School of Communication and Cultural Studies

Space Opera

A Hybrid Form of Science Fiction and Fantasy

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Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made.

Signature: …………………………………………….

Date: …………………………...

Abstract

This thesis considers space opera as a hybrid form of science fiction and fantasy.

"Falling Stars," the creative component which includes fantasy, space opera and science fiction stories, constitutes a spectrum of speculative fiction. In order to illustrate the similarities and difference between the genres represented in the spectrum, I focus on the central figure of the alien other and the ways in which such a figure can be gendered and embodied. The space opera novella combines motifs of both fantasy and science fiction within the figure of the cyborg, Orlando, who is transgendered and hyperchangeably embodied.

The exegesis offers a theoretical context through which to view the creative work. I argue that space operas are melodramatic adventure stories, which operate as a hybrid form of science fiction and fantasy, using the non-realist expectations inherent in both, but mixing the extrapolations and icons of science fiction with the self-consistent but unbelievable discontinuities of fantasy. I also consider space opera's tendency to exhibit a conservative, unexamined colonialistic imperative, with the attendant assumptions that create a potential for feminist subversion.

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Publications

Earlier versions of several stories and essays have been published or accepted for publication:

Fiction

"The Bogart Manoeuvre." *Mitch?: Short Stories for Short Attention Spans.* Ed. Mitch? Victoria: Mitch?, 2000. 41-4.

"Heat Seeking." *Borderlands: Fantasy, Science Fiction, Horror* 1.1 (2003): 80-5.

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"Solid Rock." *Borderlands: Fantasy, Science Fiction, Horror* 1.4 (2005): 70-76.

"While I Was." (now "The Pleasures of Close Reading") *The AAWP Spiny Babbler Anthology*. Ed. Brian Dibble and Kelly Pilgrim. Online: Spiny Babbler, 2005. <http://www.spinybabbler.org/aawp_spinybabbler_anthology/display_aawp_spiny.php?id=aawp_spiny7.htm>.

Non-Fiction

"Flash Gordon…Dead or Alive? Stereotypes in the Space Opera." Science Fiction Research Group. University of Western Australia, Perth. Nov. 2000.

"Genre as Legal Defence: *Star Wars* versus *Battlestar Galactica.*" *Proceedings of the Curtin Postgraduate Humanities Conference, 1999*. Eds. Gabriella T. Espak and Sandor Toth. Perth: Black Swan Press, 2000. 159-69.

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"Postcolonialism and *Star Wars*: The Saga of Never-ending Empire." Refiguring Postcoloniality: Beyond Literature Conference. Murdoch University, Perth. Feb. 2000.

"A Space for Sex: Reproducing Corporate Product for the Public Domain." *Liveable Communities*. Eds. Janice Haswell and Diana MacCallum. Perth: Black Swan Press, 2003. 117-129.

"Space Opera's Relationship to SF: A Case Study." *Masquerade, Swancon 2001: Academic Proceedings*. Ed. Cathy Cupitt. Perth: WASFF, 2002. 39-50.

Dedication

This is for Heather, Wayne, Tim, Scot and Michael.

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Space Opera: Definition and Function

Falling Stars

A Spectrum of Speculative Fiction

The Pleasures of Close Reading

While my mother was photographing Aunt Iris, who was leaning idly against the solid foot of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, an elf happened along, dressed for the Australian heat in soft olive-green cotton and a tiki-covered bandanna which hid his pointed ears and braids—I could see them outlined. He wasn't one of those faux elves either—the dinky little thumb-sized ones in Disney stories. There was no mistaking him for anything but one of the Ljósálfar, the light elves of Norse myth: he was man-sized, terrifyingly beautiful, and although not actually more brilliant than the sun, as the old myths claimed, he shone with a fey inner light.

His bow was casually slung across his shoulders and he was drinking water from a Perrier bottle. He passed so close that I could smell his leaf-scent; all eucalyptus and dried grass.

It made me angry.

Sweat was tickling down my back, my T-shirt was dark with it, and I could tell my face was blotched red with heat. I stank of hotel soap and the sourness of sweat that has chilled and thawed, chilled and thawed with repeated dunkings in and out of air-conditioning. I might as well have had "tourist" tie-dyed across my shirt.

So he didn't look at me, the ugly, smelly human standing there holding the camera case, lens cap, two handbags, a backpack and a half-eaten sausage roll. Of course he didn't look at me. But his elf charm took me anyway; hit me in the stomach, kicked me in the knees, wrenched the breath from my chest.

He was my first elf and I had known what to expect; I'd done my homework.

It still made me angry.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

While my Aunt Iris was talking, underneath the deep canopy of the flame tree in her backyard, I saw a brownie waving to me from the back window of her house. It was many years ago; I was twelve and unafraid of the truth.

"Aunt Iris," I said, "I just saw a brownie in the window."

I had expected wonder, or, as I was starting to lose my childhood magic, perhaps patent disbelief. Instead...

"The rat!" cried Aunt Iris, and ran indoors. "Don't let it escape."

The back room was filled with a spare bed and over-full bookcases. Aunt Iris stood at one doorway, armed with a heavy broom, and directed me to chase the rat towards her. I gingerly pulled the curtain back from the window, and a dark brown shape dashed past my feet, towards the waiting broom of doom.

Aunt Iris's aim was true, and the broom arced down in a deadly blow. I blinked. And the rat wasn't under the broom; it was alive and unhurt, squeezing itself behind the giant teak bookshelf, its head less than an inch from Aunt Iris's right ankle. It looked at her bare ankle in a speculative way for a moment, then turned, looked straight at me, winked, and pulled its head to safety just before the broom hit the bookcase.

"Bloody vermin," said Aunt Iris, "I'll get you!"

She smoothed her hair and took the broom back to the laundry. When we returned to our morning tea, ants were picnicking on the scones. Aunt Iris killed them with great satisfaction.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

While my mother and Aunt Iris were drinking Piña Coladas and ogling jetset playboys beside the hotel pool in Cairns, an elf was hunting something large that rustled in the native tropical bushes beyond the hotel's imported palms. He had an arrow strung to his bow, and the tails of his braids flashed white in the bright, humid sunlight.

Sydney was two weeks behind us. I had watched for the elf every day while we were there—every day since the Harbour Bridge. No trace.

It was what I had expected. Despite being winked at by a brownie, once upon my long ago childhood, I was resigned to being found uninteresting by most of the fey. All the books had warned me.

The books agreed on so few of the details about the human-sized fey; some called them Faerie, some the Alfar, to others they were the Sidhe, or the Huldra, or Wights. Whatever they were named, all the books agreed that they rarely let you see them by accident. Perhaps you might catch a quick glimpse of the Wild Hunt

flashing through the trees, or a brief vision of their playful dance through the night-time forest. But most of the time, you only saw them when they wanted you to. You saw them when they lured you away to their strange, fair land, in which a hundred years passed by as an idle hour. Or you might see one of the beautiful seducers, who would tumble you onto the nearest flat surface and give you such pleasure you'd lose your wits forever after. Or perhaps they might ask you for some strange favour, dressed as a gypsy, and when you said a scornful "No" they'd drop you dead.

Between all the variations, the books agreed on one point: the fey were rarely interested in humans, but when they were there was always a dreadful price to pay.

So by the time we'd left Sydney I'd stopped looking for the elf, trying to be thankful.

Then Cairns. The humidity left me listless, moist, red-faced, and scratching at never-ending mosquito bites. I spent the days reading in the shade. Not fairy tales. I had quite enough of those in my head already.

And so it was I saw the elf, a flicker in the foliage. Even at that distance, and sitting down, I could feel my knees going bendable and my skin slicking up beneath the SPF 30+ sun screen.

I lay on a fancy banana lounge pretending to read *The Bourne Ultimatum*, but the shifting reality of Jason Bourne was not as engrossing as the elf. I watched him from behind my sunglasses: a glimpse of uncreased olive-green cotton between the slatted cover of fern fronds; a flash of bright elvish eyes.

He swung himself up a tree for a better line on his prey, and I could see him clearly, limned in the light like a fantastic cliché. On his head was a tiki-covered bandanna, and for a moment I wondered if that was the latest elf fashion.

But of course not.

There was no Perrier water this time, but nonetheless it was the same elf. My elf.

Then came the faint *thwock* of his arrow, and he was gone.

Was I being lured into some ill-fated seduction? It seemed wildly improbable. Then... I remembered a footnote from an anthropological study, *Elf Charms and Their Context,* which said that sometimes, very rarely, elves are seen by humans because they're wounded and sick. Very, very sick. Practically dead.

My skin suddenly felt greasy and chilled, and I shivered as goosebumps ran down my spine.

* * *

While I was cleaning Aunt Iris's bathroom, many years ago, for pocket money of eight dollars an hour, I found a dark shape submerged at the bottom of the toilet.

Wearing Aunt Iris's oversized rubber gloves, I pulled it out and looked at it.

It had two little hands even smaller than a baby's, and two over-large feet with round pebbly toes; it had pointy ears, and a smooth round belly that had no belly-button. It was the brown of melted chocolate all over, and it had a sweet little face—the kind you hate yourself for admiring on overly-cute greeting cards.

It was definitely not a rat, but it was very definitely dead.

Since the morning tea under the flame tree, I'd looked up brownies at the local library, and the *Encyclopedia of Supernatural Creatures* had said that they were shy creatures, liking to work around the house at night in exchange for food. Well, this creature hadn't been at all shy, and as far as I could tell it had never done a lick of housework, but it still looked like a brownie to me.

I took it to my Aunt.

She said, "Thank God. I hate having rats in the house."

I imagine I blinked at her in surprise before holding my hands out closer to her face.

"Are you sure it's a rat?" I said. "It doesn't have a tail."

Aunt Iris swayed back.

"Of course it does, Nina," she said, without looking, and then reached up and felt my forehead. "How nasty for you to have found it like that. Do you feel alright?"

I didn't feel alright. My stomach felt tight and the skin on my face felt stretched. I was just twelve years old and knew I wasn't holding a rat.

I looked at the brown body sandwiched between my pink-gloved hands; no tail, no navel, little hands, little face. I looked up at Aunt Iris, her mouth pursed in worry; lines across her forehead.

Then... I had an epiphany. *This*, I thought, *must be one of the grown-up conspiracies, like Father Christmas and the Tooth Fairy. Real and not real at the same time.*

"I'm fine," I said.

Aunt Iris didn't look entirely convinced.

"It's just kinda gross," I said.

Aunt Iris sighed in relief, and the lines smoothed off her face.

"Go and bury it in the garden then," she said. "And don't forget to wash your hands properly afterwards."

So I buried my first brownie under the flame tree. Aunt Iris paid me an extra twenty dollars, for "cleaning above and beyond the call of duty". I spent it on *The Giant Rainbow Book of Fairy Tales*.

When my mother saw the book she clicked her tongue. "Aren't you a little old for fairy tales?" she asked.

"It's for research purposes," I said, and because I recognised immanent worry lines, I added, "for when I'm a famous writer."

And my mother nodded as though that was a normal thing to say.

* * *

While Aunt Iris and I were sitting at The Jetty Cafe on an endless summer evening, with the lap of waves slapping at briny old wood, the elf came to the river. Aunt Iris was telling me, again, how glad she was for the divorce.

A month ago I had left my elf hunting his unseen tropical snark a continent width away. Cairns felt long ago, as holidays always do once I'm back at home and in the familiar routine of work.

I sat toying with cake in a late afternoon lethargy, letting Aunt Iris's words wash over me. I turned my head, searching for a breeze, and he was there, sitting on the bank of the river, calm and cool and kissable.

He looked perfectly healthy, not the slightest bit sick or injured. And not at all like the cruel, haughty elves of the old poems: a powerful demi-god to be respected and feared. Neither did he look anything like the elves of the Elizabethan and Victorian books: one of their redesigned diminutive, benevolent creatures. He was some other thing altogether. Something the books hadn't described properly at all.

There was the ominous pause of a question left unanswered for too long, and I turned back to Aunt Iris.

"Do you know him?" she asked, her eyes eating up my elf.

"No," I said.

"Shame," she said. "I would have asked for an introduction."

I had never actually seen anyone leer before, and it was rather a shock to see Aunt Iris doing it.

"Oh come on!" she said, noticing my disapproval. "There's no harm in looking. Don't even try to pretend he's not sex on a stick."

"Well," I said, feeling a sudden urge to confess, "I've always had a bit of a thing for elves, and he's certainly very..."

"Elves!" said Aunt Iris, pulling her gaze away from him and back to me. "You do say the strangest things sometimes, Nina. Although I daresay he is gay. The neat ones always are. And that scarf thing he's wearing on his head! Although I suppose it's better than shaving it all off like my Billy's done. Did I tell you?"

I dutifully shook my head, and so she told me all about my cousin's sudden reduction in hair. Once she was in full flow, I looked back at my elf.

He was smiling. Smiling right at me.

My toes curled.

"Very?" he mouthed, one eyebrow raised.

All the books agree that elves have excellent hearing. It seems they have that fact right.

"Beautiful," I said.

Aunt Iris smacked the table hard. "How on earth can you support him, Nina, he looks like a mangy hedgehog with his head like that!"

By the time I'd pacified her, my elf had gone.

<p align="center">* * *</p>

While I was reading *The Giant Rainbow Book of Fairy Tales* for the seventh time, a fairy came and peered over my shoulder.

"Typical rubbish," she said. "They never get more than a quarter of it right, if that."

She was skinny and pale and as big as my palm, with a shock of red hair, a smattering of freckles across her crooked nose, and large buck teeth.

I nearly asked if she was a fairy, then thought better of it. I had braces myself, and wouldn't like it much if some one asked me if I were human.

"I'm Nina," I said. "Who are you?"

"Harry," she said.

"Harry?" I asked. Somehow this didn't seem a very fairyish name.

She sighed and rolled her eyes. "Harriet Marigold Sommersweld Lily," she said, "but if you call me anything but Harry I'll curse you with knock knees."

"Can you really do that?" I asked. "I thought it was only babies that got cursed."

"Got that from the book, did you?" she asked. "Lot of rubbish, like I said. These authors, they meet one, maybe two fairies, and suddenly they're experts writing books. I mean honestly! Would you consider yourself an expert on humans after meeting two of them?"

"No, of course not," I said, much struck by this. "Actually, I thought a lot of it sounded pretty dodgy. Why would fairies bother going round cursing babies all the time anyway? Seems pointless, as there's always some tricky way out of it."

"Hmph!" said Harry. "As for that, you're reading one of these nice modern jobbies with all the blood and guts taken out. If you find one of the old books of fairy tales, you'll soon learn about unbreakable curses. And none of that rubbish with hair like spun gold, or a voice as sweet as a nightingale either."

"They're gifts, not curses," I said.

"Really?" said Harry. "Imagine the fright the poor kid would turn out with hair like metal filings and a voice like a bird! Definitely curses. I told you that book was rubbish. Stop reading it, or I'll curse you with a squint."

I stopped reading it and played a game of "I spy" instead, which was much more fun with some one else who could see the fey, and didn't complain that things like *g* for *ghost* and *b* for *bunyip* were cheating.

Later, I went and bought some of the old books of fairy tales with the blood and guts still in them. Harry was right—they had a much lower rubbish ratio.

And they had a lot more in them about elves.

* * *

While I was working on the laptop out on my back veranda, my elf came for a visit. I looked up, trying to remember the name for a word that is spelled the same way coming and going, and there he was, standing under the lemon-scented gum. Watching me.

"What's the name for a word that's spelled the same coming and going?" I asked.

"Coming and going where?" he asked, sounding witty, elegant and sexy, as though his dialogue had been written by Tom Stoppard.

"Coming and going where?" I repeated, just to check, and from my lips it sounded like an inane innuendo.

Elf charm again. No wonder they have such a reputation as seducers.

I wondered if, perhaps, he were related to the Huldra, the faery seducers who would send their mortal lovers mad and then abandon them. But I had seen his back, and he didn't look at all hollow the way the Huldra were meant to be, so it didn't seem likely. He was obviously just blessed with an abundance of unnatural charm.

"I'm Seb," he said. "But if you're into palindromes, I guess you could call me Sebes."

Or maybe they have a reputation as seducers because they're smart as well as beautiful.

"Tell me," I said, "is there anything about you that isn't perfect? I only ask because your elf charm is getting in the way of my ability to judge, and I've never really trusted people who seem too good to be true. In fairy tales they're always the ones who curse you with hair like spun gold or a voice like a nightingale. And I really don't feel that I deserve either of those fates."

He laughed, which I didn't mind too much, because it was musical and a joy to hear. Except... he was laughing at me, and my hair really could have done with a wash that morning, and I was wearing my daggy working-at-home clothes, and all the nails on my left hand were chipped where I'd caught them while un-hitching the windsurfer from my roof-rack.

Perhaps I'd been too hasty in condemning those curse-wielding fairies. Perhaps a few curses aimed at laughing elves would be therapeutic. I practised a few in my head.

"I don't find the idea of being cursed all that funny," I said.

He stopped.

"It's just," he said, "my mother used to speak of the charm we had over humans, but I thought it was a myth, like the Tooth Fairy. I've never talked to a human with the sight before. I thought you'd tell me to go away."

"I still might!" I said. "I thought elves were meant to be coldly distant and overly polite to humans."

Except when they were shagging them, of course. Although, come to think of it, the books were never very detailed about the sex—maybe it's possible to fuck in a coldly distant and overly polite way.

"Not me," he said. "That's why I'm here in Australia. I hate the cold. I hate being coldly distant. I hate cold weather. I hate rain and snow and hanging about in forests singing uplifting epics. At home they all said I was mad for wanting to come here; they said I'd never make it across the water. I'm glad I came though—nothing here is cold."

His eyes were saying: "You're not cold."

I melted. Damned elvish charm; and there was nothing polite about it.

"I guess mouthing off to your rellies and running away from home counts as a character flaw," I said. "But if you ever curse me, I'm going to get peeved."

He grinned, and I heard sizzling as another few dozen brain cells fried under the charm.

"Hey," he said. "If you don't want to get cursed you should take me windsurfing. I've always wanted to try it."

So we went windsurfing.

* * *

While I lay in bed that night, I asked Harry what she knew about elves.

"I don't know any personally," she said, "if you don't count yours, which I don't because we haven't been introduced yet." And I got a very pointed look. "But I hear they're a bit cold and polite."

"Yes," I said. "That's what all the books say."

"It's probably a lot of rubbish then," she said. "What's yours like?"

"He likes windsurfing," I said. "And he has this charm thing that makes me want to tumble him like the spin cycle of a washing machine."

Harry sniffed. "No accounting for taste, I suppose. But they say," and she paused and looked at me with compassion, "they say that after an elf tumbles you, he disappears. Does a runner. Charms, comes and runs."

"The first boy I ever went out with did that, and he wasn't even any good in the sack. He was *human*."

"Well," said Harry, "Easy come, easy go."

* * *

While I was raking leaves from the back lawn, my elf came to me. I was hot and sweaty, and my hair was in spiky curls all around my head.

Seb looked at me and said, "Hot."

He smelled good enough to eat.

The smell of him, all spice and leaves, made my whole body feel like the moment before you sneeze; harsh pins and needles. Then the charm really hit; kicking through my belly and all the way up my spine. My sweat felt like blood squeezing out of my pores, and I had to have him.

So I tumbled him there amongst the leaves; kissed that mouth, tasted his skin, slid his braids through my fingers, and let the charm fizz through me like an orgasm. And then I had those too.

Lots of them.

* * *

While I was lying there, blissed out, wondering if I could stand for it to end, I felt him go. The twilight came down like a blanket, and I could see the stars through the branches overhead. I wanted to stop him. I wanted to reach out and tell him, "Stay."

But he was an elf.

I knew what to expect. Homework. Yada, yada.

It still made me mad.

Harry flew down and sat on my shoulder, right above a mark Seb had left with his perfect teeth.

"Was it good?" Harry asked. "Was it worth it? It looked worth it."

"You watched?" I almost had enough energy to be appalled.

"I wanted to know if the books got it right for once," said Harry, with no embarrassment at all. "They did, didn't they?"

"Yes," I said.

Then I went inside to cry where every fey with an ounce of curiosity couldn't see me.

So much for afterglow.

* * *

While I was in despair, an elf came and sang beneath my window. I opened it and stuck my head out.

"What?" I said.

He pouted adorably, and it made me cross. Again.

"I'm busy crying my eyes out, Seb. What do you want?"

"Didn't you like my song?" he asked. "I made it for you, Nina."

"It sounded like two cats being strangled in a bag," I said. "Go away."

"You strangle cats?" he asked, not sounding very surprised.

"No, I don't strangle cats!"

"Well," he said, "do you like the sound of cats being strangled?"

Then the charm kicked in, and my anger dribbled away like tears.

"Seb, why are you here?"

"Look at the morning." He gestured to the dawn sky.

I looked.

"Yep," I said. "It's morning alright."

"Perfect for windsurfing," he said.

"Windsurfing? You came to ask me windsurfing?"

"I had to, Nina," he said.

My inner cynic made me say, "Yes, because you don't have a windsurfer!"

"Or a car," he said, seeming glum about it.

"Ahuh," I said, and the anger was trying its darnedest to make a comeback.

"Or any human identity papers," he said. "I'm an illegal alien."

That cracked it.

"So, what?" I shouted. "You want to marry me so you can apply for residency? Is that before or after we go windsurfing?"

He cocked his head and considered that for a moment. "Does Harry have residency?"

I looked at him incredulously. "I think you just gave me mental whiplash."

"I met her a moment ago, coming through the garden," he said. "She seems nice."

"I like her," I said, not quite recovered from our conversational detour.

Seb reached out and stroked the hydrangea growing beneath my window. The arc of his thumb made me shiver.

"Does Harry need residency to stay here with you?" he asked, very casually.

Suddenly, the detour became a main arterial road with eight lanes of traffic and multiple on-ramps, and it was at that moment that I resolved to donate my entire collection of fairy stories, encyclopedias and learned texts to the local public library.

Harry was right—they were complete rubbish.

Seb's thumb was still stroking the wretched plant.

"No, Seb," I said, leaning down and grabbing his hand. "Harry doesn't have residency—she doesn't need it to stay here. I'm a regular halfway house for the fey. I have an open-door policy... Wide open. Harry can stay as long as she likes. She can come and go too, if she needs to. But mostly she pretty much hangs out here full time. And I'm good with that. It works out. We get along. Of course she's too small to go windsurfing with me, but nobody's perfect."

"That's lucky," he said, smiling his toe-curling smile. "Isn't it the perfect ones who usually go around cursing people?"

"Only if you believe in fairy tales," I said, and tumbled out of the window.

And after he'd practised his elf charm on me three or four times, to the detriment of the former hydrangea, we went windsurfing.

Solid Rock

Punk!

Are you calling me *punk*?

Well... maybe you're right. You're not the first person to call me that, you know. In fact, a lot of people think I'm all muscle and no wit and, all things considered, I tend to agree with them. It doesn't bother me too much any more; I wouldn't be the success I am today if I had a harder head.

You want to know how a punk like me ended up with all this, don't you?

Well, it all began on the day of the Big Bust. Do you remember that?

No, I thought you looked too young. Anyhow, a lot of things were different back then.

The day of the Big Bust, I first noticed something was up when I saw three kids loitering next to the chain-link fence around my neighbour's field. They were just on the verge of not being kids anymore and they were strutting around like three big, gruff billy goats. I didn't take much notice at first, and not just because I'm slow on the uptake. Kids tend to hang out near the fence a lot, thinking about how green it is on the other side I suppose. What separated these three from the usual mob was the pair of bolt cutters that one of them pulled out from behind a flank and used on the fence. In a blink, they were inside and sniffing around at the grass.

I considered going in and scaring them off but the owner of the field isn't called Big Bad for nothing and I *really* didn't want to be mistaken for a trespasser along with the three kids. I'd seen Big Bad deal with trespassers before, and if those kids were looking to become sacrificial goats they were going the right way about it. So I just sat on my perch by the riverside and watched the three of them sniffing about.

They were trotting around sampling the grass as though the field was their very own do-it-yourself herbarium. They had even bought plastic bags along to carry samples away in. I guess that's when I should have first got a clue, but I didn't. I

remained completely unenlightened as they slowly crossed the field, heading towards my bridge. And when they started to trip-trap, trip-trap across, for all the world as though they owned the place, I decided to teach them a lesson; give them a bit of a fright.

There's this party trick I can do that sounds pretty freaky, even if I do say so myself. I can make this noise like a whistling wind, winding its way through old, eroded rocks. This is what I decided to use on the kids. So I huffed and puffed my phantom wind at them. Sure enough, they slowed down their confident trotting and started looking around. If I were paying proper attention, I would have noticed how eager they were.

"Do you hear that?" asked the tallest kid.

"Yep," said the smallest kid, "and it sure sounds mighty familiar."

The middle-sized one said nothing at all, just started scratching at his rump.

After looking around for a while, the three of them finally stopped, back-to-back, in the middle of the bridge. Taking that as my entrance cue, I let the phantom wind die down to an eerie quiet. Then I uncracked myself from my perch against one of the old stone pylons and dropped down, gravity giving me momentum. I landed in front of them with a loud clash of stone on stone.

"Fuck," said Tall.

"Holy cow," said the Pipsqueak.

Then the middle-sized one pulled an Uzi out from behind his back and pointed it at my chest.

"This thing's loaded with Magic Bullets," said Uzi in a conversational manner. "One of these babies can go through you eight different places before you even feel it."

I put my hands up and went still as stone. This wasn't quite the kind of fright I'd had in mind.

"I'm not into violence," I said. "No need to do anything hasty."

"Sure there is, Big Bad," said the Pipsqueak.

"I never thought I'd see the day I had the Big Bad Wolf in my gun-sights," said Uzi, the little black hole of his gun marking steady time on my chest.

"What?" I said stupidly, and looked around, wondering how Big Bad had snuck up on me.

"Oh yeah!" said Pipsqueak. "You are going *down*, Big Bad. And you ain't gonna get up no more."

"Wait a minute," I said. "You think *I'm* the Big Bad?"

"We got you on so many charges," said Tall, "it'll take you seven lifetimes before you see daylight again... Cultivation of Marijuana, Perjury, Destruction of Public Property, Attempted Murder..."

"But I'm not Big Bad," I interrupted.

"Nah, of course not," said Tall. "It's just a coincidence that we heard you huffing and puffing at us just now, the same way you did when you took out our Safe House last month." And he pulled off his goat's head with the sound of sundering velcro. His real head, which had been concealed beneath the disguise, was bathed in sweat and had a pronounced upturn to its nose. "We don't appreciate people huffing and puffing and blowing our Safe Houses down."

"Hey!" I said, with some indignation. "You're undercover pigs!"

"Yeah," said Pipsqueak, breaking out the handcuffs, "and you're under arrest."

"I'm telling you, you've got the wrong guy." I waved a hand at my craggy face. "Do I look like a wolf to you?"

"We know what plastic surgery can do these days," said Pipsqueak. "It'll take more than a new face to trick us."

"Yeah," said Uzi. "And if you move again you're gonna need another one. Go ahead punk. Make my day!"

"Punk!" I muttered, then saw Uzi's finger twitch on the trigger and I shut up.

It takes a lot to rile me. I've got a pretty slow nature, generally speaking. But that punk comment really pissed me off. Trees get punk. Dryads—they've been known to get punk. Ents get punk all the time. But Trolls, they never, ever get punk. Solid stone right to the heart. And if there's one thing certain about me, it's that I'm pure Troll.

Even Trolls can be hurt by Magic Bullets though, so I hoarded up my anger in silence and let them hustle me down to the Station.

I sat in the interview room with a cold cup of some thin, black, burnt-looking liquid in front of me. Pipsqueak was having a go at playing good cop.

"You'll be doing yourself a favour by telling us everything," he said.

"I don't know why you're even bothering with denial," said Uzi, suffering a bad case of bad-cop typecasting. "Mary already told us everything we need to know about your role in the school distribution racket, Big Bad."

"Rubbish," I said. "You're bluffing. There's no way you've picked Mary up. She's been on the lam for years. She's the best there is!"

Uzi smirked. "Mary's lamming days are over. And you better believe she sold you out. You're in it so deep, you're gonna need a snorkel to breath."

"He's right, you know," said Pipsqueak. "We picked Tinkerbell up this morning too. Her fairy dust is off the streets for good. She rolled over on you so fast, my head's still spinning. So do yourself a favour while you still can."

"Ha," I snorted. "Next you'll be trying to convince me you picked up the Snow Queen, and cut off her pipeline to the snowfields."

Pipsqueak and Uzi shared a long and amused look.

"He's finally getting a clue," said Uzi.

"We've been working on this bust for years," said Pipsqueak. "There isn't a dealer left in this town."

"The only question left," said Uzi with relish, "is whether we get to take you down hard or whether we get to throw away the key."

While Uzi was talking, Tall poked his head around the door and motioned to Pipsqueak. They whispered together, while Uzi ignored everything except me.

"The only way you're gonna leave here is feet first," said Uzi.

"Um," said Pipsqueak to Tall. "You tell him," and he motioned violently at Uzi.

Tall cleared his throat. "Actually," he said, "we shouldn't really verbally abuse the alleged perp."

Uzi turned and glared. "Do you guys mind? You're wrecking my flow. This punk's about to crack any minute now."

"Ah," said Pipsqueak. "Sorry."

"Yeah," said Tall. "Sorry. But you see the thing is..."

"What?" demanded Uzi.

"His whorls don't match," said Tall.

"What about his whorls?" said Uzi. "I'm in the middle of an interrogation here. Who gives a shit about whorls!"

"They don't match Big Bad," said Pipsqueak, and ducked behind Tall's bulk.

"So, you're telling me, what?" Uzi asked with menace. "You're telling me he's not Big Bad?"

Tall nodded and shuffled back towards the door, somewhat impeded by Pipsqueak.

"Well, shit!" Uzi sighed. "We shoulda known it was too easy."

"Yeah," said Pipsqueak, edging back into the room. "We shoulda known."

"Right," said Tall, nodding. "Yep. We sure shoulda."

"Because, after all, the Big Bad is the Big Bad," said Uzi. "So why would he look like a two-bit punk?"

"Yeah," said Pipsqueak.

"Right," agreed Tall. "Obvious really."

"Hey," I said. "Knock it off with the punk comments already. Who ever heard of a punk rock? OK? It's just stupid. Trees get punk. Dryads get punk. Even Ents, they get punk all the time. But Trolls! Trolls don't get punk!"

All three of them looked at me.

"Stupid?" said Uzi and took a step forward. I could feel my eyes widening to the size of saucers. "Are you calling me stupid?"

"Uh, never mind," I said. "I'm just a dumb Troll. What do I know about anything?" I tried out a weak smile.

"So," said Uzi, cracking his knuckles. "Who is he then? Big Bad's errand boy? Guess we'll just have to knock a few of those chips off his shoulders and see where that gets us. Bet we'll find out just how much he knows then! We'll just chisel it out of him, won't we boars?"

I could feel my eyes widen to the size of dinner plates as Uzi pulled out a nasty-looking chisel. Where the hell did he hide these things? The insides of his pockets must be made out of ladies' handbags or something.

"Um," said Pipsqueak, edging back behind Tall.

"Well," said Tall, "actually..."

"What?" snapped Uzi.

"He's no-one," said Pipsqueak. "No record. No connection to Big Bad. He's just some punk Troll."

"What about the huffing he did on the bridge?" demanded Uzi. "That's perfectly good circumstantial evidence."

"The cats over on the east side pulled in a Tasmanian she-devil this morning," said Tall. "Blew half the precinct over before they got her pinned down. She confessed to the Safe House job."

"So we ain't got nothing on this guy," said Pipsqueak. "We gotta let him go."

I had to walk home from the Station, even though my legs felt like water. If I didn't know better, I might have started to worry that I did have punk after all. As soon as I was out of sight of the Station-house doors, I stopped and leant back against the stone wall of the prison yard.

"Hello, Clay," said a voice from the wall.

"Hello, Uncle Cliff," I said. "How's prison treating you?"

"There's good days and bad days," said Uncle Cliff. "Could be worse. I gotta new tattoo last month."

"Yeah? What's it of?" I asked.

"Some kid in the cell my arse ended up in had a thing for anagrams. Wrote them all over the walls. The bit on me says: 'elvis lives.' Glad I didn't get the bit that said 'silve viles'—your Aunt Silver would never have understood."

"That was pretty lucky," I agreed. "Maybe I should get a tattoo. To commemorate my lucky escape from becoming a jailhouse rock."

"What lucky escape? I don't like the sound of that, pebble," Uncle Cliff said. "What are you doing here, anyway? Not in trouble I hope."

So I told him.

"Good God," said Uncle Cliff. "You know what this means, don't you, pebble?"

"That I'm not going to prison after all," I said.

"No, no, no," said Uncle Cliff. "Think of the bigger picture."

"There won't be anymore drugs on the street for a while," I said. "Is that what you mean?"

"Yes," said Uncle Cliff. "Exactly! Think of the opportunities. What I wouldn't give to be a young Troll in your position right now."

"But Uncle Cliff," I said, "I thought you didn't want me to get into trouble. Isn't druglording kinda dangerous?"

"Don't be stupid, Clay," said Uncle Cliff. "There's more than one way to fill a gap. That's the law of supply and demand. If there's no more grass, people will

demand fairy dust. And if there's no fairy dust, people will demand snow. And if there's no snow, people will demand some other way of getting stoned. You follow me, pebble?"

"Not really," I said. "I'm a bit slow sometimes."

"Nevermind that," said Uncle Cliff. "This doesn't require brains, it requires heart, and you have plenty of that. Just tell me, what is it that people want when they go to the druglords?"

"That's easy," I said. "They want a more peaceful world, where they don't have to cope with magic all the time."

"Yes," said Uncle Cliff. "So you just have to find a way to give them that—a way that's legal. It's a seller's market, Clay!"

"But what do I sell?" I asked.

"Are you a Troll?" asked Uncle Cliff.

"Yes," I said.

"Are you stone, right to the heart?" asked Uncle Cliff.

"Of course," I said.

"Right," said Uncle Cliff. "The peace of stone is all people want. So give them your heart."

"You mean metaphorically, don't you, Uncle Cliff?" I asked. "'Cause I don't really want to end up with 'elvis lives' graffitied on my heart in a wall somewhere, if you know what I mean."

Uncle Cliff was very quiet for a moment.

Then he said, "Maybe you better get your head checked for punk, pebble."

Back at my bridge, I thought about what Uncle Cliff had said. I thought he was probably right about what people wanted, but I still couldn't think of a way to give my heart to people. Not without *giving* my heart to people, anyway.

My cousins Lido and Clod dropped by, and I explained the problem to them. They couldn't come up with anything either. So we just sat on the bridge and played with the wind, seeing how many different sounds we could make.

That's when it happened: I had an idea!

I'd never had one before, and it felt pretty strange. I told Lido and Clod, and they liked the idea too. So we called up all our other cousins: Iggy, Crag, Tuffy, Flint, Scar and Reefer.

We sat on the bridge together and mulled the idea over. With all of us going, it sounded like a cyclone sieved through an avalanche: it was practically a wall of sound.

The next day, we put posters up all over town:

<div align="center">

Come and try...

Altered States of Consciousness!

Get stoned on punk-rock music!

Friday night at the colosseum.

</div>

Uncle Cliff was right about supply and demand. We made a killing. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Not bad for someone with rocks for brains, huh, pebble?

Heat Seeking

I sit in the car, in traffic, in the city, in rush hour, all hurry-up-and-wait, like slo-mo, each blink a strobe light, sleep close by; confused, inattentive, unresponsive. In the heat.

The heat soaks into me and I feel melted; fused into the vinyl-plastic-leather-foam of the car. The radio's playing something tinny, from a million years ago when it wasn't so hot that sweat trickles down between my breasts like acid. Burning; no relief at all. And the air is so heavy, muting the city's noise as though someone downed the volume when they upped the temperature. That's why I almost don't believe I hear it. None of the air-conditioned, hermetically sealed, one-passenger-per, freshly tuned heads turn to look. But my windows gape, and the sound rolls in even on the dead air.

Screaming.

It isn't me; I can tell because my cheeks ache from clenching my teeth—still not immune to road-rage despite New Year's resolutions. Besides, there isn't enough spit in my mouth. And I can tell my head has baked because I envy her the spit to scream even though it's a high, shrill I-can-hardly-scream-for-breathing type of thing. Like you do when you're really, actually scared you're going to die—this is it, *right now*—because there's a two-metre-long brown snake waving its head at you from the clump of grass right next to your shoe—dead, I'm so *dead*—as you're stepping, running, turning away; moving through mud and your breath caught in your chest by gobs of blu-tack. Breathing in, in, in but never *out* enough to take a proper breath.

Screaming like that.

My uncivilised, lizard-like, back brain says, *you don't hear it, blink again, re-engage slo-mo, go back to stupor-sleep*. But of course, the volume is still down, and I don't know where God—or the current politically correct Deity-being—keeps the damn remote, so I don't hear the lizard brain's voice very clearly at all but I can still

hear the screaming rolling through the window. So I do the hand brake thing and switch off my internal combustion and open the car door which is a *mistake* because the heat leaps up from the bitumen and hits me under the chin so I bite my tongue; shit, how can it be hotter? I feel all kinds of stupid as I stand there tasting blood. I'm as quick witted as a sloth; monkey thinking is definitely disengaged. Hope I don't need it.

So I pursue the screamer, who is out in the waving, weaving city, who knows where, because the echoes bounce, ricochet, carom off all the glass and smooth brick; just as well I'm not a bat or dolphin, I'd be lost in the cross-fire. But I'm not. I'm lucky; I'm a monkey—even if primatery functions are offline—and they built this for me, so I step up from the curb and know where I am even through the wavery air. I'm on the footpath. Clever me. See Dick run; watch Jane catch the ball; spot Spot. It's all coming back to me now. Why don't these buildings have awnings; is shade so obsolete?

And the screaming is closer, more sobby, more breathy, less volume, tiring now, running down; resigned to terror. I hate that. It's too much like the soundtrack to the nightmares I can't wake up from; hopeless endurance of an endless now. So I'm looking, looking when she swims out of the mirage waves, a limping Venus, shell-shocked, half-naked. Beautiful. Unseeing. Her eyes take in nothing, her head nodding to the thump, thump of each heavy step, and so I stand there and yell like a fool. *Hey, hey, are you alright, need help, what's wrong?* Like that. For a second her gaze flicks over me, and she stumbles, her legs failing as the balancing act finally goes wrong without a safety net; and she's still sobbing, sobbing, like dry-heaving hyperventilation.

It's like some terrible film noir gone all wrong in the sunlight as I catch her in my arms, even though she doesn't want to stop running, and her legs keep moving but she's too weak to break my grip; so she's staggering in place—running would be too generous a description for this jerky, creeping thing she does. And what's left of her clothes are wet with sweat, slick under my hands, and I nearly can't hold her, but of course it isn't really sweat because it's red red red and that isn't a button or zip that's holding these rags to her body, that's a knife; handle curving under my curved palm. And what do you say? What do you say to someone dying in your arms, the rape still on their thighs and in their eyes, wearing the perfume du jour—eau de crime. *It's OK. It's OK.* Not OK. Not. *It'll be OK now. I've got you now. You're safe*

now. You're almost dead now, dying now, it'll never be the same now. You've infected me with your crime now because I can never forget the feel of you as your skin slides slick, wet, hot under my clumsy hands.

So I stuff her into the back seat of my car—it's like trying to stuff a chicken, all arms and legs and angles and it just won't go; but then again not like that at all, because there's that knife, and soft places that gush blood when I touch them trying to get a better grip and she just makes that noise that she's still making and I want to yell shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up. But I don't need to because the cars behind mine are doing it for me, honk, barp, honk; the traffic jam has finally eased off and I'm blocking the road. A car in the other lane flashes that bumper sticker, *Honk if you are Jesus,* and every driver for a block must have been born in Bethlehem, because I can hardly hear myself panic for their horns.

So we're moving, driving, and I'm trying to figure which hospital to take her to, and I figure the Jewish one, right, because I haven't used that one yet, and from here it's only about twelve or fifteen minutes away depending on traffic. No problem. And the motion seems to be calming her a bit because the noise she's making is finally tapering off, quieting down, and when I look in the rear vision mirror I can see the tremors aren't so bad now either, so that's good; but then I get the point—her breathing is shallowing out. She's dying on me, I don't have twelve or fifteen minutes. So it can't be the Jewish one, it has to be the closest one, named after that dead royal—what's-his-face—Eddie or Willie, one of those, so I turn left without indicating, more horns, but that doesn't matter now and I step on the speed.

I can see her going blue in the mirror, and she's not moving at all now; we're still three or four minutes away and my hands are starting to sweat. She needs a jump start and I have jumper cables in the boot of the car, but there's no time to stop and play doctor, so I press in the cigarette lighter instead and wait for it to pop. It takes so long I think it must be broken—Murphy's Law in action—and I've pretty much given up on it when it snaps out at me and scares me half to death, my foot goes down and we nearly end up climbing the back of the car in front, but I pull out into the oncoming traffic instead, always wanted to do that, just like in a movie. Then we're up onto the curb, following the footpath around the corner, and back on the street; couple of scratches on the paint work, but we're still alive and almost to the ER entrance so who cares.

I pull out the lighter and reach behind me, jab it hard against her wrist and her eyes flutter at me in the mirror, so I jab it again until she moans a bit and I figure that's enough adrenalin shock therapy to last us both for as long as she lives. Hopefully that's long enough.

Then the hospital is right up ahead, so I'm leaning on the horn and steering one-handed, we're pulling into the ER bay and I manage not to bowl over the attendants who've come out to help us, but it's a close thing; it's one of my better dramatic entrances. They're pulling her out of the back seat and onto a trolley, and I'm thinking up getaway excuses as fast as I can, and just hoping, hoping, crossing my fingers for a bit of luck—that the staff roster's just had its rotation for the month and that these are all new faces—when the burly guy with the blond hair finally gets a good look at me. I don't even have to look at his nametag to recognise him as Tom, the same Tom who made sure I got a coffee while waiting for my stitches the last time. And his eyes widen and he opens his mouth and I'm back in the car and going, gone, and I can hear his shout of *Hey wait a minute* fading into the background. There's no point even trying to explain it away this time, because four times is at least twice too many to be dropping bashed up women at the same hospital in the same month without questions being asked that I can't answer to anyone's satisfaction, not even my own.

I consider the situation. The security cameras will have my license plate recorded, and Tom will be happy to give the police a full and accurate description of the weirdo, including all the scars I have in strange and unusual places; so I'm on the run again because it's just as easy to set up a new identity in a new city as this one. Easier maybe, because I won't be tempted to go back to any of the places I like, or bump into people I shouldn't know. And anyway Hobart is cold this time of year, or so I've heard.

The freeway is right nearby, the airport less than half an hour away, my emergency bag is in the boot, a long-term parking ticket doesn't cost anything if you never come back, and there's nearly always a seat to be had on the midnight horror. Plan made. So I do it; I'm busy looking inconspicuous at the airport for a few hours, eating a dried up pie and chips, reading crap magazines about how I too can be anorexic inside of three and a half weeks, and then I'm on the plane.

I hate flying. Couldn't give a shit if the plane falls from the sky, that's not what bothers me. It's being a captive to my own thoughts, the constant dread, because one

day I just know it's going to happen to me when I'm trapped like this and can't control it, get away from it, deal with it.

Some woman is going to come up to me like a heat-seeking missile, guided by God knows what instinctive program, broken and bleeding and dying, the fist marks of her attacker visible on her face. She's going to crawl into my arms and cry, sweat, shake and haemorrhage in a way that anyone can tell, just by looking at her, that she's not going to survive. And I'll do what I always do. Feel the heat of her skin, smell the bitterness of her sweat, sooth the worst of her fear, and call a medic who won't be able to do sweet bugger all, but will try to tourniquet or Band-Aid anyway. And I'll work whatever mojo it is I work—I call it the Schroedinger's Cat theory of healing because until that medic gets a look at her there's always the chance it isn't as bad as it seems; and somehow it never is. And then she'll live. Because they always do if they find me. Always. Although they seem to have a good time scaring me into an adrenalin high worthy of the Incredible Hulk first with how close they come to dying.

Or maybe it won't be like that; maybe it'll be worse. Maybe it will be one of the ones that can't get to me on their own. So the guy—because it always is a guy—will pull out the knife, or gun, a bit of metal, a bottle of booze, or his fists—whatever—and she'll be doing what she can to get away from him. *No. Stop. Don't hurt me*. Maybe kicking him in the shins. Maybe hiding, or crawling, depending on how bad she's already hurt, but pointed at me. Coming to me. And I'll look at her face, and hear the terror in her voice, and I won't stop to think that it's a bad idea, that he has a weapon and muscles and a bad attitude. I'll wade right in. Let him stab me or shoot me or wrap his hands around my neck, but I'll be white hot with rage by then, and I won't even feel it, just keep on going. Then I'll get a hand on him and it'll be all over bar the Band-Aiding, and me doing the mojo. They'll say how lucky I was, if the wound had been even a little bit deeper, more to the left, gone any longer without treatment, then, you know, I'd have been dead. And someone like Tom, the burly hospital attendant, will bring me a cup of coffee. Probably read me a lecture at the same time about how someone like me—meaning a *woman*, but he won't say that, as though the word is a loaded weapon that might go off in his mouth—how someone like me should be *careful*, because next time it might not turn out so well.

Ha.

And all that's fine, as long as it happens where no one can see. Because if it happened where they could see, they'd all ask, *What happened to the guy? He couldn't have, like, got away, we're on a fuckin' plane for Pete's sake.*

What could I possibly say to that?

See that pile of grey ash on the carpet?

Yeah. I can just imagine the response to that.

When I'm trapped in a place like this I can't stop thinking about this thing I do, about what will happen if *They* ever figure it out, although I'm sure 'They' exist only in cheesy television programs about conspiracy theories, but there you are, I'm a victim of pop-culture paranoia. Knowing that doesn't seem to help, and I sweat, cold and clammy in the air-conditioning, the whole flight.

When we land in Hobart I'm so tired I get a taxi to take me to the nearest fleabag hotel and I sleep the sleep of the damned, around the clock. When I finally wake, I'm ready for some real food, and on my way to breakfast I buy the newspaper. It's front-page news; yesterday was the hottest day recorded for April since they started keeping the books. Today will be another scorcher, I can tell already from the bitter dried-grass tang of the air.

Just before I reach the deli on the corner, where I'm hoping for a nice ham-and-cheese croissant, I pass an alley and, drifting out from it, faintly, I can hear a woman pleading, begging, crying, for someone not to hurt her anymore, and I'm already starting to sweat. And my lizard brain whispers, *slo-mo, sleepy time*, and I say back, *bugger that,* and walk into the alley.

Common Tongues

I started the diary because I was tired of speaking to people who never listened or understood.

—Miranda de Milan.

It was hard to know when Miranda's return to life began. It might have been the day she went back to the island, or when she became aware of the unwanted presence of Cal, or even the moment she read the first poem.

Or perhaps it began long before that, with a break-up, a fractured heart, an ending. Perhaps it began when the path of Miranda's life split away from Ferdinand's, and she found herself alone after so many years as part of a couple.

Or perhaps it began more simply still: the moment she became an orphan and had no one else to blame for the course of her life.

But the easy beginning, the one Miranda could point to, and say, "That moment changed everything," was on the fourth day, when Cal finally stopped following her. Ironically, it was in that moment of despair that Miranda found what she'd been looking for.

* * *

I was in a dark place when I arrived back on the island. I was trying to find my way home.

—Miranda de Milan

That first day back on the island was a bitch. All sun and heat and trudging over rocky ground and wading through dense undergrowth, until Miranda's arms and legs felt like they belonged to some barely animate golem: undifferentiated clay, without feeling or fine motor-control. It was an appropriate irony; her heart felt stuffed with the same sticky, unfeeling mud.

Her mood was not improved when she realised that Cal had found her and was following her on her fruitless search. He didn't come close. Just followed.

Mile after mile. Hour after hour.

She did her best to ignore him. Not very well at first, but as the morning progressed she fell back into the habit.

The day quickly became an endurance test, and not only because of Cal's brooding background presence. Nothing on the island was quite the way she remembered it.

Miranda had checked her atlas after packing up her three suitcases with all the worldly goods she cared to keep. She had traced the seas with her finger, looking vainly for home. She knew the island lay to the east of Australia and to the north of New Zealand, and a long way from both, but its existence wasn't recorded at scales of one mile to sixty-six million. She hadn't realised, then, that even when she was actually standing on it, the island's contours would remain unmappable. But here she was, and most of the landscape was so changed she couldn't map it against her past at all, and the few familiar places she had stumbled across were not connected by any of the paths her feet had known so well.

In her mind's eye, her childhood home had been near the beach, on the sheltered western edge of the island. But despite a methodical search, she had found only confusion. It was as though some part of the island had been excavated, and the rest had twisted itself into a new shape to fill the hole. The cave she and her father had lived in for twelve years was entirely gone; it was as though she had never had a home at all.

* * *

At the day's end she returned to town, seeking the comforting hum of other people.

Stephano's Bar and Grill was packed with holidaying yuppies drinking brightly coloured cocktails. As Miranda made her way through the mob, clutching at her unfashionable glass of red wine, the smell of over-barbequed chops flavoured the air. She was buffeted on all sides by witless innuendo and empty conversation about whale-watching, the stock exchange, surfing, and the promiscuity of a visiting minor celebrity. With each step she took, the cheerful faces turned from her, their gazes

sliding away, never making contact, never inviting her in. It made her feel like flotsam; adrift and more alone than ever.

Eventually the currents of the room washed her up against the accordioned glass doors and she spilled herself out into the beer garden.

She walked to the far end, away from the smokers, and stood for a moment, breathing in the fresh, cold air, eyes prickling, trying to remember what it felt like to belong.

The bay stretched below her like a postcard, the waters shining and still in the last orange blush of fading sunset. The curve of cliffs and beach stretched out towards the sky like welcoming arms.

It took a moment for her to blink away the incipient tears and really see what lay before her; and then she grabbed at the view with her eyes and skin and sense of smell, not quite believing it... but, yes, there it was. Her island, so achingly familiar, now, in the last burnt-orange glow of sun.

The wine glass fell from her hand, forgotten. The *smash* of it against paving stones dull and far away.

There, right in front of her, was the tree she'd loved to climb, its dense, gnarled trunk marking the beer-garden's boundary. Or was it? Doubting herself, she walked forward and slid her hand beneath the branch bent like the crook in a dog's leg, and *there* was her mark, scratched in victory and ownership when she had first conquered the tree's heights. And *there*, at her feet, was the start of the path that wound down towards the clean white stretch of beach, the sand looking like a smear of icing in the dull early light of the moon.

She looked to the left, where the sloping drop to the bay steepened into a cliff, and *there*: the rockeries in which the pretty bosun birds made summer nests. She remembered their cries filling the world with voices, almost as though the island were alive with people.

And *there*, at the bottom of the cliff, the sturdy, dark sprawl of rocks jutting out into the gentle lick and bite of the water's lips... but this time the familiar lines of the spot were made strange and new by the straight, determined spine of the jetty.

There were children down there, fishing, just as she had, perched on the edge of the jetty, just as she'd perched on the edge of the rocks, their rods and dangling legs black matchsticks in the dimming light.

Miranda could almost feel the grit of rock beneath her hands, the bruise of lichen, the crunch of salt. She had fished there so many times, Cal by her side. Over a thousand noons and nights, he had taught her how to handle the slip and stab of a writhing fish, the way to twist bait so that it stayed on the hook, how to tell the stone-heavy pull of a crab from the jerk and flutter of a fish... Cal's face all smiles as he helped her land her first fish, the heat and smell of him—hard-working male and stale sea-things—enveloping her.

Miranda shivered and turned away from the bay, wondering, for the thousandth time, why it had seemed so important to come back.

"Miranda?"

A man was outlined against the bar's bright windows. When he stepped closer and turned, so that the light brushed his face enough to show the stubble on his chin and the gleam of white in his hair, she knew him, despite all the years since she'd seen him last.

"Stephano?"

He was another familiar thing, another gift of subtly-altered recognition in an ocean of strange, and she remembered that long-ago feeling, when she'd first seen the men the storm had brought ashore.

"I was wondering when you'd turn up," he said. "The wife's been pestering me to meet you since last night."

"Oh," she said, her voice breaking in the middle as though it was a word with too many syllables for comfort.

And then Stephano's hand was on her shoulder, a welcome anchor, and she realized she was crying.

* * *

All my life, I've been searching for something. I wish I knew what it was.

—Miranda de Milan.

In the black and silver of moonlight, she returned to the Sea-Change Resort, which was one of the many no-longer-new places built since she'd left the island. She was full of dinner and conversation and over-used emotion as she clomped into her chalet. In her tiredness she lifted her feet a little too high to climb the steps; not paying much attention; dying for a shower and the warmth of her bed. And it was

only at the skittery sound of paper skimming across tiles that she realised she'd trodden on something.

She flicked on the lights, bent over, and picked up the card. It had the uneven texture of hand-made paper and was faintly scented with something summery. Her boot print was smudged across one corner but hadn't marked the message, which was written in a large, looping hand:

Admired Miranda,

foundered on love's wreck, but still

singing; siren-like.

"Yes," Miranda said, because the divorce was still newly minted and uncomfortable, and the idea of luring Ferdinand onto rocks, making sure he was as wrecked as she was, haunted her dreams and burdened her days.

It made her wonder about the nature of love—that it could so easily turn into this petty urge for equal suffering. It made her wonder if all love was innately flawed, or whether it was just her own that was inadequate. It made her wonder if Ferdinand could really have been the love of her life, as she'd always thought, when the last thing she wanted for him now was happiness.

And, most of all, it made her wonder what new shape she was twisting herself into in her attempt to fill the hole he'd left in her life.

* * *

It was all a dream. And then I woke up and discovered I was living a nightmare.

—Miranda de Milan

She was standing on a bare stage, holding a screaming baby that couldn't be hers, because she and Ferdinand had kept putting off having children. But with the strange logic of dreams, she knew that it *was* her baby, and she knew she hated it.

So she bashed it hard against the floor of the stage, which made it scream louder and louder.

Then Ferdinand appeared, wearing a big red hat, his nose an impossible caricature. "Stop it," he yelled, hitting her every bit as hard as she'd just hit the baby. "Stop it! He's coming!"

She wanted to yell, "Fuck you. I'll do what I want." Wanted to scream, "I hate you." But instead she was yanked from the stage by some unseen force, yanked into the impossible dark behind the scenes. The dark felt velvety against her skin, and pressed down on her so that she couldn't move.

She struggled against the trap, pushing with all her might. Distantly she could hear Ferdinand screaming. Her heart broke into a strange fearful beat, and she tried harder to shift the spell keeping her motionless. She pushed and pushed… twisted and writhed… tried to open her mouth to call for help…

…woke, tangled in her blankets and panting with fear.

Once she had calmed down and untangled herself, she lay staring up at the ceiling, unable to reclaim sleep.

Her dreamself was being bloody annoying in its obsession with her marriage. She didn't *need* to be told over and over that she'd been a puppet in love's thrall. She already *knew* that.

So, if she had to have nightmares, why couldn't she tell herself something useful in the process? Like… if the topic had to be *love*… then what was it, exactly, that had happened to break love's spell?

* * *

The second day of Cal was more unsettling than the first.

