

SARA AND THE CHIMERA

Book 2.5

ECHOES



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CHAPTER 1

A single fish swam through the air towards the pulsating pinpoint of light, casting long undulating shadows along the inky-black, star-speckled hull of the spherical room. The fish studied the pulse of the light for a moment and then tugged lightly upon its tether—a thin, silvery chain that ran from a barbed hook in its gill. At the sensation of the motion, a second, duplicate fish bobbed down from above and goggled at the light for a moment. It too seemed to feel the need to call its brethren, and within moments, dozens of the little fish were hovering about, tugging at their chains. Soon afterwards, a grotesque, disembodied face was towed into the gathering, the edges of its leathery, hairless skin hooked into the little chains. “Well well,” the voice croaked with a tone that would have shattered a thousand mirrors, “a prophecy at the Prime level! Let us have a look.”



Elegantly, the tiny pinprick of light spread out, forming quickly into lines and patterns that might have been letters of a strange, alien language. The patterns began to slowly scroll up the wall of the chamber, then all at once, the words stopped. “What!?” The face sputtered again, singing in symphony with an untuned chorus of disbelieving fish. “Redacted? By whom?” A leathery glove of a hand reached out of the darkness for the words on the wall. Like the face, the hand consisted of only skin, torn off just below the elbow, and likewise was tied by silvery chains and hooks to the bevy of fish. It could not be deduced from its sharp movements whether the actions were initiated by the hand, or if the hand were merely acting as a puppet, moved into position by the floating fish.

As the empty fingers of the dead hand tapped at the wall of the chamber, more patterns of light appeared, colored menus of patterns and cryptic words. “Impossible,” the face growled,





the words bouncing off the metal walls and echoing through the chamber like feedback from a broken speaker. “All the prognosticators on the ship; show me all of them. Now!” the disharmonious voices sounded. At once the scores of fish all pulled out in different directions, all in all, creating a sphere-shaped shell that filled the room perfectly, with the face and hands and an antique-looking jeweled belt hung with tattered rags in the center. Between the face and the belt beat a dark, black heart, the apparent nexus of the hooks and chains that held the whole of this strange being together.

Along the various (yet single) walls of the room, in front of each fish, a series of data files now scrolled, replete with pictures of a variety of strange alien creatures—a handful human-looking, some not even close. After several minutes of high-speed visuals running by each fish, the figure at the center remained unsatisfied. “Bring up a list of all prognosticator cells on all levels along with who the current occupants are.” More data scrolled by around the room. “Stop!” the creature screeched. “Level Epsilon 59B, Block F. It’s missing a cell. Bring up the schematics of the Epsilon quadrant.” As image after image of blueprints began to form out of light upon the walls, a single red light eventually began to pulse at the apex of the room.

The new voice that rang out through the chamber was flat and soldier-like, yet still quite cold. “Captain, you have a visitor.”





Sara, where is your head?
Ha... did I really just ask you that? I know where your head is, off flying through time and space, contemplating all the variables and outcomes of our every possible action.

No. For once I was not considering the future, but the past.



Leave it to you Sara.
All the wonder and serene beauty of the
realms of the Fair Folk to enjoy, and you
spend your time in the dusty old attics of
the past.

True.
But I've stumbled onto some
big secrets my father had pre-
viously hidden from me.

CHAPTER 2

A thousand worlds away, in another, similar chamber, six white points of light hung in the air above a tiny silver globe that floated in the exact center of the private space. The lights circled the globe slowly, like tiny planets orbiting a cold sun. After but a moment, a deep and clear voice resounded through the chamber, emanating perhaps from one of the tiny points of light. “Font, analyze all of the worldship’s systems for weaknesses and damage.”

Without a pause, a soft voice echoed back from the globe at the center of the room. “Climate control systems on Gamma quadrant, Rentar level show signs of temperature wear from recent foray into Primal realms, data sent to maintenance crews.”

“That is all?” the first voice replied.

“All events above current severity level of moderate.”

“Very well. Maintain current levels. What is the current number of civilizations more than five steps above Prime with awareness or contact with other realities?”

“Eight thousand, seven hundred and forty three.”

The six points of light paused in their orbit for a moment. “That number seems unusually high,” their voice finally replied.

“Is that a question?” the voice from the globe replied.

“No,” the stars answered back slowly, “it’s just... it seems the anomalies are growing faster than current containment capabilities. Engage material synchronization link with Prime.” A single star floated down and melded into the top of the globe. A quick spark of blue light flashed where the star sank into the

surface. A moment later it surfaced. “Linking with primal Elders. It may be some time before new directives are received. What is the latest culture to have discovered music?”

“The Galankians,” the globe replied, “of reality 694.7 to the 97th power.”

“Play their most popular song.”

“The concept of a song does not yet exist in their culture.”

“Play a sample of their music. We must wait a while.” The rhythmic sound of rocks clacking together and icicles breaking rang through the chamber. Occasional shrieks permeated the sound, with what sounded a bit like fighting in places. “Now this is music,” the Star announced. The six stars swirled and bounced in the air in time to the clanking.

As the Seventh Star of Twilight danced, he pondered the fate of the worlds he had just informed on. Most would be fine, he supposed, just a bit muddled and misinformed—the Elders preferred to send agents into these worlds to distract cultures and discredit those who threatened to show them the truth. And for established worlds, native allies were already in place to do the job for them. A few of the more recalcitrant outliers might be flagged for extermination, and in the most extreme cases, extraction and erasure from the eternal record. Still, eight thousand, seven hundred and forty three. The worlds were expanding faster than they could even record them. There were no longer enough agents to operate in these places, and that meant only one thing—the Fenris. More and more the Elders had come to rely upon his skills and less and less on their own talents and machinations. Total annihilation. Why corral what you don’t understand when you can simply wipe it from existence, snuff its light out and return it to the darkness. How many of these



eight thousand cultures would be gone the next time he asked the question. How many people would be lost, and how much music? And how long before the council even realized their control no longer mattered.

After a while, a red light began to pulse along the wall of the chamber. “Captain,” a stern voice broke into the revelry.

“Yes,” the Star responded with a slight tone of annoyance.

“Forgive the intrusion sir, but we have encountered an anomaly, something never before seen in any of our historical records.”

“Indeed?” The Star could hear the distress in his officer’s voice and it piqued his interest. “What is it?”

“Well, for starters, we appear to have an intruder on the ship.”





CHAPTER 3

The Mongrel could feel the chill in the air as the sphere split open and he swam out into the bridge. He could not see his “visitor” directly. It just looked like a blot of darkness, a mote in his disparate visions, but when he turned his headless face away and looked at it out of the corner of his empty eyes, it was there—like an insect poised to prey upon him, or a wolf, or perhaps a man. It was impossible to describe the visitor—from one moment to the next it seemed different, shifting from one horror to the next, the only constant being its blazing red eyes. It was impossible to say where the thing was fixed in time and space. As one peered towards it, it seemed to shift from one place to the next without passing through the spaces in between. The officers on the bridge had all stood down, trying to pretend it was not there. Though their prism visors offered them some protection, they knew better than to risk eye contact with it. The Mongrel had dealt with these beings many times, but this one was something more. This was no ordinary extraordinary messenger. For a creature of this rank to be called up, something heavy was afoot.

In a moment it was upon him, and its icy claws froze the little fish solid as it snapped at them. Their paralyzed little bodies turned sideways and floated upward as they came into contact with the visitor, their faces locked in an expression of pain and horror.

“To what do I owe the honor?” the Mongrel growled, not averting his eye sockets, but looking straight at the creature, even if it meant he could not see it. All the better, really.

A voice like a dozen drowning cats answered back. “Your mission has been canceled and control of this ship revoked. All courses are unset and reverted back to Prime. I am now acting





captain of this ship and you are to be remanded to the tri-dimensional brig until we arrive at the Palace of Doors.”

“On whose authority do you give these orders?” Though the Fish Man’s leathery face was stony, it still showed a hint of fear, and more than a bit of surprise.

“The full council of Elders, presided over by the Octachoron himself,” the dark thing hissed.

“You mock me,” the Mongrel barked back. “You forget that the full council of Elders includes myself. I was not present for any such order. Warriors! Destroy this imposter!”

The motley of armed species in uniform on the bridge did not move. “Your men will not take orders from traitors, Captain,” the dark creature creaked out, putting special emphasis on the word Captain, as if in scorn. “A disship directive has been given.” The thing waved a feathery arm upwards. Glassy eyed, the men all raised their weapons and leveled them at the Fish Man. “Now move. Unless you would rather your execution occurred before your trial?”



“Trial?” the Fish Man stammered back in surprise. “Of what do I stand accused?”

“Treason,” the black thing whispered, “in the highest degree.”

“But this is preposterous,” the Mongrel snarled. “I have committed no treason. Of what acts am I charged?”

“None,” the visitor answered back. “But that is only because they haven’t happened yet.”



CHAPTER 4

“Show the visual onscreen.” The six points of light spread out into a flat, even halo above the silver orb in the center of the chamber. The Seventh Star did not know what to expect from the security images, but he certainly didn’t expect what he saw. A small black cat slunk along a corridor deep in the bowels of the worldship.

“Ok, so it’s a cat,” the Seventh Star spoke into the security commlink. “We probably picked it up on one of the recent worlds we visited. It must have come through when we opened a portal and nobody saw it. How it got past our sensors is upsetting, but still... it’s tiny, and Prime knows the little creatures are everywhere in all of creation. Why are you bothering me with this drivel? It is probably just as freaked out as you guys. Just put some fish out and catch the thing.”

“Watch what it does next,” the soldier’s voice crackled through the loudspeaker.

“I think my attention can be served better with other... whaaa?” The Seventh Star stopped mid-sentence, dumbfounded. “What is he doing?”

