



Tanya Ferris

**Memories of  
Sandra Anderson**

**A Cosmic Explorer**

***Book Three***  
***Nine Fantasy Stories***

# MEMORIES OF SANDRA ANDERSON

**A Cosmic Explorer**

*Book Three*

Nine Fantasy Stories  
(Twenty – Twenty-eight)

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# **Memories of Sandra Anderson**

## ***A Cosmic Explorer***

*A never ending exploration through the vast worlds of fantasy as far as the most remote areas of the cosmic network; a magical journey into the abysses of the unconscious mind, a jumble of primordial symbols, subconscious desires, metaphysical quest.*

*Fateful choices, traversing the spiral vortex of time and space, lead the heroine and the reader beyond the insupportable earthly reality to unimaginable dreamlands or, even, nightmare lands. However, even the worse nightmare is more preferable than the world of everyday life...*

*Each adventure is a personal magic ritual. I cannot foresee the result of such rituals, but there must always be a result, for there are points of contact, that is synchronicities, between the material world and the astral planes.*

*More is yet to come...*

## Story Twenty: Sexcaged

*originally handwritten  
from 6<sup>th</sup> January to 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 1995*

It all began as a very bad dream but it soon proved to be more than that... *I must be going insane*, I thought, as I heard a woman's laugh echo strident in my bedroom. I sat up at once and the blood ran cold in my veins.

“Oh, no! This can't be happening!” I cried, as an incredible image was taking shape before my eyes.

“Oh, yes; it can, my dear,” Lady Chimaera responded ironically.

The part of the chamber before me was already changing fast into the witch's den, separated from the rest of the room by a spectral, transparent partition that gradually rose up to the ceiling. The place on the other side looked like an old garret full of magic tools, thick books and various concoctions in odd-shaped bottles. Lady Chimaera was facing me with a triumphant mien. Peter of the Stars was standing beside her, looking at me complacently.

“He is mine now, and I had no particular difficulty in persuading him”, said the sorceress arrogantly.

“You are affecting his mind!” I protested.

“Just like you, Sandra, just like you -so far!”

I heaved a sigh of disappointment, knowing that a powerful sorceress like Lady Chimaera could easily enchant any man she wished. Nevertheless, I would have never expected that *my* Peter would fall a victim to her sinister charm.

“What do you want?” I asked her, as calm as possible.

“Let's say I want you to have a last look at your precious love toy... and to show you how insignificant you are, Sandra Anderson!”

“Where are you keeping him?” I asked then, striving to contain my anxiety.

Lady Chimaera smiled sarcastically and came closer to the partition.

“You know where my place is; come and get him if you can!”

“How do I know you are not just tricking me?”

“You know I am not!”

I stood there speechless, watching her chuckle maliciously as she turned and embraced Peter, who accepted her affection with pleasure, while the spectral partition was gradually melting away.

Soon I was all alone again, with my head spinning. There was no jealousy in my heart; only sheer terror. Although he was not aware of it in his daze, Peter was in extreme danger.

\* \* \* \* \*

Getting to Lady Chimaera's isolated tower was no particular problem; its location was a common secret, although nobody ever dared come close to it. I thought a lot about it and decided that the safest way to enter the witch's den was to send there an astral copy of mine. Therefore, my physical body never left my bedroom.

I let my mind fall to sleep, and then induced lucid dreaming; I focused my attention on my hands, then to the other parts of my body, until I created a tangible copy of myself. In that astral, yet dense enough carrier, I travelled through the astral planes and roamed the dusky witch's tower.

I rushed up the central, spiral stairway, feeling more and more impatient with every step. When I reached the top turret, I found the black metal door provocatively open.

I paused at the threshold for a couple of seconds and had a searching look at the hexagonal garret with the vaulted roof. The walls were covered with wooden shelves full of sorcery tools, bulky books of magic and witchcraft, bottled potions, as well as skulls and bones of various human and humanoid beings.

At first everything seemed to be paradoxically still and quiet; I could perceive no motion in there. *Either I've fallen into a parallel dimension*, I pondered, *or...*

“You are here at last, Sandra Anderson!” announced Lady Chimaera in a sonorous voice.

She had appeared before me all of a sudden, her long blond hair slightly waving at the graceful motion of her arms. She was wearing a long purple velvet garment, plenty of sparkling jewels, and a black cloak with a star-spangled finish. Peter of the Stars was standing next to her, holding an odd-shaped firearm in his hands. Behind them there was a massive altar made of black marble carved with bizarre relief magic seals.

“What have you done to him?” I demanded to know.

“What he has always wanted, of course, just what he has always wanted!” she replied provocatively, touching his shoulder tenderly.

Next moment Peter moved in front of the witch with a light footstep, aiming that dreadful weapon at me. He looked more attractive than ever in his tight green uniform, his lips half open in an arrogant smile, his green eyes sparkling as never before.

“Be careful! He hates it when someone annoys his mistress!” crowed Lady Chimaera with a sarcastic smile.

“His mistress?” I wondered, hardly believing what I had just heard.

“Keep in mind, Sandra; he is no longer who you knew!”

Peter assaulted me with a ferocity I had never seen in him before. My copy body reacted promptly and avoided the mortal laser beams with relative ease. The enemy loaded on his weapon again in maniac stubbornness; he kept firing at me furiously, pushing me back towards the entrance. Suddenly, the black metal door slammed closed behind me; I had to perform an endless set of acrobatic jumps in order to dodge the enemy's successive attacks. His moves were extremely fast and accurate, taking care not to damage anything in the room.

All at once he was too close to me, determined to finish the fight as fast as possible. In the meanwhile, the witch had withdrawn to a corner, enjoying herself to the fullest as I was getting more and more desperate.

“You know you are only dreaming, Sandra!” she declared scornfully. “You wouldn't dare come here in the flesh!”

The truth of her words shocked me for an instant; however, I managed to maintain control of my copy body.

“Oh, no”, I retorted then, as time seemed to have frozen. “I am awake! Fully awake!”

Next moment I jumped high into the air so as to evade another furious attack of Peter. At the same time I turned and struck him with a terrible astral blast that swept the weapon off his hands and made him shudder for a couple of seconds. Nevertheless, as I was landing on my feet, I saw he had already lifted his firearm from the dark purple floor.

I rushed and pounced on him immediately, striking him hard in the face. The unexpected blow made him topple back, bang his head against the marble altar and lie there stunned. For

one long moment there was absolute silence in the room.

“Peter!” I cried and ran to him. “Are you all right?” I asked in agony, but got no answer.

Then he opened his eyes and looked at me in surprise. Obeying an irresistible urge, I bent over and kissed him passionately for a couple of magical seconds.

All of a sudden I was tossed into the air, landed against bookshelves and collapsed on the floor together with some heavy books, while Peter had just retrieved his weapon, aiming at me once again. He fired repeatedly, with the same insane look in his eyes. Strangely enough, this time it wasn't so hard for me to dodge the thick azure beams, as his marksmanship seemed to have waned a little – maybe because he was still dizzy.

We both stood still for an instant, as we clearly heard the witch uttering one of her dreadful spells. The unintelligible words were still ringing in the ionized air when I noticed numerous shallow masses of an odd, whitish liquid oozing all over the place. “Ectoplasm!” I uttered in abhorrence, because I knew: Ectoplasm is created when an extra-dimensional entity is about to materialize. Such sorcery requires huge amounts of energy, but that has never been a problem for Lady Chimaera. Therefore, it would only be a matter of seconds until some hideous demon materialized in there, under the witch's commands.

Peter raised his firearm again, always aiming at me. He fired at once and I sought to take cover behind the black altar, as he went on shooting like crazy. I ducked just in time to evade the mortal beams that scorched the air several inches over my head. His next luminous beam was not at all near me, and I wondered about his continuing lack of marksmanship.

Next moment Lady Chimera screamed in terror and the room

resounded with her shrill cry of pain, as Peter had fired again, once again against her. For a moment or two, she twirled in a spasm of incredible intensity; then the sorceress fell silent, wrapped herself in her black cloak and vanished in an ethereal green cloud. In the meanwhile, all the white masses of ectoplasm were melting away fast.

“She... she is gone!” I stuttered in astonishment.

“She'll be back! Lady Chimaera won't perish so easily!” said Peter in a firm voice.

I turned and faced him in unspeakable relief. He was back again, the Peter of the Stars I always knew. I ran to him and hugged him tight, happier than ever.

\* \* \* \* \*

“So, Peter, you still haven't explained to me how you got involved with Lady Chimaera in the first place!” I asked to know, as I was piloting my starship towards Eldyla.

“I was away from home when the witch found and captured me”, he replied in a low, reluctant voice.

“What were you doing so far away from Eldyla, Peter?” I asked, smiling in feigned patience.

“I was following a spacecraft”, he went on. “I... I was just curious”, he stammered.

“Curious about what, Peter?”

“I definitely wanted to know why an Yrkanian spacecraft was heading to planet Gonast!”

I stayed taciturn for a moment or two, hardly believing what I had just heard. Then, I had a crazy suspicion...

“Whose spacecraft was that, Peter?” I asked.

“Venor's spacecraft!” he replied thoughtful, avoiding to look at me.

“What could an Yrkanian prince be looking for on a planet of amazons?” I wondered aloud, not really expecting an answer.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pretty soon I was there, on planet Gonast, for a fortnight of vacations, since the Amazon queen, Nikita, has been a good friend of mine for ages.

Gonast is a dream world, for many a myth; peace, serenity and natural beauty reigns everywhere. Although sciences and technology are pretty advanced, I consider this place as heaven – a perfect combination of natural and mystical forces. This world is ruled by women, descendants of amazons who managed to survive an ancient neutron war.

For a couple of days I had scrupulously avoided to reveal the real reason for my arrival; yet, it wasn't long before I came face to face with the incredible truth...

“We have a little surprise for you, Sandra!” confessed Limara, the chief Amazon warrior, as the sun was setting in the horizon.

“Really?” I wondered.

Limara beckoned me to follow her across the golden valley to the impressive rocky mountains that hide the Old Necropolis behind them. Entering a narrow gap on the rocks, we found ourselves in a semi-dark cavern; the three moons of Gonast were shedding their mystical light all around. Walking through a short tunnel, we reached a spacious cavity; there was a round opening above us, which bathed the evocative place in plain moonlight. There was a big, flat rock in the middle of the cavity and I was intrigued to see thick shadows moving rhythmically on top of it, although but I could not make out what it was exactly. Taking a few more steps inside, I paused abruptly as I was taken aback at the incredible sight: There were three naked Amazon warriors

upon that rock, which much resembled an altar; all three were enjoying the indulging body of a man, in a most obscene manner.