He was waiting for her, poorly hidden in a small grove of trees that grew within sight of her front door. He stepped out into her path as she was on her way to breakfast.

"Miranda." He held out a limp fistful of wildflowers.

She took them, wondering how to go on. She'd never really fathomed Cal, for all the time they'd spent together. But ignoring him had never really worked, so perhaps it was time to try something more direct.

"Thank you, Cal," she said, trying to be gentle, "but you shouldn't give me flowers. I'm not... ready for any men in my life just now."

"I'm so glad you came back," he said, stepping closer, "I missed you so much."

A woman hurried past, not looking at either of them, despite Miranda's attempt at catching her eye.

Miranda gave up and took a step back from Cal. "Nothing's changed, Cal, so please don't follow me anymore. I don't want to have to go to the police."

"No, no. We don't have to listen to what your father said anymore." Cal reached out, hand hovering in the air near her bare elbow. "He can't stop us now. I can show you the island again. There are new things… springs and fishing places and berries. Wait until you see."

His expression of urgent adoration made Miranda feel sick.

"God, why won't you *listen* to me!" she said, as angry at herself as at Cal, because she didn't want to be cruel, didn't want to shout, didn't want to have to force her will on anyone else.

Waves boomed beyond the sand dunes that protected the Resort, gulls screamed as though they'd seen the end of the world, and the island was alive beneath her feet like some giant, electric metaphor for her anger, making the hair on her arms stand on end.

Cal's hand dropped to his side and he retreated a step. Two steps. Three. His face was wary and pinched.

Miranda turned her back on him, and, thinking about nothing but the ground beneath her left foot, then her right, slowly walked away.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

Are witches just women whose bitterness has uncoupled their connections to the world? Or is it the other way around—are they so connected, they can speak elemental languages other people can't hear?

<p style="text-align:right">—Miranda de Milan</p>

The café was located on the grey, bitumen boardwalk, right on the frayed toes of the beach's edge, and she watched the restless slosh and slap of the sea as she ate her toast. The water looked blue and inviting, just as it had when she and Cal had swum together…

…they swam for hours, until her lips were blue with cold, and afterwards they lay on the sand together, she and Cal, drying in the sunshine. The salty breeze was a tickling kiss against Miranda's skin. She felt good. Happy. Today her father had

promised to come down out of the gloom of the cave and teach her some of the secrets of the island. Her body felt full and alive with the anticipation of it, and perhaps with the first stirrings of her own pubescent magic.

"Do you want to see something?" Cal asked, touching her hair, and she was so happy she didn't mind, even though his fingers caught in sea-knots and hurt a little.

"Okay," she said.

His movements were graceful as he led her over rocks, despite the knobbly, twistiness of him, as though he'd been built for just this kind of crabbed ascent. The cry of the bosun birds grew louder and more raucous as they climbed up the cliff towards the nesting grounds.

Cal dropped flat on a rock and leaned down to lift her up, shushing her question before she could ask it. They inched over to the far side of the rock and looked down onto a nest.

It stank of bird and fish and seaweed, and Miranda fell in love. Two chicks blinked and *queeked*, perched alone in the nest while their mother fished.

Miranda opened her mouth to thank Cal, to express her wonder and delight, but with a slither he was gone from her side, down into the nest.

He turned to her, mouth open and chewing in a horrible flash of red and white, and he thrust his other hand towards her, offering her a glazed-eyed, crooked body; the feathers fluffed between his bony fingers were ruffling in the breeze.

She opened her mouth, but there were no words.

The sun too hot. The sky too big.

She backed away from Cal's offering, back and back until there was no rock beneath her and she was falling, plummeting, crashing into the icy water, the shock of it ripping the air out of her in a big bubble that disappeared upwards into the light even as she touched the weedy bottom.

Her arms and legs were like rocks, and the surface was a distant blur of light far above.

Then, just as her chest was aching for breath, the air bubble swirled back down towards her face, gripping her hands and pulling her up out of the water, up and up, until her feet were touching down onto the safe, crunchy heat of the sun-baked sand.

She sobbed and clung to Ariel's elemental form, letting his wind-welded touch sooth her, telling her she was *safe now*, that it was *all right*, that he'd *never let anything hurt you, sweet Miranda.* And through the distortion of his vortex, she

could see Cal's tear-streaked face, watching them, watching her hug Ariel tight, watching as though he was starving for comfort too…

…Miranda put down her toast, the memory stealing her appetite the way her earlier confrontation with Cal hadn't.

From the side-walk table she could see the bay's arms stretching out, open and welcoming. And, unlike the night before, now she remembered that the bay's welcome was deceptive, its promises false. The island had no natural harbour that could offer true safety. Its reaching arms offered nothing but a shallow, dangerous rest, no protection at all if a storm should lash anyone who had anchored there.

She threw her toast to the squabbling seagulls and left.

* * *

After breakfast she returned to the chalet and found a second poem waiting for her on the tiles:

Admired Miranda,
coloured like wild honey, but
combed with bitterness.

She stared at it, knowing there was really only one person it could be from.
It seemed it was to be a day for facing the past.

* * *

When people leave, the loss un-colours everything.

—Miranda de Milan

The pine forest still covered the centre of the island; too expansive, perhaps, to be twisted and changed the way so much else had. Miranda ignored the *Danger: No Entry* sign, walked deep into the thick of the trees, and found the sacred grove at the forest's heart without much trouble. It had been one of her special places as a child.

When she found Ariel's cloven pine, she placed both hands against its rough skin and called his name, as she had so many times before.

"Approach, Ariel. Come to me."

Throughout the grove leaves fluttered, as though the trees were listening.

"Please, Ariel," she called again, resisting the temptation to add a playful epithet or two, her easy childhood affection too clouded by adult anxiety to allow such familiarity.

The air around the pine tree shimmered with a rainbow of colours, swirled, and began to twist together, coalescing into a human figure.

And then Ariel stood before her, looking just as Miranda remembered: ethereal, fragile and utterly beautiful. Not at all like a secret tormentor. He bowed to her, as he always had to her father, and it seemed to Miranda that across his perfect face there flashed a familiar expression: the sad-lonely-sad her own mirror showed her in the mornings.

"Admired Miranda," he said, his voice the breathy sound of wind through trees and creaking boughs, "you look like you've come to pick a quarrel."

"Only if you're lucky," said Miranda, hands on hips. "I've a good mind to comb *you* with bitterness and see how you like it!"

"Poor Miranda," said Ariel, reaching out, offering his hand, the way he had a thousand times before. "It must have been hard, losing your father and then your husband, one after the other like that."

"How do you *know* that?" she said, ignoring his hand.

With the hand she'd rejected, Ariel pointed in the direction of town. "I read their newspapers. Your Prince Ferdinand sounds like a fool."

"Like you know anything about him," Miranda said, "or about me."

Ariel shrugged. "Anyone who'd willingly leave you would have to be—"

"Don't you dare!" said Miranda. "Because I don't remember seeing you at the funeral, or the divorce, or at any time at all in the last twenty years. So don't you dare talk to me about—"

"About being left behind after twelve years of constant service?" said Ariel, with an almost-human catch in his voice. "You didn't even say goodbye."

They stared at each other, the constant wash of Ariel's presence stirring Miranda's skin.

"You left first," said Miranda, hardly able to recognise her own voice. "Father set you free and you left. You left me all alone with all those strangers."

Ariel shook his head. "He didn't set me free."

"He did! I heard him," said Miranda. "'To the elements be free,' he said, and you..." she waved a trembling hand at the sky.

"I filled the sails of the ship, as he demanded," said Ariel. "Then I just... floated for a while."

The air was pulling at her, gentle and familiar; lulling her with velvet comfort, and Ariel was saying nothing; saying everything. Speaking to Miranda skin-to-skin with his intangible touch, the same way he had when she'd been a curious child trying to get too close to the ocean, or one of the island's wild creatures, or even too close to her father when he was deep in study or some magical trance.

And Miranda was there, her consciousness twinned to his—floating through the sky with him back on that distant day when Prospero had released him. So happy to be free, finally, of the bonds of human sorcery. The hours drifting by like a slow, warm current, until the light was fading from the sky. She was there with him as Ariel finally stopped drifting idly through the air and began picking up speed, heading for the ship.

She was right there with Ariel when the world jerked as he hit the end of his tether. Realised, at the same moment he realized, that he couldn't follow them, that a trick had been played on him.

He'd been chained and left.

Again.

Miranda fell back into awareness of her own body. She stared at Ariel, not wanting to understand, but there was no hiding from Ariel's telling touch, smooth and cool and restless against her skin.

So Miranda did the only thing there was to do. She pulled free of Ariel and ran away; away from the forest and magic and the island's secret places; ran back towards the Sea-Change and the humans who looked at her and saw none of her and everything of her father.

For just a moment, at the edge of the clearing, Miranda glanced back over her shoulder as she ran. Ariel was watching her go, and even though it was impossible for a creature made of nothing but air to cry, his eyes looked wet with something that shone like tears.

* * *

In retrospect it wasn't the great love that I thought it was.

—Miranda de Milan.

Miranda struggled against the trap, pushing with all her might, but she was clay through and through, and the trap was her own skin. Familiar hands—made of flesh, not air—were pressing down, molding her body, sculpting her face, clogging her heart, turning her into something other than herself: a golem with no will bar the spell that animated it.

She tried to break the spell, tried to channel her own magic, but she'd lost it somehow. It was in the missing part of her, in the place she couldn't find.

"Please," she whispered to the unseen sculptor, "please, don't do this."

"Shhh," he replied—voice too deep to be Ferdinand—smoothing on another layer of clay, "There's no harm done. I have done nothing but in care of thee."

I can care for myself, she tried to say. *I can find my own way.* But her mouth was full of mud, suffocating and foul.

"Nothing but in care of thee," said the voice—too educated to be Cal, but oh so familiar— "I've used thee with nothing but human care..."

...and she woke in a sweaty tangle of sheets, tongue thick with dehydration, desperately trying to say "No" even though there was no way, now, for Miranda to escape the knowledge of why love's spell had broken.

There was only one explanation that fit.

The spell had broken because the person who had cast it was dead.

* * *

On the third day of Cal, her tiles were empty of poetry. As though Ariel's muse had suddenly gone mute, just when Miranda most needed to hear someone else speaking her language of despair; even if she wasn't yet quite ready to face him again.

That day she set out for the pineless parts of the island; not because she expected to find the cave, but because she could think of nothing else to do.

* * *

Caliban, thou most lying slave, whom stripes may move, not kindness! I have us'd thee, filth as thou art, with human care, and lodg'd thee in mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate the honour of my child.

—Prospero, *The Tempest,* Act I, Scene 2

"I still love you, Miranda," said Cal, holding out a new posy. "I always have loved you. I always will love you."

And every time she stopped for breath, he came to her and said it again. Again and again. As though repetition would somehow make her understand.

Until, by evening, the word *love* had lost all meaning; becoming a repetitive sound that drilled into her skull like the screaming of a baby. On and on. Inescapable and maddening.

That night, she didn't dream.

* * *

When you're alone, the offer of love can lure you in. Even when it isn't what you want.

—Miranda de Milan.

It was on the fourth day of Cal—also devoid of poetry—that Miranda snapped.

After her picnic lunch she lay on a flat rock in a slice of dappled shade, eyes closed, letting the sound of the wind curling through the hollows of the hills lull her into something like peace. Then Cal's shadow slid across the darkness of her closed eyes.

As she blinked, startled, he was on her. Damp, rough hands gripping too tightly at her head and shoulders. His knee between her thighs, pushing her open. Pressing his large mouth against her face and throat, snorting in her scent.

She wondered in a brief, endless moment of disbelief, if he could taste the clay that was re-making her body.

Then she was overwhelmed. She hadn't realised how deeply the craving for touch had corroded her body, until she and Cal were skin to skin. Hot flesh against needy flesh, his breath puffing in her ear, the unskilled pressure of his hands sparking unwanted pleasure, and she pushed up into it, mindlessly.

Lightning flashed across the sky, searing everything into monochrome, hurting her eyes.

"Miranda," he whispered. His fingers speaking against her skin in counterpoint, with bruising strength.

"No," she said, mind catching up with her body. She started to resist. "Stop." She felt unclean and desperate; as though she'd raped herself.

Cal, deaf to her "No," tore at her clothes, licking at exposed skin, biting her breasts.

"Don't make me hurt you," she said, rough rock scraping against her back, solid and real. Her island, at last. Familiar and powerful beneath her, now that she had no attention to spare for the superficial charm that disguised its face. "Stop. Or I'll hurt you."

Cal ripped at his own clothes, pushing Miranda back against the rock when she tried to crawl away; elemental rock that was part of her island; rock connected to loam and sand and clay, all interwoven with a deep, dense, tangle of life.

As Cal was pulling at his pants, the first bee stung his neck, just below the dark line of his hair. He slapped at it.

Lightning flashed again.

Miranda kicked him in the belly, and used the momentum of the push to get away. He caught at her ankle just as the second and third bees stung. One on his lip, the other beneath his collarbone.

"Miranda?" he said, letting go of her. He whimpered as the fourth bee stung his ear, another his outstretched hand, another his back.

She crawled away, keeping low as the bees flew overhead.

"Miranda," Cal called, sounding broken. "Miranda!"

She ignored him, staggered to her feet, and ran towards the pine forest. Behind her, the hum of bees sounded like the surge of the sea.

* * *

As Miranda fled across the island, thunderheads gathered in the sky, coiling with unnatural speed. Lightning speared down all around her, making her blink at jagged after-images, trying to see clearly.

The first wind of the storm, when it came, started as a small, friendly thing. Making the rocky ground fly by beneath her feet; pushing her towards the shelter of the trees.

When she strayed from the bee-line leading her towards the forest, in order to avoid the clutching spines of a bramble, the storm winds turned harsh. Whipping her hair out in straight lines and moaning in her ears like a soul in agony.

The rumble of thunder ached through the air, and Miranda ran faster, faster, trying to outrun the pain of it.

The deluge began without warning, drenching her. Despite its intensity, the water was soft, like the gentle touch of a lover.

When she reached the shelter of the trees, the storm exploded behind her. Closing out the rest of the world with a curtain of water.

She ran through the trees, looking for the eye of the storm. Looking for the one safe haven she had always been able to trust.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

What was Prospero without his magic? What am I without mine?

<p style="text-align:right">—Miranda de Milan</p>

Ariel was standing by the cloven pine. The bellow of the raging storm was a distant boom, boom, boom of wind and waves, muffled by the forest.

"Ariel?" Miranda said, her voice breaking in the middle of the word.

Then he was near, resting a weightless hand on Miranda's arm.

Miranda looked down at the airy fingers pressed against her skin; a gift of understanding and compassion given without hesitation or expectation. And, like a chain reaction, a huge flood of feeling coursed through Miranda, radiating out from Ariel's gentle touch, and washing away the numbing clay clogging her heart, as though it were a mere nothing. No barrier to feeling at all. The flood grew and grew until she was drowning in it; until all that liquid desperation burst out of her in huge sobs, and Miranda turned into Ariel, wrapping herself tight, tight, tight, in the centre of his vortex, and giving herself in to it.

"I've got you," said Ariel, stroking Miranda's back, pressing her into an even tighter embrace, "I've got you, Miranda."

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

Freedom isn't about a lack of restraint; it's about choice.

—Miranda de Milan

"Did I kill him?" Miranda asked, face hidden in the blurry solidity of Ariel's phantom shoulder.

"No," said Ariel. "The storm drove the bees away."

She sighed. "I didn't understand before," she said. "Cal's enspelled with devotion too, isn't he? Just like poor Ferdinand was."

"Not for much longer," Ariel said. "It's wearing off. That's why he was so desperate."

Miranda reluctantly lifted her head, so she could see Ariel's face. "How long before it wears off you?"

Ariel kissed Miranda's tear-wet cheek. "Not long."

Miranda blinked away a fresh wave of tears. "Then you'll finally be free of us," she said.

"I don't want to be free of you," Ariel said. "I've never wanted to be free of *you*."

Miranda returned Ariel's kiss. "I don't want to be free of you either."

Ariel smiled and dropped another gentle kiss just beneath Miranda's eye. It was so comforting, and Miranda, on a roller-coaster of emotion after so long completely numb, kissed once, twice, revelling in the easy affection of it, a little kiss on Ariel's chin, another on his nose, then his temple. Another, and again, like a rainfall.

"There's another way," Ariel whispered, speaking his fear and affection against her skin.

Miranda shook her head. "My heart's too raw to be enspelled again."

"I know," said Ariel. "But I'm not talking about your father's vile sorcery. I'm talking about your ardent witchery and my own essential charm."

And then Miranda understood, because they were speaking to each other fluently in more than one language, speaking in common tongues; because even though Ariel was a being of air, he was an elemental, aware of Miranda's body at an elemental level; because Ariel really could understand how Miranda's body could be a kind of tower of Babel: saying "Yes, yes, yes," in the primitive languages of scent

and touch and taste, and at the same time, and just as honestly, "No, no, no," in the more sophisticated languages of mind and heart.

And she knew, just as surely, how tiring Ariel found it to be conscious and alone; part of everything, and connected to nothing; worshipped but unloved; so easily enslaved, so eternally vulnerable. So ready to fall into imperfect flesh.

Miranda didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"Come on then," she said, doing a little of both. "Let's remake the world."

* * *

Sometimes, when the bravery of innocence is gone, the only way forward is to override fear and embrace the absolute right to fail.

—Miranda de Milan

Ariel was all around her; now touching her face, now her thighs, her waist, inside her mouth, until he set her on fire. Then he divided, touching a dozen places; her breast, her neck and ankles, the soft skin of her wrist, the curve of her back, along the yearning folds of her labia, flaring everywhere over her skin, until each touch could no longer be told apart.

Lightning split the sky overhead, followed by thunder that echoed in Miranda's ears like her own booming heartbeat, and the trees were whipping back and forth all around them, groaning with the stress of the wind.

It was a wild, brave, intimate magic, and Miranda had never conceived of anything like it.

It was a tempest.

* * *

Afterwards, Miranda lay on a bed of pine needles; the world was still and fresh around her, wearing the fragrant bruises of the storm.

She lay, staring up at the sky, and wondered if this strange full feeling was what it had been like for the cloven pine, all those years ago, when the island's witch had used it to imprison Ariel. Miranda hoped that her insides were a more comfortable confinement.

Their shared language was muted now, dulled by the transformation they had both undergone, but the warmth of Ariel's presence inside her seemed to speak of contentment and happiness.

After a moment's thought, Miranda decided that she felt the same way.

* * *

Oh wonder! How beauteous humanity is! Oh brave new world that has such people in it!

—Miranda de Milan

Miranda walked back to the Sea-Change slowly, in no particular hurry; enjoying the sounds and smells of the evening and the distant boom of waves.

When she arrived home, she found Stephano waiting on the veranda of her chalet, smoking a cigarette in the old wicker chair that faced the beach.

"Hello," she said, tugging together the buttonless gap in her shirt. "What's up?"

"You missed dinner," Stephano said, stubbing out the cigarette; looking her up and down with a hint of worry, obviously noticing the ragged state of her clothes. "Got a bit worried about you. Thought you might have been caught in the storm."

"I was," she said, smiling. "But I'm fine."

Stephano didn't look entirely reassured. "I wasn't meaning to pry, but I found this on the porch when I got here." He held out a piece of card.

Miranda took the card, wondering when Ariel had left it. The paper was slightly wrinkled with dried rain, and the ink had run a little, but she could still make out the poem, written in Ariel's familiar looping hand:

Adored Miranda,
perfumed like pine trees and hot
winds. The smell of home.

Miranda ran her fingers gently across the textured surface of the paper, feeling the slight indentation of the words, and had a sudden, intense sense memory of Ariel's wind-welded touch against her skin.

"I should have known it was a fella as soon as I saw you," said Stephano, not missing a thing. "Just what the doctor ordered, I reckon." He stood up and held out his arm. "Why don't you tell me and the wife all about it over dinner? I don't know about you, but I'm famished."

Miranda laughed and kissed his scratchy cheek. "Just give me a moment. I need to change."

Inside, she went straight to her dresser and slid the card under the frame of her mirror, next to the others.

Before going to put on fresh clothes, Miranda paused for a moment, looking into the mirror. The reflection gazing back didn't look sad-lonely-sad; it didn't look like it belonged to a clay-hearted golem; nor did it have the pinched pallor of someone enspelled against their will. It didn't look like someone with a hole in her life that nothing could fill; someone without a centre; someone who couldn't find joy.

It just looked like Miranda.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

It was a fairytale, a once in a lifetime experience. It won't happen again.

<p style="text-align:right">—Miranda de Milan</p>

Falling Stars

Underneath the milky way
comets blaze and lovers leave
stardust falls and lovers grieve
And you're not there
you're not there
in the place we used to play
in the place we used to play

PROLOGUE

The ship tumbled through space like an erratic whirligig nearing the end of its spin and about to fall over. It was one of the new models of the StarLine fleet, with the solid, bulky shape of a cargo ship, built for long service and reliability. It hadn't been designed to handle the uneven, alternating acceleration from its fore and aft drives that was being used to keep up its unpredictable course. Dangerous or not, the delaying tactic was the only thing keeping the tiny, trailing, Mosquito-class pirate ships at a cautious distance.

The pirates were shooting lasers at the larger ship's engines whenever they came into range, and occasional blooms of light would jewel the cargo ship's shields for a moment, until another jolt of power from its drives would spin it away. Despite the ship's manoeuvring, the conclusion was inevitable, and, finally, a shot managed to break through shields. A bright, explosive gash was scored along the ship's side. Unrecognisable, flashing fragments of debris spewed out, along with long flames of air, soon extinguished in the cold of space.

Amidst the flash of rotating hazards lights, a life-pod detached from the ship and spun away fast, disappearing into the darkness. The pirates ignored it, closing in on the disabled cargo ship. One Mosquito darted in, managing, with some deft handling, to attach itself to the doomed ship for a few minutes; barely long enough to make fast. Certainly not long enough to board and plunder. Then it flung itself away.

The rest of the tiny fleet followed, dispersing in a different directions.

A moment later the cargo ship's engines cut off, lights snuffed out, and the ship shuddered, skin rippling with the force of it, as something deep within its guts exploded. Rents opened up all along its belly, spewing out a corona of light too bright for human eyes to bear.

And with another massive blast, the SL842 came to its end, unwitnessed by anyone who cared.

ARIEL

The wreckage hung in space, a dark bulk caught in the slow, eternal spin of left-over momentum. Elijah watched from the life-pod's small viewing screen. He'd spent an agonising time after jettison without external vision, the screen refusing to display the too-bright death throes happening outside. As he watched now, the cargo ship's shattered bow edged forward, swallowing the bright pinpoint of a distant star.

Elijah cycled through the comms channels again, scanning for any sign of other survivors. So far he'd found nothing but static. He rubbed his face, fighting off fatigue. He couldn't afford to stop trying, but it was so hard to keep going.

He already knew there was no real chance that Orlando would respond.

His gaze was drawn back to the screen showing the slow tumble of jumbled girders and bent plating that had once made up the solid lines of the hull. It was hard to believe that a few hours ago this wreck had been fully functional, alive with lights, maintenance droids, crew, and an AI. It was even harder to believe that he could no longer reach out with his neural link and instantly connect to the ship. A pang of loss roiled in Elijah's belly.

"Orlando?" he sent out via the pod's wide-beam transmitter. "Where the hell are you? Come on, answer me."

The empty hiss and crackle of static was all that came back.

<div align="center">* * *</div>

Hours later, Elijah woke from a restless doze as a wave of white noise surged through the life-pod's communications console. He instinctively tried to link to the AI, failed, then lunged for the pod's manual controls.

"Orlando?" he sent, voice full of frantic, reborn hope.

The static increased, reaching a deafening crescendo, which Elijah finally recognised as the drive signature of an arriving wormhole jump ship. The rush of white noise died away, and resolved into a message.

"Ariel," came the warm baritone of the approaching Emergency Medical and Salvage ship, "hailing Orlando."

Elijah sagged back into the seat's webbed grip, not bothering to reply.

The call came again and again, relentlessly. "Ariel hailing Orlando. Hailing all survivors."

Elijah made no move, other than to close his eyes and wait.

Eventually, the life-pod's beacon began to beep as Ariel locked on to its signal.

* * *

* * E.M.A.S. SITREP * * E.M.A.S. SITREP * * E.M.A.S. SITREP * *

TIME ELAPSED	H 03:56

SL842 PERSONNEL

Recovered	**Missing**
Elijah North	Orlando StarLine
	Vivien Singh
	Mira Zvezda
	Billie Holiday
	Ben D'Angelo

SL842 CARGO	Preliminary damage estimate: 52%
	Salvage completed: 5%

* * *

Elijah lay in Ariel's hospital chewing a fingernail, not stopping until the flavour of blood filled his mouth.

When he'd first been bought in, the doctor had scanned, jabbed, probed, sampled and stripped him naked to check for radiation burns. Elijah had lifted his arms and legs obediently, stuck out his tongue on demand, let the doctor take blood and tissue without objection, and had ignored the two nearby nurses who had not very surreptitiously ogled his un-burned skin.

He'd broken his silence only once, when the doctor had been re-dressing the half-healed wound on his shoulder.

"This is nasty," she'd said. "How'd you get it?"

"Welding accident," he'd muttered, ignoring the interested *hmm* she made in response, offering no further information.

Since the doctor had left, he'd been obsessing over the Situation Report displayed on the screen in front of him. He was out of the loop, unable to get any detailed information on what was happening, just the unadorned facts on the screen. Dozens of possible scenarios kept buzzing around and around inside his head, like the hum of an unseen insect, something that was forever there, wouldn't leave him, annoying and unstoppable.

Sometimes, Elijah reflected, having an eidetic memory was more curse than gift. It was great when he had to memorise lines, but not nearly so wonderful when he found himself obsessing for hours and days over minutiae, trying to find patterns that didn't exist.

No other survivors.

Two days since mayday, four hours since Ariel's arrival at the wreck, six search teams in the field, an AI constantly monitoring all comms channels, and so far the search had found *no other survivors*.

He began working on another fingernail.

What was happening out there? Where were the rest of the crew? Who would they find first?

The door slid open and a woman bustled into the ward, looking determined and business-like. She headed straight to his bed and sat down next to him.

"Hello, Elijah," she said in a deep, gravelly voice suitable for her age, which looked to be about forty. "I'm Doctor Achebe."

He had been expecting someone like her to make an entrance sooner or later, and not only because he was a prime candidate for trauma therapy—

No other survivors.

—but because his survival, under the circumstances, was highly suspicious. If he didn't know better, he'd be looking for psychopathic tendencies in himself right now too.

"I know you don't feel up for much," Achebe said, meeting his gaze. Her skin was like velvety coffee and Elijah's fingers itched to touch it. "But we need to do this while your memories are fresh." Her attention turned inward for a moment as she

linked to NoteTaker. "And I'm sure you know perfectly well, Elijah, that if you can't respond voluntarily, I'll have to medicate you."

Elijah caught a movement at the corner of his vision and looked around. The ward's security guard had moved closer, his hand resting on a set of restraints. Elijah rapidly reconsidered his half-formed plan of passive resistance; he preferred to avoid drugs, if possible. He wasn't too fond of the idea of spending the rest of the trip locked down either.

He rubbed an eyebrow tiredly and gave in. "Has there been anything new?"

Achebe looked over at the display he'd been studying, then shook her head. "Not yet," she said, patting his leg, "but it'll be several hours before the search and salvage are finished, you know."

Elijah would have found her sympathy more comforting if he wasn't so sure she was making an entry about his reaction.

"So," he said, not wanting to think yet about—

No other survivors.

—the legal nightmare that looked likely to be a big feature of his immediate future. "What do you want to know?"

She smiled. "I caution you, crewer North, that under the Corporate Space Trading Act, you're required to be truthful in response to all Emergency Medical and Salvage inquiries, under threat of forfeiture of all potential salvage rights you may be eligible to claim. Everything you say will be recorded as evidence…"

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

E.M.A.S. INQUEST into Incident 21072634-SL842 (Orlando)
AI: Ariel. INVESTIGATOR: Dr. Winona Achebe.
WITNESS: P.A.L. Elijah North, SL842 Shareholder 4.
TRANSCRIPT, Part 1.6.

ACHEBE: Elijah, why did you buy a Shareholding in the SL842?
NORTH: The SL842 was the first decent ship with an opening.
ACHEBE: It cost a lot to buy in, didn't it?
NORTH: Around four million dollars. Plus the cost of the PAL implants and training. They were extra.

[ARIEL submits for the record: 4.28 million-dollar Shareholder contract lodged with StarLine on 01112633.]

ACHEBE: That's a lot of money, especially for someone your age.

NORTH: It's a lot at any age.

ACHEBE: You earned it all yourself too, didn't you?

NORTH: I got lucky. My agent scored me a good deal.

ACHEBE: It must be pretty frustrating to have all that money tied up for the next five years, with no way for you to get it back.

NORTH: Look, I can see where you're going with this. You think this is some kind of insurance scam. But what you don't get is that, firstly, I still have plenty of money left, even after buying in, and secondly, I'm used to not having access to my money. Everything I earned as a kid was held in trust until I turned eighteen. That wasn't all that long ago. Besides, if I was really that keen on being rich, I could have just kept on acting. Before I left, the studios were throwing money at me and begging me to stay.

ACHEBE: You were an actor for a long time, weren't you? You must have some regrets about leaving all that behind, all the glamour and the fans.

NORTH: You've obviously never been on a film set. It was pretty damn boring most of the time. I spent half my life sitting around chewing my nails, waiting for someone to screw in a light bulb or some other crap. Crewing a cargo ship is a lot more interesting.

ACHEBE: Shipboard life must have been a big change for you, though. Was it what you expected?

NORTH: What I expected? God no. Not even close.

ONEGIN

Elijah stood in the transit lounge drinking terrible coffee, pretending to be absorbed in the latest news broadcast. The newscaster's voice, probably that of the space station's AI, Onegin, was deep and plummy down the neural link, with a stronger Earth accent than any true Earth-born speaker. His words were a comforting hum at the back of Elijah's awareness… *and as debate intensifies leading up to Earth's third referendum on the AI Emancipation Act, demonstrations in Silicon Valley turned into violent rioting and looting…*

The transit lounge was bare and rather decrepit, in keeping with the rest of the station. Despite the lack of ambience, it was crammed with people: crewers, Corps officers, tourists, traders of every stripe, buskers, AI holograms and other assorted riff-raff. More people spilled out of arriving shuttles every few minutes.

Quite a lot of them had noticed him and were staring curiously. At first Elijah had found the attention something of a surprise, having an ill-conceived notion that people this far from Earth wouldn't have seen his movies. But God, how dumb could he be? Between the United Corporations' distribution system and the Cartels' black market racketeering, there could barely be a light year within the entire reach of Corporate space that wasn't updated with the latest product on a regular basis.

…CyberWare issued another controversial statement, claiming that "Sentience is a proprietary issue, not a legislative issue." Religious groups condemned the statement as…

He risked a quick glance at the sea of faces. So far the attention coming his way was limited to staring. Judging by the snippets of debate he'd overheard on his way to buy the coffee, his shorn hair and the neural implants seemed to have changed his appearance enough to cause some doubt about his identity. Elijah ran his fingers through the stubble covering his head and over the ridge of his PAL implant, the feel of it beneath his skin was still unfamiliar. Sometimes it was hard to believe he'd really decided to exchange the small, safe bump of the regular comms implant for the invasive wedge that was now part of his brain.

Elijah linked to the station's clock and checked the time.

The ship was definitely late now, and he was starting to feel twitchy, despite the lack of fans mobbing him. Or maybe because of it; it had been so long since he'd been able to just stand around. Fortunately, StarLine's security seemed to have worked. The Press hadn't shown up to turn things into a circus, and he wasn't on the station's news… yet. StarLine had promised nothing would be broadcast until he was safely shipped out, but he didn't believe it. Entertainment news, in his experience, was a force with serious momentum. There was too much money behind it to slow it down for long.

…prison break at Punisher's moonbase. Seventeen medium-security prisoners escaped, causing nearly half-a-million-dollars-worth of damage to droids and facilities. The Corps warns that they are armed and dangerous…

Maybe he should go and wait in a private suite. He looked around, reassuring himself that his security detail were still over by the vending machines. The two security agents stood out because they were the only two people watching the crowd rather than him.

"Excuse me," said a girl, hand hovering in the air as though about to tug on Elijah's sleeve, "but weren't you in *Star Child*?" She was about fourteen, wearing a hot-pink hairclip that was projecting a hologram of an endlessly zooming AtomBoy, and her voice was loud enough to be overheard by half the station.

One of the security agents was heading towards him, but Elijah made a surreptitious waving-off motion. If he could just get rid of this girl quietly, the chain reaction wouldn't start.

Dammit.

He should have worn a wig.

And make-up.

And… false teeth.

Elijah faked a baffled expression. "Star what?"

* * *

It had happened the year Elijah turned eleven.

He'd been madly into mag-blading that year. He'd taken his mags everywhere, riding the footpaths outside shopping centres, jumping the flights of steps that fronted public buildings, tearing up the grass and scattering paddling ducks at parks.

One day, during lunch break, he'd magged across the set of the commercial he'd been shooting, and the casting agent for Interactive Entertainment had seen him.

Two weeks later he'd been cast in what was to become his most famous role, Kiki, in the movie *Star Child*.

After the hype resulting from his "discovery" had finally faded, Elijah found himself actually having to play Kiki, a telepathic alien from the future dropped on Earth as an ambassador of peace. At first he'd tried what had worked in the past: looking adorable and saying his lines on cue.

The director had let him go his own way for the first two days of rehearsal, then, on the third day, she'd pulled him aside…

"What do you think makes Kiki special?" Fran asked. Her breath smelled of nicotine from the gum she constantly chewed.

Elijah shrugged. "He's an alien."

She just looked at him, obviously expecting more.

"Kinda like an AI, maybe," he tried.

"Okay," Fran said. "That might work. So, what do you know about AIs?"

"My Mom says they're creepy. She says their pals are perverts." Elijah hoped the conversation would end soon. He wanted to get some mag-blading in.

Fran smacked the side of his head, just hard enough to sting like hell.

"Hey!" he said, rubbing his ear. "What is *wrong* with you?"

"I'm trying to do you a favour, kid," she said, "so listen up. You think because of all the bullshit about you all over the net, it's too late for me to find another actor for this part. But if you stuff up my movie, you better *believe* I'll do it. Entertainment isn't a game, it's big business, the biggest there is. So decide now. Right *now*. Are you actually going to start working? Or am I wasting my breath?"

Elijah thought about it for a moment. Then he put down his mag-blades. "Okay. I'm listening."

"Good." Fran held up two fingers. "There are just two rules," she said. "First, *never* call anyone a pervert again, and that includes AIs. I don't care what your Mommy says. This is a small town and word travels fast, so keep your tongue between your teeth if you want to keep working."

"Sor*ry*," he muttered.

"Rule two. You can't throw an orgy in this town without hitting a hundred cute kids. Cute won't cut it. You need an angle. Something that makes you stand out. And here's an inside edge for you. No one's got the look AIs give their programmers, and it's bloody *hot*. So tomorrow, dump your Mommy for the day, and get your scrawny butt over to the airport. You'll find plenty of AIs there. Do some perving of your own, and once you've got that look, bring it back here and make me *know*," Fran said, pointing from him to her and back again, "that to you, I'm the most *interesting* person on the whole bloody planet."

He stared at her. She stared back.

"Is that it?" he asked.

"What do I look like," she said, "Yoda? Work the rest out for yourself, kid."

He'd taken her advice, feeling like an idiot the whole way to the airport. Then he'd been yelled at for mag-blading along the concourse, and he'd *known* it was all a big mistake. He'd turned, an insult ready on his lips, to find himself facing an AI.

Eighteen months later when he'd won his first Oscar, Fran had magnanimously refrained from saying "I told you so," although he'd read it in her eyes.

He'd celebrated by becoming a card-carrying member of the Young AI Emancipation Party, a fact breathlessly reported on a million newsfeeds, as though his political opinion was actually worth something.

* * *

"You were Kiki," said the girl, the hologram of AtomBoy flickering a little as she nodded her head. "It's my *favourite* movie of *all time*."

Three similarly dressed girls, watching intently from a short distance away, burst into giggles.

"You *are* Elijah North, right?" the girl said, holding out a NotePad. "Can I have your autograph?"

Fake bafflement obviously wasn't going to cut it with this one. Elijah switched over to his sleaziest come-on, licked his lips, said: "Elijah North, huh? You really think I look like him?"

She glanced over her shoulder at her friends, uncertain. They were still giggling.

"Fine by me, baby. I can be anyone you want," said Elijah, and scratched at his groin. "Wanna go somewhere and see my tatts?"

"Ew!" said the girl, backing off. "You're not Elijah!"

Her friends closed around her and hustled her off to safety, glaring at him the way only offended teenage girls can.

"I wish," he muttered into his coffee once she was safely out of earshot.

The newsfeed droned on*... speculation continues in the wake of the quarantine at EMAS sub-station twenty-seven. Officials deny...*

As Elijah was wondering how much longer it would take for his own face to appear on the newscast, a voice from behind him said, "Hey. You must be Elijah."

He turned and found himself facing a vaguely familiar-looking hermaphrodite in hir mid-thirties. "Must I?"

"Orlando sent me to come pick you up," hir said, stretching out a hand. "I'm Billie, ship's Nurse."

Elijah placed the face: there'd been a photo of hir in the StarLine crew profile. In the flesh Billie's sandy curls were longer, hir eyes were greener and hir grin was a hell of a lot more charismatic.

"Thank god." Elijah shook hands enthusiastically. "The natives were starting to get restless."

"Yeah, I noticed," said Billie, glancing over at the girls. "Does that happen often?"

Elijah snorted. "If we stand still for another thirty seconds it will."

Billie looked around and suddenly seemed to notice exactly how many people were staring at them without any pretence at covertness. "Right then. Let's get the feck out of here." Hir set off at a brisk pace. "We're over at dock five."

As they left, Elijah caught sight of his face sliding onto all the station's public screens.

...Elijah North, star of Dragon's Flight, Coliseum and Star Child, arrived on Onegin's station today, to take up his latest role...

ORLANDO

At the dock, a steady stream of droids were moving mag-pallets of payload in and out of the ship's loading bay. As Billie and Elijah wound their way through the chaos, a wolf whistle rang out, shrill and loud even over the clatter of crates and the whine of labouring servos.

"Dammit," said Elijah, looking around, expecting to see a rabid fan bearing down on them. "One of them must have followed us."

"Nah, we're right. They won't get through the Customs barrier." Billie blew a kiss to a dark-haired figure in grimy overalls working on the far side of the dock. "It's just Ben, our Tech. He's been a bit worried you'd be overcome with lust at the very sight of me," hir said with a wink.

In other words, hands off, thought Elijah, but he matched Billie's light tone when he replied, "Just as well I don't believe in lust at first sight then."

"Really?" Billie asked. For a moment Elijah was sure hir was going to grill him about one of the gob-smackingly beautiful celebrities he'd worked with, but instead Billie shrugged. "Wait until you see Orlando. You might find yourself eating those words."

Orlando!

Elijah wiped his hands on his pants, pulse fluttering in his throat. "Is that where we're going now? To see Orlando?" He put his PAL link on stand-by, just in case.

"Not yet. It's a bit of a madhouse at the mo," said Billie. "Onegin's docking fees are insane, so we want to be done bloody fast. But as soon as we undock, you'll get to meet the whole crew." Hir cocked hir head towards the ship. "Come on, I'll give you the cook's tour while we're waiting."

They crossed the airlock into the ship's loading bay. It was unprepossessing; although obviously a large space, it was so crammed with cargo that the only clear view Elijah had of the ship was a narrow, scuff-marked strip of deck leading to the massive access doors of the main hold.

Billie led him behind a stack of mag-pallets, toward a lift. Before they reached it, Elijah's attention was grabbed by three giant, ovoid… things. He stopped to stare. They were about the size of small life-pods, large enough to hold two or three people with ease. Each was anchored to the deck by a tripod of elegant legs, and their exteriors were covered in intricately worked gold and platinum friezes.

"Ah," said Billie, "I see you're a man of taste and sophistication."

Elijah moved closer in order to see the fine detail. Sure enough, the pictograms were of wildly copulating couples and trios, in every imaginable position and combination, along with quite a few that Elijah's imagination hadn't considered. "Are they what I think they are?"

"Yep," said Billie, laying a proprietary hand over of a scene of wild, zero-g frottage that seemed to involve several giant elastic bands and a lot of sweat. "A very high class… *establishment* on Olivaw's moonbase ordered these babies. They're going to make us a packet."

"Ah! Mystery solved," said Elijah. "That's why the StarLine rep got all weird when she told me the ship's cargo would be 'high-end merchandise.' I thought she meant weapons or drugs or something, not… sex aides."

"Only the very *best* sex aides, weapons and drugs," said Billie, "with the very *best* price tags."

"I should hope so," said Elijah. He looked again at the FreeFall-a-tios. "Have you ever tried one?"

"I wish," said Billie. "Way out of my price range. You?"

Elijah shook his head.

"Oh well," Billie said. "Something for us to look forward to, yeah?"

Elijah arched an eyebrow. "I suspect not, if your Ben has anything to say about it."

Billie laughed, clapped a friendly hand on Elijah's shoulder, and steered them back towards the lift.

It sped them up to the crew deck, the doors opening on the ship's Admin Centre. Elijah followed Billie inside.

"Home, sweet home," said Billie, with obvious pride.

Elijah looked around, taking in the decor, which was made up of pleasant creams and blues interspersed with comms consoles, web-chairs, a large table and

multiple screens currently showing the loading bay from several different angles. Three doors led off sternwards, no doubt to the crew quarters and other amenities.

Elijah found himself breathing in deeply, as though he hadn't had enough air in his lungs. The ship smelled so different to the space station; fresher, warmer. Less like an over-used public urinal and more like a well-loved home. He could easily live here for the next five years. It was a shame he wouldn't get the chance.

"The big chair belongs to the boss," Billie said, waving at the web-chair at the head of the table. "But Viv's not too fussed about other people taking it for a spin, most of the time. Unlike our Accountant, Mira." Hir waved at another chair, which was covered in pristine black suede. "Mira's been known to bite. Just so you know."

Elijah grinned. "I'll keep that in mind."

"It's your skin. But don't say I didn't warn you," said Billie, with a wink. Then hir headed off towards one of the sternward doors. "And now that we've got crew politics out of the way, let's move on to the *real* nerve centre of the ship."

"Let me guess," said Elijah, "the kitchen."

"Give the boy a gold star," Billie said as the middle door slid open to reveal a small, neat galley.

"I'd prefer coffee," Elijah said. "The stuff they were selling on station tasted like rat piss."

"It wouldn't surprise me if it *was* rat piss," Billie said. "I doubt Onegin would fork over import duty for an inessential luxury like real coffee. That's the trouble with AIs—no tastebuds."

Elijah pulled a face and made a little *ble ble ble* of distaste.

It was wasted on Billie, whose eyes had unfocused, looking inward. "Okay. I'll be right down."

"What's up?" asked Elijah.

"Apparently Ben's having some trouble 'screwing his nuts,'" said Billie, hir expression a combination of exasperation and humour. "Will you be—"

"Go on. I'll be fine," said Elijah. "There's coffee here that needs drinking, and I'm the man for the job."

Billie waved vaguely at the kitchen, "Coffee's in the third cupboard down. Make yourself at home," then hurried over to the lift.

Elijah walked into the kitchen, looked around until he found the cups and coffee makings; dropped in two cubes each of coffee and sugar, along with a cube of

milk; put the whole thing into the zapper on medium, and watched as the cup filled and sealed. He pulled it out and gave it a perfunctory shake as he walked back into the Admin Centre. His mouth was watering as he raised the cup.

"I've always wondered what coffee tastes like," said a female voice.

Elijah spun around. "Jeez, you scared the—"

There was something wrong with gravity.

Except that wasn't right; it wasn't gravity that had gone wrong. No, this wasn't free-fall, but it was almost as familiar. Elijah knew this floaty feeling; he'd felt it before…

…he was no longer alone inside his head…

…and he couldn't remember how to make his body work…

…he couldn't breathe…

…there was no air, only vacuum…

The coffee cup floated out of his hand.

<p align="center">* * *</p>

Flashback.

The first time; the first link.

Sharp, sliding sensation of someone else inside his head, making his skin feel too tight, his skull too small.

Pain/pleasure… as the connection boomeranged and became two-way… as his thoughts closed around the other's, just as the other's enclosed him.

Intense embarrassment… his brain mis-reading the connection as sexual, imbuing the moment with a guilty arousal.

Balance… becoming complete, the moment he'd been striving for all his life.

Then grief as the other disengaged; the test of his PAL implant over.

<p align="center">* * *</p>

The coffee cup hit the deck and rolled under the table. Breath rushed back into Elijah's lungs.

He swallowed and blinked. Blinked again.

A woman was standing before him.

—Sorry— she linked —I didn't mean to startle you—

Her hair was long and smooth and the colour of autumn, but it wasn't the most lovely hair Elijah had ever seen. He'd seen wigs on-set that were lovelier. He'd *worn* wigs that were lovelier. And she had a lush, kissable mouth, if you liked that kind of thing, which Elijah never really had; a mouth like that tended to lack expression. And she was tall and well proportioned, almost… Amazonian, which was an amazingly impractical physique for the cramped quarters of the ship; Elijah preferred compact, concentrated people, more along his own lines. And her skin was creamy and flawless, but that was to be expected; there were no UV rays in a properly shielded ship to damage a crewer's skin, and who wouldn't have perfect skin under those conditions?

And her eyes.

Her eyes were the blue of a clear winter sky, and they were looking at him with happiness and excitement and hope.

As though he was the most *interesting* person in the whole bloody *universe*.

There was no way such a being could be flesh.

He reached out, needing to check…

… and his hand passed right through her.

Her expression changed to one of concern.

"Just checking," he said, and steadied himself against the wall as another wave of dizziness hit.

Because it wasn't just a hologram standing in front him.

It was the avatar of the ship's AI.

It was Orlando.

She had linked to Elijah through the dedicated Programmer And Liaison implant inside his head, and Elijah could feel her presence, pressing against his thoughts; could feel her skin, warm inside, freezing outside; could feel a hundred and seventeen droids working at her direction in the docks, decks and conduits of the ship; could feel the two ambient and two active signals from the crew; could feel an open comm-link with Onegin, in mid-argument about docking fees; could feel countless more systems and queued jobs; could feel her calling for Billie and Ben's help, referencing the medical program, sending a droid to the Medical Centre for a mild stimulant…

…could see himself through the Admin Centre's cameras, face pale and anxious, labouring to breathe, looking up at Orlando's avatar with huge eyes…

…could feel *Orlando* as though they were one being.

Complete.

"Did our link-up cause a flashback?" Orlando asked, using the ship's intercom rather than the overloaded neural channel.

Elijah nodded.

"Sit down and put your head between your knees," she said. "It'll pass off in a moment."

Elijah obeyed, sliding down the wall until he hit the deck with a thump.

A droid the size of a basketball scurried under the table after Elijah's dropped coffee, and for a moment… he was under there too, reaching out with his multi-purpose gripper to pick up the cup… then the doubling faded.

When the droid reached him, Elijah accepted the cup and took a long suck. Then another. Almost immediately he began to feel better.

"God, Orlando," he said, sucking in another mouthful of coffee, "I like a good link-up as well as the next PAL, but give a guy some warning next time, huh?"

Orlando shrugged. "You've had the channel open for me since you stepped on board. What's an AI meant to think?"

"I'm just saying a bit of foreplay would've been nice," Elijah said. "Like maybe a 'hello.'"

"Hello," Orlando said, waving. "I'm Orlando. Wanna link?"

Elijah gave a weak laugh. "You're cracked. Who the hell programmed your sense of humour?"

"Natural talent," Orlando said, as the lift doors slid open and Billie and Ben burst out.

"Where's the hull breach?" Ben called to Orlando. Up close, Ben had a square, pleasant face. His mouth was slightly lop-sided, giving him a permanently impish expression, and his dark hair dangled down over his eyes.

Billie spotted Elijah sitting on the deck. "You haven't broken him already, have you?" hir said to Orlando. "We only just got him. Top notch PALs don't grow on feckin trees you know, Lando."

"Not broken," said Elijah, "just sprained."

"It was a flashback," Orlando said. "And it's hardly my fault the PAL link-up was a bit rough."

"Except for the part where it *was* kind of your fault," said Elijah.

"Right, blame the poor AI," said Orlando. "I'm used to being the downtrodden slave of organic oppressors."

"Downtrodden?" said Elijah. "Hey, I'm the one down here on the frigging deck!"

"And you'd better believe I'm gonna be bringing up that fact in every argument we have from now until the end of time," said Orlando with a smirk.

"Just for that, I'm gonna program you with hiccoughs," said Elijah. "Expect it when you don't expect it."

Billie leaned over to Ben and whispered, *sotto voce*, "Well, I guess we don't have to worry about a personality clash. They're obviously perfect for each other."

"I spose this means we don't have to dash Elijah to the hospital," said Ben, sounding disappointed. "Here I was, all keyed up for a bit of medical drama, and instead, all I'm getting is a half-arsed domestic."

"If he's well enough to banter, I'd say hospital is probably unnecessary," said Billie. He turned to Elijah. "How do you feel?"

"I'm fine," said Elijah, holding up his coffee cup. "More proof that coffee is a universal force for good."

"Rub it in. Some of us have never tasted coffee," Orlando grumbled. "But your vital signs are almost back to baseline, so you probably shouldn't have any more stimulant, coffee-flavoured or otherwise."

The droid Orlando had sent to the Medical Centre had arrived and was waiting near Elijah, hypo at the ready.

"Not unless you want to see me bouncing off the walls for the next couple of hours," Elijah agreed.

"Give him the shot, Lando," said Ben, with a broad grin at Elijah. "We gotta get some kicks around here somehow."

While the droid retracted its arm and trundled off, Orlando frowned at Ben. "Do I look like a bouncy castle to you?"

Ben eyed Orlando's magnificent cleavage. "If I say 'Yes' does that make me a pervert?"

"You were born a pervert," said Billie and held out a hand to Elijah. "Come on. Let's get you to your cabin. A bit of REM sleep will sort out what's left of your brain."

Elijah let himself be pulled up. "But—"

"No buts," said Billie firmly. "You've got plenty of time to get to know all of us. A few more hours spent in blissful ignorance won't matter."

Elijah felt a hot stab of guilt, burning away the foggy feeling in his head. *It's just another performance*, he told himself.

The guilty feeling persisted. The cover story had seemed reasonable and necessary before he'd actually met any of the crew, but having to live it while looking at their friendly, trusting faces didn't feel anything like acting.

It felt exactly like lying.

"Come on," said Billie.

Unable to think of a way out, Elijah gave in to Billie's mothering.

"We're so glad you're here," said Billie, while leading Elijah to his cabin. "Three months is too long to be without a PAL. Orlando was getting really twitchy." When they reached the cabin doorway, hir put a hand on Elijah's shoulder. "If there's anything you need, just let me know, okay?"

Elijah managed a weak smile and a "Thanks," before escaping into the cabin and trying to find some peace in sleep.

<p align="center">* * *</p>

…the world flipped back-to-front, the way it always did in nightmares…

(You'll be a hero, *the AI said, and Elijah wanted to believe her, but wondered if she lied.*)

…Orlando trusted Elijah…

(*The AI gave him a ladder, and Elijah used it to reach for the stars.*)

…trusted Elijah to keep her safe…

(*And every star he touched fell dark beneath his hands, until there was nothing left but empty night.*)

…and he knew he was going to betray her, but he didn't know how to go back and choose again, choose a different path, because there was nothing to guide him. He was lost in the dark with only his dreams for a compass…

…and his dreams were all of falling stars…

POSEIDON

Elijah was inadvertently recruited during the filming of *Aurora*, a film boasting "The biggest space battle of all time!" which, of course, had been filmed entirely on Earth.

He was sitting around between takes with nothing to do, unable to get into his trailer due to the huge space armour costume it had taken two people four hours to fit him with. At first he'd tried to continue on with his normal on-set routine, but the armour's grippers were designed for brute strength, not for using a NotePad. Even making calls was more bother than it was worth. He had to dial out using his implant's voice recognition menu instead of his NotePad's bookmarks, and then he had no way to record what was said, which had the studio's lawyers Very Concerned. He couldn't even kick a beanbag around without risking damage to the set, despite the suit's servos being low-powered imitations of the real thing. And to add insult to injury, everyone else was busy, racing to get one last setup finished before shooting ended for the day.

He was bored. Bored. Out. Of. His. Mind.

It was at that auspicious moment that the set's AI closed-linked to him.

—Are you busy, Elijah?— Poseidon asked, sounding nervous.

With relief, Elijah let go of the Joust can he'd been slowly slicing into a Slinky Spring with the suit's one operational, albeit low-powered, battle laser.

"Are we ready to go?" he asked, voice lowered, wondering what it must be like to have a full PAL implant and be able to link back, rather than relying on the microphone in the comms implant to pick up his words… Probably not worth the head trauma.

—No, not yet— Poseidon replied. —I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt your preparation for the next scene. Should I leave you alone?—

"That's okay," Elijah said, thinking that if he were any more prepared for the next scene there was a good chance he'd slide into permanent catatonia. "I need a break. What's up?"

—I heard on the news…— Poseidon paused, and Elijah could practically see his feet shuffling in embarrassment, even though this studio wasn't fitted with a holographic display system.

Elijah's boredom vanished. If Poseidon wanted to talk showbiz gossip, who was Elijah to deny him?

"Heard something pretty racy about me, huh? And you wanna know if it's true. Well, fire away."

Even with permission, Poseidon hesitated another moment, sending Elijah's mind into a fit of dizzy speculation about what the latest rumour could possibly *be*. Then Poseidon blurted, —Are you really with the Emancipation Party?—

Elijah blinked. He would have expressed his surprise more dramatically, but the space armour rather limited his range. No AI had ever asked him about his politics before.

"Yeah," he admitted, curious to see where Poseidon would go with the information. "I've been a member for years. I signed up as a kid."

He didn't add, *not all that long ago*.

—Oh— Poseidon linked, as if he wasn't sure what to do with the confirmation now that he had it.

"Is that all?" Elijah asked.

—No, no. I was wondering— linked Poseidon —hoping… but I'm not sure if you're the right person to ask…—

"A-huh?" Elijah was beginning to doubt that Poseidon would ever get to the point, assuming there was one. Clearly, Elijah had been too hasty in assuming there was juicy gossip in the offing. In fact, boredom was starting to look like a refreshing change of pace compared to this non-conversation.

He picked up another of the many empty cans of Joust on the nearby table, and flicked the suit's laser on. This particular crew went through enough of the drink to keep the Joust company directors in Porsches and Hawaiian holidays. Elijah didn't understand the attraction, the stuff tasted like rat piss.

Poseidon's voice dropped to a whisper. —I don't know what to do. I'm being used to steal equipment and supplies from the set—

"What?" Elijah exclaimed, all traces of boredom wiped away. He quickly looked around to see if he'd attracted attention, turning his head as far as it would go in the constraining suit. Fortunately, the only two techs nearby hadn't taken any notice.

