

RAGAMUFFIN

TOBIAS S. BUCKELL




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Crystal Rain
Ragamuffin

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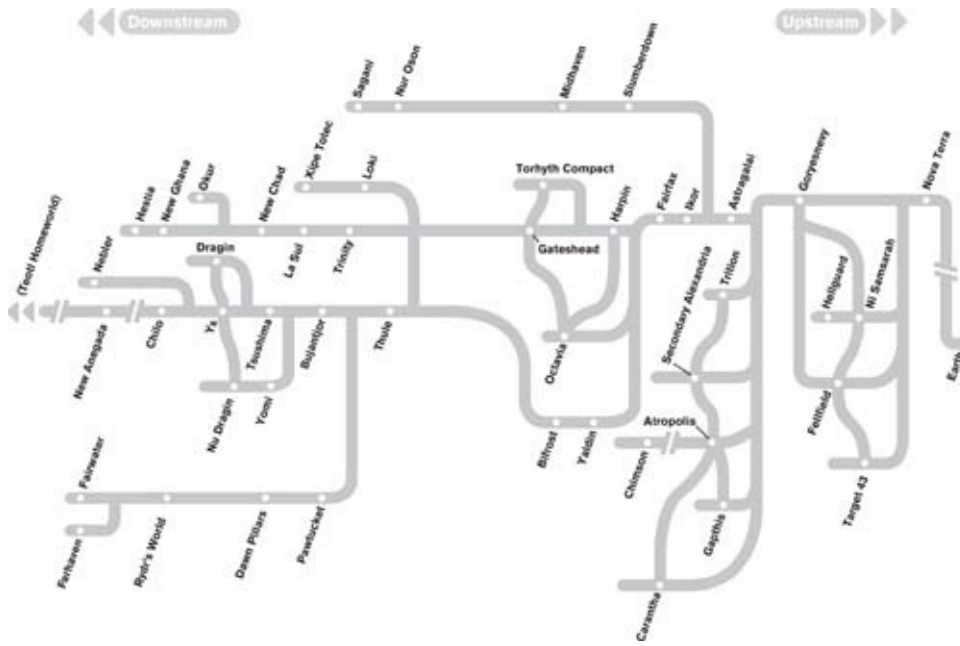
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For Emily

THE WORLDS OF THE BENEVOLENT SATRAPY



PART ONE

THE BENEVOLENT SATRAPY

CHAPTER ONE

It had been three hundred and fifty-seven years, three months, and four days since the emancipation of humanity. And for most, it did them little good.

Nashara walked down the dusty road of Pitt's Cross reservation, her scaly leather boots biting into her ankle. Log houses and refugee tents dripped acid water from a recent rain, and the ground steamed. It was a desperate assemblage of buildings that dared call itself a city, and all that did was remind Nashara of what a city should really look like.

People could be more than this. She flagged down a van bouncing through the wet street.

The mud-coated van, yellow paint flaking off its sides, stopped by the bench outside a community center where a long line of ragged and desperate faces lined up for the soup kitchen. Nashara could smell whiffs of fresh bread and body odor.

A few eyes darted her way, seeing the functional but new clothing and no doubt wondering what she was doing here. And whether she was carrying money. It was just as likely surprise at her skin, as dark as the shadows these people seemed to try to sink into. Her hair, tight and curly, but shorn military short. Old habit. Pitt's Cross consisted mainly of the light-skinned. Or maybe, just maybe, someone was already tracking her, ready to shoot her and drag her body to the edge of the reservation for bounty.

She turned her back to it all and got in the van. What was done was done, and now it was time to keep moving.

"Could rain again," the old man driving the van commented as Nashara threw a stamped metal coin into the small bucket by his seat. "I get more passengers if I wait around for the rain, charge more when they're desperate not to get stung by it."

Nashara sat down on the cushioned bench behind him and threw several more coins in. "Let's go."

"Where to?"

"Security gate."

The old man cleared his throat, leaned closer to the window, and looked up at the sky. Nashara tapped his back. He turned around annoyed, then flinched when she stared directly into his slightly clouded eyes. "I shit you not," Nashara said, "I'll break your neck if you don't start driving."

He swallowed. "Right." The van quietly lurched forward down the street, then turned an easy left. They edged past a large cart pulled by fifteen men, all yoked to it by wooden harnesses.

How far humanity could still fall. Nashara folded her arms.

Two years mucking about in Pitt's Cross, building contacts, until she'd found a job that would make her enough to leave. She watched a landscape of ruined housing and people slide by the dingy windows of the van. The buildings petered out until nothing but bare, scorched ground surrounded her.

The reservation's wall crept into view over the horizon. The black and smooth, two-hundred-foot edifice spread for as far as she could see in either direction. Spotlights stabbed at the ground and sky. It was scalable, she'd done that to get over last night, and back over in the morning.

Though not without trouble. Her left shoulder had a cauterized hole through it as a result of getting back over.

"You have a pass?" the old man asked, incredulous. "Or will I be waiting at the wall for you?"

"Are we not emancipated? Can't we travel anywhere we want?"