“What's the matter? I thought that would be a pleasant surprise!” said Limara jokingly.

“I... I didn't expect...” I only stammered and took a step forth, so as to have a better look.

Those three women were constantly changing positions on that man, in frenetic endeavors to have the most possible pleasure from his body. As about him, he seemed to have entirely submitted himself to their desires. His cries and sighs of satisfaction revealed the unique pleasure he was experiencing. I was already feeling irritated, thinking of nothing else but join that party right away.

“He is really fantastic! He has satisfied lots of us during the last three days!” said Limara in a hoarse voice.

“Three days?” I repeated in disbelief, as I was trying to make out his face; under women's thighs that was impossible.

“We found him three days ago, after he was forced to land here due to fuel shortage!”

*And you believed that?* I wanted to ask, but passed it in silence instead.

“What kind of space vessel did he have?” I asked hesitantly.

“An Yrkanian royal spacecraft!”

“Venor!” I uttered in a low voice.

“You've got it, finally!” said Limara. “But, enough talk! Let's have some fun too!”

Venor's immediate reaction, as soon as he got aware of my presence among the others, was a slight startle. Right after, he turned his head aside, as if in constraint, and smiled

complacently. His impeccable body, as it was outlined shiny in the moonlight, was utmost sensual. Just then I realized how much I yearned for such an occasion. Obliterating all thoughts from my mind, I pounced on him and exploited every little spot of his writhing body, in ecstatic co-ordination with the other four women, all night long. I was quite shocked at his stamina, though I knew it was probably due to some "love potion". The sun had already risen when the prince of Yrkania was eventually left alone on the purple rock motionless, exhausted, but fully satisfied.

\* \* \* \* \*

“So, Venor, can you explain to me how and why you landed up here?” I asked him firm.

“I told you; I was running out of fuel and I saw this planet was inhabited. Of course, I could have never imagined...”

“You knew exactly where you were, Venor, stop this silly game and tell me! What is the real reason that brought you to Gonast?”

“Well... I had been feeling bored lately... I needed a trip to unknown lands and extraordinary experiences”, he excused himself awkwardly.

“On the amazons' planet? Come on, Venor, no reasonable man comes here on their own will!” I retorted, and then I paused in perplexity. “As if you didn't know what they do to captured men here!” I went on. “And they consider you a very special prey, you know!”

“I know!” he uttered softly.

For a moment I was speechless.

“Are you out of your mind?” I exclaimed finally. “What's gotten you, Venor?”

He just chuckled, turning away.

“I still don't get it”, I went on. “You can always have any woman you like, whenever and wherever you like! Even in your palace, a big harem is constantly at your disposal!”

“Here is the problem”, he replied calm. “They are constantly at my disposal! I needed something entirely different... such as *my* always being at *their* disposal... I needed to feel like a most wanted sex object”, he finally confessed in a low, guilty, adorably sensual voice. “Am I clear enough now?”

“Venor!” I cried. “The warrior women of Gonast are nothing like your concubines! You have no idea how dangerous they can be!”

“It's not the first time I've been here, if you remember”, he whispered lustfully. “So, I have a very good idea...”

I could no longer resist; I approached and hugged him from behind, gently caressing his broad chest.

“You could have come to me, instead!” I said, kissing his well-built shoulders. “Your overall experience would be about the same, only less tiring!”

He leaned his head back and let a soft sigh of pleasure. “I'm yours, my mistress”, he said in a most sensual manner that drove me crazy.

He smiled and took a deep breath, as I was already scratching and biting him all over the blue, tight-fitting uniform. I kissed his throat and lips impatiently; then, I wrapped my legs tightly around his pelvis. His hands were demanding and tender, cupping my breasts over my flimsy, silver-coloured corsage. My fingers sank into his long, blond hair and I kissed his lips again. We were both losing control and I loved it...

\* \* \* \* \*

A couple of days passed with a hidden uneasiness growing inside me, as Venor seemed to be getting fonder and fonder

of life on planet Gonast. I had also begun to worry lest Limara and the others should be aware of my concerns, as well as of my secret meetings with the prince of Yrkania.

It was during a meeting of friends that I learned about a special occasion organized by Chryssa, a fierce warrior with slanted eyes and long, platinum hair.

“I get the impression you are not very excited about our next night of pleasure”, Chryssa told me as I was sunk in my thoughts, while the other three women of our party were talking jovially about it. “Consider this”, she went on smiling, “the prince knows nothing about it! It's going to be quite a surprise for him! This time we shall be eight!”

“Eight?” I stammered, already feeling sorry for the unsuspecting prince.

Suddenly a shrill sound reverberated deafening all over the place. Alarm!

We all ran to the assembly chamber, which was quite near in the premises. Big screens covered one of the walls, showing in real time what was wrong.

“The prince of Yrkania has escaped!” we were informed at once. “He is no longer in his room!”

“Escaped? But how?” wondered Chryssa.

“You wonder how?” I exclaimed. “I wonder what took him so long! After all, he is the throne prince of Yrkania!”

Instant monitor scanning showed us the exact location of the fugitive, moment by moment. He probably knew that, but he didn't seem to care much.

“He has already reached the spacecraft platform!” cried Chryssa.

“Of course! He wants to take his space vessel back!” I said, feeling the blood enraged in my veins as the game was getting

more and more interesting.

Having put the two guards out of action, Venor was about to enter the open aerodrome. It was just then that we finally reached him. I landed in front of him after performing a set of successive air somersaults along the three levels of the spacecraft platform. He stood still for a moment and looked at me frowned, as I got in his way. The look on his face showed he was determined to fight hard for his freedom.

In the meantime Limara had also arrived, while Chryssa was near the two guards who had come to themselves by now.

“We must not let him escape!” I heard one of them shout, aiming her laser gun at the fugitive.

In fact, all of us were armed but this didn't seem to daunt Venor; he promptly dodged all laser beams and luminous blades aimed to hurt him. Moreover, he confronted our martial art moves with considerable effectiveness. He kept on fighting bravely his way out, neutralizing our assaults with sharp, accurate blows – although it was obvious he stood no chance of beating all five of us. At a moment he kicked Limara hard on her abdomen, which made her stumble back in pain and wrath. Judging by the look in her eyes, I could tell she would even kill the rebel if he kept on resisting.

Next instant Venor had to confront Chryssa and her laser sword; not without certain anguish, I watched him dodge her luminous blade, finally disarming her with a sharp blow on her wrist and pushing her back with a fast side kick.

“He is getting away!” I heard her shout, while Venor was now running to the sector of the spacecrafts.

It was one of the guards who reacted first, defying the general numbness of the rest of us; she lifted her weapon, aimed carefully and shot without hesitation. A soft cry was heard and next moment the prince fell down unconscious.

“Let's get him!” the other guard shouted, while Limara was watching the whole scene with an expression of worry on her face.

\* \* \* \* \*

Well, despite his mutiny, the prince was still everybody's favourite – as he found out himself after he had regained his senses. He was lying on a metal platform, with five women all over him. “No!” he cried and shut his eyes in despair, as he had just got aware of his present condition: Chryssa was kissing his broad shoulders, her arms all over his naked chest; one of the guards forced him to dispose of his trousers, aiming at his genitals with her laser weapon. He sighed of lust as the other guard kissed him on the nape and then had his sex inside her. At the same time, he turned his head so as to receive Chryssa's passionate kiss on his lips. His fiery eyes urged her to take him right after, almost pushing the blond guard off him. The latter frowned, and limited herself to caressing his quaking chest and ribs.

His passion reached a summit as soon as he got aware of Limara on top of him, riding him in frenzy, like an ancient Amazon on a wild horse. The others seemed to be lost in haze, as she kept on shaking on him out of control; the prince breathed deeply, sensually proposing his well-trained chest. The chief Amazon warrior groaned of lust and then slapped the captive twice, leaving him breathless. There followed a cascade of kisses, bites, scratches that tortured his body to bleeding; his face was full of tears, as she claimed his sex again and again, uncountable times.

In the meanwhile I, together with the others, had stepped back, acknowledging Limara was so crazy about that man that she probably wanted him for herself only...

“You are all mine, prince Venor!” she confirmed right after.

Right then I noticed Venor's imploring glance at me. He was indeed worn out and he silently pleaded for help. But what could I do?

Only after the chief Amazon warrior had finally got off the exhausted prince with a last kiss on his lips, I approached hesitantly. For a few moments I just stood there watching his wonderful body exposed on the metal platform. He looked so fragile, helpless, irresistible; he could hardly keep his eyes open, I could see he needed some rest, however...

I pounced on him crying “If *they* had you, I assert one more right upon you!”

He gave me a pleading look, in vain; then he closed his eyes in surrender. Hot desire took over me like a gigantic inner flame. I kissed his throat and lips again and again wildly, pulling his long, blond hair softly with my fingers. He opened his eyes and stared at me in eager desperation, his heart pounding like a hammer. I let my hands wander all over his body, whispering in his ear:

“No need to worry, Venor; more often than not, you have owed your life to your body!”

It was obvious that with me he seemed to enjoy sex a lot more than with anybody else – all four times that I had him, driving the others mad as they kept watching speechless. I can tell they were rather jealous of me by the time all this was over and I got off him after a long kiss of mutual passion.

\* \* \* \* \*

A couple of days passed without any more raids on Venor's body; during that time he looked quite tranquil -though a little down in the dumps- but I could foresee the storm coming. So, when Limara paid me a visit that evening, I was prepared it would not be a simple social occasion.

Her emerald eyes were shining in restrained fury when she

announced to me: “This has to come to an end! I can no longer tolerate other women laying even a finger on prince Venor! I have already cleared out to all those who are interested that I want him as my personal mate! Anyone who wishes to claim him will have to confront me in a fair duel on the set date and time!”

“A duel! A duel of Amazon warriors for Venor!” I exclaimed in astonishment.

“Have I made myself understood?” she concluded in a stern voice. Obviously, she considered me to be one of "those who are interested".

“Perfectly understood!” I replied calm.

In the process, I tried to dissuade her from the whole affair, reminding her that Venor was the throne prince of Yrkania and that it wouldn't be wise at all to keep him on Gonast forever.

“Sooner or later they will find out where he is; and you don't want the Yrkanian Fleet outside your door”, I warned her.

“Let them come!” she replied arrogantly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Venor looked quite pensive when I visited him in his room next morning.

“I thought you've all forgotten me”, he said with a soft smile.

“So, what's up now, Sandra?”

“Someone has declared a duel on you!”

“What is this supposed to mean?”

“This means an Amazon warrior has chosen you as her personal mate, her lawful husband let's say, which is considered a great honour for you”, I explained to him in a calm voice. “She has also challenged to a duel anyone who

wishes to claim you!”