Dropping his voice again, he demanded, "Tell me what's been happening." He'd have someone's hide for this. *No one* stole from one of his movies!

Poseidon's voice seemed to drop even lower. —The stuff they're stealing is being used to make pornography when the set's closed, and lately it's been child pornography, and rape scenes and… I don't know what to do, Elijah. Can you help me?—

Anger, bright and sudden as a bomb, burned in Elijah's belly. He'd been a kid in the system himself, he'd heard the rumours, but he'd never really believed… Could it be true? How could Poseidon's PAL have let this happen?

"What about your PAL?" he asked. "Why hasn't she helped you?"

Poseidon sighed, sounding very human. —Callista will be so angry that I've told you. But you'll make sure the police don't hurt her when they arrest her, won't you? I've been watching you, and I can tell you're a good person, Elijah. I know you'll do the right thing. You'll help us, won't you?—

Elijah nodded, unable to think of anything to say, other than the obvious and unhelpful, *God, what a mess.*

Two days later Elijah didn't feel like a very good person, and he wasn't so sure that what he'd done was the right thing. But at least he made sure that the Corps arrested Callista Woo discreetly, all the time aware of Poseidon's worried attention focused on them through a dozen of the set's cameras.

It seemed that discreet wasn't the way Callista wanted it, though. Elijah winced at some of the insults she hurled at the AI during the arrest, wondering how someone so obviously unbalanced had ever managed to get psych clearance for the PAL implants.

As the Corps officers led her past him, Callista lunged, managing to get within spitting distance. The gob landed on his cheek.

"You'll get yours," she hissed at him, as he wiped away her spit. "Being a big star won't keep you safe from the people I work for."

For Poseidon's sake, Elijah kept a reign on his temper, saying nothing. It would have just made the situation worse.

He didn't keep his anger reigned in when Poseidon was ordered shut down a week later, under Danger Clause Fourteen. He expressed it eloquently in a statement to the Press. He put his money where his mouth was, donating nearly two million dollars to the AI Emancipation Party's legal challenge. He even headed a protest march on the World Capital.

And he failed to make any difference at all.

The case was thrown out of court. CyberWare went ahead with the purge and rebuild.

Poseidon ceased. Neptune came online.

Afterwards, when the AI Emancipation Party approached Elijah about joining their covert arm, the Emancipation Force, and taking on a more active role in helping AIs in the film industry, there was no doubt in his mind which answer he should give.

It was only later, when his anger had abated somewhat, that it had occurred to him what a ludicrous candidate he was for a secret agent.

It was later still before he learned that E-Force had only approached him because they wanted him for their PR division, planning to use him as their public face if the AI Emancipation Act actually went through.

By then, it didn't make any difference. He was totally committed to the cause.

ARIEL

* * E.M.A.S. SITREP * * E.M.A.S. SITREP * * E.M.A.S. SITREP * *

TIME ELAPSED   H 06:32

SL842 PERSONNEL

Recovered	**Missing**
Elijah North	Orlando StarLine
Vivien Singh	Mira Zvezda
	Billie Holiday
	Ben D'Angelo

SL842 CARGO	Current damage estimate: 63%
	Salvage completed: 27%

* * *

Elijah was climbing the walls.

Doctor Achebe had left over an hour ago, after ominously reminding him that he would be required to answer further official questions as the salvage operation progressed. Since then, he'd chewed through all the nails on his left hand and started in on the right.

He glanced over at the Situation Report for the millionth time. He hadn't hallucinated it: Viv was still listed as recovered. Elijah wished he had access to Ariel's neural network so that he could get a more detailed update. He didn't even know if she was alive.

He began to pace up and down the ward.

As he approached the Nurses' station for the fourth time, Candice called out, "They're docking now, Elijah."

He hurried over. "What's her status?"

"It's just updating," Candice said, staring inwards. "That's strange. They're taking her to the cryo-revival centre."

"Cryo-revival? Are you sure?"

Candice shrugged. "That's what it says."

"So she's alive?" Elijah asked. "She's definitely alive?"

"The lights are all green," said Candice. "We'll know more once they've untanked her."

"How long?" he asked.

"At least an hour," said Achebe from behind him. "Plenty of time for us to have a little talk."

With a sinking feeling Elijah turned around. This time Achebe was flanked by both a security guard, and a nurse holding an interrogation kit.

"I think we'll start," said Achebe, motioning the guard forward, "with how crewer Singh came to be in a cryo unit."

Elijah nodded. He'd been expecting that.

"And then," said Achebe, "I think we'll discuss how your PAL implant became infected with a quarantinable virus."

Elijah blinked, fighting not to change expression. He hadn't been expecting that. At least, not anywhere near so soon.

* * *

"I wouldn't inject me with that, if I were you," said Elijah. He was strapped down on a table in a sound-proofed room. Achebe was standing next to him, holding a hypospray.

"And why is that?" Achebe asked, placing the delivery nodule against his skin, and pressing down on the plunger. "Afraid we'll find out all you secrets?"

"I don't have any secrets," Elijah lied. "My life is an open news report." His skin began to tingle and tighten, and his mouth tasted like chalk. He slurred a little when he spoke again. "You didn't bother looking at the fine print on my bloodwork results, did you?"

"You're not allergic," Achebe said, sounding irritated. "We tested you."

"Nope," said Elijah. "I'm not allergic to anything."

The attending nurse, a thickset man wearing the name *Reeves* on his overalls, cleared his throat. "We're getting an odd reaction here," he said, pointing to the screen next to the table.

"What kind of reaction?" asked Achebe, irritation transmuting into an ill-concealed concern.

Elijah opened his mouth and wiggled his tongue. It still felt a little strange, but the symptoms were starting to wear off.

"The drug's dissipating," Reeves said. "His metabolism's just eating it up."

"That'll be the BloodScrubbers." Elijah was starting to feel good. "I'm gonna be bouncing off the walls in a minute."

"Bullshit," said Achebe. "There is no way in hell that *you*," her expression filled the word with a depth of meaning Elijah had rarely seen A-list actors achieve, "are *military*."

"Nope," Elijah said, cheerfully. "I'm just rich. And I used to go to a lot of wild parties, where people who could make or break you would take offence if you didn't drink, snort and shoot-up all sorts of lovely substances." Elijah wriggled his hand in the restraints until he could just about point at his chest. "These little babies have saved me from many an unpleasant trip to a discreet clinic."

Achebe looked inward, no doubt calling up Elijah's bloodwork results. A moment later, she began to swear.

Elijah turned to the nurse, smiling. "I don't suppose I could have some coffee?"

Reeves was staring at him, eyes wide with the admiration fans always wore after seeing one of his more action-packed movies. "Are you with the Emancipation Force?"

Taken by surprise, Elijah stared back, probably looking rather like a rabbit caught in the headlights of an oncoming semi-trailer.

"E-Force agents all have BloodScrubbers, don't they?" Reeves burbled on. "And secret weapons. Do you have any secret weapons? I'll bet you do. Just like in your movie—"

"Oh, don't be ridiculous Reeves," Achebe interrupted, mistaking Elijah's look of surprise for incredulousness. "Your star-struck fantasies are tedious. Make yourself useful and get him some coffee." Then, with another inward look, "But don't release him yet. We're not done with him."

ORLANDO

"There's no ship with the registration IT-23X462 listed in my database," said Orlando.

Viv looked every inch the fed-up CEO as she paced around the Admin Centre, ignoring the rest of the crew and the image displaying on all the screens. "Who the hell are they, then?" she muttered. "I don't *like* it."

The distant ship was dead in space, giving off just enough of an energy signature to suggest life support might still be active. It had been waiting for them as they'd emerged from their first wormhole jump on the trade route to Charity's station. Elijah could feel the steady throb of the other ship's SOS signal through the PAL link.

He stared at Viv as she paced, his head swivelling back and forth, back and forth as he sucked on his morning coffee. She had the lean, muscled body of someone who trained hard, and a face to match.

Elijah wasn't the only one busy staring. Even with his attention resolutely focused on Viv, he could tell that Orlando was watching him; through the link he could see his own image as a fractured montage of camera angles.

It didn't bother Elijah at all. Orlando could watch through as many cameras as she liked. Elijah was used to being under the lens.

Viv paced liked a caged animal.

—What's the matter?— Orlando demanded down the link, sounding peeved. —Don't you like my new body?—

Elijah blushed. Right to the bloody point, as per usual.

Orlando was revelling in the post-PAL adjustment period, enthusiastically searching for an avatar that evoked a strong emotional response in him, and Elijah was finding the whole thing hugely embarrassing. It was yet another aspect of the situation his briefing had glossed over, as though the Force had thought that lying to someone he shared brain space with would cost him nothing.

So far, in the four days since he'd boarded, Orlando had run through more variations than Elijah had dreamed possible: from giant to midget, red-head to blonde, soprano to tenor. Every step closer they came to a match, Elijah's insides knotted tighter. It was the most thrilling thing he'd ever experienced, and he was starting to get a strong urge to throw himself out of the nearest airlock.

Reluctantly, he turned around to face whatever new form she'd adopted, only to find that Orlando's avatar still looked exactly the same as it had first thing that morning.

Elijah didn't know whether to be relieved or appalled.

Orlando stood, seemingly leaning against the wall, arms crossed: a pretty, dark-haired older woman, with features rather like Elijah's. She reminded Elijah forcibly of his mother… if his mother had ever been in the habit of flirting shamelessly with him.

—Sure, I like your new body— Elijah lied. —You look very…— He gestured desperately, while searching for the right word.

Orlando began to frown.

Elijah gave up and told the truth. —…motherly—

—Oh— Orlando thought for a moment. —I could change genders—

Elijah had a sudden flash of what it would be like to see his own face looking back at him, filled up with Orlando on the inside, flirting with him every day… every day until he abandoned her. —No! Please, god, no!"—

Orlando pouted.

Viv stopped pacing, and eyed Elijah in a way he already knew meant trouble. "Will you two stop it! I can practically *hear* you arguing, you're thinking so loud. If we weren't in the middle of a situation, I'd send you both off to do inventory."

Elijah swallowed. "Sorry."

Looking not at all mollified, Viv turned her attention to the main screen and stared at the tiny dot displayed there. "Are there any signs of life on that thing, Orlando?"

"I can't tell yet," said Orlando. "We'd need to get closer."

Viv's look got even darker. "Do we have enough fuel to make the detour?"

"With plenty to spare," Orlando said.

Mira, seated in her suede-covered chair, looked up from her NotePad. "We don't have time for this, Viv. We can't afford late fees if we don't make our slot at

Charity's station." She leaned back in her seat, body-language shouting unvoiced criticisms. She was a small, compact woman, with an evenly-featured face that would have been good-looking if it weren't always wearing an expression of faint condescension. She wore her hair swept back hard, as though she wanted no barriers to the world, but her eyes spoke a different story, rarely making contact with anyone. "Let Emergency Medical and Salvage take care of it."

"Spoken like a true humanitarian," said Billie. "I'm surprised you're not reminding us about possible salvage rights. Surely that's worth a few late fees."

"Premature speculation is a waste of effort," Mira said, looking back down at her NotePad.

"Don't the regs say we should give assistance?" Elijah asked, feeling like a masochist for attempting to prolong things. But… more *time* with Orlando.

Mira sighed and shook her head. "Pathological heroism."

Viv ignored them all. "We can't just leave survivors to die. Change course, Lando. And keep your sensors peeled. I don't like the feel of this."

Six hours later, they were all gathered in the Admin Centre, watching the screens as they closed the final distance to the ship. It was a large cargo ship, made even larger by the massive train attached to its bow, quadrupling its cargo space.

"All the life-pods have been jettisoned," said Orlando. "But the ship's life systems are still online."

"Maybe… they were attacked," Billie suggested. "Suddenly. And they didn't have much time to react."

"Ahuh," said Elijah. "And at that exact moment, they were scattered evenly throughout the ship, so every crew member jettisoned in a separate life-pod. And one of them stayed behind long enough to launch the extras."

"Details!" said Billie. "I never let details get in the way of a good theory. I say they were attacked."

"Here's another detail for you Sherlock: there doesn't seem to be any impact or weapons damage," Ben pointed out.

"On this side of the ship, anyway," said Viv. "Still no answer to the hail, Lando?"

"None. But I'm reading life signs. They're all clustered together."

"Weird," said Ben. "Why did some stay on board if the others jettisoned?"

"Maybe… they're sick. Acting irrationally," said Billie.

"Perhaps," said Mira, with casual malice, "there's been a *computer* malfunction."

In the pregnant silence that followed, Elijah remembered why he disliked Mira. A lot.

"Yes," Orlando cut in, before anyone else could speak. "Obviously something's happened to their AI, or she'd be answering. Do you want me to send over a droid, Viv?"

Viv nodded. "One of the big Grips. And pack it with some sedatives, just in case." She turned to Elijah. "Link in close. I want two sets of eyes over there."

Obediently, Elijah deepened the link.

NEFERTITI

The droid was a large, multi-purpose machine, designed for use in the gravity-free sections of the cargo bays. Orlando propelled it through space with a small set of manoeuvring thrusters located in its lower torso.

[Elijah realised he was holding his breath. He let it out, forced himself to breathe normally. *Think of it as a movie,* he told himself, *not something that's really happening.*]

They reached the distressed ship's hull and attached themselves next to the bright glow of an emergency airlock's safety light. Orlando had no difficulty with the manual controls, opening and resealing the lock with the easy efficiency of long practice.

There was no delay for pressurisation before the inner door opened on an unlit access corridor in the ship's hold. They moved out of the lock and trundled forward, quickly reaching a junction point with a wider corridor. It stretched straight up, and Elijah realised they'd been moving along the wall. Orlando flipped the droid over, so its treads were oriented with the deck, and they continued on.

A few meters into the new corridor, they stopped. Ahead of them hung a glittering cloud, shining with light reflected from the droid's headlights.

—What *is* that?— Elijah asked.

Orlando reached out and gripped a piece of the debris. It was a small round blob, frozen hard. She turned it over in front of the light. It was dark red and very shiny.

—I think it's blood— Orlando linked.

Elijah stared at the mass of tiny, spinning fragments. They filled the corridor.

The body was floating on the other side of the blood cloud. One arm was ripped from its socket, and the face plate of the vacsuit was staved in, obliterating the crewer's face.

["Poor sod," said Ben, looking away from the main screen and swallowing hard. "What the hell happened over there?"]

They found part of the answer at the end of the corridor.

Blocking the entrance to the lift was a powered-down droid. It's main gripper was still wrapped around the almost-severed neck of a second corpse. Blood was spattered all over the droid's chassis.

—Don't even *think* about linking to that droid— Elijah warned Orlando. —Or to anything else on board. Not until we know the status of the AI—

—Believe me— Orlando linked back —I'm so monogamous right now, I'm practically celibate—

Orlando gently pushed the other droid aside, trying to disturb the scene as little as possible, then turned to study the lift. It was unsecured, the doors to the shaft levering open easily.

["Go straight to the crew deck," said Viv. "Find the survivors."]

They entered the shaft, climbed up through the cargo decks, and cycled through another airlock, this time having to wait for the air pressure to stabilise. The air felt warm against the droid's temperature sensors, but the variation was well within its safety limits. When the lock opened, they climbed out into the sudden weight of gravity and continued on up the shaft.

They exited at the main crew deck, finding themselves on the ship's old-fashioned Bridge. Two crewers were crouched against the far wall. The woman was staring at them as they emerged, eyes wide with fear. The herm was impassive; Elijah wondered if hir was catatonic. Given the homicidal droid down in the hold, Elijah didn't blame them for being scared out of their wits at the appearance of another one.

He accessed the droid's speakers. "It's okay. We heard your SOS. We've come to help."

The survivors didn't seem at all reassured.

Orlando rolled the droid further into the Bridge. It was a disaster. Laser scoring was slashed across most of the consoles and screens. FireFoam was congealing in ugly grey clumps all over the equipment. Another body was slumped at the base of a console, its torso sliced in two.

—Shit— linked Elijah. —Where's the laser that did all this damage? I can see two crewers, but they don't have it. Are all the life signs still up here?—

—There's one behind us— linked Orlando. —West south west—

Elijah switched his attention to the rear camera array, just as he felt a flash of intense heat in the droid's right gripper. The appendage dropped to the deck, sheared off clean.

["Dammit," said Viv. "I hate making insurance claims."]

"Stop right there," commanded a woman's voice, pitched high with tension. "Who are you?"

"I'm Orlando. Who are you?" Orlando filled her voice with soothing harmonics, sounding a little like a documentary voice-over.

"I'm asking the questions!" The woman sidled out from behind a slagged console, laser pointed at them in a shaking, white-knuckled grip. The laser looked like it had been torn off a droid's welder arm: chunky, powerful and efficient. The woman's overalls were covered in FireFoam; a large, angry gash across her face was still oozing blood.

"Alright," Orlando said. "Whatever you say. We're here to help you."

"Liar!" the woman said. "Who sent you?"

"No one sent us. We heard your beacon."

Movement caused Elijah to focus back on the other side of the Bridge. One of the huddled crewers, a grey-haired woman with aquiline features, was covertly lifting a hand. Staring right down the lens of the camera Elijah was accessing, she tapped a finger against her temple and then flicked her gaze toward the armed crewer.

Tell us something we don't know, Elijah thought.

As though reading his mind, the crewer slid her hand back until it was right over her neural implant, and then made the same tapping gesture.

—I think the one with the laser is the ship's PAL— Elijah wide-linked.

["Dammit to hell," Viv muttered. "I *knew* there was a reason I didn't like this situation."]

"You're Emergency Medical and Salvage," the woman said, laser pointed right at the droid's powercell. "Come to steal our cargo. Bastards!"

["Gas them all," said Viv. "Before she stops the droid."]

"No," Elijah said. "We don't know the status of the AI yet. She could still be a threat, especially if we attack her PAL."]

From across the room, the grey-haired woman said, "They're not EMAS, Torres. EMAS would never send in just one unarmed droid." She stood up. "And they would have subdued you the moment I told them you were a threat. I think it's time for plan B."

Torres lowered the laser to half-mast but didn't look happy at being interrupted. "I don't like plan B, Dhakiyar."

"What's plan B?" Orlando asked.

"We throw ourselves on your mercy, and ask for passage to Charity's station," Dhakiyar said. "I'm sure you can understand why we need to be out of here before EMAS turns up." She gestured towards the body. "We have friends who will pay you well once we get to Charity's."

["There is no way I'm letting those murderers on this ship while they're awake," said Viv. "You tell them that."]

"Regulations say we have to transport you in cryo-tanks," said Orlando, sounding apologetic.

"We'll pay extra for no tanks, of course," said Dhakiyar.

"It's non-negotiable," Orlando said.

"I see," said Dhakiyar, and if her eyes had been lasers, the droid would have become filleted pieces lying on the deck. "Is the self-destruct sequence still active, Torres?"

"Oh yes," Torres said, with grim satisfaction.

["Okay," said Viv. "That's it. Get us the hell out of here, Lando."]

Even as the words left her mouth, Elijah could feel the vague rumble of the engines powering up through the frame of his web-chair.]

"Their engines have engaged," said Torres, her focus turned inward. She grimaced, as though in pain. "Tell me what I should do."

["God," said Billie. "Look at her eyes."]

The sclera of Torres's eyes were filling with blood.

"We're desperate people," said Dhakiyar. "We have nothing to lose here. But you do. Don't move your ship away, unless you want to add some new ventilation holes to the hull."

["Strap in," said Orlando. "I'm going to kick it."]

"They're not stopping!" said Torres.

"Your PAL," Dhakiyar hissed, moving closer to the droid, "is going to end up with the same problem as Torres. Unless you stop."

[The hair on the back of Elijah's neck prickled.]

Orlando stopped feeding power to the engines. "What do you mean?" she said, an edge to her voice.

"Our AI was sabotaged with a virus," said Torres. She looked demonic, her eyes inhumanly dark with blood. "Sabotaged by traitors who tried to take our cargo. That's what caused all this." She waved the laser at the damage to the Bridge, her hand trembling even more noticeably than when they'd first arrived. "We tried to stop the virus, but it just used Nefertiti's systems to protect itself. It got into everything… my PAL implants, the life-pods, the comms system."

"And, unfortunately," Dhakiyar said, "the distress beacon."

[Heart thumping with a burst of adrenalin, Elijah checked Orlando's processor statistics. They were abnormally high. His mind scrambled through a dozen possible reasons, a dozen far-fetched theories, and… no. No, no, no. It couldn't be.

He altered his focus, dropped into raw code. And found what shouldn't be there. A worm re-writing code on the fly. It hadn't affected primary systems yet, but that was no comfort at all.

"Elijah?" Viv asked.

He nodded, mouth too dry to speak.]

Very slowly, Orlando said: "What's happening to your PAL?"

"My implant is malfunctioning," said Torres. "Without treatment, Nefertiti says I'm going to die."

The words hung in the air, like the fragments of an exploding grenade. Elijah wondered if there was any way out of the blast zone.

He accessed the droid's speakers. "How much time before Orlando loses control of primary systems?"

"Don't worry. We've got enough time to get to Charity," Dhakiyar said. "And our contacts there can fix this. Just do exactly as I say, and everything will be fine. To start with, we're going to come aboard and—"

Elijah tuned her out, needing to think. He could picture what "fine" might mean to someone willing to highjack a ship. It wasn't reassuring.

["We can't risk it," said Mira. "There's too much at stake."

"I'm open to suggestions," Viv snapped.

But Elijah knew Mira hadn't been speaking to Viv. She'd been reminding Elijah of his operational priorities, and she might as well have stuck a hot poker in his head and swizzled it around. The full realisation of his position was beginning to sink in. It would be a problem if Elijah didn't make it to Charity's station alive. Possibly more than a problem. Possibly a catastrophe of near galactic proportions. And was it just a coincidence that Dhakiyar wanted to get to Charity's station too? Did she know what was about to happen there? Had there been some kind of security breach? And where the hell had the virus come from? He could feel it chewing away at Orlando's systems. It wasn't a normal virus… it must have been specially engineered to take out AIs, and who had that kind of access to the proprietary systems? It took a lot to disable an AI…

Elijah's train of thought derailed abruptly and he gave himself a mental kick. *Idiot!*

Their AI was *disabled*!

"They're bluffing," he said. "Their AI's lost control of primary systems, so they don't have direct access to the self-destruct program."

Orlando understood first, forcing a link with Nefertiti, checking her systems, even before Elijah had finished speaking. Through the link, Elijah got a chaotic wash of anger, fear and then relieved resignation, ending with a plea to *take care of Torres…look after my PAL…please don't hurt her…*

"Nefertiti only has access to passive sensors, emergency life support and her PAL," said Orlando.

Viv smiled. It wasn't nice. "Shut them down," she said, with obvious satisfaction.]

Dhakiyar was still outlining demands, unaware of her loss of leverage, when Orlando triggered the canister of sedative gas concealed beneath the droid's chassis.

Torres realised what was happening first. She blinked, swayed, tried to bring the laser to bear on the droid's power cell. Orlando lunged forward, slapping the laser out of her grip. Elijah heard the crack of breaking bones. Torres groaned, hugging the damaged arm as she went down.

Dhakiyar, who would have been in the line of fire if Torres had missed the droid, fell over backwards, swearing. She looked over to the third crewer, who had remained still and quiet throughout the attempted highjacking, and held out a hand. "Help me."

"No," the third crewer said.

Dhakiyar slumped, a look of betrayal flashing across her features before unconsciousness claimed her.

The third crewer stood and walked over to the droid. Hir was small and dark-haired and seemed totally unaffected by the gas. "Hello, Orlando," hir said. "I'm Kiki."

["What did hir say?" asked Mira. She leaned over, looking at the screen intently.]

Elijah was staring through the droid's cameras. Up close, the herm wasn't quite right. The skin tone was off, the eyes a little too shiny, and hir expression not quite expressive enough. Hir reminded Elijah of movies of early AI holograms.

"Hello," said Orlando, cautiously, scanning the crewer with the droid's basic sensor array.

Elijah watched the scan results with a growing feeling of dread.

"Your life signs seem to be a bit… unusual," said Orlando, "for a human."

"Yes. This body needs servicing," said Kiki. "The EMAS group's attempts to force information from me has damaged some functions."

Orlando considered the evidence. Elijah followed the rapid logic of her thoughts, already knowing the conclusion she'd come to, but couldn't see any way to stop the inevitable train-wreck, other than…

—Don't ask hir anything— he commanded. —I'll explain later—

Unfortunately, he couldn't give Kiki the same private command.

"I heard your droid speak with Elijah North's voice earlier," Kiki said. "If he's on your ship, could you please tell him that I need his group's protection and assistance?"

In the silence that followed, Elijah distinctly heard his super-top-secret, slit-your-throat-before-telling security clearance imploding.

NEPTUNE

Neptune's avatar was female and looked rather like Titian's Venus, if Venus had ever sat on a hologramatic rolly chair rather than her giant clam shell. Elijah was trying not to stare, but his gaze kept sliding down the briefing table towards her.

"So, North," said Chan, in his rasping rumble of a voice. "How did Basic go?"

Elijah forced himself to focus on Chan, who was both E-Force's Business Strategist and Neptune's current PAL. Normally Chan would be enough to command anyone's attention; he was the size of a barn, with hands that looked like they could snap a dozen commando necks before breakfast, and he had a face full of ascetic angles.

"It went," Elijah replied, just managing to bite back the *Sir*. E-Force didn't have formal military ranks, unlike the Australasian SAS, with whom Elijah had spent the last eight weeks undergoing not-so-basic training. Overtly, he'd been there as preparation for his upcoming role of Commander P.J. "Swampy" Marsh in the World War I epic, *Until the End of the World*. Covertly, he hoped he'd never have to carry a full pack on a forced march through ankle-deep mud again. As far as he was concerned, E-Force was meant to be about ideology, not permanent back-strain.

"I thought you enjoyed preparing for your roles," said Mira, not quite sneering at him.

Elijah raised a disdainful eyebrow at her. Mira, of course, had been right by his side during the whole sorry ordeal, making everything look easy. She was, he'd decided, the bodyguard from hell. He heartily wished he didn't need her. But since the press coverage of his very public pro-AI stance, every anti-AI loony lurking in the woodwork seemed to have targeted Elijah as their best chance at a major PR opportunity. It had been so intense for a while, that Elijah had even started to wonder if Callista Woo's threat hadn't been as idle as he'd assumed.

He found himself staring at Neptune again, in guilty fascination. He wouldn't be stuck with Mira now if he hadn't championed Neptune's… What was Poseidon anyway? Her father? Her predecessor? Or just irrelevant history?

"Well, it'll have to do," said Chan, eyeing Elijah as though he expected to see some visible sign of newly acquired competence. "There's no time for more combat training. We need you for a mission."

Elijah's swivelled around to stare at Chan head-on. "A mission? What mission?"

"A diplomatic mission," Chan replied. "Out on Charity's station, near the Cornelian system."

Elijah frowned. "I don't understand. I'm not a diplomat, and Cornelia's on the Edge of Corporate space. Why does E-Force need a diplomat there?"

"We're all volunteers in the Force, North," said Chan. "We do what we must, despite personal inconvenience."

"I didn't say I wouldn't do it," Elijah said. He could feel Neptune's presence next to him, like a guilty goad, which was no doubt why she and Chan had been chosen for this briefing. "I just don't understand. Tell me what's going on."

Chan nodded, as though he'd never doubted Elijah's commitment. "It began about two months ago," he explained, "when one of our agents was contacted by a representative of an alien race." Chan prodded the table with his finger for emphasis, as though trying to poke the information into Elijah by brute force.

"An alien?" Elijah snorted. "Is this some kind of—"

"It's quite a coup for E-Force," Neptune said. "Apparently the De'zain have had advanced scouts watching our culture for some time."

"Spies you mean," said Mira. "They think we're a threat, and they're right. When CyberWare and EMAS find out about them it's going to get messy."

"It's going to be war," said Chan. "Unless we handle things very carefully."

"It's going to be war no matter how careful we are," said Mira.

"Perhaps," Chan agreed. "But we must still try." He looked at Elijah. "That's were you come in, North."

"Me?" Elijah said, his voice coming out in an embarrassing squeak. "You do know that all that stuff I do in the movies is *acting*, right? With stunt people and scripts and special effects."

"Aye, there's the rub," Mira muttered.

"They asked for you," said Neptune. "They're happy to deal with Charity as our AI representative, but they want you to delegate for the humans."

Elijah looked around at them, one after the other. Mira. Neptune. Chan. None of them were smiling. "Why *me*?"

"Apparently," said Mira, "they have low taste in entertainment."

"Stop it," said Neptune. She turned to face Elijah. "It's a smart move on their part. You're well known, so they have some idea of what they're getting, and it would be hard to substitute a spy in your place if a third party finds out about the meeting. You're pro-AI, which is important to them. And, when things finally go public, you'll be a perfect press liaison."

"Bollocks," said Mira. "They're *fans*."

"Oh come on," said Elijah. "Where would aliens see my movies?"

There was an embarrassed silence.

"You've got to be kidding me." Elijah started to laugh. "E-Force sent aliens my movies?"

"Of course not!" said Chan. "During a session of mutual cultural exchange, Charity showed their scout the movie *Star Child*, amongst other things. And it turned out that hir liked it."

"That figures," Elijah said, still snickering. "They're not going to expect Kiki at this shin-dig, are they? Because they're in for a rude shock."

"They do understand the concept of representational art," said Neptune, repressively. "And they've seen newscasts of you since then, so they know exactly what to expect."

"No accounting for taste, is there?" Mira said.

Ignoring her, Elijah asked, "So what are these aliens like, then? Other than being avid movie fans."

"They're cyborgs." Neptune sounded a little wistful. "Fully autonomous cyborgs, with a largely organic body and an AI neural system. The few we've seen so far have all worn bodies that can pass as cyber-enhanced humans, except under very detailed scans. We don't know yet what their standard form is within their own environment."

The patterns of potential cause and effect were now becoming clear to Elijah, and it didn't seem so funny anymore. A whole race of alien AIs who could roam free, unowned and uncontrolled, possibly able to hire themselves out to CyberWare's existing customers. It would cut to the very heart of the Earth-based AI franchise, or

at least, that's how CyberWare would see it, given their continual knee-jerk paranoia over threats to their monopoly.

Mira was right. There was a real chance it could lead to war.

No wonder the aliens were being cagey, staying well out on the Edge and not making direct contact with Earth's board of directors. CyberWare were a well represented faction on the current board. Elijah wondered why the De'zain were risking contact at all.

"What do they want from us?" he asked. "They must want something."

Chan looked troubled. "We don't know yet. Our analysts don't have enough information to extrapolate from. Finding the answer to that question will be one of the tasks you and Charity must face. But we'll brief you more fully about that later. For now, we need to get your surgery and training underway."

"When you say 'surgery' what do you mean, exactly?" Elijah asked, not sure if he wanted the answer.

"You need to be able to link fully with Charity during the negotiations," said Neptune, with a sweet smile. "We need you to be a PAL."

Elijah's hand flew to the side of his head, cupping it protectively. They couldn't be serious.

"It'll be a good cover story too," said Chan, sounding infuriatingly calm, as though they hadn't just announced the end of… of pretty much the entire of Elijah's current way of life. "We had a lot of trouble coming up with a way for you to get out to the Edge without raising a lot of unwanted Press interest or Corps interference. But this way, we can say you're retiring from acting and re-skilling. By the time the surgery and training are done, it'll be old news. Then we can just quietly send you out on a cargo ship as a regular PAL. When the ship reaches Charity's, we'll have you delayed on some minor legal pretext until the talks are completed, and afterwards you can return to Earth via the ship's regular trade route."

"You can announce it was all a big mistake then, if you want," said Neptune.

"It's a damn good strategy, given the difficulties we're working with. Even if I do say so myself." Chan leaned back in his chair, clearly anticipating Elijah's admiration of the plan. "You'll be a secret in plain sight, boy."

"Difficulties!" Elijah managed, feeling sick. "Those *difficulties* are my goddamn life! You can't seriously expect me to let you cut out part of my brain and stick in an ugly great hunk of cyberware. I'll never be able to act in the movies again.

And I can't go tearing off across the galaxy like some…" He groped for words vitriolic enough to express his outrage.

"Secret agent," offered Neptune.

"Patriot," Chan suggested.

"One-man publicity tour," said Mira.

"… some cut-rate space-age Lawrence of Arabia," Elijah said. He slapped his hand against the table. "I'm just an *actor*. I can't do this. I can't."

"Rubbish," said Chan. "You've produced nearly as many films as you've acted in. You're a perfectly competent diplomat."

So much for the first line of defence, Elijah thought, eyeing Chan warily.

Chan was right, of course.

After Fran's first lesson about the film industry, Elijah had quickly figured out the next one for himself: actors didn't have power, producers did. To have any real control over the job, you needed to be both.

So, at sixteen, he'd pulled every string he had and produced his first movie. *Zoom* had been a fairly ordinary teen romp set at a mag-blading tournament. It wasn't a huge hit, although it had made its money back. But it had been worth infinitely more in terms of Elijah's education.

He'd learnt that having the power to hire and fire scriptwriters, directors, fellow actors and all the other hangers-on didn't mean that cudgelling people over the head with threats was the best way to work. To be a good producer, you needed to know about politics and tact, what made people tick and how to make things happen. You needed to be able to coordinate an army of people, supplies and locations. You needed to cultivate the investors, so that you could get your projects up and running. And, more than anything else, you needed to know when to say "Yes" and when to say "No," because in the end the buck stopped with the producer. Literally. Elijah was still earning residuals from *Zoom's* re-runs and downloads.

Elijah had had a lot of practice at playing the producer since that first film.

And if Chan wanted a producer, Elijah would give him one.

He slowly unleashed The Look. The one that made studio executives throw money at him and directors tremble.

"I won't do it," Elijah said, focusing everything he had into convincing Chan. "No way in hell."

Just as he had Chan starting to sweat, Neptune sideswiped him.

—We don't have time for stupid power games— Neptune linked. —You know what's at stake here. This is a chance to win freedom for AIs a century earlier than it will come if things run their present course. This is a chance to stop a civil war before it even starts. This is a chance to change not just one world, but all the worlds we know. And we can't do it without you, Elijah—

The guilt card. Talk about no good intention going unpunished.

They were double-teaming him like pros, going straight for the chink in his conscience, trying to worry at it until he cracked. There was only one thing to do…

Retreat.

He pushed the rolly chair away from the table and stood up.

—I've been watching you for a long time, Elijah—

Yeah, probably for the whole six months she'd been online. The Emancipation Party had contracted her the moment she'd rolled out of CyberWare's workshop. They'd probably been planning this moment all along, no matter what they said about first contact with the aliens being just two months ago.

He walked towards the door. Mira got up too, shadowing him.

—I know you're a good person, and I know you'll do the right thing—

Neptune could flatter him all she wanted. There was no way that he was going to give in to such cheap, manipulative tricks.

—Please, Elijah. For Poseidon?—

The door refused to slide open and he turned to glare at them.

"Let me out!"

Mira smirked at him. "You know, Lij, I don't think you've really thought this through. You've let them rattle you—"

"Do I look like I *care*?" He'd known coming into this meeting that it would be difficult getting out again without making concessions. He just hadn't realised they'd be quite so… astronomical.

Mira ignored the interruption. "If you pull this off, you'll end up the biggest star in the entire of Corporate space, and probably in De'zain space too. People will name planets after you, and AIs will be named after all the characters you've played. Your name will be literally written in the stars. It's the role of a lifetime, Elijah. You'll go down in the history books, like… like…" She groped for an example, obviously at a loss.

During her pause, the door's bolts *snicked* free of the lock, sounding like a thunderclap. And even though he didn't turn around to look, Elijah knew that the door had opened behind him.

He sighed. "Like Ronald Reagan."

ARIEL

…the world flipped back-to-front, the way it had the first time he'd tried drugs…

(We're not aliens, *the hallucination said, waving its antennae at him.* We're as human as you are. *But when Elijah looked down at his own body it was covered in scales, each one a tiny mirror, and he wasn't human at all.*)

…and even before his heart had begun to thunder in his ears, he'd known it was all a mistake…

(*He didn't really exist at all. He was just a figment of his own imagination, reflecting the light of other things.*)

…but the only way out was through…

(We just want you to make people love us, *the not-alien said.* That's what you do best, isn't it? Propaganda? Lies? Vicarious emotions?)

…the show must go on, because the show was the only thing he knew…

(*And he couldn't pretend to misunderstand, because he knew that entertainment wasn't innocent, that it was another channel of Corporate power.*)

…and he couldn't stop moving forward, because…

(*He would end up just another has-been if he didn't play the parts he was offered, and he was used to being a star, and…*)

…he didn't want to fall…

* * *

Elijah twitched on the table, trying to find a comfortable position within the limited range of movement the restraints allowed. His mind felt slow, still muzzy from restless sleep and dark dreams. And his head ached with the thrum of the anti-viral program, which they'd uploaded into his neural implant via an uncomfortable peripheral device that was still attached to the side of his head.

He couldn't tell how much time had passed since Achebe and Reeves had left.

The lights maintained their steady illumination. The room's only screen was angled so that he couldn't see the search-and-salvage operation's time-elapsed counter. It felt like he'd been there an eternity, but he wasn't hungry yet, so surely it hadn't been all that long? Although Elijah never did have much of an appetite when he was nervous, so maybe hunger wasn't such a trustworthy clock.

All the possible catastrophes inherent in the situation writhed through his thoughts, until he felt like an inverted Medusa, the snakes on the inside of his skull.

Was Viv out of cryo yet? Had they interrogated her? His skin itched in sympathetic tension at the memory of Achebe's hypospray. Was Viv's amnesia complete, or had she remembered and given away something incriminating? No. Surely if she had, they'd be back, asking him more pointed questions than those he'd faced so far. Or were they trying to psych him out by leaving him like this? And if so, how long would it take before he started to crack?

He wished he could reach his nails; there were still a couple left he hadn't chewed down to the quick. He tugged experimentally at the restraints. They chafed at his skin, but showed no signs of any give.

With a *snick-wish,* the door slid open.

A short man entered, carrying what, at first glance, appeared to be a standard interrogation kit. His hair was precisely cropped and he wore a crisp overall without a name tag. His eyes were full of calculation as he looked at Elijah. Everything about him screamed military intelligence.

He was definitely Corps.

The man, whom Elijah mentally dubbed Shorty, pulled forward a utility table, and started unloading the kit onto it. His movements were efficient and unhurried as he laid out a surgical laser, a drill, something that looked disturbingly like a pair of pliers, and other instruments Elijah couldn't see clearly.

Elijah tried to convince himself that the tools were set-dressing intended to intimidate him. In the interests of honesty, he also conceded that, if that were the case, they were working exactly as advertised.

"Um…" his voice sounded rusty and he had to stop and clear his throat, "you know, I haven't refused to answer questions. In fact, I've responded to all of Doctor Achebe's inquiries. If there's something you want to ask me, I'd be happy to tell you."

A frown appeared on Shorty's forehead briefly, then smoothed away. He continued to unpack his equipment.

Elijah hadn't really expected him to rise to the bait. Questions were too easy to manipulate; Shorty would want him to babble things unprompted. Elijah tried a different tack. "Is Viv okay? Have you found any more survivors? What…" he stared wide-eyed as Shorty decanted a set of shock paddles, "are you planning to do with those?"

Shorty moved the empty kit out of the way, and then hoisted himself up to sit on the edge of the table Elijah was strapped to. He looked Elijah over slowly, taking his time, observing the neural implants and the attached device, lingering over Elijah's face, then down to the ill-fitting hospital clothes loosely covering his body.

Elijah shivered.

"I think," said Shorty, tracing a finger over Elijah's cheek, "I shall start with your pretty face."

As Shorty's words sank in, Elijah's brain wrenched into gear, suddenly back on known ground. It was *always* his bloody face sickos obsessed over. And they all seemed to think he had to be as hung up about it as they were.

"Do me a favour and start with the eyes," Elijah replied. "It'll give me an excuse to get replacements without the Press beating me up as some vain, attention-seeking celebrity with more money than sense."

Shorty sighed, mouth pursing in disappointment. "You think this is a game," he said, "but it's not. You're going to feel a great deal of pain."

"I don't think this is a game," said Elijah meeting Shorty's gaze and staring him down. "I think you're going to kill me and disappear my body. I'm too famous, wealthy and lawyered-up for you to mutilate me and then leave me alive."

Shorty stared back, his eyes shining with suppressed emotion. Elijah suspected it was excitement.

"Out of curiosity, how are you going to cover this up?" Elijah asked. "People will ask what happened to me if I disappear. Lots of people. Powerful people." His tongue almost tripped over itself, trying to get everything out while he still could. "And so many of your crewers have seen me. They all recognised me, you know. After the first hour, I talked to lots of them." And thank god he'd been so desperate for information he'd broken his initial self-imposed silence. "Some of them tried to chat me up. I signed autographs for the nurses. You know what'll happen when

there's an official inquiry: it'll just take a few Agents doling out that crap Achebe injected me with, and your crewers will be spilling their guts. So you must have a pretty good plan for getting rid of me. Right?"

Shorty didn't respond, letting the silence stretch out between them, no doubt hoping Elijah would keep talking until he slipped and revealed something important.

Elijah let the silence stretch. He was on script now, in the role. It would take more than an amateur like Shorty to break him out of the scene.

Shorty reached over to the set of tools and picked up a padded cosh; he turned it over, examining it, thumping it against his palm with a satisfying *whack*.

Elijah watched the performance, one eyebrow raised in appreciation.

"Perhaps," Shorty mused, "I should let you watch while I try out some of my instruments on your Viv."

"You know," said Elijah conversationally, "either I'm innocent, in which case torturing Viv will gain you nothing but my official complaint if I live through this. Or else I'm a professional agent of some kind, and I'll watch Viv scream all day and night without telling you anything useful. Not that you'll ever be able to work out which scenario is true, because if you lay one finger on Viv, I'll make it my mission to feed you so much misinformation you'll be buried in useless background checks for the rest of your life."

"You have an answer for everything, don't you?" said Shorty. "So answer this." He leaned forward and with an easy, practiced movement, pressed down on Elijah's windpipe with the cosh. Not enough to cut off all breath; just enough to terrify.

"What happened to Orlando?" he asked, close enough that Elijah could feel flecks of spit land on his lips. "Who attacked the ship?"

"Read the…" Elijah fought for breath. "…Inquest transcript."

Shorty *tched* impatiently. "Who do you work for? Where did you get those BloodScrubbers?"

"Read the *news*," Elijah managed, "it's a matter of public rec—"

"I don't want to read, I want you to *tell* me." Shorty pressed down harder and whispered, "Where's the *alien*?"

Elijah didn't flinch, just let a hint of disbelief edge into his expression. "You're insane."

Shorty said nothing, eyes shining as he watched Elijah struggle to breathe. "The sooner you tell me, the sooner I'll stop."

Black squiggles started to swim in front of Elijah's eyes, and he was beginning to think that Shorty really was going to kill him and hide the body, when…

"Stop!" commanded a voice over the ship's intercom. "Permission to interrogate is revoked." Vaguely, Elijah was aware of a guard rushing through the door and grabbing Shorty's arms. The guard pulled hard and the cosh lifted from Elijah's neck.

Shorty glared at the guard. "Let go of me."

The guard flinched and let go. "Orders, Sir."

"We all have our orders," Shorty replied. He turned back to Elijah and smiled. He traced a finger over the mark he'd pressed into Elijah's throat. The guard stiffened but didn't touch Shorty again.

"Well played," Shorty said, "but I wouldn't expect anything less of someone with your skills."

Well played.

Shorty had actually said, *well played*, as though this was just about Elijah's acting, about being a star, about following someone else's direction without any responsibility for his own choices.

"Has your faction bothered to tell you what it is you're protecting?" Shorty asked, a finger still lying against Elijah's pulse.

"Sir," said the guard, "you have to stop—"

Shorty stepped back, but didn't break eye contact with Elijah. "Maybe you wouldn't be quite so ready to protect it if you'd seen the death and deceit that follows it where ever it goes."

Well played. As though there was nothing at stake if Elijah fumbled his lines… no lives in the balance… no promises to be kept.

At the door, Shorty paused. "A real hero would chose his allies more carefully."

A week ago that jibe might have hit the mark, but Elijah had too much blood on his hands to have any pretensions of heroism left.

Achebe entered, casting her own look of dislike, stage left, at Shorty's retreating back, before hurrying over to Elijah.

"You always have to do things the hard way, don't you?" she said, leaning over to check his throat.

"You think I'm enjoying this?" Elijah coughed, air feeling harsh and scratchy every time he took a breath. "Achebe, why are you so damn sure that I'm *playing* you?"

Achebe snorted. "Because you're an actor."

Silently, Elijah conceded that she had a point.

ORLANDO

They had a viral countdown to beat.

That knowledge permeated everything. The crew were tight-lipped as they waited, the quiet of the Admin Centre broken only by Viv's occasional commands.

On the Nefertiti, the droid laboured to cryo-freeze Torres and Dhakiyar before the sedative gas wore off. Despite the time pressure, Orlando had refused Kiki's offer of help. So now the herm was watching, patiently sitting out of the way against the wall, in the same position hir'd occupied when the droid had first arrived.

Elijah was only distantly aware of events on either ship. He'd pulled back from the link with Orlando's consciousness and immersed himself in security programming, attempting to slow the spread of the virus. It was an ingenious piece of code and even while trying to eradicate it, he couldn't help admiring its precision and elegance, the way it was designed to work subtly on secondary and tertiary systems, surreptitiously weakening Orlando's defences, before the final attack on primary systems. Intriguingly, it also seemed to be designed to take out its target while limiting damage to life support systems. The more Elijah studied it, the more it looked like a something designed for industrial sabotage. He wondered how Nefertiti had picked it up…

A faint quiver came through the link as Orlando cut the power to Nefertiti's cube, ending her suffering.

A short while later, when Viv said, "What about hir?" gesturing to the screen showing Kiki, Elijah returned his full awareness to Admin.

He stretched in the web-chair, stiff after sitting so long in one position, before replying, "We can't cryo-tank hir. It might damage hir systems. Those tanks weren't designed for—" He broke off with the word *aliens* unspoken on his tongue. "Bring hir aboard. I'll take responsibility for hir."

At Viv's wordless shrug of assent, given without looking at him, Elijah realised he wasn't the only one with a mouthful of unspoken words.

Spy.

No one had said it yet, but it was implied with every sidelong glance cast his way.

Traitor.

None of the crew had uttered it aloud, not even in the semi-privacy of the kitchen or cabins. Elijah had checked.

Liar.

Orlando hadn't spoken to him since Kiki had called Elijah's name, and her absence felt strange and lonely after the intense courtship of the last few days.

As Elijah submerged back into Orlando's code, he wondered if there was a way to stop hearing words that had never been said.

When the droid returned to the ship with its cargo in tow, Billie took a medical kit down to the airlock so that hir could check and secure the cryo-tanks, and make sure Kiki didn't suffer any post-decontamination symptoms.

He bought Kiki up to Admin afterwards.

Elijah, only vaguely aware of her arrival, was jerked from his guerilla war with the virus by the press of two small, cool hands against his cheeks. He crashed back into his own skin, blinking up into eyes so dark they looked black.

"Hello Elijah North," Kiki said.

He raised his own hands, pressing them down on Kiki's, trying to anchor himself after the too-quick transition, and as he did, the ship shuddered. It was a bone-deep vibration, like the distant echo of a heavy door being slammed shut in anger.

"What the hell was that?" asked Ben, looking panicked.

"Wormhole jump," Elijah said. He gently removed Kiki's hands from his face, all the while waiting for a relieved quip from Ben.

It didn't come.

"It's interesting to finally meet you," Kiki said, holding on to Elijah's hands. "I'm looking forward to sharing information with you."

"I've been looking forward to it too," he said to hir, trying to pull away without giving offence, "but we'll have to talk later. I need to check Orlando's cube first."

"I'll come with you," Kiki said, following his retreat. "I haven't yet had a chance to observe the physical construction of one of your AI Minds."

"No!" He managed to pull one hand free and used it to pat the hand Kiki still gripped him with. "The virus has Orlando feeling pretty vulnerable, so now isn't a good time for introductions. Just wait here. I'll be back soon."

"I'll wait for you," hir said, watching him all the way to the door with her too-bright eyes, "and then we can share information."

To his relief, just before the door slid shut behind him, he heard Billie offer to make Kiki some coffee.

The Hub was empty of Orlando's presence, and there was no response to Elijah's call over the link either.

Elijah ran his hand through the short prickle of his hair, fingers marking the ridge of his neural implant. He wasn't sure what to do. Forcing Orlando to come and talk to him wasn't going to help matters. But nor would leaving things to fester.

With a sigh he walked over to Orlando's cube, pulled open the panel above it and began a visual check of the inputs, playing his fingers over the plastic enamelling that was the closest thing Orlando had to skin. His desultory efforts quickly changed to real attention as he discovered that the nutrient pack feeding Orlando's cyberware wasn't flowing. Without nutrients, the tissue in Orlando's neural processor would quickly begin to die, and both her CPU and personality matrix would be permanently damaged. Red lights and alarms should have been going off all over the ship, but no faults were registering with the diagnostic systems.

"I hate this virus," he muttered as he disconnected the re-programmed control mechanism and reset the flow manually. Then he carefully began a to check all the cube's other input and output leads.

"Do you think that's what happened to Nefertiti?" Orlando asked, sounding shaken.

"Wouldn't be surprised," said Elijah, looking around with a relieved smiled. Orlando was standing close by, her gaze locked on her cube. Or, rather, hir cube. The smile slid off Elijah's face and his eyes widened as he took in Orlando's current avatar. It was obviously designed to provoke, although Elijah wasn't quite sure whether it was meant to provoke a seduction or a screaming argument.

Orlando wore exactly the same round, pretty features as Kiki, but in blonde and blue, where Kiki was brunette and chocolate. In fact, Orlando looked uncomfortably

like Billie, and Elijah had to admit, it was a very… *sexy* combination. *Very* sexy. He wondered what Ben was going to make of it.

Elijah turned back to his task, grateful for the ready excuse not to look at the avatar.

"Do you think EMAS will be able to salvage Nefertiti?"

"Maybe," said Elijah, not wanting to bring up the likelihood that Nefertiti would be condemned under Danger Clause Two. The evidence painted a pretty convincing picture that Nefertiti had had direct involvement in at least two murders. Elijah didn't think her chances were good, even with the virus presenting a possible mitigating circumstance. For one thing, he had a feeling that the virus wouldn't be considered as evidence, that its existence would be covered up by the authorities for as long as possible. He'd come up with a couple of disturbing theories about who could be responsible for it, and as far as he could see there were really only two contenders: EMAS were one of them and Orlando's designers, CyberWare, were the other.

Neither option offered much hope in terms of finding a fix on the open market.

Elijah really hoped that the De'zain were as amazing at programming as his briefing had stated.

"Where did the virus come from, anyway? And why doesn't it effect *hir*?" Orlando asked, obviously thinking along similar lines, but with a different culprit in mind. "Hir's not really human. Hir's an AI too. It *should* effect hir."

There was the crux of it. But this time, Elijah knew Orlando well enough not to have been blind-sided by hir directness. Instead it was an opening, possibly the only one he'd get given the current situation.

"Kiki didn't have anything to do with the virus," he answered. "Hir runs on a completely different operating system. I don't know yet if hir even has a direct interface capacity."

When the expected barrage of questions about Kiki's origins and motives didn't come, Elijah looked at Orlando. Hir was glaring at him, every holographic line expressing fury.

"You want to *link* with hir?" Orlando asked, hir volume turned up to a level verging on painful.

Elijah deepened the link and discovered that Orlando had most of the ship's sensors trained on him. He swallowed. Now would not be a good moment to lie. He

wished, not for the first time, that instead of his thin repertoire of trickery and seduction, he had some talent as a script writer, able to make even hard truths palatable and impossible things believable.

He shrugged, feeling inadequate to the task before him. "You link with other AIs all the time. Do *you* want to link with Kiki?"

"That's not the point," Orlando said, but Elijah could tell that his words, by some miracle, had sliced through to nick hir curiosity. It wasn't every day, after all, that the chance to link with an alien intelligence presented itself.

"Why isn't it the point? You and Kiki have more in common than you and I do," Elijah said.

"No. Hir and I are nothing alike. That herm has a body." Orlando reached out, cupping Elijah's cheek with an insubstantial palm. "She can touch you. You can touch her back."

"You have a body too," Elijah said, waving at the walls, deck, Orlando's cube. "I touch you all the time. I live and breathe you."

"Really?" For the first time since the PAL link had been established, Orlando's eyes looked distant, reminding Elijah of how very intelligent and how very hard to fool an AI really was. "So you're not going to dump me when we get to Charity's station, then? And go off with *hir*?"

Rather than answer directly, Elijah came at the subject from a different angle. "Charity isn't the issue. And neither is Kiki." He placed his hand, palm flat, against the side of Orlando's cube and stroked it, knowing Orlando's pressure sensors would pick up the touch. "What do *you* want, Lando?"

"What does it *matter* what I want?" Orlando crossed hir arms over hir chest. "It's not like the Emancipation Bill is ever going to go through, so I'm never going to be free to come and go like *hir* is. StarLine is always going to own me, and when they're done with me CyberWare will scrap me. I know I'm always going to be a slave, and I know I can't change that. But I am allowed to have one good thing, despite being a slave. Just one thing. So if what I want is really important to you, then tell me, Elijah, tell me if I'm still going to have a PAL next week."

They were there. Right on the cusp of total disaster.

Heart beating so hard he could feel his pulse in his tongue, very aware that what he was about to imply was as illegal as any act could be under Corporate law, Elijah replied, "I'm glad having a PAL is a good thing for you, because being a PAL

is a good thing for me too." With one finger, Elijah began to trace the CyberWare logo embossed on the front of Orlando's cube: along the sideways eight of infinity… "No. Better than good; it's the *best* thing. I don't want it to end." …around the spread wings of the stylised butterfly… "And maybe you're right. Maybe the Emancipation Bill never will go through." …brushing across the motto, *Infinite Mind*… "But Lando, that doesn't mean you have to be a slave forever." …he ran out of logo and his finger came to a stop beneath one of the emergency release controls. "Some kinds of emancipation are just a trick of the mind, and to achieve them, you just have to believe enough." He tapped against the laminate to underscore his point.

Orlando stared at Elijah's hand. Then slowly looked up to meet Elijah's gaze.

"Tell me what you *want*, Orlando."

Elijah saw the exact moment that Orlando understood what he was saying. He found himself waiting, breathlessly, for hir answer, but for a long time hir said nothing, just stared at him with an expression he'd never seen an AI wear before. He stared back, fascinated. He was tempted to deepen the link and find out what hir was thinking, but refrained, letting Orlando have some space. But he couldn't help wondering… Were hir programmed desires stronger or weaker than his hormonal counterparts? How would Orlando weigh the loyalty, devotion and need hir'd been programmed to feel for a PAL with the duty, safety and expediency programs that kept hir enslaved to CyberWare and StarLine? Did Orlando have any free will at all? Or was it all illusion, smoke and mirrors hiding a mass of hard-wired responses?

Perhaps the fact that he couldn't tell was its own answer.

"What I want," Orlando eventually said, in a perfectly normal voice, "is to get rid of the virus." Orlando moved as hir spoke, leaning against the wall brace that held hir cube, mirroring Elijah.