"Don't spout that crap at me." They both knew they needed a "human safety pass" to be allowed over there, and passes were rare around the reservation. "Even if you get through, how far can you get over

two feet when all you have is reservation coin?"

"You'd be surprised." Nashara looked out the window. One last look at the barren landscape.

"Waste of my time, all the way out here for one passenger." They slowed and then jerked to a stop. The driver leaned over and pointed a small gun at her. "Hand over your coin and get out."

Nashara looked down at it. And snapped it out of his hands before his next blink. She casually snapped his trigger finger, and to his credit he bit his lip and bore the pain as he looked around for the gun. Reservation-born and accustomed to the pain of it all.

"You should have shot before speaking," she said. He might have had a chance. He stared at her, realizing his underestimation would probably cost him his life.

"Come on, get out," Nashara said as she opened the door. She didn't blame him for trying. What did he have to lose? A lifetime behind the wall? A faint mist sprinkled down. It blew inside the cab and tasted acidic. It burned the tip of her tongue as she tasted the air. It would stain and then dissolve her outfit if she walked out there, so she'd take the vehicle. "I have a pass, and therefore a schedule to keep."

"How the hell did you get that?" the old man asked as he stepped out into the rain and turned to face her.

"Same way I got this," Nashara muttered. Someone had underestimated her.

She shut the door to the van and drove on without looking back. Several minutes later she threw the gun out of the window into the mud.

No sense in approaching a massive security perimeter like the wall around Pitt's Cross with a gun.

The gate groaned slowly open, responding to the presence of the pass hung around her neck.

Several snub-nosed pipes tracked her progress through the tunnel. If she so much as twitched wrong, they'd smear her against the wall.

The floor lit up just forward of each step, leading her onward to a set of doors that rolled aside for her. Several guards in khaki protective armor and reflective-visored helmets surrounded her.

"Pass?"

Nashara pulled the necklace off and handed it over. The nearest guard scanned her with a wand. Even if she were naked, it wouldn't detect anything under her skin. Her skin bounced back the wrong signals to his crude scanner. And neither guard would find the crude slivers of gold and silver stolen from the Gahe breeder's house. She'd cut slits in the skin of her thighs. The skin had congealed over the small bounty.

The other guard verified the data inside the small pendant at the end of the necklace. He looked back at her. "Nashara Aji. You have twenty hours outside the reservation. After that the pass will broadcast your violation and you will forfeit any rights to travel. You will be jailed and fined. You may give up your right to emancipation."

He handed the necklace back to her and leaned in close. "Visiting a breeding program, eh?"

That was what the pass indicated her business outside the wall was. Nashara ignored the guard.

An alien stood safe inside a bombproof glass enclosure behind the guards. A Gahe, one of the rulers of everything currently around Nashara. It stood five feet high on four legs. Its bullet-shaped head, so hard to reach around to snap, Nashara knew, swiveled like an owl's to track her. The rounded, silver eyes didn't blink.

The alien's massive mouth yawned open. From inside, gray, tentacle-like tongues wormed out and flicked at a clear panel in front of it.

"Human, stop," the translated voice in the air around her snapped. Nashara froze. "Pause for

decontamination that your stink may not infect our honorable citizens.”

~~Nashara knew the routine. She stripped with her back to the human guards behind her. A biting spray and explosion of UV light later she walked out of the checkpoint.~~

She was out. Out of the reservation and its starving, population-exploding sovereignty and freedom. And just ahead of the mess that would soon be after her.

The guards were the last humans she saw for the next hour as she walked down the paved road. No vehicles passed her. What reason did the aliens have to go to the reservation? They avoided it if at all possible.

The road led into a larger highway three hours later. Nashara's clothes dripped sweat from the heat. She had no water; no one was allowed to bring anything out of the reservation but the clothes on his back and her back.

Still, she pressed on as the occasional vehicle trundled past. Each one looked completely different from number of wheels to color to design. The Gahe prized individuality to a bizarre level.

Seven hours later she stopped in a small town and looked around. The Gahe built their houses like their cars, every one different to their own taste. It looked like something out of a nightmare, random curves and angles jutting out every which way, dripping walls.

Three Gahe loped toward her, tentacle tongues lolling. One of them held a gun aimed at her. Nashara held her necklace up, showed it to them, and inserted the pendant in her ear.

“I am legal,” she said.

The large Gahe dropped the gun into the pocket of a biblike shirt over its chest. It thumped to the ground with a hind leg and spat at the ground.

“What are you doing here?” The pendant translated the gestures into tinny words in her ear.

“I am waiting for the bus.” Nashara remained still. They didn't seem like any kind of Gahe that were here to arrest or detain her.

The Gahe sat down in front of her. Nashara waited for a translation of that, but none came. She relaxed and pretended not to see them. She stared off into the distance and waited.

She could disappear here and no one would care, or notice. The Gahe around her knew it too. But they weren't aware of what she'd done last night. They were just trying to intimidate the free humans. Nothing to worry about, and she'd kill them too if they tried anything funny.

Another human was on the pumpkin-shaped bus that showed up, a dark-haired, old lady in a glittering dress and complex, braided hairdo fixed around the top of her head like a crown. The Gahe clustered along the left side of the bus. They lounged in their round chairs and stared out the windows, ignoring her. Nashara thought she smelled mushrooms as she walked down the aisle and sat down.

