to put the book and the pendant from his mind. But now, as he went in search of Kylie, he leaned back in the bus seat, making an effort to recall everything.

“Reporting a missing person: Kylie Lee. Kylie, report to Deck 7 immediately. Citizens of Tiranova, please look for this girl.”

Jonathan heard the announcement blaring over the speaker at the interstellar station the moment he stepped off the bus and saw the announcement screen flash a picture of Kylie, her red hair as wild as ever. He hurried to launch pad B2, hoping that no one would recognize him as Kylie's brother.

This announcement meant that his parents must have already reported Kylie to the authorities. Jonathan knew they could discover that he was missing at any moment. It was important that he board this shuttle right away. The screen beside the launch pad read: "Now boarding for the 11:00 shuttle." Perfect timing. Jonathan strapped himself into his seat. His last view of the interstellar station was bright letters on the announcement screen which scrolled, "Reporting a missing person: Jonathan Lee..."

Jonathan shut his eyes and felt the shuttle's rockets come to life somewhere beneath him. Soon he was hurtling through space in his sister's wake. Somewhere back in a small Tiranovan ticket booth, a gum-chewing girl wondered why the last name of Lee sounded familiar. Somewhere on Old Earth, Kylie was searching for a family with the name Starkweather. And on an interstellar shuttle carrying a member of the Lee family to Old Earth for a second time that day, Jonathan was dreaming. He dreamed that he saw a boy with curly red hair and a blue hoodie in a crowd of people. For some reason, this boy was important. Jonathan knew that he must follow this person, though he had never seen him before. He called out, "Wait!" but before he could reach the boy to ask his name or whether he had seen Kylie, the boy vanished,

and Jonathan woke up from his nap to find himself still in the shuttle. *It was just a dream*, he thought. Somewhere on Old Earth, a boy with curly red hair wearing a blue hoodie darted through a crowd of people. He was waiting for someone.

Chapter 5

by Bryn Phinney

"Reentrance to Old Earth has begun. We will arrive at Houston, Texas in approximately five minutes and ahead of schedule. Our crew is proud to announce that your craft achieved the second highest daily speed of transit of any Trips Interstellar flight. Passengers please prepare for departure." The speakers boomed into the shuttle cabin and split Jonathan's head.

Like I didn't know already! Despite the previous experience of several interspace trips, reentry still made him nauseated every time. *When are they ever going to find a way to land that doesn't empty the contents of everyone's stomach?* Fifteen minutes ago he was desperately sorry to have slept through the shuttlecraft's free breakfast service. Now he was actually grateful. *Kylie better be here, or I'm the biggest loser ever.* His fingers fiddled with the straps of his father's briefcase. *I wonder what's inside this thing anyway.* He clicked it open. *Of course, papers to grade.* Beneath the papers, in the bottom of the case, lay a long-forgotten comb. The craft and Jonathan's stomach settled onto solid ground as he gripped the comb and snapped the case shut. If only his mom knew that he was going to voluntarily comb his hair...

"Welcome to Old Earth." The platform sign looked a little ragged to Jonathan—old itself. He fought his way through the swarm of chattering vacationers and confident, quick-striding businessmen. There must be an information booth or something. *Keep calm, keep calm. You can do this.* He peered back and forth through the stream, looking for signs. Suddenly, out of the swirl, it was *him*. Curly red hair. Blue hoodie. His dream came whirling back. The boy's back was turned, and as the ebb subsided, he began to retreat with it. *Wait!*

"Hey, wait!" Jonathan called out above the din, keenly aware of severe *déjà vu*. "Hey, excuse me!" Rushing up, he tapped the boy's arm. The hoodie stopped short sharply, pulling back to reveal startled blue eyes and a face no older than Jonathan's own.

"What do you want?" asked the boy. Jonathan suddenly realized that he had not really thought through what he was going to say if the boy didn't recognize him.

"I'm sorry, I—"

"Wait a minute." The other boy was sizing him up. "Are you Mr. Lee?"

A vision of his father's ID materialized, right along with one of an angry officer hauling him before the Tiranovan juvenile judicial assembly.

"Uh, yeah..." Jonathan said.

The blue eyes suddenly lit up. "I'm so glad I didn't miss you! How did you know that I was waiting for you?"

"I didn't. I mean, I did, but it's confusing."

"Then you know. Well, I'm glad you stopped me. I would have left without you. You look so much younger than your picture."

"I am," Jonathan mumbled.

The boy didn't seem to have heard him. "I'm Kean Starkweather, by the way. My parents can't wait to meet you." He led the way out to the station's mostly empty parking lot.

"Kean... How do you spell that? Wait—" Kean had begun to unlock what appeared to be a vehicle with four wheels. "Is this a car? Like in the old movies?" Jonathan angled around the vehicle to get a better view.

Kean laughed. "Yeah, a Jeep to be exact. And it's spelled K-E-A-N, sort of like 'keen' even though it's pronounced kee-un."

"You drive?"

"Of course."

Glancing out the Jeep window, Jonathan decided that there wasn't really that much to worry about running into anyway: far from geometrical bushes to avoid, the landscape was, as his high school agriculture teacher would say, "imprudently verdant."

The Starkweather home was modest and, to Jonathan's mind, incredibly remote. No houses were anywhere in sight among the tangled vegetation when Kean shut down the motor and led the way inside a warped wooden front door. Forty-five minutes later, Jonathan scooted satisfactorily into a leather chair, glancing beyond the rim of his coffee mug to the generous backyard.

"Thank you so much for lunch."

Mrs. Starkweather smiled and nodded across the table. "You were hungry." Her red hair and blue eyes mirrored Kean's across the high tabletop. Irish, Jonathan suddenly recalled from one of his

books—those were the Old Earth people with red hair. Didn't his mom have some Irish relatives in the past too...?

Mr. Starkweather leaned back with his own steaming cup. "So about why you're here. It's been a long time since we've contacted anyone from your family, but I'm so glad that it's finally happened. With the loss of the Phoenix Galaxy, things are becoming urgent for everyone in the Milky Way, Old Earth and Tiranova included. What did you bring with you?"

"With me? Nothing." Jonathan said, waving away the briefcase resting next to his chair which they had begun to look at expectantly. "You see I didn't come here to bring anything." Mr. and Mrs. Starkweather exchanged glances. "I came to follow my sister."

Mr. Starkweather leaned forward. "Your sister? Your sister's here already?"

"Yeah, she got here first. There is something she has to do—I don't really know what it is, but I need to find her."

"We didn't know she was coming. You were the only Lee on any interstellar flight charts. If we'd known..." he shook his head. "Do your parents know where you are?"

"Not exactly." Jonathan rubbed his thumb against the mug's ceramic rim.

Mr. Starkweather frowned. "Without permission?"

"It's kinda complicated, but she didn't really have a choice...I didn't either." A twinge of guilt spiraled up his back with the last words, but he drowned it quickly in the coffee.

"So she may have come with a pseudonym. Well, if we'd known, we would have been there. That way she wouldn't have had to search for us all alone."

"So she came to find you?"

"Well, I assumed so. But Jonathan, I think this conversation needs to wait for a bit. Right now, you need sleep."

From deep in the leather, Jonathan had already found that the house, red-haired woman, and adventures of the past twenty-four hours were rolling into the wonderful, thick blanket of unconsciousness. *Why is interstellar travel always so draining? I can never sleep properly on the shuttle, and even when I can...*

"But Kylie—" The words came struggling out.

"You are in no shape to find her now. We'll consider next steps in a few hours when you feel better."

He barely remembered mumbling a response before sunshine and the smell of frying bacon were sneaking their way between bedroom curtains and his thick bed covers.

"Good morning!" Mr. Starkweather greeted him from the kitchen. "Talk about tired! There was no waking you last night. Come on and join us for breakfast."

It was one of the best breakfasts, and certainly the best bacon, that Jonathan could ever remember. With a twinge he thought of his mother's pancakes and the chaotic morning forty-eight hours ago that had brought him here. He hoped his parents were doing OK. Eventually, he plated one last piece of the Starkweather's delectable bacon and refilled his mug for the final time. Mrs. Starkweather leaned across her empty plate.

"Jonathan, do you know anything about your ancestor, Liam Clay?"

"My mother told me that he was a great scientist."

Mrs. Starkweather nodded, "And a fantastic mathematician. Back when Tiranova was still a new frontier, so to speak, he predicted some crucial problems with the settlement. No one really knows what they were, but it was eminently clear that the government didn't appreciate the interference."

"So that was why they demoted him," Kean put in.

"Right." Mr. Starkweather agreed. "They even kept him from publishing, all because his solution to the problem was not in their economic interest. But Jonathan, Clay knew that what he had discovered could save the lives of thousands in the future. So he hid the secret in such a way that it would be remembered: he kept something in his own family, to have with them no matter where they went. And he gave his best friend and fellow scientist, my ancestor Aldan Starkweather, the other half to understanding his solution, which I gave to Kean." He placed his hand over Kean's.

"Aldan's old lab is actually pretty close to here," added Kean.

"Wait..." Jonathan leaned forward. "The pendant. That's what it is."

"Pendant? What do you mean?"

"Yes. Kylie has always kept it close, almost secretly. And I think my grandmother gave it to her. Maybe that's our family's clue."

"What's it like?" Kean asked.

"Some kind of special stone, I think... ivory?"

"Bone, not stone," Mr. Starkweather explained. "Interesting. And what was the design on the front?"

"I don't know. I've never really seen it up close."

The man nodded. "Well, first, we need to find your sister, and sooner than later. Earth is a wilder place than it used to be, especially after so many people moved to Tiranova these past years. We're not the only ones who know of Clay's predictions. There are some others who are now beginning to put the pieces together; they know that the solution could be worth thousands of dollars in blackmail, possibly even start a war. And," he added, "ivory is a rare good in its own right."

"But how am I supposed to find her?" Jonathan asked. Images of choking to death in a huge tangle of overgrown trees or running for days from black masked assassins were taking visible shape.

CLICK! CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!

"That's the door, but what a nervous knock!" Mrs. Starkweather exclaimed as the little group was startled to their feet, and Kean went to pull the thick door open. A single boxy figure whirled in from out of the damp summer evening and up to Jonathan. It was DX-4.

Chapter 6

by Taylor Schaible

Twelve hours earlier

"Welcome to the Houston Interplanetary Shuttle Port. The current time is 5:35 pm. Temperature: 86 degrees Fahrenheit. Weather: humid, with 60% chance of rain overnight. We at Interplanetary Starlines would like to apologize again for the 5-hour delay. Enjoy your stay in Houston, Texas!"

The gears in your treads whirl softly as you and Kylie exit the shuttle arrival building. The air outside is thick with humidity, almost like being covered with a blanket, and the forest is so overgrown it practically pushes itself up to the shuttle port's doorstep.

"All right, DX-4," says Kylie, "What can you tell me about where we are."

You pull up data on Houston from the web, "We have landed on the edge of the Chihuahuan Rain Forest. Formerly, the Chihuahuan Desert."

"This used to be a desert?"

The fact is certainly a surprising one. With such muggy tropical air and overabundance of plant life, it's hard to picture the area as dry and rocky, as it must have been long ago. "The rain forest is a young one, resulting from rapid changes in weather patterns within the last century. It has since overtaken the desert and even grown beyond its boundaries."

"How about places to stay? Any hotels? Inns? Maybe something inconspicuous?"

You quickly scan your database, bringing up a map of the local area. "There is a bed-and-breakfast two miles away in that direction." You point toward the east. "Small, but cozy."

"Well," says Kylie, "We'd better check it out."

The bed-and-breakfast in question is a two-story Pre-Migration-style house that looks like it is being swallowed by the enormous trees and vines that surround it. The sign at the end of the driveway reads "Tucker Bed and Breakfast - Rooms available."

"Wow," says Kylie, "Have you ever seen a house like this before?"

You briefly scan the house, "Records show that this house was built in 1884 by a settler named Amos Tucker."

"1884? That's ancient!"

"On the contrary, historians define the time period known as Ancient as being a predecessor of the Greco-Roman..."

"DX-4," says Kylie, giving you a sympathetic smile, "I know that. I'm just teasing."

"Oh." Lately, you've been getting better at recognizing little quirks in human communication, like sarcasm or exaggeration, but you still slip up sometimes.