“You are... you are joking, of course!” stuttered Venor, his eyes wide open.

“Not at all; from now on, you will belong to one woman only; on the other hand, you will never leave Gonast!”

“Oh”, he frowned and his face darkened. “And who... who has declared that duel on me?” he stammered, as if he were afraid to hear the answer.

“The chief Amazon warrior, Limara!”

On hearing her name, Venor froze breathless.

“I told you, it's a great honour – especially if you are wanted by a most respectable warrior, like Limara!” I told him, amused at his bewilderment.

“Has... has anyone accepted the challenge yet?” he asked to know, probably hoping to hear a positive reply.

“No. Nobody has, nobody will”, I disillusioned him. “Nobody every dares challenge Limara. I would never oppose her; I would be in a most difficult position even if I won”, I tried to explain.

The prince frowned once again and lowered his head.

“I don't want to become Limara's mate”, he confessed then hesitantly.

“I fear there is nothing to do about it; you had better get used to the idea!” I teased him.

“This is not what I came here for”, he stated solemn. “I hadn't planned to stay here more than a month or so...”

“Well, things change...”

*It's time you faced the consequences of your decisions for once,* I pondered.

“Let me put it straight, Sandra”, he continued, still looking down. “I don't think I will survive that woman for long... you know how... how...” he stuttered, unable to find the correct words.

“Insatiable”, I said.

“That's right, insatiable she is... and she will be exhausting me day and night...” he went on stuttering. “I don't think I can endure her for long...” he concluded in despair.

In any other case I would consider his fears exaggerated, but not in the case of Limara. Besides, he was so adorable in his helplessness there was no way I could be indifferent to his entreaties. Acting instinctively, I approached and wrapped my arms around his naked shoulders, already feeling successive waves of lust taking over his whole body.

“We shall work something out”, I reassured him, although at that time I had no idea what I could do about that. “Don't worry, Venor, we shall find a way out of this!”

My hands were already stroking his muscular chest, and he sighed of pleasure to the slightest touch of mine. I didn't care at all about Limara now; besides, there was no way she could ever find out, since the prince would certainly keep his mouth shut. We embraced each other tenderly and sealed our agreement with a soft, yet very hot kiss as a prelude of an unforgettable night.

\* \* \* \* \*

No matter how hard I pondered on it, in the end I always admitted it was an impossible case; it just seemed to be impossible to get Venor out of Gonast. I needed urgent help for this, but I didn't know who to turn to. Who would ever accept to come on a planet of amazons and help me out with something like this? Peter of the Stars was out of the question, of course...

All those intense contemplations gradually brought me to a state of light sleep. Soon I was dreaming of grave, unpredictable perils threatening my life there, in the astral planes. As the dream became clearer, I realized I was being menaced from above, by some lunatic on a flying vessel which resembled a motorbike; in his right hand he was holding a heavy machine gun.

“You don't understand; others will pay for your crimes!” I heard him shout, but I was not sure I had heard well.

The place around looked strangely fragmented, as if split apart by an unspeakable force; a kind of crimson smoke came from long fissures on the ground. Looking up, I faced the terrible weapon still being aimed at me.

“You don't understand... Others will pay...” he sounded repeating the same rhyme as if he were an automaton, his voice fading away in the gusts of wind.

The dream was already lucid -no longer a dream- and all my attention was focused on that reality: the shattered land, the suffocating smoke, the lethal machine gun right over my head. Just then I knew he meant very specific "others", who were in danger too. I could not see those persons but they had been captured and imprisoned by that lunatic; and they all hoped for someone -me- to set them free again.

My copy body was complete now, and it felt as if I were there in the flesh. The danger was even more tangible at this state of awareness, as any injury on my copy body would affect my material body as well.

In the meanwhile, the place looked more and more familiar: At first I could make out the main gate of the Old Necropolis in the distance, its metal bars shining under the light of the three full moons of Gonast. Between it and me there were innumerable ruined walls, ancient tombs and parched trees.

Then I remembered the immense, underground vault situated under the Old Necropolis – actually an arsenal of ancient times, a remnant of a dreadful neutron war. All weapons, computers, electronic and other devices, as well as military cyborgs, were still kept in there intact and inactivated, guarded by a team of five Amazon elite warriors.

However, something was very wrong here: the five guards were nowhere to see and a lunatic with a flying motorcycle and a big firearm in hand was roaming all over the Old Necropolis; I only hoped the guards were still alive.

“You don't understand... Others will pay for your crimes!” he cried ominously once again.

Next instant the flying vessel swooped down quite close to me; the villain fired his weapon, piercing the silence with a cascade of deafening, rattling sounds. My reaction was immediate, accurate, acrobatic: miraculously avoiding all his bullets, I jumped high up in the air and kicked the enemy off his flying vehicle which fell down and burst into flaming pieces. However, that didn't daunt the lunatic who kept firing at me while falling all the way down to the ground.

Performing a set of successive air somersaults, I finally managed to land on my feet safe and sound. Strangely enough, the enemy was now running away, shouting psychotically once again:

“You don't understand... Others will pay for your crimes!”

I instinctively closed my ears with my palms, feeling unable to stand that nonsense rhyme once more. Right at that moment, it occurred to me he was heading to the prisoners' cell.

Next moment a huge bulk of fragmented walls collapsed on the ground beside me with a tremendous crash, heaving up thick clouds of dust, as well as uncountable pieces of stone,

glass and metal that spread all over the place. I barely had the time to jump aside, while the psycho was still running away.

I needed badly the *power* to stop him, before it was too late; I yearned for it with all my heart, but it just refused to come to me – not the way I had expected it. However, something happened right away, something that looked like a miracle: All of a sudden, I noticed a frayed flex sparkling brightly right next to me; it looked very dangerous as it emitted violent electric discharges around, but I calmed down and concentrated really hard for there was no margin for errors.

Next instant I grasped the frayed flex in my left hand; high tension electric energy shook my body vehemently only for a fraction of a second. My right hand glowed with a white hue just for a second, as I extended it towards the fleeing enemy and struck him with a powerful energy blast. Right at that moment, the villain turned towards me and fired once again all over, causing a cascade of collapsing ruins all around which finally buried him -dead or alive- under a big mass of rubble. Only then did I stop for a moment and consider the gravity of the danger I had just been into.

Anyway, it was all over now; it took me a while to discover the place where the guards had been imprisoned: It was a small, empty room on the north part of the ancient arsenal under the Old Necropolis. All five of them looked mortified and shocked for being taken by surprise by that maddened droid.

Leda, the chief guard, explained to me what had happened; it was an extremely rare incident, but it had happened: One of the ancient droid warriors had suddenly been activated and gone out of control, as if it had mysteriously developed its own "free will". Acting methodically, he had managed to put out of action all five guards of the arsenal and imprison them in an unused chamber. Then he had broken free to the Old

Necropolis and taken advantage of the frequent time-space gaps there, so as to elude attention of the other Gonast warriors. However, my astral self had located him soon enough, before he would combine more serious trouble.

“We owe you, Sandra”, concluded Leda, lowering her head in admission.

At first I feigned indifference to any kind of "reward"; then, I cunningly changed the subject and explained the whole problem of Venor to Leda and the others, leading up to the fact that only one kind of warrior could successfully confront Limara in a mating duel.

“The prince of Yrkania can't be kept here any longer; it's a matter of safety for the whole of Gonast!” I concluded stern.

“Yes... I understand what you mean”, said Leda thoughtful.

“I shall need one of your cybernetic units, a female one, for a few days only!” I declared finally.

“Very difficult... but I'll see what I can do...” she stammered, full of doubts. “First, we must inform Queen Nikita about this extreme situation”, she went on. “We certainly need her consent and collaboration for this kind of plan...”

Two nights before the set date of the duel ceremony, a flashing light hissed through the skyline of Gonast, splitting the crimson sunset in two. The meteor, which landed in the wilderness beyond the Old Necropolis, proved to be a spacecraft shot down by intergalactic bandits, as the pilot claimed. The flying vehicle was seriously damaged but she was safe and sound.

As soon as I saw her -very tall, muscular, haughty- I knew she was the cybernetic unit I had asked for. She introduced herself as Mayra Mars, a Lyran army officer, and she agreed to stay on planet Gonast for as long as her space vessel needed to self-repair – most probably, no more than two or

three days.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Does anyone wish to challenge the chief warrior Limara and claim prince Venor of Yrkania for herself?” asked the arbitrator in a stern voice.

For a few moments there was sullen silence all over the arena; then, quite out of the blue...

“I do!” a firm voice resounded all around.

Everybody turned their heads and stared in astonishment.

“Who dares?!” uttered Limara between her teeth; then, she was flabbergasted as she saw...

It was the newcomer, the guest!

There was an abrupt uproar of disapproval that spread through the crowd of Amazon warriors like a heatwave. However, Mayra stood there undaunted.

“You can't, you are a foreigner!” Limara shouted at her.

“Yet, she can”, the arbitrator corrected her. “Any woman warrior has the right to accept a duel, even a foreigner!”

The duel proved to be a lot more violent and spectacular than expected: Limara fought one of her best hand-to-hand fights, yet her rival soon proved to be more than worthy. The crowd remained silent during the battle, surprised at the foreigner's superior skills and stamina. Venor kept on watching remarkably calm, with a rather complacent look on his face. Everybody was astounded at Mayra's incredible martial art skills and breathtaking attacks.

After a long, agonizing fight, Limara was eventually knocked out. The crowd froze of bewilderment and disappointment, but the duel was undoubtedly fair. The foreigner had won and there was nothing to be done about it. According to the

ancient moral laws of Gonast, the man belonged to the winner and there was nothing to change that. I could hardly conceal a smile of satisfaction, as my plan seemed to be working like clockwork.

After all was said and done, Limara withdrew from the arena so embarrassed as never before in her entire life. Mayra Mars approached the prince and gave him such a strong kiss on his lips that he was left almost breathless; he took one step back and gasped for air. He belonged to her now, and he wouldn't even dare imagine what that meant...

\* \* \* \* \*

“Thanks a lot, Sandra, thanks for all what you've contrived for me, thanks a lot!” Venor vented his ill-temper at me, after I had met him and Mayra in her spacecraft, now flying away from Gonast.

In due time, that is very soon, I would have to arrange the safe and undetectable return of the space vessel and the droid back to the basements of the Old Necropolis.

“Do I make out a tone of irony in your voice?” I mocked.

“This woman is even more demanding than Limara”, he complained in a low voice, lest she should listen. “You wouldn't believe what she does to me any time she finds me alone...”

“In the dark!” I chuckled amused.