The lady growled at her and drummed a syncopated rhythm on the ground. She smiled at Nashara.

“Nice clothes,” the pendant in her ear translated the thumping and growling. The lady cleared her throat. “I am Growf.” She slapped her hand on her wrist and growled. “You live behind the wall?”

“Recently, for a while, yes,” Nashara said.

“You hate me.”

“No.” Nashara shook her head. “I'm sorry for you.”

“I may be pet,” the lady growled in Gahe. “But I eat. My great-grandfather pet. Good pet. Eat well. Not starve. Do tricks.”

A Gahe stood up and barked at them both, too quickly for the pendant to translate. It walked over and its tongues reached out and grabbed the lady's crown. They were strong, strong enough to yank

Growf up to her feet.

Growf whined and bowed, kissed the floor, and shuffled over to the back of the bus.

Nashara turned away from the scene and looked out of the window at yellow grass and squiggly trees.

It all depressed her. The whole damn planet depressed her. The Gahe ruled Astragalai firmly, and there were too few humans here to do much about it.

A few hundred thousand lived behind the wall in Pitt's Cross, most of the rest as professionally bonded pets to Gahe.

She'd killed a high-ranking Gahe breeder late last night for some shadowy, idiot organization formed by offworld humans that wanted to free the human pets. The League of Human Affairs. They repaid her with a ticket that would take her off Astragalai and aboard a ship heading toward the planet New Anegada.

Five years, planet by planet, trying to get there, the last two a particular hell stuck here in Pitt's Cross.

Nashara couldn't wait to get the fuck off the planet. It had been a mistake to head into a nonhuman place. A two-year mistake.

She checked the pendant cover, squinting. Just a few hours left. Any Gahe would have the right to take her as property or kill her when that ran out. Gahe authorities would be moving to deport her right back into Pitt's Cross. Gahe breeders paid prime for wild pets.

The pickup zone was a clearing, bordered by well-maintained gardens, and a ticket booth. A round pod with windows sat in the middle of the grass. Nashara walked over the cut yellow grass, squishing her way to the ticket booth.

"You travel alone?" The Gahe behind the glass shook its squat head. Round eyes looked her up and down.

"My ticket is confirmed. I am here. I am a freedman." No damn pet. "Here is my pass." She waved the necklace at the window. She had no time for delays. The body of the Gahe breeder she'd killed would have been found by now. It wouldn't take long for its friends to figure out it wasn't one of its pets or human breeding pairs that had killed it. Enough checking and Nashara's DNA would be found somewhere on the pen she'd stabbed it in the large eyes with.

"I guess this is okay," the Gahe informed her. "Go to the pickup pod."

The pod stood twice her height with a massive reinforced hook at its tip. Fifteen Gahe seats ringed the inside. Reclining Gahe sat strapped in half of them.

Alarms sounded throughout the clearing as Nashara stepped in the pod. A Gahe attendant outside licked the pod with a tongue and the pod sealed shut.

Gahe stared at her, panting. One of them growled.

Nashara strapped herself in as best she could. It was clear they never expected human use of the seats.

Another timbre of alarm started. Nashara turned around and looked down the length of the clearing just in time to see a shadow and then the long line of the orbital skyhook coming straight toward them. The strong rope of carbon fiber led all the way back to orbit. It spun slowly, each end touching down to snag cargo several times per day.

The massive, rusted, industrial-looking hook on the end whipped toward them and struck the top of the pod.

Nashara's neck snapped back. She swore. Gahe pounded the floor with their front feet. "Laughter"

the pendant noted as she pushed it back in her ear. The joke was on them. Right now word would be spreading that a human had killed a Gahe. If the League person who'd paid her to do it had told the truth, then the last time that had happened had been a hundred years ago. And that same small insurrection that had left a Gahe dead by human hands in Pitt's Cross had led the Gahe to isolate the free humans on the planet there.

The pod accelerated, hooked onto the almost indestructible cable. It swung up into the sky past the clouds in a long arc toward space.

CHAPTER TWO

The space habitat Villach orbited Astragalai. It hung in position to receive pod traffic and redirect it onward if necessary.

The two cupolas of Villach looked like perfect spheres split in half. They were connected by threadlike wires of the same material as the rotating tether that snagged Nashara's pod and whipped it into orbit. A material that the Gahe sold to humans but humanity was prohibited from making.

Villach's two separate half spheres spun around each other, connective wires singing a constant low hum in the background as Nashara took the elevator from the center of the configuration down through the clouds hovering at the open top of the space habitat.

Pets wandered around on leashes, their Gahe drumming or slapping their tongues at them. Beautiful hairpieces and costumes glittered everywhere Nashara looked.

Nashara pulled the pendant out of her ear, not interested in hearing alien tongues anymore. The pendant beeped, indicating her time was up. But Villach wasn't a reservation. It wouldn't have dedicated human packs waiting to swoop in on her. By the time something came to investigate the violation, Nashara would be long gone. Besides, a human shouldn't have been able to afford the price of getting off the planet. That would leave them confused for a while.