Kylie steps onto the porch and knocks. A woman with well-tanned skin and iron-gray hair answers. Her face is wrinkled with both laugh-lines and frown-lines, but otherwise, she is still in good physical condition.

"Welcome to the Tucker Bed-and-Breakfast." she says, a distinct Old Earthen twang in her voice, "What can I do fer you, miss?"

"Um, hi," says Kylie, "I'm K— I'm Dana Pristell. My robot and I need a room for the night."

"Yer in luck, I've got several open upstairs. Rebekah Tucker-Hernandez, by the way," she reaches out for a handshake, "But folks around here just call me Beck."

Kylie shakes the woman's hand and follows her into the house. It is decorated in an eclectic mix of modern and Old West styles. Digi-frames hang next to sepia-colored photographs on the walls. Wooden rocking chairs in the parlor are refitted with cushions that give automatic back massages. The woman, Beck, directs you toward the robot lift before guiding Kylie up the worn wooden steps. You meet up on the second floor, outside one of the bedrooms.

"Here we are," Beck says, "The Rosewood room. Y'all get settled and then come down for supper. Wednesday's meatloaf night." She turns and walks back down the hall.

The first thing Kylie does upon entering the room is drop her backpack to the floor and flop onto the quilt-covered bed. "So tired," she groans. "Tired and hungry." Fascinating how something as mundane as space travel can have such a noticeable effect on human operating systems.

"Charging time for Kylie." you say.

Kylie sits up on the bed, "Think Beck's meatloaf is any good?"

"I suspect it can't be any worse than interstellar shuttle food."

Kylie laughs at that, which causes a smile to appear on your LCD screen. "Come on, buddy, let's go."

Several minutes later, Kylie has filled up her plate with a slice of meatloaf and piles of mashed potatoes and is digging in at the large dining room table.

Beck sticks her head out of the kitchen doorway, "Everything tasting good?" Kylie gives her a thumbs-up. The bed-and-breakfast doesn't appear to be particularly busy. The only other guests at the table are a couple in their late twenties, pouring over a travel brochure and discussing the best place to go zip-lining.

Once Kylie has finished her meal, she waves Beck over and asks her if she's heard of the Starkweathers.

"Starkweathers..." says Beck, "Like Aldan Starkweather? The famous scientist?"

"Yeah," says Kylie. "Scientist. That sounds right."

"Can't say I know them personally, but Dr. Starkweather had a lab here in Houston. It's about a twenty minute drive from here. I can call a taxi cab for you in the morning, if you want."

"Yes, that'd be great." says Kylie, "In the early morning, if it's not too much trouble."

"Not sure what you're gonna find there, though. That lab's been shut down since the government pulled their funding. After Starkweather and Clay retired, there were a few scientists who wanted to continue their research, but the powers that be said they were wasting taxpayer dollars with research that uncovered nothing useful. I dunno, smells more like a conspiracy if you ask me."

Conspiracy. You tuck that word into your memory bank and make a note to run a search on "Starkweather and Clay conspiracy" later.

Kylie thanks Beck for the meal and you both make your way upstairs, her by the staircase, you by the lift. Once back in your room, Kylie changes into an old t-shirt and shorts and climbs into bed, carefully placing her glasses on the side table. "You ready to find the Starkweathers tomorrow, DX-4?"

"Affirmative," you say. "You still have the pendant?"

"Got it right here," she says, pulling the necklace out of her shirt.

"Very good," you say, wheeling yourself into a corner and preparing to shut down.

After a few minutes though, you hear Kylie roll over in bed. "DX-4, can you tell me a story?" She is staring up at the ceiling, playing with her newly short, newly brown hair.

"You cannot sleep?"

She shakes her head, "It's too loud outside." Indeed, the calls of birds and insects and other rain forest noises can be heard coming from the other side of the window. "I was wondering if you could tell me one of your bedtime stories. You know, like the ones you told Jonathan and me when we were kids."

A smile spreads across your LCD screen. Kylie has not asked for a bedtime story since she was very young, but it has always been a favorite function of yours. "What would you like to hear? The Three Little Martians? The Droids and the Shoemaker? The Little Spaceship that Could?"

"How about Snow White and the Seven Cyborgs?" says Kylie. "I always liked the way you told

that one.” You pull up the text of that story from your memory bank and begin.

You get to the part where the evil queen asks her magic port screen who the fairest maiden in the land is when you hear Kylie snoring softly, already asleep.

“Good night, Kylie,” you say, pulling her quilt up for her. A strange but not unpleasant warmth fills your circuits. If you were human, you might have called it tenderness. As it is, you dismiss it and return to your corner, shutting down for the night.

Chapter 7

by Carolyn Greco

The next morning, Kylie awoke to the sound of chattering rainforest creatures outside and the smell of fresh bacon and eggs. You were already up, standing by the window to catch the rays of the early morning sun on your solar panels. "Good morning!" you said. "Are you fully recharged?"

"Morning," mumbled Kylie, her smile eclipsed by a yawn. She stretched and yawned again before realizing that you'd asked her a question. "Sorry, buddy, my system takes a while to boot up in the morning," she laughed, "but yes, I am fully charged, and ready to find the Starkweathers."

She slowly got to her feet and stumbled across the room to the little mirror that hung above the old fashioned bureau. It took her several minutes to calm her hair which, now that it was cut short, was even wilder than before. But soon she was ready, repacked her bag, and the two of you followed the smell of the bacon and soon found yourselves in the dining area. The place wore a more cheerful look in the morning than it had at night, and was busier too. The new sunlight shone through the patterned curtains, and the guests chattered and laughed as Beck moved about the tables, talking to the customers and serving their food.

Kylie chose a table by the front window, and you rolled up close beside her. "I feel better already," she whispered to you, looking up and smiling as Beck approached with her tray of steaming food.

"Good morning, Miss Pristell!" exclaimed the woman. "I'm glad to see you up and about. I was just on my way to call you, in case you were still asleep. The taxi will be here in about half an hour to take you to the old Starkweather lab, if you still want to go."

"Oh, yes please! Thank you, Beck."

"That's alright, dearie, though for the life of me I can't see why you'd ever want to take a look at that old place. Now, what'll it be for breakfast?"

Kylie placed her order, and you backed up closer to her side and looked out at the other guests. You could see the zip-lining couple from the night before, drinking coffee and watching something on a small hand-held device. There was a family of five about one of the large tables, and three more sets of couples about the smaller ones; and there was one man who appeared to be traveling alone, wearing a dark suit and tie, sitting at one of the far tables, pouring intently over a stack of papers in a briefcase.

These were all the people you saw, sitting about tables in that homey little bed and breakfast. You didn't see me—but I saw you. I had the advantage there, for my chair was behind you, and was somewhat more in the shadows. And I watched you then, even as I had the night before—you and your mistress, the dark-eyed girl who traveled with no luggage and went by two different names. She ate her breakfast quickly, stopping now and then

to say something to you. She was immensely fond of you, and I understood at once that you had been through a great deal together. You probably wonder how I know so much about this—but I have observed both humans and robots for many years, and know something of how they function; and besides, I had been listening at your window the night before.

The girl finished her breakfast and settled back in her seat to wait for the taxi. Her eyes followed the road, resting on the spot where it disappeared into the forest. “I wonder...” she murmured, idly playing with her necklace. She pulled the pendant out from beneath her shirt and turned it over in her hand, causing the sunlight to reflect off its smooth surface. Ivory—real ivory! I had been right in my guess. When she showed up the night before, asking for a room, I'd caught a glimpse of it—enough to make me suspect, but not enough to make me sure. And so I had followed her, and watched her, being careful not to get in range of your sensors. I didn't know if you yourself knew the value of the thing you carried, or what it was made of, but I saw that it mattered to your mistress, and that you would defend it for that reason alone.

Presently the din of the rainforest was interrupted by the steady noise of a taxi motor. Kylie's eyes lit up, and she pushed back her chair and walked quickly to the door. You were right behind her as she paid Mrs. Tucker-Hernandez for her room and the food, and stepped confidently out to the waiting cab.

I waited until she had gotten in and given her directions to the taxi driver before making my appearance.

"Excuse me," I said, running up, "but are you by any chance going downtown?"

"Not all the way into the city," said the driver. "We're stopping at the old lab."

"Oh, that's alright." I turned to Kylie. "Do you mind if I come along? I'll split the cost of the cab."

She looked slightly taken aback, but answered, "Sure! No problem." I smiled as I climbed into the cab. This girl was either extraordinarily naïve, or extraordinarily unwilling to cause a disturbance and draw attention to herself. The driver hopped out of the cab and went to open the compartment in the back of the cab, which was used for luggage, robots, animals, or anything else the passengers had that was too big to fit comfortably in the back seat. You looked at me—I cannot tell if you hated me then, but certainly you did not smile. And then the cabbie loaded you into the back compartment, slammed the doors, revved up the engine, and we were off down the bumpy Texas road.

We rode in silence for some time. I initially tried to strike up a conversation with the girl, but she wasn't very communicative, and told me next to nothing about her home, her family, or her business at the old Starkweather lab. She seemed uncomfortable with all of my questions, and drew back further into her corner of the cab. Her hands twitched uneasily, and she drew her necklace out and clasped it tightly. That, at last, was what I'd been hoping for.

"That's a very pretty necklace," I said.

She took one look at me and went as white as a sheet. I've never seen anybody change color so quickly, not in all my years of doing this. But the

kid had guts. She didn't miss a beat, and her voice was only a little breathless when she said, "My grandmother gave it to me."

"May I look at it?"

She unclasped her hand from the pendant, but did not remove it from her neck. She was clever, this girl. But now for the first time I saw the carving on the ivory—a fine, intricate, perfectly preserved symbol that would make the value of the necklace nearly double what I had thought it would be.

I held out my hand. "I should like to have a closer look at it, if you don't mind."

"What is your name?" she asked, sharply.

"Roderick Stephanoso."

She shook her head.

The cab jolted suddenly as we went over a large pothole. "We're coming up on the lab, Miss," the driver called back. I knew I had to act quickly, or I'd lose my chance. I pulled a switchblade from my pocket and pointed it at her.

"Give it to me."

She stared at me uncomprehendingly. "What? Why?"

"Do you know what this is?"

She shook her head again.

"It's a knife. I'm threatening you with it. Give me the necklace." She seemed to understand. Apparently she wasn't used to seeing people threatened with such low-tech weapons. But she shook her head, and shot a glance into the back of the cab. You could hear what we were saying, but the back of the seats prevented you from interfering. I pressed closer with the knife, about to demand the necklace again; when suddenly I

heard the *beep, beep!* of the cabbie's transmitter radio, and I understood that our previous conversation had been recorded and broadcasted to all other registered vehicles in the area. All the local police cars would be heading toward us in minutes, along with whoever or whatever else had been listening to the police information transmitters. There were gangs on this side of the forest that were no laughing matter either.

"Stop this cab and turn it around," I said, pointing my knife at the cabbie.

"Yessir," he said, stepping hard onto the breaks.

The cab screeched to a halt as if it had hit a brick wall. Kylie had her seatbelt off and sprang out of the cab quicker than lightening. She raced around to the back to let you out. The moment your wheel treads touched the ground she was off, with you by her side, sprinting along a chain link fence toward the lab's gatehouse on the edge of the forest. I ran after her and caught her arm, trying to grasp the pendant with my other hand—but she twisted and fought me, and I never caught it. We struggled briefly—and suddenly, out of nowhere, a group of men in tan uniforms sprang up and charged at us.

I knew them at once by the insignia on their jackets—they were the Elite Guards, the government's henchmen. I had met them before, and I still had several rather ugly burn marks on my back from the encounter. I was expecting somebody to show up in response to the cabbie's call, but not them, and not nearly so soon. No way could they have made it out from the city that quickly. They must have already been somewhere nearby...

the old lab? But that couldn't be right; it had been abandoned for years.

I released Kylie's arm and bolted down the road. I figured my life was more valuable than a bit of ivory, and that the Guards would have better things to do than chase a runaway jewel thief. I heard them yelling. "Stop! Stand your ground!" and heard footsteps close behind me, accompanied by a whirring sound I did not recognize. I looked over my shoulder, and there was Kylie, running close behind me, and you, bumping along after her, carrying her backpack over your metal shoulders.