“We have no idea, sir. The Font was of no help. We know you have unrestricted access, so maybe you can tell us.” On the far wall of the chamber, a large moving picture was projected onto the silvery surface. It showed the cat stand up on two legs and touch the wall of a passageway somewhere on the worldship. A small hole opened in the surface of the wall and the cat stepped through it. The hole closed behind him, leaving no mark or sign of the cat’s passage.

“Font,” the Seventh Star barked, “why is this feline interloper aboard my worldship?”

“Question unclear,” the response came back. “Please elaborate the intention of your query.”

“The black cat on my ship,” the Star replied, sounding confused, “what is it doing?” This was odd, he was fully linked to the Font. In cases such as this, the Font normally just read his mind to interpret what he really meant.

“There is no cat on this ship,” the globe responded.

“But...” the Seventh Star did not know what to say. The Font was never wrong. It could never not answer a question. “Review the security footage. There is clearly a feline intruder. Where is it now?”

“There is no cat on this worldship.”

“So where has this intruder gone, then?”

“Unknown.”

“What?” Such a thing had never happened before. “Ok,” he started again, slowly, “the feline-looking creature in the video. What is it? What is its destination and where has it hailed from?”

“It is a cat,” came the response.

This was impossible. It could only have been the power of another word being used against the Font. And only the Elders had control of the words. “Very well,” the Star pressed onward, “so what in the name of all Prime was happening when it touched the walls of my worldship and altered them in some way outside of even my understanding?”

“Reality alteration,” the globe replied. “This ship exists in several realities at once; that is how it swims between worlds. A being who is a conduit to one of these realities may alter

the parts of the ship that exist only in the worldship and in its reality. This is the technique employed in building the worldship, by shifting it between an origin reality and an imagined reality and back, so that the imagined changes to the physical presence of the ship become possible in the lower-level reality. It takes advantage of the ship's reality flux engines, which constantly shift it from one reality to another."

"A conduit to an origin reality? Would you not need to be an original builder of the worldship in order to manipulate it in this way?"

"Under most circumstances, yes."

"And who built this ship?"

"The primal Elders, though legend tells that its design was copied from a prototype built by a creature known as the Starsailor."

"And what form did this Starsailor take."

"The Starsailor is a legend only. There is no evidence that he ever existed in any kind of fully realized form. However, the original prototype worldship was crewed by cats. You should know this; it came from the story you told with Curiosity."

"Yes, but that was a million prime years ago. No cat from that age could possibly still draw breath. Creatures of that sort have not existed for eons. Should I hold any concern for the wellbeing of this worldship? After all if this creature can create holes in corridors, then why not turn the ship into a rock or break it into a billion pieces? Or at least threaten the integrity of the ship's reality flux engines?"

"Only elements of the ship that do not exist in any other reality than the original may be manipulated. Where someone else has

noticed, changed, or touched the ship, it is grounded in multiple visions of reality and cannot be easily altered. Only places like an empty corridor or a gap between the walls may be manipulated, as no one else considers them.”

“Font, this cat can’t be acting alone. There is no way it could gain such access to the ship without some higher-order being providing it aid. Is there any evidence that any of the Elders has taken action against the council? On any realm of existence?”

“Of late, no. Though there is a recent development.”

“Development?”

“One of the seers on the Mongrel’s worldship is currently having a vision.”

“Narrate.”

“One of the Elders is about to turn on his fellows. He plots to steal the Font of All Knowledge and thereby disrupt the ability of the Elders to communicate and to maintain control over all realms of creation. He employs the words of power against the Elders for his own personal glorification and gain.”

“And who is this traitor?”

“His identity is unknown. He wields a weapon of pure light that blinds the eyes of the seer.”

“Could such a weapon be also used to blind the Font of All Knowledge?”

“Potentially, if it were also a word of equal power.”

“And which of the elders has access to the true word of light?”
The floating lights drew closer to the silver sphere.

“You know this,” the Font answered. “It is the Mongrel.”

The six stars shook slightly in the air, though out of fear or excitement, it could not be determined. Finally the clear voice of the Seventh Star emanated out again. “Pause for a moment; I must communicate this to Prime.”

In the brief moment of silence that followed, a distinct click and a thud could be heard. From above, at the exact apex of the spherical room, a small, manual emergency hatch opened in the silvery wall. A slim rope ladder dropped down from the hole and a lithe black cat slipped through the opening and began to climb down. At once, the six points of light flew into a fury and began to circle the small creature at an impossible pace, closing in on it, until finally, all six stars suddenly stopped, pausing and hovering in midair before a strange marking in the fur on the front of the cat’s tiny chest—a snow white star.

“Hold,” the voice of the Seventh Star came forth again, this time sounding very unsure of itself. “How can it be? I know you.”

“Hello father,” the cat mewed, dropping from the ladder onto the floor of the chamber. “We have a great deal to discuss.”



CHAPTER 5

The airlock flowered open with a hiss and sunlight came streaming through. The Mongrel could still see the sinister creature standing to his left, or more accurately, could still sense its presence. The pure light of Prime seemed unable to illuminate the creature, as if some high-up object was obscuring the rays, leaving the creature blotted out in a smear of shadow. But the watcher was the least of the Fish Man's problems now. Before him lay his home, the ancient realm known only as Prime, or 0.0 to the Infinite Power if one wanted to be precise. Zeroth power, the Fish Man thought to himself—it really should be 0.0 to the zeroth power, but the masters of Prime didn't like the sound of that, so we changed the rules. Well, he considered, really we made up the rules in the first place—all of them. Heck, we made up everything, he thought, even the watchers. Careful what you wish for, indeed. It was difficult to be an ancient immortal being without piling up a few regrets.



As the Fish Man swam out onto the platform, the whole of Prime opened up before him—the joining place of all of the primal realms. The name “Prime” was both an identifier and a point of honor, indicating that this was the oldest realm and the origin world of all creation. Arguably, the primal realms were older, but they weren't proper worlds on their own—legend referred to them as the palette with which the creator painted the first realm; and really they were officially part of Prime anyway, but you wouldn't want to live in them.

High above stretched the cold infinity of Primal Air, where red storms the size of planets had been raging for eons. Directly ahead, the Fish Man could just make out the edge of the primal realm of Water—an endless ocean that had no bottom and where waves crashed and monsters swam at a magnitude beyond imagination. To his left, he knew, was the edge of the





Forest Primeval, a jungle so thick with life that nothing could survive there. And finally, to his right, he could feel the heat coming off the realm of Primal Flame—a land of magma and smoke and light, unquenchable and unstoppable. Somewhere behind him he could hear the burning of the Endless Fire, the border between wood and flame where an inferno had raged since the dawn of time, the forest growing as fast as the fire could eat it up. And just ahead to his right he could see the great column of steam that rose to touch the sky, marking the boundary of flame and water. And here, at the center of it all, where all the primal worlds came together, lay the first realm.

The realm of Prime was not big as worlds go, but striking nonetheless, and though arguably walkable from end to end, its area was impossible to measure, as much of it had been built down into the earth so as to maximize the usable space. Prime was roughly circular in shape, with its ancient roads giving the appearance of spokes on a massive wheel. On the outer half of the circle, where once had been rolling hills and open fields of wildflowers, now sprawled the massive villas of the Elders. Every time the Mongrel came here, it seemed, they were larger, to the point where now they consumed all the land in sight. Only twenty Elders had ever existed, and half of these, like himself, dwelled outside of Prime, but each one had a villa, and a staff, culled from a thousand other worlds, and slaves, and that staff and those slaves had families and pets and staff and slaves of their own. Even the Mongrel himself had a villa, and he could see that it had also grown larger than he remembered. Had it been that long? The villas of the Elders were officially their homes, but by this point they had become little more than museums for the various trophies and works of art that the Elders had stolen from all the realms that they held in their grip. Each villa had its own style and architecture; and they weren't simply buildings but were more like small cities—the villas





encompassed stadiums and coliseums, monuments and towers, parks and ruins. Nothing ever fell to ruin in Prime—everything was under tight control, but there were indeed carefully prepared ruins—replicas of famous places from other worlds, recreated at the highest of expense.

The inner circle of the wheel of Prime was known as the Primal Zoo. It was here that at least one of every sentient race in creation was kept for display, as well as tens of thousands of the more unusual or interesting creatures that were deemed unfit for existence. Here were humans of course, as well as fairies, and talking lions, and dragons, and land seahorses, grey aliens and squid people, and farrain, theyden ru, and tro-ha-jin. Goat-headed people could be found in the zoo, as well as people-headed goats and even one odd being that had the body of a goat attached to the body of a person via a long neck. In short, the zoo was just that, a menagerie of all the various creatures and species that dwelt under the control of the Elders. If it seemed arrogant, it was meant to be. The zoo was intended to be intimidating—a visible show of dominance over all creation. Originally, the zoo had been planned out to function as a map of the various realms of existence, with the various main paths representing the numbered worlds and their levels of creation, but over time the mapping had been abandoned as creation could no longer be fit into one flat plane. Regions bisected each other in strange ways, with bridges and tunnels running over and under other regions, all fighting for space and attention and creating a maze, or an impossible tree, the branches of which swirled upwards and around, stretching high into the sky above Prime. At the center of this thicket lay the most infamous building in all of the known creations—the Palace of Doors.

This ancient, inverted stone pyramid was itself massive, and its twenty layers stepped downward into the ground, forming a





colossal crater, lined entirely with intricately sculpted walls and floors. Carved in relief along the surface of the palace was the history of Prime and its creation of and dominion over the lesser realms, starting from the void at the bottom and working its way upward to infinity. At this stage, the walls of the palace continued to step up far above the ground, spreading out like buttressed wings and shadowing over the older portions of the zoo.

Throughout the palace were its namesake, the hundreds and hundreds of gates to other realms that served as Prime's first line of control over creation. Each door was different and ornate, its style and materials reflecting the world to which it served as a portal. Each gate was also resplendent in massive locks and chains, symbolizing that the gates could only be opened from this side—when it inconvenienced the Elders.