She broke the necklace off, crushed it to dust between her hands, and let it drift to the floor.

The human section of Villach, a long, pie-shaped area of the five-mile-wide cupola, reminded her of the reservation. But not as desperate. Tight streets, waterproof paper houses and greenhouses. She found a market packed with several hundred people. It was the first time in two years she'd seen that many people gathered together that weren't lined up for the food kitchens. As on the reservation, the spoke Anglic here, not human imitations of Gahe's thumps, growls, and whistles.

She pulled out the last of her coins and stopped at the nearest toy shop. Several kids behind the table of used equipment smiled at her. The tallest bowed and stepped forward with a flourish of his waxed red robe.

"Help you?"

"I need a lamina viewer," she said. "Got anything?"

They handed her an oversize, bright green wrist screen. Designed for clumsy kid fingers, it strapped on easily enough, and she tapped it on. A simple point-and-shoot viewer. She pointed a finger at the boy and information popped up for her.

His name was Peter the One Hundredth, fifteen years old, owner of the stall. Previous customers rated him "competent" on average, with some complaints about equipment breaking down.

"You like it?"

Some speculated that the goods were stolen.

Of course they were.

Nashara stopped pointing and tapped some more, accessing Villach's various streams of public information, and checked the habitat's outbound transportation schedule. She found what she was looking for. The *Stenapolaris*, due to leave in two hours.

Cutting it close. But she had a berth reserved, and *Stenapolaris* would be headed close to Ne Anegada. Once she was aboard it, the Gahe would be hard-pressed to ever find her.

"Lady?"

Nashara looked up. "Yes, I'll take it." She threw him the reservation coins from her pocket.

"We don't take this," Peter the One Hundredth protested. "It's devalued crap."

Nashara sighed. She propped her boot up on his table and dug her thumb into her thigh until skin broke and peeled it back with a grunt. She slid a piece of silver out and wiped the blood off. “Assay this.”

She needed the lamina viewer. All around her in the habitat’s information-rich data streams lay important information. Such as directions to get to the docks, or what elevators to take. Whom you were talking to. Layers of it tagged everything, a myriad of ways to view the entire world lay around them.

Kids ran around the stall seeing virtual monsters they chased and shot with their friends. Merchants quietly passed information among themselves. The station’s public lamina carpeted the sky with up-to-date general information, or provided tags about everything one saw.

To be unable to view lamina meant being illiterate among those who read to survive.

Nashara had to use lamina indirectly or the technology built into her head would get out of control. She bit her lip and focused on the transaction in front of her.

Peter passed the piece of metal to the kid behind him, who walked back into the tent for a moment. Peter’s head snapped up as he heard something inside his own head. “Silver?”

“Good enough?”

All three nodded. Nashara turned and walked into a bulky man dressed in trousers and a yellow utility jacket.

“Nashara Cascabel?” She liked her first name, but always kept the second one changing.

She looked him over. “Who’s asking?”

“Steven.” He looked around, dropped his voice. “We’ve been trying to contact you.”

Nashara held up her wrist and looked at the tag that popped up when she pointed at him. It identified him as Gruther. “I just got access.”

“Shitsticks,” the man swore. “That explains that.”

People up here in orbit had the technology implanted behind their eyeballs from late childhood on. Only four-year-olds or the impaired couldn’t wrap their minds around constantly seeing things that weren’t really there.

“I have my reasons for not plugging directly in,” Nashara said softly. “Your organization and mine aren’t done. I’m getting ready to leave. What the hell are you doing bothering me?” She didn’t like this. She glanced around, looking for eyes staring back. This screamed wrong to her.

“The package you delivered has been discovered,” Steven said, meaning that the Gahe had found the breeder she’d killed. “The recipients are not happy, and they’re looking for the postmaster. They like to make an example of you.” Too many people around, Nashara thought, to really deal with Steven.

“They thinking to look up here yet to express their gratitude?” Nashara stepped back from him and jostled an old man in a ragged suit who swore at her.

“I’m told they’ll finish their sweep of house’s garden”—that would be Pitt’s Cross—“within the hour.”

“Steven, or whatever the hell your name is, why is this your problem again? You paid me, I did it. I’m leaving. You’re making yourself traceable. You’re holding me up.”

Steven swallowed. Nervous, Nashara thought, but about what? “We’re impressed with what you did. They want to help you more. Do you want to see full freedom, do you think humans should be able to exercise all the same rights as the Gahe? Or any other damn alien?”

“All bullshit aside”—Nashara folded her arms—“what are you trying to offer here? I have a berth to go to. I need to leave.”

Steven took a deep breath. "You don't actually have a berth."

Nashara stared at him. ~~His neck would break a lot easier than some Gahe's.~~ "What do you mean by that?"

"Do you really think that . . . that package delivery was worth the price of a ticket to another world?"

Nashara shook her head. This wasn't about the assassination. They'd underestimated her again. "You didn't think I would make it back out of there." It wasn't a question. Just a statement.

"No one down there has the ability to deliver packages. But we're working on it, and we'd hope that what you did would encourage others to try. And if that happened, we would assist them. We've been secretly building a network of couriers, and not just here, Nashara," Steven brimmed with excitement, "all throughout the worlds. We've been preparing for *decades*. We have ships, secret couriers, and lots and lots of packages we want delivered soon."