“I no longer like such games”, he went on stern. “I don't want to be anybody's sex slave anymore, and I don't give a damn who she can be!”

At that moment Mayra's strident laugh echoed all around, sounding like an alien musical instrument. She had probably overheard everything.

“You see?” stuttered Venor, pointing at the big warrior

woman who had just entered. “Sometimes I get the impression she is made of steel! I have come to dread any kind of contact with her!”

“Come on Venor, you are exaggerating!” I chuckled again.

“No, I am not! And I am going to get rid of her and you as soon as possible! You bet I can...”

“Listen, Venor”, I interrupted his growing fury. “This woman and I have just gotten you out of Gonast!”

“Oh, yeah, and she is wilder than all of them!”

“You are wrong, Venor; this woman is...”

“She is a maniac, that's what she is!” he burst out, not minding at all Mayra still listening to our vivid conversation.

“She is a cyborg, Venor”, I said finally. “She is just a cyborg...”

# Story Twenty-One: Stray Beyond Sunset

*originally handwritten  
from 15<sup>th</sup> April to 10<sup>th</sup> June, 1995*

It all started as one of those astral trips that promised unforgettable experiences and unprecedented feelings of bliss and fulfillment.

I soared in thick, endless haze for an indefinable span of time, immersed in a weird sense of eternity and nothingness. Then I perceived certain forms being shaped on the white, smoke-like substance known as the astral fluid – the primeval, subtle matter of which all universes are made of. At first all forms were white, vague outgrowths in the immense space where the "sky" had not been separated from the "earth" yet. My impatience almost ruined the experience, but I eventually calmed down and let it develop.

Next moment I, Sandra Anderson, was fleetingly admiring an idyllic rainbow rising over shiny, dark crystal rocks. There were ethereal, winged creatures thriving in that magical world, some of them watching an extraordinary event taking place among the rocky formations.

I was taking part in a very special fight which excited their interest, for my rival was no other than Peter of the Stars. It had already proved to be too hard for me to take on him, as he kept on moving around fast, with incredible flexibility, dodging all my blows, just waiting for the right moment to overwhelm me. I would certainly hate to lose that battle of prevalence...

Therefore, I hesitated no longer: I jumped aside, grasped my escrima stick from the ground and split it in two bastons with a sharp motion.

“Let's play a little harder, Peter!” I shouted at him.

“We had agreed on a hand-to-hand fight, Sandra!” he protested. “Now, this is going to cost you!”

Next moment he drew his sword, ready to defend his precious pride. A skillful stroke of his gold blade almost disarmed me; however, I managed to parry all his blows with continuous circular movements of my bastons, intending to end this fight as soon as possible.

The fairy creatures with the colorful wings kept watching the duel, either standing on rocks or flying around. Fascinating in their inborn deviousness, they giggled and laughed considering the whole incident as a funny game. It had begun as such in the first place...

Moment by moment Peter got more and more aggressive, determined to win no matter what; my double sticks could barely hold the vehemence of his sword.

“Peter... stop this... you don't have to...” I stammered, trying to talk some sense into him.

Nevertheless, he went on attacking wilder and wilder, making me retreat all the way back to the edge of the precipice.

Peter of the Stars is an excellent fighter and an incredible fencer; therefore, I should have been prepared for a defeat from the very first moment this had started. I twisted and twirled my sticks again and again and against him, but I was still retreating constantly. Stumbling back on a sharp boulder, I lost balance and fell on my back, while Peter was brandishing his gold blade before my face.

“So, here is where it ends, Sandra!” he cried and lifted his

deadly weapon, as if he were going to deliver the final blow.

“No!”

My cry of fear made him waver for an instant. A light expression of regret came to his smart face; at that moment he was vulnerable.

Within a second I seized my bastons again, sprang up and assaulted him with a set of weaving movements that took him by surprise. Soon he was injured on the right shoulder; the sword slipped off his hand and he collapsed on the ground stunned.

“Do you surrender?” I asked at last.

“I... I do...” he stuttered in a feeble voice, blushing in shame for his defeat. “You didn't need to be so wild”, he added then, touching his hurt shoulder with his left hand.

“I know, Peter; *you* should have won this fight”, I admitted and helped him stand up.

I asked for his lips as an act of apology; Peter chuckled and responded eagerly. We hugged and kissed under the sparkling rainbow among the crystal rocks, all fairies rejoicing around us. His shiny, red hair felt like silk in my hands; a precious treasure my Peter was, a very rare jewel to safeguard and cherish...

\* \* \* \* \*

Return to reality usually proves to be a painful experience, especially when there is nothing but trouble to expect in the following days.

This time the information given to me by Peter of the Stars had led me on a primitive planet called Rystadel, at the furthest end of the "cursed" constellation of Yades. My ongoing inquiries had finally brought me to an isolated, mountainous village called Aradark. The houses were made

of stone and tiled roofs, their gardens full of colourful flowers. The narrow streets were cobbled, joined with picturesque bridges; and nature was thriving all around. Yet, behind all this rural beauty, I could often sense an unspeakable, tangible evil lurking in the air.

A couple of days had lapsed without any disturbances, save some lingering rumours about the newly arrived, terrible Archangel Assar, "who always lies in wait" for his victims in the dark. People disappeared and were often found burnt all over; yet, their clothes and surroundings were always intact, just like on incidences of spontaneous combustion. Such occurrences were always attributed to the Archangel, a supposedly godsent entity who had come down on the planet in order to give the iniquitous a deserved punishment. As a result, more and more people turned into a new kind of religion, worshiping the Archangel Assar as their God.

There was also a lot of talk about a gigantic statue of that "God", which was said to have been miraculously built "at the top of the world" within a night by "God" himself. None of the people I had known so far had ever actually seen it, but it was supposed to survey the whole planet continually with its vigilant eyes, promptly punishing the sinners with an "inner fire". I doubt whether any of them knew that Assar is the ancestral name of the Yrkanian royalty...

In all probability, the statue of the "Archangel" was an intricate weapon of the Assars, secretly being tested on the primitive population of Rystadel. I had to find and destroy it the sooner the better, but so far I hadn't figured out where it could be exactly. However, it is common knowledge that "the top of the world" is usually the most northern part of a planet...

\* \* \* \* \*

The fresh breeze of dawn was coming through the half-open

window of my attic when I got up and looked out, to the immaculate countryside that spread to the horizon. I admired the view for some carefree moments; then, I suddenly shivered as if from a bad premonition.

Pretty soon there was agitation in the street below; I watched carefully and saw there was a small crowd coming down the cobbled street. As the sun was rising slowly, I could make out a pretty young lady being followed by a group of admirers; she was one of those who are wont to going around half-naked for the pleasure of men. At a moment she paused and bent her body forth in a quite provocative manner, leaving in common view her naked hips under the flimsy, short skirt. However, instead of excitement, there was instant horror, as the young woman had suddenly become abnormally stiff in that posture. Next moment I was shocked to realize that her whole body had just been carbonized.

I stood up at once and craned my neck out of the open window. Mass madness had broken out in just a few minutes; two of the men grabbed the burnt body and threw it on top of other charred corpses by the edge of the street. *How is it possible that sooner or later evil eventually contaminates every aspect of good?* I wondered. Then, some of the men looked up and saw me standing by the window. I felt the blood freeze in my veins, and I wished to get away from there at once. Yet, on second thoughts, I decided I had better stay put; trying to escape would only drive them even crazier. Besides, I had not come here to escape from evil; I had come to eliminate it.

I slowly moved away from the window, so that the crowd could no longer see me, although I felt rather insecure as I had no idea what would happen or what I would do next.

“Where do you think you are going?” a man's voice resounded stern in my room.

I turned round and recognized...

“Xavier! How did you find me?”

“Silly question!”

That was Xavier, Venor's younger brother, and his presence never boded any good. He was well-built and haughty, maybe even more arrogant than his older brother. His long, black hair with the dyed red tufts by his temples waved slightly in the breeze coming through the open window. Four Yrkanian warriors were standing behind him, all armed and ready to fire.

“What are you doing here, Xavier?” I asked immediately.

“I was going to ask you the same”, he replied grim.

“How do you cause all these spontaneous combustions?” I asked bluntly.

“Enough talk! So long, Sandra!” uttered Xavier and his green eyes shone maliciously.

He sought to fire his laser weapon at me right away, but my reaction was immediate and accurate: After disarming the enemy with a strong flying kick, I sprang back and performed a backward somersault on air; my hands touched the window sill and in a split second I was down on the street, barely dodging all those laser beams being aimed at me through the open window. I only hoped that...

Peter of the Stars had arrived right on time, driving an impressive ground vehicle. That type of automobile was quite common in the cities of Rystadel, but not in the cobbled streets of Aradark.

“Go, go, go, Peter!” I shouted at him, rushing in the co-driver's seat at once.

The automobile increased speed immediately, and then it swerved and disappeared around the corner, leaving behind a

thick cloud of dust.

Xavier and his men had just rushed out of the house, swearing bad and firing in vain.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun was setting bright scarlet behind rows and rows of distant mountain tops that spread to the horizon, when Peter and I finally came in view of our final destination, "at the top of this world", in my stealth hovercraft.

Indeed, I was amazed at the sight: On the summit of a steep mountain there was a huge statue of an archangel in panoply, his enormous wings open wide. Unless I had seen it with my own eyes, I could have never imagined any monument could ever be so high.

The wondrous statue dominated the vast stretch of barren hills and shimmering rivers, and it was considered to be a representation of Archangel Assar, the alleged original ancestor of the Yrkanian royalty. This has always been a common belief throughout the Empire and, most probably, with the passage of centuries, not only the people but the royal family as well had come to believe this fairy tale.

The gigantic statue stood on a massive tower, and the whole construction was made of a black metal material that glittered eerily in the fading sunlight. Only its eyes were different, made of a light blue, sparkling substance. Every now and then, thin azure rays were projected from those cold eyes to different directions. I shuddered as I understood they were aimed at specific human targets far and away – ordinary people who were supposed to be punished for their "sins" so as to strengthen the faith of the masses.

Just like we had expected, the lofty tower soon proved to be standing on an underground Yrkanian base. Nevertheless, getting near enough without being detected was not

particularly difficult: First Peter neutralized the alarm system with a transmitter of electromagnetic waves of his own device; then, we got rid of the guards and placed a minuscule detonator at the pedestal. The only thing left to do now was to move away and activate it by remote control.

“You don't think we are that stupid, do you?”

Venor's voice rang sonorous behind us; turning around, we faced the throne prince and his younger brother accompanied by six Yrkanian soldiers, all with laser weapons in hand. At that moment Peter pressed the right button.