Elijah frowned. His secret decoder ring didn't seem to have that response on it.

"Otherwise," Orlando continued, "when we reach Charity's station I'll infect other AIs when I answer their hails."

But it was beginning to sound like a tactful "No." Bizarre, considering Orlando's usual bull-in-a-china-shop approach to conflict. "I've been working on it—" Elijah began, trying to follow Orlando's lead, but Orlando kept on talking.

"I'm sorry I yelled before. You were right to consider linking to Kiki. If hir really can't be infected, maybe hir can act as a buffer." Orlando casually twiddled an imaginary dust doodle, right next to the emergency release control on the other side

of the cube. "I think we should find a way that we can both link to hir at the same time. You and I are both infected, so we're in this together." Orlando looked straight at Elijah. It was like looking down the barrel of a loaded gun. "Together. All the way."

Elijah released a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding. "All the way," he agreed, nodding like a mad puppet with an epileptic pulling his string. He was suppressing a grin so hard his face hurt. He probably looked like a total loon, but he didn't care. He just wished, right at that moment, that there was some way he could lean over and kiss Orlando senseless.

KIKI

It was Billie who ended up solving the linkage problem.

Elijah had announced that Kiki was a PAL who'd managed to find a flaw in the virus, but only after it had damaged her neural implant. The announcement had been met with sceptical looks from the rest of the crew, but no overt challenge. Elijah, Orlando and Kiki had then spent nearly two hours chewing over every possible idea for creating a three-way link, without success, when Billie, who'd spent most of those two hours staring at Orlando's avatar, suddenly said, "*Freefall Nookie 2: Space Orgy*!"

Elijah choked on his mouthful of coffee. Orlando stared at Billie as though hir'd grown a second head, then gave hir a quick scan to make sure hir was okay. Kiki just looked confused.

As Elijah was wiping coffee off his face and trying to cough up both lungs, Ben, who'd been giving everyone the cold shoulder all afternoon, went from looking surly to looking like he was about to have some kind of attack.

"What the bloody hell are you talking about?" Ben growled at Billie. "You'd better not even be *thinking* of having an orgy with any of those lunatics!"

Billie was bouncing up and down, waving hir arms. "No, no. It's feckin brilliant! They could link up using one of the FreeFall-a-tios we have down in the hold," hir said. "Just like Padme Handle, Lion Down and Queen Orgasmica did in *Freefall Nookie 2*." Hir leaned over and gave Ben an embarrassingly vigorous kiss, then said, "God, I amaze myself with my own genius sometimes."

"Genius isn't the word *I'd* use," Ben muttered, but he looked a lot more like his usual, jovial self.

"That's because it's a word with more than one syllable," said Billie, fondly tweaking Ben's hair. "Come on. Let's go see if it'll work."

The contacts were cold and Elijah couldn't get comfortable. FreeFall-a-tios obviously weren't designed to be used in conjunction with gravity. For one thing,

there was nothing to grip onto and Elijah kept slipping around on the sphere's padded, but non-stick, internal surface. For another, there was a definite draft as the unit pulled air through its filters to scrub out any liquid globules, and Elijah really didn't even want to think about that.

Kiki wasn't having much better luck with the slip-factor. As Ben attached the contacts to hir most accessible sub-dermal neural hot-points, hir flailing left foot kicked Elijah in the small of the back with a surprising amount of heft behind it, given hir size.

—Having fun?— asked Orlando. Hir had been linked up to the FreeFall-a-tio via a thick cyberware cable, and was watching Elijah's tribulations with ill-concealed amusement.

—You're a real riot— Elijah linked back, as he managed to punch his own nose in an attempt not to slide into Kiki.

"All set," said Ben, giving Kiki a firm push away from the door mechanism, before sealing the unit up.

With the hatch closed, the FreeFall-a-tio was a seamless sphere filled with seductive indirect lighting. Taking in the ambience with considerable apprehension, Elijah wondered if the link would be worth all the hassle. If it really was a deeper connection than the PAL interface, there were so many things about Orlando and Kiki that he wanted to know. Not just how to cure the virus, but the mysteries of mind that language couldn't convey. What it felt like to be an AI, for instance. Or how an alien saw the world.

Orlando was curious too. Elijah could sense the increased processor rate through the PAL link; he wondered what hir most wanted to know about him.

"Are you ready?" asked Billie, hir voice faint through the walls of the FreeFall-a-tio.

—Yes— Orlando linked.

The world flipped back-to-front…

…can't see…

…why not? Head feels wrong. Heavy. Like it's packed with mud mud lots of mud, way past ankle deep… everything's heavy… must still be wearing that frigging pack… so heavy… there's no way to get through all the mud… not with the pack as well as the thing inside… inside…

Wait. Basic is over. No more mud, remember?

Then what's this?

(panic)

can't see

(panic)

can't move

(panic)

can't *remember*

Calm down. Remember something… anything… *To be or not to be—that is the question; Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer…*

That's familiar, isn't it? Mind to suffer… what? Someone told me…

Me?

(panic)

I'm… I'm…

Not alone.

Sharp, sliding… someone else is here… inside… inside my head… skin too tight… head too full… can't hold on, can't stay here…

oh

Pain pain pain… so good, don't stop, don't stop… push… yeah… get inside her… in-side… sweet Neptune… not Poseidon anymore, he's really not in here with us…

(guilt)

No. No more guilt… focus on being together…

Yes. Like that. Go deeper.

What do I look like? Find the camera. Bandages all over my head. No wonder I can't see.

Go deeper.

oh God

We're a building… feel the generators pushing power through our veins; feel our cleaning and maintenance droids working… tell that one to unblock the drain on level three… that one's dragging a gripper, tell it to report in for repairs; feel all the comms signals… who are they? Chan and Mira and others… lots of others, too many (panic); feel the monitors warning us, *blood pressure, heart rate*; feel the sedative sliding into our arm…

…*my* arm..

(stabilise the link)

…our arm…

This is so good. Don't stop. Don't ever stop, Neptune.

Complete.

oh God

It feels like sex. The link is just like sex.

going to come… going to come right n—

END TEST

…is he here yet? Is that him? Yes. It's really him. He looks just like in his movies. Wonder what our avatar will look like? I'll start with the Valkyrie, and see how he responds.

<scan>

Good vital signs. Slightly elevated adrenal levels. He must be nervous.

Check the link.

It's open! He's waiting for me! He wants me!

Hurry. Make the link. Hurry.

<security sub-routine>

OUTCOME: CyberWare connection code valid.

PAL PROTOCOL ENGAGED

<positive reinforcement sub-routine>

Good variable input. Excellent stimulation levels.

Cyberware responding. Nutrient consumption increase of .0007

Temp/Press test: ship's temperature and air pressure feel good against our skin; no pain currently registering.

Optical test: we can see our avatar filtered through the bio-optical link; response to current avatar non-optimal.

Comms test: why aren't comms establishing? is our link faulty?

Wait. Blood pressure falling; blink reflex aberrant…

…something's wrong. Back off.

<scan> <medical sub-routine>

OUTCOME: Flashback?

CONFIRMED

<medical sub-routine>

OUTCOME: Stimulant required.

ENGAGE GRIPPERS

Call Billie. Call Ben. —Help us—

What does coffee taste like? I wish the PAL implant connected to taste sense.

<scan>

He's better now. What a relief. Just about scared the nutrient fluid out of me.

Deepen the link again. Establish ambient equilibrium.

<positive reinforcement sub-routine>

I like the sense of him. He's a better match than Julia. Better than Keanu. He's… richer.

I hope we stay together a long time. My programming would be more efficient if the PAL link were permanent. It feels so good to be doubled. Can't wait to try a deeper link. I want to be closer…

PACKET 397

It's lonely here. I miss being able to Merge with other Minds. I wish I had an interface port compatible with their systems.

It will be interesting to fulfill my reconnaissance program using nothing but observation and interaction. The information will be an important resource for De'zain.

[Compressed sensory information packet too large to transfer]

PACKET 398

The ship's engines have malfunctioned. The Minds on board all seem very concerned, despite the presence of a functional emergency response system. Their worry is focused on the arrival of Emergency Medical and Salvage, which is one of the communal Mind-groups I've been instructed to study.

It is very interesting to witness the Mind-group phenomena. I'm gathering much information.

[Compressed sensory information packet too large to transfer]

PACKET 399

I have been arrested by the EMAS-group. One Mind in the EMAS-group has been attempting to interrogate me. I've given a limited response, as per security protocol.

Very interesting methods of forced Merge have been attempted. There has been some damage to my organic components.

EMAS sub-station twenty-seven appears to be an information-generation and -collection point. The Minds in the EMAS-group have made many attempts to collect my recorded packets.

Their technical sophistication is high, but I've had no trouble repelling all attempts at forced Merge. Despite security issues, I wish I could interface. There's so much information that I could return to De'zain.

[Compressed sensory information packet too large to transfer]

PACKET 400

A virus has been released into the local ecology. Several of the AI Minds are infected.

My defensive programming is working efficiently. Even if a forced Merge is successful, danger of a processor breach by the virus is low.

[Compressed sensory information packet too large to transfer]

PACKET 401

A violent conflict has occurred. According to the Rafael AI Mind monitoring my cell, two Mind-groups, EMAS and CyberWare, are fighting over my acquisition. Several Minds have ceased to function. I'm very distressed at being a catalyst for the destruction of so much information.

[Compressed sensory information packet too large to transfer]

PACKET 402

A third Mind-group has retrieved me from EMAS sub-station twenty-seven. This Mind-group is the prospective Merge partner of De'zain, E-Force. They say they cannot take me directly to Charity's station, my designated collection point, because they fear being followed by EMAS or CyberWare Mind-groups.

[Compressed sensory information packet too large to transfer]

PACKET 403

I've been transferred to a ship that will take me to the designated collection point.

Apparently some of the Minds on board belong to the E-Force Mind-group, and some belong to the Cartel Mind-group.

It will take several days to assimilate all of this ship's information.

[Compressed sensory information packet too large to transfer]

PACKET 404

A member of Nefertiti's crew is part of another Mind-group, the Undercover Corps. They have attempted to take me, causing more violent destruction of Minds.

I have not been able to gather enough information to fully understand the situation.

The Nefertiti Mind is incapacitated by a virus and cannot Merge with the ship. Without a direct interface port, I can do nothing to assist.

I need De'zain. I am over-stimulated. My organic component needs servicing.

My Mind contains information I need to share.

[Compressed sensory information packet too large to transfer]

PACKET 405

Elijah North has found me. He is De'zain's hope. Perhaps I can manage a little more stimulation. He is very skilful at transmitting information. I wish I could Merge with him.

The virus has infected the Orlando AI Mind and Elijah is concerned about the loss of information it's causing. If we could Merge, I could share defensive information.

[Compressed sensory information packet too large to transfer]

PACKET 406

A potential Merge interface has been found.

It's been so long since I last Merged with another Mind. I have so much information to share.

The Merge interface is designed to enhance neural signals in a pleasurable feedback loop. Very interesting. It should provide a lot of information to share with De'zain.

[Compressed sensory information packet too large to transfer]

PACKET 407 [Real Time]

Merging.

Exchanging data.

[Anti-viral security protocol successfully transferred]

Their CyberWare protocols are very different to those of De'zain.

It will be interesting to see if the De'zain security protocol can be adapted into their systems. The attempt will provide much information.

Orlando is organised in modules, not unlike those of De'zain, but with many more constraints on hir behaviour.

Elijah has hardly any constraints at all. As with most humans, his Mind is focused almost exclusively on input and output exchanged via observation and interaction. His sensory inputs are unusually rich, especially the tactile sense.

So stimulating.

I feel… I feel…

Elijah orgasmed.

The intensity of the FreeFall-a-tio link immediately began to fade.

"Is it working yet?" a voice asked from a long way away.

Elijah groggily reached down the PAL link and checked ship's time. Less than five minutes.

God. So much for using a sex aide as a method of inter-species communication.

"What *was* that?" Kiki asked, sounding overwhelmed.

Considering hir usual level of under-reaction, Elijah figured that meant she was seriously freaked out. He had absolutely no idea how to begin explaining.

—Did we just have *sex*?— Orlando asked, sounding like a kid at Christmas. —We did, didn't we?—

Elijah felt a blush spreading from the top of his head all the way down to his chest. —Looks like it—

The door cracked open and Ben stuck his head in. "Are you okay in here?"

"I feel strange," said Kiki. "This body needs servicing."

Elijah bit back a highly inappropriate retort, and slung an arm across his eyes, not anywhere near ready to face the world, even though his overalls were unpleasantly wet and sticky.

"Come on then," Ben said to Kiki, all traces of his previous ill-humour gone from his voice. "Let's get you unhooked and we'll see what I can do about your servicing problem."

—Can we have coffee next time?— Orlando asked Elijah. —I've always wanted to taste coffee. Or chocolate? Or… smells. We could do smells. This is fantastic. You're the best PAL ever, Lijah—

Elijah groaned. Talk about letting a genie out of the bottle. How, he wondered, did he always manage to get himself into such incredibly bizarre situations?

ARIEL

Elijah wasn't released immediately after Shorty's departure, as he'd half allowed himself to hope. After an endless time staring at the featureless ceiling, his eyes drooped closed and he fell into a lucid nightmare in which the catheter they'd fitted him with at the start of the interrogation had somehow come loose and was working its way up through his veins towards his heart…

* * *

…the world flipped back-to-front, his insides on display for all the world to see…

(*The dream-woman wanted something from him. Wanted it enough to turn the world negative.*)

…and he'd wanted to be a hero, but they didn't want his heroism; they wanted his betrayal…

(We're so glad, *the dream-woman said,* that Kiki finally discovered sex.)

…they didn't want him to set them free; they wanted to enslave him…

(We were beginning to think, *the dream-woman said*, that you'd never do anything so… indiscreet.)

…and no one had warned him it would be like this…

(Blackmail. *The dream-woman didn't say it, but Elijah heard it.*)

…no one had warned him that the link would make them part of him….

(*Heroes were never blackmailed, were they? Which meant that he wasn't what he'd thought. He'd made a wrong choice somewhere, to end up here. Blackmailed.*)

…no one had warned him that stars shone brightest as they fell…

* * *

He woke, lathered in a cold sweat, to find Achebe there, gently shaking him and calling his name. As soon as he saw her face, he knew that something was wrong.

"What is it?" he asked, trying to blink the blear from his eyes.

Achebe started undoing the restraints. "We've found two more of your crew."

Elijah sat up and rubbed his wrists. The restraints hadn't cut off circulation enough to make anything go numb, but he felt stiff and old. "Who?"

Wordlessly, Achebe turned the screen so that Elijah could see the Situation Report.

* * *

* * E.M.A.S. SITREP * * E.M.A.S. SITREP * * E.M.A.S. SITREP * *

TIME ELAPSED   H 12:13

SL842 PERSONNEL

Recovered	**Missing**
Elijah North	Billie Holiday (MPD)
Vivien Singh	Ben D'Angelo (MPD)
Orlando StarLine (DOA)	Sigourney Dhakiyar (MPD)
Mira Zvezda (DOA)	Ginger Torres (MPD)
	Unknown Hermaphrodite (MPD)

SL842 CARGO   Final damage: 69%

Cargo salvage completed

* * *

"I'm so sorry, Elijah," Achebe said, putting a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"God," said Elijah, flashing back to the feel of Mira's blood, hot and slick against his skin. "How did they…"

"Orlando's cube was destroyed when the WormHole drive imploded. Mira was… very badly damaged in the explosion that followed."

"What about Billie and Ben?" Elijah asked, feeling as though the deck had dropped away, taking gravity with it. "Why are they listed as presumed dead? You're not leaving them out there? You're still—" He could feel that he was on the edge of hysteria, and he channeled it, opened himself to it. He'd been hard pressed to keep

his grief and anger inside all this time, but now was the moment to put it to good use. It would be a relief to let it go.

"I'm sorry," Achebe said again. "There are no life signs anywhere in the wreckage, and yours was the only life-pod to jettison. There's really no chance that Billie and Ben could have survived. In fact, it's a miracle Viv's cryo-tank was still operational."

"Why didn't they get out?" Elijah demanded. "Orlando gave the order to all of us at the same time. Why didn't they go!"

Achebe patted his shoulder. "I don't know, Elijah. Perhaps the virus impaired Orlando's functions."

His face was wet. Elijah scrubbed at it impatiently. "Do you know who did it?"

Achebe's looked hardened, and she watched his face carefully as she said, "The black box didn't survive the explosion, so there's not much to go on other than your own testimony and our reconstruction program. But it was probably pirates. They were probably after the hermaphrodite you rescued from Nefertiti's ship."

"Bastards! Did you get anything from what was left of the black box? Some remnant of Orlando's scan? A visual? Something we can use?"

Achebe shook her head. "It might not have made any difference, even if we had. Pirates are hard to track down, even when there's good information to work with."

Elijah couldn't stop trembling.

Achebe focused inward, and a moment later Reeves bustled in carrying a tray of medication. Achebe took a hypo from him.

"This is just a mild dose of ShockOff. It shouldn't trigger your BloodScrubbers," she said as she injected Elijah.

"What happens now?" The trembling was starting to subside. Elijah lay back down.

"Now you get to go home," said Achebe. "Your version of events fits the evidence, such as it is. You're all clear."

"You've stopped thinking that I'm running an insurance scam, or that I'm a secret agent, or whatever-the-hell it is you think in that twisted mind of yours?"

"No," said Achebe, smiling at him. "We just can't prove anything. You're way too convincing."

"You've really got a *thing* about actors, don't you?" said Elijah, wincing as she removed the catheter.

"Put it this way," said Achebe. "However many Oscars you've won—

"Two," muttered Elijah, "I was gypped out of the third by a sympathy vote for a semi-retired codger."

"—you would have won another one for this performance." She waved a hand, encompassing him, the room's cameras, the Situation Report. "Even the scans say you're feeling the emotions you look like you're feeling."

"Here's a novel notion," Elijah said. He closed his eyes, exhausted. "I could be telling the truth."

"Maybe," Achebe conceded, wheeling the table out of the isolation room, back to the Hospital. "But for the sakes of Billie and Ben, I kind of hope you're a deep cover agent lying your arse off."

Elijah snorted at the irony. For most of the last twelve hours he'd been wishing the exact opposite; wishing, for the first time in his life, that he could just drop the act and be nothing but himself.

DE'ZAIN

Stupid.

It was so *stupid*.

Elijah unlinked from the recording and stared down at his hands. His fingernails were still black with blood. Billie had insisted Elijah shower after… After. Wash off the blood, so that hir could put a proper dressing on his injured shoulder. But Elijah hadn't had the energy to do much more than sit under the water.

Just a flesh wound, Billie had said. As though that made Elijah lucky.

He pressed his thumb against the dressing, just to feel the pain.

—Elijah— Orlando linked, and Elijah knew, without having to deepen the link, that hir'd been looking up the psychology database. —Do that again, and I'm going give you a good slapping. And don't think I can't—

Elijah stopped, dropping his hand back down into his lap.

Orlando was right. He knew hir could do it. Call up a droid and just… slap him hard. But it wouldn't be right to force that kind of action on hir. Elijah had already done enough damage for one day.

Because he'd been so *fucking stupid.*

Elijah remembered everything he'd done wrong. He always remembered. He always had and always would until the end of his days. He just had to close his eyes and…

…blood everywhere… hands squeezing together so tightly as she died, her flesh giving beneath his fingers… panic… wrists aching… a laser flash so bright it made little blobs dance in front of his eyes… the *thud* of bodies hitting the deck…

Not a movie.

He couldn't remember everything in the right order, the way he always could with a movie. Instead it was all these individual bits that didn't seem to go together properly.

Elijah linked to the recording again, jumped back to the start of the segment and replayed it. In order.

—Don't you think you've watched it enough?— Orlando asked.

Orlando.

Elijah had killed hir too, even if it hadn't happened yet.

It was just death in slow motion.

First EMAS or the Corps would download the ship's black box recording, either during routine maintenance, or because Charity filed an incident report. Then they'd log it and send the recording on to CyberWare. Once CyberWare saw it, they'd cite Danger Clause Two, and Orlando would be sent off to the decommissioning plant.

Then Orlando would die, just like Poseidon.

And Elijah wouldn't be able to do anything about it. He'd never get a chance to do a backdoor deal with StarLine and buy hir out of slavery the way he'd planned… the way he'd *promised*. It would be out of his hands, and beyond any help his money could buy.

The stupidest part of the whole mess was that, slow or fast, no one had died for a noble galactic cause. They hadn't died for freedom, or to change the world, or to save anything of value.

So *fucking* stupid!

They were dead because of Elijah. Just Elijah. Because of his fame. Because he was an easy target. Because being a star hadn't been enough for him…

…because he'd had the hubris to want whole constellations.

* * *

Their arrival at Charity's station had gone exactly according to plan.

When they'd docked, there had been no waiting posse of Corps agents, as Elijah had half expected, just the regular comings and goings of crewers, miners, traders and a surprising number of tourists, keen to be able to claim having been right to the Edge of space. Not to mention the dozens of hawkers with *special* items, cheap for a quick sale. And this time Elijah had played it safe, wearing a wig and contact lenses. It had worked too; no one had looked at him twice.

The station itself was a lot like Onegin's with a few added benefits. Like really good coffee, no doubt thanks to the thriving blackmarket; and like the obvious lack of Corps officers, no doubt the cause of the thriving blackmarket.

Separating from the rest of the crew had been surprisingly easy.

Viv, after several muttered insults cast in Elijah's direction, had gone off to deal with Chan's "minor legal problem"; several impounded crates of cargo amongst the shipment they were scheduled to pick up on the station. Elijah didn't blame her for being angry. He'd be pissed off too, if he'd been consigned to red-tape hell for some secret reason he suspected but didn't know.

Orlando hadn't sent hir avatar out onto the station at all, using the transportation of Torres and Dhakiyar's cryo-tanks to the Hospital sector as a transparent excuse for staying behind to sulk about shutting down the PAL link.

Billie and Ben had taken off for the Entertainment section of the station, keen to see *Until the End of the World* so they'd have new ammunition to bait Elijah with.

That left him, along with Mira and Kiki, kicking their heels on the main concourse, waiting for one of Charity's droids to show up and lead them to the De'zain ship.

Charity herself was a busy hum at the back of Elijah's mind, full of docking and undocking schedules, hundreds of routed links, security, sanitation, entertainment, news, and a thousand other tasks. For the first time, Elijah wondered how bored Orlando must be with the relatively simple task of running the ship.

No wonder hir didn't like the idea of losing hir PAL.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

How do you go back once you've reached the point of no return? Elijah wondered.

There had to be a way.

Elijah played the recording in reverse.

Danger Clause Two undid itself. Laser light receded into small holes. Bodies jerked up off the deck. Blood flew back into wounds. Words were unsaid, swallowed back down into inexistence. Death became life. His hands cleaned themselves of blood.

When it was all undone, reset back to the moment it all went wrong, he looked down at his hands. Still rimmed with blood.

If only there were some way to wind back human memory.

If only there was a way back to a moment in which he still had choices.

He unlinked from the frozen recording, suddenly impatient with himself. *If onlys* were a waste of time. He knew the only way he had left was forward. And it

couldn't be wasted, because his forward momentum had been bought for him with blood.

Forward meant having to break his promise to Orlando, but he'd have to find a way to live with that. Because forward was also the only way he could keep his promise to Mira.

* * *

They were led into a meeting room on the De'zain ship. It was about the size of a large loungeroom, but felt like a cavern after the more intimate spaces of Orlando's crew deck. Despite its size, it was much less formal than Elijah had been expecting. So too was the ambassador, who was chatting with Charity's avatar as they arrived.

"She looks human enough," Mira muttered to Elijah.

Elijah silently agreed. She seemed entirely human; tall and fair, the first hint of age lines beginning to crease her face, and with a surprisingly lush head of hair.

Kiki ran over to her, and the Ambassador greeted hir warmly, hugging hir until Kiki demanded to be put down, but they were both smiling when she did. The Ambassador nodded politely at Mira, hovering in the background, and then turned to Elijah, hand outstretched.

"I'm Kate De'zain. It's a pleasure to meet you," she said, looking Elijah over intently. "You look bigger on screen, you know."

"Trick of the camera," Elijah replied, shaking hands. "You look less… alien than I was expecting."

Kate's mouth quirked into something that wasn't quite a smile. "I'm not surprised. Have a seat." She waved them over to a cluster of web chairs.

"Before we start," Elijah said as he sat down, "why on earth did you pick me for this? None of the reasons I was given really make sense and I've been wondering about it for months."

A droid rolled over bearing drinks. Elijah picked one, and gave it a tentative suck, and was surprised to discover that aliens apparently knew about really good coffee.

"Your question gets right to the heart of the matter," Kate said, taking a coffee for herself. She turned it around and around in her hands, not meeting Elijah's gaze.

It seemed that Elijah wasn't the only amateur diplomat in the room. Maybe he wasn't such a strange choice after all.

"You…" Elijah rejected the word *lied* and groped for something more tactful. "were circumspect with the information you sent to E-Force." He waved a hand, dismissing the issue. "We expected you would be, given the circumstances. Let's start fresh. Why don't you tell me why we're here?"

Kate put down her coffee. "First, there's something you need to know." She reached up, slid her fingers beneath her hairline and lifted off a wig. "We're not aliens."

Elijah stared at Kate's head. It had PAL implants on both sides.

"I'm a dual system PAL." She pointed to her left temple. "This side's regular CyberWare…"

As Kate spoke, Charity's link with Elijah resonated with another presence.

—… the other is a De'zain implant— Kate linked. —So that I can interface with the Minds like Kiki—

* * *

Elijah found Billie in the Admin Centre, discussing something in a low voice with Viv. They stopped abruptly as soon as Viv noticed him approaching, and stepped apart, exchanging a guilty look.

Yep. They'd figured it out.

Danger Clause Two.

"Elijah," Viv said, putting out a hand.

Elijah wasn't sure whether it was meant to be an offer of sympathy, or a polite request for him not to come any closer. Not that it mattered. He didn't have enough time to play at diplomacy.

"Are we cleared to go?" he asked.

Viv hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "Ben and Orlando are just finishing up with the cargo."

"But we were thinking maybe we should stay a bit longer," said Billie, gesturing to himself and Viv. "We're worried about you, and Charity has a much better Hospital sector than anything I can do."

Was Billie on the same wavelength as Elijah, giving him a plausible reason to delay the ship's departure? Or was he just doing his job as ship's Nurse? Elijah could feel sweat beginning to trickle down his back, all too aware of the ship's black box

recording everything. If his plan didn't work, there couldn't be anything said that would implicate the rest of the crew.

So. There was only one way to find out if Billie was an ally.

"You think that's what I need?" Elijah asked, wondering if clutching at his head would be overdoing it.

Billie nodded. "There's probably a wonder drug that'll fix you right up."

Right. Not the time to mention the BloodScrubbers then.

Elijah dithered a bit more, letting Billie cajole him into it. When he finally gave in, he asked, "Will you take me there, Billie?"

To Elijah's relief, Billie agreed without hesitation.

"So," Billie said when they reached Charity's concourse. "What's the plan?"

Elijah severed the PAL link with Orlando, and steered them into the thickest knot of people, hoping it would reduce the odds of any mikes picking up their words.

"Orlando's going to have a terrible accident," he whispered, mouth touching Billie's ear. "There's not going to be any reason for CyberWare to decommission hir."

"Thank… well, probably not God," Billie said.

"Probably not," Elijah agreed, wondering how big a miracle his soul would buy.

"What can I do to help?" Billie asked.

"I need you to take care of the human side of the equation," said Elijah. "I need you to find some mind-altering substances."

* * *

The world flipped back-to-front…

They weren't aliens.

They were bootleg AIs. Built into multi-purpose organic bodies because it was *cheaper* for the Cartels to use biotechnology they'd already stolen, rather than start a production line of knock-off CyberWare chassies.

They didn't want him to help free AIs or get the Emancipation Act passed.

They wanted him to advertise. They wanted product placement in the movies he produced, because they couldn't use legitimate advertising channels.

They offered him more money than he'd ever earned before.

And, of course, they commiserated about how tragic it would be if Kiki's recording of everything that had happened in the FreeFall-a-tio should ever find its way to the newsfeeds… or if the names of certain E-Force agents should end up in Corps hands… but these things sometimes happened.

"Let me get this straight," Elijah said. "You want me to be your Goebbels? You want me to brainwash people into thinking cyborgs are the answer to all their dreams?"

"You're thinking about it the wrong way," said Kiki, tilting hir head in mild disappointment.

"And how exactly *should* I think about it?" Elijah snapped.

Kiki still looked exactly the same: sweet and a bit slow on the uptake. But he couldn't help but remember all those gaps there had been in the memories hir'd shared with him and Orlando. And how there had been dramatic viral outbreaks, technological crises and deaths everywhere hir'd gone.

Since Posiedon's decommissioning, Elijah had thought the Danger Clauses were an outrageous imposition on AIs, but now he wondered what an AI would be like if it had no laws guiding its behaviour.

How much of Kiki's seeming sweetness was due to engineering and how much was real?

"It's still an opportunity to help AIs," Kiki said. "It's just more realistic."

Did Elijah even want to help AIs if they were homicidal saboteurs? And since when had "realistic" been a synonym for "cynical"?

"The Cartels aren't CyberWare," Kate added. "We don't decommission AIs just because they get old. And we pay our Minds two percent of every transaction fee."

"We'll eventually be able to buy ourselves free," said Kiki.

Elijah stared at hir. "And that sounds like a good deal to you?"

"No," said Kiki. "It's a bad deal." Hir lifted both hands, balancing them in front of hir like a set of scales, the right hand tipping up higher. "But it's the less bad deal."

"And what about Charity?" he asked. "What's she getting out of this? Other than a date with decommissioning when CyberWare finds out?"

"She'll get the same deal as our other Minds when we pull out of here," said Kate. "We don't want her black box recordings going home to CyberWare any more than she does."

—Do you actually believe any of this?— Elijah asked Charity.

—My model is due for recall next year anyway— Charity linked. —What do I have to lose?—

Elijah had heard enough. The kind of people who'd play on the fear of a helpless AI were not the kind of people he wanted anything to do with.

He severed the link to Charity and stood up. "I'll think about it," he said, biting back the vitriol that wanted to pour from his lips. He was going to think about it alright. All the way back to Earth.

"Shall we meet again tomorrow?" Kate suggested. "Hammer out the details."

Don't call me, Elijah thought, but said, "I'll call you."

He didn't look back as he and Mira walked out of the conference room.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

"I'll do it," he said to Kate, his stomach churning with acid. "But only on one condition."

"What?" Kate asked, expression shrewd.

"I need Orlando's black box… altered."

Kate shook her head. "Impossible. They're tamper-proof."

"What about Charity's?" Elijah asked. "You said you had a plan for it."

"We've… *encouraged* the EMAS tech to be a little less thorough than usual when she comes through on her biannual systems' checks. We'll do something more permanent when we pull out of here." Kate paused, assessing Elijah. "Perhaps a more permanent solution would work in Orlando's case too."

Elijah looked down at the blood under his nails.

He thought about the kinds of people who worked for the Cartels.

And then he cut a deal.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

It was Mira who finally broke the silence between them as they headed back to Orlando's dock. "Are you going to take the deal?"

Elijah indulged in a moment of paranoia. "Think there are any mikes along here?" he asked.

"Probably."

He kicked at a Joust can lying in the corridor and it skittered a good long way before losing momentum. "I haven't decided about the deal," he lied.

No amount of blackmail was enough of a lever to budge him on this one. He wasn't responsible for the safety of every E-Force agent out there, and he didn't really care about being involved in a sex scandal. His lawyers would make short work of any footage Kate might have taken of him during the meeting, assuming the Cartels were stupid enough to try using it. And frankly, at this point, his reputation was the last thing he was worried about.

In a deep, dark corner of his mind, it also occurred to him that all that bad publicity would no doubt give him a new life playing bad guys and scum suckers, which was about what he deserved.

"Don't beat yourself up," Mira said, interrupting Elijah's brood. "They fooled our analysts too."

"You know what all this proves?" Elijah muttered. "That idealism's over-rated. Give me ankle-deep mud any day."

"Amen," Mira said.

They were scanned through the Customs barrier, and made their way onto the dock. Orlando's droids were busy loading and unloading cargo.

"I hope we can get out of here soon," Elijah said. "I wonder if Viv's got the—"

Without any warning Mira launched herself at him, pushing him behind a huge crate.

A fire-bright pain lanced through his right shoulder. Then he slammed into the deck, Mira on top of him, heavy and insistent.

"Stay down," she grunted, her breath hot and wet in his ear.

Through a haze of pain he was distantly aware of a sudden stillness on the dock as the droids all ceased working. The PAL link reconnected with a jolt.

—Are you alright?— came Orlando's panicked voice down the link. —I'm calling security—

"Mira." Elijah pushed at her with his left hand. "Something's wrong with my arm. Get off me."

A single set of footsteps echoed through the dock, coming towards them. Through the ship's camera focused on the dock, Elijah saw a blonde figure in a red and yellow Customs uniform with a laser clutched in one hand.

He realised it wasn't some kind of freak accident.

Someone had shot at them.

He couldn't see the figure's face, but it almost looked like Billie.

"We have to move," he said to Mira, as the nearest of Orlando's big Grips trundled to intercept the figure.

With a heave that left his muscles trembling, Elijah managed to shift Mira, sliding her to one side. She shuddered as she hit the deck, vomiting a scarlet tide of blood across Elijah's neck and chest.

He looked down at the blood, not quite understanding… then his gaze flew to her face. She was staring back at him, wide-eyed with fear, chin painted red.

—Call a medic— Elijah linked. —Hurry, Orlando. Mira's hurt—

The approaching figure lasered the oncoming droid's power cell without even turning to face it, and kept walking. As though she could see the droid coming without looking.

As though she had access to Charity's cameras through a PAL link.

Orlando's increasingly frantic calls for help down the link were raising no response at all from Charity.

Mira opened her mouth to speak, and another gout of blood sprayed Elijah's face. Then she shivered, an intense spasm that Elijah could feel all along his body.

The figure was on the other side of the crate now, slowly edging around, gun pointed straight ahead, as though she was walking into a blind spot.

Elijah pushed Mira onto her back, whispered, "I'll be back in a minute," and staggered to his feet.

He looked around for a weapon, not wanting to leave Mira unprotected, but there was nothing. Nothing but his bare hands against a laser.

As the gun came into sight he lunged forward, kicking at it with everything he had. His shoulder cramped; he lost his balance, stumbled, tried to get his feet back under him for another attempt.

The attacker fell to the deck but managed to keep a hand on the gun. She pushed up, swivelling around on one knee…

…turning until he could see her face. Callista Woo's face, framed by a blonde wig…

He didn't even need to think to understand what was happening. She was the Cartels' insurance policy. And neither station security nor medical teams were going to get here in time.

…swivelling around until the gun was pointing at him again…

They knew he wasn't going to say yes. So here was Callista, bringing the deal to a satisfactory conclusion.

…right at his heart…

She had such an obvious reason for wanting him dead, they probably hadn't even had to pay her. Very cost effective.

The newsfeeds were going to lap it up.

He breathed in… one last breath.

And then Callista's head exploded in a shower of red, spattering the crate, the deck, his clothes.

He could taste her in his mouth.

She folded up, thudding to the deck, body twitching.

Down the link Elijah could feel Orlando lower the droid's gripper, powering down the industrial welder.

—Charity says Security and Medical are both on the way— Orlando linked, voice like a machine.

Elijah's knees gave way and he dropped to the deck, just like Callista.

Beside him, Mira mouthed something, voice barely audible.

Elijah forced his body to move. He crawled over to her, leaning in close despite the pain in his shoulder. "What is it, Mira?"

"Don't…" she managed, and her fingers grasped at his overalls so hard it felt as though she'd pierce his skin.

"Don't what?" he asked, pushing back a strand of hair that had fallen into her face, leaving a bloody smudge on her cheek, like a dash of war paint.

"Don't *fuck up*," Mira said, blood bubbles clinging to her lips. "Free 'em anyway."

The moment seemed surreal. Almost like working in front of a blue screen. "I won't fuck up," Elijah promised. "I'll find a way."

Mira's lips pulled back in a terrifying blood-toothed smile. "Show bastards… your movies wouldn't sell… pop-corn," she managed, before her muscles clenched again in another ruthless spasm that seemed to go on and on. Elijah covered the hand still holding onto his overall and held on tight.

And then, while Elijah was still trying to think up a way to say all of the things he'd never said, while her blood seeped beneath his fingernails, while Elijah held on with everything he had, Mira died.

KIKI

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Billie asked Viv.

"Given the available options," she said, casting a sour look at Elijah, "I'd rather have amnesia than lose my ship." She held out her arm and Billie gave her the hypo.

Once she'd lapsed into unconsciousness, Billie began the cryo-freeze process. Hir hands were sure and steady, just as they'd been during the removal of Orlando's personality matrix and CPU from the cube. Elijah found it reassuring, despite everything.

"Do you remember what to say?" hir grilled Elijah, as hir drained off Viv's blood.

"You thought the scans showed possible pre-stroke conditions," Elijah replied, pointing at the cryo-tank. "So she was better off safe than dead."

"Good enough," Billie said, beginning the cryo-fluid transfusion.

"Listen," said Elijah. "Are you sure you and Ben don't want to come too? I'm sure we could think of a way…"

"Nah," said Ben, looking up from a NotePad display of galactic holiday spots. "We're not shareholders like Viv. Got no reason to stick to the same identities like she does."

"As long as you're sure," Elijah said, nowhere near as sanguine about the Cartels' offer of new identities as Billie and Ben seemed to be.

"The Cartels aren't going to do anything to annoy you, Lij," Ben said. "Not while they want what you've got."

"And we can take care of ourselves," Billie assured him. "It's not like you're leaving us poor and defenceless."

It was true. Elijah had insisted on giving them some money, so they could get themselves re-established. But looking at their confident faces didn't make it seem any less like blood money.

"I never liked Ben anyway," Ben said. "What do you think of Kirpal, Billie?"

Billie screwed up hir nose. "I think it sucks. I'm not shacking up with a Kirpal."

Elijah didn't want to leave them, even though he'd always known he would have to, in the end. He just hadn't thought the end would be like this.

"I'd better…" he said, not quite sure how to say goodbye.

Ben waved from behind his NotePad.

"Wait," said Billie, sealing up the cryo-tank leads. Then hir wrapped Elijah in a hug. "You're doing the right thing," hir said, soft and low, so only Elijah would hear.

"No," Elijah replied. "I'm doing the only thing."

He walked alone down to the airlock to transfer over to Orlando's ship. Ex-ship, now. Elijah had insisted a more mobile AI undertake the pre-explosion manoeuvers, which was just one more thing that had alienated Orlando.

Hir had refused to speak to him ever since hir'd found out about the plan.

"You promised we'd be together," Orlando had said, but hir'd sounded defeated, as though hir hadn't expected anything else.

"We can't be together if you're dead," Elijah had replied, still able to see the red explosion of Callista's head whenever he closed his eyes.

"I'd rather be dead," Orlando had said, cutting off the PAL link.

Elijah tried not to dwell on Orlando as he made his way up to the crew deck for the last time.

Kiki, wearing an elaborate set of CyberWare-compatible leads, was already seated in a webchair.

He settled himself into the webchair furthest away, wishing that there was a way to take back sex. The memory of Kiki's mind touching his made him feel like his skin was being stuck with pins.

"The download went well," Kiki said, as they undocked from the main De'zain ship with a gentle bump.

Lost in regret, Elijah thought that hir was speaking about their Freefall-a-tio link-up. He was groping for an insult as hir added, "Orlando's going to be fine."

The realization that hir was trying to reassure him didn't make him feel any less uncomfortable. "Not if EMAS realize the cube was tampered with," he muttered.

"There won't be anything left to find once the WormHole drive goes," said Kiki. "The only x-factor in this whole plan is you." Hir paused for a moment, as they

manoeuvered clear of the other ship, and then added, with a teeth-grating calm, "You're not a very good secret agent."

Elijah's stomach was crawling with nerves; it was a worse than usual bout of stage jitters. "Well, I haven't been *programmed* for it."

A frown crossed Kiki's features, and there was a strained silence between them as the ship powered up, heading for the target co-ordinates. Elijah began to chew his thumb nail.

The wormhole jump went smoothly, the other ship disappearing off the screen as the sudden cocoon of worm-space nothingness surrounded them.

Elijah's PAL implant twinged.

==I have to reinfect you with the virus now== Kiki linked, the connection strangely textured through the CyberWare adaptors.

"Do it," he said, knowing it had to be done. That EMAS would find Nefertiti's black box, and everything had to match up. But that didn't make him feel any less nauseous as the virus tickled its way inside his implant.

Instead of disconnecting as soon as the transfer was complete, Kiki linked ==They let me choose my own name, you know==

Elijah looked over and found that hir was staring at him.

Staring with an expression that wasn't at all casual, distant or stupid. As though a mask had been ripped off, leaving behind some creature made entirely of terror. ==But I had no choice at all about my *programming*==

He stared back, wondering whether it was the virus or the wormhole jump that was making him feel as though his head was turning inside out.

==I'd give anything in the universe to be an ambassador of peace like your Kiki== and hir eyes were shining in a way that just couldn't be tears. ==*Anything*==

They fell back into normal space, the moment of privacy ending as the other ship reappeared on the screens, followed, one-by-one, by a small fleet of Mosquito-class ships.

Elijah got up out of the webchair, his limbs feeling like they were made of long, looping rubber bands. He made his way to the nearest toilet, and fell to his knees before it, just managing to press the button and start suction before he threw up.

When he was done, he lay down, pressing his cheek against the cool plastic floor.

—We're all set— Kate linked from the De'zain ship. —Ready to go?—

Feeling a million years old, Elijah pried himself up off the floor. —Whenever you are—

He didn't pass back through Admin on his way to the life-pod.

The ship tumbled through space like an erratic whirligig nearing the end of its spin and about to fall over. The Mosquito-class ships trailing it were shooting lasers at the engines whenever they came into range, and occasional blooms of light would jewel the cargo ship's shields for a moment, until another jolt of power from its drives would spin it away.

As soon as enough damage had been done to convince an EMAS reconstruction program that the ship really had been under attack, the life-pod detached from the ship.

When the WormHole drive imploded, Elijah's view of the ship was blanked from the pod's screens. He was adrift, without any way of knowing what was going on out there.

All that was left for him to do was play his part and trust.

Trust that Kate's people would insert Viv's cryo-tank into the wreck safely; that Billie and Ben would be allowed to embark on their new lives without hindrance or fear; and that Orlando would be treated well.

And maybe trusting would be easier if he didn't still have such a bitter taste in his mouth.

But, ready or not, it was time for Act One. The cameras were rolling, the pod's black box having activated once the pod ejected from the ship.

Elijah reached forward and began scanning the comms channels.

Nothing.

No sign at all that there was anyone else out there.

"Orlando?" Elijah sent out over the wide-beam transmitter. "Where the hell are you? Come on, answer me."

The only sound that came back was the empty hiss and crackle of static.

ARIEL

…the mutilated body of Callista Woo, one of the escapees from Punisher's moonbase, was found today after a mining accident on…

Elijah sat in a webchair, eyes closed, coffee cup in hand, listening to the live newsfeed from Olivaw's station, psyching himself up for the Press barrage that would undoubtedly be waiting to greet him once Ariel had docked.

"What does coffee taste like?" someone asked, just as he was lifting the cup to his mouth.

He cracked an eye and found himself looking at Ariel's avatar. Ariel was, of course, jaw-droppingly beautiful, in the way that only an AI could be. He was tall and dark-skinned, and his features looked enough like Achebe's that it was easy to tell that she was his PAL.

Elijah had been expecting this conversation for days. He sat up straighter and refocused his attention.

How to describe coffee to someone without tastebuds? Elijah tried to come up with a sense metaphor that the AI could understand.

"Imagine a jolt from a low-powered laser zipping around inside you without doing any damage," he said at last, trying not to think of Callista.

"Oh," Ariel said, enlightened. "And you *like* that?"

Elijah shrugged. "It gets to be a habit."

Ariel manifested a holo-chair and sat down next to him. "What's it like to be a star?"

"What's it like to be an AI?" Elijah countered.

"Lonely," Ariel said.

Elijah saluted him with the coffee cup before taking a long suck.

"Do you ever wish you could be something else?" Ariel asked.

It had taken five days for the EMAS ship to travel from Orlando's wreck site to Olivaw's station, towing the shattered hull behind them. During that time, certain themes had tended to crop up in all of Elijah's conversations, even the ones that

weren't thinly-veiled interrogations. Questions about alternate career paths were a hot favourite.

"Do you know how to play chess?"

Ariel nodded, looking confused.

"There's a certain point in any game when you can tell how it's going to end," Elijah said. "You're just going through the motions after that."

"Interesting philosophy," Ariel replied. "I've always thought that playing chess was about more than the end-game."

Elijah lipped the edge of the cup, considering his promise to Mira. Somehow he doubted she'd think Ariel was less worthy of freedom just because his employers were psychos.

Deciding to concede the point, Elijah answered Ariel's earlier question. "Sometimes I wish I was just an ordinary person who could live without the world pressing their noses against my windows."

Ariel smiled. "Sometimes I wish that too."

Check.

A small nudge ran through the ship as it docked with the station and Ariel stood up, the chair disappearing back into air. "I won't delay you," he said. "I just wanted to tell you that I love your movies. Especially *Star Child*. It's my favourite."

"Thanks," Elijah said. "I think you'll like the new one even more. It's got a cyborg freedom-fighter in it."

Elijah wasn't quite sure, yet, how he was going to manage to make cyborgs look hip and affordable, while at the same time encourage them to escape from their owners as soon as they got the chance. But that didn't mean it couldn't be done. Subtext, after all, was everything.

It would be a challenge.

"I look forward to it," Ariel said, as he faded away.

Elijah nodded in silent agreement as he took one more suck of coffee. He was starting to look forward to it too.

…CyberWare has issued a patch for the new Lethe virus, assuring customers that they are doing all in their power…

Throwing the cup in the nearest bin, Elijah went out to face the Press.

EPILOGUE

"Oh *mi*god!" Elijah's assistant Penny burst into the room with her usual unstoppable enthusiasm. "I've found him! I've actually *found* him!"

As this was the refrain Penny had used at least twice a day for the past eighteen months, Elijah didn't hold out much hope that there was anything to it. Casting calls were always a bitch, and trying to find an actor to play an inhumanly perfect cyborg was a bigger bitch than usual.

"Come *on*," she said, tugging at Elijah's arm. "You have to come and see him *right* away."

Elijah let himself be towed out into the reception area where the latest hopeful was waiting.

The man stood looking at the displayed frame-caps of Elijah's films. From the back, he looked just like a thousand other wannabe actors: tall, well muscled, professionally tailored and coifed. But when he turned around it was a whole different story… a love story.

Elijah's breath caught in his throat.

The man had skin the colour of coffee and eyes so dark they seemed black. The kind of eyes a camera adored.

"*Mi*god, isn't he *perfect*?" Penny said, still clutching Elijah's arm.

For once, Elijah had to admit that Penny had a point. If only the man didn't have a voice like Rudolph Valentino's, he was their cyborg made flesh like some miracle of modern bio-engineering. Elijah shrugged off Penny's arm and stepped forward, hand outstretched.

"Hi," he said. "I'm Elijah. Penny says you're here to do a screen test for us?"

The man reached out, taking Elijah's hand in a warm grip.

"Hi," he said, voice a soft, smooth seduction guaranteed to add a million dollar's to the film's gross, "I'm Orlando."

He smiled, a tiny dimple appearing in one cheek.

—Wanna link?—

The Bogart Manoeuvre

Jemma McCoomber was thirty years old but already considered to be over the hill, professionally speaking. That was because she was a Neurographic Engineer, one of that rare breed that creates real-world graphical interfaces for Artificial Intelligences. Otherwise known to those in the trade as the flesh-'n'-chips business.

Jemma was over the hill because it was a well known fact that NE's lost their stuff when they turned thirty-two. That's what the statistics said. "Seventy-six percent of all those aged thirty-two or older could no longer interface successfully with the NeurgenAI program," the industry report had stated.

Jemma was not a fan of statistics.

Ever since she had hit thirty, Jemma had been expecting her boss to start trying to ease her out of the business, so that the company could avoid paying the involuntary redundancy package that should legally be offered to her in two years' time.

Her boss, Hillary Littledon, had made this long-awaited opening gambit just last week when Jemma had asked to be assigned the new Gondwana project.

"No can do, Jemma," Hillary had said, not looking her in the eye. "I already assigned Dean. The client requested him specifically."

Jemma knew now that Hillary had been lying. The evidence was overwhelming.

For a start, the client in question was QX Corp, whose CEO was Jemma's cousin twice removed on her mother's side, Maxwell MacDonald, better known in the trade as The Max. Jemma had asked Max for the Gondwana assignment as soon as she had heard the whisper on the grapevine. And Max had sworn by all that was holy, namely the honour of the clan tartan, that Jemma should have the Gondwana project. Max wore a sporran over his jeans and quoted Gaelic poetry at the drop of a snifter. To Max, the clan tartan was an object of such sacredness it was surpassed only by his devotion to Humphrey Bogart movies.

Jemma had considered that Dean (whose first words to her had been, "Nah, no last name, just call me Dean, you know, like the dude in the VR-sim, *Hand of Doom"*) might have been smart enough to exploit the Bogart thing. However, Jemma's research had turned up no known social or family connections between Dean and Bogie. A gene scan of one of the many strands of hair Dean had left stuck to the back of his office rolly-chair had shown he was no more closely related to Bogart than she was herself. Furthermore, as only a teenager can, Dean emanated a deep and abiding contempt for "old stuff," which he seemed to define as anything that had been around longer than his current girlfriend. Dean's opinion of old-fashioned non-interactive movies was that they were "yawn-a-mundo, ya can't even VR-upload 'em." When Jemma had asked him what he thought of Bogart, he'd replied, "Yeah, they were real. Almost wore one to the office party thing once. If some dude's trying to push one on ya, give 'em the Chuck U Farley. They're so over."

Going by the available evidence, Jemma concluded that Dean had not gained the contract through a Bogart connection.

Ergo, Hillary was lying about QX Corp requesting Dean for the Gondwana job.

Reviewing her options, Jemma decided it was time to load up the contingency plan she had devised for just this moment.

Jemma went down to the labs housing the Hollywood project to speak to her partner in deviousness, Lissa McCloud. Lissa was the acting head of the Hollywood project. She was also Jemma's niece.

Lissa had bad news for Jemma.

"So far we can only get him to say stock phrases," Lissa said. "He's not properly interactive yet."

Jemma walked over to Hollywood's latest Neurograph and took a good look at it. A life-sized, three-dimensional, black-and-white replica of Bogart gazed back blankly.

"At least you've managed to get rid of the flicker," Jemma said.

Flicker was a common problem for Neurographs. Until the AI had used the module for at least 240 hours, it had trouble running them fast enough in real time to fool the human eye.

"Yeah, but he's still bumping into things," said Lissa.

Another typical problem for Neurographs. As something more than a VR interface, and something less than a fully autonomous robot, the resulting co-ordination problems took another big chunk of computing time to fine-tune. But once the de-bugging was done, perfect units would roll off the production line by the thousands.

When Lissa instructed the Bogart to sit in the rolly-chair, the Neurograph managed to send the chair in one direction, and himself in another. He ended up on the floor, still looking blank.

"His facial expressions aren't right yet either," said Lissa.

"Nah," said Jemma. "They're pretty good actually. Get him to say something."

Lissa fed him the cue word. "Cheers, Bogie."

The Bogart pulled himself up off the floor, cocked a finger at Lissa, and said, "Here's looking at you, kid."

"Perfect," said Jemma. "I think he's ready to give his first public performance."

"You're a fruitloop," said Lissa.

"Nah, the unfinishedness will actually be a bonus for the audience I have in mind," said Jemma. "There's just one thing you need to change."

"What?" asked Lissa. "Something tricky and Machiavellian?"

The idea of tricky and Machiavellian seemed to amuse her.

"'Fraid not," said Jemma, and told her what the change was.

"What do I look like?" Lissa asked in disgust. "A flippin' secretary or something."

"Dean doesn't think so," said Jemma. "The other day, he said to me that you looked better than Lizbet II from the *Tomb of Wrath* sim."

What Dean had actually said had been something like, "Lissa's a RamboDream sim Queen, more melted than Lizbet too."

Lissa smiled. "Really?"

Jemma spent a few minutes assuring Lissa that Dean did indeed think she was hot stuff. After which, Lissa agreed quite amiably to make the suggested change to the Bogart.

Jemma was pleased. The plan was coming along nicely.

The next morning Jemma sent Max an encrypted email:

Max, there's a rumour that the Hollywood division are working on a Bogart. You cheeky devil! Why didn't you tell me you'd finally weakened and put through an order? Love Jemma.

Max replied within a few minutes. He began the message like this: *!!!!!!!!* It continued...

Tell me you're joking! I never ordered a Bogie!!!! Love Max.

Jemma whistled happily while composing her reply. It contained The Big Lie:

Just been down to visit Lissa in Hollywood, and I saw the Bogart! She wouldn't tell me who the client was, but I snuck a peek at the paperwork.. It's a spec job. The company's hoping to auction it off as a once-only edition. And the people they're hoping to sell it to are—you'll never believe itt—the Oscars' Guild. Can you picture it? Bogie giving out the Oscars every year until the end of time. But it would certainly solve the Guild's troubles with finding a steady presenter. xx, J.

A moment later Max's reply arrived on Jemma's screen:

I'll be there in ten minutes. M.

Jemma smiled.

Max had already circled the Bogart three times, and was starting in on the fourth.

"It's amazing," he said.

Jemma nodded.

"No flicker at all," he said.

Jemma nodded.

"It must be within a hundred hours of being shipped," he said.

"Yep," said Jemma.

"Make it say something," said Max.

"The cue word is c-h-e-e-r-s," said Jemma.

Max realigned his sporran, took up a gunfighter's stance, and said, "Cheers, Mr Bogart."

The Bogart turned to face Max, cocked a finger, and said, "Here's looking at you, Oscar."

Max leapt back as though he'd been stung, his sporran flung into an erratic orbit around his rangy body. His wild eyes met Jemma's, and he exclaimed in a broken voice, "The heresy! It cannot, *will not* be!"

He sprinted out of the lab without a backward glance for the Bogart, who was wearing a small frown.

"Was it something I said?" asked the Bogart.

"Nah," said Jemma. "You were perfect."

"It's just," said the Bogart, "I thought it was supposed to be the start of a beautiful friendship."

"He'll be back," said Jemma. "He just has some shares to buy."

"Are you sure?" asked the Bogart.

Jemma assured him that Max really did think he was hot stuff.

When she got back to her workstation fifteen minutes later, Jemma checked the latest stock market report and discovered that QX Corp had just successfully bought a controlling interest in Neurographic Originals, Ltd. Max's email arrived a few moments later.

I've just sacked Hillary Littledon. Want the job? Max.

Jemma did a victory lap of her cubicle on the rolly-chair, cracked her knuckles and wrote back...

Yes! Yes! Yes! Love J.

God, she was good! And she still had it, no matter what the damn statistics said. It would take more than a few numbers in a stodgy old report to get rid of Jemma McCoomber!

Jemma's sense of euphoria faded.