Why on earth is she running? I thought, but then I saw the fear in her eyes, and heard the harsh voices of the Guards, and I realized they were after both of us, and already had the cab driver out of the car with his hands over his head.

"Stand your ground, or we'll open fire!" came the shout from behind us. Kylie fixed her eyes on the gatehouse ahead of us and sprinted like a runner charging toward the finish line, running so fast that she even passed me.

"Stand by," called the commander's voice—then a moment of silence— "Fire!"

The whole world exploded around us. Bullets and dust filled the muggy air, swirling about us like a sudden sandstorm. I felt a searing pain in my shoulder, and Kylie went down, doing three summersaults before landing on her stomach. I kept going—or I meant to, but my foot caught on a tree root and sent me sprawling. But you hadn't been hit. You slowed down, and stopped beside her. "Are you hurt?" you asked her.

"A bit," she answered, looking up at you. "I can't run. You have to get out of here..." she coughed in the dust, bending over to shield her face.

"I won't leave you," you said, drawing closer to her.

"You must," gasped the girl. Then she had an idea. "Take this," she said, slipping the pendant from her neck, "and go to the lab for help. Go!"

You hesitated.

"They won't hurt me if I don't have it. You have to find the Starkweathers and give it to them—it's our only chance!" She forced the pendant into your metal hand, and sank back down onto the ground.

"I will do it for you, Kylie," you said, quietly. Then you turned, and rolled away. I tried to grab the pendant as you went past—old habits, I guess—but you were too quick, and vanished quietly into the dust cloud just as the soldiers advanced.

Chapter 8

by Shinyoung Kim

Tiranova, 19:00 hours.

Bright neon lights were glittering everywhere, significantly blurring the difference between night and day. The central city of Tiranov was the hub of the great space-born construct created generations ago when great men and women reached out to the void of space. Looking down from the sky, Tiranov was completely covered in thick clouds and smog. The great towers scraping the skies were outstandingly visible, since the lower extremity of the city was completely veiled in vapor. The VTOL plane ripped through the clouds, swift and silent, just like its passenger was in battle. It landed on the helipad of one of the skyscrapers that greatly resembled an ancient oriental temple or palace. The plane left immediately as its passenger jumped out of its interior. A couple minutes later, a man appeared at the reception desk of the five-star Shangri-La Hotel. He wore a black suit, a rather classic design dating back to Old Earth. He had dark red hair matching with his wine red shirt. He was a charming young man, probably around his late twenties, with deep, mesmerizing blue eyes.

"I have a reservation," he said, in a deep voice with perfect Tiranovan pronunciation.

"Your name please," asked the receptionist, in a rather shy voice.

"Mikhail Nikolai Markov."

"Is that all the luggage you have?" said the girl, pointing to the black suitcase.

"Yes."

"Please stand by the biometric scanner for identification."

The small machine hummed as it picked up the man's fingerprints, pupil shape, voice, and DNA. It stopped running with a positive beep.

"Your room is on the top floor, Mr. Markov. Please have a pleasant stay at Shangri-La, the eastern jewel of Tiranov."

The man smiled as he was handed over his keys, coated in solid gold and freshly inscribed with his initials, MNM. He left for the elevator immediately.

Mikhail sat in his living room, habitually pouring a glass of whiskey. He took the glass to the window. A few stars weakly poked through the smog and light pollution. Mikhail sipped a little from his cup as he tried to remember what the stars looked like back before his teens, back before star mining had ruined the night sky. Not successful. A quick glimpse at his watch made him busy. The man opened his small suitcase. With a blueprint of the building in hand, he was indecisive about his weapon of choice. His old reliable companion advised him as usual, from the man's ear.

"Hey, how about the needle?"

"Silent, fast acting, and clean. Good. Downside is that I have to go real close."

"Pistol with silencer?"

"Long-range and effective. There would be blood though."

"How about poison in his drink?"

"We talked about this, DX-4. No poison," said the man sulkily.

"EMP the room and stick a knife?"

"Are you stupid? EMP would shut you down."

"Oh, I forgot. Well, I have spent quite a long time sticking in your ear. I hardly even remember when I moved on my own tracks. It's no wonder that I feel much more human now."

"Whatever man... I guess needle. Gun for plan B."

"Good. The banquet starts pretty soon. Change your clothes. And you better clean your gun."

The man threw away his shirt. An antique ivory necklace was hanging on his neck. He let out a sigh as he closed his eyes. The next moment he started disassembling his gun at lightning speed. He flipped open his cleaning tools as soon as the gun was broken down. The playful robotic voice echoed in his ear when the man was done re-assembling the pistol.

"Two minutes and fifty seconds. Ten seconds off from record. You take too long attaching the silencer."

"Dang it."

Mikhail approached the grand party room at 20:00 hours. Of course, he was wearing a standard waiter outfit, "borrowed" from his good friend waiter A, now asleep. He didn't forget to make sure the girl in the reception hall took a long nap too, since she saw his face. With everything ready, Mikhail casually pushed the cart he had stolen from the kitchen toward the banquet room. He quickly identified his target; Al Dwein, military general, commander, and

a ruthless rebel killer. Commander Dwein was a tall man with grey hair, a flamboyant mustache, and deep tanned skin rugged from numerous battles.

"Today's menu is exceptionally deadly," chuckled Mikhail to himself as he stepped toward the old veteran. Mikhail pulled up a needle in his hand, but moments before he was going to make his move, the robotic whisper in his ear made his face go white.

"She is here."

Mikhail tucked the needle away and slowly turned his head around. He reached for his inner pocket. The cold feel of metal didn't do much to ease his anxiety.

"Eight o'clock. Behind the column."

Just as the ivory column came in sight, a set of eyes appeared. It belonged to a skinny half-Asian girl in her late twenties, who looked quite fragile but nevertheless beautiful. She had a gloomy black dress on, more of a funeral dress than a proper party dress. It was as if time stopped. Her eyes were the black jade eyes of a falcon, looking down at its prey: cold, ruthless, and bitterly cruel. But if you watched her eyes long enough and close enough, they were also sad and lonely. No doubt about it, it was *Kylie*. Her long, beautiful dark gray hair swept through the air as she dashed at superhuman speed toward Mikhail.

Click.

An empty magazine dropped on the floor, making a metallic sound. Seven bullets hit the woman, but she did not change course. Her arm twitched as a long scythe appeared. Mikhail stretched back, dodging the blade just in time

while simultaneously pulling the military sword away from the general's scabbard.

Crash!

A huge noise roared through the room as two neo-steel blades met each other. Starting with a woman's cry, the banquet was in chaos. Mikhail bit his lips as the general scurried away to safety. DX-4 screamed in the radio, alerting all rebel personnel to leave the area.

"Abort mission! Abort mission! Abort! Abort! Abort!"

"Deploy smoke screen!" cried Mikhail, as he barely blocked the incoming blow.

Immediately a thick white cloud surrounded the room, and the lioness lost her grip on the hunt.

Hours later, the man in black and his little robotic earpiece crawled out of an unused heat vent. The duo walked straight to an old hotel.

"Oh I'm gonna kill that *gorram* intelligence officer," Mikhail muttered, as he threw away his clothes onto the hotel room bed. He jumped in the shower and turned it on.

"Hey, I'm not entirely waterproof you know," grumbled DX-4 as he began wiping himself.

"Mechanics care about you, not me."

"Thanks. Appreciate it."

The man remained silent as the mirror showed a large scar along his back. It would have been a fatal wound if his mother had not jumped behind him; the last action she would ever do to protect her son. Her husband hadn't been able to handle the grief that followed once she was gone. The first meeting with Kylie had, indeed, been memorable.

Mikhail stopped the shower, put on a bath robe and walked out onto the balcony. He did not forget to pick up his cigar.

"Kylie is vicious as ever," he said, chuckling bitterly.

"It's my fault. I shouldn't have left her," said DX-4, beeping sadly.

"Well, who knew the wonder child mechanic would grow up to be like *that*? You know, it's entirely that stupid robber's fault. Mowed down by lasers in the middle of a petty theft. And Jonathan! Clumsy kid, using his father's ID to get to Old Earth! I bet he was clueless what happened when he was killed."

Both of them were quiet for a bit, while Mikhail puffed up cigar fumes. DX-4 broke the silence as he noticed little frost particles were forming along Mikhail's hair.

"Hey, dry your hair."

"Shut up, you're not my mom."

The man looked at the sky. Again he wished he would find some light and beauty in the ether, but again he saw only smudges through the grime. With the burning cigar in his mouth, he pulled out a pocket watch. An old family photo, consisting of three members was in the frame. The bottom line read 'The Starkweather Family.' Tears began to form in Mikhail's eyes. *Why did you have to do that, Kylie. Why?* DX-4 beeped again, as if he noticed the man's gloomy feelings.

"So, uh, I got new coordinates."

"Brilliant. What name am I using now?"

"We're going to a neutral zone. You can use your own name, Kean."

Chapter 9

by Melody David

The connection between our swords at the banquet is different from usual. I know that much. The reverberation is at a frequency that affects my central processing unit.

My experiences with Kean are growing more intense lately, and I have closer calls.

While realizing my mission is scrapped again, I am grateful for the smoke screen to also make an exit. But as I dart from column to column my (real) hand hits the ivory one—and an ingrained sensory memory tells me that this is not ivory. This is fake—like most of Tiranov. Why am I surprised? I suppose because this memory doesn't seem to come from my hard drive, but from the sleepy organic matter that surrounds the steel in my head.

At the base of the column, my better eye catches a small sliver of data, housed in rectangular plastic. Where could this have come from? It's one of the smallest backup drives I've ever seen, and can't possibly hold more information than a first year in Advanced Theoretical Engineering during exam week, which is to say, embarrassingly little. But I pocket the tiny card.

My nervous system is scrambled. I can't tell the difference between my right and left arm, so I try to send a request to my master to put me into

sleep mode to heal, but the message just can't get through. I try restarting my programming and even do a hard laboratory reset. I hate the startup questions, meant to reorient myself, but only bring up complex emotions that 0s and 1s can't process.

"Who are you?"

"I am a cyborg. I follow commands. I do not remember my original human life." Although my name was either Dana or Kylie, I remind myself; just to make sure I retain that piece.

"Initializing..."

So I follow protocol and through the drudgery of 1.5X speed, find my way to the top of the highest structure and lock myself on the roof. I have to manually force my left arm scythe to lock into standard position. Rotating both forearms in turn, I angle my EELA (Economy Efficiency Low Absorption) light panels toward the setting sun and wish I had a hand in building my own body.

Since this is going to take forever, and I am not receiving any commands at the moment, I let curiosity overtake me and slip the small chip into a converter to begin downloading the contents.

My vision goes blurry. I feel a physical whipping sensation backward, although my body holds still. I am thrown into an oblivion in my head as my organic mind grows more real than it has in a long time, and I see a vision of a broken body on a metal surface. I see myself, battered and bald, lying on this cluttered experiment table. I know a deep sadness denoted by 0s and 1s—This is YOU. You felt this sadness. This is your chip. It's been a long time, buddy.

I see a blurry scene of soldiers. They're approaching a crumpled figure on the ground. You are moving away, but stop. Suddenly, a man with wild hair runs out from a small structure on the edge of the forest—he cries out something inaudible. Radios and other communication devices buzz. The soldiers stand at attention, and then help the man carry the limp figure into the lab. You override programs telling you to avoid peril, to abandon this user and find the next closest Lee family member. Instead you follow me. When he spots you, the wild-haired man smiles and welcomes you to my side. My slowly awakening organic mind does not trust this smile, but you come with me anyway.

The man with wild hair walks into the room where you watch with your characteristic tenderness. The room is cramped and dark, except for the blinding spotlight shining on my supine form. You've managed to crawl up a cluttered pile of toolboxes and server racks to see me from above. I have been lain out on a table that was hastily cleared of some kind of experiment involving lasers. The wild-haired surgeon (or is engineer more accurate?) has clothes that match his abode—disheveled and grey. He speaks to both of us.

"I've managed to stop you from dying immediately, but there is still much work for me to do. I'm going to have to ask you to play dead—both of you. Local law enforcement is on its way, responding late as usual, to analyze the attack. They're going to want to pin it on some gang activity."