Next instant a tremendous explosion made the whole place tremble as if by an earthquake. The Archangel Assar had just been reduced to dust; only a part of the pedestal was still standing among the thick whirls of ashes and smoke. All soldiers froze, hardly believing their eyes. However, the princes seemed to be oddly calm.

“Maybe I should thank you for that”, Venor announced enigmatically.

“What... what do you mean?” I stammered.

“The statue of the Archangel Assar was nothing but an experiment; anyway, we intended to dismantle it soon...”

“What for?” exclaimed Peter astounded.

“What you have witnessed so far, is no more than an infinitesimal proportion of the force we have come to possess! What we have in hand now is the ultimate weapon!” Xavier chipped in triumphant.

Venor turned his head and glared at him.

“Nonsense! You must be mad!” retorted Peter, obviously trying to make him say more.

“The source of force we now possess, will offer us supreme power and domination over innumerable more galaxies,

maybe over the whole universe! And there is nothing, absolutely nothing you and Sandra can do about it!” Xavier wound up arrogantly.

“What kind of weapon is that?” I wanted to know, as I had actually begun to believe Xavier.

“Enough with the stupid questions!” cried Venor vexed.

“So, Sandra”, exclaimed Xavier then, aiming his laser weapon at me. “It's time we finished what we started in Aradark!”

Not that he meant a fair fight; threatened by eight Yrkanians in all, there was not much I or Peter could do. Yet, right at that time, I was suddenly feeling better, so much better, for...

The *power* was with me once again, energizing me more and more, moment by moment.

“As you wish, Xavier”, I replied willfully. “As you wish!”

My astral attack took everybody by surprise, Peter included. Raising my arms, I released a terrible energy blast from both my hands, striking all the Yrkanian enemies who collapsed on the ground stunned. That gave me the time I needed to flee; nevertheless, as soon as I had the time to look around, I was terrified to find out that Peter was nowhere to see.

I burst into tears at once. Crying is not something I usually do, no matter how adverse the circumstances may be. However, that was the only thing I felt like doing as soon as I realized Peter had fallen in the hands of his worst enemies. *Maybe he is already dead*, I feared. In any case, I had to find him no matter what...

\* \* \* \* \*

“Just leave him to me, brother!” said Xavier with a crooked smile. “I have my methods to make him change his point of view!”

“I'm not at all sure about this, Xavier” retorted Venor.

“I know what I'm doing and it won't be the first time! Just trust me!”

“I have special plans for you, Peter”, said Xavier then, turning to the captured enemy. “You have no mind control implants in your body, right? Well, pretty soon this will change and you will be my most loyal servant; and not only that!” he wound up, gently stroking Peter's nape. The young man shivered shocked.

“No matter what you do, I will find a way to escape; and it won't be the first time!” retorted Peter audaciously, although he was tied with chains against the wall.

“All right; he is all yours!” Venor announced finally and walked out of the room.

“I think I can tell what that cursed woman has found in you!” said Xavier equivocally, softly touching Peter's chest.

The captive shivered again, yet he didn't actually oppose to the enemy's strange affection.

“We are leaving this insignificant planet very soon”, Xavier continued in a low, evocative voice. “And you, Peter of the Stars, will come with me!” he went on, leaning over Peter in a most sensual manner.

The young man felt unusually numb, unable to move or utter a word. *So, certain rumours about Xavier are true then*, he only pondered with a hazy mind.

Next moment Xavier got nearer and whispered something in Peter's ear. The young man listened carefully, gasping of surprise.

“You can have the honour to be the first to witness the Primordial Fire, our ultimate weapon, which will make all galaxies kneel to the Interstellar Yrkanian Empire; or, you

can be its first victim! Which of the two happens, depends on you only!” concluded Xavier, slowly moving his right hand to Peter's genitals.

The young man reacted promptly, hitting Xavier's groin with his right knee. The enemy doubled in pain for a few seconds; when he turned to Peter again, the expression on his face had changed.

“You have decided, then”, he said in a broken voice. “I'm really sorry about that, Peter..”

“You will be even sorrier!” replied the captive in an enigmatic tone.

\* \* \* \* \*

The statue of the Archangel Assar had been completely destroyed, but the Yrkanian base built under it was still intact. There were even more vigilant guards and sensitive alarms all over and around it. Therefore, trying to get inside it without any help or special equipment would certainly be suicide.

There was only one alternative for me, and that was to climb the whole precipice on the southern side, which was extremely steep all the way down to the deep river below. That side of the mountain was entirely unguarded as it was supposed to be practically insurmountable. Such an endeavour was extremely dangerous of course, since I had to do it without any protective equipment that could possibly render me visible to the guards in the base. The only thing I used for climbing up the precipice was a strong, sharp knife. Thank Goddess, I eventually made it...

Getting into an Yrkanian base has always been a long series of perils and fights, yet it had become a kind of routine for me: first I located the least guarded parts; then I got rid of all the soldiers I met; finally, I weaved my way in step by step.

It wasn't long before I stood outside a thick metal door and had a quick look inside, through the small, latticed window.

I was unspeakably relieved to see Peter was still alive; yet he was enchained, half-naked and looked worn out. Then I noticed Xavier's hand on Peter's shoulder; I was taken aback more by Peter's passivity than by Xavier's gesture.

I had to put an end to this at once; I drew my laser weapon and fired immediately, crashing the metal door to smoking pieces. Both men inside the cell looked at me dumbfounded, while the strident sound of the alarm was reverberating all around.

“Sandra Anderson! How did you...” Xavier stammered in surprise.

Before he had finished his question I fired again, but the enemy stepped aside just in time to dodge my laser ray. Within a split second I repeated the attack, this time firing twice, and my well-aimed beams fractured Peter's shackles. The young man knelt down at once, overwhelmed by fatigue and astonishment.

Next instant, Xavier drew his weapon and assaulted me at once; I avoided his successive laser beams by performing a set of quick somersaults on the floor. Then, I knelt on my left knee and fired, but the enemy dodged my laser ray once again. I was astounded at his readiness and suppleness; he was certainly a worthy opponent, and I was running out of time.

Prince Xavier sought to repeat his attack; I jumped aside, holding my weapon tightly, determined to end this fight as soon as possible. Yet, it was Peter who eventually put an end to it with a set of fast high kicks. The enemy was taken off guard; he lost balance and fell back, the laser gun slipping off his hand.

Xavier had to fight vehemently against both Peter and me, down on the floor, for a few long seconds. The prince defended himself with extremely violent blows that made me dizzy once or twice. At a moment I managed to hit him hard on the right temple with the stock of my gun. He stopped fighting at once and leaned back stunned with eyes shut. Right after he lost his senses, lying by Peter's feet.

\* \* \* \* \*

There followed a frantic escape through endless corridors and rooms, some of them full of Yrkanian soldiers who seemed to troop in from every direction. Having grasped Xavier's weapon and being in excellent fighting trim again, Peter helped me get rid of or by-pass all squads we met, until we reached the least guarded exit – the one by the precipice.

“We are almost out of here”, I said in a low voice, “but we still haven't found out what that ultimate weapon of the Yrkanians is”.

“Xavier confided in me it is a source of infinite energy that will make all galaxies kneel before the Assars and the Yrkanian Empire”, replied Peter. “It is hidden on a cursed planet, an abandoned world beyond the known universe, a place all human civilisations wish to consider a myth”, he wound up pensive.

“The Forsaken Lands!” I was taken aback.

“You know...!”

Who hasn't heard of The Forsaken Lands?

“How come Xavier revealed all this to you, Peter? What exactly happened between you and him?” I asked then, not at all sure I wanted to know the answer.

“Nothing happened; nothing irreparable...”

Our heated conversation was interrupted by three laser rays

that flashed past Peter's body, making him fall silent and turn round immediately.

“Do not move!” Venor's voice echoed stern in the corridor, while Peter and I were just a few steps away from the exit.

“Do not let them escape!”

This time it was Xavier, who had just arrived. He stood behind his elder brother and looked quite irritated.

“We have problems”, I whispered.

“You don't tell!” mocked Peter, who was still half-naked and looked kinda sexy.

“Give in now!” ordered Venor, coming closer with his weapon in hand.

“Are you ready, Peter?” I only asked.

“I am always ready!”

“So... Let's go!”

It all happened extremely fast; I sprang up and fired at Xavier at once, just a split second before performing multiple air somersaults so as to avoid multiple laser beams. Peter attacked Venor with a set of martial art kicks, making him stumble back in surprise. Xavier, having ducked right on time so as to avoid being struck by my lasers, got ready to attack again. A never ending set of acrobatic movements and successive laser beams against our enemies eventually opened us the way out of the Yrkanian base, to the "safety" of the dark precipice.

All is well that ends well.

Or not?

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## Story Twenty-Two: The Forsaken Lands

*originally handwritten  
from 10<sup>th</sup> June to 14<sup>th</sup> August, 1995*

I experienced unique excitement as well as anxiety when the *Zephyrus* soared into the starlit vastness of space once again. That wouldn't be an ordinary intergalactic travel; we were heading to a black hole with a velocity  $\gg c$ . Sitting side by side, Peter and I were holding hands, so that our telepathic communication could be perfect.

*... We are reaching a moment of absolute incontinuity... The peculiarity beyond the event horizon contains trillions of solar systems... We sink in there and we pass them all by, and they all seem like tiny, spectral entities... Keep your mind wide open and your soul hard like a diamond, so that you can defend them against the impossible... Ride the cosmic vortex, ride it on... Bow to its fury; do not break...*

In no time, we had got out of the blackness of space and entered a blue region of the multiverse; a whole new world spread before us.

*... Get psyched...*

*... There is only one moment left...*

*... a heartbeat...*

*... We have passed through!*

We had just been born again together, elsewhere, elsewhen, in a legendary world known by many as *The Forsaken Lands*.

“Here we are, Peter! This is our final destination!” I exclaimed, after we had got out of our two-seater spacecraft.

We were standing on an odd-shaped platform over an immense expanse of alien ruins. Most of them were weird towers of various shapes and materials that rose magnificent to incredible heights. For some moments we just looked around speechless, observing all those wondrous units of abnormal technology abandoned very long ago. A huge, orange moon was dominating on the night sky and its bright light made the place look even more eerie. And, paradoxically enough, the air was breathable.

“How... how awesome!” stammered Peter stupefied.

“This used to be an extremely advanced civilization of alien life forms, which flourished when our universe was still new”, I began to explain in a low voice, as if hypnotized. “Its decline came about one million years ago, when new, more material life forms appeared on the planet. That was the advent of evil: flesh and blood beings, which eventually brought about the decay and downfall of this world, as well as its final holocaust. The result is right before our eyes”, I wound up pensive.