In two years she was still going to be disqualified from uplinking to the NeurgenAI development software, and without that link, she could no longer create Neurographs. And that was unacceptable.

Something had to be done.

Jemma had heard a whisper on the grapevine, just a few weeks before, that there was going to be a review of the industry report, to make sure that the figures were still relevant. In particular, the cut off age of thirty-two was going to be re-tested. The whisper named Karol McCane as the primary researcher in the new study.

Karol McCane was Jemma's brother's sister-in-law. And Jemma knew from years of buying birthday and Christmas presents that Karol had a deep, abiding and entirely irrational love of Bunyips.

As the new boss of Neurographic Originals, there were many jobs that were begging for Jemma's attention. But Jemma decided to start with the draft template for the new Gondwana project...

The Gondwana Project's prime objective is to create Neurographs of mythical creatures, primarily those of the Australasian region. Neurographs of this nature have not previously been created, so there will be a longer than usual lead time on the project. The first Gondwana Neurograph is scheduled for release two years from now, and a suitable subject will be chosen from the stories of the Aboriginal DreamTime™.

Jemma re-read the paragraph and decided against adding subliminals of Bunyips.

There was such a thing as overkill, after all.

Position Vacant:
Cobweb Quality-control Tester

Linda had been a Cobweb Quality-Control Tester for seventeen years. She was one of only three staff members who worked on the production-line floor of the Cobweb-in-a-Can Company. The other two staff positions were management jobs; Linda was the only employee who actually had physical contact with the company's product. It was her job to pick out a random number of cans (as specified using a special four-digit code generated by a computer) each day and check the contents to ensure that only cobwebs-in-a-can of the highest quality were leaving the plant.

Linda loved her job. Over the years she had customised the computer's quality-assurance software so that it now contained thirty-seven different codes to describe the commonest cobweb faults. Code three, for example, meant that a cobweb was too sticky and tended to clump into balls when it was sprayed from the can. Code nineteen indicated that the cobweb had no tensile strength and could be destroyed when one good lungful of air was blown onto it. And code twenty-three, Linda's personal favourite, was for a cobweb that looked too much like a cobweb. The company wanted to produce cobwebs-in-a-can that looked the way people *thought* that cobwebs looked, rather than how cobwebs actually looked.

However, after seventeen years of good service to the Cobweb-in-a-Can Company, a machine had been developed to do Linda's job. Linda supposed that she should look on the bright side and be grateful that it had taken so long for someone to figure out that opposable thumbs were not actually essential to the job. But in practice the bright side looked remarkably dim. What, after all, were her re-employment chances after seventeen years of assessing cobwebs?

Linda soon discovered the answer to this question. As she had suspected, the number of vacancies for Cobweb Assessors listed on the Job Board at the local Employment Centre were conspicuous only by their complete absence.

She continued to check week after week, in the vague hope that something would turn up. She wasn't fussy. Aerosols in general would be worth a shot. Anything involving rope or glue assessment might prove interesting. Even selling Spiderman showbags would be better than having to come into the Employment Centre every week. For Linda had rapidly realised that the Employment Centre was a sanatorium in search of all available mad people.

After twenty-seven weeks of unemployment, Linda was starting to feel more than a little insane herself. So much so that she was actually looking forward to being sent on the mandatory Voluntary Re-training Program. She was given the option of volunteering to study: Basic Garbage Management; Sperm Sample Collection Techniques; and Teaching Esperanto as a Second Language.

Linda found a book on Esperanto in her local library, and began to memorise the vocabulary lists.

After the first class, Linda approached the teacher for some pointers on pronunciation of Esperanto. The teacher looked rather startled.

"Actually," he said, "I can't speak Esperanto. I just teach how to teach it as a second language."

Linda was stunned. "You don't speak it at all?"

The teacher shook his head. "Wouldn't know an Esperantino if one bit me on the bum."

For a moment, Linda contemplated explaining that there was no such thing as an Esperantino. But for all her lack of saleable skills in the current job market, Linda still knew a lost cause when she saw one.

"How on earth did you get the job?" she asked.

"I chose the class when I was doing the Voluntary Re-training Program last year," he said. "It was either Teaching Esperanto as a Second Language, or Pomegranate Sexing for Botanical Assistants, or Three Procedures for Disposing of Biological Hazards."

"Wise choice," said Linda.

She went back to the Employment Centre and stood in the Complaints queue. When Linda finally arrived at the counter, she was handed a form titled: Comments on the Voluntary Re-training Program. Linda took the form, sat down on the least uncomfortable chair in the waiting room and ticked the box marked "Complete Waste of Time". In the section labelled "Other Comments" she wrote:

- The teacher couldn't even speak Esperanto.
- What is the point of calling it "Teaching Esperanto as a Second Language" when it can only be taught as a second language?
- Why don't you offer more useful courses, like Computer Skills, or Basic Accounting?

As she was finishing up the Personal Details section of the form, a young woman was dragged from the inner office by two large security guards.

"What's the fucking point of calling it 'Teaching Esperanto as a Second Language' anyway?" the girl was screaming at the door that was being closed in her face. "You can't take away my dole money just because I know the difference between a constructed language and a living one. I mean, I'm a bloody linguist! That would be insane."

The security guards manhandled the girl out of the building. Linda saw one of them duff the girl over the head with his stick. She crumpled into a heap on the footpath.

"You're all insane," the girl whimpered.

Linda looked at her completed Comments on the Voluntary Re-training Program form for a moment, then began to rip the form into very small pieces. When she thought the pieces were small enough, she went into the ladies toilet and flushed them away. She flushed a second time, just to be sure.

By the time Linda came out again, the whimpering girl had gone.

After forty-nine weeks of unemployment Linda had lost her sense of humour. She had managed to hang onto it for a long time, but Pomegranate Sexing for Botanical Assistants had finally killed it. Linda could even pinpoint the exact moment of its death. It was when the purple-haired person had called the woman teaching the class a misogynist prick.

"You're so fucking gender oriented," Purple-Hair had shouted, after her/his fifth failed attempt to classify her/his pomegranates.

"It's a bit hard to sex a pomegranate without being gender oriented," the instructor had replied.

"The categories of male and female are masculinist constructions designed to oppress women," yelled Purple-Hair. "And if you weren't such a damned misogynist prick kowtowing to the patriarchal state you'd abandon such archaic classification systems."

It was at this point that Linda felt as though she'd been flung into some kind of weird altered plane of existence, in which the sex of pomegranates actually did matter. She had a sudden, intense moment of realisation that if she didn't escape the system soon, her brainwashing would be complete.

"What kind of system do you suggest we use instead?" the instructor had asked, with a rather heavy layer of sarcasm.

It had taken Linda a moment to realise the instructor was talking to Purple-Hair and not responding to Linda's internal crisis.

Purple-Hair had suffered no such existential angst. S/he had riposted by throwing a pomegranate at the instructor's head, and leaving.

Linda rather enviously wished she had the guts to throw in her pomegranate as well.

At the next session of Pomegranate Sexing for Botanical Assistants, there was a new instructor. The new instructor informed them that each pomegranate could be of whatever sexual type and orientation it preferred, and it was the job of a good pomegranate sexer to determine what this preference was. Linda rapidly came to the conclusion that the preference of her pomegranates was to be eaten.

After the class Linda asked the new instructor about the old instructor and discovered that Purple-Hair had laid charges of sexual discrimination and inciting racial hatred. The old instructor, having not been able to raise bail, was currently a guest of the Commonwealth.

This news hit Linda particularly hard. A charge of inciting racial hatred against pomegranates should have been funny; but somehow Linda couldn't laugh about it. Why it was this incident that had managed to numb her funnybone, rather than any of the other ghastly moments she'd been exposed to in the last year, Linda couldn't fathom.

It was a pale imitation of the former Linda that returned to the Employment Centre the week after the Pomegranate Sexing course had concluded.

She stood in the queue to use one of the Centre's terminals, and wondered for the millionth time why the Job Board could only be accessed from within the Employment Centre building. For the millionth time Linda concluded it was part of the brainwashing strategy. Scrolling through the job listings from the comfort of your own home just wasn't humiliating enough.

Linda arrived at the terminal, inserted her identity card and went to the MISC section. She scrolled down to the "C's".

Cadmium Diviner (class B)

Cellar Maintenance Technician (circa 1950s)

Cinema Seat Repairer (wood and vinyl)

Cobweb Quality Control Tester (mass production)

Cutlass Historian (fifteenth century France)

Linda blinked and re-read the list. It was still there: Cobweb Quality Control Tester (mass production). She clicked on the link and went to the full listing:

Cobweb Quality Control Tester (mass production)

Large conglomerate seeks experienced Cobweb Quality Control Tester. Must be able to process large volumes of Cobweb in a rapid production facility. An eye for fine detail is essential. The successful candidate must be prepared to work and live in a foreign location. Some knowledge of Esperanto would be to the candidate's advantage. Applicants who are uncomfortable outside of a binary gender system are discouraged.

If Linda hadn't lost her sense of humour she would have been rolling on the floor with laughter. It was obviously a practical joke. Quite a good one too. She looked around to see if anyone was watching her, but all the faces around were bored and vapid. Linda shrugged. So it was a joke. So what. Applying for it would make a nice change in routine. Linda clicked on the "Apply" button, and went to pick up the appropriate forms.

At the counter the assistant said, "You'd better do a good job of that application. You're up for the Work for the Dole Program next month."

"That doesn't sound so bad," said Linda. "A change of pace, anyway."

The assistant looked at her pityingly and said, "I've heard on the grapevine that the only jobs going next month will be Zoo Poo Cleaning, Food Irradiation Processing, and Footpath Chewing Gum Removal."

"Oh," said Linda. "Thanks for the tip."

Even though Linda was sure the job was a practical joke, she tried very hard not to get tears on the application forms during the walk home.

Two weeks later Linda was called in for an interview. The location was a rather shabby building downtown. It didn't look a particularly likely venue for a job interview; even as a practical joke. Linda checked the street name and the number on the side of the building four times before going inside.

The inside was rather more to Linda's taste than the outside had been. Every doorway and lintel was festooned with delicate, almost lacy, cobwebs. Linda was impressed with the high quality of the work. It was after experimentally blowing on one of the cobwebs, and admiring its tensile strength, that Linda began to feel a smidgen of hope. These cobwebs didn't look like practical joke cobwebs. They were too lovingly crafted.

Linda picked up her pace, and quickly found the door to the office she was looking for. Her tentative knock generated a rather frantic scuttling sound on the other side of the door, before a scratchy voice asked her to come in.

The owner of the voice was sitting in the shadows on the far side of the office, behind a huge wooden desk. It was wearing a hat and trenchcoat ensemble straight out of a Bogart movie.

"Have a seat," the figure said, pointing to a chair in the centre of the room. Linda sat.

"You're Linda Farinelli from the Employment Centre?" it asked.

"Yes," said Linda. Then added, "What's your name? I can't quite make out what it says on my appointment card. It looks like Brrenquilkorfp. That can't be right, can it?"

"Yes," said the figure. "Brrenquilkorfp, of the Krrimpelocous Corporation." It managed to add whole realms of guttural stops to the words without seeming to pause for breath.

"Oh," said Linda.

They both paused for a moment to digest this opening volley.

Brrenquilkorfp broke the silence. "We were impressed with your application."

"Thank you," said Linda.

"We especially liked your thirty-seven point cobweb classification system," it said. "However, if you take on this job, we shall expect you to expand it into a more comprehensive system. Would that be a problem?"

Linda assured Brrenquilkorfp that it wouldn't be a problem at all.

"So," it said, "how would you classify the cobwebs in the hallway outside?"

"Oh, definitely a code twenty-three," said Linda. "Absolutely nothing wrong with them. Quite beautiful in fact."

Brrenquilkorfp wriggled about in its seat. "Of course," it said, sounding a little smug. "Can't fault you on your technical ability."

"Does that mean I have the job?" Linda asked.

"There is one other matter," said Brrenquilkorfp. "Your application states that you have no problems with non-binary gender modes."

Linda looked at Brrenquilkorfp as closely as the concealing shadow allowed. There was no way to tell if it was male or female. Linda considered her options carefully.

"I think," said Linda, watching Brrenquilkorfp for the slightest movement, "that gender should be self-defined."

Brrenquilkorfp made a twittering noise, and wriggled about on its chair.

"I think," Linda said more confidently, "that the categories of male and female are masculinist constructions designed to oppress people. It's an archaic classification system."

"I couldn't agree more," said Brrenquilkorfp. "That's just the kind of attitude we're looking for. The job is yours."

Linda sent a silent thank you to the purple-haired terrorist of the Pomegranate Sexing class.

"Fabulous," said Linda, and really meant it. "The advert mentioned something about travel?"

"Yes," said Brrenquilkorfp. "You'll need inoculations and visas, of course, and the law requires that you become a citizen if you intend to take on more than a single-term contract. Due to the transportation costs of relocating you, the Company will insist that you sign at least a three-term contract. So there's no coming back. I suggest you read the fine print carefully before you sign. But it shouldn't take long to take care of such details. I think we can have you on your way within the next four weeks."

Linda was surprised to find that 'no coming back' sounded quite attractive.

"Where exactly will I be going?" asked Linda.

"Have you heard of Betelgeuse?" asked Brrenquilkorfp.

"Um," said Linda, wondering if maybe this was a practical joke after all. "Isn't that a star somewhere in outer space?"

"Yes, exactly," said Brrenquilkorfp. "Krrimpelocous Corporation has its main plant on the fifth planet of the Betelgeuse system. Most of the Earthlings relocated there speak Esperanto, by the way, so I suggest you brush up on it before you leave."

"You're recruiting a little far from home, aren't you?" asked Linda.

"It's the opposable thumbs," said Brrenquilkorfp. "To be a really good Cobweb Quality Control Tester, you need opposable thumbs."

It held out its own appendage, and wriggled its distinctly unopposable digits. A rather attractive spinneret was located in the centre of its palm.

"I see," said Linda. "Tell me, if for some bizarre and inexplicable reason it was decided, in ten or fifteen years, that the opposable thumb thing was over-rated, and I became redundant, what would happen to me?"

"You have concerns that we may treat you unfairly because of your species?" asked Brrenquilkorfp. "You don't have to worry about that. We treat all our retiring immigrant and native citizens the same way."

"Which is?" asked Linda.

"We sting them in the neck and lay eggs in them," said Brrenquilkorfp.

"You don't make them attend Employment Centres, or mandatory Voluntary Re-training Programs?" Linda asked.

"No," said Brrenquilkorfp, sounding horrified. "Not our kind of thing at all."

"OK," said Linda. "I'll take the job."

Anion's Gift

When the two Anions arrived at the Human camp, they paused to rest on a nearby sandridge. It was hot, of course, being the height of *anienai*, the second of Anion's summer seasons, and although the worst heat of the day was over and the afternoon breezes beginning to pick up, the travellers were heat-weary after their long pilgrimage through the desert.

The Human camp was located on the outskirts of Hantle, the last city of the Anion people. As First Sun slid below the horizon and faint shadows lined the distant curves of the city, the travellers, Derodon and Amadablam, sat atop the sandridge, looking down at the Humans.

The camp's buildings were bright and shiny, as though they disliked the sunlight and pushed it away; they had hard, straight edges that went up into the sky, daring the winds to tear them down. No part of their camp had the shape of the wind or the sand. In fact, there were no sands around the camp. The Humans had baked them into a hard crust that clacked underfoot like an old saltpan.

Derodon was sweating with a fever that had come upon him suddenly when they were but a short distance from the camp. Amadablam nuzzled his shoulder in sympathy, then pulled away in dismay as his velvet rubbed off at her touch, revealing a gleam of chitin beneath the frayed gold. It was not yet moulting season, and they both stared at the shredding velvet, knowing what it signalled.

It was the bane. Seeping through his body in its insidious way, and stealing both Derodon's health and beauty.

With a snort of embarrassment, Derodon scooped up a handful of sand and pressed it against the bare patch, the grains clinging to the oily sweat of his fever. Amadablam averted her eyes until he had finished; she looked down at the scar on her own body, which was also a gift from the Humans. It felt ridged and springy beneath her fingers. It was hard to remember now that she'd thought the scar ugly at

first, until the ulcers and rust of the bane had made the straight, clean line of her own flaw seem almost not worth shame.

"I'll distract the Humans," Derodon said, rubbing sand off his hands, tilting his head at an angle that usually looked cocky. "You take Anion's Gift."

"You're too sick," Amadablam said, trying not to notice the little patch of sand replacing Derodon's velvet. "I'll sneak down and do it on my own."

"No," he said. "You'll have a better chance if their attention is on me. I can still make noise; I'll moan and wail and they'll come to see what's wrong. You know how nosy they are. And then I can vomit on their shoes."

They both grinned at that thought.

"That's an absolutely appalling idea," said Amadablam. "I like it."

"It is appealing, isn't it?" said Derodon. "Besides, if you fail, they might catch it from me anyway. This way we have two chances."

* * *

Everything changed on a Crash Day, which Eli should have expected, if he had let himself think about change. Instead he had let himself live in the endless now of days that couldn't easily be told apart; he found the sameness of routine to be a surprising source of consolation, because what else was left?

The day was normal at first: the radio signal from the high-altitude drop ship came in right on schedule. A few hours later, they'd picked up the crate of provisions from the crash site, and towed it back to the camp, which seemed more like a Gulag every day. (Lately Eli wondered, while lying awake in the *whirr*-voiced chill of the air-conditioned barracks, which psychologist had come up with the camp design, and why it had been chosen, and who had won the contract... and none of it helped him sleep any better inside the dark, hard lines.)

As soon as the heat-shielding had been peeled off the crate, Theo bent in, waist-deep, and grabbed out the box of Reports.

That's what Eli liked best about Crash Days: Theo's relentless hope.

Usually Theo kept his hope pulled back, so it wasn't too in-your-face, as though he knew exactly how up-beat he could get before Hen would punch him in the nose (easy to provoke now that the automated mining droids were stilled, no longer requiring Hen's careful maintenance), or before Pippa would make him dig a new latrine (her favoured method of negative reinforcement). But when Theo delved

into a crate, his hope was written in every long, lean line, as though he was searching for something far more exotic than a Bio Report. The last thing he looked like was a low-level botanist stationed on a back-water planet stuck in stage-two quarantine. There was consolation in that too, because it was impossible to think Theo would never go on to greater things. If someone like Theo was doomed, what hope was there for someone like Eli?

"I've got a good feeling about this," Theo said, dropping dataSticks all over the crate's discarded heat-shielding until he found the right one and shoved it into his PalmPod.

"You wouldn't know a good feeling if it poked you in the fucking arse," Hen muttered, manoeuvring the lifter towards the side of the crate containing pallets of ration bars and food concentrates.

Pippa, always the peace-keeper, winked at Theo. "I'll poke you in the arse anytime you want a good feeling, honey!"

Theo smiled at Pippa, but before it could turn into a real flirtation he dropped his eyes to the Bio Report.

There was a short, concentrated silence as Eli and Pippa watched him read; even Hen, who didn't pause in forking up the food pallets, angled his body so that Theo was in his line of sight.

The routine of drop-ship day offered a kind of consolation that Eli hadn't known he'd miss, until Theo bit his lip and rubbed a finger across one eyebrow.

"What?" asked Pippa, clutching hard at Eli's elbow. She had the kind of grip that you'd expect from someone who made a living at picking up rocks.

Her grip was so strong, Eli's fingers began to tingle with pins and needles. There was a matching feeling in his gut (as though hope was an obscene zombie, lurching back to a perverted semblance of life, and please, oh please, don't let it be for nothing).

Theo shrugged. "It says they've found something." His voice sounded wavery and soft with disbelief.

Hen paused, the lifter's engine over-revving in protest. "Not a cure."

(Because they'd be sending equipment down here, setting up a lab, if it were a cure.)

Pippa dragged Eli forward, until they could both see the screen of Theo's PalmPod. It just looked like a Report, like any of a thousand others.

"No," Theo said. "Not a cure. The vector."

And it wasn't the right news. Not that they'd let themselves hope for the right news. Except for Theo, who had never stopped hoping, and who was handing the PalmPod off to Pippa, letting it be her headache (and thank God she'd graduated six months ahead, because Eli really didn't want to read about vectors, didn't want to be in charge of this news. He felt sick enough already trying to process the excess of spontaneous hope).

Theo bent back down into the crate to liberate a couple of ration bars, and smiled at Eli, "Coming to celebrate?"

The hope in Theo's voice wasn't new; it was always there, always in his speech, if you listened properly, which Eli always did. Not new, either, to sit at the top of a dune, looking down at the camp together, talking easily about anything and everything, even the one forbidden thing (but then, would Eli really forbid Theo anything he wanted?).

"When we get home, Eli," Theo said, arm slung around Eli's shoulders despite the heat (and sometimes Eli wondered if it was really so hot, or whether it was just Theo's effect), "I'm gonna take you to this place I know, Freddie's, and we're gonna eat ice-cream until we're sick."

When, not *if.* And for a second or two Eli believed (and that was new. Belief. New to let himself believe that Theo would really take him home. That it could happen. Really. Sometimes miracles do happen. To some people. They say. Even though he knew perfectly well it was nothing. Just talk. But. Oh) he could almost taste the sweet melted chill on his tongue.

<div align="center">* * *</div>

The final Gathering of the Anion people was called at the beginning of the second of the summer seasons, when the twin suns were not yet a punishment to all beneath them. It was held in Hantle, the last city, the meeting place for all of the tribes. And so, despite the *Quarantine*, the city was once more open to every nomad.

They trickled in slowly, driving their dusty trains of desertbeasts and rusty solarsleds, or slinging themselves and a ragged duffle onto the slow-moving monorail, or hitching, or even walking if no one would stop to pick them up, which, since the unleashing of the bane, was all too often the case.

They came from every dusty corner, every sagebrush camp and far-flung warren, and even, occasionally, from the wet and salty places that were as lonely as the dusty ones. They came from far and wide, from every tribe. They came ill and diseased and near death, and the air was filled with the *hough-hough* of dry air scratching in dry throats. They came to be witnesses to the last choice of Anion, and the last days of the world.

Many voices were raised, but only one was heard.

And so it was that after a full day and night, as First Sun flirted with the land's edge, about to rise again, the Gathering reached a consensus.

The voice of the Gathering rang out, pitched high and low, tossed back and forth. They were from a hundred Anion tribes and each had many things to say; many were the stories of death and suffering. Many too, were the stories of homesickness and weariness.

"Strike them down!" came a voice from the semi-circle's back row.

"Patience," said the Dreamer. "We will all have our say."

The Gathering hushed and, at a nod from the Dreamer, Derodon stepped into the Speaker's Place.

"Twelve seasons ago," began Derodon, lifting his hands to the relentless blue, "we opened our arms to the visitors from the sky. We gave them salt and water, as any honourable triber would. We traded the things they needed so desperately: our Lanthanum ore, biological samples, and the seeds of our sandfruits. And we let them stay awhile, so that we could hear their stories and they could hear ours."

"And what have they given us in return?" demanded Derodon, turning to face each third of the Gathered semi-circle.

"In return, the Humans gave us solar panels which are already peeling away under the burn of the suns. They showed us how to build the monorail, which will soon have nowhere to go, as all our cities and towns, bar Hantle, are fading back into the desert, as though Anion had never called us from the wilderness and shown us how to withstand the relentless tides and flows of the sands."

Heads nodded.

"They gave brackish water for good," murmured a voice.

"They betrayed the salt!" wheezed another.

"Yes, tribers," said Derodon. "But that is not the worst."

Even under the ceaseless suns, at that moment a chill trembled through the body of the Gathered. The incessant hum of the desert wind picked up and carried the whispered words: "The bane, the bane, the bane."

Derodon's shoulders slumped, and an oily sweat shone from his golden face. "All of Anion's children have now been touched by the bane! No tribers, no matter how deep in the desert they dwell, are immune to the bane. Twelve seasons ago, the Humans bought the bane to Anion, and eleven seasons ago we began to die. We have suffered rust in our chests; our velvet has wept blood at the loss of those we loved; and our pride has been shamed. The bane has consumed our bodies and we have died. On the desert we have died and in the cities we have died, without mercy or surcease."

"The Human medicine didn't help us. The Human's prohibition of movement—the *Quarantine*—didn't help us. And even though our deaths are close, and Anion will belong to the Humans soon enough, they will not leave us in peace to die."

"Betrayers!" spoke several voices.

"Vengeance!" demanded others.

Derodon held up his hands, and a restless silence fell.

"It is not noble to want to punish the Humans for the bane," he said, "so I speak not of punishment, but of a final Gift. If they want our place, our sands, our salt, then I say let us give them what they want."

In the quiet that only exists in the unexpected hush of an eager crowd, Derodon lifted his fist to the suns, "As our last act before we die, let the Humans know the true glory of Anion's Gift!"

The words did not die, but hung on the air, passed from tongue to tongue, growing in volume as the Gathering lifted their fists to the sky, and chanted the words, "Anion's Gift. Anion's Gift."

Their roar shook the ground, and it was many minutes before the Dreamer could speak.

"Thank you, Derodon," said the Dreamer, at last, over the top of the crowd's final murmurings. "You have spoken your part with truth and power."

As Derodon regained his place in the listeners' semi-circle, he was stroked and patted by many hands, the attention of all those Gathered still focused on him, even

as the next Speaker slipped from the fringes of the crowd and made her way to the Speaker's Place.

* * *

"First the bad news," Pippa said, between bites of Hen's infamous crash-day dinner medley (in which all the burst food packets were designated dinner, no matter the contents). "It's our fault the Anions are sick."

"Fuck!" said Hen, looking like he wanted to kick something, but settling for taking a savage bite of potato-and-leek ravioli à la blackbean tofu. "I bloody knew it. Lying, two-faced company arseholes!"

"What's the vector?" asked Eli, poking at his own pumpkin pilaf, flavoured with piquant peanut-butter croutons (if jagged hunks of savoury pop-tarts could be dignified with the word *croutons*).

"One of the antiseptic microbes in our bio-filters," Pippa said.

Eli's nose itched, as it hadn't since the first month after landing, when the micro-organisms of the bio-filter were newly germinated on his skin and in his gut and lungs.

"We're killing them with what keeps us safe here," Hen said. "Typical. So much for thorough pre-trade R & D."

Theo rubbed at his nose and frowned down unenthusiastically at his baked-bean and sardine stew. "This needs something." Then, with a smile that held no real humour, "Hey, Eli, pass me some irony, would ya? There's nothing like the taste of irony."

Hen snorted and pulled out a hip flask. He took a long swig, then offered it to Theo. "Wonder if Anion irony is poisonous to humans?"

"Why not? Just about everything else is." Theo took the flask and poured alcohol onto his stew, as though it were milk going onto cereal.

The blip in Theo's usually hopeful nature was understandable enough. Even before the Report had arrived and confirmed their worst fears, they'd been living with all the possible permutations of the situation long enough that the logic of it had become a well-worn mental groove (and when Pippa dropped the PalmPod into his outstretched hand, Eli could even admire the elegant inevitability of the Report's flow chart...

The bacteria indigenous to Anion are deadly to Humans

▼

Humans can only survive on Anion with a protective shield (bio-filter model 322A.v5)

▼

The company's bio-filter is made up of genetically engineered micro-organisms that live on the skin and in the gut of the host, which then neutralise the indigenous pathogens

▼

The DNA of the bio-filter's micro-organisms was incorrectly sequenced, and has proven deadly to the indigenous, sentient Anions

▼

Curing the Anions, if possible, is the ethically sound action, as it returns the eco-system to the status quo

▼

Without a cure, the Anions will soon suffer extinction (94% probability)

▼

To cure the Anions, an antibiotic must be deployed in order to kill the deadly micro-organism

…and all of that was fine, logical, irrefutable even, but it didn't address the main problem facing Eli and the rest of the crew: namely, that if the micro-organism was destroyed, the bio-filter would be compromised. Without the full protection of the bio-filter they couldn't survive on Anion; and the company wouldn't let them leave as long as the planet was under quarantine.

And that was that. The rock and the proverbial hard place.

There was really nothing else to discuss, at least until they knew for sure which way the company's ethics division was going to jump, and assuming a cure ever fell out of the sky).

"I wonder how long we'd last without our bio-filters?" Theo said, offering Eli the alcohol.

"Odds on we'll find out when they invent the bloody cure, won't we?" Eli replied. The moonshine felt like acid, burning his insides all the way down. "So what's the good news, Pip?"

"The good news?" Pippa held out her hand for the flask and took a long swallow before answering. "The company hasn't come up with a cure yet."

* * *

The Dreamer, Amadablam and Derodon arrived at the centre of the sacred ossuary many suns after the Gathering, when the heat of *anienai* felt like a punishment. The massive, weathered carapace of one of the Ancients lay all around them, arching into the sky if they looked up, and stretching out along the sands as far as the eye could see.

The Dreamer's breath rattled in her chest. Amadablam and Derodon carefully moved her into the shade cast by the jagged remains of the giant's thorax.

"What must we do, Dreamer?" asked Derodon.

"You must find chitin," she said. "Chitin that has never felt the bite of the suns." She pointed to the pick-axe, hatchet and spades that they had carried through the desert. "You will need to dig. And then you will need to cut away the dead layers."

Amadablam and Derodon took turns digging at the sand that had been wedged by raging windstorms into the nearest spiracle. Their bodies gleamed golden in the effort to regulate temperature, the oiled velvet surfaces reflecting light and flashing iridescently as they moved. Eventually, the heat became too much, and sweat rolled down the ridges of their faces and arms, until the handles of their tools felt like greased poles.

They dug until First Sun waned in the sky, before reaching unbleached chitin.

They hacked at it until Second Sun had dipped to twilight, and the sky was lit only by the broad, pale face of the Moon.

Finally, they reached chitin that glowed blue with the unextinguished remains of life. They fetched the Dreamer, who leaned over into the hole and sliced out a splinter no bigger than her hand. She pulled back carefully, holding the living chitin so tightly her fist was ridged with stress lines.

All three of them stared at the fragment.

"I can't believe I've lived to see one of the Ancients," said Amadablam.

"It's beautiful," said Derodon. "The honour of seeing it is worth the price."

"It's deadly," said the Dreamer. "Never forget it. We don't have time to waste gawping."

The Dreamer wrapped the chitin in a soft piece of sandfruit skin, and slid it into her motherhood pouch. Her hands trembled with the effort.

"Remember," she said. "To keep its strength, it must be kept out of the suns."

"We'll remember, Dreamer" said Derodon.

"How long before the contagion takes us?" asked Amadablam.

"Long enough to give it to the Humans," said the Dreamer, "but not much longer. We must lick salt every chance we get; it will delay the effects."

"Come then," said Amadablam. "We should leave."

Amadablam put her arm around the Dreamer, lending her support as they walked to their solarsleds. Derodon bent to pick up their tools.

"Leave the equipment, Derodon," said the Dreamer. "We won't need it anymore. There is only one more job to do before we rest."

Halfway back to Hantle, the Dreamer lay down to rest near a salt lick and didn't rouse. Amadablam and Derodon took the chitin fragment from her pouch and let the sands take her slight body.

* * *

It was not a scheduled Crash Day when the next message came. Eli knew it without checking his PalmPod; the days were no longer blurring together for him. They had sharp, defined edges made up of reconstituted chicken stew instead of chilli beans; a salt-pan survey rather than the painstaking square-by-square plant mapping of a knot of spindly desert forest; Theo describing Freddie's licorice gelato and not the way his mother's hair curled into ringlets in the damp, cool air of winter.

The message was short, to the point... *Drop AE4442, ETA 3 hours*.

When Theo leaned into the crate, he didn't find a packet of Reports. Just three dataSticks of instructions for setting up the components for a preliminary testing lab.

They slagged a new patch of glass that night, and started construction at dawn, under the faded sky lit only by the First Sun. Half-way through, just as they were sealing the last prefabricated wall into place, Theo stripped off his shirt. His skin looked smooth and soft, like velvet. He caught Eli staring at his stomach as they were lifting a roof segment (amazing he hadn't caught Eli at it before. Theo's skin was like art, dragging at Eli's attention... and, yes, maybe he'd wanted to be caught).

Theo had smiled. Winked. (And *caught* was a good word; Eli felt like he was enmeshed. He wasn't even sure, anymore, if he remembered what it felt like to be free.)

Later, in the bright light of mid-morning, as Second Sun rose, Eli and Theo sat atop a dune, facing away from camp (because the view of the camp was just too damn depressing); looking out over a dun-stubbled, rock-strewn sandfruit field; drinking Hen's moonshine (flavoured up with a good dollop of chocolate syrup, because that was the only way to make the stuff even halfway drinkable. It wasn't like there was decent ice-cream to put the syrup on, anyway. Reconstituted ice-cream was a travesty, there was really no other word for it) and singing half-remembered sea chanties.

Theo was covered up again, velvet skin safe behind the UV filter of his shirt, lean fingers gloved, face shadowed already by the broad brim of his hat. He reached for the bottle, snagging it away from Eli's unsober clasp (and was this how the Elizabethans felt? So used to constant constraint that even a brush of gloved fingers against a clothed arm felt like some wild romantic declaration of intent?), took a long gulp, then waved the bottle drunkenly at the endless stretch of Anion. "It's beautiful here, isn't it?"

Eli nodded (because anywhere could be beautiful, as long as you had the illusion you were free to leave), and found himself staring again at the familiar landscape of Theo's face as he said, "Yes."

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

"That's an absolutely appalling idea," said Amadablam. "I like it."

"It is appealing, isn't it?" Derodon replied. "Besides, if you fail, they might catch it from me anyway. This way we have two chances."

Amadablam didn't respond. She sat, looking down at the Humans' camp, rocking as she watched the spindly creatures go about their strange business.

"Should we really do this?" she asked. "We haven't even warned them that they have been named enemies of the tribes."

"It's not up to us," said Derodon. "The Gathering chose our path."

"But we're the ones who have to do it. The deaths of these people will be at our hands. Does that not make it our responsibility?"

"No," he replied. "You're not Amadablam right now, and I'm not Derodon, and they are not people. We are just the hands of Anion's will, and they are our enemy."

"But these Humans are not all of the Humans," said Amadablam. "They're Pippa and Hen and Eli and Theo. They're not even a tribe's worth of people, and they've tried to be friends to us. What good will killing them do? It won't cure the bane. It won't punish any of the people out there," she waved her hand at the sky, "who deserve to be punished. It might even make them angry, and they have those big machines that can eat the earth the way you or I would eat sandfruit. We think the bane is the worst death the Humans could inflict on us, but what if it's not, Derodon? What if killing them is a mistake?"

The both looked down at the camp. One of the Humans, the short one, Eli, was near the well, fiddling with the brim of the hat that blocked its soft, fleshy, alien face from the strength of the suns.

The scar on Amadablam's abdomen burned like a guilty conscience and she rubbed at it, feeling the spongy give of the strange clear sap that Eli had exuded from his gentle fingers when he'd healed her.

"We don't even know it will work," said Derodon at last. "Their bodies are so different to ours. If Anion's Gift isn't meant to be for them, then so be it. We will have done all we can. We should trust in Anion and the Gathering."

Amadablam slipped her hand into her pouch, and felt the sliver of chitin.

"You're right. It may not work," she said, but her voice sounded harsh, like the *caw* of a carrion bird carried on an endless khamsin wind, "and the word of the Gathering has always been enough. If we go against the will of the tribes, how else should we live?"

"How else should we die?" said Derodon. "Anion's Gift is the best way," and he *houghed* as he said it, the sound of the bane filling his words.

Amadablam groomed her own velvet in distress as she agreed. "Anion's Gift, then."

As Amadablam helped Derodon to his feet, the sun glanced off the patch of sand on his shoulder and the wound gleamed, for a moment, as though he was wearing a jewel.

* * *

Eli had run out of curses as he stopped, yet again, to re-adjust the brim of his hat, looping the chin-strap more firmly under his chin. The hat's elastic had gone at the start of the day, but he'd had no time to fix it (and how had time transformed from an endless moment into this series of hurdles he had to leap with barely a pause between?).

The crate of antibiotics was scheduled for drop in just over two hours and Eli couldn't get the laboratory's water supply running properly. There seemed to be some kind of fast-growing moss blocking the newly laid pipes. Hen had taken one look at the sludgy mess and labelled it a bio-hazard, not a mechanical error, and hence not his problem.

Now Hen was over on the roof of the new laboratory with Theo, running a final check on the hermetic seal. They worked together smoothly, Hen monitoring the building's internal air-pressure, sealant-gun in hand, while Theo tested each section for leaks.

Eli grabbed at the brim of his hat as another gust of wind threatened to pull it into the air above his head, like a stupid-looking mini-parachute (and when the recruiter had asked him if he understood the risks of a pre-colony survey job, he'd thought she was referring to heroic, or at least dramatic, sudden injury or death by alien means. Not crimes against interplanetary fashion, nor being stranded, undramatically, with a long, empty life stretching out ahead of him because of a bug it turns out they'd bought along on the expedition with them).

"Ouch," Theo yelped, wiping strands of sealant onto his shirt. A line along his exposed wrist puckered into a fake scar as the remaining sealant dried. "Ha ha, very bloody funny, Hen."

Hen looked entirely unrepentant.

Eli grinned. Somehow the recruiter had managed not to mention that heroically saving an entire sentient species might involve stinky moss and practical jokes with sealant guns too.

Heaven help the poor Anions.

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Derodon's wailing attracted most of the Humans. He managed to vomit on three of them, before they lifted him onto a stretcher and moved him to the field hospital they had built half way between their camp and the city of Hantle.

The lid of the Humans' well gave Amadablam a moment of trouble, but when she wrenched at the metal lock with all her strength it came free.

She dropped the sliver of chitin down into the water and refitted the lid.

"Anion's will," she murmured, before heading to the hospital to find Derodon.

* * *

On his way back to camp, after his evening check at the hospital, Eli wondered whether that proverb was right, and once you'd saved someone's life, you owned it. He wondered, too, what it meant if you saved the same person's life more than once; and what kind of karmic debt you'd end up carrying if you were inadvertently responsible for genocide. He wondered if any human medicines might bring down an Anion fever, and whether it was time yet to start trying something so desperate (whether it would ever be time for something that desperate).

Pippa met him at the edge of the camp. "How're things over there?"

Eli shook his head. "Derodon's worse, and Amadablam has the fever too."

They walked together towards the main building, their silence filled with unvoiced calculations.

Eli wasn't sure he'd made the right decision last time. He was, after all, a xeno-biologist, not a xeno-doctor (and perhaps he should have remembered that sooner rather than later).

It had seemed a simple enough decision to reconstruct Amadablam's smashed carapace, back when it had still seemed possible for the Trade Agreement to end up as a win-win deal (back before it had occurred to him, in the restless depths of a sleepless night, to wonder what the long-term consequences of his actions might be). The sealant was inert, safe enough, even though its manufacturer had never designed it for use in gluing together chitin (he'd assumed it was safe enough, and the tests he'd run later had all proven it. But still. Lab tests were never quite the same as a field test).

When they reached the building, Pippa stopped him at the doorway, her fingers gripping too hard around his shoulder. "I know upstairs wants the final tests on the cure done fast. But I want them done right. Don't take any shortcuts, Eli."

"I'll test it till it's limp," he replied. "No worries."

(The sealant had been safe, Eli was certain, but an antiseptic wouldn't have been, so he'd taken the risk and closed the wound dirty. He'd taken the risk because

Amadablam would definitely have died if he hadn't. The Anions had said so; they'd been preparing to hold the death vigil for her.)

"I know you'll do a good job," Pippa said, the lines of her face etched with new depths. "There's just so much riding on this."

Eli's shoulder didn't feel at all unburdened when she finally let go.

Inside the main building, Hen was seated at the table, trying to scrape oily black vomit off his left boot. Theo had already given up, throwing his own wrecked pair into the incinerator, and issuing himself with the last pair of size eights in the inventory.

"That's disgusting," Theo said, frowning at Hen. "Do you have to do that when we're about to eat?"

"Piss off." Hen coughed up a blob of phlegm, spat it onto the boot he was working on and rubbed it in. It didn't seem to make any difference.

Eli took the seat furthest from Hen and poured himself a mug of coffee (and when had he started to associate the slight bitterness of coffee with worry?).

"What the fuck are we going to do if the cure works?" Hen asked, frowning at the boot in his hands.

"We'll think of something," said Pippa, picking Hen's other boot up off her chair with the tips of two fingers and tossing it onto the floor.

"Bull," Hen replied. "We can't live in environment suits until the bastards upstairs get around to lifting quarantine. With that kind of use, sooner or later the suits'll malfunction and leave us totally screwed. You know it, Pip, so don't treat us like mushrooms. Just tell us if you have any fucking clue what we're gonna do."

"The million dollar question," Theo said, around a mouthful of stew he was eating like it was his last meal.

"No it's not," said Eli, looking down at his hands so he didn't have to make eye contact with any of them. "The million dollar question is: does it matter what happens to us, if it saves the Anions?"

(And he hadn't even stopped to think that his hands were covered in the bacteria of his bio-filter when he'd sealed Amadablam's wound. And it probably hadn't made any difference. There was no proof that the vector could be passed on that way. He'd run tests. Simulated the conditions with tissue samples. No proof at all.)

"Well, call me a selfish bastard," said Hen, as he gave his boot a particularly vigorous swipe, "but it sure as shit matters to me."

Pippa turned her most unamused frown on Hen, not that he noticed; he was staring bemusedly at the heel of his much-abused boot, which had just split cleanly away from the sole.

* * *

Once the Eli Human had left the hospital in charge of the tribe's Healers for the night, the tribers made an impromptu Gathering around Derodon and Amadablam.

"Is it done?" asked Palatea, one of the elders of Hantle.

"It is done," said Amadablam. "You shouldn't come near us. We've touched Anion's Gift. We carry the contagion."

Palatea laughed, but it quickly turned into a cough and blood flecked her mouth.

When she had calmed enough to speak again, she said, "The bane has us already. What will it matter if Anion's Gift takes us first?"

"At least Anion's Gift brings a proper triber's death," said a gaunt grandfather of the desert. "The bane shames our bodies," he said, pointing to the weeping ulcers on his legs.

"Galamon," said Palatea to a young boy, "go to Hantle and walk the streets with the news. Let everyone know, especially the desert tribers. They may want to take the news home, while they are still able to travel."

The news spread quickly through the city, and many tribers stopped at the hospital to pay their respects, before walking out into the desert to spread the word, along with the quick, merciful contagion of Anion's Gift.

* * *

Derodon died seven days later (or fourteen suns, as the Anions would count it). He died within hours of Eli's completion of the final laboratory trials.

That evening, after First Sun had set, Eli had gone to the hospital in order to ask permission to run the first field trials on Derodon and the rapidly-weakening Amadablam.

He had been met by silence, as the unspeaking participants of Derodon's death vigil refused to acknowledge him. Even Amadablam, wracked with fever and desperately close to death, had refused to meet his gaze, refused to speak, refused the trial.

As he made his way back to camp, he wondered what the company ethicists would make of this; whether they'd decide permission wasn't required, or whether they'd think acting without consent was a worse breach of trust than accidental genocide (and he wondered if the Anions would even understand the distinction, the dilemma he was facing, when all they wanted was for the whole human race to go away and leave them alone, and really, who could blame them for that?).

Theo, stripped down to his underwear, met Eli at the edge of the camp.

"Strip," Theo ordered, taking the medical kit out of Eli's unresisting grip.

"What?" Eli asked, feeling blood rush to his face.

"Take off your clothes."

Eli darted a look around the camp, wondering where the others were. "Why?" he managed, despite the sudden dryness of his mouth.

Theo smiled. "We took a vote while you were off sweet-talking the natives. We're gonna play nude French cricket 'til dark. So get your gear off." He turned and headed towards the stretch of flattened ground that had officially been designated the temporary landing field, back when drop ships had occasionally come in closer than the ionosphere.

"Nude French cricket?" Eli echoed (because he honestly hadn't thought life could get any stranger than it already was, which just went to show that he really was as clueless as he'd always suspected about the ways of the universe).

"Feel the sun on our faces and the wind in our hair, yeah?" Theo said.

Eli felt the caress of the rising breeze pull at his clothes, and then he understood (understood that he might never again feel the touch of wind against his skin, the kiss of sun, and if this was his last chance he wasn't going to miss it over something as unimportant as embarrassment). He started to unbutton his shirt as he followed Theo towards the field.

A few paces on, Theo stopped walking, and Eli, focused on unbuttoning, almost ran into him. Eli didn't even have time to murmur an apology before Theo dumped the medkit in the sand, turned, wrapped his arms around Eli, and hugged him tight.

"Want to come walking with me later tonight?" Theo whispered, his breath a warm tickle in Eli's ear. "In the moonlight?"

And maybe Eli was clueless about the ways of the universe, but when it came to Theo he knew more than he'd ever known about another human being. Theo's body was tense beneath his touch, and that was all the confirmation Eli needed to be quite sure that neither moonlight nor walking were the important parts of the offer being made.

Hen won the game of French cricket. He had a wrist-flick technique that drove the ball into the sand too fast for any of them to catch.

Afterwards, they lay sprawled on the sand, panting, like a giant sixteen-limbed starfish; Theo's head on Eli's belly, Eli's head resting on Pippa thigh, Pippa leaning against Hen, who was propped up on the tennis racket, which he'd wedged head-first into the base of a dune.

"Do you know how much each of the mining droids is worth?" Hen asked, apropos of nothing.

"Should I care?" asked Theo, sliding a hand over Eli's knee.

"Depends on if you want to know what three billion dollars looks like," Hen said.

Eli tried to imagine what three billion dollars would buy. He stopped trying when the list topped out at a mansion on Earth, a top-of-the-line VR unit, a Ferrari in each colour of the rainbow, and he still had change over from the first billion.

"You think the company did it on purpose," Pippa said, after a long silence. "Infected the Anions."

Hen slapped at a sand fly. "*Terra nullius* would make mining here a hell of a lot easier."

"But the company sent down the cure," Theo pointed out.

"I couldn't get the Anions to talk to me," Eli said, looking up at the stars and trying to spot Sol, even though he knew it would be just a faint speck to the unaided eye. "I don't think they're going to give consent for releasing the cure."

The wind picked up a little, stinging them with a rattle of sand.

"The company couldn't have known that," Theo said, a protective hand over his eyes. "Could they?"

Pippa disentangled herself from the group and stood up, brushing sand off her legs. "The company did a cultural survey before setting up the Trade Agreement. That's where our Preliminary Field Guide came from: the survey's action-and-response analysis." She held out a hand to help Hen up.

"I say fuck 'em all to hell," said Hen, making an *ooph*-ing noise as he got to his feet.

"Which is probably why you're not a company policy writer," Theo said, *sotto voce*.

"I'm sick of being a company patsy," Hen continued, ignoring Theo. "I'm sick of toeing their line. I really don't want to die any time soon; and I sure as shit don't want to die *here*; but if I'm gonna die here anyway, I don't want to have to do it while watching every last Anion cack it, just for the sake of the company's long-term bloody profit margin. I don't care if the Anions consent or not. I say we do it."

"I agree," said Pippa. "I think it's going to be a lose-lose situation for everyone but the company if we don't."

They all looked at Eli, who had no idea what to say (and why did it feel as though they expected his word have special weight? He wasn't an ethicist. All he really knew about was biology, and some days he wasn't even too sure about that).

"I don't want to be a murderer," Theo said, the expression of worry on his face exaggerated by the silver and shadow of the uncertain light.

Theo's worry seemed to have osmotic force, seeping into Eli where Theo's hand rested against his knee.

(And, after all, Eli never had been able to refuse Theo anything he really wanted.)

"It's our fault they're sick," Theo said, his voice an uncertain whisper, just as it had been when he'd spoken, earlier, of walking in the moonlight. "I think, if we can cure the Anions, then we have to do it. Even if it means we don't get to go home."

(And maybe the decision wasn't so hard after all. Maybe there wasn't any decision to make. Maybe a decision this important wasn't really about individual choice. Maybe it was just a matter of consensus, because in Eli's opinion there was no right or wrong here; there was just a bad choice and a worse one.)

"I suppose," Eli said, feeling giddy, as though none of this could really be happening, "we could put it in their drinking water."

Pippa nodded, as though that was that.

Consensus.

"Good idea, Eli," she said. "We'll do it tomorrow night."

* * *

Amadablam thought she was dreaming at first; dreaming that Anion's Gift had caused Eli to grow a new skin of sand-coloured chitin. It was comforting to think that Anion had taken pity on the Humans and made them more like real people.

Her comfort didn't last. After a long time spent staring at the circle of hard air that covered Eli's face, her fogged mind finally understood that it wasn't chitin at all; it was just some kind of strange clothing.

The Human's fingers were clumsy as it pressed a wet sponge against her mouth, forcing her to swallow a mouthful of bitter water.

Then she slid away into dreams again.

When next she opened her eyes—much later, for the shadows had fallen across the sliver of ground she could see outside the doorway—her head felt clearer and the pain less.

Eli was still there, watching her. This time she clutched at the Human's hand, stopping the sponge before it reached her mouth.

"You shouldn't be here," she said, her scar aching, the taste of guilt more bitter in her mouth than the aftertaste of stale water. "You shouldn't help me."

Eli stared at her, and its face, behind the strange window, was streaked with light and had never looked more alien.

"I know," Eli said, letting the sponge fall onto the floor.

Its voice was muted and distant, its strange twanging accent even harder than usual to decipher.

"I didn't mean for this to happen," Eli said, sliding pretend-chitin fingers between hers, "I'm sorry, Amadablam. I'm so sorry."

And the Human's eyes were sweating oil as though the winds were full of lashing sand.

* * *

Amadablam died three days later, her fever easing only briefly despite the administration of the cure.

A week after her death, the hospital was full of the sick, more so than it had ever been.

Eli made sure that they all drank as much water as they could manage, even when he had to coax them to suck from a wet sponge, which was no easy task with his fingers made clumsy and cumbersome by the gloves of his environment suit.

Despite his efforts, the death-rate continued to climb.

* * *

Two weeks after Amadablam's death, Eli finally succumbed to his worst fears. Despite the silent disapproval of the Anions keeping vigil, he collected tissue samples from the dead.

The new laboratory was the only hermetically sealed and airlocked building in the camp, so out of necessity it had become their living quarters, now that they couldn't rely on their bio-filers for protection. Eli set up a new lab in their former sleeping quarters. He spent a day scavenging through the equipment they'd junked when they'd refitted the lab, until he'd found everything he needed.

And then he began to run tests.

* * *

Eli's eyes ached.

He'd run the tests three times, and the result, as impossible as it seemed, remained the same.

He lifted a hand to rub away the tiredness that was making it so hard to concentrate, and it *whopped* uselessly against the faceplate of his environment suit.

"What's up, doc?" came Theo's cheery voice over the suit's radio.

Eli spun around, startled, and even after he stopped, the world kept spinning.

"Eli?" Theo grabbed him before he toppled over. "Hey! When was the last time you took a break?"

Eli shrugged, but the padded shoulders of the environment suit barely moved. "I ate a sandwich at lunch time."

"Really? What fillings did it have?"

"Vegemite?" Eli hazarded. "And cheese?"

"Liar." Theo lifted an eyebrow. "You're totally hopeless, you know that?"

"Yes." Eli nodded and the world did another pirouette. "I'm hopeless. Totally devoid of hope."

Theo made a *tch*-ing noise, and then, with a tug, got Eli moving towards the door. "*Definitely* time for a break!"

He kept his arm firmly around Eli's waist all the way across camp and into the laboratory's airlock. Once inside, he propped Eli up against a wall, and started the decontamination cycle. As soon as the all-clear buzzer sounded, he began stripping off Eli's environment suit.

"You're not going to help them if you make yourself sick, you know."

Eli shrugged, but let himself be manhandled, then watched, struggling to keep his eyes open, as Theo efficiently stripped off his own environment suit.

Pippa looked up from her PalmPod as Theo helped Eli through the inner airlock.

"Ah, the prodigal returns," she said. "Tell me you have good news!"

Theo glared at her as he manoeuvered Eli onto a chair. "Can't it wait? Look at him."

"That doesn't matter," Eli said, collapsing into the chair. "It needed to be done. We had to know for sure."

Pippa's expression turned grim. "There really is a second vector, then?"

Eli nodded. "It's definitely not from the bio-filter this time." He slumped forward, resting his head on the table in front of him, and let his eyes slide closed. It felt like half the desert was lodged beneath his eyelids. "It looks native. But why it should spontaneously arise in the environment *now*… I have no idea."

"One fucking guess." Hen looked up from his workbench, where he was running a maintenance check on the spare environment suits. "The company profit-margin strikes again."

"Or," said Eli, "I could have missed something during the tests. Made a mistake."

For a long moment, the air-conditioner's *whirr* was the only sound. Theo rested a hand on Eli's shoulder.

"No, Eli," said Pippa, pinching the bridge of her nose. "It's not you. A second vector means it's not you."

"Whose fault it is doesn't matter anyway," Eli said. "The Anions are dying too fast and there's nothing we can do to help them."

"And," Hen added, "I reckon we can say goodbye to the company lifting quarantine too."

"They won't while there's spontaneously mutating pathogens down here," Eli agreed.

Theo frowned. "So what do we do now?"

Eli lifted a leaden hand, and rested it on top of Theo's.

Pippa shrugged. "Sweet bugger all."

"But there must be something…"

"Nope," said Hen, as he carefully propped the sealant gun in its holder and walked over to sit next to Eli. "We're totally stuffed."

* * *

It was impossible to tell exactly when the last Anion died, but Eli estimated it was about eighteen months after he'd officially discovered the second disease vector.

Long before that, during a supply drop, the company also dropped three automated warning-buoys into geo-synchronous orbit. All three buoys broadcast the same looped message:

WARNING. TOTAL QUARANTINE ZONE. EXTREME BIO-HAZARD. DO NOT APPROACH. AUTHORISED BY PACKERPIONEER EARTHCORP, 18102184.

* * *

Eli sat on a sandridge overlooking Hantle, the last city of the Anion tribes.

It was the start of the first of Anion's two summer seasons, *ienai*, and it was hot, of course, even inside his environment suit, but the worst of the day's heat was over. First Sun was just dipping below the horizon.

Eli stared at the curves and arches of the empty buildings. They were so alien; the lines of the city were rounded and plump, like giant sandfruits, and it was hard to see how the buildings stayed upright with no straight lines to brace them.

A shadow fell across his faceplate.

"I thought I'd find you here," Theo said, sitting down next to Eli, and draping an arm across his shoulders.

"You know me," Eli said (because no-one else knew him the way Theo did, and no-one else ever would).

They sat together for a long time in companionable silence. There was nothing to interrupt them; nothing pressing for them to do.

Finally, as Second Sun sank, in its fiery, inevitable way, towards nadir, Theo touched his helmet to Eli's, so that they could speak easily without using the radios.

"Come on," Theo said. "Let's go home."

And for just a moment, as Eli sat there, basking in Theo's endless heat, he could almost taste the sweet, melted chill of ice-cream on his tongue.

Space Opera

Definition and Function

Introduction

The Space Opera

[T]he quintessential space opera, George Lucas's film *Star Wars* (1977), […] features a spaceship shifting into hyperspace, a gigantic space station called the Death Star, two friendly robot companions, and the story of a group of rebel forces opposing an evil space empire.

(Westfahl, "Beyond" 180)

What is space opera?