You roll forward and blurt, "The shooters were marked as Elite Guards! They were not a simple gang! They are under your own orders!"

"I know!" roared the man. "You'll see that it won't help to argue with the police. Once they're out of the way, then I can actually save the girl's life. I'll save her life forever."

You grow silent at this, wondering what he could mean by such a statement.

A stoic giant official, his light mustache trimmed to perfection, enters with a youthful deputy in tow. Her auburn hair is pinned to her scalp uncomfortably. He surveys the makeshift hospital room, and then puts his trainee in charge.

"Find evidence to use in court."

She looks around and prods my shoulder, but I do not move. "What weapon caused the injuries?" she asks the man with the wild hair.

"What kind would you like it to be?" he asks with a tone of sarcastic disapproval.

She looks to her superior for support. His steely face gives none.

"Well," she continues, "the Elite Guard uses 9mm blasters and the local gang uses laser scythes." She emphasizes the latter with a not so subtle increase in volume.

"These are marks of a laser scythe, of course. I'll get you the X-rays." He rummages through a cabinet, having to go through multiple drawers before settling on a worn black and white X-ray sheet from a file marked "Jane Doe." The female cop accepts it and looks again to her superior for affirmation. This seems to be granted with a nod as he gestures to the door and grunts.

So the detectives box up my "murder" and commend the man with wild hair for his attempts to rescue me. I do not stir. Once the detectives' foot-

falls fade from hearing, the man says, "My guards will see them safely off the premises, out of my lab. Now to start my work, Miss Lee. Don't you want your little robot friend to fetch your brother for you?"

My own real memories are coming through now—in addition to those on your chip. I try to organize the information, and realize that this memory is some time after I was attacked. I have been moved from my initial "surgery" room into another area of the lab. You have gone out and return with... my brother.

"Jonathan—how did you get here?" I said, wanting a better look at him but forced to remain motionless on the table.

"Hopped the next transport after you went missing," he said. "Thought I'd... rescue you. What have they done to you, Kylie?" His eyes are wide as he looks up and down my still form on the table. Somewhere deep in my consciousness I realize that he is what could be called "emotional."

You offer the explanation. "Kylie is now a cyborg, Jonathan. The scientist has done this. It is irreversible. Jonathan, I suggest you tell Kylie what you have learned from the Starkweathers. I will make sure we are not interrupted." Jonathan nods, and you roll back to the door and station yourself as sentry, watching the hall for any movement.

Jonathan clenches his fist and looks down at the floor for a moment before he is able to look up again. He relays his story of meeting the Starkweather family and the attack on their home. "DX-4 got there right before the troops did," he tells

me. "Kean was shouting—the Elite Guards were swarming the place—and I had a fraction of time to jump through the back window with DX-4. Mr. Starkweather was waving at me to leave, saying he'd stay behind to protect his family. He gave me a small piece of stone, and I followed DX-4 back here to you."

Hearing Jonathan finish, you return to us. You look proud at having brought my brother safely to my side. "Thanks, buddy." I will need to learn how to make my newly remade face smile. Maybe you can teach me?

"Kylie," you say with urgency. "The Elite Guards that attacked the Starkweather house must have followed me there from this lab. I avoided detection as Jonathan and I returned, but I think it would be wise to leave this place immediately. We cannot trust the scientist."

I know you are right. Though he saved my life, he is also the one who almost took it in the first place. But I feel almost too weak to sit up, and even if I could... "We're stuck here until I am fully charged." I motion to the power cable attached to a port in my side. "And it will probably be a while. I can't tell exactly, but I certainly don't feel 'fully charged.'" I look to you, wondering if you could tell me how it's supposed to feel.

"And you need all the power you can hold if we're going to make a run for it," Jonathan sighs, realizing the necessity of the wait. "Who knows when we'll be able to stop and charge you up again." He flops down on a nearby chair, rubbing his hands across his face and through his hair, as he always does when overloaded. It is a lot to process: your

sister ran away to save the worlds and got turned into a cyborg. His next sigh is a calm one. "Where did that scientist go, anyway?" Jonathan asks. "And what is this place?"

"This is Starkweather's lab," I say. "Beck was right—there's nothing left. We're in what's left of the library. And the scientist said he was going to let me rest until I am fully charged."

We all look around the dim room with low ceilings. Scraps of paper are everywhere. There are just a few dilapidated books, torn and worn, on the shelf that leans near my makeshift convalescence bed. The other shelves seem empty of anything but trash and dust.

"Your hair is different," Jonathan says. "And I can actually see it growing. I miss the red."

"Cybornetic implants seldom include the pigmentation coding to make hair any color but silver," you say.

"Thanks, Mr. Encyclopedia," Jonathan says with a snort.

I don't know what he's talking about—there is no mirror around. I've never been a cyborg before, but hair growth and color change seems fairly petty an alteration. Maybe it's just a side effect. I wonder what else about my body has changed and what other side effects will follow. I lay still, tethered to the sturdy wooden table, charging up my new cyborg body with an ancient iPod Touch cable, no less. My thoughtful mood draws my hand up to my neck to feel my pendant, but it's not there. My mind whirs loudly to remember where I last had it. Was it taken off for surgery? Did the thief get it after all? Ah, you have it. Of course. And it's safe with you. I suddenly

recall Jonathan has the Starkweather stone, too, and it just seems like the two should be together for the reveal. "So, Jonathan, show me the stone. DX-4, do you still have the ivory?"

They bring out their tokens and lay them flat where I can see them, propped up on an elbow.



"They're quite simple, aren't they?" I say, disappointed. My ivory has a lot of marks and lines—preserved well but unidentifiable by any of my knowledge. This stone one is just a lopsided circle, with some kind of protrusion on one side, the whole thing more worn and eroded. Some shallow, looped scratches adorn one side.

Jonathan suddenly has a thought and grabs my backpack. He pulls out a very familiar book with gold lettering and flips to the back half with all the plants. At one time I loved all of the images—as any kid on Tiranov would have. Most units were surrounded by excessively symmetrical growths that all looked the same. Non-genetically modified plants were a rarity.

"Maybe the carvings have something to do with the plants in your book?"

"What makes you think that?"

"I actually had a lot of dreams about this book as a kid."

"About a book you had never seen?"

"Ah, well, I did see it once—in your room—but the dreams were about pages I hadn't seen."

"I had always thought the book was more about the signs that accompanied the loss of the Phoenix Galaxy. It talks a lot about some plants that will wither—but that wasn't observable on Tiranova where those plants don't exist."

"Well, we're on Old Earth now. Maybe it means something."

You roll over to Jonathan's side as he flips through the book with fallible human eyes. Of course you've been programmed better—you roll back toward the desk and scan the two carvings

into your databank. Then, you nudge Jonathan. "Turn the pages so that I can see and scan." You quickly run a comparison check. Jonathan patiently turns each page as you scan. Suddenly, you look alert and beep excitedly.

"The stone's image is most likely a flowering almond. The ivory's image is a sprig of rosemary."

"Wait," I cry, feeling cheated. "I never saw a picture of my ivory's inscription in that book before. Where do you see it, DX-4?"

"On the last page of the written portion, Kylie," you answer. Jonathan turns eagerly to this page, but it's all writing, no image at all. "It is a palimpsest," you say. At our blank stares, you explain further. "Someone erased a drawing of the ivory's plant, a rosemary sprig, to write one more page of predictions. There were no more marks for you to see, but my scans could pick up the indentations on the paper itself."

Jonathan's eyes are wide. "Then, what's rosemary? My survey of agriculture class was so brief."

I think back to my survey of history, long forgotten compared to the more interesting engineering classes that followed. "'There's rosemary, that's for remembrance.'" I mumble to myself.

"Wait, what?" Jonathan's eyebrows knit just as they always did when I tutored him in applied calculus.

You understand though. You also appreciated the structured, albeit strange, writings of the historian Shakespeare.

"Oh, just something that stuck from a long time ago." I always had a strange, and generally good, memory. The skill had especially clicked

when I was twelve, when grandma had given me the pendant.

"Hmmm." Jonathan had already moved on to the stone. "A flowering almond. What does that one mean?"

"Perhaps there are books here in the library that can aid us," you suggest.

"Yeah," Jonathan brightens. "Let's go!" You and he race off into the maze of mostly empty shelves, hoping for anything useful to be left over. I am forced to wait on the bed, limited by the leash the wild-haired scientist built into me.

Soon the two of you return. You have two books on heraldry and Victorian flower language that you found on a shelf marked with Liam Clay's personal monogram. "They might have some information as to the meaning of the almond and the rosemary."

Jonathan returns with an oddly slow gait. "Kylie..." he begins.

"What's up?" I ask tentatively.

"I found a few manuals by the library's entrance..." His voice trails off as he sits heavily on my bed, staring off into nowhere, as if he's still trying to process what he's seen. "They were on the lab's purpose and directive. Have you heard of 'star mining'?"

I shake my head. "Not much." I think back to that lecture in physics class. "It was an idea of how to get energy from a star, but initial tests presented too many problems. It was abandoned."

"But it wasn't," Jonathan says. "That's what this lab is—was—for. They were supposed to figure out a safe way to star mine to support terraforming..."

I wonder at his trailing off again, and supply the rest of the sentence, "...But they found too many problems and abandoned their research. Like I said."

"No, Kylie," Jonathan says. "Their research stopped, but the government kept terraforming anyway. They must have kept star mining too!"

My eyes widen at Jonathan's news. "That's it! That's why the stars are going out! Jonathan, quick. Gather up all the star mining information you can! We'll take it back to Tiranova. They have to know. Everyone has to know! Mom can even break the story on the nightly news."

Jonathan rushes off and returns quickly, his arms carrying several manuals. He begins stuffing them into my backpack, which you still wear awkwardly on your boxy shoulders. The last things he slips in are the pendant and stone.

You smile at me, and I feel the corners of my mouth begin to pull up.

Suddenly, more beeps sound off. My mouth returns to firm line. I look down at the iPod touch cable—surrounding the port in my side are green lights. I'm fully charged. And a new sensation arrives—the compulsion to do something against my will.

"Let's go," I tell Jonathan. He nods and secures the zipper of the backpack. "We're supposed to go outside."

I jerkily rise and move quicker than ever out the door, down the hall, up a flight of stairs. I must get outside. Jonathan has no choice but to follow, and you roll along beside. I have no trouble seeing in the dark—Jonathan has to pick his way toward me.

Outside the lab, we come to a clearing and I look up—thousands of stars stare back. Suddenly, I feel torn to pieces—my arms swivel, my surroundings blur. Your LCD screen peers up at me, shocked. Out of the corner of my right eye, I see my brother crumbled on the ground.

“Kylie, stop!” Your voice is strained. “You’re a cyborg now. Someone must be controlling you. You have to fight back.”

But the operating system is also giving me new information about myself. I have new powers, and some of them will take up hard drive space where memories reside. Some of them start to fade away.

A new command overcomes me. An image of three forms appears in my mind—a mother, a father, and a boy—a boy with curly red hair in a blue hoodie. A dossier filled with information on this boy—this target—becomes clear in my mind and fills it. “Kean,” I whisper. You catch the implied command and go rolling into the dark, away from me. Your wheels whirr. As you pass out of sight, your screen swivels around to give me one last encouraging brave smile. The smile tells me, *I will protect Kean*. It tells me, *You can fight this, Kylie!* And I fight a little. As I focus on not following this new command, I sense memories fading away. Mom. Dad. In a struggle to hold on to them in my mind, I lose control over my body.

I’m shocked to attention. I use one newfound power as a cyborg to shut down unnecessary functions—like emotion—to block out what comes next.

I slam back into my body on the rooftop in Tiranov. The sun has set, and I wonder how long I

have been standing here motionless with my EELA light panels trying to absorb starlight. I check the status of my reset. Thirty seconds to go. Fifteen seconds. Ten. Blackness.

Light. My master has a new mission for me. I head for my ship and realize I have a card in a memory slot. I eject it and move it to a storage compartment in my thigh. Maybe I will get to it later.

Chapter 10

by Beth Potterveld

Kean stood at a street corner in the dead of night.

DX-4 chirped in his ear, "It's 1:25. She's 6 minutes late. What if something happened?"

"She certainly wasn't caught up in traffic," Kean said scanning the empty streets one last time before turning to hide for the night and await new rendezvous coordinates.