“There are many who believe that when the right time comes, the original inhabitants of The Forsaken Lands will return and dominate on their shattered planet once again, bringing a new Gold Age for the whole universe. This belief that appears in many different versions and religions, in many different worlds, throughout space and time”, added Peter.

“There is an incredibly powerful source of energy on this planet, not very far from here, which keeps this corner of the firmament still existing and ensures a certain thermodynamic balance for the whole universe”, I went on. “Peter, we must find this source and seal it for good...”

“Before Venor intervenes and messes everything up!” Peter finished my sentence.

\* \* \* \* \*

“They are here already!” announced Xavier impatiently. “They have been located northeast of the ancient cosmodrom, on the embanked highway!”

“That's too bad”, said Venor frowning. “Such a thing should have never happened!”

“They never just stick to their last!”

“Is it possible that they have somehow found out about the Primordial Fire?” asked Venor, giving his brother a suspicious look.

“No; I don't think so”, replied Xavier in a low voice.

*I should have killed Peter of the Stars when I had the chance, he thought grim. It was foolish of me to let him live...*

“This story has to end once and for all, Xavier!” said Venor finally. “I leave this to you; for your own good, try not to fail this time!”

The throne prince's harsh voice made Xavier shiver; instead of saying anything else, he lowered his head and walked out of the room hastily.

\* \* \* \* \*

“You hear something?”

Peter's voice sounded loud in the still of the night. At first there was an almost imperceptible thud; then, a kind of flapping noise. Right after, we could clearly hear the sound of steps scurrying around and towards us. My heart lost a leap; that could be anything in such a sinister place.

Next moment, we barely dodged a hail of mortal laser rays that flashed past us. Suddenly the place was full of Yrkanian

soldiers led by Xavier, who rushed against me furious like a wild horse, brandishing a laser sword.

I reacted with a fast air somersault, so as to avoid his luminous blade; I landed a few metres away, while Peter was about to attack the enemy with his own laser blade. A brief, yet vehement swordplay between the two men filled the air with whirling sparkles, while an indefinable number of Yrkanian soldiers were watching the duel from every possible angle. I shuddered because we had been taken by surprise. *They are too many! How long can we resist?* I wondered, as I was staring at Xavier who was now retreating to Peter's decisive assault. However, after a breathless defense, he was standing strong again.

“You will not insult my pride again, Peter of the Stars!” he shouted in a raucous voice and got ready to strike.

I observed the muscles in Peter's arms contract as he stood on guard, ready to confront the enemy once more. The Yrkanian soldiers approached cautiously, without making a sound. I took cover behind a lofty metal tower, with my laser gun in hand, pondering on Venor's possible whereabouts.

Next instant I felt it, and I was paralyzed on the spot; I stood motionless for a second, wishing I had got that wrong. Yet, it was a tremor indeed; a couple of seconds later, another one followed. The whole place was quaking badly, and a strong wave of agony filled the air. The Yrkanian soldiers shuddered; their attention was broken, and that was our chance to escape: Peter attacked once again, making Xavier step back and fall down on a lower level of the platform. I disarmed three of the enemies with fast high kicks and fired at a fourth one, making him stumble back and collapse, probably dead. Then we fled, running like crazy among the shiny, metal towers, while the enemies kept on firing at us frantically. My relief was beyond words when we reached my

two-seater at last.

\* \* \* \* \*

“That was close!” I uttered, after we had taken off.

“So, what are we looking for exactly?” Peter asked to know.

“I am not sure; yet, I have a strong hunch that the Yrkanian base can't be far...”

We flew lower for a while, carefully observing the odd constructions around us.

“There! Behind that block of multiple towers!” cried Peter suddenly.

To my great surprise, I saw a big, strange, round hole among all those metal towers. We approached very carefully and were speechless at the sight: There was an enormous, spiral stairway unfolding towards the depths of the planet, its innumerable flights of stairs gradually fading into impenetrable darkness.

“I... I don't like this!” stuttered Peter.

“Yet, this is it, Peter!” I exclaimed. “I'm certain Venor's quest lies somewhere down there!”

“I still don't like it”, insisted Peter.

We landed behind a block of cylindrical towers. My spacecraft looked much like a part of them; at least, it wouldn't be easily detectable.

Another tremor followed as soon as we got off, and the surrounding constructions shook above our heads. That was quite freaky, but there was no turning back now.

“We have to get down there”, I said softly. “I'm afraid the procedure has already started...”

“What procedure, Sandra?” asked Peter stern, as we both started going down those stairs.

I didn't answer for I wasn't sure.

More tremors made us shudder as we were descending, while the golden moonlight of The Forsaken Lands was slowly giving its place to thick darkness. Not a sound was heard down there but the beat of our hearts, intense like a twin jackhammer.

Pretty soon there was nothing we could see there, nothing at all; yet, we kept on going down, one flight of stairs after the other. The fear we experienced was no less than the primeval fear of the dark tunnel that absorbs the soul after death. Moreover, there was a weird sensation of a certain presence, a kind of entity that filled the air all around us, becoming more and more evident as we got lower and lower, following that endless stairway to nowhere. Sense of time was lost; it could be minutes, it could be hours, always going down in constant anguish.

Then, all of a sudden, another earthquake shook the place all over, and that one was considerably stronger than the previous ones. Peter and I strove to keep standing on the stairway, fumbling our way on the metal walls of the tunnel through the tangible darkness. Next moment I felt the steps sliding away beneath my feet; balance was lost and both of us were now precipitating, screaming in agony. After a never-ending, dreadful free falling, the darkness was abruptly dispelled by a blinding light – and this is how that nightmare ended.

\* \* \* \* \*

“One more stage of the chain reaction has been completed!” a sonorous man's voice echoed in my ears.

“The netrine core is still being shelled; soon it will be properly reformed...” another voice was heard.

“And the ultimate power will be mine!” announced Venor

triumphant.

“What...? What are these two doing here?” someone else asked, obviously astonished.

*For heaven's sake! Where have we ended up?* I wondered, still dizzy, my eyesight blurred.

“Arrest them! Now!” shouted another one.

I shivered, as I recognized Venor's voice.

Another earthquake roared for several seconds, and the whole place creaked alarmingly. I had almost recovered from a vehement blow; Peter was coming to himself too.

Next moment I could see we were trapped in an immense room with metal walls and oval-shaped windows. Xavier was approaching with a laser sword in hand, followed by a number of Yrkanian soldiers. Venor was standing nearby, watching everything with a complacent look on his face.

“To him I have promised the Primordial Fire” announced Xavier in ambivalent anger. “As about her...”

“You have what?” exclaimed Venor then – but he was given no time to wait for an answer.

Ducking just in time, I hardly avoided Xavier's laser blade that hovered just an inch above my head. Peter kicked away two of the guards who had come too close. Next instant Venor pulled his laser gun out, and some more guards arrived to surround us. As about our own weapons, they had simply disappeared.

“Peter...” I stammered, not knowing what I wanted to say exactly, as everything seemed lost.

At that moment there came another tremor, a terrible one, which caused many of our enemies to lose balance and stagger on the floor breathless. That was our chance to escape – to where, indeed?

I considered it a miracle that Peter and I were still alive, running frenetically side by side, all those laser beams flashing around us incessantly. One of the mortal rays smashed a metal door in front of us, revealing a long corridor behind it. Dashing into it frantically, we soon ended up in front of another metal, closed door – and that seemed to be the end of our desperate rout, as the enemies were already behind us. I felt frustrated, yet energised at the same time, as I could feel the *power* was with me once again.

I struck the door with a thick astral blast at once; I expected the metal slab to be shattered into pieces, but it only moved aside instead. Peter and I slipped into the room without even thinking about it, while the enemies' voices were reverberating harsh and desperate behind us: “They've entered the Chamber of the Primordial Fire!” ... “The procedure is not complete yet!” ... “The netrine core needs three more stages of transformation!” ... “Kill them now!” ... “Too late!” ... “No, just leave them there!”

The last order was given by the throne prince, just one second before the door was sealed again behind us.

\* \* \* \* \*

We were alone -and safe?- at last; all alone in an immense chamber which seemed to be oddly empty. Then I felt it stronger than ever before, that presence again. It was an invisible, disembodied, coming-in-waves presence, a sort of living vibration that filled the atmosphere all around.

Peter stood by me taciturn; he acknowledged that alien presence as well – an all-mighty, supreme entity that existed beyond the limits of time and space. It was a superior being made of pure *power*, similar to the kind I occasionally experienced inside me, yet it was not at all identical. Suddenly, I felt weird; I felt threatened and "at home" at the same time...

Always silent, Peter pointed at something ahead. There was a kind of arcade at the other side of the room; I couldn't make it out well because it seemed to be extremely far away. That spacewarp effect made us both wonder for a few moments; then, we hastened towards the arcade and paused as soon as we reached its threshold. It was just impossible for us to get any further; we could only stand still and face...

Inside a protective crystalline dome there was a bluish, sparkling shield of variable hypoatomic particles continually shelling an astral entity which looked like a spherical vibrating light, gradually transforming it to concentrated energy of infinite power. The netrine core was shining bright before our eyes, omnipotent, inexorable, bright like a sun, yet not blinding.

Next instant I noticed the azure shield of particles was of the same matter as the mortal rays launched by the Archangel Assar on planet Rystadel. I shuddered as I realized the Yrkanians had already begun to use that power for their purposes of universal dominion.

In the meanwhile, the alien presence was getting stronger and stronger, moment by moment. As the chain reaction was going on, and that neutral entity was getting more and more powerful, something else, extremely malevolent was waking up out of primeval oblivion. And, in all probability, none of the Yrkanians suspected anything.

The initial result of the spacewarp had now taken the form of an endless crystal forest that glowed like a chandelier of a billion lights. The sight was unbelievable; I couldn't take my eyes off such grandeur...

Then I thought of Venor and his endeavours to tame that kind of force and I laughed spontaneously. *Does he really believe he could ever control such powers?* I wondered.

“The procedure has to stop!” I announced in a firm voice. “It has to stop, or...”

“Or?”

“The Forsaken Lands will collapse inside the netrine core”, I went on pensive. “You, I, Venor, the Yrkanian Empire, Eldyla, everything we know will be absorbed inside it, and the universe will cease to exist as we know it!”

“Is there... is there a way to stop it?” stuttered Peter.

I took a deep breath, as I thought of means I would rather abstain from.

“If only I could carve a magic circle on the floor!” I sighed.

“I hope this can help!” announced Peter confident, taking out a laser sword and turning it on at once.

“Peter! How did you get this?” I asked astounded.

“I grabbed it from a guard during our escape”, he replied smiling. “I thought it could be of some use!”