Above and below, on the central axis of the pyramid, two singular features stood out above all others. High in the air, hovering, at the very center of Prime, hung the Eternal Sun. Unlike on later worlds, this sun never moved. There was no night on Prime, or seasons, or time either in some ways—all of that had been invented later. The sun was small by planetary standards, but its light, drawn from the power of primal flame, never went out.

And finally, at the lowest level of the pyramid, marking the very center of the first realm of Prime, a void of infinite blackness lurked. The nothing point, it was called. It was not large, but not insignificant either, perhaps the size of a small house or pond. No light entered the point, and none emanated from it—it remained the perfect black of the void at all times. This, of all creation, was the one thing that the Elders feared. Anything or anyone that entered the nothing point would simply vanish





from existence—not just gone, but unwritten as if they never had been, forgotten by all for all time. It is possible, the Fish Man remarked to himself on considering the palace, that there were more than twenty of us in the beginning. If one of us had entered that hole at some point, who would know?

The nothing point was the ceremonial execution point of all of Prime's direst enemies—the ultimate punishment. In particular, any creatures that broke the Elders' rules of what a creature should be or could do were disposed of here. The Elders were the authors of the laws of the universe; and beware all who broke them.

The Mongrel was chagrined to see that he had been brought in via the Traitor's Gate, located not in the palace, but on the outer edge of the great wheel. From the Traitor's gate, the Victor's Processional—the widest road in all of Prime let straight through the city to the main entrance of the palace of doors. He was to be escorted the entire nine-mile run on foot. This was a walk of shame—a public parade before all of Prime, showing not only that the Mongrel was a turncoat, but that he had been captured before he had even begun his plot, a laughable, ineffective turncoat at that.

And here they were, his escort. Rising up on the platform now to flank him came not one but two of the masters of Prime—one of the small, black, canine forms of the Fenris, and the stark, scaly, feathery ball of tentacles that made up the Infinite Nest. These may have been familiar faces from the dawn of time, but they weren't smiling.





Good, good.
You used your knowledge
of Eskrima, the fighting
style I am employing, to
counter me.



You press the attack
well, but to be the best

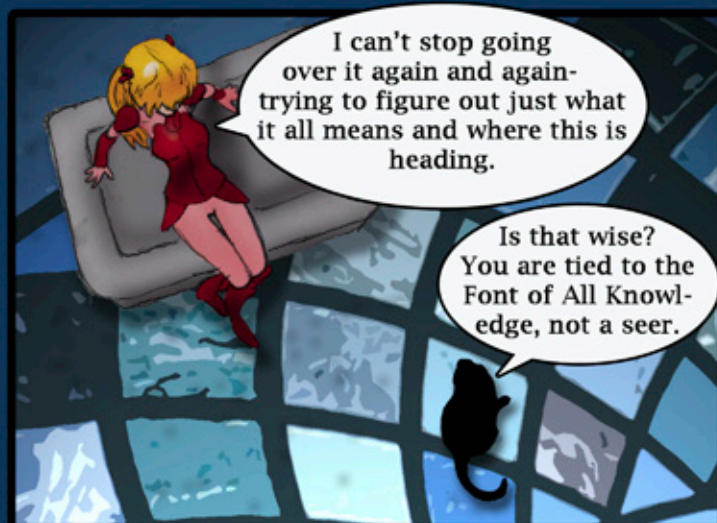
you must improvise...
and do the unexpected.



Do we have to keep
going? I'm getting a
little tired of being
knocked on my butt.

It's all this new
knowledge that was
released to the Font upon
meeting my father.

Sara, you seem distracted.
You make one improvement only
to take two steps back. You
cannot allow anything to weaken
your focus in the middle of a
fight.



I can't stop going
over it again and again-
trying to figure out just what
it all means and where this is
heading.

Is that wise?
You are tied to the
Font of All Knowl-
edge, not a seer.



I'm just trying
to do what
you've been
teaching me

use my knowledge to
counter our enemies.

Yeah? And
how's that
working for
ya?

CHAPTER 6

"I am here to interrogate the prisoner." Six points of light floated gracefully into the sterile, metallic central cell block of the worldship. In the glaring light, a broad circular complex could be seen, with heavy glass walls set all around, each cell looking into a highly technological crystalline chamber. In most of the units, prisoners waited; some were quite large, like the gas giant whose wispy form was pushed into a cube by the walls of the cell, and others quite small, like the tiny red octopus, no bigger than a mouse, who sat writing eight different books at once with eight different pens. Some might have been even smaller, as a few of the cells appeared entirely empty but seemed still to be powered on for some reason. In the center of the area, a set of monitoring consoles were set in a circle, facing out towards the cells. Four armed soldiers sat at the consoles, pressing various buttons and turning odd switches. They jumped to attention when the captain appeared.

"Of course, Captain", one of the soldiers spoke, a hulking creature with a long, fur-covered snout, pointed ears, and four arms. "And as per protocol, we will escort you. Recording engaged now." The creature reached out one of his lower arms and flipped a switch on his console. A small, red light began to blink.

"Indeed, protocol." Four of the six points of light broke off from the group and flicked out towards the soldiers. As the lights made contact with the men, they absorbed into their bodies, disappearing. Instantly, the three lower-ranking soldiers sat back down and resumed their monitoring duties. The wolf-like creature reached out again and re-toggled the switch, and the light went off.

Nodding, the wolf creature padded over to the remaining two

points of light and stood obediently by. "Protocol", he nodded, and then followed meekly after the captain as he made the rounds of the cell block.

Soon enough, the two points of light came upon the glass chamber where the star-chested cat sat, calmly cleaning itself. It did not look up as the guard approached. "We may speak freely now without fear of prying ears," the Seventh Star assured the prisoner, but the cat pretended not to hear. He shrugged his shoulders and patted the glass, mouthing soundless words. "It does not help your cause to ignore me," the captain replied, sounding slightly annoyed. When the cat only returned to his cleaning, the Seventh Star let out a sigh and moved forward, passing through the glass walls into the cell. "I assure you that we are alone. What we say here only we will know," he repeated. This time the cat looked up and winked at him.

"You are a very important being," the cat mewed, "master of all knowledge and center point of all communications throughout all creations. Much has changed since we last met. I don't suppose you've let it all go to your head?"

"I have been entrusted with a heavy burden of responsibility," the Seventh Star returned flatly.

"Responsibility?" the cat narrowed its eyes. "You are responsible for a great deal of suffering and death, that is for sure. But as for being responsible for all of creation, nobody asked you to watch over us all. That's no responsibility, that's a choice."

"Not so," the Seventh Star answered. "The masters of Prime itself charged me with this hallowed task. It is my unyielding duty, preventing realities from overreaching their bounds and infesting other creations. Think of the suffering that would ensue if the edicts of one reality were to overlap and mix with the

laws of another, ripping perception and local physics asunder. We must ensure that realities are left to flourish on their own, in isolation. One dare not consider the aberrations that might come into being if we allowed such cross trans-physical disturbances.”

“You allow realities to flourish in a vacuum,” the cat snapped back. “Without communication, without input from other realities, without even knowledge of them, how do you expect life to advance? How do you know what is best for living things? You hide the truth and cripple us, doom us to a life of limitations. How do you know what the point of all of this grand experiment is if you don’t let it experiment? You act like gods, but you are not; you are, ironically, exactly what you call yourself, elders. You are older than all of us, but that does not make you stronger or even better. You want to be an elder? Be an elder; share your knowledge with the universe. Show us what you know. Guide us with your experience, but do not cripple us and blind us. You know not what we could become if we were allowed to shine forth.”

“Is this broken course of logic why you have come to my door?” the Seventh Star replied. “To chastise me? I could wipe you from existence with less strain than it requires to say these words.” He narrowed down to a single point. “Or even... cast you into the nothing point, whereupon you will cease to have ever existed.”

“Is that why you have come here,” the cat spat back, “to threaten me? Is that your model for creation—bully and intimidate, destroy those whom you don’t understand? You have indeed changed. When I knew you of yore, you quested for knowledge and new ideas. You were a creator of worlds, not a destroyer.”

“This again. I will not deny that there is something familiar about you, but this insistence upon speaking to me as if you and I are somehow interconnected, I will not stand for nonsense. I bid you then, tell me how is it that you and I have crossed paths before, when I bear no memory of it.”

“Ah, certainly no memory in all of recorded time,” the cat countered. “You do not remember? You sang me into existence from nothing. Perhaps you could ask your precious Font for the tale—the bastion and record of all truth in the universe. You have deleted things from the Font yourself—you do not suppose your masters have deleted a few things they do not want you to hear? And another thing—one of twenty and you still have masters? I wonder what kind of creation you would really seek if you could follow your own will.”

“What folly would you press me to?” the Seventh Star chuckled in reply. “Rebel against Prime? Abscond with this ancient vessel and tour the fledging realms of creation offering up original knowledge—the veracity of the true nature of reality to all who would offer ear? You think me free to act against my peers and betters? I am no more free than the prisoners that surround you. Tell me, do you know why I am called the Seventh Star of Twilight?”

“Because you are made of Seven Stars?” The cat shrugged.

“For the most part. And how many stars have you ever seen?”

“At once?” The cat thought. “Six, I’d guess.”

“So where is the seventh?”

“Wait, you’re asking me?” the cat replied. “I thought this was a story.”



CHAPTER 7

The Mongrel entered the arena of the Palace of Doors to the jeers of a hundred thousand voices. All the residents of Prime were in attendance, or at least those important enough to have been given a seat. The rest of them, the servants and the serfs, had lined the sides of the Victor's Processional as he had swam his way into the city. They smell blood, he thought to himself. Well, I will give it to them.

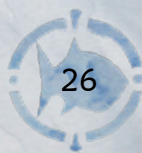
His escort led him forward, down a ramp specially prepared for these such events. The ramp jutted straight forward into the center of the space, cutting past the layers of stone tiers and ending on a small platform, suspended almost in the center of the arena, high above the nothing point. The Mongrel knew this platform well—he had designed it himself. It sat on a great hinge, with a stop holding it in place, connected by a series of wires and pulleys to a heavy, ornate lever just across the way, situated just beside the ebon throne whereupon sat the ultimate master of Prime, the singular being known only as the Octachoron.