They'd expected a martyr. The League needed someone to strike against the Gahe and die, and then they would help Pitt's Cross rise against the Gahe. But she had no desire to join. She had a mission of her own.

Nashara unfolded her arms and tapped his chest. "I'm going to kill you. It's going to be very slow and very painful, and you're not going to care about packages," or any other simple code words.

"We're willing to help," Steven belted out quickly. "Truly. We really need someone with your talent."

"That was a onetime thing, Steven. I was a desperate girl in a bad situation." The toy she purchased from the stall couldn't even be purchased with Pitt's Cross coin, let alone a trip into orbit. She'd had to do something.

There. She spotted a simple table knife on a stall table.

She was so close to getting away from it all. So close. "For a onetime thing, you were very good at it." Steven sensed her weariness. "We'd like to hire you."

The eagle-eyed vendor didn't spot the snatch, and now Nashara had a weapon. "I have a pressing mission of my own that doesn't fit in with being a League 'package deliverer.' I'm sorry. I need to go to it, Steven, and you're telling me I'm not going. That's a problem. And of all people you should understand that when I say I am not for sale, I really mean it."

She whipped around him. He jumped, but before he could do anything more, she'd draped one hand around his shoulder and pressed the knife against the small of his back with the other. Bystanders didn't notice the move, and by keeping herself pressed close to Steven, no one would notice the knife. They just looked overly chummy.

The kid behind the stall twitched. He reached under the table, and Nashara raised an eyebrow at him. With a smile the kid stepped back and watched.

"What are you doing?" Steven asked.

He tried to pull away, but she yanked him right back and whispered into his ear, "Steven, this is just a table knife, but I'm strong enough that I will begin by puncturing a lung of yours with it. Do you know how much that hurts? After letting you writhe about for a while, I'll slam this knife into your heart. Of course, you can stop this by giving me what I was promised for doing a very dangerous and dirty job."

"We have someone sympathetic to the League," he said quickly. "The owner of the *Daystar*. It's docked here at Villach. We'll spirit you aboard."

Nashara watched as three men in long, green robes picked some items over at a nearby stall while watching the two of them.

“Headed for?” A pair of grubby women with baskets waited to look at the toys on the table. She was in their way. They looked somewhat impatient.

“A Freeman colony in orbit around the world Yomi,” he hissed out of the side of his mouth.

One of the ladies snapped her fingers. “You gonna stand there all day, you two?”

Yomi lay over fifty wormhole transits downstream and in the right fork, the Thule branch. But was still fifteen upstream from the dead end of New Anegada. Nashara shook her head. “That’s not a close to the planet I was promised.”

One of the green-robed men glanced over at the increasingly irate ladies, then at Steven and Nashara.

“No, but it’s not here, where you’re certain to be taken down by a Gahe hunting pack. We need to leave now. We’ll help you find your way to where you need to be once you’re at the Freeman colony. There’s something we need to tell you about New Anegada anyway.”

He was being too nice. She was half tempted to snap his arm. And Steven specifically avoided looking in the direction of the men in green.

“Any Ragamuffin ships at dock?” she asked.

“They don’t make it this far upstream. You might find one at Yomi though.”

Nashara leaned closer. “Tell those three men to back way off.”

“What three men?” Steven looked around.

She dug the point of her improvised knife into his skin, enough to make her point. “Steven, back them off before things go bad.”

He looked over at them. They moved back.

Nashara dug out several bloody pieces of silver and tossed them at Peter. They bounced in a trough of chips and wires. A teenage girl with blond hair and sunburn joined Peter, and the two women in front of Nashara stared at the silver.

“I have a favor to ask you all,” Nashara said to them.

“What are you doing?” Steven twisted, shoving his shoulders against her.

“I’m going to pay a handful of these nice people to walk to the Daystar with us with any friends they can round up, board with me, and then leave once I’m nicely ensconced aboard the ship.”

He tensed. She’d figured that out as well. With a crowd around them the Villach security program would keep a close eye on a mob. And for all the rhetoric the League of Human Affairs deployed she’d bet her life it still preferred to skulk about in the shadows.

“Now let’s go before Gahe start showing up,” Nashara hissed. Time was running out and things were getting complicated.

Peter pocketed the silver and tapped the air, and as Nashara stepped forward, kids flowed in toward them, jostling closer as the word spread throughout the lamina that some crazy lady was paying Peter in silver to help walk her over to a ship.

The *Daystar*’s cramped quarters made her feel cornered. The grimy passengers bored her. Three indentured workers escaping to the free-zone still dressed in grimy coveralls and casting relieved and yet still suspicious looks around. A human pet with his hair styled in a tall ringed cone and shaved eyebrows, glitter on his cheeks and lips. He didn’t have a name, but he showed her the bar code on his inner thigh. A handful of rich tourists in blue leather. All human. Aliens wouldn’t deign to ride dirt human transports.