“You are great!” I said and kissed him softly.

Then I snatched the weapon off his hands and began carving a circle on the iridescent, white floor. Soon the protective magic seal was complete: it consisted of two concentric circles with special ideograms between them. An isosceles triangle was drawn inside the inner one; at its centre there was another, much smaller circle which contained a letter from an ancient alphabet. It was the initial letter of a long forgotten god. A tremendous magic ritual was about to begin.

“May the Great Goddess be with us”, I said and urged Peter to enter the protective seal together with me.

I took a deep breath, then another one; as I was falling in instant trance, I started uttering the magic spell. Peter looked at me in awe as a torrent of unintelligible words of an old-

forgotten language came out of my mouth. Very soon, we were both given the impression of an invisible, yet palpable army of entities pushing each other impatiently out of their world into ours. Peter shivered, and so did I.

*“Ujcidí quehdesfí gvijrtur feq esdejedegde... Ujcidí gvijrtur...”*

The thin air around us shifted violently; the invocation was already taking effect, although there were no visible changes on the netrine core that was still being shelled, still changing into something extremely dangerous for the whole multiverse.

*“Ujcidí Zherge... Ujcidí Bsihlufar... Ujcidí Drifuor fhuj... Ujcidí fhuj...”*

Agitation in the atmosphere became even stronger; I shuddered as I knew the ritual could prove to be just as dangerous as the mutated netrine core. However, at that time I could do nothing but continue, defying Peter's frightened eyes. I tried to keep my voice as firm as possible, while the terrible words were still coming out of my lips in a cascade:

*“... sev Zherge, sev Bsihlufar, sev Drifuor... cudhiidej fydox, uqsietorej fhuj...”*

A new tremor made the whole planet shake, almost making us stumble out of the protective circle. I knew something dreadful was about to occur but I did go on, trying very hard to keep my voice from breaking:

*“... taswe fdox, taswe Zherge, taswe Bsihlufar, taswe Drifuor...”*

Next instant there was a golden flash coming through an astral "door" that appeared on the ceiling, at the far end of the eerie arcade. The place shook once more, and then we saw it: a horrible, gigantic, skeletal paw ending to four long silver claws rushed through the "door" I had just created. It stretched

all the way through the crystal forest towards the netrine core. Peter and I stood there frozen, watching it grab the crystalline dome and lift it on the air; for a moment I feared it would crack, but thank Goddess it didn't. In a split second, the bluish shield of hypoatomic particles and the vibrating core were carried away through the opening, leaving behind an insupportable stench.

After the skeletal paw was gone, the "door" disappeared at once. The air was clean at last, and a strange serenity prevailed all over the place. The nightmare seemed to be over, yet a strong sense of anguish took over me and I wondered why...

In almost no time, the crystal forest melted away before our eyes. Right after, a spectral vortex was created inside the magic circle, lifting us back to the surface of the planet, out of the spiral stairway that had led us into the Yrkanian base. For a moment or two, we only stood there silent, among the majestic towers that still rose to the night sky above us, as if nothing had happened.

\* \* \* \* \*

“How do you happen to know those invocations?” asked Peter then, full of curiosity. “I was astounded! Nobody summons such entities anymore!”

“Consider, most of them are insane!” rang a familiar voice behind us.

We turned round at once and faced the throne prince of Yrkania standing by a lofty tower near the rim of the spiral stairway, with a laser sword in hand.

Next moment prince Xavier appeared next to him, also armed with a similar weapon.

“You don't think you have achieved anything with that stupid spell, do you Sandra?” he uttered in an equivocal manner, his

chest shaking with wrath.

“Leave this to me!” Peter cried to me, turning on his own weapon at once.

Looking up to the sky, I saw an Yrkanian space vessel hovering above us; Peter and I were surrounded by enemies. Summoning up all the *power* left in me, I lifted my arms and struck the Yrkanian spacecraft with a strong astral blast. It lost height immediately, soared in the air for a few moments and made an emergency landing on a circular airlift behind a block of silver-coloured towers. Nobody came out of it; nobody dared, or nobody could.

Xavier attacked first; Peter barely parried his furious strikes, as their laser swords hissed and sparkled in the dark of the night. However, the prince was soon impressed by Peter's extraordinary fencing skills:

“You didn't seem to be so tough when you were in my hands!” he uttered maliciously.

Xavier's pungent remark was violently interrupted by a hail of sharp strikes that finally overwhelmed him.

“I've beaten you once again, Xavier, and there is nothing you can do! It's over!” cried Peter decisively, his luminous blade almost touching the prince's chest.

“You are wrong!” retorted Xavier. “Nothing is over yet!”

Suddenly, I felt my head spinning; something was indeed very wrong: neither of the princes seemed to be particularly depressed by their latest failure...

In the meanwhile I was fighting against Venor, who had quickly and cunningly forced me to step on a flat platform among the surrounding metal towers. At that time I was strained of all *power* and I couldn't do much to avoid being cornered at the edge of the parapet. Jumping up and

performing a swift air somersault, I dodged Venor's laser blade and landed a few steps beside him. Yet, he proved to be faster than I had expected: within a split second he turned round and disarmed me with a quick laser strike. I was taken by surprise, my gun was gone, and his strong hands grabbed my throat, choking all air off my lungs.

“This is how it ends, Sandra!” he roared with fiery eyes. “Sooner or later I will regain the Primordial Fire and you will be an obstacle no more!”

“You've been an obstacle too long, Venor!” I shouted at him and punched him on the face.

Only for a moment Venor loosened his grip, but that was all the time I needed not only to set myself free from his grasp but counterattack as well with multiple martial art blows. Next instant a strangled scream echoed all around; my sudden reaction had caused Venor to stumble back, lose balance and slip off the metal parapet. I rushed to him and stared all the way down, only to see...

He was facing me from below, having grasped one of the decorative outgrowths of the parapet. I doubted whether he would be able to keep on hanging like that for long, yet he was still looking at me with eyes like daggers.

“So, this is how it ends, Venor, isn't it?” I said mordantly.

Instead of an answer, I received a wrathful grin.

After a long moment of hesitation, I stretched my right hand towards him and shouted:

“Come on, Venor! Let's save each other!”

“Don't play with me, Sandra! I can find a way out of this by myself!”

“You know you can't! Be quick, before Peter gets wind of this!”

He grabbed my hand without any more delay. Dragging him up was quite tiring, but it felt really satisfying, the correct thing to do for many reasons...

By the time Venor was standing on his feet again, Peter had already approached, having just put Xavier out of action.

“What have you done, Sandra? You don't intend to ever get rid of him, do you?” he cried indignant, pointing his laser blade at Venor.

“Listen, Peter”, I said as calm as possible. “It is wiser for us to keep the throne prince alive, as our hostage, while leaving The Forsaken Lands...”

“Oh, sure, so that you can keep a close eye on him!” he interrupted me, while Venor was smiling complacently.

“You don't want Venor dead either, Peter”, I went on in a low voice, having approached near enough so that the throne prince couldn't hear. “Think about it: If Venor is gone, Xavier will be heir to the Yrkanian throne. In comparison with him, Venor is an angel!”

“I wouldn't be so sure about this!” replied Peter in disbelief.

Our brief quarrel was suddenly interrupted by a kind of air movement towards us; we both stepped aside instinctively, but it was too late. I heard Peter cry of pain, then flinch back injured. A long, hopefully not too deep wound was to be seen on his right ribs. Xavier had reappeared out of nowhere, brandishing his laser sword. The sadistic expression on his face showed he was determined to kill both of us right away. However, neither this time was he meant to succeed: Peter swerved to the left so as to dodge another strike and, at the same time, he bore a terrible blow on Xavier's chin with his right elbow. The prince was taken by surprise and collapsed on the platform stunned.

That brief incident gave Venor the chance he needed to

counterattack with a flash motion: Grabbing his brother's weapon, he sought to hurt me at once. I stepped back instinctively but, as if he were ready for this, he repeated his attack even more viciously; I had to run, fight, hide, be found, run again, and so on, again and again and again...

“This is going nowhere, Venor”, I uttered, as he was trying to corner me between two metal towers. “You will get nothing out of this! So, slow down, give it up...”

An even wilder assault was his answer; I sprang up and avoided his laser blade once more. Right then a flapping sound filled the air; it was Peter of the Stars, who had just arrived quick as an arrow, landing with a flying kick on Venor's shoulders. The throne prince lost his balance and Peter snatched the laser sword off his hand with an incredibly fast grip. Venor tried hard to defy his dizziness, as he was lying helpless down on the platform, vainly trying to grasp the laser sword from Peter's hands.

“Give in, Venor”, I shouted impatiently.

He tried to spring up instead.

Peter held the laser sword firmly against him, forcing him to stay down. A red, circular bruise had been formed on the prince's throat. All air seemed to be gasped out of his lungs, as he was looking at Peter with wide open, frightened eyes.

“Give in at last!” I shouted to Venor once again.

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## **Story Twenty-Three: The Rise of the Mystic**

*originally handwritten  
from 15<sup>th</sup> August to 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 1995*

After my extraordinary adventure on the Forsaken Lands, I needed and deserved a few weeks of relaxing vacations on planet Emanon. It is a small, primitive, and fascinating world, which combines a wild natural beauty with hidden forces of magic lurking behind every corner. Just like Eldyla, it is semi-material, only less unpredictable. Nothing has ever threatened the peace of this planet, nobody -not even the Yrkanian Empire- has ever dared challenge its powerful warlocks.

On the fourth day of my stay on Emanon I decided to go on a boat ride across the Lake Magenta. The place was wonderfully serene and enchanting, as the sun was setting bright on the magenta waters; the vivid colour, which has given its name to the lake, is due to some kind of algae growing on its depths. I was all alone in a wooden boat floating on the crystal-like surface of the lake, feeling perfectly calm, observing the odd-shaped cliffs along the shores, the profuse flora all around, the pink and lilac clouds that streaked the sky. It was a unique, spiritual experience, no lesser than a trance...

When I reached the opposite bank and got off the boat, I set up for a brief walk to the nearby grove. I had forgotten everything about impossible missions and dangers, enemies and traps; it felt strange and wonderful, as if I had become

someone else in another, better world.

It was right then that I was taken by surprise, assaulted, knocked out and abducted by a squad of blue-dressed warriors. They had appeared all at once, hidden behind tree trunks and rocks, entirely invisible until that moment. They were not Yrkanian; their style reminded of monk warriors, maybe ninjas.

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When I recovered, I found myself sitting on a metal chair in a dimly lit, almost empty cell, surrounded by three of those warriors and another one, who seemed to be their leader. I gave him a closer look, as he stood before me: He was wearing loose garments, and he had wavy brown hair, slanted eyes and high cheekbones. He looked more like a monk than a ninja warrior; his presence actually appeased my fears, as he looked quite noble and composed.