High above the platform, directly in the center of the arena, a single point of light hung in a gilded, runed, double cage. The tiny glow evoked the flame of the golden sun that hung high, high above—only the sun didn't need a set of wires and chains to keep it in place.

The Mongrel raised his hands up into the air and his fish swam outward and up, forming a shape like a bowl. "It's good to be home!" he shouted. The crowd began to howl.

"Silence!" The voice was not so much heard as felt, like the shockwave of a supersonic jet. All around, all eyes turned to the ebon throne. Though called a throne, it was more of a dais,





or possibly even just a heap, crafted from the blackened cores of a thousand rebel worlds, each reduced to a single lump of darkness by the wrath of the Fenris. Atop the heap floated the familiar form of the Octachoron, the seer or Prime. As with the other elders, his shape bore no sense or reason, but stood simply as an experiment to the possibilities of creation. His appearance now took the shape of two cubes, nested inside of one another and connected by lines at the corners. Different colors of light flickered from each of the six sides, and the light seemed to shift as the cube on the inside pulsed with something of a heartbeat. From the outer cube radiated a calm, languid voice, loud, clear, and commanding, yet soothing and impeccably authoritative. “We have a traitor before us.”

“Wasn’t there supposed to be a trial?” the Mongrel returned. Is this what it was coming to? Twenty elders seemed too few to the Mongrel to start all of everything. How many times had this already happened and been erased from everyone’s memories? Was this how Prime would fall? One citizen at a time until only the last was left? And then how much control could one Elder exert. No, the Mongrel was no traitor, but this was not a system he could support—unless he were on top. He knew it now—he would indeed rebel; it was inevitable. But this was no thought he could entertain now. He had to get rid of it.

“You may present your evidence,” the cube calmly stated.

“My evidence?” the Mongrel sneered. “My evidence is that there is no evidence. I have done no wrong.” But he would. He knew it now. The prophecy was coming true. He looked up and stared upon the beauty of the Primal sun. Was this the last time he would feel its glow? Then he looked down. With the sun directly above him, his shadow was truly monstrous—a shapeless blob with innumerable tentacles and multiple mouths





and eyes. What if these were its thoughts, not his own? The Fish Man imagined a twisted world, a darkened cave where the shadow lurked, plotting its revenge against the masters of Prime. The Fish Man closed the empty eye-slits in the wrinkled skin of his empty face. A bit of a rush job, but he thought he could do this.

“Seventh Star,” the cube announced after a brief pause to see if the Fish Man had anything else to say, “present the factual evidence from the Font of All Knowledge.”

At this, the point of light in the cage between the Fish Man and the Octachoron brightened, and a voice uttered forth from it. “Of late, a ranking prognosticator, a bruth, on the ship of light was struck with the illumination of foresight and wrote down his vision.”

“And the vision?” the cube pressed.

“In it, one of the Elders destroys the worldships and steals the words of power therein, using them to dominate Prime and take all of its glory for himself, starting of course, with the ship of light, the ship under the Mongrel’s command.”

“That was what was written down?” the cube answered.

“No, that is a summary.” The Seventh Star seemed to hesitate.

“What was written down by the seer?” the Octachoron demanded.

“Ah, yes... well if you must know, let me just consult the Font here... yes, got it.” There was a long pause. Then finally, the Star continued. “With the Font silenced, a blinding light fell upon the first realm, silencing all but its wielder. And lo, the rulers of the palace were cast down into the pit, and the servants feasted on their empty homes. And all were made to grovel





before the new master, in the light of the new sun. And the voice of the Fenris sounded, marking the end of all worlds and the beginning of a new creation, one born of chains and scales, of deceit and malice. All is born again in the image of the new creator.”

“Illuminating,” the cube pulsed. “And the Seer? Who brought forth this vision?”

“He is one of the thousands of prognosticators on board the ship of light.”

“And his name?” the cube demanded.

“Oh, um...” the Seventh Star mumbled, “Malakesek. His name is Malakesek.”

Something seemed wrong here. The Fish Man did not recall a seer by that name on his ship, let alone a bruth. And what would a bruth be doing on level 59B in Epsilon? Was the Seventh Star lying?

“And what is this seer’s rating? And the Mongrel,” the cube continued, “does his mind reek of treason? What does the Font see in his heart?”

“Umm...” the Star answered, “ninety-five percent. But most of the five percent were futures thwarted by the intervention of Prime. And as for the Mongrel, yes. He reeks of anger at how he has been treated and plots revenge on those who hold him in judgment.”

Not true, the Mongrel knew. Those thoughts had been carefully extracted and implanted in the mind of another being. He knew the technique worked, he and the Seventh Star had discovered it in their exploration of the Font long ago. Something else was afoot. “O glorious and all-seeing Seventh Star of Twilight,” the





Fish Man mocked, “can you tell us what is in the mind of the Octachoron on this momentous occasion?”

There was another pause. Finally, the Star answered. “You are not in a position to demand such things. His thoughts are his own.”

“No, please,” the cube interjected. “Entertain him. I want to make an example of this traitor here.”

The Star answered, hesitatingly. “He tires of your games and desires to see you cast into the nothing point and erased from all of our thoughts.”

“More specifically,” the Octachoron spoke. “For example, what number do I think upon?”

Silence spoke back. Then finally the Star nervously answered. “Um... pi?”

“No.” The strange cube-like creature pulsed with a deep purple light. “Seventh Star, is there something wrong? Are you not with the Font?”

“Yes,” the point of light spoke back rapidly, “there is something going on with the Font. The Mongrel—I know not what he’s done, but it seems we are under attack. I should have....”

A sharp clank broke the exchange. The gilded cage in the center of the arena shook, and a split formed in the outer shell. Then, in what seemed both too fast to imagine and an eternity of watching, the inner cage tumbled loose and plummeted downward, taking the Seventh Star with it. And as the bright white point of light struck the emptiness of the nothing point below, it winked out of existence. And then everyone suddenly wondered why they were staring down at the nothing point.





“The Seventh Star’s your traitor!” the Fish Man shouted for all to hear. “But don’t take my word for it. If he is innocent, then all six of him will return to Prime immediately with the Font in tow. But somehow, I don’t foresee that happening.” To those near him, some of the longer chains of the Mongrel could be seen tucked under the edge of the platform, tugging at some sort of mechanism. The Fish Man smiled. He had, after all, designed this platform himself, and it was not hard to anticipate what it might be used for.

“We will wait,” the cube spoke with sour words. “You will remain in custody. And your fate will depend upon the return of the Seventh Star.”



CHAPTER 8

The lights on the detention level flickered briefly, then dimmed, as if switching to backup power. Somewhere far away a low, groaning sound could be heard, as if something large were shifting under extreme pressure.

“What is this? What you have done to my worldship?” the Seventh Star demanded?

“Your worldship?” the star-chested cat replied. “Wherever did you get that idea?”

“Stop this pretense. My patience for your games is at an end. You may very well have placed us in grave danger. Now you will reveal to me exactly what mischief you have been about or... or...”

“Or what? You’ll take me to the center of the universe and drop me into a void to erase me from ever existing? Like no one has tried that before. Besides, don’t you kind of need a working ship for that?” The cat resumed licking its paws. Somewhere above, a click was heard, and then a silence followed, the kind that makes one realize that it hadn’t actually been silent before, but you hadn’t really noticed until now. Seconds later, loud alarms began ringing all across the ship. Somewhere in the center of the detention block, a red light began to flash.

“I was thinking something more conventional—grinding you into a pulp perhaps? This cell does possess a blender mode if I am not mistaken.”

The cat paused and looked up briefly, some concern on his face. Then suddenly he smiled and went back to licking. “No, you’d never do that.”

“I think perhaps you underestimate me. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because then you’ll never find out what I did to your ship.”

“Aha! Just as I knew!” the Star exclaimed. “Very well, then let us have the truth, plainly. What exactly have you done?”

“Are you kidding? I’m not going to tell you that. You’d have to kill me to get that out of me.”

“You are the most exasperating of entities. But if you think execution is the only weapon in my arsenal you are mistaken.” The single point of light in the cell floated downward and touched upon the white star on the little black cat’s chest, fading inside of the little creature. The cat’s eyes lit up for a second, and then dimmed. The Star’s voice radiated out of the cat’s body. “In the name of all Prime, what is this convolution that passes for your mind, little cat? It’s like trying to peel an onion made out of spaghetti.” The light came back out, floating up out of the cat’s mouth. “Well then, so we will do it your way. State your terms.”

“Well, for starters,” the little cat announced, “you could let me out of this cell.” An instant later, one of the two guards over at the console flicked a switch and the glass door of the cell slid upward into the ceiling. The cat trotted out and shook itself off.

“Captain, are you in there?” A cracking voice came out of the console. “What is going on? Please give orders.”

“I am here.” The guard at the console touched a switch as the Star spoke. “But I am not with the Font. What does the Font say is going on?”

“That’s just it,” the voice spoke. “The Font isn’t responding.”

“What?” The guard at the console flipped open the lid on a large, round station, revealing a small, silver globe inside. “Font, this is the Seventh Star. What is happening to my worldship?”

A very long pause followed; at least ten seconds or more. Then finally, the Font responded, “Power levels are low.”

“What?” the Star replied, confused. “This vessel is powered by the Font of All Knowledge. What power under all of creation could hope to interrupt its radiance.”

“Hmm,” the cat interjected, “wonder if it was those curious fleas?”

“What?” the Seventh Star barked back. “Fleas? What fleas? And don’t you mean circus fleas?”