Just then a pod turned the corner and flashed its lights at him, before turning them off again. As it slowed to a stop, the driver's window winked out and the voice came from inside the dark cabin. "What is your name?"

"Mikhail Nikolai Markov," Kean answered.

"What is your destination?"

"Just out for a stroll." Kean strode to the pod's passenger side door, confident he'd fulfilled the pass-code. When he found the door still locked, his heart skipped a beat.

"What," the voice came again, "was the date of the first major victory of the rebels against the Authority?"

"Oh come on, Cass! I don't know that."

The cabin remained dark and the door remained locked.

"October 25, 2515," DX-4 answered for them. "Battle of Aizino."

The door unlocked and Kean swiftly plopped into the seat. Cass lost no time in berating Kean for his lapse. "Every rebel should know that date."

"It's not like there's an entrance exam."

"I know, right!" Cass retorted, fully believing there should be one: all short answer plus an essay portion on the full history of the rebellion, from Starkweather/Clay Conspiracy to Fullbright Massacre. With her passenger secure, Cass peeled out as though in a high speed chase.

Kean fastened the pod's safety harness around his shoulders and waist. Especially with Cass as his driver, he'd need it. It was standard procedure for the rebels to rendezvous in the neutral zone and then circuitously make the drive back to rebel territory, the side of the globe opposite Tiranov. The driver had to be sure no one (and no thing) followed them, so the route was unpredictable. Cass hated being sent out on such mundane tasks, preferring to stay in her electronics lab, but it was a rebel's duty to aid the cause in whatever way required (as Cass would quickly tell anyone who grumbled), so when her rotation as driver came, Cass dutifully obeyed. But that didn't stop her from getting it over with as swiftly as possible.

"HQ isn't going to be happy with you," Cass continued talking as quickly as she was driving. "You should've seen General Ito's face when he heard you'd missed your target. All those other units in place. We were so close! Then you blew it! I knew this would happen."

"Hey," DX-4 took up for Kean. "No one knew Kylie was going to be there."

"Except for me and everyone I tried to tell!" Cass took a hard left, followed by another hard left, and a donut. "Bah, that bot-girl! Always the glitch. Always! She guards that lab like a watchdog, and when she isn't there, she's turning up just where we don't want her. I knew the Dwein mission was going to be a disaster. But did they listen to me?"

"Nope," Kean humored her with an answer.

"They never listen to me. I can see these things before they happen, you know. Remember Martinez? Called it. Last winter's flu strain? Told them so. I keep telling them I've got those dreams, like that Jonathan kid did. You knew him; his dreams came true, right?"

"Yep, all his wildest dreams came true," Kean said dead-pan. "Right before his sister killed him." He tried to light a cigar along the jolting ride.

"Don't smoke in my pod!" Cass grabbed the cigar from Kean's hand, punched the window button, and tossed it out as they zipped along an overpass.

"Hey!" Kean objected. "It cost me a week's dish duty before Bucky would smuggle those for me."

"It'll cost you more than that for missing your mark last night. You've set our plans back months. There's no time for that anymore. More stars are going out. We've lost nearly all the Scutum-Centaurus arm, if you haven't noticed."

"Don't worry; we'll stop the Authority's star mining," Kean muttered, kicking back with more confidence than he really felt.

"How the heck can you know that?" Cass countered.

Kean casually twirled the ivory pendant between his fingers. "I just know."

"Look at me," Cass taunted. "I'm Mr. Big Shot, the heir to the Starkweather line. I know all about the secrets to save the worlds just because of my last name. I should get to run the whole rebellion just because I share a few genes with the best friend of the scientist who knew how to save us. Bah! Thank what lucky stars are still out there that we just use you as an assassin."

They drove in silence for a few minutes, Cass jerking the pod down side streets and through tunnels of the nocturnal cityscape.

But the silence didn't last long. "And you know what else gets me?"

Kean groaned. "Here we go," DX-4 said.

"That rosemary pendant." Cass gestured more freely than a driver doing evasive maneuvers should. "And almond on the other one. Those are the clues they leave us? They couldn't type up the full explanation and pass that down through the generations? Why leave a trail of breadcrumbs when the fate of the world is at stake!"

Kean dryly recited the answer that every rebel knew to this question. "Clay and Starkweather did leave the entire story to their children. It got lost and forgotten over the generations. There's no way to be absolutely sure any knowledge will last after you die. The pendant and stone were only ever meant as a way to keep the precise knowledge out of Authority hands, a backup."

"A USB backup containing their full research?" Cass asked with bitterly sarcastic hope in her voice.

"Just fail-safes," Kean muttered, feeling the need to defend his great-grand-cestors. "Just a message of memory and hope."

"Memory and hope." Cass's voice dripped with disgust. "Who was ever going to figure that out?"

"I did," DX-4 beeped. "Anyone with a processor could have figured it out."

"Anyone with a processor who also happened to find his way to an abandoned lab on Old Earth to discover Clay made a hobby of musing on heraldry and Victorian flower language. Yeah, anyone could've figured it out." Cass sighed loudly as they approached the rebel base. She gave the clearances at the check points, and Kean noted the updated passwords. "And now this whole mission has been a wash."

"Not entirely," DX-4 chimed.

"Oh really?" Cass demanded.

"Maybe." DX-4 faltered. "Hopefully." The humans waited until the robot shyly admitted, "I left a memory chip for Kylie."

"You did what!" Kean exclaimed.

"I left a chip for Kylie," DX-4 repeated.

"A chip with malware to decommission her so she can't meddle with any of our future missions?" Cass asked, knowing she was wrong.

"Just a memory," DX-4 answered. "To help her remember what it was like, you know, being human." Kean recognized the old sadness that crept into the bot's voice whenever he talked about how Kylie used to be. "It was worth a shot."

"Psychological warfare doesn't work against an enemy who doesn't have a psyche anymore," Cass stated as she parked the pod in the bunker. They all climbed out of the pod and headed to the hallways. As they approached the turn off for the electronics wing, Cass said to DX-4, "You should

come to my tech lab sometime so I can delete that 'Stupid ideas' sub-routine from your CPU."

"I stay with Kean," DX-4 said. "Always. That's why I ditched my treads in the first place. And we've got a debriefing to get to."

Cass shook her head at the pair of them, "We're all going to die."

"We're not all going to die," Kean said waving goodbye and heading for Comm.

"Why does no one ever believe me?" Cass asked and turned toward her lab.

Chapter 11

by Megan Wilburn

Kean took a deep breath as he approached General Ito's office door, and knocked.

"Enter," came the sharp reply.

"Sir," Kean said standing at attention.

"You blew the mission," General Ito stated.

"Sir, no one told me that she would be there," Kean replied.

"It doesn't matter," General Ito snapped. "That was our last chance to get to Al Dwein before he left this system and went into hiding. Now we'll have to start all over. Your failure has set our plans back months, perhaps even years. If it were up to me you would never go on another mission. But the Commander has requested a combat specialist for an applied science mission. The briefing is in ten minutes. Follow."

"Yes, sir," Kean replied falling into step slightly behind General Ito.

General Ito led the way through a series of corridors to the applied sciences sector. A fingerprint scanner granted entry. They went down several flights of stairs, down several more hallways, and eventually came to another locked door. The general put his hand on the scanner again, and the door popped open. The room was dark, but it appeared to be a conference room with a long

table set up in front of a screen. The Commander was there speaking quietly to a mousy young woman with glasses.

"Welcome," said the Commander. Kean had never seen the Commander in person before, and felt giddy as he shook hands with the supreme leader of the rebels. It was a high honor. "This is Libby. She will be presenting the background to the mission. Libby, this is General Ito, and Kean Starkweather."

"General," she nodded. "And a Starkweather. I am honored. Mrs. Lee is also here."

Kean felt a twinge in his stomach. He knew Kylie's parents were respected among the rebel forces, ever since Mrs. Lee first broke the news about the star mining agenda that DX-4 and he had submitted back to Tiranova from the information found in the lab manuals. That news had escalated their lives into the current era of war. Still, to be sitting in the same room as Kylie's mother was not a pleasant thought.

"Please be seated," the Commander said.

Kean sat at the far end next to General Ito. Other members from his team sat scattered around the room among the other meeting attendees. He returned several nods from his teammates as he took his seat.

"Okay," said Libby pushing her glasses further up the bridge of her nose. "Let's go back to the beginning. Liam Clay and Aldan Starkweather discovered the Authority's plan for star mining and its disastrous impact on our galaxy and those near to us, and came up with a plan to prevent this from happening. However, their

solution harmed the economic interests of those who were in power, and are still in power today. So what were they to do? They passed their knowledge down to their children, and their children passed it on to their children, and so on. But the story was not faithfully reproduced, and some important information was lost."

"This we know," said Kean.

Libby took a deep breath. "Or so we thought."

"What?" exclaimed General Ito half rising from his chair.

Libby continued as if she had not noticed the interruption. "Aldan Starkweather's grandson Adrian was a prolific writer."

"Of fiction," Kean protested.

"Have any of you read *Fire in the Sky*?" Libby asked.

"I don't have time to waste on fantasy," General Ito snapped.

"I read it once when I was kid," Kean said. "It's been a long time."

"Then I will explain," Libby said. "The story takes place on a planet called Prometheus. Evil magicians have corrupted the world, polluting air, water, and earth. But when they try to steal the light from the stars in another evil plot, they overstep. Our young hero decides enough is enough. He teams up with a dragon, and they defeat the magicians."

"Spoiler alert," Kean muttered.

"And then fly to the heavens," Libby continued, "where the dragon breathes life back into the dying stars."

"You think this book is literal?" General Ito asked unimpressed.

"The parallels are certainly striking," Libby replied.

"Great," said Kean. "So where do we get a dragon?"

"Libby, if this is all you've got..." General Ito began. Several other voices began murmuring across the room in tones of exasperation.

"I wasn't finished," Libby interrupted loudly, quieting the dissenting voices. "If I may draw your attention to the screen, this is a timeline of the scientific developments that led to the massive climate change on Old Earth that was seen in the 24th century. It is during this time that the idea of mining stars for energy came about in a theoretical capacity. Old Earth scientists first used this technology on systems in the Phoenix Galaxy fifty years before Starkweather and Clay began their research. Mining has spread out from the Phoenix Galaxy into every system in the known universe." She clicked to the next slide. "This map shows the spread of star mining."

The graphic showed a red haze starting from the Phoenix Galaxy, and spreading star system to star system.

"And this shows the recent collapse or dimming of the star systems."

A blue haze covered the red, following a very similar, but not quite identical pattern.

"You may notice that they don't line up exactly, but the trend has enough statistical significance to indicate a causal relationship. Star mining is very unstable and highly dangerous, but countless safety studies have been hushed up. Everyone was getting rich off of star mining. It is well

within the realm of possibilities that Starkweather and Clay were also silenced for this same reason. And so we have our evil magicians stealing from the stars."

"I'm still waiting for the dragons," Kean said. "And what am I even doing here? You said you needed a combat specialist, but this is science and literature."

"I'm not finished," Libby replied clicking to the next slide, with a little more force than necessary. This slide showed DX-4's old scans of Kylie's pendant and the Starkweather stone. "These tokens were passed down through the Starkweather and Clay families. The eldest daughter of Liam Clay's line passed down a pendant made of ivory, and the other—passed through the male line of Starkweathers—was of a stone not found on earth. The inscriptions are of rosemary and almond."

"I already know that," Kean muttered under his breath.

"The significance of the inscriptions has been lost, and this has led to much speculation, and even back to heraldry and flower languages. But, when I began investigating I broadened my search, looking for any instances where rosemary and almond were connected. And I found this."

She clicked to the next slide.

"This is the Prince Galaxy. Named after Rosemary Prince, the sponsor of the first and only exploratory team to travel anywhere near this region. It is dangerous, and difficult to travel there because you have to travel through Fanta's Sea, which is a nebula located here." She clicked to a slide showing a map of space.

"The ground team landed on a planet named Prometheus in the habitable zone. They sent back many images of barren terrain, but also of the stars as seen from the surface of the planet. And this..." she went to the next slide, "was christened the Almond Blossom constellation by the explorers. Notice Fanta's Sea, in the center of the flower creating the reddish coloring of an almond blossom."