The tourists relaxed, eyes closed, immersed in environments that only they could see. The walls were gray and bare, there was nothing else to do but immerse deep into some personal entertainment.

lamina. The better part of a day accelerating out from the habitat Villach had already passed. Nashara camped out in the cockpit of the *Daystar*, a gimbaled sphere deep inside the very center of the long cylindrical ship.

The portly captain, Danielle, danced from one edge of the cockpit to the other. Her crisp, new emergency gear made Nashara wonder if she was safe aboard the leaky, old tramp ship.

Danielle admired Nashara, she said. Ever since the moment Nashara had marched aboard her ship surrounded by thirty scruffy stall kids and Steven at knifepoint, waiting with all of them in the cockpit until she could verify that every last League agent had walked off the *Daystar*. And now Nashara remained in the cockpit with her.

No doubt the moment Nashara left, the captain could track where Nashara walked, vent a corridor and leave her exposed to the vacuum. She could survive some of that, but eventually, the captain would win. And if Nashara killed the captain, she could take control of the ship, yes, Nashara had those skills. But once she inserted herself into the ship's lamina, she would die.

So Nashara remained in the cockpit, watching the captain, the captain watching her.

The captain smiled, her belly wobbling in the lack of gravity as they fell away from Villach. "The story I will tell to all my passengers from now on."

"That exciting? I thought you were a League sympathizer."

Danielle spread her arms. "Whoever my masters will be, I want them all to know that I am loyal to them."

Nashara grinned. "Cynical."

"Honest." Danielle tapped the air to give commands. "You are a glorious human being, Nashara. You will die in the most amazing way, someday, and people like me will talk about it for years. Do you believe in the great-person theory?"

"The what?"

"There are some people who always sit in the middle of big things. They live large lives. Like you. It is not enough for you to settle into a life in Astragalai and give up, no, you have panache. And I get to sit here in my ship and sail from star to star and watch people like you pass through lives. You're my best dinner anecdote, I think."

"It's hardly great." Wires snaked all around the cockpit. That couldn't be safe, could it? "All I want to do is get to my destination in one piece. I'm tired. This is all temporary."

At the front of the cockpit Danielle waved her hands, and the cockpit walls faded into screens that showed perspectives of space. Lots of inky darkness. Nothing that really stirred Nashara's soul. She preferred worlds, not the empty vacuum.

"The League wanted me to stop and turn you over, you know. I told them you'd kill me. I like my life too much, and they know it. You're okay aboard my ship." Danielle chuckled, a bit too high pitched, as if nervous. "Where are you going?"

"As close to New Anegada as I can get."

"New Anegada?" Danielle shook her head. "Honey, you aren't going all the way to New Anegada, you know. It's not only way downstream of here, but it doesn't exist anymore."

"Yes, I know." Nashara sat on the curved floor.

"The wormhole leading there got cut off. Hundreds of years ago."

Nashara turned on Danielle, the sinking, tired feeling in her stomach having nothing to do with the thump and shudder of the ship's engines. "I'm well aware of it. I just need to get close."

Danielle looked at her as if seeing her for the first time. "Why?"

"It's none of your damn business."

“You’re out of your mind.” Danielle shook her head. “Clean out. Near New Anegada is where the Ragamuffin ships prowl. They’re liable to board and shoot up any ship you take out there. Only good thing I see the Hongguo do is patrol against them.”

Nashara rubbed the side of her temple. “The Ragamuffins, you sure they’re pirates, or do you just hear that they’re pirates?”

“Seen video of their attacks.” Danielle folded her arms.

“Sure you have. Ever seen an attack in person, Danielle?”

“No,” the *Daystar* captain conceded.

“Probably because they’re silently docked next to you at habitats, keeping as low a profile as possible. Just a bunch of merchant ships left on the wrong side of the wormhole when Chimson, and then New Anegada, got cut off.” The Black Starliner Corporation had settled both Chimson and New Anegada with islanders and other refugees from Earth, and the Ragamuffins had formed out of necessity. When alien aggression started up, they needed a more militant arm for protection. Humans cheered the Ragamuffins on, until they lost. Then suddenly they were “pirates.”

“You know a lot about them?”

Nashara shifted. “Known a few. They used to route between Chimson, Earth, and New Anegada until the Satrapy declared that human ships weren’t allowed to use the wormhole routes or fuel up without licenses. Licenses they refused to grant to New Anegada or Chimson.”

“You sound annoyed.”

The Gahe and Nesaru had found humanity through the wormholes and used them. The Satrapy dragged the Gahe and Nesaru off their homeworlds into space hundreds of years ago. Humanity was only the latest addition to the benevolent Satrapy. “The aliens don’t know how to make wormholes. But they get to say who uses the wormholes and who doesn’t?”

“You think the Satrapy doesn’t know how the wormholes work?” Danielle looked sharp and interested, with a half smile.

“If the Satrapy were that powerful, would they be that scared of human beings running around without supervision?” They could shut down the wormholes to human-occupied worlds that scared them, such as Earth, in agreement for Emancipation. They could do it to stop the nuclear suicide bombers, or to Chimson for trying to gain independence. And Nashara bet that they had also shut down New Anegada for some reason. But Nashara, and many back on Chimson, believed that all the Satrapy could do was shut the wormholes down.