“Ah, hmm,” the cat languidly replied, “I did notice my coat wasn’t as itchy, thought it might have been the dry air in that cell. But now that you mention it I don’t seem to have them with me anymore. They must have hopped off back there in the control room. Curious fleas, a bit of an anomaly—their civilization started from a misprint, you know? Or no, actually, you don’t... because you rounded them all up, destroyed their world, and erased them from existence. Tremendous thirst for knowledge, those things. Might be trouble if they got access to the Font. Wait, you remembered to shut it off after you escorted me from the control room, right?”

“Too many queries,” the Font suddenly spoke.

“The... it... fleas?” the Seventh Star shouted, exasperated. “Font, engage airborne toxins in the central control chamber.”

“Oh, good luck with that,” the cat laughed back. “Those fleas are totally going to be decimated... next Wednesday, maybe.”

The captain flicked another switch on the control panel. “Alpha team, get to the central control chamber and hit the Font with a flame jet. Now!”

“Sir,” a voice came back, “the chamber is sealed.”

“Well then open it! By whatever means necessary.” The Seventh star, as the four-armed creature now, turned back to speak to the cat, and then paused, a look of shock on his face. “Oh no!” he gasped.

“Trouble in paradise?” the cat interjected, but the star seemed preoccupied.

His voice cracked as he spoke through the wolfish warrior’s body. “The trial? Not now!”



CHAPTER 9

The Mongrel dreamed of the caverns. Endless they were, and with no apparent contact to the surface world. Other things dwelled with him here, both strong and meek, but he was always the hunter. As the shadow, he consumed all he touched. Even light, or at least the weak light of the glowing moss that the natives used to see, only created more shadows when it shone—shadows that the shadow creature then merged with, allowing it to become larger, more powerful, more separate. The shadow fed off of the fears of its prey—one of the last great untapped sources of energy in the universe. But the hunter did not kill its victims outright; it toyed with them, pursuing them relentlessly through the endless caves. The victims always sought a way out, but there was none. Every ounce of hate, every bad thought, every fear of inadequacy or smallness, every failed dream and every misspent hour, the Mongrel poured into the shadow—his alter ego, the other side of his coin. Any anger at the Elders, the shadow possessed it. Any outrage at his treatment or imprisonment, it was the shadow that tortured its victims to slake its pain. The longer the Mongrel stayed in the cage, the more he became the shadow, and the stronger it grew.

“Well, well, if the Primal Zoo isn’t finally complete.”

The Fish Man awoke from his daydream. The crowds of gawkers had dissipated, and the maze of paths, though scattered with litter, was still and empty... well, almost empty. One small pair of dark eyes shone from the deep shadows of the night just outside the cage. Only one creature could bring night to Prime. “Have you come to gawk, World Eater?” the Fish Man spoke. “Or do you have more pressing matters to discuss?”

“You seem uncharacteristically relaxed, slime boy,” the creature in the shadows rasped out. “Captivity suits you.”





“Perhaps I needed a vacation,” the Mongrel replied. “Is it me, or are you getting smaller?”

“How tempting it is to put an end to you here and now, fish face. What’s the pleasure in executing a prisoner if you don’t even remember doing it? My way is so much better. Come on, say something else witty.” Tendrils of black leaked forth from the open mouth of the creature in the shadows and felt their way towards the Mongrel. The fish recoiled back into the recesses of the cage, but a long black lash reached forward and wrapped itself around the nearest one. The little fish disappeared, and the chain it held clattered to the floor.

“What do you want, Ludwig?” There seemed, if it were possible, to be a tinge of fear in the Mongrel’s voice.

The little creature stepped forward out of the shadow and studied the shaking ball of fish and skin and chains. “Pathetic,” it spat. “And to think there was a time I looked up to you—to any of you. But that time was in the past.” Quite mismatched with its voice, the speaker was a tiny black ball of fur, no more than a foot high—canine in form, with a stout chest, wolf-like coat, no tail, and pert, pointed little ears. Its little black nose evoked more cuteness than mayhem, but the Fish Man was not fooled by appearances.

“Is that so?” The Fish Man considered his options. On some worlds he stood a chance, but on Prime... his best bet was to play the psychological game.

“Turns out you were right,” the creature called the Fenris answered, “the Seventh Star never returned.”

“Oh?” The Mongrel sounded a little too pleased to hear the news.





“And along with him, the Font is still missing.”

“The Font?” the Mongrel spoke. “How will Prime maintain control without the Font?”

“That’s what I’ve been wondering, friend. Only one answer to that. Looks like I get a promotion. Why control something when you can just snuff it out of existence? Like you, for example.”

“I have my uses,” the Fish Man replied.

“Indeed, and the Octachoron still has need of your services. You are to be returned to your ship. You are to seek out the Font; your new mission and prime directive. That and eliminate anyone who was involved in, or witnessed, its theft. We don’t want the rest of creation to know Prime is weak, do we?”

“So I am free to go?” The Mongrel seemed almost surprised.

“Yes, you are,” the little dog answered. “But on one condition.”

“And that is?” the Fish Man pressed.

“You must prove your loyalty to Prime. Your hearth world, the realm of your own creation, where your wives and children dwell, and where rest all the wonders of art and works of beauty you have created—you are to take me to it, and see it destroyed. Only then is your penance paid.”

“I see,” said the Mongrel, and far away in some long distant reality, the shapeless shadow creature grew ten times.



CHAPTER 10

The Star suddenly snapped back to attention. He turned to the cat. “Understand me feline, whatever your vexation is with me, it is time to set it aside. If indeed you have some purpose for me, then you must realize that you have placed me in grave danger. Should I fail to regain control of this worldship and respond to Prime, well I shudder to think what might happen. I must get to the control room immediately. Your tricks took you there before through the walls. Can you ferry me that way?”

The cat thought for a moment. “And what’s in it for me?” it finally replied.

The Star stared at the cat and clenched his teeth, but finally took a deep breath, realizing he had little choice. “If you aid me in resolving this crisis, I will agree to treat with you, to hear all your arguments and give them due consideration. I can offer you no guarantees, but no matter the outcome of our discourse, once it is concluded, I promise to set you free—not free on this ship, but back on your own reality.”

“I suppose that’s the most honest answer I could ask for,” the cat nodded. “Deal. But it’s a bit of a complicated path from here. I’ll need an extra set of hands with some manual doors and hatches.”

“This warrior is plenty strong,” the furry four-armed soldier announced.

“No,” the cat replied. “I don’t think he’ll fit where we need to go. You need someone light, fast, strong, thin, and tall. You need...”

“Him.” The free points of the Seventh Star sped towards one of the cells. In it, a pale creature of the fair realms sat, legs

folded in meditation. The stars passed through the glass and into the body of the fey, who then stood up and opened his eyes. The soldier at the console flipped a switch and the glass wall slid open. The fey creature stepped out of the cell on long legs, grabbed a commlink off the wolf, and reached the cat with blinding speed. Milky white eyes looked down at the little feline, and with a voice as soft as starlight, it spoke, "This body should more than serve our needs. Let us be on our way."

"Yes, that'll do," said the cat. "But first we need to get out of this prison block—no hidden passageways here. One of the soldiers typed a code sequence into the console, and the metal doors to the exit slid open. "Look for a service hall, something without a lot of traffic." They spilled out into the hall, leaving the guards behind. The soldier at the console entered another code and the doors behind them began to slide shut. Just before they closed, three points of light floated out from the creatures in the room and slipped through the gap in the door.

"Captain," the commlink flickered on a few moments later, "we are about to cut through into the control room. Confirm we are to torch the Font."

"Confirm," the Seventh Star barked into the link. Faintly in the background, a commotion could be heard through the link. Cheers of success came through, and then a loud clang and a clatter. Then suddenly, the voice of the Font could just barely be made out.

"Engaging airborne toxins," the Font said.

"What?" the Seventh Star shouted. "No! Font! Font! No toxins!"

"I don't think it can hear you through the link," the cat interjected. Over the commlink, the distinct sounds of spraying

chemicals, fire, and screaming could be heard. After a few moments there was silence. Slowly, the lights started to come back on to their normal levels. “Well, I think your flea problem is solved, but don’t think we want to go to the control room anymore,” the cat spoke. “Got a plan B?”

“Just get me to the nearest communication center,” the Star answered, “there’s no time to... gaaaaah!!!!” The elf-creature convulsed, falling to its knees and shaking. It rolled on the floor, vomiting up bile and shrieking in pain. The seizure continued for quite some time, but eventually, it slowed and then finally calmed, and the elf sat up. Its eyes were a deep green.

“Where am I?” it asked. “Who are you, little creature, and what is going on?”



CHAPTER 11

“Father!” A young girl ran up and hugged the king. “You’ve been gone so long. I thought you’d never come back!”

“I’m sorry, my child,” the tall regent replied, taking her into his arms. “A king has many difficult duties. Oh, but my how you’ve grown!” He brushed back her dark hair and looked into her golden, almond eyes. So trusting. He smiled—a thin smile—but a smile nonetheless.

“I made you a picture!” The little girl handed the tall, olive-skinned man a scrap of paper upon which some colorful scribbles had been drawn. “There’s you on your throne, and there’s mommy, and me, and little Addie.”

“Very nice,” the man replied sadly, “but who are all these people in the front?”

“Oh them! Those are all the slaves you freed!”

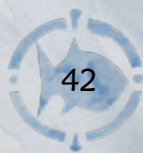
“Freed?” the king laughed. “What slaves did I free?”

“All of them,” the little girl smiled. “You got to be the hero.”

“Oh, Justine, don’t be silly. Where did you hear that kind of idea?” The king patted the girl on the head. “If I freed the slaves then who would build the city, or grow the food, or cook us such wonderful dinners? Who would sculpt the beautiful statues and play the music you love?”

“But the protesters...” the girl began.

“Shhh,” the king put a finger to her lips. “You can’t listen to them. Freeing them wouldn’t help them at all; it would just make us slaves too. Now, where’s your mother. I have something very important to tell her.”





“She went out.”