Libby paused, and took a deep breath. "When the team of explorers arrived, they declared the planet insupportable of life. Indeed, they found no evidence that any living creature had ever been on the planet's surface. Three days into the mission there was a sudden spike of thermonuclear energy on the surface. The ground team went to investigate, and was never heard from again. The orbital team's scans found their bodies in this cave." She clicked again, "Burnt and mangled. This mission was aborted."

"Six months ago, I asked Cass to build me an unmanned probe to land on Prometheus and explore. For several weeks I too found no evidence of life in any form until this..."

She clicked.

Kean's mouth dropped open. An enormous lizard-like creature filled the frame. Its body long and scaly, its tail and back spiked, its wings huge and bat-like, and its massive mouth open in an exhalation of flame.

"You're joking," Kean said. "This is a joke. It's a hoax."



Libby smiled triumphantly. "I have more images," she clicked through several more slides. "Statistics, readings, calculations of energy output and projections, the list goes on, and the supportable scientific evidence has been carefully reviewed. These creatures exist on that planet, and their fiery breath is strong enough to revive a dying star. This was at least part of the plan put forward by Clay and Starkweather—now passed down to us."

"Maybe one of those beasts could take out some Authority star mining stations too!" voiced

an enthusiastic younger recruit from the back of the room.

"You've gotta be kidding me," Kean repeated.

"There is nothing we can do about the stars that have already died, or collapsed into black holes, but I am confident that we can find a way to use these creatures to revive the stars that are left. But we need to act now, every world that star mining has touched is in danger," Libby said calmly.

There was a long silence.

"That is where you come in Kean," the Commander said. "Your mission is to capture one of these creatures, and bring it back here so that Libby and her team can study it."

"We're already fighting the Authority with all the forces we have," General Ito said. "Are you sure we need to dig up a dragon too?"

"You just need to capture it," Libby said. "The Prince Galaxy is only one week's journey in a standard intergalactic shuttle. There may be some challenges going through the nebula on the first day of the journey, but..."

"Let me get this straight," Kean said interrupting her. "You want me to capture a fire-breathing creature, and transport it across the galaxy in a confined space full of combustible gases. Explain to me how that doesn't go horribly, horribly wrong."

Chapter 12

by Luke Major

Earth was dying. More land was lost every year. The soil produced poisons and the air choked our lungs. Our population was brought to the brink, and the war over remaining resources consumed a quarter of what was left. Finally, when hope had all but disappeared, for the first time in history mankind united as one to find a solution. Earth could be saved, but it would take two centuries. The only way for mankind to live on was to leave. They built Tiranova on the outer edge of the solar system to be a sanctuary until Earth could once again receive them. As the migration began, a process that would take decades in itself, they constructed terraforms across the Earth's surface that would slowly help it recover. The energy required for their operation and Tiranova were on a scale unlike any. A special method was divined to provide all the energy they needed. Only a few knew the secrets of star mining and what it meant, but without it, mankind would have perished. — Kean Starkweather

“Cass! Get out of the cockpit already,” Kean says. His team is securing the last bits of gear, but the engineer still has half the control panel off and wires hanging in her face.

“Just wait two more minutes. You’ll be happy I tweaked this when you’re riding the waves later,”

she tells him. With my enhanced eyes, I can see them conversing even from my hiding place behind several tall crates in the Rebel base's hanger bay.

You start playing a song from Kean's ear that is universally known as a waiting tune, though its exact origins are no longer known to me. Is it from some game show in antiquity? It makes several soldiers smile.

I gather that you are leaving for Fanta's Sea, a foolish mission. I wait to commence my assault and let you kill yourselves. That is most efficient. It is the one I am here for. I will wait until nightfall when fewer people will stand in my way, then the General will die.

Kean's team was about an hour away from the nebula, Fanta's Sea. Some of the crew looked restless as Kean scanned the rows of seats. "DX-4, what's so dangerous about this nebula? I thought space travel was generally safe through things like this," Kean asked.

"Normally yes," DX-4 answered, "but this nebula is unique. It has an abnormally high amount of dark matter moving through it at relativistic speeds."

"Dark matter? What's so dangerous about it? I thought it didn't interact with anything."

"It only interacts with space-time. In other words, it affects gravity."

"How does that translate to dangerous?"

"Normally the shortest distance between two places is a straight line, but when space gets distorted the shortest route looks more like a curve since the path itself is moving, so to speak."

"Huh?"

"The path to Prometheus is constantly changing, you will see it yourself when we get closer. The stars will look like they're moving as light alters its path throughout the nebula."

"No wonder that research team took so many pictures of the stars."

"Yep."

DX-4 accessed the ship's speakers and warned everyone to secure themselves and any loose equipment. "It's going to be a bumpy ride!"

"Ahhh, he's dreaming again..." I hear my master say from inside the room. I step out of the dark hallway and bow.

I use long flights like the one between Tiranova and Old Earth to recharge. The rebels had failed to detect me until it was too late, making it an easy mission. I am ready for my next assignment. "Will I have a new mission, then?" I ask. My synthetic eyes allow me to focus on most of the room even though I am facing the floor. A partial memory flashes through my mind as I perceive the large tank to my right. That boy had been my brother, but that means nothing to me now. The wound I gave him across his chest has long since healed, but a large scar was clearly visible. He has barely grown at all since the master placed him inside, his aging slowing, preserved and asleep, so my master could use his premonitions before he became too old.

"No, from these dreams, they will finally be coming here to the lab it seems... How did they find...? Where was Kean heading before your last mission?" he asks.

"Fanta's Sea."

"HA! They actually read that book and connected the dots." My master doubles over with laughter in his seat. "It doesn't matter; they no longer have an organization with Ito and the other commanders out of the way. I can't lose. Jonathan gave us the victory just a bit before he grows too old and becomes useless, haha! Stay here, and kill them when they enter. Use the facilities as you see fit... just remember to keep Kean's head intact."

"Affirmative," I answer before slipping back into the dark.

The crew was laughing; they had made it, somehow. They had made it through the nebula and were descending to Prometheus's surface. The orange-ish planet looked like a land right out of a story book. Oddly smooth mountains rose up to sharp points and streams of steaming silver liquid looped and snaked across the surface reflecting the stars above that looked as if they were darting back and forth across the velvet sky. The crew quieted down as they took in the new sight and waited for the landing to finish.

Kean ordered three of the crew to start on any repairs; they still had to go through the nebula again on the return journey. DX-4 assured them the trip out was easier since they wouldn't be looking for a single point within the nebula, they just had to get out next time.

The rest of the crew suited up with Kean and crammed into the three hovercrafts they brought. Each was equipped with a large railgun, which they hopefully wouldn't need, but the dragons had killed people before.

They raced across the alien surface without talking much. The place was beautiful in an odd way. Kean wished he could take off his breathing apparatus and suck in pure air. DX-4 might have guessed what he was thinking and said in a happy tone, "This planet's atmosphere will burn holes in your lungs!"

"Thanks for the information. The boiling silver pools made me think that this air was completely safe to breathe," Kean replied in a similar tone. He eyed some protrusions of grey rock and wondered whether the Starkweather stone his family had guarded for so many years had come from on this planet's surface.

"Ten minutes out from where Libby's probe was roasted," DX-4 informed the entire group.

Just as he said, ten minutes later, they found the remains of a large probe outside a wide cavern mouth that angled gently downward. The dust inside looked more yellow than the surface.

"All right!" Kean said through the com. "Find good firing angles at the mouth of the cave. I'll go check if one is in there." Kean could see one of his officers was about to protest but continued before he could speak. "A fire blast from one of those creatures will kill everyone inside that passage; this is the kind of stuff I'm trained for. If it's in there, and I don't have a good shot with the tranquilizer, I'll come back and we'll make a new plan. Be ready for anything!"

Kean jumped out of the hovercraft and one of the crew heaved him the heavy tranque gun.

"This thing is heavier than I thought it would be," Kean said as he heaved it over his shoulder.

"We didn't know how much it would take to knock one of these creatures out, so we chose to err on the side of caution," DX-4 explained.

"I guess that makes sense. Alright, here we go." Kean focused and jogged toward the cave. He slowed when he got within some meters and stealthily peeked inside. His visor outlined the edges of the cavern and overlaid a dark red grid along the floor to help him see where he was going.

"Time to rescue the princess, sir knight," DX-4 whispered in his ear.

Kean would have said, "be quiet," but he didn't want to make any extra noise himself.

He moved quietly down the slope for what seemed like forever before the cavern curved to the right and leveled slightly. Kean's connection with his team started to get spotty, so DX-4 warned them they might not be able to communicate for a while and to assume the worst if they didn't contact them after 30 minutes.

The floor sloped downward one more time and leveled off again with another turn. Kean was grateful that there weren't any forks in the road. That's when his visor sensed a sudden rise in temperature. Kean's heart started to beat faster as he prepared himself and continued.

"It is likely around this next bend," DX-4 said quietly.

Kean pressed himself against the wall and peeked around the corner. His visor outlined a large, somewhat circular room with a high ceiling. A stream was running through the far end out of some narrower passageways. A large hot outline was in the center. The visor had trouble giving it

shape, and parts of it were moving slightly. As the visor slowly worked, Kean recognized the beast from Libby's photos. It was coiled up in a heap inside of a circular trench it had dug for itself as a nest.

"It's asleep," DX-4 said. "You can probably risk a little light if you want to find a soft spot for the tranquilizer."

Kean nodded and activated his light. The small circle of light let him see the scales on the creature. They reflected the light like emeralds and looked tough enough to repel bullets.

"I'd suggest the neck," DX-4 said.

Kean traced the creature up to the neck, it did appear to be a little softer there. He unstrapped his weapon and carefully aimed.

"You're good to go," DX-4 confirmed.

Kean fired.

The large projectile slammed into the creature's neck and shattered into a million pieces. Its chemical substance evaporated in the hot air, useless. The sound echoed through the large room over and over and over. Kean's body froze even as his heart felt like it was going to burst through his armor.

A large blue eye opened and focused on Kean. A small jet of flame left the creature's lips and ignited the stream in the back, filling the cavern with light. The flames danced in the reflection of the dragon's green scales as it slowly rose from its nest keeping its head sideways, never taking its eye off of Kean.

Kean knew he couldn't escape this thing, and there was no way his team would ever be able to drag it out of here.

"Only one of you this time..." a booming deep voice hissed as the creature's mouth subtly moved. "Or are there more of you waiting for me to leave my home?"

Kean's shock at the creature's voice didn't allow him to process what it said. He dropped his gun.

"No, they were familiar with my kind. You are different. Why have you come here?"

Kean stared at the creature still in shock.

"Kean!" DX-4 shouted in his ear. "It's weird but pull yourself together!"

Kean shook his head and shouted, "I'm here to save the people of Old Earth and Tiranova."

"Tiranova? That name was mentioned before. What does that have to do with me?"

"Our stars are at risk, as are many others... they say that you can heal them."

"You wish to steal our breath like the others before you?"

"Steal? Please forgive me, but I thought you were an animal."

The dragon breathed out slowly and the air warmed again. Kean got the sense that it was saying, "Hmmm."

"Leave this place, others of your kind already stole our secrets."

"What do you mean?"

"Years past, many of your kind came here. We taught each other how to speak our languages and learned about each other's homes. They left for over fifty years, but more returned later and took many of my kind away. You are no longer welcome here."

"But..."

"LEAVE!" The dragon's mouth glowed as its breath caught flame, but fire didn't shoot anywhere...yet.

Kean turned and ran as fast as he could.

"That bot-girl! Cass yelled and then clenched her teeth as the pain in her side intensified. The lights flickered and she leaned on the scorched wall for a moment to regain herself. She told everyone they were all going to die... why didn't anyone ever listen! She was almost there, just a few more meters and she could record her message. She wouldn't let her win; Kean was still out there. Somehow she made it to her lab and fell into her seat. She pulled up her emergency program written for just this sort of occasion and activated it.

"Kean," she said. "I finally got her. I got her to breathe in a cloud of nanites that can track her." Cass was forced to stop talking as she coughed up blood, too much blood. "Here's... everything you need in this message." She wiped her mouth before continuing, "I'll be expecting an essay on how you won and how it fits into the larger political context when I see you..." Cass fell into unconsciousness. The program automatically stopped recording a few minutes later when her lab no longer detected her heart beating and sent the message.