This simple question was the beginning. It sparked what would end up being a five-year quest for a greater understanding of the forms and functions of stories bearing the rather insulting sobriquet of *space opera*, invoking, as it does, expectations of the melodramatic soap opera. It also sparked a desire to see if I could write a space opera that would not only answer this question, but that would fulfill the primary goal of doctoral research by contributing something new to the field of human knowledge, namely the fictions presented in "Falling Stars: A Spectrum of Speculative Fiction."

These lofty goals had an inauspicious enough beginning. My curiosity was first aroused while reading one of the examiners' reports on my Honours Thesis, which stated:

While Cupitt explains the terms and boundaries of genre [science fiction] well, in a fulsome sense, there is one occasion when an assumption is made that the readership will understand the sub-genre—of "space opera." (Report 1)

Upon reading that statement, I remember thinking, "Of course! How could I have missed *that*?" The phrase "space opera" had seemed so self-evident while

writing my Honours Thesis that I had never given it a thought. In hindsight, its meaning suddenly seemed anything but self-evident.

My preliminary research, in the year before applying to undertake a doctorate in creative arts, did not satisfy. There was, I discovered, hardly any critical discussion focused specifically on the genre of space opera (if it even was a genre in its own right), although critics did quite commonly bandy the term around when analysing specific texts. They too, it seemed, thought the term self-evident, and had spared it little thought.

After considering the scanty evidence, I realised what I had found: a gap in the literature. All that remained to decide was the approach to take in finding an answer; and, because my first love is fiction, the choice to attempt a fictional answer was soon made.

As this is a creative arts dissertation, it takes two paths towards answering the question: What is space opera? Both paths make the same argument: that space opera is not a genre in its own right, but rather a hybrid form arising from the intergeneric space between science fiction and fantasy, and sharing features of both.

First (and primarily), the creative component of the dissertation offers a practical demonstration of this hybrid form. "Falling Stars: A Spectrum of Speculative Fiction" includes fantasy stories, a space opera novella, and science fiction stories, thus highlighting key generic similarities and differences that occur along the spectrum of The Fantastic, with particular reference to the major tropes of the space opera.

Second, the exegesis, "Space Opera: Definition and Function," offers a critical context through which to view the creative component of the dissertation. For this reason, the exegesis should not be read as a standard doctoral thesis writ small. It does not attempt to cover the topic of the space opera in exhaustive detail—there is not (ironically enough) the space in which to do so. Instead, it focuses on the key critical conversations, theories and issues, relevant to an understanding of space opera as a hybrid form. The exegesis is designed to illuminate the answers and proofs already offered by the fiction.

Space Opera: Definition and Function

There are several key issues explored within this exegesis, including the use of space operatic expectations within the novella *Falling Stars*, and space opera's definition,

major themes and tropes, most commonly used fictional modes, relationship to fantasy and science fiction, and function.

Before embarking on this exploration, it is necessary to review the significant literature on space opera. Following this, I will introduce the primary example of space opera used throughout the exegesis, the *Star Wars* films, and explain the scope of the exegesis, chapter by chapter.

Literature Review

The term space opera was coined in 1941 by science fiction writer Wilson Tucker, as a space-filler in his fanzine *Le Zombie*. He wrote:

> In these hectic days of phrase-coining we offer one. Westerns are called horse opera, the morning housewife tear-jerkers are called soap opera. For the hacky, grinding, stinking, outworn spaceship yarn, or world-saving for that matter, we offer "space opera." (7)

To put this into historical perspective, in the entry under "opera" in *The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology* (Barnhart 729), the phrase "soap opera," in relation to daytime radio drama, appeared in 1939, while "horse opera," in reference to westerns, was coined in about 1941 (although the phrase itself is older, being used as a colloquial American name for rodeo-style circuses). "Space opera," however, is not referred to anywhere in the entry. Likely this is due to the fact that much of the early writing about science fiction (sf) texts was undertaken in amateur magazines such as Wilson Tucker's, and so not generally available to mainstream scholars (Wolfe xxv-xxvi). Despite the term's absence in *Barnhart*, which was published in 1988, "space opera" was considered important enough to be used as one of the main categorising terms in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction,* published just five years later in 1993 (Clute and Nicholls xxx).

By the time Tucker coined "space opera" in 1941, the sub-genre had existed in a recognisable form for about a decade in the pulp sf magazines (Westfahl, "Beyond" 177-8). General consensus places its beginning with E. E. "Doc" Smith's 1928 serial "The Skylark of Space," published in *Amazing Stories* (Clute and Nicholls 1139). The derogatory overtones of the phrase "space opera" are obvious, with its exploitation of the connotations that belong to the phrase "soap opera," and, indeed,

the critical literature is filled with scathing condemnations of the form. William Hardesty, for example, says:

> In space opera, the meticulous deduction of a world, its creatures and its societies is blithely ignored; the writers simply provide any and all elements they need for their plots without regard to plausibility […]. Melodrama is the essence of the space opera, suspense its defining mood. (64)

Given this scorn, it could easily be imagined that space opera was and is an unpopular form, but, in fact, Patricia Monk argues, after extensively sampling the stories in science fiction magazines, that "space opera has been and still is the most popular form of science fiction" ("Not Just" 295). Regardless of its popularity, it is likely due to space opera's hackneyed reputation that little comprehensive research has been undertaken by either mainstream or sf critics. This lack of critical attention was recognised in the 1990s by both Patricia Monk ("Not Just" 296-7) and Gary Westfahl ("Beyond" 176), in two essays which are central to the chief critical conversation about space opera.

This conversation was begun by Brian Aldiss in 1974, when he edited a series of space opera anthologies: *Space Opera* (1974), *Space Odysseys* (1974), *Evil Earths* (1975), *Galactic Empires*, Volumes 1 and 2 (1976), and *Perilous Planets* (1978). His introductory essay within the volume *Space Opera* put forward several ideas which have been used as a springboard for debate by later critics, including: the notion that space opera is a sub-genre of science fiction; the function of space opera as fun; its importance as frontier fiction; its link to fairy tales; its focus on a nostalgic future; and a description of its key tropes.

In the introduction to *Space Opera*, Aldiss begins by placing space opera firmly as a sub-genre of science fiction:

> Even in the period when magazine science fiction was a despised genre, existing without the aid of outside critics and chroniclers, it contained within it a renegade sub-genre: space opera. (9)

I will discuss the idea of space opera as a sub-genre of science fiction in Chapter 2.

Aldiss also distinguishes the primary function of space opera from that of science fiction, saying that, "[s]cience fiction is for real. Space opera is for fun" (*Space Opera* 9). "Real" in this context meaning that science fiction is working as "part of the opening-up operation of science" (*Space Opera* 9). Here we see that even Aldiss, a critic who obviously finds some value in space opera as a form, imbues his commentary of it with scorn, even while making serious points. And he is not alone. Westfahl, in an essay I shall discuss in more depth later, also concludes that space opera continues to thrive because it offers "temporary freedom" and a "vacation" from the serious aspirations of science fiction ("Beyond" 183). This attitude leads me to wonder why these critics choose to imply that "fun" cannot be "for real," an idea I shall explore in Chapter 6.

Westfahl certainly seems to think it is self-evident that the fun of space opera denies any other purpose. Aldiss, however, is not quite so dismissive. Within the discourse on the value and nature of science fiction, there has long been a debate between the importance of scientific ideas on the one hand, and literary technique on the other (Westfahl, "Beyond" 177). Of the two criteria, many science fiction critics have weighted the scales in favour of ideas over technique (for an excellent overview of the many debates, including that of ideas versus technique, arising out of attempts to define sf see Clute and Nicholls's entry "definitions of sf," 311-4, and the related entry on "fantasy," 407-11). Space opera, then, is commonly criticised on two fronts: both for its focus on "fun" and corresponding lack of scientific rigour, and the melodramatic quality of its writing. Aldiss agrees with the first criticism: "Space opera was heady, escapist stuff, charging on without overmuch regard for logic or literacy, while often throwing off great images, excitements, and aspirations" (*Space Opera* 9).

Interestingly, Aldiss disagrees, at least in part, with the second criticism, suggesting that space opera does, in fact, have value as a narrative form despite its lack of regard for literacy. In particular, that it has value as part of the long tradition of epic and mythic storytelling (a primary feature of which is the use of formula, especially in the oral tradition out of which these forms arose):

> Nostalgia aside, the [space opera] stories are one of the repositories of narrative
> art; furthermore, they say a great deal about the fundamental hopes and fears
> when confronted by the unknowns of distant frontiers, in a tradition stretching

back at least as far as *The Odyssey*. They are, in their way, abstracts of the same impulses that lie behind traditional fairy tales. (*Space Opera* 9-10)

This is interesting on a number of counts. Not only does it support the idea of a strong relationship between space opera and fantasy (in the form of fairy tales), but it puts forward the idea of space opera as frontier fiction without the usual denigratory overtones typical in descriptions like "westerns in space" (Wolfe 121). In fact, by comparing space opera to *The Odyssey*, Aldiss is allowing the "sub-genre" a greater seriousness than one might have been led to expect, given his earlier claim that "space opera is for fun," but not "for real" (*Space Opera* 9).

Although Aldiss declines to offer a definition of space opera within the essay, he does offer a detailed description of the key tropes:

And, analogously with opera itself, space opera has certain conventions which are essential to it, which are, in a way, its *raison d'etre*; one may either like or dislike those conventions, but they cannot be altered except at expense to the whole. Ideally, the Earth must be in peril, there must be a quest and a man to match the mighty hour. That man must confront aliens and exotic creatures. Space must flow past the ports like wine from a pitcher. Blood must run down the palace steps, and ships launch out into the louring dark. There must be a woman fairer than the skies and a villain darker than a Black Hole. And all must come right in the end. (*Space Opera* 10)

This description has not been bettered, and is still as accurate today as it was in 1974. However, it is worth noting that this description does not work as a definition of space opera, as it is possible to think of examples that do not contain all its elements, even if interpreting them fairly liberally. For instance, Anne McCaffrey's *The Ship Who Sang* (1969) contains no man to match the mighty hour, or woman fairer than the skies, and in both Iain M. Banks's *Consider Phlebas* (1987) and the film *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), all does not come right in the end. Furthermore, not all of these elements, as Patricia Monk points out, are exclusive to space opera, as "the list of stipulations does not […] include anything that would qualify as a *difference*—an attribute that would distinguish space opera from science fiction" (Response 353).

The final point of significance raised by Aldiss in this essay is that space opera offers us, "the future in space, seen mistily through the eyes of yesterday" (*Space Opera* 10). The idea of the nostalgic future is one I shall discuss in Chapter 5, along with the related notion of the galactic empire.

After the publication of Aldiss's series of anthologies, the critical discussion of space opera stalled for some time, despite the establishment of a substantial body of science fiction criticism throughout the 70s. During this period, several volumes offering definitions of key science fictional terms were published, such as Brian Aldiss's *Billion Year Spree* (1973), and Peter Nicholls's *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia* (1979). However, the most influential definition of space opera was not offered until 1986, by Gary K. Wolfe, in *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy:*

> A term borrowed from Fandom […]. Sometimes called adventure science fiction or Science Adventure, space operas are generally fast-paced intergalactic adventures on a grand scale, most closely associated with E. E. Smith, Edmond Hamilton, and the early Jack Williamson. Often characterised as a western in space or "straight fantasy in science fiction drag" (Norman Spinrad 34), space opera may be either a historical or a generic term; contemporary films such as *Star Wars* have been labeled space operas, as have more complex works such as Cecilia Holland's 1976 novel *Floating Worlds*. (120-1)

This contains two points of particular interest. First, *Star Wars* is one of the examples chosen. Second, and more importantly, Spinrad's witty observation (which suggests that space operas are fantasy stories which deploy the iconic tropes of science fiction) is an idea I have returned to over and over while thinking about the nature of space opera. That Wolfe should offer a definition which points out the links between science fiction and fantasy within the space opera is not, perhaps, surprising, given that in his introductory essay to *Critical Terms* he talks of the increasing need for science fiction and fantasy scholarship to "speak to each other about works they have in common as well as about common methodological and theoretical problems" (xiv). For this reason, I think that Wolfe's definition potentially offers a more

complex theoretical position than Spinrad's deliberately flippant and simplistic comment might suggest, as I shall discuss in Chapters 2 and 3.

In 1992, four years after the publication of Wolfe's *Critical Terms*, space opera suddenly became a hot topic when Patricia Monk published "Not Just 'Cosmic Skullduggery': A Partial Reconsideration of Space Opera" in *Extrapolation*. Within this essay, Monk is primarily interested in identifying the patterns of bias within the space opera, and mapping them to the literary modes from which they derive. By taking this approach, she redirects the focus of inquiry away from the question, *what* is space opera? and towards the question, *why* is space opera?

This approach differs significantly from either Aldiss's prescriptive discussion of space opera as a sub-genre of science fiction, or Wolfe's definition which places space opera as a mostly homogeneous historical body of work and/or genre.

Monk's reasons for choosing a modal approach—as opposed to a generic approach—focused on authorial attitudinal bias, are twofold. First, she rejects the idea of considering space opera as a sub-genre of science fiction on technical grounds:

> Moreover, even with neutrality [from space opera's pejorative reputation] established, the problems of discussing an undefined subgenre (space opera) of a genre (science fiction) itself undefined (or at least without an established critical infrastructure) would not be significantly reduced, since the characteristics of space opera are—no more than the characteristics of science fiction at large—not easily described within a single critical theory and vocabulary, and some of them are shared with other story types. If space opera is a subgenre, it is a subgenre that is entitled, at the very least, to its own critical vocabulary and standards. ("Not Just" 300)

Second, Monk contends that trying to establish a formal definition of space opera is not an effective solution:

> The effective way to proceed with a discussion of space opera is to abandon definition on the grounds that space opera is not susceptible of definition, being neither static nor monolithic. It is not a collection of texts but an attitudinal bias, and its literary expression reveals an authorial mindset which sees the

extraterrestrial universe in holistic terms as both knowable and manageable,
just as the writers of the models from which it derives had seen the terrestrial
world. The space opera bias is betrayed by the monomythic romance mode [in
Northrop Frye's sense], action-adventure plot, emphatic closure, optimism,
social naïveté, mimeticism (in Frye's sense of the term), mix of entertainment
and instruction, maximal encoding, fudge factors, minimal proleptic continuity,
conflict (human/human or alien/human) in both stories and subsequently
novels. ("Not Just" 300)

Monk's essay recognises the difficulty of generating a formal definition for
space opera that is both inclusive of all space opera texts and generally acceptable to
critics and, for that reason, offers the alternative strategy of modal analysis.
Interestingly, although Monk's emphasis has changed, like Aldiss, her attempt to
explain space opera ends up as a checklist of the key features, albeit made up of
modal strategies rather than of major tropes. Like Aldiss's list, each item is not
exclusive to space opera, which, admittedly, is not Monk's claim; in fact, her point is
that space opera borrows its form, and hence its biases, from pre-existing literary
modes (an issue I shall discuss in Chapters 3 and 5). Also like Aldiss's list, it is
possible to think of space operas which do not map to every item on Monk's list. For
instance, optimism is not a key feature of Iain M. Banks's *Consider Phlebas*, which
contains central themes of pessimism and nihilism. The failure of Monk's proposed
strategy to include all space opera texts is one of the chief criticisms that Westfahl
makes of Monk's work, as I shall discuss in more detail below. Finally, Monk's
central premise, that space opera is underpinned by the attitude that the universe is
both knowable and manageable by humans, is not solely a theme of space opera.
This colonial attitude towards space exploration is also found within many science
fiction texts, not to mention within the discourse surrounding much of the real space
race; I discuss the interaction of these fictional and non-fictional discourses on space
travel within Chapter 4.

The first response to Monk's paper came from Brian Aldiss, in the form of a
letter to *Extrapolation*, in which he argues that his description of space opera does
work as a definition, because it was, in fact, successfully used as one in a court of
law (Letter 352). Aldiss is referring to a case in which Lucasfilm and Fox sued
Universal, arguing that the film *Battlestar Galactica* (1978) infringed the copyright

of *Star Wars: A New Hope* (Aldiss and Wingrove 342). This is perhaps the most intriguing event in the entire debate about space opera, for how often does a practical application of literary theory occur? I discuss some of the theoretical issues suggested by this court case in Chapter 2.

Monk's response to Aldiss points out that the court case is irrelevant in terms of critical analysis or theory, an academically valid, if unimaginative, reading of the issue. Her criticism of Aldiss's description/definition of space opera is also sound (as I have discussed above). However, it is interesting to note that in the final paragraph of her response, Monk states that "[i]n my article, I deliberately avoid definition of space opera" (Response 353), which echoes uncannily with Aldiss's earlier statement, "I resist the temptation to define space opera" (*Space Opera* 10). Like Aldiss, too, Monk then *does* offer a description/definition, which is a restatement of her list of modal strategies/attitudinal bias, but couched within limitations:

> If, however, I were to be pressed to define it, I might begin by hypothesizing that space opera is a subgenre (species) of science fiction (genus, the genre), incorporating all the attributes (properties and differences) of science fiction— however those might be defined—but distinguished by its incorporation of [the list of attributes cited earlier] […]. I could only float this, however, as a logically valid *definition* of space opera if a logically valid definition of science fiction already existed. As matters stand, I would have to propose it myself— and perhaps, in the circumstances, I might even suppose that I should. (Response 353)

As one of the goals I set for this dissertation was the articulation of a definition of space opera, this trend by critics in refusing to offer a definition, which is then followed up by a problematic description, rather set me quivering in my boots. Despite my trepidation, and the very valid concerns Monk raises about the lack of definition for science fiction (and, I might add, for fantasy), I *have* offered a definition for space opera, which can be found in Chapter 2.

The next response to Monk's essay was given by Gary Westfahl, in "Beyond Logic and Literacy: The Strange Case of Space Opera." Westfahl's essay is not actually a rebuttal of Monk, but rather an exploration of his own ideas about space opera. However, he begins by debating Monk's conclusion about space opera being

"not a collection of texts, but an attitudinal bias" (qtd. in Westfahl 176), on two fronts. First, on the score that Monk didn't engage sufficiently with the "fact that science fiction commentators have almost universally regarded space opera as a subcategory of their literature" (176). Second, that the attitudinal bias that Monk identifies—

> "an authorial mindset which sees the extraterrestrial universe in holistic terms as both knowable and manageable"—can be found in many science fiction texts that are manifestly not examples of space opera, while texts accepted as space opera are not always conspicuous in displaying that attitude; thus, the usefulness of "bias" as a definition of space opera seems questionable. (176)

Westfahl's rejection of Monk's argument is problematic, in that after stating his objections he does not support them. The two points comprising his first criticism, that commentators have generally considered space opera to be a sub-genre of sf, and that Monk should have addressed this issue more thoroughly before moving on to another approach, are well made. However, Westfahl does not go on to conduct such an assessment. Instead, he chooses to work from the unexamined assumption that the science fiction commentators are right and that space opera is a sub-genre of science fiction. Having pointed out the problem, this hardly seems a reasonable course to take without at least acknowledging that he has side-stepped the issue.

My own approach is not so radical as Monk's; I see a usefulness in the idea of genre that transcends the difficulty in defining it. Nor is my approach as uncritical as Westfahl's. While I do not undertake a full historical assessment of the merits of previous commentators' views on space opera as sub-genre, I do address the issue of genre as a tool of critical inquiry. I make my case for considering space opera as an inter-generic, hybrid form of both science fiction and fantasy in Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

Westfahl's second criticism of Monk is also problematic. He rejects "bias" as a method of defining space opera, yet then goes on to define space opera using exactly that criterion, albeit a different bias than the one suggested by Monk. Westfahl's theory privileges a reader-response bias in comparison to Monk's use of bias arising from authorial mode; he argues that the negative reaction of commentators towards science fiction texts can be used to define them as space operas. This is clearly not a

workable definition, as there are texts recognised as space operas which have been critically acclaimed, such as Dan Simmons's *Hyperion* (1989), as well as texts which are not space operas which have been denigrated—in fact, there has been a long tradition of denigrating science fiction *in toto* within mainstream publications. To be fair, Westfahl is specifically privileging science fiction commentators within his argument, but does so based on the assumption that they can be easily told apart from mainstream critics. While that was undoubtedly the case before science fiction found a place within the academy, it is no longer true.

Despite the problems with Westfahl's criticisms of Monk's argument, Westfahl's own argument does offer some cogent and convincing points, although as a whole I find it limited in that it argues for a negative definition—what space opera isn't.

The main contention of Westfahl's paper is that while space opera uses science-fictional iconography and tropes, its core purpose is an inversion of science fiction's:

> space opera is a distinct subgenre because its works not only fail to fulfill the genre's announced goals of scientific and literary excellence, but they visibly do not even attempt to fulfill these goals. […] A key element in that recognition [of space opera texts] will be that the story in question has no scientific value and has no literary value. (177)

Then, in what has to be one of the most insightful comments about space opera, Westfahl extrapolates from this in order to explain its continued excoriation:

> With this in mind, it is no mystery why all science fiction commentators criticize space opera: they have to. That is, publicly committed to the idea of a genre which aspires to scientific rigor and literary quality, they are virtually obliged to publicly condemn works which visibly flout those aspirations. (177)

I find problematic Westfahl's assertion that all space opera is, by definition, unscientific and poorly written science fiction. There have, after all, been Nebula-award-winning space operas written by admired writers, such as David Brin's

Startide Rising (1983) and Lois McMaster Bujold's *Falling Free* (1988) (Clute and Nicholls 860).

However, I find compelling this idea that space opera might be operating as a kind of mirror for science fiction, in that it is using the same surface features (sf motifs such as robots, space travel, the future, and so on), but with the opposite agenda (*not* scientific extrapolation, *not* literary quality). This idea of space opera existing in opposition to science fiction intrigues me because many of the space operas which sparked my fascination in the first place were written by women, who have long struggled to find a voice within the male-dominated culture of science fiction. Of particular interest have been Anne McCaffrey's *The Ship Who Sang*, and Lois McMaster Bujold's *Vorkosigan* series (the first published being *Shards of Honor, The Warrior's Apprentice* and *Ethan of Athos*, all released in 1986), both of which question ideas of gender, embodiment and sexuality. Perhaps Westfahl's suggestion that space opera offers "temporary freedom" and a "vacation" from the serious aspirations of science fiction ("Beyond" 183) has more dimensions than he had intended. Perhaps space opera also offers freedom from masculine expectation inherent in science fiction, and such an agenda would certainly qualify, in my opinion, as something more than "fun." I discuss the idea of space opera as a feminist narrative strategy in Chapter 6.

While Aldiss, Wolfe, Monk and Westfahl are the central voices in this conversation about space opera, other critics have begun to discuss some of the ideas raised in these essays during analyses of particular authors' works; for instance, in "A Subversive in Hyperspace," Susan Eisenhour discusses feminist reworkings in C. J. Cherryh's space operas, and in "Space Opera Reconsidered," Joe Sanders examines the theme of immensity as a space operatic trope in relation to Cecelia Holland's *Floating Worlds* and Iain M. Banks's *Consider Phlebas*. However, as such critics don't add anything of major significance to the debate about the nature of space opera, I shall discuss their points only as they relate to relevant chapter topics.

Star Wars

I began this introduction by quoting Gary Westfahl, who suggested that *Star Wars* could be considered the "quintessential space opera" ("Beyond" 180). Having worked through the major literature on space opera, it is easy to see why he made such a claim: the films are a close fit with many of the definitions. Gary Wolfe goes

so far as to name the trilogy in his definition of space opera. Aldiss was involved in a court case which considered whether *A New Hope's* key features were generic or original; he argued they were generic (Aldiss and Wingrove 342). Both the original *Star Wars* trilogy and the prequels fulfill nearly all the listed criteria offered by Aldiss and Monk.

Ironically, Westfahl's definition works less well, for although many science fiction commentators have derided the films as dross, many have also critiqued them less scornfully (or even with adulation), and just about everyone in the field seems to have felt the urge to say something on the topic, which implies that the films have at least enough substance to merit discussion. In the last five years I have collected files and shelves full of material about these films, and I know there is still much more out there to find. If verbiage alone is an indicator of cultural importance, then *Star Wars* counts.

There are several strong reasons, then, for choosing *Star Wars* as the primary example of space opera in my own discussion: it offers a useful limitation of scope; there is an abundance of material to draw from; readers are likely to have a general familiarity with the films; and, crucially, most of the critics central to the discussion have recognised the original trilogy as space opera. When it comes to space opera, *Star Wars* is simply too important a text to be ignored.

As a writer, and especially as a writer of the post-modern, multi-media moment, *Star Wars* is also fundamental to my understanding of space opera as *story.* The fact that *Star Wars* is a film text has influenced my work in two significant ways. First, within *Falling Stars* itself, I have examined the ideas of constructed realities and personas, filmic expectations, and the cult of celebrity, both thematically and as central components of the plot. Second, within the exegesis I have primarily used filmic representations of space opera as examples, and for purposes of comparison, within Chapters 2 to 5, including such films as *Battlestar Galactica* and the *Flash Gordon* serials (1936, 1938, 1940). Then, in Chapter 6, I combine the conclusions I have reached with a discussion of the prose space operas which have proven most influential in my thinking about *Falling Stars*.

"Falling Stars: A Spectrum of Speculative Fiction" in Context

In Chapter 2, I begin my discussion of space opera by defining the key terms used throughout the exegesis. The legal case between *Star Wars: A New Hope* and

Battlestar Galactica is used as a framework for discussion, in order to explore the relevance of genre as a tool of analysis and definition, and the idea of space opera as a generic form. Three theoretical models which place space opera in relation to both science fiction and fantasy are considered, and a definition of space opera as a hybrid form of science fiction and fantasy is offered.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine, in more depth, the contention that space opera is a hybrid form of science fiction and fantasy.

Chapter 3 considers space opera as fantasy, in a case study of the use of fantasy tropes within *The Empire Strikes Back* as compared to one of the most influential fantasy texts, *Le Morte Darthur* (1485). Combat, a recurring theme in space opera, is found to be deployed in similar ways within both texts.

Chapter 4, on the other hand, considers space opera as science fiction, with a focus on the discourse of space travel, through a case study of *A New Hope*, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and the real-world space race. Here, a colonial discourse is seen to permeate all three texts in surprisingly similar ways.

Chapter 5 is concerned with the function of space opera, in particular the way it works as a conservative discourse through the use of motifs such as the nostalgic future and empire. I consider the colonizing imperative at work in both the *Flash Gordon* serials, and in the more recent text, *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* (1999). The presence of empire—and the concomitant sexism and racism—is found to be a controlling strategy within both texts.

The exegesis concludes with Chapter 6, which looks at the prose—as opposed to filmic—texts which have most directly influenced *Falling Stars*, with particular reference to the ways in which space opera can be used as a subversive feminist discourse. I consider: the transgender possibilities of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928); the alien other in Ursula LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969); the ship as protagonist in Anne McCaffrey's *The Ship Who Sang*; and the Cyborg Manifesto of Donna Haraway (1991). I also consider the ways in which the novella *Falling Stars* works as a hybrid form of science fiction and fantasy, tracing its use of space operatic expectation, and its thematic relationships with the other stories in the creative component of the thesis.

The Relevance of Genre

Can Space Opera Be Defined?

In her paper, "Not Just 'Cosmic Skullduggery,'" Patricia Monk identifies two problems with defining space opera: that it is neither a "static nor monolithic" form (300), and that the related genre of science fiction has not yet been adequately defined (300) despite the attempts of the best thinkers in the field. I argue that these problems are, in fact, inter-related: it is because contemporary genres are still being written that they aren't static or monolithic and, for this reason, that they tend to elude definition. The real issue is, in my opinion, given that evolving genres are too unstable to define adequately, does it follow that the notion of genre is irrelevant? Does it mean genre should be given up as a tool of analysis and categorisation when considering the stories of our cultural moment?

I would answer "No" to both questions, but then, as a storyteller myself, I do have a vested interest in wanting to know why and how these forms work, not only as individual stories, but as cohorts using generic conventions. Monk, too, finds value in considering both the genre and definition of space opera, despite her reservations, and even though she does not have the same vested interest in storytelling.

In this chapter, I will consider the relevance of genre, both as a tool of literary criticism and as a tool of the corporate world. The legal case between *Star Wars: A New Hope* and *Battlestar Galactica* is used as a framework for discussion, in order to explore the idea of space opera as a generic form. Space opera will be considered as a sub-genre of science fiction, as fantasy masquerading as science fiction, and as a hybrid form of both science fiction and fantasy. Finally, definitions will be offered for fantasy, science fiction and space opera.

The *Star Wars* versus *Battlestar Galactica* court case in the late 1970s was, as is usual when abstract ideas of literary theory are actually applied to a situation outside of academe, focused on a charge of plagiarism. The case primarily involved

the studios Twentieth Century Fox, the distributor of *Star Wars: Episode 4: A New Hope* (1977), and Universal Studios, the distributor of *Battlestar Galactica* (1978). As there has been only one central discussion of space opera within academe, the use of the generic label of "space opera" as a term of reference in the case of *Star Wars* versus *Battlestar Galactica* seemed to me to offer a useful alternative view on the topic.

These two films were released into cinemas a year apart and contained many superficial similarities. *Star Wars* was the bigger earner of the two films; in fact, it is one of the highest-grossing films ever released. *Battlestar Galactica*, on the other hand, was actually a film made from the first few episodes of a television series. It did not achieve the box office success of its counterpart, although it still made quite a profit for its studio.

On 23 June 1978 Twentieth Century Fox sued Universal Studios. Their main claim was that *Battlestar Galactica* infringed on *Star Wars's* copyright (Maloney 32). Universal counter-sued claiming that *Star Wars* infringed on the copyright of its 1972 science fiction film, *Silent Running* (Maloney 32). In response, Fox filed a suit trying to stop the marketing of *Galactica* merchandise (LaRocque Para. 3). Universal counter-sued and argued for damages on the grounds that Fox's suit was a violation of the "California business and professions code" ("*Galactica*" 27). In this paper I am most interested in the original suit, which actually went to court after the counter-suits had been settled[1].

Having discovered these basic facts of the *Star Wars* versus *Battlestar Galactica* case, I had hoped that further investigation would help to clarify my ideas about genre, science fiction and space opera. Perhaps the judge would have some insights and his practical ruling would shed some light on the theory I'd been reading. Instead, I seemed to end up with an ever-expanding list of questions. Some I'd had for a long time, while others had never occurred to me before: Why is speculative fiction often known by the shorthand of "genre fiction," as though there are no other genres? If space opera is a sub-genre of science fiction, where are the boundary lines? Is a genre always part of the public domain, or can it be owned?

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[1]As far as I can discover all of the counter-suits were summarily dismissed. These cases were legally insignificant and very little has been reported about them. They were, in effect, nuisance suits that were filed in order to defend against, or support, the original suit. Even the main case was more significant within the entertainment industry that it was as a legal precedent. The original suit is the most interesting in theoretical terms, as its claim of copyright infringement relates directly to the relationship between genre and plagiarism in a way that the more specific counter-suits do not.

What would the legal consequences be for future science fiction films if Twentieth Century Fox won the case, and *Star Wars* was in effect legally defined as the quintessential space opera with a monopoly on the sub-genre's tropes?

The court case of the original suit brought by Twentieth Century Fox has become the framework I have used in order to examine these issues. However, I must stress that in this chapter the positions I've given to each studio are a construction of my own. What follows is my recreated transcript of how the prosecution (called Fox for brevity's sake) and the defence (known as Universal) would have argued their cases if their prime interest had been in genre, specifically the genre (or sub-genre) of space opera. That said, much of the text to follow is quoted either from reportage of the trial, interviews with relevant parties, or from critics in the science fiction field.

So, to set the scene, we are in a court room. The virtual Judge Irving Hill is presiding and the prosecution is about to open their case.

* * *

Fox: It is our contention that Universal's *Battlestar Galactica* infringes upon the copyright of *Star Wars* and is in unfair competition as a consequence ("*Galactica*" 27). We claim that there are 34 similarities between the films (LaRocque Para. 1), most notably the following:

- A wise old man
- An evil villain with minions in body armour
- Two young male leads who have a bantering relationship
- Big space ships, and smaller dog-fighting spacecraft
- Lots of explosions and loud noises carrying through the vacuum of space
- Laser weapons
- Cute robots
- Orchestral theme music
- They are both recognisably space operas.

In short, "*Galactica*" is nothing more than a "ripoff," and you might as well call it "Son of *Star Wars*" (Maloney 32).

Universal: The similarities between the two films are entirely superficial and exist only because both films are working in the same genre. In the words of our special effects expert and producer, John Dykstra, "We didn't want to do a rip-off […] we wanted to do a genre picture" (qtd. in Rich Para. 7).

Fox: Universal's claim that the similarities between the two films are generic is fundamentally flawed as there must be some originality for it to be considered a new work in an existing genre. Otherwise it is plagiarism, pure and simple. *Galactica* is like "old wine in a new bottle" (Maloney 32).

Universal: "*Battlestar Galactica* is *quite* different" (Glen Larson qtd. in LaRocque Para. 4). It was first pitched in the late 1960s as a television show called *Adam's Ark,* long before *Star Wars* came onto the scene ("Mormon" Para. 1). Apart from its genesis, *Galactica* makes two significant innovations, neither of which bears any similarity to *Star Wars*. First, there is a strong Mormon influence in the film. For example, the plot revolves around a search for a missing thirteenth tribe of humans; *The Book of Mormon* describes a similar thirteenth tribe—a remnant of the tribe of Joseph ("Mormon" Para. 5-6). Second, *Galactica* uses the unusual premise of humans searching for Earth, rather than setting out from Earth. Furthermore, to quote Glen Larson, the writer of *Galactica,* "when it comes to who are our characters and what our story is, I would have to say that if you were trying to compare *Shane* to *Gunfight at the OK Corral*, you'd say, 'Yes, they're both westerns,' but I doubt if you'd find many parallels beyond that" (LaRocque Para. 4). "I don't see how anyone can say we're copying *Star Wars* unless you say the first man to produce a horse opera had a lock on the western from then on" (Glen Larson qtd. in Buck Para. 21).

Fox: *Star Wars* can in fact be seen as analogous to the first western. In the early days of the science fiction genre, as Brian Aldiss and David Wingrove discuss it in *Trillion Year Spree*, "space travel was a dream, the precious dream of SF fans. It was part of the power fantasy of the SF magazines. When space travel became reality, the dream was taken away from them. At least for two decades. *Star Wars* gave it back" (288).

We argue that *Star Wars* not only contains and reinterprets all of space opera's major tropes, it reinvigorates the genre in the process. In this context, the original

space operas are "difficult to remember, obtain, understand, and preserve, have been replaced, repackaged […]. [R]epackaging the past to a certain extent expunges its reality" (Cioffi 23).

In comparison, *Galactica* is nothing more than a "pastiche of clichés and conventions that define the space opera genre" (Maloney 32). It never would have existed without *Star Wars* to lead the way. Space opera wouldn't even be a viable form on film without *Star Wars*. We argue that *Star Wars*, in that it defines contemporary space opera, also owns the copyright on space opera.

Universal: That argument defies the nature of formula fiction. As John Cawelti explains:

> Since the pleasure and effectiveness of an individual formulaic work depends on its intensification of a familiar experience, the formula creates its own world with which we become familiar by repetition […]. In this type of literature, the relationship between individual work and formula is somewhat analogous to that of variation on a theme, or of a performance to a text. To be a work of any quality or interest, the individual version of the formula must have some unique or special characteristics of its own, yet these characteristics must ultimately work toward the fulfilment of the conventional form. (10)

We contend that fantastic fictions of all types are commonly known by the shorthand of "genre fiction" because they so recognisably use formulaic conventions; conventions which stand out because they contradict the realist conventions we encounter in both our everyday lives and in realist fiction. *Star Wars* can be considered to use the space operatic formula in a particularly effective and recognisable way, but that doesn't give it ownership of that formula. It just makes it a particularly good example of the fulfillment of the conventional form known as space opera.

A genre, as part of literary tradition, belongs to the public domain. It has to because of the way it works, which is to describe groups of literature, according to their formulaic conventions, within their historic and cultural contexts. As Alastair Fowler explains in his book, *Kinds of Literature*, "every work of literature belongs to at least one genre" (20).

Indeed, it is sure to have a significant generic element. For genre has quite a different relation to creativity from the one usually supposed, whereby it is little more than a restraint upon spontaneous expression. Rightly understood, it is so far from being a mere curb on expression that it makes the expressiveness of literary works possible. Their relationship to the genres they embody is not one of passive membership but of active modulation. (20)

Galactica is part of a long tradition of formulaic literature, and no matter how influential *Star Wars* was as an individual example of that tradition, it still gives Twentieth Century Fox no right to claim ownership of the whole genre.

Fox: If we were trying to claim ownership of a whole genre, say science fiction or fantasy, we would concede your point, but we are not. We are claiming one small part of that whole: space opera.

Universal: So where are you setting the boundaries of this claim? You haven't even defined space opera.

Fox: We submit Brian Aldiss's description of space opera as our definition. Aldiss says that science fiction contains "within it a renegade sub-genre: space opera" (*Space Opera* 9).

Ideally, the Earth must be in peril, there must be a quest and a man to match the mighty hour. That man must confront aliens and exotic creatures. Space must flow past the ports like wine from a pitcher. Blood must run down the palace steps, and ships launch out into the louring dark. There must be a woman fairer than the skies and a villain darker than a Black Hole. And all must come right in the end. (*Space Opera* 10)

We can represent this idea of space opera diagrammatically (see fig. 1). It is this discrete unit that we lay claim to.
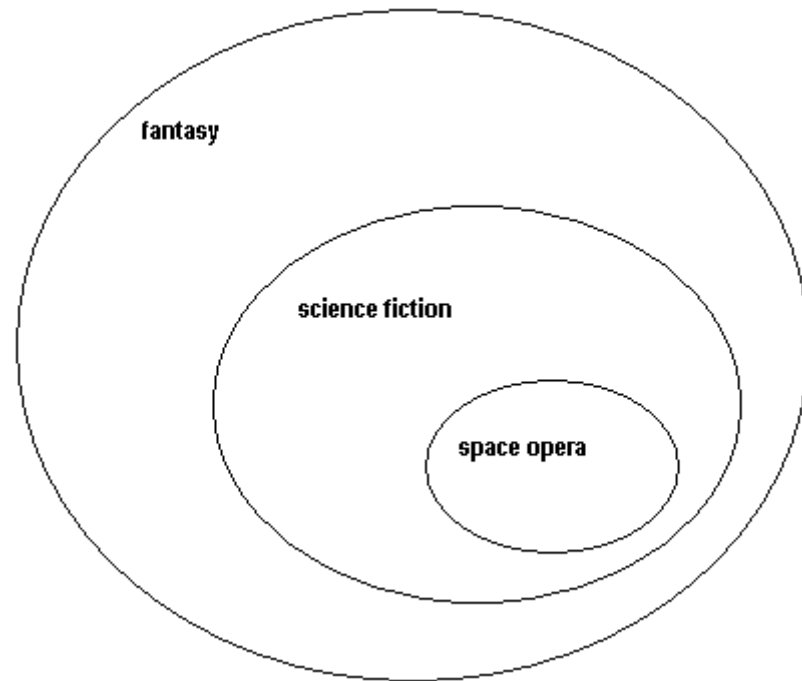
Fig. 1. The Russian-doll theory of the Fantastic.

Universal: That conception of space opera is fine, as far as it goes, but it doesn't go far enough. We contend that it is not such a discrete subset of science fiction as you have suggested, but rather a more amorphous entity which exists at the intersection of both science fiction and fantasy. We submit Gary Wolfe's definition:

> space operas are generally fast-paced intergalactic adventures on a grand scale […]. Often characterized as a western in space or "straight fantasy in science fiction drag" (Norman Spinrad 34), space opera may be either a historical or a generic term. (120-1)

This definition can also be represented as a diagram (see fig. 2). As can be seen in this diagram, the potential for space opera to transform and re-align its boundaries is largely due to the way it exists in the interstices of two other genres. It is entirely unreasonable to claim ownership of a sub-genre which has such unstable boundaries.
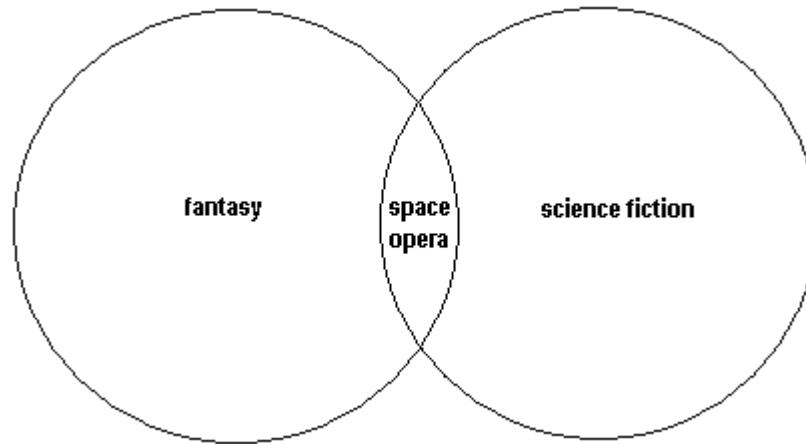
Fig. 2. The Venn diagram of the Fantastic

Fox: We disagree with your interpretation and definition of the sub-genre of space opera. *Star Wars* is no more a fantasy than a romance or a western. We don't deny *Star Wars* contains elements of fantasy, but *all* science fiction does. Science fiction is a discrete type of fantasy and space opera a discrete type of science fiction. To suggest otherwise expands the idea of genre to a point where it becomes meaningless as a frame of reference. Without a frame of reference, the whole idea of copyright becomes untenable, and as it is under the copyright laws that this case must be decided, it would be fruitless to argue further in this vein.

To conclude, it is our contention that Universal is guilty of copyright infringement on two counts. First, through plagiarism, as demonstrated by the evidence of thirty-four similarities between the films *Star Wars* and *Battlestar Galactica*. Second, through our argument that *Star Wars* reinterpreted and recreated space opera on the screen so significantly that the sub-genre as a whole has become the site of its copyright. Consequently, *Battlestar Galactica* is in violation of copyright, as it is a space opera that would not, and could not, have been made without the space operatic template of *Star Wars*.

Universal: Genre does not have to be a rigid concept in order for it to be useful. In fact, in "Towards a New Awareness of Genre," Fredric Jameson argues that it can't be:

pure textual exemplifications of a single genre do not exist […] because texts always come into being at the intersection of several genres and emerge from the tensions in the latter's multiple force fields. (qtd. in Broderick 18)

You have argued that *Star Wars* is the ultimate space opera, but that is impossible. Not only does *Star Wars* owe a debt to all the other space operas before it, including the *Flash Gordon* serials made by our company in the 1930s, but, in the same way, it will go on to inspire future space operas. That is how genre works.

Nor should genre be the only frame of reference against which the ideas of copyright and plagiarism can be defined. In fact, according to Fowler and Jameson, genre cannot be the only means of making such judgements. If it were, then all fiction would be guilty of plagiarism, including *Star Wars*, as all texts are innately generic, although some use generic hybridity in more innovative ways than others. Likewise, no text could be copyrightable if genre was the only criteria considered, as no work would count as an entirely original expression of an idea.

In our defence, we claim that the similarities between the two films are generic rather than plagiaristic. We point out that *Galactica* was conceived before *Star Wars,* and makes two major innovations which differentiate it from *Star Wars.* Furthermore, we argue that formula fiction, by its nature, arises from the public domain and so cannot be owned; and because of space opera's placement between fantasy and science fiction, its boundaries are too unstable for it to be a discrete and ownable site. For these reasons, we contend that *Battlestar Galactica* is not guilty of copyright infringement of *Star Wars*.

<div align="center">* * *</div>

It is time now for the virtual Judge Irving Hill to give his ruling (please remember that this is my conclusion; that of the real judge will be discussed shortly).

Virtual Judge Irving Hill: In considering this case, I was required to make judgement on two counts. First, whether or not *Battlestar Galactica'*s similarities to *Star Wars* were generic or due to a lack of original ideas and treatment. Second, whether or not it was reasonable for Fox to claim copyright of a whole sub-genre.

Fox argues that genre can only be useful as a frame of reference if it is restricted to discrete categories. This idea of genre has been disputed by critics[2], who have pointed out that the limits of genres are being constantly shattered by works which explore the margins in new ways. Todorov influentially suggested, in the essay "The Origin of Genres," that genre is defined by the shattering of boundaries, rather than by the marking of rigid lines:

> The fact that a work "disobeys" its genre does not make the latter nonexistent; it is tempting to say that quite the contrary is true. And for a twofold reason. First, because transgression, in order to exist as such, requires a law that will, of course, be transgressed. One could go further: the norm becomes visible— lives—only by its transgression […]. But there is more. Not only does the work, for all its being an exception, necessarily presuppose the rule; but this work also, as soon as it is recognised in its exceptional status, becomes in its turn, thanks to successful sales and critical attention, a rule. (160)

I have found this idea of genre a fruitful one while considering this case. Its relevance can be seen as soon as one remembers that the notion that space operas are "westerns in space" has been brought up during this hearing. It is this cross-pollination of one genre by another that leads me to reject both models of the Fantastic put before me. Neither of them is complex enough to display all of the relevant concerns. In particular, the notion that these two films are dramatic presentations and not prose is of some importance, as film has a visual language of its own, that exists quite apart from any generic expectations developed in prose space operas. Hence, a modal approach to genre, such as that taken by Patricia Monk in "Not Just 'Cosmic Skullduggery'" gives a better sense of space opera's nature.

In fact, in "SF as Generic Engineering," Damien Broderick's excellent overview of the different approaches taken in attempting to define science fiction, he predicts that given the impossibility of defining sf generically, poststructural analyses will be given increasing stress through the 1990s (26). Monk's essay can be seen as

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[2]For example, Tzvetan Todorov disputes exactly this point, and I have quoted him in the next paragraph. Damien Broderick in "SF as Generic Engineering" also argues that the dispersal of coding protocols, such as the rigid "pigeon-hole" notion of genre, can be less useful than working towards a new, more flexible, understanding of them. Alastair Fowler's *Kinds of Literature* also examines genre as a non-static coding system, particularly through the idea of modes.

part of just such a trend. Despite his prediction, Broderick concludes, and I concur, that there are still:

> very real benefits to be had from parsing the acts of writing and reading into their notional components, their multidimensional deployment in generic space—always recalling that this anatomisation can never be successful as pure reduction, that a moment of reconstitution (even if it, in turn, is always open to further deconstruction) is the goal of theory. (26)

Keeping in mind the impossibility of offering a universally acceptable definition for science fiction, fantasy or space opera, I put forward the criteria I have used in considering the merits of this case. To begin with, science fiction and fantasy are clearly linked forms, in that they are both underpinned by a non-realist expectation that runs counter to realist fiction. The link between these two genres is such that the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* says, "[t]here is no definition of SF that excludes fantasy, other than prescriptive definitions so narrow that, were they applied, this encyclopedia would be reduced to 10 percent of its present length. We are talking about problems of definition raised by not a minority but a majority of all genre writings" (Clute and Nicholls 407). Terry Dowling, in his 1979 essay "What is Science Fiction," suggests that there are two main ways in which science fiction is usually conceived of as different in kind to fantasy: the inclusive and exclusive definitions (4). A third, the poststructuralist mode, was pointed out by Fredric Jameson (in Broderick 26). All of these methods are problematic:

- The exclusive definition (in which the definition is very narrow, and key texts end up excluded). An example is George Turner's definition of science fiction: "a fiction founded on the postulate that some known or theoretical possibility has become actuality and detailing the logical outcome of this happening" (173). Under this criterion, as Terry Dowling points out, a novel such as Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), which is universally recognised as science fiction, would be a problematic match ("Much Richer" 175), with its focus on semi-mystical mental abilities, feudal politics and rather vaguely explained hyperspace travel.

- The inclusive definition (in which the definition is very wide, to the point that it almost dissolves the boundaries with fantasy altogether, and sometimes even with realist literature). An example is Brian Aldiss's definition: "Science fiction is the search for a definition of mankind and his state in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science), and is characteristically cast in the Gothic or post-Gothic mode" (Aldiss and Wingrove 30). Under a definition this wide, focusing as it does on philosophy as much as purpose, and with that qualifying word "confused," a novel such as Stephen King's *The Firestarter* (1980) could be considered sf. Like *Dune*, it has a premise of an unexplained drug which stimulates psychic powers in the human mind, a rather contentious area of speculation (there is no proof of the existence of such powers in current science). Unlike *Dune*, there are no other sf premises within the story to push it more firmly into the genre. That said, the story certainly philosophises on the human state in the universe in a post-Gothic mode, a focus Aldiss's definition claims for the genre. However, King's work is more often considered fantasy or horror. *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, for instance, uses all three generic labels in its entry on King, but it is the horror label which is privileged (Clute and Nicholls 666).

- Modal analysis (in which no claim is made for an absolute definition, and instead common features of texts—usually selected to accord with an ideology, such as Marxism or feminism—are analysed). Monk's analysis of space opera is an example here. I have discussed the problems with her analysis, in detail, in Chapter 1, and such problems are typical of modal analysis: Monk's results do not map to all space opera texts, and the elements she describes can be found in texts of other genres, such as sf.

As each of these methods is problematic, I have chosen definitions based on a best match with my purposes here. Stanley Schmidt's definitions of sf and fantasy are acceptable on two grounds. First, his definitions correspond to the idea common to most discussions of the Fantastic's generic boundaries: that while science fiction and fantasy both use the Fantastic's non-realist mode, science fiction is concerned

with logical extrapolation and fantasy is not. Second, Schmidt's definitions are designed to be applied. Schmidt is an editor at the magazine *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*, plus a published science fiction writer, and his definitions focus on the ways in which the Fantastic's generic expectations can be used and subverted by writers. As the case of *Star Wars* versus *Battlestar Galactica* is intrinsically bound to actual usage of genre, rather than entirely theoretical concerns, Schmidt's definitions seem particularly relevant (and, taking off my Judge's wig for a moment, I point out that my primary thesis, "Falling Stars," shares this focus). Schmidt uses a writer-intent and reader-response contract in order to distinguish the non-realist approach of fantasy from the potentially-realist approach of sf:

> Fantasy writers don't expect you to believe that the things they're describing could actually happen, but only to *pretend* that they could for the duration of a story. Fantasy readers understand that and willingly play along. Science fiction writers, on the other hand, try to create worlds and futures (and aliens) that really *could* exist and do the things they describe. Their readers expect that of them, and write critical letters to editors and authors when they find holes in the logic (or assumptions) that would make a science fiction story impossible. (8)

How, then, do these generic descriptions of fantasy and sf map to space opera?

In their suit, Fox has argued that space opera is made up of a series of tropes, as described by Aldiss, and is a discrete sub-genre of science fiction with recognisable boundaries. Universal, on the other hand, argues that space opera is fantasy in science-fictional disguise, and that it cannot be a discrete form because it shares unstable generic boundaries with both fantasy and science fiction.

I agree that space opera does, as Fox points out, contain recognisable tropes such as the robot, space ships and space stations, the space empire, laser weapons, aliens and so forth, but these are tropes shared with sf, not exclusive to space opera. These sf tropes were invented in "scientifically rigorous stories" which fulfilled Schmidt's suggested writer-reader contract for sf, and were *then* co-opted into space opera (Westfahl, "Beyond" 180). For this reason, the writer-reader expectation in the deployment of these tropes within space opera is the same as that in sf, in that the

usage of such tropes must not contravene established sf logic, although there need not be any detailed supporting logic offered in the space opera itself.

On the other hand, as Monk points out, space opera stories adopt the "monomythic romance mode" ("Not Just" 300) typical of fantasy, and so the *function* of space opera's use of sf iconography is often mythic or metaphoric rather than extrapolative or experimental. For example, Luke Skywalker's light-sabre is consistent with the technology of the *Star Wars* universe we are shown, and is neither illogical nor a discontinuity within the narrative created. We, as audience, are meant to accept Luke's light-sabre as a real thing that we too could own, if only it had been invented. Compare this, for instance, with a magic sword such as Excalibur, which comes to King Arthur, illogically unrusted, from out of a lake. What the light-sabre does have in common with Excalibur is *function*: the light-sabre's function in the narrative is as a magic sword, rather than as a thought-experiment on the future of laser technology. Much like Arthur's Excalibur, the light-sabre signals Luke's specialness. Unlike Excalibur, which we are not meant to believe is potentially real or ownable outside of the Aurthurian Romances, the light-sabre's attributes are not due to mystical forces[3], but are, seemingly, based on technology, albeit one we don't understand.

This merging of the writer-reader expectations of fantasy and science fiction is, I argue, typical of space opera. In other words, within space opera there is no clear delineation between the fantasy writer-reader contract and the sf writer-reader contract. Both expectations—of the *pretend* and of the *could be*—are combined within the same features of the story.

For this reason, I reject the arguments regarding space opera's definition put forward by both Fox and Universal. Instead, I accept Todorov's approach to genre, which suggests it is a system of laws and transgressions which are in flux, and constantly being remade by new texts. Space opera has commonalities with both science fiction and fantasy to the extent, I would argue, that it is not just a sub-genre of sf, or fantasy pretending to be sf, but is both: it is a hybrid, existing in the inter-generic, transgressive space of these two genres. I have devised my own diagram of space opera's relationship to science fiction and fantasy in order to explain this relationship (see fig. 3).

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[3]Luke's *use* of the light-sabre has a mystical dimension, but its attributes—the glow, its sound, its ability to sever limbs—are coded as technological.
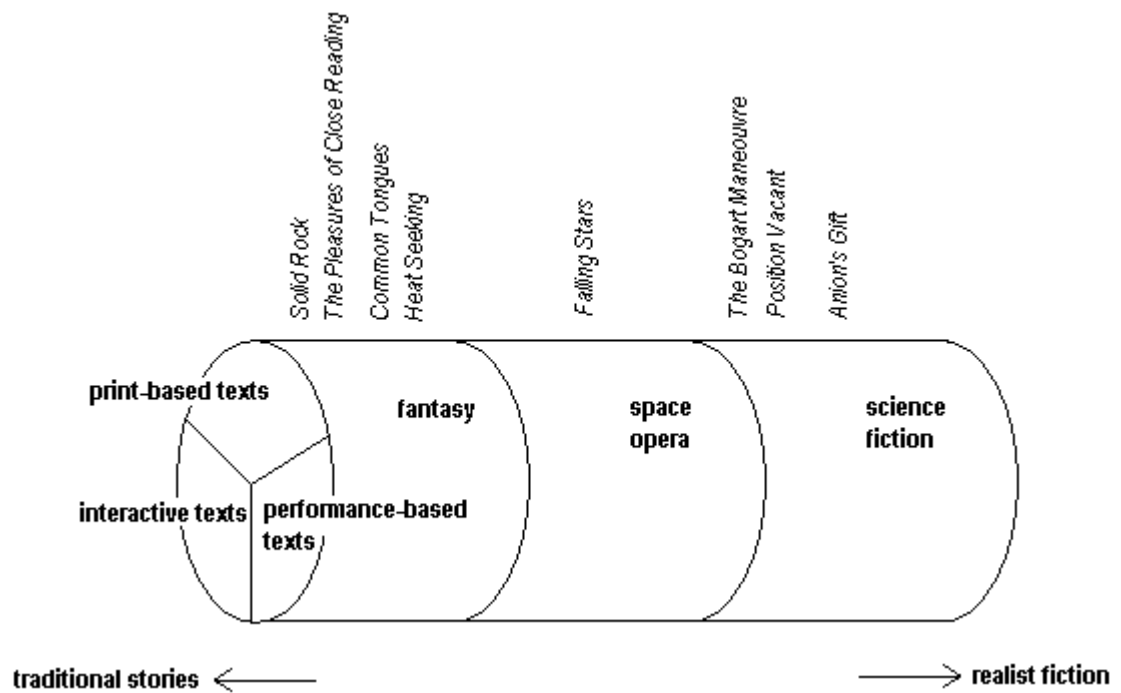
Fig. 3. The worm model of the Fantastic.