“Your highness.” A guard in splendid, yet sooty, silver armor with a torn, red silken sash limped forward, mopping the sweat off his brow. “Is there somewhere we can speak in private?”

The king stooped down and lifted a little bauble on a chain that hung around his daughter’s neck. It was a tiny glass ball, no bigger than a marble. Inside, cloudy swirls of light danced. “Now I need a reminder of you for a little while,” he spoke softly. He kissed the girl on the cheek and looped the bauble into his belt. “Remember, no matter what happens, daddy loves you.” The king shooed the child away to her nursemaid and stepped out onto the balcony with the knight. It was summer, and the breeze was sweet and warm. The muscular monarch wore only sandals, golden armbands, and a thick, jeweled, ornate belt with a bright array of colored silken scraps hanging down from it. On his head sat a small crown made from a barbed silver chain. Tattoos like dragon scales ran across his thick torso. “What is it?”

The knight was out of breath. He staggered and leaned against a chair. “Just before you arrived. We don’t know what it was. It came out of the shadows near the baths. I don’t even know how to describe it, like a shadow itself, all shapeless, like it was made out of teeth and eyes that you couldn’t see. It must have been waiting there for us. It took the queen and the boy... the heir. Just swallowed them up like a big cloud of ink. I don’t know who sent it, but my men went after it. It peeled the skin off one, turned another man inside out. The ones that saw it are all half mad now; Latrace clawed his own eyes out. I closed my own when I got up to it, probably the only thing that saved me. I took a brazier from the temple and stabbed at it with the fire. It just disappeared, back into the shadows—melted away.





We have everyone looking for them, but I do not think the creature was of this world? Do you know what this this could be? Are there legends of...?"

"No. I have never heard of its like," the king interrupted with a sigh. He looked the captain up and down. The big man was shaking in his boots. "You did all you could. Continue the search. I trust no one more than you. Now leave me be, I need to be alone."

"You... you are not angry?" the knight stammered, almost flinching. His face could not hide his intense surprise.

"At you? No, you did your best. But you have more work to do this day. Go, with my blessing."

"Bless you, your highness! We will find them." the captain knelt and kissed the king's hand, then moved off.

The king took in the summer air and strolled over to the veranda. He ran his hands along the carved marble surface, feeling its smoothness and its warmth. Sighing, he looked out across his kingdom. Beyond the manicured colors and grand sculptures of the gardens he could see the golden roofs of the city, with its crowded alleyways and shining towers. Beyond the city ran an arm of the great sea, and then the mountains, sweeping up behind, purple with snow. He loved this world.

"What was all that about?" a growling voice came up behind him.

"Politics," the king answered, turning to face his companion. A small black dog stood before him.

"Well," the dog grumbled, "are we going to do this, or what?"



You're doing great! This is the longest you have ever been able to stay in the driver's seat.

Having me focus on acid suppression seems to really help.

Wow, look at you! You're actually letting go and using my body's natural acrobatic skills.

I can see why you like this.

That being said, we have reached the limit.

Your body is going to start to adapt to what we are doing and figure out how to digest me if we are not careful.

Prepare for ejection!

I have to admit, the training is working. I'm able to act in the moment, and I have a better grasp of the big picture than ever before. I actually feel sorry for our enemies. Well, sort of. If you knew what I knew....



CHAPTER 12

“Escaped prisoners!” the communications officer exclaimed with a start. “Halt right there!” The three creatures in the archival room leveled short but sinister-looking pistols at the two unexpected guests. The officer fingered some kind of grenade-looking device clipped to his belt.

“Hang on, this is not what it seems,” the cat enunciated. “This is the captain.”

“Are you sure about that?” the lithe, long-haired fey interjected. “These guys don’t seem to think so.”

The little feline slapped one paw against his own forehead. “Ok, fine,” he sighed. “Well, I guess you got us, guys. Sorry. One of the guards on the prison level went nuts when the power went out and opened a bunch of the cells. I guess we kind of panicked and just ran for it. Now we’re totally lost. I don’t suppose you know the way back, do you? It’s getting on lunchtime.”

The tall, spindly, silver-skinned officer took his hand off the grenade and seemed to relax a bit. “Well, yeah, of course we know how to get back... wait a minute!” he hollered. His eyes narrowed. “You saying you want to go back into your cells?”

“Yes, please,” the cat nodded. “It’s really not climate controlled for my species out here. Far too moist. Think I’m getting a cold.”

“Hang on,” the soldier snapped. “You guys aren’t going anywhere.” He switched a channel on the signal board. “Command central, come in—we have two prisoners here; they seem suspicious. What should we do?” There was a brief pause. “That’s weird, there’s no answer.”

“Check the Font,” one of the techs suggested.

“Good idea,” the ranking officer replied. He hit typed a series of codes into a separate control panel. “Font, what is the current situation?”

“Power stabilized. All life forms on control level have been extinguished.”

“What?” the third soldier exclaimed. “Wait a minute, what’s going on?” The three guards rushed over to the center control panel and began switching between what appeared to be different security cameras. The red light indicating engagement with the Font stayed on.

“Psst,” the cat nudged his companion. “Do me a favor—the Font still thinks you’re the Captain. Can you just say this out loud? ‘Font, shut down all lights on the Archive level.’ Just humor me.”

Confused, the elf creature shrugged. “Font,” he finally announced, “can you shut off all the lighting in the Archive level?” The red light blinked once, and then all the other lights in the room went out. There was a quick, faint flurry of sound, and then suddenly the little cat tugged at the elf’s hand. “Out in the hall, fast! And hit the deck!” Following the cat’s lead, the elf sped out the door and then dove onto the floor. A loud shockwave rocked the room behind them.

A moment later the cat ran back into the room and came back with a hand-held light. A small metal pin dangled from one of his front claws. “Good news,” he spoke, “looks like that was just a stunner. I think the console appears fully functional. Here, drag these guys back out into the hall and lock the door. Oh, and strip their guns and commlinks first.”

The elf nodded and went to work. The cat studied the consoles. A few of them appeared to have powered down, but the red light was still engaged. The cat tapped it. "Font," he asked, "what reality has the tastiest fish?"

"Value judgment unsupported," the Font replied, "please specify additional parameters."

"Oh brother," the cat exclaimed, "I really don't understand what all the fuss is with this thing." He nodded at the tall fey as it secured the door. "Hey, get over here. I have a few more things you need to say if you want to get off this ship."

"Abandon ship!" a mechanical voice clanged over the loudspeakers a few moments later. "Bio-destruct systems initiated. Follow the emergency lights to your lifeboats." The notice was accompanied by a loud claxon wail.

"I don't get it," the cat asked. "How can you have no idea who you are but still remember all the advanced security codes?"

"I dunno," the elf replied. "How does a cat talk?"

"Oh, that's complicated," the cat returned.

"Exactly," the elf stated.

"Ok, I think the guards in the hall are gone now. It's total chaos out there, really. We need to get to the old bridge."

"I thought the bridge was full of poison gas," the elf replied.

"Besides, we can't fly this ship without at least a crew of ten, even with the computers fully functional."

"No, no," the cat answered back. "The old bridge." The cat paused. "Yeah, you may not know about that. Ask the Font for a ship map, I might be able to recognize it."

“But this is just a 3d map,” the elf protested a short while later. “It’s just an art installation.”

“I don’t think you’re using it right,” the cat stated. The cat jumped out onto the metallic surface and dug its claws into the mesh fabric. It began pulling up in places and pushing down in others. Where it pulled, the fabric lifted up, forming hills and towers, where it pushed, valleys appeared. Suddenly, the entire ship began to lurch to the side. “You know, it’s been a while,” the cat spoke nervously. “This thing is a bit more complicated than I remember. Can you see if you can get the windows open in here?”

“What windows?”

“Oh boy,” the cat hissed. “Plan B!” The ship began to shake.

“What are you doing?” the elf complained, holding onto a doorway for support.

“We’re going to have to land this thing,” the cat answered. “I have to surface it into a single reality. But I can’t risk anything Prime will know about. I’m flying blind a bit here—just trying to find the highest-order world. Hopefully with these new ones, we’ll hit one Prime hasn’t discovered yet.”

“But the higher order realms are all unstable,” the elf replied. “You can’t take the ship in there.”