The journey out of Fanta's Sea was indeed easier, but they exited on the wrong end. It would add an extra day to the return journey to fly around it. No sooner had they cleared all interference than they received an encrypted message on the Rebel channel.

"It's one of Cass's encryptions," DX-4 said. "It was sent quite a while ago, within a day of when we left the base."

"Do you have the key?" Kean asked.

"Let me see. Oh no."

"What is it?"

"Her emergency key worked."

Kean's heart wasn't getting a rest, as it started racing again. She wouldn't have used that encryption key unless... "Open it."

"It's a recording, along with some tracking information, put on your visor."

Kean donned his visor and watched Cass's message.

The crew grew silent with the look on his face.

"Cass... Everyone..."

This was the first and last time any rebels would see Kean cry.

My master and I watch you coming through the facility's detectors. I command them to target your ship and watch as you deftly dodge many shots. But no one can do the impossible. This is one of the only ways to enter the Terraform system that spider-web underground throughout the earth; it is designed to be impenetrable from terrorist attacks. How did you find out about this entrance? Did you finally piece it together from your various spies? Your ship takes a shot and starts going down. You manage to steer it toward one of the gun turrets, well done, but futile. The ship explodes with one turret blast: no one could survive. I go back into stand-by mode.

"They took the bait!" DX-4 said. They watched from their hovercraft as their ship went down and crashed. DX-4 had been piloting it remotely. "We have a narrow strip we can hopefully approach from now."

The three hovercraft moved single file across the Chihuahuan landscape at great speed. The rain made it hard to hear anything as it battered their visors. Within a little under 20 minutes they arrived at Aldan Starkweather's old lab. They quickly removed themselves from the vehicles and rushed the building.

"The passage should be right about... there!" DX-4 pinged their visors at the proper location. Plasma cutters were used to open a doorway in the wall revealing a stairway and long dark tunnel.

"Kean," DX-4 asked as they swiftly progressed.

"What?" he said sharply.

"Will you be able to restrain yourself? We made a promise years ago, I ditched my treads for it. We're going to save Kylie."

Kean was silent for a few seconds, but eventually replied, "I'll try."

"Thank you."

They moved quickly through many rooms and hallways.

"She's testing us," DX-4 said.

"What do you mean?"

"The way she's moving, I think she's testing if we're tracking her."

"That was quick!"

"She was programmed for these kinds of things."

"She's stopped! She must have a plan."

Kean grimaced and said, "Lead us there."

"She may have a trap ready."

"We'll have to risk it. This facility is too large to move through carefully."

I find that you can follow me. Where did you place a tracking device? I inform my master of the situation and make my way to closest security center. First, I will separate you from your group; you'll be much easier to take care of with only Kean and a soldier or two. I activate a lock down and watch through the security cameras as doors begin to shut. Your group tries to move faster, but it is too late, and some are cut off. Automated turrets appear from the ceilings and open fire. A few of your comrades go down immediately, but the group takes out the threat impressively quick. They have plasma cutters too. Your group is larger than anticipated. Kean starts signaling something and the cameras go blank. You are well equipped. I will have to join the fray.

"This place is crazy!" Kean said.

"It is one of four. They are what has been restoring the Earth, and were designed to be hardy," DX-4 explained.

"Do you think she'll be coming now?"

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"Stay on high alert, people!" Kean shouted as they just finished cutting out another doorway.

"She's moving fast!" DX-4 warned everyone.

Before the two men with plasma cutters could even move out of the way a chunk of metal went flying backward taking out both of them. A

blur came through the hole and two more soldiers were knocked aside as their armor barely saved them from a clean slice across their abdomens. Another slice and they would be goners.

"She's here!" Kean yelled and raised his weapon just barely being able to track her movements in the dark. He dodged to the left and fired as a scythe whipped past over his shoulder. He missed.

Kylie easily maneuvered through the room placing herself between soldiers to make it hard for them to shoot without risking friendly fire. One more soldier fell as she spun back towards Kean's direction for another slice at his head. Her momentum carried her forward and she was about to jump off the wall when Kean yelled, "Now, DX-4!"

I feel a current run through my body and fall to the floor. My limbs stop responding. I initiate stand-by mode for a quick self-repair. With this kind of damage it will only take seconds. As my perception fades I hear you say from Kean's ear, "We probably only have a few seconds, the nanites won't work again!" Nanites, it was nanites.

"We probably only have a few seconds, the nanites won't work again!"

Kean quickly pulled DX-4 from his ear and knelt down next to the twitching cyborg. He planted the robot behind her right ear and deftly connected a data cord from DX-4 to a port on Kylie's scalp. Kean sprang back up and pointed his weapon at Kylie's head. He and the remaining soldiers shone their lights on her. "It's up to you now, buddy."

Once upon a time there were seven cyborgs living in an artificial forest...

What is this? This is...

The evil queen, Grimetalica, used her network to spy on everyone in the land to find the shiniest one of all...

This was... when I was seven. You were telling me this story for the first time. How could I have forgotten? More memories came to me then, but they were off. They weren't from my perspective, they were from yours, your old low-rez photo receptors. I upgraded these later. There was the memory now...

Kean watched Kylie's body suddenly become still. Her eyes focused and her head turned toward the lights.

"Kean..." she twitched again and her scythe extended suddenly.

"DX-4 has attached himself to your system. He's doing his best to intercept commands and give you memory, Kylie. Fight it, Kylie! Come back!"

Kylie twitched again and turned away. Her head was filling with old memories. She was Kylie for sure, not Dana, that was an alias. Jonathan! If she remembered how to cry she would have, but that was one experience DX-4 couldn't give her. "I... I..." she struggled as old commands still slipped through and told her to kill, and how to do it. She sheathed her scythe.

"That's it, Kylie, fight!" Kean encouraged. The men around him seemed less positive and backed away a bit. Kean stood his ground but didn't lower his gun.

"Kean! Hurry!" Kylie stuttered. "It's... almost too late, rescue Jonathan!"

"Jonathan? But Jonathan's dead."

"No," she forced out. "He's... here—"

Kylie accessed the door controls and released the lock-down. Her master enquired of her progress. She lied. "Take the train..." she said to Kean and pointed into the wall.

Kean understood that she meant a general direction and nodded. "You can win, Kylie. You've got help now!" Kean dashed off with his group.

Kylie tried her best to just hold still as DX-4 continued to give her his memories.

Kean's team found the train, just as Kylie had said. A monitor showed that it would take them to the center of the complex. He activated it and they only had to wait a few moments before a small car whipped down the rail and stopped for them. His team climbed aboard and the car accelerated quickly and smoothly into the complex's heart.

The car stopped and its doors opened with a pleasant ding. Kean took point as his team cautiously advanced into the large chamber. Corridors led off all around, like spokes on a wheel. In the center was what could only be a giant engine. It extended up through the ceiling and down through the floor for more stories than Kean could guess. It gave a low continual rumble and pulsed with light. Tubes and bundles of wires trailed off of it from every angle. Several went to a dais with a control panel that stretched out for several feet and flashed with a dozen surveillance screens. Many more cables went to what Kean thought looked like a coffin leaning upright against the wall, but it had a glass

top and was well lit from within; a body lay inside it. Someone sat in a large, high backed chair in front of the screens, with their back to Kean's team.

"It took you long enough to return!" the man said not even bothering to turn around. There was no answer as their footsteps stopped. The man rubbed the ivory armrest of his large chair, feeling the smooth ivory, real ivory, from a mythical creature. He slowly stood and turned around to find Kean staring back flanked by four soldiers, their weapons pointing at him. "Ah, you managed to best her then," he said. "She was my favorite."

Kean was taken aback. The figure before them was no mere man. The same steely gray hair as Kylie's, a blinking red eye: this man was a cyborg!

I was moving slowly toward the train now; you had given me enough strength for that. You were now working at deleting my master's work. Soon you had enough spare processing power to talk to me.

"Kylie, why are you in this place? How is Jonathan here?" you asked me.

"Jonathan never left. You remember the man that we thought saved me?"

"The wild-haired surgeon?"

"He is Aldan."

"What do you mean? Aldan Starkweather? He died generations ago."

"He didn't die; he's like me."

"A cyborg?"

I nodded. "He played along with Liam Clay while he was alive, even passed down some clues because he thought they were useless. But he never believed in Liam's solution."

"Do you know what it was, Kylie?"

"Yes, from my master's database files. Did you find the dragons in Fanta's Sea?"

"We did, but we couldn't bring any back."

"They were found back in Liam's day. Back when we were still hoping to find a home around a different star. That's where he found out about the dragon's source of energy."

"Do you mean the dragons mine stars too?"

"Yes, but they do it in a sustainable way; they would never cause the death of a star..."

"That is how the discovery was suddenly made!"

"Yes, with that much power they could even restore Earth. They kidnapped many dragons and brought them back to earth where they discovered their secrets. Liam was part of this team. He felt terrible about what they did to the dragons, but didn't stop for fear they would lose the Earth. When the Terraform system was turned on for the first time, they directed its power consumption toward the Phoenix Galaxy. Liam learned to his horror that the system had to draw an exponentially greater amount of power from a star the further it was away. This would lead to a rapid loss in available stars. With this vast distance, they would not be able to sustainably recover the Earth on the planned timetable. They needed to slow down, or the Earth's fast recovery could eventually mean its doom."

"I imagine that didn't go well?"

"No, he was hushed and many stories were made to cover up what was happening. They even covered up that they had ever discovered the dragons. That's when Liam made his plan. He only

brought his best friend, who was also part of the project, in on it."

"Aldan."

"My pendant, it's made from the bone of dragons! Rosemary for remembrance and for the Rosemary Prince Galaxy, a double clue... we were supposed to find out that the ivory was not of this world and find out why, and remember what we did to save Earth."

"Who are you?" Kean yelled.

The man smiled and stood up. He slowly began to walk down the stairs that lead to the platform with his desk. His face seemed familiar to Kean, who soon recognized what he and his cousins had dubbed the "Starkweather chin" in their childhood. "I'm your ancestor, Aldan."

Kean's brow furrowed as he considered those words. "What is going on here? Why do you have Jonathan?"

"Star mining. And the boy? His dreams are useful, though his usefulness is almost gone. I was considering fixing him for Liam's sake."

"Fixing him?"

"Like I did with Kylie. Her brain was much too smart to lose," he said as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Stop moving, keep your hands where I can see them! What are you doing here?" Kean yelled.

"I could fix you too. I guess, you are family after all. Don't you see, Kean? Mankind doesn't deserve to live on. They destroy everything they touch. Let them star mine themselves out of existence. Even if they take all the stars with them as they die, we will live on."

“‘They?’” Kean asked, not liking so distancing a pronoun and readjusting his aim for Aldan’s chest.

Aldan seemed unfazed but he was no longer moving. “Would you like to become part of the new race, Kean?”

Kean was pretty sure he understood enough at that point: this man was insane, and he was behind Kylie’s corruption. He pulled the trigger.

The man took the bullet in the chest without flinching. He looked down at the unbleeding hole and sighed.

“You won’t shoot me again,” he said.

Kean and his whole team opened fire.

The man jerked into a blur. Kean felt a wind rush past him and turned to find one of his comrades falling. Aldan’s arm had pierced through the weak point Kylie made earlier.

“How messy...” Aldan said, pulling his arm from the dying man’s abdomen. “With your new body you’ll be nice and clean inside and out, Kean!” He disappeared again, but he left a strangely moving cloud behind. It engulfed a second soldier. The soldier’s gun disintegrated before his eyes, then his armor. He tried to pull it off quickly as he realized what was happening, but was too late. The nanites got to his skin and started pulling him apart at a microscopic level.

“Nanites are much cleaner. Could you all kindly step into the cloud?”

Kean found Aldan by the desk typing commands at a control panel. The lighting in the room turned red as turrets descended from the ceiling once again. Another comrade fell with the new source of gunfire before they were able to neutralize them.

"Aldan!" Kean yelled and riddled the control center with bullets, but Aldan was on the ceiling now, his robotic hands and feet easily allowed him to race across the surface upside down. He leapt from the ceiling and was heading toward the last member of Kean's team, but just before his hand reached the rebel's head, another blur crashed into Aldan and sent him flying. Kylie was here.