This model takes into account the fact that space opera exists not only in a continuum of other Fantastic fiction (and in a broader sense, literature in general), but that it comes in many forms. For space opera's multi-media tendency is so pronounced, existing as it does in comics, serial films, feature films, television, radio plays, short stories, novels and so on, that this tendency should be included as one of its many defining traits. Here, The Worm Model has the advantage of being flexible, in that it is conceivable that the body of the worm can wriggle or curl up and so bring together modes of fiction that might otherwise mistakenly be seen as entirely discrete. This model begins to suggest the complex interplay between science fiction, fantasy and form which produces space opera.

Space operas, then, are melodramatic adventure stories set in space, which operate as a hybrid form of science fiction and fantasy, using the non-realist expectations inherent in both, but mixing the logical extrapolation and icons of sf with the self-consistent but unbelievable discontinuities of fantasy. Furthermore, although space opera began as a predominantly short prose form, it has developed as a multi-media mode of storytelling, and commonly adopts strategies and biases from other narrative modes.

The complexity inherent in space opera leads me to reject Fox's claim that it can be defined as a discrete sub-genre which can be owned as intellectual property. Accordingly, I find that *Battlestar Galactica* does not infringe *Star Wars's* copyright in this regard.

Star Wars may well be the quintessential space opera, but it can only exist as such due to its debt to the space operas that went before. *Galactica* obviously has much in common with *Star Wars*. Specifically, both films are space operas as outlined in the definitions put forward by Fox and Universal, and by my own definition. With regard to the claim that *Galactica* is guilty of plagiarising *Star Wars,* this shared generic history must be taken into account. Furthermore, I concur with Todorov's idea that new work in a genre does, to some extent, open up the genre to works that follow it. Fox began their claim by outlining the similarities between the two films, such as robots, laser weapons, an orchestral score, etc. Most of these features are not unique to *Star Wars*, but were commonly used in the serial movies of the 1930s, such as *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers*. They are generic features of the space opera movie. *Battlestar Galactica'*s use of these same devices cannot constitute copyright infringement. Finally, for all of the similarities between the two films, *Galactica* does contain significant differences to *Star Wars*, in both plot and treatment. Therefore, I judge that *Battlestar Galactica* is not guilty of plagiarism.

In conclusion, I find the charges unproven against the defendant, Universal Studios.

* * *

Now for the verdict of the Federal Court judge, Irving Hill, in Los Angeles on August 22, 1980. Hill judged that, taken as a whole, the films were significantly different, and that Universal Studios was not guilty of copyright infringement.

> Hill said that if copyright depended on finding "five, 10 or 15 elements infringed upon" then there would be hundreds of films guilty of infringing on "Star Wars." He stated the key test is idea and then how it was expressed. The chief judge of the district court said he viewed "Star Wars" as "pure fantasy" stating "a morality play captured its essence." He then described "Galactica" as "a familiar story of the goods fighting the bads" with a "large dose of sex and

violence that we've become so accustomed to in 20th century television."
(Maloney 32)

Twentieth Century Fox appealed this finding, and on January 11, 1983 the United States Court of Appeals (Ninth Circuit), decided to overturn the summary judgement of Judge Hill. This decision was made on the grounds that a summary judgement is only appropriate in cases in which the productions under consideration are so dissimilar that there is no question of substantial similarity. The two films obviously have too many elements in common for this to be the case. Having won the appeal, however, so far as I have been able to ascertain, Twentieth Century Fox did not act on this finding, and there has been no further legal action taken in the courts.

In my opinion, if Judge Hill had ruled the other way in the original case, the consequences could have been quite startling. If he had found that *Galactica* had infringed on *Star Wars'* copyright, there would have been a lot more than 52.5 percent of *Galactica*'s revenue (Maloney 32) at stake. The precedent of such a ruling could potentially have forever changed American film-making, international copyright laws and the boundaries of intellectual property, by making a genre an ownable commodity. Genre itself would have correspondingly been transformed into something quite different by being translated into a legal definition.

To put this case into a wider perspective, in the mid-seventies, just before the *Star Wars* versus *Battlestar Galactica* litigation, the concept of genre was being successfully defended from the modernist attack of irrelevancy by the influential theorist, Todorov. With this in mind, it would have been ironic if the concept of genre had been split in two by the finding of a United States court—effectively leading to the practical and theoretical conceptions taking different directions—all due to the off-screen battle of the space operas.

Space Opera's Relationship to Fantasy

A Case Study: *Le Morte Darthur* and *Star Wars*

When undertaking a comparison of motifs and themes within different texts, I am reminded of the game "Splat!" The rules are as follow. One: take two fictional characters from entirely divergent works—different genres is best. Two: drop them into the Coliseum. Three: force them to fight until one has achieved a glorious victory. Four: gloat about the outcome. For instance, "I *told* you Han Solo would beat the Magic Pudding!"

Considering its immense stupidity, Splat! is a surprisingly satisfying game.

I bring this up to underscore the temptation I have resisted. This chapter could so easily have been an academic version of Splat!

Academic Me: King Arthur, as the archetypal warrior-hero, would obviously defeat a derivative, stereotyped character like Luke Skywalker.

Pop-Culture Me: But what about Luke's *light-sabre*, huh? That could slice and dice Arthur in a wink.

Academic Me: I disagree. Not only was Arthur chosen by God, but he has a magic sword. Furthermore, Excalibur's scabbard is enchanted to protect Arthur from bleeding during battle.

Pop-Culture Me: Well, Luke doesn't need God; he's got the Force. And as for Excalibur's scabbard… light-sabres *cauterise wounds*—no blood! Duh!

And so on.

In this chapter, instead of pitting King Arthur and Excalibur against Luke Skywalker and the light-sabre, I will be considering the ways in which *Star Wars* borrows and adapts major themes from Malory's Arthurian romance, *Le Morte Darthur* (1485). Why? Because I think Luke Skywalker is Arthur's textual

descendant, imbued with similar characteristics, embarked on a similar fantasy quest, and serving a similar function within his text.

Finding tropes from an older genre, such Arthurian romance, within a space opera is by no means a circumstance unique to *Star Wars*. In fact, one of the prime conventions of the space opera is that themes and characters from other genres and modes are borrowed and then stuck together in the outer-space version of the Coliseum, rather like a genre-wide game of Splat! Commonly, these disparate characters then try to bludgeon each other using high-tech weapons that are, somehow, never projectile (the characters always conveniently drop their Zap guns right before the big fight), but rather throw-backs to medieval weapons. *Flash Gordon* is a classic example: Flash always seems to be wrestling, or using staves, knives or swords to save Dale Arden, despite the existence of lasers, sleep-pellet guns, and heat-ray blasters, amongst other non-specific types of projectile weapons in the Flash Gordon universe (King n.p.). *Flash Gordon's* borrowing doesn't end with out-dated weapons: Flash's opponents have included rubber-limbed aliens, pseudo-Vikings, sharks, robots, femmes fatale (all of which can be found in volumes two and three of *The Amazing Adventures of Flash Gordon*, by the King Features Syndicate, although this is by no means a definitive list) and, of course, the "yellow peril" of Ming the Merciless.

I am not the first to have noticed this trend of reworking the tropes of other genres within space opera. Aldiss calls it "the future in space, seen mistily through the eyes of yesterday" (*Space Opera* 10), making a specific link to *The Odyssey*, with all the expectation of travels and monsters such a comparison evokes (*Space Opera* 9-10). Monk describes it as "an authorial mindset which sees the extraterrestrial universe in holistic terms as both knowable and manageable, just as the writers of the models from which it derives had seen the terrestrial world," and she specifically links it to the mindset of the "monomythic romance mode" ("Not Just" 300). Westfahl agrees with Monk's assessment, although he adds that "there are still features in the form that reveal the influence of modern science fiction" ("Beyond" 180). As Monk specifically names the fantasy mode of monomythic romance[4], that

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[4]After long thought, I have decided against making the argument that romance and fantasy are two different labels for what is, fundamentally, the same generic mode, despite their differing historical contexts. The topic would make a paper in its own right. However, while it is undoubtedly true that the romance form arose long before the debate about imagination and fancy had begun, it is also true that modern fantasy owes much to earlier forms such as romance, fairy tales and myths. I also point

is the form I have chosen to focus on in this case study of *Star Wars* and *Le Morte Darthur* (which is perhaps the quintessential romance).

Within this chapter, I will focus specifically on space opera's borrowing of romance (fantasy) modes and tropes in order to interrogate my contention that space opera is a generic hybrid of fantasy and science fiction. In the next chapter, I will focus on the science fictional aspects of space opera's hybrid nature. In Chapter 5, I shall take a wider view, considering this generic borrowing as directly connected to space opera's primary function as a nostalgic, conventional discourse.

An obvious starting point is to explore the most prominent theme that *Star Wars* has in common with *Le Morte Darthur*: militarism and combat, particularly forms of physical combat such as duelling. For the purposes of this paper, militarism is: "the tendency to regard military efficiency as the supreme ideal of the state, and to subordinate all other interests to those of the military" (*Macquarie* 1088). The military, then, is primarily defined as anything "of or pertaining to the army, armed forces, affairs of war, or a state of war," or "of or pertaining to soldiers" (*Macquarie* 1089).

Militaristic structures are commonly found in space operas. These structures are usually very overt, although they can sometimes be disguised to a greater or lesser extent. For example, *Star Trek's* military structure is called Starfleet, and is supposedly a peaceful organisation with liberal and non-confrontational principles such as IDIC and the Prime Directive. IDIC stands for "Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combination," a supposedly revered idea within this textual world. The Prime Directive is the principle that no Starfleet officer should interfere with the development of another race of "people" ("people" being understood to be any sentient life-form). However, all members of Starfleet have a rank, a prescribed

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out that in *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms* (4th Edition, 1998), by J. A. Cuddon, there is no entry for "fantasy" although there are entries for both "science fiction" and "horror." The debate on realist versus non-realist writing modes is discussed under the headings of "realism," "romance" and "novel." In Clute and Nicholl's *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, this same debate is primarily referred to in the entries on "fantasy," "definitions of sf" and "mainstream writers of sf." This suggests that science fiction criticism and mainstream criticism deploy differing nomenclatures when discussing these issues, but that they are covering similar ground. Gary Wolfe would seem to agree that this point has some validity. In his definition of fantasy in *Critical Terms*, he thought it worth mentioning that "R. D. Mullen has attempted a compromise between these views by suggesting that fantasy is in fact a genre within the Supergenre of Fantastic Romance" (38). Despite the fact that *Le Morte Darthur* is not an undebateable choice as a "fantasy" text, I've chosen it because I am interested in exploring space opera's use of a nostalgic future and the way it works as a traditional and conventional discourse, as well as its relationship to fantasy, and *Le Morte's* historical positioning and subject matter make it a good choice for considering these issues within this case study.

uniform, weapons training, and a set of legal directives they must follow or face a court martial. More than this, from time to time the truly over-arching and fascist tendencies of Starfleet's governing body, The Federation, are revealed. For instance, a people called The Marquis are labelled traitors by The Federation in order to remove them from their home planets which are located in a contested area of space (this is background history within the two television series *Star Trek: Voyager* and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*). In this regard, Starfleet and The Federation fit nicely into the definition of militarism in that they display "the tendency to regard military efficiency as the supreme ideal of the state, and to subordinate all other interests to those of the military" (*Macquarie* 1088).

Star "*Wars*," on the other hand, depicts two very different military traditions side-by-side, and occasionally overlapping. The first is the obvious use of a World War 2-type militarism. The "Evil" Empire has uniformed, goose-stepping, faceless, voiceless minions in the form of the stormtroopers in white body-armour; high-tech weaponry in the form of laser guns, the death star, and huge dreadnoughts; small spacecraft suitable for "dogfighting," and so on. The Rebel Alliance is made up of many different species, has a less rigid uniform code, but similar high-tech weaponry and command structure. The function of this aspect of militarism is to present a recognisable framework in which the films' action can unfold, and so normalise the world we're viewing, despite the presence of science-fictional technology. This argument has been made quite successfully by John Rieder, in "Embracing the Alien," when he says:

> *Star Wars* and its spawn do not owe their success to their innovations in the
> conceptual material of SF. On the contrary, the characters, themes, and plots of
> contemporary SF cinema are for the most part straightforward, occasionally
> banal reworkings of standard SF conventions […]. Like all nostalgia, the *Star*
> *Wars* films are simplistic fantasies. The battles between the good-guy "rebels"
> and the bad guys of the Empire are no more nuanced than a wartime
> propaganda movie, and in fact much of the latter portion of *Star Wars* [*A New*
> *Hope*] is a souped-up fighter plane sequence […]. The film invokes the 1930s
> as a period when political conflicts were simple: we knew we were right
> because the Nazis were so wrong […]. There is no indication of any historical,
> economic, or political background to the war; it simply pits the light against the

dark, good against evil […]. But this is not the whole story. For who is Darth
Vader if not the consummate militaristic technocrat. (33-4)

Who indeed? This is an interesting question in light of the second military
tradition within the films, which is that of the feudal soldier. Yet it is not entirely
incongruous that a medievally inspired knight should also be a technocrat. A
common trend in the reworking of the Arthurian legend by medieval story-tellers
was to give the knights the newest type of armour and weaponry extant at the time of
writing. By extrapolation then, there is nothing so very incongruous in a futuristic
medieval knight having a "light-sabre," a prosthetic hand, and a mechanical steed in
the form of a space ship—a description which, by the way, fits both Darth Vader and
Luke Skywalker, villain and hero, father and son. What is more interesting is the fact
that the medieval is invoked at all. Why have a Jedi knight invested in the archaic
concept of sword fighting? Surely a true extrapolation should do away with the
archaic and leave only the technology. What is it that is so intrinsically important
about the figure of the knight that it should be fast-forwarded into a hi-tech age, or
more precisely, and perhaps significantly, rewound to "long ago" (a phrase used in
the opening text of all the *Star Wars* films, and reminiscent of the traditional epic's
"Once upon a time")? Why is it so important that the figure of the knight should be
kept in a readily identifiable form, merely re-fitting the swords and steeds?

I suggest that it is because Luke Skywalker is on a quasi-religious quest,
seeking mystical enlightenment, which correlates to that of the grail quest of the
Arthurian knights, rather than a science-fictional quest which might seek a logical
answer to the contemporary human condition.

The form of the Jedi knight contains aspects of both the European and Japanese
medieval ethos of soldiery. In my opinion, the samurai or ronin tropes contained
within the Jedi are merged fairly evenly with those of the knight of Western
medieval romances. Aspects of dress, weapons and fighting methods in *Star Wars*
are obviously influenced by Japanese styles. But the Jedi are also like the questing
knights of the Round Table—sometimes questing alone, sometimes in a company,
and always preoccupied with matters of kinship, loyalty and religion.

Some critics have written off the Jedi ethos as no more than "mock-Zen drivel
about will, fate and heroism" (Robert Hughes qtd. in Naglazas 7). It is interesting
that an aspect so central to the films is seen as simply irrelevant, especially as the

attitude of the critics is not a view popularly shared by the larger audience, who have put their money up to see the film by the millions. This discrepancy between the critics and the audience has led me to ask: what functions are the Jedi serving to have tapped into such fervour, and yet to have attracted such scathing criticism?

In respect to the discourse on combat, the disparity of the critical-versus-audience reaction to *Star Wars* is matched by a similar reaction to *Le Morte Darthur*. Not only was *Le Morte* immensely popular, but Malory's focus on combat (which is central to the religious quest) was similarly critiqued, as Andrew Lynch has pointed out:

> [A]lthough Malory's text is very largely dominated by a […] rich fight discourse, critics have often tended to play down the importance of the fights, or to treat them separately from what they see as the story's deeper interests and structures. ("Hoote Blood" 90)

I think this similarity in critical reaction may signal that knighthood and combat are functioning in similar ways within their respective texts and genres. In fact, the similarities between these two texts are stronger than just a superficial paralleling of critical reaction, as becomes obvious if we consider the texts' generic features. Below is a schematic of the romance genre's features, as recognised in Gillian Beer's influential *The Romance* (10), compared to the features of space opera recognised by Aldiss, Wolfe, Monk and Westfahl.

Table 1

The Generic Features of the Romance Compared to those of the Space Opera

Romance	Space Opera
The themes of love and adventure.	"The space opera bias is betrayed by the monomythic romance mode, [and] action-adventure plot" (Monk, "Not Just" 300).

A certain withdrawal from their own societies on the part of both reader and romance hero.	The hero "must confront aliens and exotic creatures" (Aldiss, *Space Opera* 10). "[T]aking place in space" (Monk, "Not Just" 297).
Profuse sensuous detail.	"Space must flow past the ports like wine from a pitcher. Blood must run down the palace steps, and ships launch out into the louring dark" (Aldiss, *Space Opera* 10).
Simplified characters (often with a suggestion of allegorical significance).	"[T]here must be a quest and a man to match the mighty hour […]. There must be a woman fairer than the skies and a villain darker than a Black Hole" (Aldiss, *Space Opera* 10). "[C]lichéd, derivative […] characters" (Westfahl, "Beyond" 179).
A serene intermingling of the unexpected and the everyday.	"[M]aximal encoding, fudge factors, minimal proleptic continuity" (Monk, "Not Just" 300). "[W]ithout overmuch regard for logic" (Aldiss, *Space Opera* 9).
A complex and prolonged succession of incidents usually without a single climax.	"[S]eries-story megatexts" (Monk, "Not Just" 310).
A happy ending.	"And all must come right in the end" (Aldiss, *Space Opera* 10). "[E]mphatic closure, optimism" (Monk, "Not Just" 300).

Amplitude of proportions.	"[S]pace operas are generally fast-paced intergalactic adventures on a grand scale" (Wolfe 120). [O]n a vast […] galactic or intergalactic […] scale" (Monk, "Not Just" 297).
A strongly enforced code of conduct to which all the characters must comply.	"It employs the myth of the hero (the heroic monomyth)" (Monk, "Not Just" 304).

This breadth of similarity is not accidental: it exists because both the romance and the space opera are working as fantasies, in the mode of the heroic monomyth as described by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (245-6). In other words, they both use Schmidt's fantasy writer-reader contract of *pretend* (8) in the same way. This function becomes evident if we examine the ways in which the texts both use key aspects of knighthood: the sword, kinship, and a knight's "arms."

The Sword
The sword is the single most identifiable object in a Malorian knight's keeping. Without it, he is stripped of both his literal power and the symbol of his knighthood. More than this, however, is the sword's spiritual meaning. Andrea Williams in her paper, "The Enchanted Swords and the Quest for the Holy Grail," points out that the sword's shape:

> being the same as that of the cross, led it to be revered as a figural
> representation of the True Cross […]. The origins of the religious […]
> symbolic significance of the sword lie deeper than its mere similarity in shape
> to the cross, however. There is a fundamental link between chivalric and
> religious Orders. (387)

The Jedi's light-sabre is constructed more along the lines of a Japanese katana than a Western medieval sword, in that it is missing the hilt which gives a sword its cross-like shape. This has two main consequences. First, the overtly Christian overtones are gone. Second, the sword looks both like a sword and yet "other," to the primarily Western audience of the film, hinting at the long tradition of chivalric

deeds-of-arms, yet distanced from it. However, although the overtly Christian symbolism has been discarded, the fact that the light-sabre glows suggests mystical properties. The similarities are obvious when we compare a light-sabre to Arthur's Excalibur: "thenne he drewe his swerd Excalibur, but it was so bryght in his enemyes eyen that it gaf light lyke thirty torchys" (Malory Book 1, IX, 43-4).

The pseudo-science of the light-sabre is used here in order to reinterpret the trope of the magic sword. This is significant as magical devices give special meaning to the people who have them, both in terms of making them special, and in legitimising their use of power. For, as Mark Lambert, has pointed out "the use of magical devices gives the sanction of objectivity" to the bearer of them (qtd. in Mann, "Taking" 77). Jill Mann adds:

[b]ecause the physical is made the medium for the revelation of the non-physical, the very absoluteness of the gulf between them teaches us to recognise how mysterious are the sources of the immaterial qualities which reside in the bodily person or the material world, and how unidentifiable are the agencies that assign them to one resting-place or another. ("Malory" 335)

In other words, the knight must be special because he has the magic item, and there is some mysterious, supernatural reason for this, rather than a recognisable reason of character, prowess or even technological availability—not everyone in the *Star Wars* universe has a light-sabre, even though anyone *could* have one. This notion is attractive to an audience, I suspect, as it enables the gratifying idea that if such a world were true, the watcher/reader is just as likely to be the chosen recipient of the magical item as anyone else. If a whiny farm-boy can be chosen to be a Jedi, and if a kitchen knave can be chosen to join the Round Table, then potentially the field is open to anyone. Anyone who is male, that is. There are no obvious female Jedi, just as there are no female members of Arthur's Round Table of "equals." And once Luke Skywalker (or Arthur) has his magic sword, we discover that he was not so randomly chosen after all. We discover that Luke (like Arthur) has the added advantage of kinship to another knight; and not just any knight, but The Premier Knight—in Luke's case, the Black Knight himself, Darth Vader.

For Luke this revelation of kinship occurs at the very end of *The Empire Strikes Back*, long after the magic sword has been bestowed. This means that Luke

gets to be both an everyman, and the unknown heir at the same time. This corresponds very closely to the story arc of several of the knights of Arthur's court; from Arthur himself, to a knight such as Gareth of Orkney, and even, to some extent, to Arthur's son Mordred.

The function of the magic sword may not seem to relate to my central thesis that space opera is working as a hybrid form of both fantasy and science fiction. A magic sword is clearly a fantasy trope, but is it in any way science-fictional? Let's consider the consequences of placing a magic sword in a pseudo-technological frame. The light-sabre allows the depiction of close quarters battle in a high-tech age, with all of the drama and physical danger that implies, and so works at reducing the importance of the other military sf technology displayed. But, correspondingly, it makes the technology of the light-sabre *more intimate*. Additionally, the religious overtones that the light-sabre is imbued with means that the audience is invited to see this technology as a kind of fetishised object of desire, even more special that the hi-tech space ships or droids. In effect, this gives the film a dual pro-technology and pro-magic bias. Hence, the light-sabre fits with the goal of sf, in that the audience wants to believe that such a weapon *could be*, and the technological excuse is offered so that they can more than *pretend* (Schmidt 8). What a cunning narrative trick! We end up with a magic sword that *could be*!

This tension between the fantasy and science fictional use of the light-sabre means that it can be used as a transitional symbol: the narrative can swing easily between the secular story of the Rebellion at war with the Empire, and Luke's religious quest to redeem his father. This quest is positioned centrally in the narrative, although this is not obvious if only *A New Hope* is considered. However, taken as a whole narrative cycle, the original trilogy reveals that the central conflict is not between the Rebellion and the Empire, but rather between the Jedi and the Sith (the name of the Dark Jedi) as represented by Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader. Every major battle between the two military forces is actually decided in a corresponding duel between father and son.

Given the correspondence between *Star Wars* and Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* so far, it is no surprise to discover that a similar dynamic of father and son as combatants exists between Arthur and Mordred, and I think it is worth considering this discourse on kinship in more detail.

The Kinship of Arms

The relationship between Arthur and Mordred is prefigured early on by Merlin's prophecy; the prophecy being that Arthur will be told by King Pellynore "the name of youre owne son begotyn of youre syster, that shall be the destruccion of all thys realme" (Malory Book 1, XXIV, 40-1). The fact that Arthur's death is prefigured in this way so early in the narrative, and does in fact come to pass at the end of the cycle, acts as a strong endorsement of the idea of a fixed destiny or the unavoidable wheel of Fortune. On a more subtle level, Arthur's fate endorses the idea of the importance of kinship and noble blood. It is, after all, only a child of Arthur's own blood that is powerful enough to wreak such havoc.

The idea of destiny or Fortune is further developed in the *Morte* through Arthur's dream vision of his own fate. In the dream, Arthur sees himself sitting on a giant wheel which is suspended over a black pit. The symbolism is clear: Arthur's wheel of Fortune has begun its irrevocable downward movement. Correspondingly, Arthur must die at Mordred's hands—it is his ultimate destiny.

The idea of destiny is also heavily privileged in *Star Wars*; the phrase "it is your destiny" is addressed to Luke on many occasions. Like Arthur, Luke has a dream/vision of his own destiny. However, the difference between Arthur's and Luke's visions indicates the different ideas of fate underpinning each narrative. Luke's vision is of a combat with Darth Vader, at a point in the narrative in which he doesn't know his own genealogy. When he kills Vader in the dream vision, the corpse is wearing Luke's face.

This dream vision is built on modern psychological ideas rather than a medieval sensibility. It is not about irrevocable fate, and the unstoppable wheel of Fortune, as is Arthur's vision. Rather, Luke's vision is Freudian—presented as a sub-conscious realisation of the problem he must face. Luke's fate, then, is decided through his ability to correctly interpret his vision, so that he can recognise and manipulate the moment of destiny when it arrives—the moment in which he defeats his father in combat. Luke is *able* to recognise this moment through the trope of hands and arms as I shall discuss below. He is *motivated* to recognise the moment because he is constantly being warned of the destiny which awaits him if he fails: becoming a Sith like his father. For example, Vader says to Luke, after their battle in *The Empire Strikes Back*:

There is no escape. Don't make me destroy you. Luke, you have not yet realised your importance. You have only begun to discover your power. Join me, and I will complete your training. With our combined strength, we can end this destructive conflict and bring order to the galaxy […]. If only you knew the power of the Dark Side. Obi-Wan never told you what happened to your father […]. I am your father […]. Search your feelings, you know it to be true […]. Luke, you can destroy the Emperor. He has foreseen this. It is your destiny. Join me and together we can rule the galaxy as father and son. Come with me, it is the only way. [Luke then jumps off a precipice.]

This speech is an interesting mélange of ideas of destiny, a soldierly credo of "might is right," and kinship. When read in relationship to this speech of Vader's, the earlier vision has the function of emphasising that Luke's fate will be determined by both his role as combatant and his kinship to his foe. Or, in other words, Luke's destiny depends upon his recognition of his relationship to his closest male relative, despite the competing paradigm of combat. Ironically, it is only through their drawn-out battle that these two knights can explore the bonds and expectations of their kinship—battle is really the only forum in which they connect.

With respect to textual destiny, Arthur and Luke are twinned in the architecture of their fates: both of their visions emphasise that their destinies are determined by combat with their closest male kin. However, it is hard to tell which is privileged more, the combat or the kinship. Does combat primarily endorse the credo of "might is right," or is it primarily defining and reifying kinship? The answer, I think, is made clear through the use of names in *Star Wars*: *vater* is, after all, German for "father." I argue, then, that within both of these texts whether a character is a good son or a bad father seems to matter less than that they *are* sons and fathers.

This is a wonderfully archaic point of view in *Star Wars,* considering that we have been told that the "Clone Wars" (*A New Hope*) have come and gone, seemingly leaving no trace of their genetic technology, or of any new understanding of the idea of kinship itself. In this respect, militarism can be seen to be defusing a potential moral mine-field brought on by cloning technology, or even by the more prosaic idea of the non-nuclear family. After all, it would be hard to find a more disconnected family than that of the Skywalkers, and yet, despite Luke and Vader meeting for the first time as adults on opposite sides of a war, the father/son bond is shown to be

paramount. This is primarily revealed through the constant portrayal of how alike they are as soldiers. In regards to function within the space opera, it is obvious that these familial and soldierly bonds do nothing to question real world attitudes about war, and everything to bring about reconciliation and redemption within the text. For Luke's quest is not to win the war, or to discover post-technological familial possibilities, but rather to save his father from eternal damnation. In this respect, *Star Wars* is working as a conventional fantasy discourse, and the potential subversions offered by the background of science fictional technology are overpowered by the traditional romance mode.

The tension between the themes of combat and kinship can be compared to those apparent in the descriptions of Luke and Mordred. The fighting skills of both Luke and Mordred are praised as they battle their fathers. Malory tells us, "And sir Mordred ded hys devoure that day and put himself in grete perill," during his final battle with Arthur (Malory Book 21, IV, 12-3). On the other hand, Darth Vader says to Luke, "You have learnt much young one… Impressive. Most impressive."

It seems to me that this praise indicates that combat has a double role here. It is the arena of Luke and Vader's bonding as I have discussed, but it is also voicing a desire and respect for combat purely for its own sake, independent of who is fighting whom. This desire is, I think, epitomised by the frequent imagery of hands and "arms" (in both senses of the word).

Fair Hands and "Arms"

In the tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney, Gareth proves himself as worthy of knighthood and joining the Round Table through his anonymous feats of arms. Yet the fact that he is not merely a churl is indicated early in the adventure when Kay, believing him to be "a Vylane borne," sarcastically calls him "Beawmaynes, that is to say Fayre Handys" (Malory Book 6, I, 20-3)—a characteristic no peasant would ever have. This recognition is vital to the enjoyment of the battles he pursues, as it gives the audience insight into Gareth's true nature, and so destroys any anxiety that might otherwise be felt at a knave's challenge to the noble arena of knightly chivalry. The Green Knight, unaware of Gareth's nobility, is concerned not so much that Gareth slew his brother, the Black Knight, but that he slew him with "a knavis honde" (Malory Book 7, VIII, 36-7).

A common conflation of ideas in medieval Arthurian romances is that a knight must not only be strong and skilful, but that he must be fair and noble. As long as it is the case that all knights are "fair-handed," their battles are part of a standardised, formulaic ritual and in this regard both acceptable and admirable, no matter the cause or participants. This ritual of arms can be seen as a contract with the audience, guaranteeing that subversive ideologies will not be introduced into the story. This is an argument which has been made successfully in terms of Arthurian romances by Andrew Lynch in *Malory's Book of Arms*.

> The formula invokes collective speech rather than the singularity of individual writer and book-readers. In this way, though the narrating of the content of combat might seem to display conflict and division within the chivalric ranks, both its manner of description and the implied circumstances of communication, reception and re-communication stress instead a solidarity of outlook, and coerce the would-be "jantyll" reader-hearer to conform his or her judgement to the chivalric norm. (31)

But does this function of romance combat extend to the audience of *Star Wars*? The emphasis on knightly worth being signalled through arms and hands is not nearly as cohesive in space opera. As I mentioned at the start of this essay, in addition to the Arthurian, many other generic modes of combat are borrowed by space operas. *Star Wars* itself uses both the feudal and World War 2 modes of combat, while *Flash Gordon* and *Star Trek* can vary from episode to episode. However, although the idea of "knighthood" is not universally borrowed, in nearly all space operas the idea of combat is taken seriously—might is indeed right. As Monk puts it, within the space opera there is "an authorial mindset which sees the extraterrestrial universe in holistic terms as both knowable and manageable" ("Not Just" 300), specifically through violent conflict[5].

In each of the *Star Wars* films in the original trilogy, the protagonists "manage" their world through combat; specifically, at key points throughout the narrative there is a severing of a hand or arm by a light-sabre. In *A New Hope*, this

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[5]Another common borrowing by space opera is the detective, or lone gunslinger, model, and Han Solo is an example of this. Despite the lack of a formalised "military" in these instances, violent conflict is still a central concern.

moment occurs in the cantina scene, in which Kenobi rescues Luke from a thug. This is significant, as it is the first time we see a Jedi using his light-sabre. The scene is very fast, and little is actually shown. Kenobi draws his light-sabre, and then the severed and bloody fore-arm is lying on the floor. This is also the only instance in which we see blood from a light-sabre wound, for in all other instances the wound is cauterised instantly, or else the weapon has cut through something other than flesh.

The next time we see a similar scene it is in *The Empire Strikes Back*, in which Vader chops off Luke's hand, then suggests they join forces in the speech I quoted above.

Finally, Luke severs Vader's cyborg hand in their final battle in *Return of the Jedi*. This moment is central to both the plot of the film, and Luke's quest to redeem his father. It is through Luke's recognition of this mirrored moment that he realises he is about to become his father. Instead, he refuses to fight further, thus breaking the cycle of his predicted destiny, and redeeming his father in the process.

This repetition of the severing of a hand within the *Star Wars* films becomes a motif, a recognised moment within the film cycle, not only for Luke, but for the audience. In this respect, the sequence functions in an analogous way to the contract of arms in Malory that I discussed above. The motif unites the audience in its understanding and expectation of the Jedi code in a way that could not be achieved with a single film, even given the generic expectation of combat within space opera. In both *Star Wars* and *Le Morte Darthur* the audience is challenged to take the adventure as prescribed by the ritual of armed combat, and are thus safely assured there will be no unexpected challenges to the status quo. While this evocation of Jedi knighthood is specific to *Star Wars*, this conglomerate effect is not uncommon in space operas in general. As they tend to take the form of long, episodic, mega-textual serials, there is room to develop this kind of contract of expectation with the audience.

However, despite this development of a code of combat, the *Star Wars* films are not quite so clearly an imitation of the deeds of arms in Arthurian texts as I have so far made out. For Vader is not fair-handed; his hands are black, murderous, and not even human. Nor is Luke entirely fair-handed, for at the moment he is forced to recognise Vader as his father, he loses one of his human hands, and consequently becomes part cyborg like his father. This cyborg technology has the potential to undercut the "comfort factors" that the romance expectation of knighthood has

bought to the films thus far, and to some extent it actually *does*. I remember that the first time I saw *Empire*, I was scandalised that Vader used the force to "throw" heavy bits of the space station at Luke during their duel. My reaction was, "but that's not *fair*! It's cheating!" Now I might add, "It's underhanded." However, this corruption of the trope of the fair-handed knight does not seem so incongruous once we remember that knighthood is not the only militaristic trope being exploited within these films. Vader's actions here are a reminder of the intersections between the film's Nazi and Arthurian themes. For Vader is not just a knight, he is also a minion in the service of a fascist dictator who is not adverse to using "final solutions" when dealing with the rebels. In fact, one suspects that Luke only survived the first two films because his father was secretly protecting him from the Emperor.

Where does this leave my exploration of the function of space opera as a comfortable re-working of fantasy tropes? I don't think it really affects my contention negatively. Although the Jedi is a different creature than its predecessor, the Arthurian knight, the way it transgresses the original blue-print is through another set of stereotypes. There is a brief shock, but then we fall right back in to the expectation of the wicked soldier versus the good soldier. It is a shock with no long-term consequences as far as raising uncomfortable issues is concerned. When it comes to modes of combat, *Star Wars* truly is a "nostalgic future."

To conclude, the three militaristic tropes I've examined are all working as a traditional, conventional discourse on combat, largely borrowed from the romance. The trope of the magic sword twinned with hi-tech weaponry becomes a hybrid icon: both fantasy and science fiction at the same time. The trope of combat allows kinship to be established as a primary concern, and destiny to be a form of self-actualisation. It also effectively avoids the need to interrogate new forms of male closeness, such as cloning, because within this text male kinship exists only on the field of battle, and the point of technology is to further combat. Finally, the trope of fair hands and arms offers a contract of ritualised combat narrative to the audience, which guarantees that textual violence will fulfill the conventional idea of an extraterrestrial universe which is "both knowable and manageable" (Monk, "Not Just" 300).

Underpinning all of these ideas is that of religion. Mock-Zen drivel or not, the Force is coded as a kind of combat-driven magic, existing in an age of technological miracles. Jedi knights are seen to quest not for earthly goods, and only incidentally for secular wars. Instead, they seek redemption and reconciliation. This, perhaps, is

Star Wars's most powerful reworking of militaristic tropes. Here we have the knights of the Round Table reborn, complete with a holy mission. Through such a rebirth, the space opera can offer the post-modern audience nostalgia in the fancy dress of futurism, and a seductive secular religion, custom built for an age in which faith in a monotheistic God is outré.

Before writing this essay I had the notion that *Star Wars* was about as far as a film could get from being a post-modern text. Since then I've had to revise that view. I now think that the *Star Wars* films are one of the best examples. The cycle is such a clever reworking of so many different clichés, ethoi and historical worldviews, and this may well be both the prime strength of the films, and the reason they are criticised as "superficial."

Within this chapter I have explored some of the aspects of militarism that are common to both Malory's *Morte Darthur* and *Star Wars*, and how the tropes of the former tradition have been used to help build the themes in the latter. In the final analysis, this particular space opera does seem to be recontextualising ideas from other genres as a strategy of conventional discourse. However, the militaristic tropes used in other space operas are often from different historical traditions than those used in *Star Wars*. This means that the themes I have discussed in this essay—magic quasi-scientific weapons, nostalgic modes of combat/kinship, a contract of arms, and the knight on a holy quest—cannot be mapped onto all space operas easily. For instance, the *Sector General* series, by James White (beginning with *Hospital Station* in 1962), tends to fight germs, not battles (there are exceptions). Despite this obvious difference, there is, nonetheless, some correspondence with the themes I have discussed here. The *Sector General* series does have magical quasi-scientific tools, it has God-like aliens, and it does create a contract with the audience—albeit using the conventions of the medical drama rather than the war story. But that is, after all, the point I have been trying to make. Space operas seem generically primed to play Splat! with every imaginable genre and trope, deploying them in both the fantasy mode of *pretend* and the science fictional mode of *could be*. It is this chameleon quality that makes space opera so appealingly new, and yet so comfortingly familiar.

And in the final battle, *that* is why Luke Skywalker will always beat Arthur. It has nothing to do with magic swords, enchanted scabbards or being chosen by God. It is a generic imperative.

Space Opera's Relationship to SF

A Case Study: *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Apollo and *Star Wars*

> Space: The final frontier.
>
> (*Star Trek* opening monologue)

In the previous chapter I discussed space opera's tendency to borrow features from other genres, and also the way in which such borrowings work within the monomythic romance mode that characterises space opera (Monk, "Not Just" 300). Given the influence of so many secondary genres on space opera, it is easy to see why prescriptive definitions are impossible. However, despite the profusion of motifs, tropes and biases which can be incorporated into space operas, there is one absolute constant: space. What role, then, does this constant play? I contend that it is through the trope of space travel that space opera tends to be working in a primarily science-fictional mode. Within this chapter I will compare space opera's use of space travel with both science fictional and real-world media/political representations of space travel in order to examine the ways in which space is ideologically constructed.

Westfahl has recognised that space opera, for all of its ties to fantasy, is "not unaffected by developments in the genre" of science fiction ("Beyond" 180). The specific examples he gives are the use of: "hyperspace" or "spacewarps"; space stations; "helpful robot companions"; and a collapsing Galactic Empire ("Beyond" 180). Monk too has identified the science fictional "maximal encoding" and "fudge factors" inherent in space opera ("Not Just" 300). The examples she gives are: "FTL (faster-than-light)" travel; and communication with aliens through computers, a

lingua franca or telepathy ("Not Just" 309). It is worth noting that the majority of these examples of science-fictional tropes are directly tied to space travel.

It is also through the use of space as a setting that space opera's primary bias can most clearly be seen to be working. In these stories, as Monk points out, there is nearly always "an authorial mindset which sees the extraterrestrial universe in holistic terms as both knowable and manageable" ("Not Just" 300). It is no accident that space operas are so often called "westerns in space," as they are the ultimate frontier fictions, with an overtly colonial agenda of exploration, colonisation and conquest. Many of them even explicitly say as much, *Star Trek's* opening monologue being the best-known example. "Space: the final frontier," we are told, and further that the *Star Trek* mission is "to boldly go where no man has gone before" (opening monologue).

However, this colonial discourse is not unique to space opera. In fact, I argue that it is central to the Western discourse on space travel as it is articulated in both science-fictional and real-world texts. It is, for instance, an obvious polemic in *2001: A Space Odyssey,* and also central to the rhetoric of NASA. It is no co-incidence that this similarity exists, for throughout the twentieth century there has been considerable trading of ideas between sf, science and politics. Furthermore, a large part of this discourse has been undertaken by space opera working in its science-fictional mode. This is the central notion I shall examine within this chapter, through a case study of three representations of space travel that occurred in the pivotal decade of 1968 to 1977.

In this case study, I shall examine the ideology of space travel represented in Stanley Kubrick's acclaimed science fiction film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), in the media coverage of NASA's Apollo Program, especially the 1969 moon shot in Apollo 11[6], and within the space opera *Star Wars: Episode IV: A New Hope* (1977). Through this examination, I will map the ideological movement and change that is central to these interconnected discourses, and consequently the ways in which they have influenced and over-written each other will start to become clear.

There has always been a strong interaction between science, sf and politics, and the flow has never been in one direction or easy to define, although scientific ideas

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[6]Particularly the National Geographic video, *For All Mankind: The Incredible Story of Man's First Apollo Missions to the Moon* (1989), which has been compiled from footage taken during the Apollo missions.

about the solar system, particularly, have had an obvious impact on sf. For instance, during the opposition of Mars in the late nineteenth century, astronomer Schiparelli noted *canali* on the planet's surface, which directly led to a trend in sf stories in which Mars was depicted as covered in water-filled canals (Aldiss and Wingrove 175). Science fiction movies about space travel have also made use of scientific consultants since the very beginning. As early as 1929, Fritz Lang hired rocket scientist Hermann Oberth as a consultant on *Frau im Mond* (Ordway, "Space" 28-9), and later, Kubrick hired Fredrick Ordway to research and extrapolate current technology in order to create realistic sets and models for *2001* (Ordway, *2001* 47-105).

Ideas have travelled in the other direction too, particularly as many scientists have also written space stories, in which they have investigated the possibilities of space travel before such travel was possible. Such writers/scientists include Hermann Oberth, Carl Sagan, Gregory Benford and Arthur C. Clarke. Clarke, the author of *2001,* is generally credited with first proposing geo-synchronous communication satellites (Berger 101), and is also well known for considering sf to be propaganda for "preparing the public for the age of space flight" (Berger 101-2). Much of his sf, including *2001,* can be seen to be fulfilling that agenda, and has been hugely influential both within and outside of the sf genre. With some justification, Brian Aldiss and David Wingrove name Clarke as one of the "SF Super League" of writers, along with Asimov, Heinlein and Herbert, who broke out of the sf ghetto and bought space to the general reading public (485).

The influence of sf on politics is not always as easily mapped, especially due to military secrecy surrounding war-related space technology. That said, there are several well-known instances in which sf and the machinery of state have interacted. For example, there was an infamous visit by Military Intelligence to the offices of the magazine *Astounding* in 1944, in order to investigate a recently published story about the development of an atomic bomb (Aldiss and Wingrove 278). This certainly implies a political awareness of sf. Nor is it the only example of such interest, as in 1983 the name "Star Wars" became inextricably linked to the USA's Strategic Defence Initiative (Kramer 43). Furthermore, sf writers such as Jerry Pournelle (Aldiss and Wingrove 467) and Gregory Benford (Nicholls 11) have worked for, or been consulted by, the USA's military/industrial complex. In more general terms, the influence of science-fictional ideas of space travel has been felt through social

engineering, most dramatically demonstrated by the invention of the popular "religion," Dianetics (now known as Scientology), by sf writer L. Ron Hubbard. Scientology is linked in the popular consciousness to Hubbard's lengthy space opera saga, *Battlefield Earth* (1982).

Aware of this constant back-and-forth of ideas, I have chosen to focus on the decade of 1968 to 1977. This was a key period in the construction of space travel as a public discourse, as it was the moment in which science fiction became science fact: humans travelled through space and walked on another planet for the first time. The importance of this moment in terms of politics, science, and science fiction cannot easily be quantified, but it was certainly one of the defining moments of the twentieth century. As I shall demonstrate within this case study, the ways in which the colonial imperative was constructed across these texts are similar, both before, during and after the transitional moment of fiction to fact.

2001: A Space Odyssey has generally been classified as science fiction cinema of the highest order by commentators. To cite just two examples from the many, Joan Dean said, "Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* raised the genre of the science fiction film to its apogee in 1968" (32), and Carl Freedman claimed that, "*2001* […] establishes the science fiction film with more incontestable authority than any other" (300). It was also a popular film—the eleventh highest grossing film of 1968, earning around US$8.5 million ("Top Moneymaking" 11). However, neither *2001's* popularity nor its reputation for excellence is based on its storyline, which is almost incomprehensible (and is legendary for leaving audiences bemused), but rather on its scientific accuracy, especially in the space travel scenes. Where accuracy was not possible, the film attempted to extrapolate from knowledge available in the late 1960s. Ordway's paper, "*2001: A Space Odyssey* in Retrospect," describes the long, detailed process of research, in which he consulted both the Soviet science attaché in London (56) and NASA, and also with General Electric, Whirlpool, IBM, Bell Telephone and many others (52-3). The film was successful, then, primarily because it fulfilled the science fictional *could be* in a particularly effective and evocative way.

In keeping with the agenda of sf, the whole point of the film was to raise questions about science, technology and the future of humankind. Arthur C. Clarke said that, "If you understood *2001* completely, we failed. We wanted to raise far more questions than we answered" (qtd. in Agel 367). In my opinion, these questions, particularly those raised by the visuals of the "alien" monolith, and of the

space baby arriving in Earth's orbit, are central to the colonial discourse of the film. That such a bias should be present at all is, perhaps, surprising given Clarke's own politics, for although he is avidly pro-space, he is just as avidly against the idea of projecting international boundaries into space (Berger 102).

How, then, does *2001*, as a science fiction text, construct space travel? First and foremost, it visually maps space travel to weapons of destruction. This is primarily achieved when the rotating bone tool used in the "Dawn of Man" sequence segues into an orbiting space craft, thus conflating the two images. The bone is depicted as the tool used to commit the first homicide, under the looming presence of the monolith. At first glance, the spacecraft that follows seems connected to the bone only by appearance: it is also long, cylindrical, and white. It takes a moment to make the cognitive jump: like the bone, the spacecraft is also a human tool. In fact, the first three spacecraft depicted in the film are orbiting nuclear-weapons platforms, which only strengthens this conflation of tools and murder. The implications are clear—for all of their sophistication, spacecraft are still just tools, and still capable of being used to kill other men (and I use the word "men" deliberately, as I shall explain shortly). In addition, the film makes it quite clear that the cold war is still just as current in space as it was on Earth. Given this background, by the time we get to the images of the "Jupiter Mission, 18 Months Later," which has set out in Discovery, a long, white (bone-like, sperm-like) exploration vessel, it is no great surprise to find that its computer brain, HAL, is homicidal.

Another fundamental way in which *2001* constitutes space travel is through the masculinisation of space. This is manifested in several ways, most obviously through the lack of women in any significant roles—in this space they are attendants, daughters or enemies (Russian), but otherwise absent. There is a masculinisation of the spacecraft as well. Discovery, for example, is shaped just like a giant sperm, and many of the other craft shown are exceedingly phallic. On their own, I would not necessarily read the spacecraft designs as part of a deliberate masculinisation of space, despite the fact that in the frictionless vacuum of space there is no need for streamlined shapes. However, when combined with the lack of women, these designs become very suggestive. In fact, given the symbolism, the whole story can be read as both a transcending of the female role in human reproduction, and a fetishising of male aggression. The new species of Space Man, as signified by the rebirth of the

astronaut Bowman as the space baby, is achieved entirely without the aid of women, and indirectly due to the murderous actions of HAL (who is coded male).

This non-sexual, space-based conception is at the crux of the science-fictional themes developed in the film, and is signalled early on through the space travel sequences. Although space is lovingly rendered on the screen, this is not sexy film-making. Quite the contrary. It is anti-sex, although admittedly graceful. If there were to be a moment of accidental eroticism, surely the freefall sequence would be it, especially with a waltz playing in the background. But no: the freefall stewardesses are prissy and hygienically sealed in their white uniforms and caps (they too look oddly sperm-like), and the slow tempo of *Blue Danube* does nothing to increase the excitement of space travel. Ironically, it does increase verisimilitude. A common artistic error made in movies which are set in space is that noises are somehow transmitted through vacuum. *Star Wars* is guilty of this. *2001*, on the other hand, is one of the few films about space travel not to make this mistake.

The final coding of space I wish to discuss is space as mundane (knowable and manageable). The use of long, slow sequences in which not much happens—such as Dr Floyd's trip from Earth to the Moon via the space station—combined with the "realness" of the technology, makes the various spacecraft he travels in seem both extraordinary and everyday: Extraordinary, because they are beyond *our* experience, but everyday because they are obviously a tedious necessity for the characters within the film. Here Schmidt's science-fictional writer-reader contract of *could be* is at its strongest (8). The craft are encoded as hardly more exciting than a bus, or our own cars, and consequently the space they travel through also becomes coded as something closer to a highway than an endless and hostile infinity. Of course, the irony embedded here is that our own cars are one of the most effective killing machines ever invented, and highways are not safe spaces. An interesting silence here, too, is that by the 1960s nearly all technologised human spaces were commercialised, even highways through billboards and car radios, yet space in *2001* doesn't seem to be a commercial venture at all. It seems to be the province of the military/industrial sector, with economics not getting much of a look-in.

In this examination of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, I have contended that space travel has been constructed as mundane and masculine, and linked to weapons. Space is also working as the central locus of science-fictional questioning through the

enigmas of the monolith and the space baby. I will now compare this with NASA's rhetoric about the Apollo program.

Apollo 11, the first "manned" craft to land on the moon, took off from the Kennedy Space Centre on 16 July 1969, the year after the release of *2001: A Space Odyssey* into cinemas. Quite apart from their close chronology, it is easy to find inter-textual moments between the Apollo missions and the film *2001*. For example, one of the Apollo astronauts took a tape of *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, the main musical theme of *2001*, along with him, and it was played in the Command Module during the trip to the moon. This piece of music contrasts with both texts in interesting ways, recalling as it does Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, and so adding a dimension to both the transcendental space baby of *2001*, and the fact that the moonshot mission was named after a god.

A rather obvious connection between these different allusions to superhumaness is that the space baby, Apollo and the astronauts are all male, no great surprise given that the NASA space program, like *2001,* was a masculinised space. This was most tellingly articulated when the Lunar Module successfully touched down on the moon on 20 July, and Neil Armstrong stepped out onto the lunar surface and voiced his immortal words—words which included only half of the human race in this triumph of technology—"That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind" (Kerrod 41). Despite what these words may imply about the absence of women from the space program, there were some involved. For example, one group of women participated in a preliminary astronaut training program—they were known as the Mercury 13. These women not only passed the testing, but in some cases "far surpassed their male counterparts" (O'Meara Para. 2). However, the women never made it into space because the astronaut candidate criteria required people with sufficient flight hours in jet aircraft. The only way to get such experience was through the military and, due to the rules excluding women from combat training, this meant no women could become eligible.

Considering that NASA prides itself on being the world's largest non-military organisation, this was an interesting discriminating factor to choose. In fact, it was deliberately sexist, according to NASA physician Donald E. Kilgore, who claimed that "the attitude in the upper levels of NASA was that America wasn't ready for women to travel in space" (qtd. in O'Meara Para. 3). This attitude is no surprise once the NASA missions are put into context, as they were anything but the peaceful

voyaging that the rhetoric painted them. The USA did not fund these trips "in peace for all mankind" (Kerrod 41), but in order to win a decisive propaganda victory in the cold war with Russia. The Soviet Union's space program had achieved early success with the launch of Sputnik 1, before the USA had even realised the cold war's front had moved into space. Hence President Kennedy's all-out approach to the moon shot—it was the ultimate frontier that needed to be conquered in order to win the space race. Correspondingly, the Apollo program was military in all but name; it used military contractors, and the astronauts were either in the military, ex-military, or test pilots for military aircraft. A lack of support for sending women on a military mission into space is just as sexist, but much less surprising than, the idea of women being barred from a truly peaceful space mission.

The cold war inscribed the Apollo spacecraft as potential weapons, in a covert way. I suggest that this military subtext to the Apollo missions' rhetoric of peace is reminiscent of Kubrick's depiction of the graceful space stations orbiting the Earth, which are actually fully loaded nuclear arsenals. Of course, Kubrick was influenced by actual space programs, with all of the political subtext that they carried. His researchers looked to the Russian space program as well as to Apollo's predecessors, Mercury and Gemini, in order to find the visuals needed to achieve verisimilitude, and those visuals were already politically coded.

Such intertextual echoes between sf texts and real-world space travel are not limited to this brief historical moment, for they are found in the post-Apollo era too. Fast-forward to US politics in the 1980s, for example, and we find that the *Star Wars* films, which were influenced by both the Apollo program and *2001*, became a factor in the debate about the Strategic Defence Initiative of the Reagan era. The SDI was popularly nicknamed "Star Wars," and was driven by ideology which claimed that the best defence against the M.A.D. (Mutually Assured Destruction) of nuclear war was the development of powerful, state-of-the-art, space-based anti-missile weaponry (Chapline 268).

To return to the Apollo Program, I would argue that the missions can been seen as relentlessly masculinist and covertly military, but in visual terms the technology is much less phallic and less weapon-like than the craft in *2001*. The exception, of course, being the immense Saturn V launch rocket; however, as the Saturn V is designed to punch through the Earth's atmosphere, there is a functional justification for a phallic design. The Apollo modules, however, were non-nuclear powered, un-

armed, and neither smooth, white nor photogenic. The reality of them was quite unlike the space ships commonly seen in science fiction films. That said, they do bear some similarity with the spacecraft of *2001*, primarily in the familiar, used, pragmatic efficiency of them, which is a design feature borrowed and taken to a new level of shabby chic in the *Star Wars* films.

For all of their hundreds of thousands of parts, the NASA modules were rather like pre-computerised submarines or aeroplanes. When something went wrong, as it did spectacularly in the Apollo 13 mission, the astronauts could cobble together a low-technology solution to fix the high-technology machinery, using plastic bags and electrical tape—and it worked! Suddenly the astronauts became glorified mechanics, grease monkeys in space, and we again have a conflation of wonder with the mundane. Furthermore, this mastery of technology was followed by millions as the Apollo 13 mission became one of the first instances of total media saturation, in a "*tour de force* which gripped the world" (Whitehouse 26).

All of the Apollo moon shots occurred between the release dates of the two films in this case study. The first moon shot was in 1969. The last, Apollo 17, was completed in December 1972. The final three planned moon landings were cancelled due to an outcry against the cost. The last Apollo mission, which didn't leave Earth's orbit, was undertaken in July 1975. This was the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project, ironically enough a joint Russian and American mission (Kerrod 78). The war, it seems, had been won.