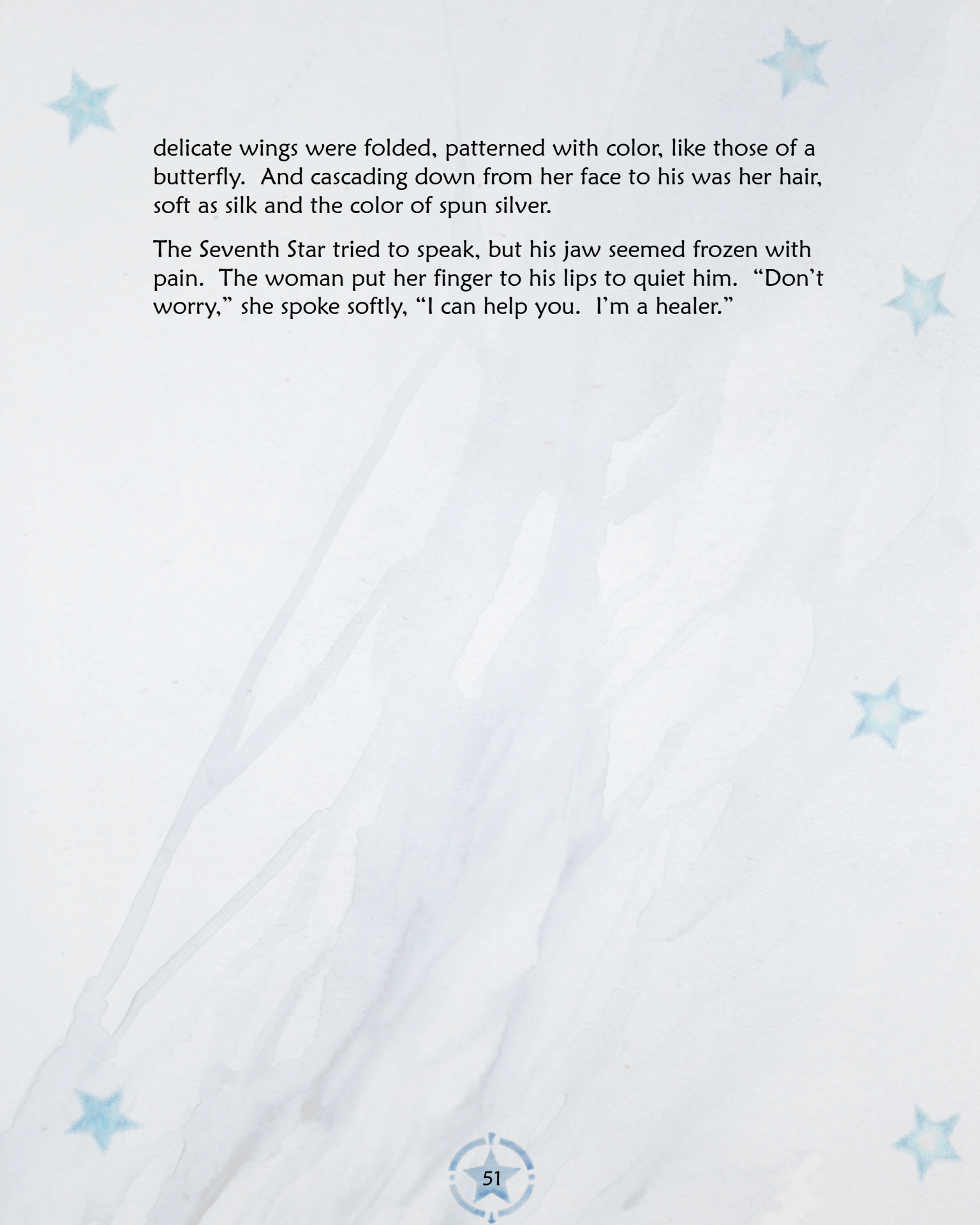
“Too late,” the cat answered. “And... I think it worked!” The ship began to shake violently. “Or not. Hang on!” With a jolt, the room began spinning, end over end. The cat remained in place, hooked into the pilot’s chair with his claws, but the tall fey creature was sent flying, bouncing around the room. The cat desperately tried to stabilize the ship, but seemed to be coming up short. A thick, greenish blood-like substance could be seen

smearred across a few of the walls. "Sorry!" the cat cried. And then there was a tremendous bang.

Can you walk?" the cat asked. The elf looked pretty bad. There was maybe one limb out of four that wasn't obviously broken. "Come on, there's one lifeboat left. We can't stay here." The mangled elf lay on his back and slid himself across the floor with one foot. The cat helped him drag himself up onto a wheeled chair, and then they rolled out and down the corridor and into a small chamber. The cat pushed a button and the room sealed, then lurched forward with a whoosh. The cat hopped up into the pilot seat and studied the console. "Well, there's plants here. That's a good sign. Just have to find the right kind of tree." The elf passed out from pain.

When the Seventh Star came to, the cat was nowhere to be seen. Not far off, he could see the exploded remains of what might have been some kind of crashed space capsule. He lay in some kind of meadow. All around him were purple flowers. Above him, a silvery sky twinkled with twilight. Not far off, large, strange trees reached up to the sky. Leafless trees, almost like... mushrooms.

"Oh my!" an exquisitely soft and clear voice rang out. "It looks like someone was in that thing. He doesn't look good. Go and fetch the others." The Seventh Star tried to turn his neck to see who was speaking, but it would not face that far. Soon, gentle hands touched his body and felt his face. "Alive," the voice whispered to itself, "and a miracle at that." The Seventh Star could feel the hands untangle his legs and roll him over onto his back. Above him loomed the face of a beautiful fairy woman. Her skin was lily white and delicate as lace. Her almond eyes shone like white diamonds in the dim light, elegantly crowning her perfect features and regal cheekbones. Behind her, a pair of



delicate wings were folded, patterned with color, like those of a butterfly. And cascading down from her face to his was her hair, soft as silk and the color of spun silver.

The Seventh Star tried to speak, but his jaw seemed frozen with pain. The woman put her finger to his lips to quiet him. “Don’t worry,” she spoke softly, “I can help you. I’m a healer.”



CHAPTER 13

“You’ll want to perch yourself on the observatory,” the Fish Man stated flatly. “The portal generator is in the top, and the tower is rigged so that no one can get up the stairs and surprise us from below. I assume you want to be able to get out afterwards. Think you can keep enough of the city’s infrastructure intact to keep the power flowing?”

“You’re being rather cooperative,” the hound growled. “Anyplace in particular you’d like spared?”

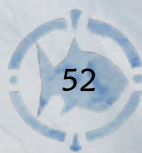
“The sculpture gardens?” the Mongrel answered after some thought. “I made most of them myself you know?”

“Good to know. First thing I intend to wipe out of existence.” The dog grinned.

“And if they should test your loyalty?” the Fish Man questioned. “If they had you wipe out your own home, or your precious watchers?”

“Heh,” the little dog chuckled, “now that’d be hilarious.” The Fish Man could feel the dog’s whole body smile.

From below, people had begun to take notice. Pedestrians were stopped, staring and pointing up at the mass of fish and chains and skin that floated above them, a little dog clutched in its hollow hands. Those on nearby balconies with a better view screamed. A woman fainted and toppled backwards, nearly spilling out onto the street. The dog opened its mouth and thin black tentacles flowed outward, grabbing at the people they passed. As the tentacles touched the people, they turned completely black and shapeless for a moment, like a splash of ink at the end of tendrils. Then they merged back into the ebon strands and were gone, as if they had never been.





As they rose higher into the sky, they could see what appeared to be some kind of authority figures below, firing weapons up at them. The dog coughed, and a shell of shadow appeared around the Fish Man. As it expanded, it absorbed the missile fire. Soon, the shadow touched the ground and spread outward, erasing everything in its path. With the soldiers gone, the people began to panic and flee. Vehicles crashed and overturned, the injured were left trampled and bloody as the crowds passed by.

“We do have air cars here, you know,” the Fish Man spoke.

“Not anymore, you don’t.” Jets of black shadow shot forth from the dog’s open mouth, intercepting with incoming hover-vehicles at a range of miles. They were gone with a thought.

Soon enough, the Fish Man had arrived at the tallest building in the city, a black, mirrored monolith that reached almost a thousand feet up into the air. Atop the tower, a great metal disc with a protruding tube sat, a massive telescope to reach the heavens. The Fish Man sat the dog atop the scaffolding and floated downward towards the roof. “Well, this has got to go,” the little wolf croaked, erasing the telescope. “It’s blocking my view. Ah, there. Lovely world you’ve built here. You can see forever. Now where’s that sculpture garden?”

The Fish Man looked out upon his creation for the final time. With the orange sun just dipping down over the horizon, it was indeed beautiful. Amidst the burning of the city, he could smell the fragrant scents of the mountain flowers and the honey in the fields before them. He could hear the calls of the birds by the seashore. The sunsets here were incredible, but he couldn’t look at it anymore, he had something to do.

“Where are you going?” the dark voice barked from above.





“Downstairs, to prepare our exit.”

“Well don’t. Stay right there where I can see you, but get under the scaffold.” A black tendril shot out and erased the handle on the door from the roof. The Fish Man slumped a bit, but stayed in place.

Without further ado, the little black dog howled, its mouth opening impossibly wide, almost as if he were swallowing himself. In his place, an intense ball of shadow hovered, flowing outward like a flood. The darkness flowed down the sides of the scaffolded platform, trapping the Fish Man in a bubble of black. No sound reached him from outside at all. Curious, one of the little fish nosed towards the wall of ink, and came back without a nose. The Fish Man reached into the scraps that hung from his belt and felt for the little glass ball. Its warmth gave him comfort. This could be a while, he thought.



The Fish Man had no idea how much time had passed. There was simply no way to tell it, but the blackness finally receded. The city was silent. The shells of the buildings still stood, but featureless, scrubbed of any art or uniqueness. Nothing stirred in the city below. There were no people, no vehicles, no animals, no grass. No birds sang and no bees buzzed. Where the meadows of flowers had lay in the foothills, a reddish desert now lay, and the purple-capped mountains were simply gone, replaced by an infinite plain of dead sand. Even the waters of the sea were gone, and whatever had lived within them.

Above him, the dog coughed and wretched, choking on some solid object. It fought with the thing for a moment, and then finally, it vomited forth a dark lump of stone, like a piece of coal, no bigger than child’s fist. The dog threw the stone down to the Fish Man and then cleared its throat. “Ok, we’re done here,” it rasped. A tendril shot out and erased the door to the stairway below. “Let’s go.”





An elegant and advanced planetarium greeted them in the room at the top of the tower. Artfully built computer screens and catwalks lined the walls, disguised to look like the leafy canopy of a great forest. The walls of the domed room were all set with red lights, like some kind of a star map. A massive model of the solar system dominated the center of the room, with planets and moons and comets and more. At the center of the model, two reddish-orange suns orbited around each other. The Fish Man approached, taking the little glass ball out of his belt, removing it from its chain, and setting it into a fixture at the center of the model. The equipment began to hum.

“Whoa, what do you think you’re doing there, scale brain?” the dog clamored.

“This is the key to the machine. You want out of here? This needs to be in place.” The Mongrel flipped a final switch.

“Hmm...” the dog thought for a bit. “You’re a conduit to this place, right?”

“The only conduit,” the Fish Man nodded.

Two thin threads of black shot forth from the dog’s nostrils and wove their way into the Fish Man’s eye slits. They fished around for a bit and the Mongrel gasped in confusion. Finally, they retracted. The Fish Man looked around for a bit, confused.