"Don't touch them!" Kylie yelled, her scythe unsheathed.

"You can't beat me. I didn't give you a body like mine," Aldan said as he jumped to his feet and moved out of another rain of bullets, even swatting a few off course. "It seems they found a way to block my commands. I'll have to fix you again, Kylie."

"I'll hold him off. Get Jonathan!" Kylie yelled and dashed after Aldan.

Kean grimaced and ran for the coffin-tank that housed Jonathan. "How am I supposed to get him out?" he said angrily to himself before he resorted to banging the glass with the butt of his gun. The glass cracked and shattered on the fifth hit. A clear, viscous liquid spilled out and around Kean's boots. He reached inside and detached the boy as quickly as he could from the various tubes and wires of the apparatus.

Jonathan choked as his breathing tube was removed, but he had no other obvious injuries. He moaned and fell slack in Kean's arms, muscles weak from his long imprisonment.

Kylie was a blur of motion as she pursued and retreated in her duel with Aldan. He knew he was better, but he wasn't stupid enough to let his guard down. Kylie glanced slightly to the right to confirm that Jonathan had been rescued. "Get him out of here!"

"Right!" Kean yelled back and threw Jonathan over his shoulder, then ran for the door.

"Sorry Kean, I decided to fix you, remember?" Aldan said and the doors began to close. He also sprayed another cloud of nanites toward the last soldier, who swiftly dove out of the way, but lost his weapon in the process.

"Aldan, please, you can stop this! Think of Liam," Kylie pleaded.

"Haha! I am thinking of Liam, Kylie. I fixed him long ago; he's on standby further below with the rest of the great minds I've chosen. No one but me understands this facility and the mission behind it anymore. I cannot be stopped!"

"Please, Aldan! They can't even be people when you don't give them their own will."

Aldan caught Kylie by the neck and snapped off her scythe-arm, pinning her other arm with an oddly jointed leg. "The new race doesn't need more than one will, Kylie. Don't worry, I'll activate you again soon. The new world is almost ready." Aldan pointed his fingers ready to drive them through Kylie's body.

BANG!

A single shot passed through Aldan's forehead. His grip loosened, and Kylie threw herself free from his slack grasp. He fell and spun as his momentum carried him forward. "How...?" he said and his eyes lost focus. With a clunk, his body settled face up on the cavern floor, a single diode flashing on his chest as his limbs gave a few more jerks. Then the light ceased.

Kylie whirled toward Kean, who was kneeling and holding Jonathan steady while staring amazed at Aldan's lifeless body. Jonathan was holding Ke-

an's gun; he didn't even have his eyes open. After years of seeing his torturer through that thick pane of glass, learning the only vulnerable point in Aldan's body, his waiting was over. The bullet had found its mark. His energy spent, Jonathan slumped into Kean as his sister rushed toward him. A fresh tear streamed down her cheek and her skin's memory came back in a flash. "So this is crying."

It took a while, but Kean eventually managed to contact some rebel cells that had escaped the destruction of their base and they took control of the complex. They discovered a vast storehouse of cyborgs, people Aldan had stolen from their homes and "fixed." One of these was Liam Clay. The old scientist awoke, groggy and confused, but keenly remembering what he had been trying to tell the world before he was shut down by the government and silenced by Aldan. The rebels' top remaining scientists filled Liam in on the state of star mining, and he set to work making the process sustainable with an alacrity surprising for a man who had been supposed dead for five generations.

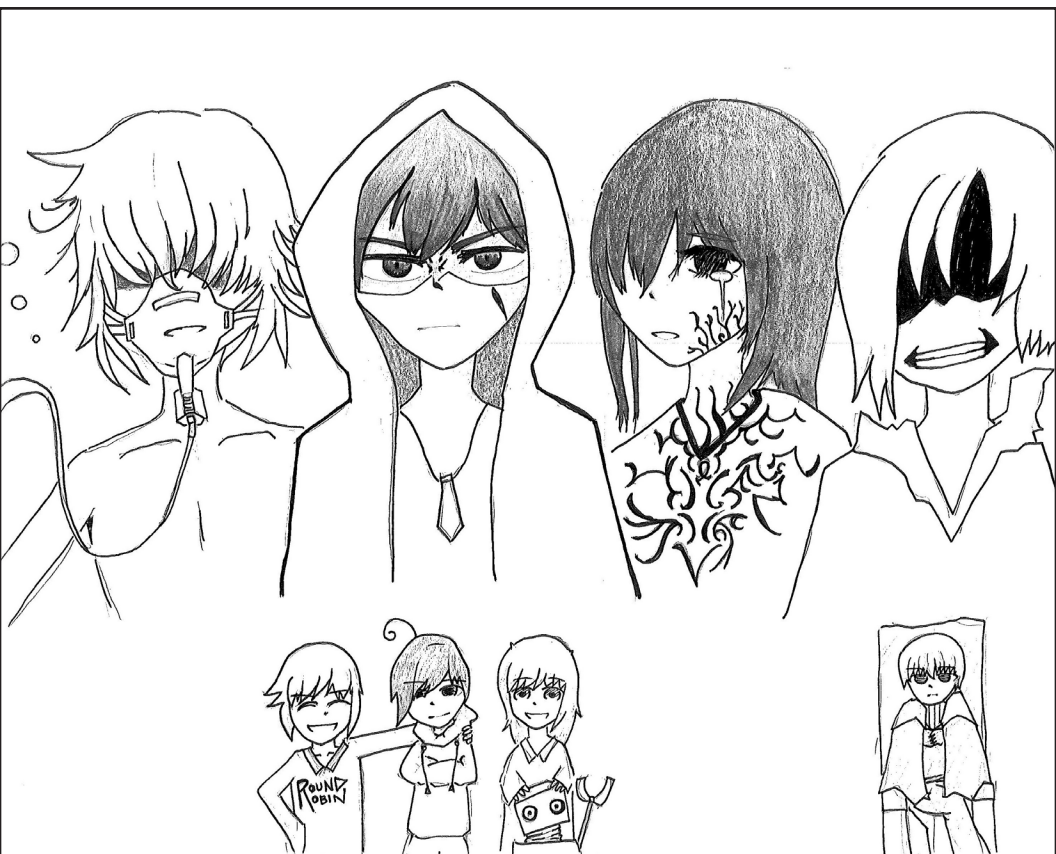
Aldan's records revealed that he had several cyborgs working as government officials and military officers undercover. Amy Lee had the idea to call one of these officials in for a live interview. During the interview, as eyes across three solar systems were watching, rebel technicians put the official and her cyborg colleagues into stand-by mode, revealing their nature to Tiranova and enabling their immediate removal.

Kean was chosen to lead the rebels and propelled them to victory in the chaos that ensued

after Aldan's puppets were revealed. When the war was over, he wrote a fantastic essay, really a whole book, about everything that had happened during the rebellion. Cass would have been proud.

Kylie was repaired and finally learned how to smile when she got to speak with Jonathan again. After years of being surrounded by only cyborgs, Jonathan was happy to find he wasn't the only human left. Many hugs, and tears, and pancakes were involved when Kylie, Jonathan, Jiang, and Amy Lee were all finally able to sit down around the breakfast table again after ten years.

DX-4 became a permanent part of Kylie's cyberspace, enjoying his perch above her ear. He stayed with her always and promised never to leave again.



The End

Appendix

The round robin you just read, “Before Night Falls,” was written a chapter at a time. Each new author wrote the next installment, with full knowledge of what had gone on before. Then as a group, we all edited the final story, making sure all the details were consistent. This makes for a good, cohesive story.

There's another way to do a round robin that's more raucous. While seated in a line, each author writes only one sentence of the story before passing it on to the next. To make it even more fun, fold the paper over so that the next writer can only see the one sentence of the previous person. I definitely recommend this fun party game for your next gathering of creative types.

At the final meeting of WhInklings for the 2015-2016 year, after writing our grand round robin over the previous several months, we wrote another round robin that was too good not to share. Carolyn Greco supplied an illustration after we finished writing.

“Aedran and the Unicorn”

Jennie stared down the large stone wall and began to sing the ancient song.

As expected, a large pair of antlers emerged from the irregular crack, attached to the body of a lion with the prehensile tail of a monkey.

The creator of the strange creature was delighted, and named it Aedran.

Aedran reached forward and felt along the side of the table; suddenly his fingers grasped a long tube-like object, sending it crashing over the table edge.

Aedran yelped and jumped back in pain, clutching his hand; for the long, slender object that he had grabbed was a unicorn's horn, and the unicorn, in anger, rose up before him with a blinding flash.

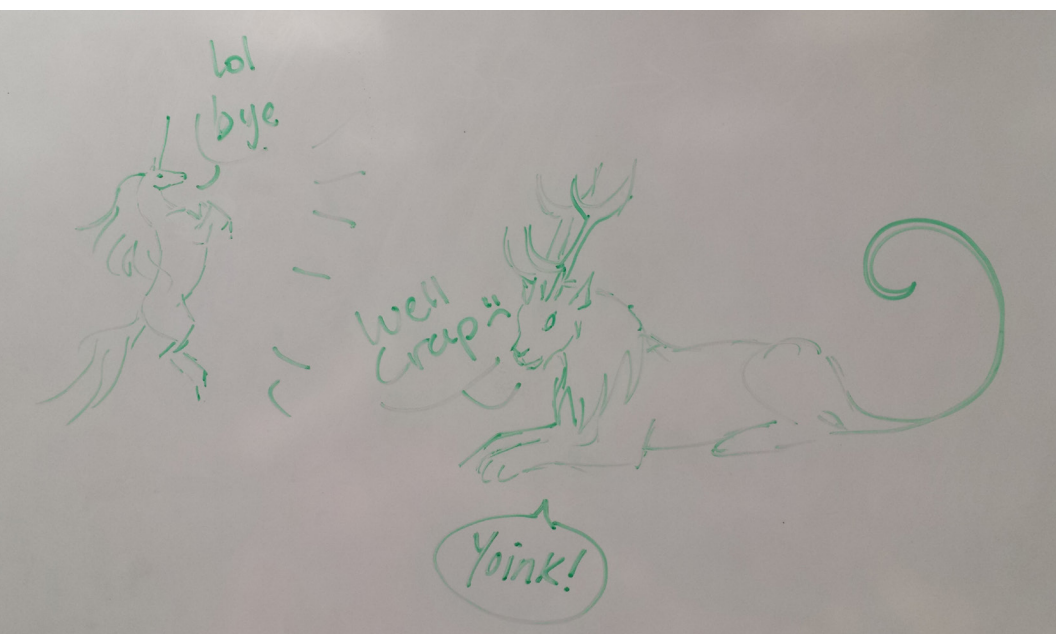
Aedran was holding his burned hand, and when he looked, the unicorn was gone.

“Well crap!” said Aedran, “I could have used that unicorn's healing power on my hand.”

It was too late. Aedran released a sigh as he watched the sun dip behind the hills, thinking he would never be able to get back everything he'd lost. Crazy to think how all this introspection had started. What a world.

Suddenly, looking next to him, he saw a glint of metal in the rays of the setting sun. It was a magic coin. Holding it and making a wish, the most important thing was returned to him as if he'd never lost it.

The End.



SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

- We welcome submissions from any member of the Wheaton College community, whether student, faculty, staff, or alum. Only two pieces from any one author may be submitted per issue.
- For copyright reasons, we must limit our published selection to original characters and worlds only. Please, no fan-fiction or fan-art.
- While the journal's main emphasis is on fiction, we will also consider poetry, non-fiction, essay, and art for publication.
- The journal will only publish genre fiction. The genres included are:
 - Science fiction
 - Fantasy
 - Mystery
 - Action/Adventure
 - Horror
 - Western
- We are interested in any mix of these or similar genres. If your piece falls under a genre we missed, please contact us and ask about it. We will most likely welcome your story!
- Short fiction is preferred, but chapters of longer stories may have the opportunity to be published serially.
- Essays and other non-fiction submissions may be on these genres themselves, authors who write in them, personal experiences with genres, reviews of popular works of genre fiction, etc.
- Art submissions must have as their main subject something to do with the target genres. Please submit your work as a high-resolution PDF.

Deadlines

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- Fall semester—October 31
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