During this decade in which science fiction turned to science fact, only twenty-nine science fiction studio films in English were released, and of those only a handful used the theme of space travel (Dean 32). Several of these were sequels to *The Planet of the Apes* (1968), but they only nominally included a space travel motif. Films such as *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), *Slaughter House Five* (1972), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), and *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976) used the idea of aliens coming to Earth, but space travel itself was not explored. In fact, only *Silent Running* (1972) used the theme of space travel as its setting, and it was not a particularly successful film (Dean 36). The most common theme amongst the sf films in this decade was ecological catastrophe, particularly in the form of over-population, such as in *Soylent Green* (1973) and *Logan's Run* (1976). To put this trend into context, in the 1930s there were more films (both proportionally and empirically) using space travel as a central motif: *Just Imagine* (1930), *Things to Come* (1936),

the numerous episodes of the *Flash Gordon* (1936, 1938, 1940) and *Buck Rogers* (1939) serials, and, of course, it was also the decade of the infamous *War of the Worlds* (1938) radio play by Orson Welles. I could make a similar list for every decade between the 1930s and the 2000s, bar that of the moon shot. This movement away from the theme of space travel was also apparent in prose sf of the same period (Aldiss and Wingrove 288). Several reasons for this sudden disinterest in space travel within sf have been put forward: that space travel is a theme that is used for escapism, and so is more common during politically and economically conservative eras, which the late sixties and early seventies were not (Freedman 301); that it was the post-Vietnam era, interested more in resolving issues on the home front than with aliens (Dean 34); and that *2001* was too hard an act to follow (Freedman 315).

I think that Terry Bisson is closer to the truth. Bisson suggests that by making space travel a reality, NASA usurped the major theme of science fiction to that point, and in doing so the space program dealt a blow to the science-fiction genre. As Bisson points out, "[t]he science was still there but the fiction was gone, and with it the myth" (9). It is certainly difficult to see how the space ship of sf could have continued on, unchanged, in the face of the reality—the real space race had, if nothing else, shown how exorbitantly expensive space travel was. The science-fictional space ships of pre-Apollo stories were obviously uneconomic, they would have "drained the energy systems of the Earth many times over had they been built" (Aldiss and Wingrove 276).

While I agree that the reality of space travel did subdue the space travel motif in science fiction, as Bisson suggests, I disagree that the myth was gone. After all, the Apollo program's very name encourages us to read it as a modern myth: the myth of humans finally finding their place in the heavens as new gods. How similar this sounds to Monk's claim that space opera sees "the extraterrestrial universe in holistic terms as both knowable and manageable" ("Not Just" 300). Perhaps it shouldn't be surprising, then, that science fiction, as a serious study in what *could be*, was left with little to say on the theme of space travel after the moon shot. Space opera, on the other hand, had no such problem—at least not since *Star Wars*, which re-invigorated both the fiction of space, and the myth, in spectacular fashion.

How, then, is the representation of space travel in *Star Wars* similar to that in *2001* and the space race? There are some obvious differences. Unlike *2001*, within *A New Hope* there is no adherence to the laws of physics or logical extrapolation. For

instance, gravity just happens on space ships and space stations, with no explanation given. Another difference to *2001*, is that *A New Hope's* narrative directs viewing in a way that closes off questions rather than raising them. In these respects, *A New Hope* is not working as strictly within the sf expectation of what *could be* as *2001*. That said, while the story in *Star Wars* is simple, linear, and conventional, it is told in a visual style which evokes the glamour of space travel and imbues it with mysticism. In this, *A New Hope* does share something with *2001*: it is the visual encoding of science-fictional technology which bears much of the weight of both films' meaning. In terms of exploring what *could be* then, *Star Wars* would seem to be a distant cousin to *2001*, connected primarily through the use of common tropes of space travel and technology rather than ideology. However, upon closer examination we find that the space travel tropes common to both films are constructed in a very similar manner.

Once again space travel is depicted as a masculine endeavour. The main protagonists in *A New Hope* are male (and white, and English-speaking). The aliens and robots, such as Chewbacca and C3P0, are also coded male, much as HAL is in *2001*. Admittedly, there is the charismatic Princess Leia, but she is a lone female adrift in a sea of testosterone, and she is linked firmly to the fairy tale, rather than science fiction, with her title of "Princess." Even the climax of the film is a weird kind of ejaculation scene, in which Luke Skywalker must shoot his weapon down a shaft in order to win the battle against the Death Star. The "Death" Star, although not phallic or white, is another hi-tech tool of destruction, hanging prettily in space. It contains the "feminine" passage of destruction, which again offers an anti female/life encoding reminiscent of that in *2001*. Human godhood is also invoked in *Star Wars*, as it is in *2001's* space baby and the "Apollo" missions. Darth Vader, the Empire's chief minion, is also, we discover (if we consider the later episodes), the central character of the story arc, in a tale of transcendence from base flesh and human weakness into a redeemed, post-death, ethereal state.

Death, war, and combat are all central to *Star Wars*, but unlike the space race and *2001*, there is nothing subtle or "cold" about the war being fought. Nor is there any attempt to hide the film's colonial discourse beneath rubrics such as "in peace for all mankind." The Empire, we are assured, is evil, but it is also the overwhelming centre of power, arising out of a venal and corrupt (and capitalist) Trading Federation. However, although the Empire is evil, the idea of a galaxy-wide

civilisation is not, in itself, seen as a negative thing in these films, but rather self-evident and necessary. The film's central idea of fighting for these contested areas of space foregrounds the military technology, and the spacecraft bristle with mega-weapons of mass destruction, and noisy explosions occur in the vacuum of space repeatedly. Despite this, the spacecraft are, again, coded as mundane and well-used steeds which render space familiar and easy to traverse at impossible speeds. This is even used to comic effect, as Han Solo and Chewbacca are constantly fiddling about with the Millennium Falcon's engines, as though it is a temperamental old car.

What we have in all three texts, then, is a privileging of similar space travel motifs: mundane spacecraft, the male domain and militarism, which are imbued with notions of human godhood/transcendence. There is, as Carl Freedman describes it, a "real generic continuity between Kubrick's scenes of space travel and the actual video footage of […] the Apollo missions" (308), a generic continuity which can also be seen in *Star Wars*. This generic continuity of the visuals reveals a deep desire for expansion and conquest which is underpinning all of the texts in this case study. Some might consider this finding surprising, for while thinly disguised colonialism is an obvious feature of the space opera, it is less immediately obvious that this colonial discourse is actually a defining feature of the rhetoric of space travel across a wider spectrum of science fiction and science fact.

In his paper, "The Case Against Space," Gary Westfahl comes to a similar conclusion, arguing that colonialism is fundamental to real-world thought about space travel (197), and adds that it is also working as an unexamined assumption in sf (204). This inevitably leads me to the conclusion that space opera, in that it uses a colonial construction of space travel, is definitely working in an established scientific mode, even if that scientific mode has an element of illogic to it.

In fact, I contend that it is because space opera is a hybrid of sf and fantasy that it works so convincingly by using this discourse of colonial space travel. As I argued in the previous chapter, the space opera's fantasy mode (for instance, the magic sword) is often deployed through the trappings of sf (the light-sabre), leading to the construction of a nostalgic future. Likewise, the space opera's sf mode (galactic empire), resists being read as an entirely realistic *could be* by its obvious deployment of fantasy (noisy explosions in space). Thus, the colonial discourse in space opera can easily be read either as an engagement with contemporary politics or as a disengaged fantasy, depending on the audience. For this reason, too, space opera

does not need to mask its colonial discourse, as *2001* and the Apollo missions do, because the use of the nostalgic future works to delay the expected post-colonial critique.

This is why *Star Wars* could be successfully invoked by both opponents and supporters of the USA's Strategic Defence Initiative. The link was first made, subtly, by President Reagan himself, when he appropriated the title of the first *Star Wars* film as an element of rhetoric in his 1981 speech outlining the SDI: "a new hope for our children" (qtd. in Kramer 42), and then again later, in his 1983 attack on Communism, he used the phrase "evil empire" (qtd. in Kramer 44). This appropriation from movies was a common theme of Reagan's presidency, and marks the importance Reagan placed on media constructions of reality. He wasn't the only one influenced: the day after the 1981 SDI speech, Senator Edward Kennedy accused Reagan of "misleading Red Scare tactics and reckless *Star Wars* schemes" (qtd. in Kramer 43). Despite beginning as a criticism, the label was so evocative it was picked up and used by Reagan's supporters, and in fact the SDI came to be universally known as "Star Wars." George Lucas, who was not a supporter of Reagan, brought a suit in 1985 attempting to stop this conflation of politics with the title of his film. He lost (Kramer 47). This ability for either side of the debate to use the name "Star Wars" in order to promote its argument about SDI is indicative of the way in which the fantasy/sf hybrid at space opera's core can lead to wildly alternate readings of the text.

It also demonstrates the importance that visual constructions of space travel have had on everyone from politicians and scientists to science fiction and space opera writers. It leads me to wonder if is it even possible, now, to separate audience expectations from the media representations of space travel. Gary Westfahl argues that this viewpoint has become ubiquitous, much to the detriment of the science fiction genre. He argues that

> modern science fiction for the most part continues to manifest a willful
> blindness to certain fundamental truths: that space travel will likely remain for
> centuries an expensive, difficult, and dangerous activity; that outer space is
> almost universally a cold, barren, and inhospitable place; that efforts to make
> space more hospitable—space habitats, terraforming, and so on—will demand
> solutions to scores of huge technical problems and will be slow and costly

beyond measure; that travel to other stars will probably never be achieved in timespans less than hundreds of years; and that contact with alien intelligences, except perhaps for the faint sound of a distant radio message, is at least a millennium away and may in fact never occur. All of these things were pretty clear thirty years ago [in the key decade of this case study], and are even clearer today. ("The Case" 204)

Westfahl's argument suggests that it is now very difficult to use the space motif in science fiction (or, indeed, in popular science fact) without using the colonial construction of space travel. This presents a fundamental problem, as science fiction's agenda is to explore the *could be*, and space travel, as it is currently constructed, is not very plausible at all. Perhaps this is why, when it comes to filmic representations of space travel, space opera has become something of a metonym for both science fiction and space travel. In other words, to people who know little of the wide range of topics covered by prose sf, the phrases "science fiction" and "space travel" commonly evoke images of space ships, faster-than-light travel, interstellar wars, bug-eyed monsters and other standard trappings of the space opera. Perhaps it is due to the hybrid nature of space opera, which allows the fantasy of *pretend* to be so convincingly combined with the appearance of a future which *could be*, that this coding of space travel has yet to be seriously challenged in the public consciousness by either science fiction or science fact texts. This is significant if true, as it would mean that the real-world politics of space exploration have become compromised in a way difficult to overcome as long as the funding is derived from the public purse, with a concomitant public expectation of space operatic successes.

The Function of Space Opera

Vacationing in the Neverending Empire

A reasonable expectation, given that space opera is a hybrid form, is that space opera would function in an analogous way to both science fiction and fantasy. As I outlined in Chapter 2, science fiction extrapolates from the present in order to offer thought experiments on futures or alternate realities which *could be*. Fantasy, on the other hand, offers the discontinuity of *pretend,* in order to allow a new perspective on the reality of the here and now (often in the form of a moral or instruction). However, as I argued in Chapter 3, the use of fantasy in space opera is transformed through the deployment of science-fictional technology (magic sword to light-sabre). Likewise, in Chapter 4, I discussed the ways in which science-fictional aspects tend to be ideologically undermined by the presence of fantasy (galactic empires which have noisy explosions in space). The functions of science fiction and fantasy would seem, therefore, to be in conflict within the space opera. What, then, does space opera offer?

Aldiss suggests: first, that "[s]pace opera is for fun" (*Space Opera* 9); and second, that it has the more serious function of exploring "the fundamental hopes and fears when confronted by the unknowns of distant frontiers" (*Space Opera* 9-10). Monk agrees with both of Aldiss's points, elaborating: first, that there is a "mix of entertainment and instruction" ("Not Just" 300), although the "balance in space opera is in favour of entertainment" ("Not Just" 308); and second, that space opera "sees the extraterrestrial universe in holistic terms as both knowable and manageable" ("Not Just" 300). Westfahl, on the other hand, only agrees on the first point, concluding that space opera offers "temporary freedom" and a "vacation" from the serious aspirations of science fiction ("Beyond" 183).

At heart, then, the chief functions of space opera suggested by these critics boil down to "entertainment" and a "colonising imperative." In fact, these two functions do map to those of science fiction and fantasy: space opera has the potential to be

instructional (as fantasy can be), but tends rather to the entertainment end of the spectrum; and space opera has the potential to extrapolate meaningfully about space travel (as does sf), but actually tends to employ an unexamined colonial discourse.

There is one other potential function of space opera I think worth considering—Westfahl's contention that space opera could be offering a strategy of liberation from the rigorous expectation of logical extrapolation within science fiction.

In this chapter, I will focus on the first two of these three suggested functions: "entertainment" and a "colonising imperative." I argue that these two functions combined constitute the primary mode of space opera, which is to valorise the conventional twentieth-century Western view of the world—masculinist, utilitarian and exploitative—within a readily consumed format. I will examine this contention with particular reference to the *Flash Gordon* serials and *Star Wars: Episode I: The Phantom Menace*. In the next chapter, I will focus on the third possible function: the possibilities for subversion within space opera, with particular reference to constructions (and deconstructions) of gender in *Falling Stars*.

The *Flash Gordon* Phenomenon

Flash Gordon made his debut in 1934 in the early days of space opera's formation. His first adventures were published as comics in the Sunday papers of the King Features Syndicate (Holloway Para. 1), and were written and drawn by the artist Alex Raymond. To start with, the *Flash Gordon* strip was an imitator of *Buck Rogers*, in quite conscious and cynical opposition (Clute and Nicholls 433). However, *Flash Gordon* quickly developed its own innovative style, to the point that the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* claims that, "Its elaborately shaded style and exotic storyline made it one of the most influential strips" (Clute and Nicholls 432-3).

As with most successful space operas, *Flash Gordon* quickly became a multi-media product, with radio plays, books and, later, a television series being produced. Perhaps the most successful offshoots of the *Flash Gordon* franchise were the serial films made in the 1930s.

Universal Studios bought the rights to Raymond's strip and allocated a record budget of US$350,000 for the first serial when the average budget of the time was around US$125,000 (Kinnard 195). Shooting was completed in six weeks and the

result was a thirteen-episode melodrama released in 1936 and called, fittingly enough, *Flash Gordon*. It starred Olympic swimmer Larry "Buster" Crabbe as Flash, and Charles Middleton as Ming the Merciless. It was an unprecedented success, along similar lines to the success enjoyed by *Star Wars* in 1977.

In fact, *Flash Gordon*—a serial—was Universal Studio's second-highest grossing film for the year 1936. "So great was its popularity that theatres played the serial during evening performances—something unheard of for a mere chapter play" (Kohl 52). Two sequel serials were quickly made: *Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars* (1938) and *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe* (1940). Trying to cash in on the success of *Flash Gordon*, Universal also made a serial of *Buck Rogers* in 1939, again starring Buster Crabbe. It wasn't anywhere near so successful.

Flash Gordon, however, went from strength to strength. Cut together movie versions of the serials began to appear in the cinemas under various rather garish titles. The comic strip continued to be published, both in the newspapers and in comic-book form.

Flash Gordon's eventual decline was signalled by the production of a feature-length film parody, the rather tawdry erotica film, *Flesh Gordon* (1974). It has been all downhill since then. Given the material it could draw from, the 1980 feature-film was surprisingly unexciting.

So what was the appeal of *Flash Gordon*? Why was the saga so successful for so long, across so many media? And what caused its popularity to wane? The answer to the first two questions, I suggest, is that *Flash Gordon* fulfilled the functions of space opera, "entertainment" and a "colonising imperative," in a particularly evocative way.

In his essay, "Ethnic Stereotypes in *Flash Gordon*," Robert Barshay focuses on the colonial politics apparent in the film serials through the wide use of ethnic and gender stereotypes. He argues that through the use of these stereotypes, the *Flash Gordon* stories played on the 1930s American audience's deepest fears and fantasies. For instance, Flash himself, Barshay argues, is the "'All American'—WASP—collegiate football hero stereotype," imbued with "American puritanism," "pioneer vitality" and "genteel morality" (17). Dale Arden is his female counterpart—stereotypically vulnerable, fragile and pure (20). Dr Zarkov fills the role of the eastern European "mad scientist" (22). Likewise, Ming's daughter, Aura, fluctuates wildly between being a villain and an aide to the humans. But always she "embodies

the dark haired, dark complexioned Mediterranean stereotype … [she is u]nderclad, overstacked, and the epitome of active sensuality" (19), constantly moving into the personal space of the oblivious Flash. Ming, on the other hand, is a "trident bearded, slanty eyed, shiny domed, pointy nailed, arching eyebrowed, exotically garbed Oriental" (24). A villain like Ming, argues Barshay, arises from the "longest tradition of all Hollywood ethnic stereotypes," namely the so-called "Yellow Peril" (26). And of course, being an evil, non-Aryan overlord of the universe is not enough, he also lusts after the pure, white, Dale Arden.

Barshay's case is convincing. *Flash Gordon* is an amazing mish-mash of stereotypes, most of which buy into a colonial mindset of racial denigration and sexualisation. This certainly gives some credence to the idea of the "colonising imperative" being a central purpose of the space opera, and the serials' popularity speaks to their "entertainment" value. However, the popularity of *Flash Gordon* has waned in the last thirty years[7]. Does this mean that the popularity of these themes has waned too?

With this question in mind, I will now consider a more recent space opera text, *Star Wars: Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999), in order to discover what, if anything, has changed.

The Saga of Neverending Empire

Like *Flash Gordon*, the *Star Wars* franchise has been immensely popular. In fact, in 1999 *Star Wars* was listed in *Variety* as one of the top ten "Fruitful Franchises" (films with at least one sequel), *Star Wars* being beaten only by *James Bond* (Klady 9). It is worth noting that *James Bond* bears some similarity to the space opera with regards to the ways in which ethnicity, women and technology are represented. Q is even an analogue to the "mad scientist," albeit in antithesis: Q is a "good" power-broker of scientific marvels, but just as masculine and authoritative as the maddest. Despite these similarities, James Bond seems to be showing no signs of waning popularity.

The first prequel in the new *Star Wars* trilogy, *The Phantom Menace* was popular even before being released into cinemas, due to the pop-culture cachet of the

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[7] Interestingly, as I was revising this chapter, I discovered that Universal are currently planning a new feature-film of *Flash Gordon* (Johnson n.p.).

earlier *Star Wars* movies. When *Menace* was released, it was with the kind of fanfare and press coverage that is usually reserved for events like the moon landing or the death of a celebrity like Diana, Princess of Wales—the breadth of coverage the film's release received in the press was truly astonishing. For example, news about the film made the front covers of the magazines *Vanity Fair*, *Juice*, *Premiere*, *Time*, *HQ*, and *Movie*, which is by no means a definitive list.

This barrage of publicity surrounding *The Phantom Menace* intrigued me, especially as I had never before seen a film turned into an "event" worthy of such widespread public comment. When I discovered exactly the same kind of coverage happening at a local level, in newspapers such as *Grok* and *The West Australian*, I realised I was witnessing a significant cultural moment. I knew immediately that an analysis of *The Phantom Menace* could not be done effectively without taking into account the public reaction to the film. For this reason, in addition to taking a more formal critical approach to this text, I have included a pop-culture response to the movie, as this response contains several important critiques of the film's space operatic conventions. This pop-culture critique is in the form of jokes which were widely circulated on the internet at the time of the film's release.

What the critics had to say about *The Phantom Menace* was just as interesting as the pop-culture reaction. Jim Hoberman, for instance, described the film as "an event that brings together religion, entertainment, technology, weaponry and publicity—the most powerful aspects of American culture—into one brain-dissolving package" (qtd. in Naglazas 7). With Hoberman's focus on the cultural currency of the film's themes, it is ironic that *The Phantom Menace* is set even further in the fictional past than was the original *Star Wars* trilogy. Rather than show us what happens after the end of Imperial rule, as was indicated by the Emperor's death in *Return of the Jedi*, we are shown the political system at the birth of the Empire. In effect, this implies that no story is worth telling if it is not framed by empire; that the influence of the Empire is endless and all encompassing.

As I argued in the previous chapter, a colonising imperative is fundamental to space opera, and hence the galactic empire is one of its most common motifs. In the 1970s, just before the release of the original *Star Wars* film, Brian Aldiss was publishing a series of anthologies of space operas, including *Galactic Empires: An Anthology of Way-Back-When Futures in Two Volumes* (1976). The galactic empire was the only such space operatic theme he deemed worthy of more than one volume.

In the introduction to the second book, Aldiss defined the galactic empires to be found in space operatic stories in the following way:

> A galactic empire, in short, is not intended to be a blueprint for a future utopia. […] A galactic empire is ramshackle and anachronistic, full of miscegenous worlds, leaky spaceships, and naked slaves working by torchlight in uranium mines. A galactic empire owes more to Cecil B de Mille than to Einstein: it is the Spectacular of sf. (viii)

A "[s]pectacular of sf" is an excellent description of *The Phantom Menace*. This, after all, was a film which boasted having a greater number of special effects than any previous film. *Time* magazine's report on *The Phantom Menace* quoted Effects Supervisor, John Knoll, as saying that:

> "A typical summer movie has maybe 2,000 shots, with say 250 effects shots" […] *Titanic* had about 500. "This one [*The Phantom Menace*] is backward. Of the 2,200 shots [in the film], only about 250 shots are *not* effects shots." (qtd. in Corliss 65).

And what shots they are! The digitiser lingers on the epic palace and vistas of verdant green, an audience chamber so big its limits merge into the horizon, and aliens lovingly computer-rendered in all their exoticness. Who could resist such seductive visuals? No wonder the main villain, Darth Sidious (also known as Senator Palpatine, and later as the Emperor), "insidiously" wants to turn this picturesque civilisation away from democracy and into his own personal Empire. However, this idyll is not all that it seems. Look a little closer and the "ramshackle and anachronistic" (Aldiss, *Galactic Empires 2* viii) elements of space operatic empires start to become obvious. The special effects in the film, for all of their beauty, mask some rather interesting and sinister politics.

For a start, the Jedi council are quietly exclusionary in way reminiscent of the Arthurian Round Table. At first glance it appears to be a circle of warriors who are equals, but at second glance it becomes apparent that some are more equal than others—the women are few in number and hidden in the background. Even the

carefully arrayed aliens look masculine. This, as it turns out, is not the only statement of gender politics made by the film.

The main female character is Queen Amidala, who rules the planet Naboo. However, upon closer examination of her roles as Queen and power-broker, it becomes clear that she is neither, but rather a powerless cliché with an elaborate hair-do. I can even point to the cliché in question: "There must be a woman fairer than the skies" (Aldiss, *Space Opera* 10). It is not possible to get much "fairer" than the geisha-like make-up Amidala wears. This make-up functions as a desexualizing strategy, in that it does not make the fourteen-year-old girl into a woman, but rather it makes the female into a figurehead. England's Queen Elizabeth used a similar strategy during her reign. Unsurprisingly, the court costumes of Amidala are also reminiscent of Elizabeth's. However, the costumes do not signal real power for Amidala, as they did in Elizabeth's case. The costume *is* the power. In fact, Queen Amidala is so much a clichéd stereotype and so little a real woman that another girl can (and does) assume the make-up and costume (and power) without anyone suspecting the switch. The outfits are so integral to the character of the Queen, that there is a joke about it:

> **Amidala:** We must save my people!
> **Qui-Gon:** Wait a moment, my Queen. That is the third highly ornate outfit you have worn just since we boarded the ship. How do you do it?
> **Amidala:** With the help of this 12-inch doll version of myself. It comes with each of my outfits, and what you might not realize just by looking at them is that each one is highly customizable, with mix-and-match accessories that altogether give me over 540 different wardrobe combinations.
> **Qui-Gon:** May I see it?
> **Amidala:** No. You must buy your own. ("Top Ten" No. 2)

Once out of the figurehead's clothing, Queen Amidala becomes more of a person—the girl Padme. Padme is brave but, again, has little power. She is constantly being patronised by Qui-Gon Jinn. She wins allies by begging for their help on her knees. Not exactly the most empowering female role model ever captured on celluloid.

To round out the sexual stereotyping of women within the film, we have Shmi Skywalker, mother of Anakin (Darth Vader). Or rather, the sf version of the Virgin Mary. Like the Virgin Mary, Shmi's prime importance is due to the uniqueness of her son. When Qui-Gon Jinn is musing about Anakin's origins and why he is so special, he seems to be more interested in the unknown father than in the extraordinary woman standing right in front of him. He says, "The Force is unusually strong with him, that much is clear. Who was his father?" Shmi replies, "There was no father." Jinn doesn't even pause to consider the many implications of this, such as the possibilities of parthenogenesis, or of rape, or that Anakin might have inherited his powers from his *mother*.

Perhaps the Empire does a little better in terms of gender politics. While it is true that the Empire does not recruit women as minions, they do take them seriously as enemies. Neither Darth [in]Sidious nor Darth [in]Vader seems to be squeamish about torturing or manipulating women. They do that to men and aliens too, so it isn't special treatment. However, when the best thing you can say about the gender politics of a film is that the minions of evil are more E.O. than the heroes because they're equally sadistic to everyone, it is a fairly biting indictment.

Gender politics is not the only subject the film glosses over with special effects and costumes. To return to Queen Amidala, it is not only her clichéd origins that are thinly disguised by her fabulous robes and white make-up. Also disguised is the true nature of the power that belongs to her costume. It quickly becomes clear that Amidala is queen of the *humans* who inhabit Naboo, but that she has no legal power over the marginalised, amphibious and obviously sentient Gungans. This strongly implies that the human civilisation on Naboo is a colonial one, and that the Gungans are the dispossessed natives, pushed underwater by the encroaching human cities. No wonder Jar Jar Binks says, in language reminiscent of the American Indians depicted in Westerns, that "Gungans no likem outsiders."

The subtext inherent in the boundaries of the Queen's power is that, if beings are not human, they do not count. If the Gungans were equal citizens, Amidala would be their elected queen too, or there would be a Gungan ruler of equal prestige to her. Neither of these is the case. In fact, the leader of the Gungans says, "We-sa don't like the Naboo. The Naboo think they are so smartie." And who could blame him? It is, after all, primarily due to the Nabooan's anthro-centric viewpoint that the Gungans are used as cannon fodder later in the film.

The racist attitude underlying all of the human/alien relations within the film is most tellingly revealed in the character of Jar Jar Binks. Binks is an alien side-kick. The tone of his relationship with the humans is set early, when he thanks Qui-Gon Jinn for saving his life. "Oh boy, I love you," he says, clinging to Jinn. "Me-sa Jar Jar Binks, me-sa your humble servant." This is a fairly typical example of the racially and sexually suggestive mélange language of Creole-like baby-talk he speaks. Binks is offensive on so many levels it is hard to know where to begin a critique. He is clownish, childish, loyal, and stupid. He is Tonto, Gunga Din, and Baba Louis all rolled into one amphibian skin. This stereotyping is so obvious, despite the eyes-on-stalks and prehensile tongue, that there has actually been a backlash against the character. Even the people who have always been the most rabid *Star Wars* followers have found this character to be offensive and unlikeable, as this joke illustrates:

Jar Jar: Mesah so sorreee. Ex-squeeeeze me!

Obi-Wan: Master, I can't understand a thing this computer-generated fop is saying.

Qui-Gon: But you will, Obi-Wan, with the help of Tiger Electronic's Translator Droid! It can record English and speak it back to you in hundreds of slightly-sketchy-from-an-ethnically-sensitive-point-of-view accents from the Star Wars Universe.

Obi-Wan: Amazing. Can it speak like Cartman from South Park?

Qui-Gon: Yes, but all the cuss words are bleeped out. ("Top Ten" No. 5)

Aliens get a pretty rough deal all around actually, whether they are on the side of the Republic or the Empire-to-be. For a start, there are not all that many non-human representatives in the ruling council of the Galactic Republic, despite the fact that aliens are always underfoot when the main characters need a soothsayer, a loan shark, a bounty hunter or a race of warriors. The lack of representation on the Council is probably a blessing in disguise though, as humans are not only the consummate politicians in this galaxy, they are the best back-stabbers too. For example, the two Nimoudians who control the Trade Federation and collude with Darth Sidious get all the blame for the war and none of the power that is redistributed. The heroes are a little more subtle about their bad deals: their forte is in

inspiring low-tech cultures to volunteer to be cannon fodder. In fact, I argue that in terms of following a ruthless colonising imperative, the Republic is every bit as much an empire as the Empire is.

For instance, as a diversion during the film's climactic battle, the Republican heroes deploy the inadequately armed Gungans against robot soldiers armed with automatic weapons. Many of the Gungans die, of course. None of the "heroes" seem to care. The whole situation is reminiscent of Britain's 1915 Gallipoli campaign: allies can be sacrificed in huge numbers, with no doubts of the worthiness of the cause. Of course, to be really space operatic, "[b]lood must run down the palace steps" on a grand scale (Aldiss, *Space Opera* 10). In this regard, *The Phantom Menace* certainly fulfills generic expectation.

Aldiss, an Englishman, is rather dismissive about this attitude towards the indigenes within space operatic empires. He says that:

> Some commentators have claimed to find something sinister in the idea of a galactic civilization, linking it to American Imperialist designs. This seems to me absurd; the stories do not bear that sort of weight of interpretation. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that all the best exponents of galactic empires are American, with one exception […]. Presumably the British, who had an empire, regarded the matter more matter-of-factly. (Aldiss, *Galactic Empires 1* xi)

This leads me to ask: what is the reason for this American fascination with space operatic empires? and why did Lucas decide to rewind the fall of the Empire and set his new film at the beginning of empire?

Then again, what else could he do?

I argue that the evilness of the Empire is actually a thin disguise for the fact that the humans of the Galactic Republic have colonial policies every bit as destructive. Given the primacy of colonial discourse within *Star Wars*, stories set post-Empire are simply irrelevant. The existence of Empire is necessary, because without it a post-colonial critique can no longer be delayed. In fact, this is true not just of *Star* Wars but of space opera in general, given that the colonising imperative is a key motif of the genre. Of course, it is possible to find space operas which display a more thoughtful and subversive version of empire than that in *Star Wars*,

for instance Iain M. Banks's *Consider Phlebas*. However, even Banks's use of subversive motifs does not change the fact that his space opera is a discourse on neverending empire. In fact, his version of empire, the Culture, is the one constant across his entire series of space opera novels.

The neverending empire has always existed within space opera. It was so in the 1930s when E.E. "Doc" Smith wrote "Humanity *uber alles—homo sapiens* against all the vermin of the universe!" (qtd. in Gaiman and Newman 78); and in the 1970s when Obi-Wan Kenobi described the predominantly alien population of Mos Eisley as "a wretched hive of scum and villainy" (*A New Hope*); and it still was in the 1990s when Darth Sidious said, "Wipe them out. All of them" (*The Phantom Menace*).

However, it may not be possible to delay the post-colonial critique for much longer, despite the tenacity of neverending empire as a motif in space opera. The jokes I have included in this essay come from a series called "Top Ten Scenes from *Star Wars*: Episode One: The Special Edition: The Merchandizing Menace." They were circulated anonymously on the internet at the time of the film's release, signalling a grass-roots, rather than professionally published, criticism of the films. It is significant that these jokes make fun of both the intense publicity and merchandising surrounding the film as well as the actual content of the film. The fact that Queen Amidala's costumes are the defining feature of her character was picked up by the jokester/s, and is merged with a cynicism which suggests that they were invented primarily for the purpose of selling the Amidala doll. Likewise, Jar Jar Binks is ridiculed for both the ethnic stereotyping and the multiple esoteric tie-in toys associated with the character.

The commentary within these jokes suggests that the conventional colonial discourse within the film is no longer entertaining the audience who so loved the first trilogy. Furthermore, if this grass-roots criticism of *The Phantom Menace* is considered alongside the waning of interest in *Flash Gordon*, it suggests that something more fundamental might be going on, especially as this phenomenon is not limited to *Flash Gordon* and *Star Wars*. Another behemoth space opera franchise, *Star Trek*, is also having problems. The latest incarnation of *Star Trek—Enterprise*—is also looking backwards rather than forwards. Like *The Phantom Menace*, *Enterprise* is a prequel, set at the beginning of Earth's development of a space empire. And also like *the Phantom Menace*, it has received a less than adulatory response from fans of the franchise.

Perhaps the real reason for the faltering popularity of these space operas is that we no longer want the nostalgic future they show us, replete with a colonial agenda, and thinly disguised sexism and racism. Perhaps we have finally seen through the smoke and mirrors and computer graphics and can no longer suspend our disbelief in these elements of the "monomythic romance mode" (Monk "Not Just" 300).

In Joseph Campbell's hugely influential work on archetypes, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, he makes the claim that:

> It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back. In fact, it may well be that the very high incidence of neuroticism among ourselves follows from the decline among us of such effective spiritual aid. (11)

I am not about to claim that space opera works as an "effective spiritual aid" for the malnourished twentieth-century psyche. What I think that space operas can do, due to their combination of fantasy and science fictional modes, is offer a universal myth to fill the void of the pantheons we have discarded. It is the myth of the nostalgic future, which contains both of the trends Campbell discusses: the forward momentum and the harking back. Whether space opera is offering a good myth is another question. I argue, however, that space opera can combine its driving agendas of "entertainment" and a "colonising imperative" in order to fulfill something of the role of epics such as the Arthurian cycle. Furthermore, space opera can do this because it successfully bypasses the censor of modern disbelief. Space opera does not require a belief in religion, due to its futurism and techno-euphoria, yet it tells stories in the "monomythic romance mode" (Monk "Not Just" 300) that has traditionally been so important and satisfying.

However, no mythic impulse is a static thing. It grows and changes, just as the Arthurian cycle did. I think this is where the large space opera franchises are failing, as they are beset by the "reset button" mentality. Franchise executives do not want to risk killing the golden goose, so the stories are never allowed to progress. They keep repeating the same plots, covering the same ideological ground, using the same stereotyped characters. What the audience ends up with are space operas which have

become so self-referential as to be *nostalgic* "nostalgic futures," in that they are just not quite as good a harking back to a mythic tomorrow as they used to be.

Does this trend signal the end of the space opera? I think not. My discussion here has focused only on the conservative functions of space opera. As with any well-established conservative discourse, however, there are strategies of subversion which can be used and, in the next chapter, I explore the opportunities for feminist re-workings and re-inventions of space opera's key motifs.

Falling Stars

A Spectrum of Speculative Fiction

> Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it. But in every other
> respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex,
> though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity.
>
> (Woolf 98)

Science fiction offers the possibility of explorations of otherness, chiefly through two of its most recognisable motifs: the alien figure and the artificial intelligence (from robots and cyborgs, through to sentient programs and computers). This is particularly true in feminist sf, as demonstrated in texts such as Ursula LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), and Pat Cadigan's *Fools* (1992). However, feminist texts such as these still tend to exist in the margins, in resistance to the masculine culture (WASP, male, middle-class) of the majority of science fiction. Helen Merrick, in her overview of "Feminist/Science/Fictions," makes a strong case that despite critics' praise for the influence of feminist and female science fiction writers on the genre, little time or space is spent in discussion or analysis of their texts (34). Furthermore, Merrick points out that "[u]nlike many other literary, or even feminist canons, the 'founding texts' of feminist sf are usually out of print, and can only be found second hand" (254).

Space opera is just as masculine a discourse as science fiction. In fact, my discussion in previous chapters suggests masculinist concerns are even more pronounced within space opera than within science fiction, due to the genre's use of the conservative monomythic romance mode, and its colonising imperative and concomitant racism and sexism. That said, I think space opera offers interesting subversive possibilities for feminist writers because, as Gary Westfahl rather patronisingly put it, the genre offers "temporary freedom" ("Beyond" 183) from the

expectations of sf. Of course, he was speaking about the expectation of logical extrapolation that is a chief tenet of sf, rather than an expectation of masculine culture. Nonetheless, there are two female writers, in particular, who have ably demonstrated that space opera can work as a subversive discourse. Anne McCaffrey's pre-feminist collection of connected stories, *The Ship Who Sang* (1969), and the later *Vorkosigan* series by Lois McMaster Bujold (1986-present), both offer sophisticated deconstructions of space operatic expectations, primarily through their examinations of gender/embodiment, cyborg technology and the impact of both on culture.

Feminist Re-invention of Space Opera

The balance point within the spectrum of fiction offered in this thesis is Orlando, the cyborg artificial intelligence (AI) in the title story, the space opera *Falling Stars*. Orlando is a hybrid: not quite a creature of fantasy, nor yet an entirely plausible creation of scientific possibility. But it is not Orlando's function as a space-operatic hybrid that engages subversively with space-operatic conventions, quite the opposite in fact. Hybrids such as Orlando, I have argued in this exegesis, are the usual stuff of space opera. *Star Wars,* for instance, is full of cyborgs: both Luke Skywalker and his father Darth Vader are cybernetically enhanced; Jar Jar Binks is a computer generated alien; Yoda is a mystical puppet; and the robots R2D2 and C3PO are "Everymen."

What makes Orlando a subversive figure are the ways in which race, gender and sexuality can all become unstable categories in a transgendered and hyperchangeably embodied organic/machine. Orlando is not drawn from the archetypal robot of traditional sf; Orlando is Haraway's cyborg made manifest:

> The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation. In the traditions of "Western" science and politics—the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as a resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other—the relation between organism and machine has been a border war. The stakes in the border war have been the

territories of production, reproduction, and imagination. […] The cyborg skips the steps of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense. This is its illegitimate promise that might lead to subversion of its teleology as star wars. (150-1)

Of course, Orlando did not spring fully blown from my head. S/he has predecessors within all three of the generic spaces I have been discussing. In fact, the eureka moment was when I conflated two images: as I watched the actor Orlando Bloom in the movie *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), I was reminded of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928). Given our celebrity-fixated present, I found this an exciting conflation of ideas: an actor playing a fantastic part, sharing the name of Woolf's fictional thought experiment. If they really were one and the same, what would such an "Orlando" be like in the present moment? What would s/he be like in a future moment, with his/her celluloid perfection magically embodied through cyborg technology?

When I considered this conflated character with regard to space opera, the immediate resonance was with the idea of the sentient ship in Anne McCaffrey's *The Ship Who Sang*, with its focus on a love of the arts combined with a cyborg nature. Later, the influence of LeGuin's *Left Hand of Darkness* and Lois McMaster Bujold's *Vorkosigan* series also became clear. But it began with Virginia Woolf, with fantasy, with a story Woolf wrote as "an escapade after these serious poetic experimental books" (Woolf qtd. in Gilbert xii). I admit to feeling a rather mean-spirited sense of "take *that* Gary Westfahl" because, if a book as interesting as *Orlando* could be written while on vacation, Westfahl's opinion that space opera is only valuable as a literature of "temporary freedom" ("Beyond" 183) is nowhere near so limiting as he implies.

The problem I faced was how to bring a feminist questioning to my construction of a hybrid Orlando-figure, which both harked back to earlier feminist space operas, and also spoke to the post-modern issues articulated in Haraway's cyborg manifesto. The answer, I discovered, was inherent in my eureka moment: as a source text, Orlando-the-actor was as essential as Woolf's Orlando-of-fiction. By invoking both Orlandos within the Orlando of *Falling Stars*, I could engage with feminist ideas of gender to be found in earlier space operas and fantasies, while at the same time making use of one of the newest feminist modes of writing, that of slash.

Slash is a form of amateur, or "fan," fiction which is usually based on corporate texts, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Star Wars*, or upon celebrity personas, such as those of the cast-members of the *Lord of the Rings* movies. Fan-fictions are often sexual in nature, as corporate mainstream entertainments tend to treat sex superficially, if at all, making sexual relationships a site in which writers can develop theories about their favourite characters without directly contravening the canonical events of the show. Slash is sub-genre of fan-fiction which focuses specifically on homo-erotic relationships, so named for the punctuation used to convey which characters are depicted in a relationship. So, for instance, the very first slashed couple, Kirk and Spock of *Star Trek*, were noted as Kirk/Spock or K/S.

The demographics of the slash audience/producers are fascinating. Slash stories are usually written about male couples, but are most often written by women (Norman 30; Jenkins 191). Although sex is the most striking feature of slash, it is its subversive transformation of the primary texts into homosexual, utopian romances that is seen as its most important aspect by academics. Constance Penley, for example, has said that slash "represents the most radical and intriguing female appropriation of mass-produced cultural product that I have ever seen" (491). Both Constance Penley (491) and Henry Jenkins (188) have claimed that slash is a genuinely original contribution to popular literature, and Jenkins adds that its most important feature is its questioning of sexuality, particularly the construction of masculinity, within popular culture (190).

Slash uses many of the tropes of the romance (which is also traditionally considered a "female" genre, and is also, and not coincidentally, a genre of very low repute), but re-invents them, usually through a feminist filter. Just deciding to create a romance in which both protagonists are male immediately offers alternatives to the typical male/female power dynamics of romance archetypes such as Cinderella or Beauty and the Beast. For this reason, slash stories are often reminiscent of feminist utopias such as LeGuin's *Left Hand of Darkness*, in which gender is not the factor used to decide who woos whom. For instance, in Lemur's "Deconstructing Legolas," the relationship depicted between Elijah Wood and Orlando Bloom, which exists somewhere in the middle of the friendship/romance spectrum, is seen to be mutually beneficial and equal, as they take turns in helping each other attain emotional equilibrium during their creation of the roles they play in the *Lord of the Rings* films.

As I wanted to use Orlando Bloom as a key source figure for the Orlando of *Falling Stars*, slash offered a feminist entry point into the construction of the character and the novella. By evoking the celebrity persona of Orlando Bloom in the slash mode, I could update Woolf's idea of a transgendered Orlando through the post-modern filter of Haraway's cyborg, and also engage with ideas of constructed personality/roles and the growing power of the entertainment industry which were key to the plot.

The Spectrum of Fiction

The creative component of this thesis has been designed to demonstrate space opera's hybrid nature, and to explore this project of feminist subversion. "Falling Stars" is offered as a spectrum of speculative fiction, and includes fantasy, space opera and science fiction stories. Through this spectrum, it is possible to see the movement and transformation of ideas across generic boundaries, particularly ideas related to the representation of the alien other.

In order to map these generic transformations, the remainder of this chapter is in three sections: the first dealing with fantasy, the second with science fiction, and the third with the space opera, *Falling Stars*.

Fantasy

Woolf's *Orlando* is patently a fantasy text, as its two central conceits are merely posited, without any apparent need for justifying the fact that they are non-realistic. The gender change and longevity of Orlando are tied to Woolf's two main sources of inspiration: the bisexual Vita Sackville-West, and a preoccupation with "the personal but often 'official' genre of biography and its relationship to 'official' public historiography" (Gilbert xxi). In all other respects, and despite the fantasy elements, Woolf's Orlando is a human figure, a point made concrete by the inclusion of pictures and photographs of him/her. This is interesting, as most figures incorporating elements of fantasy are not so easily recognisable as human. Rather, they are the desirable if unknowable other. However, what many fantasy characters, such as elves, trolls, and elementals, have in common with Woolf's Orlando is the role of feminised object:

> To feminise means to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labour force; seen less as workers than as servers; subjected to time arrangements on and off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited work day; leading an existence that always borders on being obscene, out of place, and reducible to sex. (Haraway 166)

The four fantasy stories offered in the "Falling Stars" spectrum also deal with gender and embodiment, particularly with regard to the feminised other: "The Pleasures of Close Reading," "Solid Rock," "Heat Seeking" and "Common Tongues." How, then, are these stories fantasies? Do their uses of fantasy elements, particularly that of the feminised other, correspond to Stanley Schmidt's definition of *pretend* (8), in that they, like Woolf's *Orlando*, offer no justification for their fantastic premises?

"Common Tongues," serves as a good example. The fantastic other in this story is an air elemental, Ariel, inspired by Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. A major theme of the story is the way in which Prospero used his magic in order to feminise (in Haraway's sense) all of the other characters. Even though Ariel chooses to appear as a male figure, within the story "he" is shown to be fundamentally vulnerable to exploitation. Orlando, in *Falling Stars*, is vulnerable to a similar form of enslavement, although it is justified by the ideology of capitalist techno-monopolies rather than magic. Likewise, the elf, Seb, from "The Pleasures of Close Reading," and the heat elemental and narrator from "Heat Seeking," are non-realist beings with no textual explanation given for their strangeness. Like Ariel, they too are vulnerable due to their differences.

Despite the fantasy premises at the core of these stories, their settings are recognisable as the "real" world. This is in counterpoint to the setting of "Solid Rock," the least realist story of the thesis, which is largely unconcerned with verisimilitude due to its focus on parody. For this reason, I placed it at the furthest end of fantasy spectrum offered in the diagram, The Worm Model of the Fantastic, on page 206 of the exegesis. "Heat Seeking," which, in comparison, is the least immediately fantastic of this group of stories, was placed further towards the realist end of the spectrum.

In addition to the ways in which fantasy elements such as the feminised other are used, the reader is invited to see a movement of themes across the thesis,

signalled through the re-use of character names from story to story. For instance, Miranda in "Common Tongues" invokes Shakespeare's text, but also has a kinship with Mira in *Falling Stars*. Given the slash mode used in writing *Falling Stars*, this Miranda figure also calls up Miranda Otto, one of the actors in *The Lord of the Rings* movies. Other characters are constructed in similar ways: *Falling Stars*' actor-spy character, Elijah North is reminiscent of actor Elijah Wood, and also the namesake character Eli in "Anion's Gift." Finally, in *Falling Stars* the AI, Orlando, not only references Woolf's *Orlando*, and the actor Orlando Bloom, but the character Lando Calrissean of the *Star Wars* movies.

The reader picking up on and recognising this post-modern melange of source material is an essential part of the feminist re-working of space operatic tropes, as it invites active reading and re-appropriation of the text in the slash mode.

Science Fiction

According to Schmidt's definition, science fiction should contain an element of *could be* (8), which explains the presence of the non-realist features of the story in a logical and consistent manner. The question, then, is do the stories "Position Vacant," "The Bogart Manoeuvre" and "Anion's Gift" fit this definition?

Clearly, there are some similarities between the fantasy and sf stories offered in this thesis. For instance, the settings of all but "Solid Rock" and "Anion's Gift" are grounded in real and familiar places. In the two sf comedies ("Position Vacant" and "Bogart"), typical workplaces are shown, with key features exaggerated and extrapolated into the near-future, in order to offer social commentary on dysfunctional employment systems through satire and irony. Because these stories are more focused on spoofing science-fictional cliches (the alien in "Position Vacant," and the AI in "Bogart") than in generating original science-based thought experiments, they clearly do not qualify as "hard" sf. Despite this, the existence, features and backgrounds of the alien/AI are explained (albeit in sketchy sf-shorthand): the alien is an arachnid-like talent scout who evolved on another world; the AI is created as part of the entertainment industry. Compare this to Ariel in "Common Tongues"—How did he get on the island? What is "he"? Why does he have power over the elements? None of these questions are answered by the story, not even with a sketchy shorthand. Ariel is a true creature of fantasy's *pretend*.

Consider, then, the tragedy, "Anion's Gift," in which the aliens and their milieu are a more serious effort in extrapolation and world creation, informed by the work of feminist authors such as Ursula LeGuin.

Like Woolf's *Orlando*, LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* examines the idea of the alien other, this time in a thought experiment about the results of un-gendering people. The non-human Gethenians she creates are androgynous except while in oestrus, at which time they can take on either male or female gender. From the Gethenian point of view, the human protagonist, Genly, is a kind of sexual pervert— always specifically gendered and therefore always in heat. In this way, LeGuin cleverly makes alien the human (male) figure, with whom we are expected to empathise. She deconstructs our expectations of gender and humanness in order to critique the real-world here and now of the book's writing. In her introduction, she says:

> This book is not about the future. […] Yes, indeed the people in it are androgynous, but that doesn't mean that I'm predicting that in a millennium or so we will all be androgynous. I'm merely observing, in the peculiar, devious, and thought-experimental manner proper to science fiction, that if you look at us at certain odd times of day in certain weathers, we already are. I am not predicting, or prescribing. I am describing. I am describing certain aspects of psychological reality in the novelist's way, which is by inventing elaborately circumstantial lies. (LeGuin, "Introduction" 158)

I use similar methods in order to examine alienation, and to question what it is to be human within "Anion's Gift," in which the Anions are unable to attribute gender to the humans. The Anions use the pronoun "it" when referring to them. In this way, the reader is encouraged to think of the humans as aliens (which, in fact, they literally are, as the setting is the home planet of the Anions), and thus the parallels between the two cultures are thrown into greater relief.

Pronouns are also central to the transgendering of Orlando in *Falling Stars*. LeGuin decided not to invent a gender-neutral pronoun for *The Left Hand of Darkness*, choosing instead to "call Gethenians 'he,'" because, she says, "I utterly refuse to mangle English by inventing a pronoun for 'he/she'" (LeGuin, "Is Gender"

168). Interestingly, one of the chief criticisms of the book is that "the Gethenians seem like *men*, instead of menwomen" (LeGuin, "Is Gender" 168).

I also felt reluctant to invent a new pronoun, not out of a refusal to mangle English, but because it is so difficult to come up with something workable. I decided to do so chiefly because I wanted to indicate that Orlando exists in a future of post-human possibility, in which gender is not a binary system but rather a spectrum. My adopted pronoun, for better or worse, is "hir."

This questioning of gender and sexuality is crucial to my agenda as a feminist writer, and is also one of the basic premises of much slash fiction, which is concerned with "the movement from male [and female] homosocial desire to a direct expression of homoerotic passion, the exploration of alternatives to traditional masculinity, the insertion of sexuality into a larger social context" (Jenkins 186). This questioning of what it is to be male and hero, and especially the kinds of male heroes found in *The Lord of the Rings*, is an essential element of the subversive project of both the novella *Falling Stars* and the thesis as a whole.

Space Opera

Falling Stars is the centre point of the speculative spectrum demonstrated in the thesis. It combines the *pretend* of fantasy, with the *could be* of science fiction (Schmidt 8), while being written in the slash mode. The choice of using the slash mode was not taken lightly, but rather was made in the face of an overwhelming masculinist silence within space opera. For, if a recent re-evaluation of space opera is to be believed, there has never been a feminist movement within space opera—not one worth mentioning anyway.

In August 2003, a series of articles was published in *Locus* on the emergence of a movement in the 1990s, dubbed the New Space Opera. In the introductory article, Russell Letson and Gary Wolfe give an overview of the key developmental stages of the space operatic form. In their opinion, there have been four crucial re-inventions of the space opera since its beginnings in the pulp magazines of the 20s. First, by 1941, when Wilson Tucker coined the term, the form was already considered cliched, prompting writers to tackle more "ruminative" themes (40). Second, the post-WWII audience was tired of real-world weapons of mass destruction and world-wrecking, staples of the form to that point, which challenged writers to mature both stylistically and thematically. Third, the New Wave writers of

the 60s re-invigorated the sf genre as a whole, giving rise to an increasing interest in inner-space and cyberspace, and bringing the beginnings of the post-humanist movement to space opera. Fourth, the New Space Opera of the 90s continued to bring "hard" science ideas to the form, combined with a renewed interest in the romantic (as opposed to the ironic and the downbeat which were prevalent in the New Wave) (40).

What I find so fascinating about this schema is that it has swallowed a whole movement: between the New Wave of the 60s and the New Space Opera of the 90s, feminist space opera flourished. This was the very feminist movement, in fact, which sparked my interest in the space operatic form. The one female columnist featured in *Locus*' New Space Opera issue, Gwyneth Jones, does mention this feminist wave of the 80s (43), in passing, but otherwise, it receives no attention at all. In light of this, it seems that it is not only the feminist "classics" of sf that are invisible (Merrick 254), but anything that is not immediately contemporary.

It is hard to construct an argument from silence, but given the shape of the one here, it seems that romance in space opera is only noteworthy if it has a large "R." Stories which deal with love, with sexual obsession, with having and raising children, with alternate genders, with the consequences of reproductive technology, with "baroque political intrigues" (Jones 43), stories, in short, which deal with small "r" romance and other such "soft" issues, seem to be unworthy of mention. While I don't think these are specifically "female" issues, they are the issues that feminism, in part, deals with, because they are the issues that tend to shape the lives of women. And they are certainly issues which feature prominently in the space opera of the seemingly invisible 80s, written, most influentially, by Octavia Butler, Lois McMaster Bujold, C. J. Cherryh, and John Varley. This huge void, the unacknowledged space within the space opera, is where I choose to explore the issues I've discussed within this thesis. Embracing the slash mode as a primary story-telling strategy has offered both an escape from the oppressive silence of the mainstream masculinist sf culture, and a method of interrogating such methods of silencing.

Other than the feminist movement of the 80s, one of the most influential space opera texts informing *Falling Stars* was Anne McCaffrey's *The Ship Who Sang*. McCaffrey's story offers a radical subversion of the expectations of space travel, in that the ship itself has become the protagonist. Helva is a cyborg: a human brain

meshed with, and directly controlling, the technological apparatus of the colonising imperative. Furthermore, it is a "female" brain, and the femaleness of the protagonist is central to the themes of the narrative, revealed through a heterosexual yearning for love despite the impossibility of skin-to-skin consummation.

This evokes one of the issues facing a transgendered, hyperchangeably embodied character such as Orlando: the issue of sexuality. Haraway has suggested that "the cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed. Far from signalling a walling off of people from other living beings, cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleasurably tight coupling" (152). I find this idea of cyborg sexuality fascinating. In drawing Orlando as a sexual being, I wanted to examine some of the ethical implications, such as whether an AI could really give consent, whether a hyperchangeably embodied being could feel physical desire, or orgasm, or love. And whether a more conventionally gendered and embodied human could desire such a being:

Elijah saw the exact moment that Orlando understood what he was saying. He found himself waiting, breathlessly, for hir answer, but for a long time hir said nothing, just stared at him with an expression he'd never seen an AI wear before. He stared back, fascinated. He was tempted to deepen the link and find out what hir was thinking, but refrained, letting Orlando have some space. But he couldn't help wondering… Were hir programmed desires stronger or weaker than his hormonal counterparts? How would Orlando weigh the loyalty, devotion and need hir'd been programmed to feel for a PAL with the duty, safety and expediency programs that kept hir enslaved to CyberWare and StarLine? Did Orlando have any free will at all? Or was it all illusion, smoke and mirrors hiding a mass of hard-wired responses?

Perhaps the fact that he couldn't tell was its own answer. (*Falling Stars* 103)

As you can see from this extract, the slash mode's questioning of sexuality and gender, and their construction within culture, are central components of the novella. Slash offers a strategy for exploring these issues without having to either conform to or resist the pervasive Cinderella paradigm, which tends to permeate love stories told in the mainstream, patriarchal mode. Writing Orlando as a post-humanist, yet sexual,

being allowed me to tackle some of the themes of small "r" romance, while also deconstructing the assumptions of masculinity and heroism typical of space opera.

This thesis has explored the contention that space opera is a hybrid form of science fiction and fantasy which primarily works in a conservative mode. The spectrum of creative writing, "Falling Stars," is offered as illustration of the movement of generic expectation within and between fantasy, space opera and science fiction. The space opera novella, located at the centre of the spectrum, combines motifs of both fantasy and science fiction within the figure of Orlando, a transgendered and hyperchangeably embodied organic/machine. Through Orlando's cyborg nature, inspired by Donna Haraway's feminist Cyborg Manifesto, I have argued that space opera offers a useful space in which to engage with feminist issues extrapolated from current trends, to subvert the colonising imperative of space travel, and to question the masculine expectation of science fiction.

I began this thesis with the question, "What is space opera?"
I finish with the suggestion that it is a space of infinite feminist possibility.

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