“Turn it on,” the dog spoke. “I’m ready.”

“Turn what on?” The Fish Man answered, looking around the room in confusion. “What is this place?”

“That’s what I was hoping you’d say,” the dog answered, as a transparent blue sphere of light appeared in the center of the room. “Ok, time to go home now.” The dog nodded at the shimmering portal. “You first.”





CHAPTER 14

“What makes you think it will work this time?” the little black cat whispered from the shadows of the empty hall.

“It probably won’t,” the little floating point of light answered from beside him, “but someday it will, and we only get one chance every ten years. Plus, Michael has given us a few new toys. Why do you ask? Do you feel like giving up now? I thought this was your idea.”

“No objections,” the cat replied, “just curious. What? Can’t a cat be curious?”

“You won’t have to be ever again if this works.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” the cat answered back.

The point of light reached the end of the hall and approached a round silver door, diaphragmed, like a camera aperture. The light spoke aloud. “This is the captain, I have come to perform the scheduled visual maintenance check on the engine room.”

“Enter, Captain,” a voice came from the door. The door flowered open, revealing a vast, silvery chamber inside. The Seventh Star strode forward along with the cat and five other, larger, creatures who followed behind woodenly, as if on auto-pilot.

“You know, you’re getting good at that, it didn’t even hesitate.”

“It’s simple,” the Seventh Star answered. “Not that I have any malicious thoughts, but if I did, I could simply store them in my missing piece, totally invisible to the Font. Same technique you suggested from the beginning; I just know how to do it now.”

The seven creatures spread out around the round chamber and the Seventh Star flitted about, taking stock. Catwalks provided



walking space in the crowded maze of pipes and cables, all of which were maintained by machinery, which in turn was maintained by more machinery. Only once every ten years was anyone, and then only the Captain, allowed inside to verify that things were indeed in order. They were. But a captain had to make sure.

“Font, for safety precautions, while we are in the chamber, temporarily disable all maintenance bots.”

“Shutting down.” A number of automated arms and gears and spidery robots stopped moving.

At the center of the room was built a large structure, into which all the pipes and cables eventually connected. The structure consisted of some kind of metallic core obscured behind a thick layer of frosted glass. Around this glass, a series of spinning blades twirled, slicing through the air with a sickening hum. One of the five larger creatures in the room, a chimp-like being of some sort, approached the spinning blades, carrying an odd metal ladder that looked ridged, as if made out of densely-woven springs. The chimp set the ladder and made as if to approach a pressure gauge on an upper level, but stumbled on the catwalk, tripping and knocking the ladder into the blades. The machine tore the ladder apart instantly, but as the blades cut at the coiled springs of the metal, the ladder expanded, tangling up in the blades like taffy. With a series of creaks and screeches, the spinning blades slowed to a near halt.

“Font,” the captain spoke, “there has been an accident. With automated maintenance off, we will need to remove the foreign object manually. Please disable the outer defense systems before they are further damaged.”

“Defense systems cannot be shut off. Unauthorized,” The Font

spoke back.

“What?” the Seventh Star exclaimed. “Well, we need to inspect the area for damage and it’s not safe.” He waved at the three chimp-like creatures that had arrived with them. “You three, hold this thing steady. Use the new gloves and levers so you don’t hurt yourselves.” The three chimps ran up and took positions around the struggling blades and began to push them back, holding them in place. The blades were strong, and the sturdy creatures grunted with the effort, but did not complain.

The Seventh Star flitted past the blades and pretended to inspect the damaged machinery. The other two creatures slipped forward past the blades and shook out bags, each one full of different types of crickets. The crickets all began to play.

“Font,” the Seventh Star asked, “we anticipate you may at some point come under a sonic attack. There are several minor vibrations currently in your chamber. Please identify if any of them poses a risk of resonant frequency damage to your glass shielding.”

“Yes,” the Font replied, “there is.”

“Can you identify which sound is a potential risk?” the Seventh Star asked.

“No,” the Font replied. “Access to that information is forbidden.”

“Well, here we go again,” the cat announced.

The Seventh Star swirled around the central column, inspecting the crickets. With him went the fourth assistant, a spindly bug-like creature who bristled with antennae and other odd adornments. The bug creature held a small device in his hand that he pointed at each cricket. After several trips around the

center, the bug returned to the cat and presented the data it had collected. The cat looked it over. “Well, want to take a wild guess?” the bug creature spoke with the voice of the Seventh Star.

The cat sighed and squinted at the little screen of the device. “What’s with these samples in the delete grid?” the cat finally asked. “There’s a ton of them in there.”

“Those were corrupted readings,” the Seventh Star replied. “The grunting apes really seemed to throw off the new device. So shrill.”

“Oh,” the cat answered, “well that’s no goo... wait, now wait a minute.” The cat looked over at the sweating chimps and then gave the bug creature a look. “That’s got to be it.”

The bug creature strolled over to the smallest of the three ape creatures. It did not appear to be able to hold out for long. The bug leaned forward, brushing its feathery antennae against the chimp’s face and puffing its abdomen up in the air. The cat stuck his paws over his ears. A split second later, the chimp grunted and the bug’s abdomen flowered open with an explosion of sound—the grunt turned up to an unreal volume. The engine room vibrated, and the glass wall in the center shattered, falling to shards and revealing a small inner chamber behind.

“Attack detected!” the Font clamored. “Initiating defenses.” Jets of flame started shooting about the chamber, and a mechanical whir and blur of motion indicated the maintenance machinery was coming back on. As the silvery spiders approached, the chimps let go of the blades and retreated towards the center of the chamber. With a creak and a snap, the blades came back to life, breaking what remained of the ladder and knocking away the bots. Within a few moments, the blades blurred out the

outside, protecting them from the rest of the ship's defenses. Safety was only a very narrow strip, however. Two feet inside the blade wall, the central chamber was now ringed by a wall of flame.

"Well, it's up to you now," the Seventh Star intoned to the cat. "Think you remember how to do this?"

"Not a problem," the cat answered, "should be the same song used to bind the Font in the first place, only backwards."

"That was an age upon an age upon an age ago," the Star replied.

"Ok," the cat shrugged, "so there's a risk. You got a better idea?"

"Not really," the Star stammered back as the little bug began to wither noticeably from the heat. "Good luck."

"Thanks," the cat replied as it approached the final creature in the room, something that looked a bit like a cross between a dragon and a kangaroo. As the cat approached, the creature picked it up and pushed it into its red-scaled pouch. Then it stepped into the fire.

Behind the wall of flames, the cat emerged from the pouch, shook itself off and then looked about. Only one object stood in the small, round chamber—a simple silver pedestal, with one great heavy tome set upon it, closed. The cat cleared its throat and began to sing a strange song—like the midnight strains of an angry alley cat recorded and played backwards through a broken speaker. Whatever the song, it seemed to have an effect, as the cover of the great book lifted open and the pages began to turn as the cat sang, slowly at first and then faster and faster, until suddenly the last page was struck and the book came apart,

pages and words and numbers all shooting out into the air.

With the destruction of the book, the lights went off in the chamber, the fires went out, the blades ground to a halt, and the sinister robots fell to the floor, motionless. Soon, the only lights in the chamber were the floating pages of the book, infused with a golden glow, and the six lights of the Seventh Star, twirling about madly. Over the next few seconds, the six points shot out one at a time to meet the falling pages. As each page was touched, it disappeared, and the light of the Star grew brighter. Soon, there was no trace of the book, and the light of the Star lit up the engine chamber like the light of day.

“We’ve done it!” the cat shouted with a bit of surprise to his voice. “Do you have access to the Font?”

“It’s amazing,” the Seventh Star replied languidly. “So much more than I ever imagined. So much more than I ever thought it could know.”

“Well, it’s not powering this ship anymore,” the cat replied, so “I’d image it has some new tricks. What do you see? Can you see Aras? Can you see Hyperia?”

“Of course I can see Hyp...” the Seventh Star trailed off. “Oh no,” it spoke back up, “they’ve come for her. Or something has. I don’t know what this thing is, all darkness and pain and malice. It’s not an Elder or a Watcher. It’s swallowed her up—so dark inside.”

“And Aras?” the cat sounded distressed.

“Michael has her. An agent from Haven tipped him off. And... and there’s something else.”

“Something else?” the cat asked, “like what?”

“Michael has it too,” the Seventh Star answered. “When this shadow creature took my wife, it left someone else behind—a baby boy, one who cannot exist, but somehow does.”



CHAPTER 15

On a remote, far-off world, the seventh form of the Fenris was busy on his evening walk. Spring had come, and there were all sorts of fascinating scents coming out of the earth. New plants and flowers, sure, but also things that had died in the fall and were only now thawing out enough to rot. He wanted to explore them all, but his handler seemed distracted tonight—busy with his commlink and his irritating conversations. The handler strode along, oblivious to the desires of the little dog, dragging him past a dead rat without even noticing. Soon enough, they approached the border of forbidden territory, and the Beagle came out to curse at the Fenris. “Woo! Woo! Woo!” it hollered at the top of its lungs, and with no grace or discernment either, only loud buffoonery. The bombardment continued unabated, as the small hound bayed loudly and ran with them as the little black dog and its man trotted along the fence.

“I could end you,” the Fenris thought to himself, and then shuffled over to the fence to lift his leg and piddle on the post.



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Free for now from the foul attentions of the Mongrel, Sara and the Chimera are still unable to find a place for themselves. An ill-fated attempt at going home again sends them again on the run, with Sara's mom in tow. With their options quickly running out, Sara decides to gamble everything on locating her reclusive father, the mysterious Seventh Star of Twilight.

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The machinations of the Seventh Star have come to fruition, and creation is plunged into full-scale rebellion against the



forces of control and power. The legendary Starsailor finally reveals himself and takes his place at the vanguard of the forces of freedom. Yet no matter the outcome, no one will escape unscathed. Families are torn, relationships broken, and nothing will ever be the same again.

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