Danielle shrugged. “Who knows? Look, Nashara, how long are you going to remain in my cockpit? We’re approaching the first wormhole on our little journey downstream towards Yomi. We have a lot of wormholes and miles to cross before we get there. You going to camp out in here for three weeks?”

“If need be.”

Danielle laughed. “Nashara, if I’m going to kill you, or dump you out the air lock, or whatever you think I’m going to do, there isn’t much you can do about it unless you plan on having all your meals here.”

Nashara did not laugh. She had found a spare set of acceleration webbing and pulled the retractable ribbons from their recessed spots. She wove the fabric around herself. “That offer sounds good. You have a jump seat here. I’m happy to ride with you. Where’s the catheter?”

“My best dinner story . . . ,” Danielle muttered. She turned and got into the soft chair hanging dead center in the cockpit and strapped herself in. “The League will be waiting for you on Yomi. They’ll kill you there.”

“Of course.”

Danielle raised a finger and closed her eyes. She settled into her chair, and the thump of the engine changed. ~~By now the *Daystar* had climbed high out of Astragalai's gravity well, almost enough to break free of the planet.~~ The Gahe choose to keep their wormholes far out from the clustered near-planet orbits.

On the screens Danielle provided, Nashara saw a cloud of communications buoys as large as the own ship. They pulsed a riot of laser light at the blank piece of inky dark in front of them. Buoys on the other side would snag the light, parse it, then pass it on. Forty-eight worlds ruled by the secretive alien Satraps, connected through thousands of wormholes strung throughout almost random parts of the galaxy, held together by threads of light. It sounded tenuous, but the Satrapy ruled strongly enough through its surrogates.

It took attention to thread this needle. Anything less than true center and the ship risked tearing itself into debris against the sides of the wormhole. Meanwhile, Nashara was sure Danielle had listen to the chatter of traffic control, contending with other ships in line to transit.

Nashara stared into the round plate of nothingness on the screens until it swallowed them and the lines of flickering laser light all along their sides. A tunnel of light illuminated by stellar dust. Her stomach flip-flopped, her brain trying to process something that it couldn't understand.

Now the screens showed more buoys and the remains of a half-processed chunk of rock. Girders and docking tubes thrust out from the side.

"Transit number one," Danielle said, and reopened her eyes. "Of many more to go."

The *Daystar* coasted toward the debris. No planets existed out here. A light-year away from Astragalai, the planet's sun just a pinprick from here. The next wormhole lay on the other side of the rock, a few thousand miles away. A smart captain such as Danielle wouldn't waste much fuel speeding up to it but coast toward it with a few adjustments.

Nashara's wrist screen chirped. She looked down. A simple text message from Steven: "You are now a wanted criminal in all forty-eight worlds of the Satrapy for the detonation of a nuclear bomb in the Gahe section of Villach. Happy travels."

Nashara deleted it.

"Congratulations," Danielle said, revealing that she'd gotten a copy of the message. "My best story yet. And a wonderful move on their part, pointing the finger your way."

"They're insane," Nashara said, and Danielle frowned. "A nuke?" They probably killed more humans at Villach than aliens.

"They said the Hongguo will be hunting you," Danielle said. "Your name and DNA profile will be on every ship of theirs. Now you've made enemies of both the League and the Hongguo. Dangerous."

Nashara sighed. "Every move I dig myself in deeper."

"You hungry?" Danielle asked. "I can have one of my guys bring something over before the next transit here. It's squeezy stuff, right, but I'm hungry, for one."

Nashara stared at her. "And then when I use the bathroom in a couple hours, you have the ship lock me in, suck the air out, turn me into a mummy?"

"You're paranoid." Danielle shook her head.

"Everyone has been out to get me of late," Nashara snorted. "I feel it's justified."

Danielle laughed. "If you have to use the shitter, I'll come with you, I swear."

Nashara wanted to like her. Wondered if she'd have to kill her eventually. It would be a waste to get cornered into a losing situation like that.

Besides, the *Daystar* would stand no chance of outrunning any Hongguo ship if they decided she was worth the trouble of looking for. And now that the League assholes had sicced them on her, she

only had to worry about them. The League would stand clear and just watch.

~~Just as long as the League hadn't told the Hongguo to find her aboard the *Daystar*, she'd be okay.~~ Hopefully they needed their sympathetic captain Danielle's goodwill more than they wanted Nasha dead.

Hopefully.

CHAPTER THREE

Six days and eleven wormhole transits later Nashara lowered her guard and took the luxury of a quick sponge bath as the *Daystar* passed between a trio of wormholes spaced a thousand miles apart. They trailed each other in geostationary orbit around a massive gas giant. Several massive storms near the equator stared down on the speck of a ship as it slowly drifted from one wormhole to the next over several hours.

They were downstream of Astragalai and getting close to Harpin now. Certainly moving in the right direction, Nashara thought, although Harpin was a habitable world with a Satrap living in a habitat orbit over it. And maybe a Hongguo ship or two. Not somewhere to loiter.

Danielle hung just outside, keeping a hand on the top of the opaque curtain so that Nashara knew where she was.

“What would you do if I just kicked off for the cockpit right now?” she asked.

“I’d kill you.” Nashara pulled her leathers back on. She’d added an assortment of blades fashioned from parts found loose in the cockpit. She’d had a lot of time floating around to make shivs.

The rest of the *Daystar* didn’t really exist for her. Only the nearby bathroom and the cockpit sphere. And Danielle. Two more weeks to Yomi. So far no Hongguo ships had caught up with them and demanded a boarding.

She played for time now. But then she’d been doing that for five years now. Keeping her head low, trying to meander her way toward New Anegada.

Danielle looked Nashara over. “So what’s your whole story?”

“You really want that dinner-story prize, don’t you?” Nashara stared back. “Or maybe you just want to sell the information to your League friends. Your new masters.”

“Would the League of Human Affairs be any worse than having the Satraps, and the Hongguo doing their dirty work? Who cares who’s in charge?”

Nashara shrugged. A point. But anyone crazy enough to set off a nuclear bomb in a habitat wasn’t fit to be in charge of anything.

“Seriously, where the hell did you come from?”

Tired of evasions, Nashara looked at Danielle. “If I tell you, will you level with me on something?”

Danielle shrugged. “If I can.”

“You got a copy of that message from Steven. You’re a lot more than just a League sympathizer, aren’t you?” She was probably Steven’s superior.

“Somewhat, yes.” Danielle smiled. “It’s a very loose organization, and I have things that the League needs. They pay close attention. But trust me when I say I’m no threat to you. If anything, I can be an ally. I’m already diverting my ship somewhat to help you out, because I would like to help rebuild your relationship with the League. Besides, you’re interesting.”

An ally. Nashara hadn’t had an ally in a long time. “I’m from Chimson,” she said.

“That’s old history,” Danielle said. Chimson had been cut out of the wormhole network hundreds of years ago. Just after Earth and before New Anegada.

“I’m very old,” Nashara said. “You have some closely regulated antiaging technologies around Chimson excelled at them and I’m a product of that. One of the reasons the Satrapy had the Chimson wormhole shut down was that fear that we would make it cheap and spread it.”

“Hundreds of years old?” Danielle fidgeted in the middle of the bathroom doorway.

“Hundreds, yes. I was there, for the final battle at the wormhole, trying to keep the Hongguo back

The Ragamuffins were not just New Anegada's mercenary protection, Chimson had its own as well. Nashara smiled. "I was with the Ragamuffins when we killed the Satrap in orbit around our planet."

"I've heard that rumor," Danielle said.

"We took Chimson from them with our bare hands," Nashara said. "And even though they shut us away from the rest of humanity, it was still a glorious thing." Here in the Satrapy communication was monitored, and there were only millions of humans scattered around among the aliens. Monitored. Tagged. Herded. They put up with delayed messages being passed through the buoys for no reason. But on Chimson . . . "You should see what ideas and people flourished as we all jammed together. It must have been like Earth before the pacification, with all those billions of minds so close together." She stopped.

Danielle just hung there, listening. "And?"

"It didn't stop, after we were cut off. We grew. And we decided to give something back to everyone out here. I volunteered to come back. I was packed away with nine others in a vehicle flung out to the nearest working wormhole, almost a light-year away. Took many decades to get back into the wormhole system, get back into the forty-eight worlds."

"But why in hell's name would you do that?"

"You've seen me in action. There were ten cloned and rebuilt like me, my sisters. We were sent back here." But not as mere soldiers. Their bodies were just containers, a delivery mechanism. But she wasn't going to be talking to Danielle about that. She crossed her arms. "A Hongguo ship captured us and we woke up in interrogation cells. My nine sisters wreaked a particular hell on them before they died, and only I got out. Five years ago. We were supposed to offer our services to New Anegada, but it didn't take long to find out they didn't exist." And hearing that a free human society lived in Pitt's Cross had led to a two-year mistake. Pitt's Cross didn't have the tools to even begin to wrap their minds around her particular talent.

"And now?"

"Now I'm just looking for a quiet place, run by humans. That's all. I need a home, Danielle. I just want to stop and be home."

Another wormhole approached. The conversation ended as Danielle moved them into the cockpit.

Three more transits. Danielle smiled and turned to look at Nashara.

"What?" Nashara heard something skitter through a tray of hoses and wires wrapped around the equator of the cockpit.

"They're waiting for you on Yomi."

"Hongguo? Or your buddies?"

"Hongguo. The last buoy forwarded a warning."

Nashara took a deep breath. She would have to roam around the Daystar and see if she could cobble together what she needed for a showdown. Anything explosive, anything sharp. And of course, on Yomi she'd be near a powerful and massive lamina.

She'd probably die at Yomi. But the havoc she would wreak would never be forgotten by the Hongguo.

Nashara's mind was the real weapon. The moment she made a direct neural connection, it would ripple free through lamina, spawning copies of itself and infiltrating every corner of the environment.

Chimson scientists had told her she needed monitors and machines to help her infiltrate and infect the lamina properly. At Yomi she would have none of that help. Just as her sisters had had none of that help when they'd awoken in the Hongguo interrogation cells. Like them, she'd burn her own mind out.

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