“We have brought her, as you ordered, reverent Magister!” one of the warriors announced.

“Good! Very good!” he answered.

“What am I doing here? Where am I? Who are you?” I asked right away.

“Silence! Magister Horvath wishes to interrogate you!” one of my captors cried stern.

“I have lost a very rare book of magic”, said the Magister then. “A book of utmost importance!”

“So, why does this have to do with me?” I protested.

“We have reasons to believe you are involved in its disappearance, Miss Sandra Anderson!” he replied solemn.

*So, he knows who I am*, I reckoned thoughtful.

“This is ridiculous! I know absolutely nothing about it!” I

protested once again.

“Yet, you are interested in high magic and you have often occupied yourself with extraordinary rituals and spells”, he went on with a serious mien.

“This doesn't mean I have stolen your stupid book! What's going on here?” I began to lose my patience.

“Stay calm, my dear, just stay calm”, said the Magister in a patronizing manner, as his men sought to keep me immobilized on the chair.

“You think you know me, but you don't!” I uttered, tightening my fists.

The Magister's cry “Be careful!” reverberated all around as I sprang up abruptly; within a split second I disarmed and knocked down two of the guards with a set of martial art blows. Right after I heard a "click" behind me; someone was about to plant a bullet in my head, but I hit him hard on the chin with my elbow, making him stumble all the way back. I was already feeling very sure of myself, thinking I would soon be free and out of this place.

Instead I froze as I heard the Magister shout in an unusually sonorous voice: “That's enough, Sandra Anderson! I'm not going to tolerate this!”

Next instant he tended his left hand towards me and struck me with a terrible astral blast. Fire and lightning burst inside my brain; then I was wreathed in darkness, I collapsed to the floor, and that was the end of my battle.

“So, Miss Anderson, are you going to co-operate, or not?” the Magister asked me in a masterful manner, as soon as I gained consciousness again.

“What... what do you want from me?” I stammered, still lying down. “I told you, I don't have the damned book!”

“I know!” he replied stern.

“You do?” I wondered, trying to stand on my feet again.

“Nevertheless, you are involved anyway!”

“What do you mean?”

One of the guards tried to hold my hands behind my back; I just pushed him away.

“You have been on the Forsaken Lands lately, haven't you?” the Magister asked me, without actually waiting for an answer. “A certain magic ritual of yours foiled the plans of the Assars for universal dominion; however, it has caused a series of cosmic commotions as well!”

“How... how do you know?” I stuttered in wonder. “What kind of commotions?” I wanted to know right after.

“Because of deficiencies in your invocation, the *door* to Zherge, Bsihlufar, Drifuor remains partly unsealed; if someone utters the correct magic spell, the Insane Gods will invade our universe! Is that clear enough?”

I looked at him flabbergasted. I didn't know what to believe and I couldn't think of anything to say.

“The stolen book, which is one of a kind, contains extremely dangerous magic rituals and spells that allow contact with such entities”, the Magister went on stern. “It is a very dangerous book, Miss Anderson; I suppose you have heard about the Book of Avaton!”

“It is quite sizeable, it has a black crystal cover and black pages with red letters, and it is said to have been written by the demon Avaton himself. It's dark magic and it's a legend...”

“Yet the book exists”, he went on with an air of arrogance. “I, the Great Magister Horvath of Emanon, have had the only copy in my possession until recently. I must get it back as soon as possible, and you, Miss Anderson, are the only person

who can carry out such a mission!”

“Why, Magister Horvath? Why can't you undertake this task yourself? As I've just seen, you are a most powerful warlock!”

“It's a matter of cosmic balance, Miss Anderson”, he replied in a low, evocative voice. “It's you who caused the problem, even unintentionally; so, it's you who must set things to rights”.

“I wonder though: who would be capable of coming into your ashram and stealing the Book of Avaton without being detected?” I wondered.

“My main sect has been infiltrated by Yrkanian psychics, persons of high spiritual powers, who managed to deceive our mind readers, get in our ashram as disciples and steal the book”, explained the Magister in a low voice, trying to conceal his embarrassment.

“I understand; the Yrkanians often use such psychics for high espionage”, I said pensive.

“The Book of Avaton is kept in a special crypt inside the palace of Assar the Great”, went on the wizard. “This means, you have to sneak in there and get it!”

“And how am I supposed to achieve this?” I asked then, looking forward to hearing the answer.

“Pretty soon, the throne prince Venor will invite you and ask for your help!”

Well, that was not something I ever expected to hear.

“My help for what?” I gasped in surprise.

“That's quite complicated; but you will have all the information you need when the right time comes. In the meanwhile, you must trust me and accept his invitation!”

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun was setting bright over the crystal roofs of Isova, the Yrkanian capital on planet Jeiri-4, its golden rays shining all over the violet sky. Venor was returning to the palace in his personal spacecraft, being in unusual hurry. He should have been satisfied for accomplishing his mission on Magnipoor, the biggest of the three moons of Jeiri-4, overthrowing the new, revolutionary regime and establishing the dominion of Assar the Great again. However, he wasn't tranquil at all, as he suspected this was far from over yet.

As he soared over the azure torrent of Ayer, which winds its way through the thick forest to the limits of the majestic city, his impatience increased dramatically. He had to arrive as soon as possible and take action at once, because a very special natural phenomenon was about to take place – an utmost sinister phenomenon, which might cost his family their royalty and the Yrkanians their dominion over numerous galaxies. There was nothing he could do to prevent it from happening; he could only hope there would be no serious consequences.

It occurred just before the break of dawn, putting an impressive end to a month-long wait: the icy comet Radilev fell on Jeiri-7, the seventh planet of the solar system. An atomic mushroom of about 2500 km was formed right after the impact. There began a chain reaction of multiple, incredible explosions all over the huge planet, releasing an energy equivalent to twenty million megatons approximately. The entire planet echoed like a bell due to the sound of the thrusting waves.

Venor, as well as the rest of the royal family, kept watching the progress of the phenomenon moment by moment through the telescope of the Royal Observatory. They were all very preoccupied because, according to ancient prophecies and

modern esoteric sects, such cosmic turbulence within such a short distance from the seat of the Yrkanian Empire could inevitably affect not only its nature but its world order radically. It could bring about social turmoil, revolutions, the downfall of dynasties and kings, as well as the rise of new leaders. Venor would definitely like to believe all that was nothing but naive superstitions; however, no matter how hard he tried he couldn't reassure himself.

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I was rather reluctant to go and meet Venor in his own capital -until a couple of weeks ago I would have considered this suicidal- but I eventually decided to accept the challenge, since his entreaty for my services seemed to be sincere. It could all be a trap of course, but I know Venor very well: he would never resort to such a cheap trap. Besides, I trusted Magister Horvath as well as my inner voice which urged me to accept the invitation and the potential risk.

It was I who chose the place of first encounter: Venor and I agreed to meet at the *Balcony of the Heavens*, an impressive black rock carved with a spiral, iridescent stairway which takes the colours of the rising or setting sun. The rock rises over the endless ocean and it is situated below the immense estate of the Assar palace; it is a site of great geodynamic power, considered sacred since the ancient times of Yrkania. So, there I was, waiting for him on top of the rock; I felt quite nervous when I saw him coming up the stairway. He looked weary and impatient at the same time, and I wondered what could possibly trouble the throne prince of Yrkania so much.

As soon as he saw me, he paused and stared at me taciturn for a few moments, obviously dazzled by my special appearance – as I had hoped: I was dressed in a black velvet, tight-fitting uniform adorned with three broad, black leather belts with metal buckles; it was an impressive outfit, which proved to

be ideal for such a special occasion...

“It all started with the crash of the comet Radilev on planet Jeiri-7” he began to explain. “I suppose you know about it”.

“I know”, I replied calm. “Has it caused any natural destructions on Jeiri-4?”

“In fact yes, it has caused some, but this is not the case; it's that...” Venor sighed lowering his head. “I've been losing the loyalty of my peoples...”

“Excuse me!?” I uttered in disbelief.

“Such cosmic phenomena are said to bring about the fall of dynasties and kings, as well as new leaders to power. At first I refused to believe that, but more and more populations have begun to turn their back on our dynasty, defying even the threat of weapons. The whole situation is going out of control...”

“I would never expect you to say so!”

“They are already waiting for the right time”, he went on, in obvious frustration. “They are waiting for their new leader to appear and rule with justice and wisdom!”

I couldn't help a brief, complacent smile.

“I'm really surprised you are daunted by such pseudo-Messiah beliefs of your oppressed subjects!” I told him mordantly. “Besides, you have no scruples when it comes to crushing the slightest opposition to the Yrkanian dominion!”

“You have no idea what kind of forces we are dealing with!” protested Venor.

“Why don't you just tell me?”

“My father... my father received someone very special in audience the other day” he stuttered, looking even more embarrassed. “The man introduced himself as the spiritual

leader of the New Age of Awareness, and he virtually demanded that Assar the Great and his whole family abandon their throne and their reign over the Interstellar Yrkanian Empire!”

“And that man... that man walked out of your palace alive?” it was my turn to stutter.

“Yes!” exclaimed Venor in despair, dropping all pretences of self-control. “I can't explain that but no one... no one could...” he just wasn't able to finish his sentence.

“No one could stop him!” I said and he nodded, still looking down.

“Sandra, you do know this man! It is the Great Magister Horvath of Emanon!”

“Magister Horvath!” I repeated, taken aback. “As far as I've heard, he never leaves Emanon unless for a very important reason!”

*And it seems he hasn't told me the whole truth*, I reckoned then.

“Getting the Yrkanian throne seems to be a very important reason!” said Venor poignantly. “He has already been to Magnipoor and formed a new sect in Narcoit Cloister, influencing the largest part of the population”, he went on.

“I don't think it's the throne he wants... Anyway, what do you expect from me exactly?” I asked.

“I think you are the most appropriate person to approach him and find out his true intentions; I need to know how dangerous he can become...”

“I assure you he can become very dangerous”, I replied stern.

“Are you telling me there is nothing we can do?”

“Magister Horvath seeks no mundane power”, I tried to settle

his fears. “Yet, I am quite curious to learn why he has molested you recently. Are you sure you have no idea?”

Venor refrained from answering; he only looked at me silent, maintaining the same desperate look in his eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

*... I am in the spacious yard of the Narcoit Cloister on planet Magnipoor, walking among numerous people. Something extraordinary is about to happen, something we have all been waiting for a long time. Suddenly there is a lot of agitation, as crowds of people scurry towards an arched gate. I follow suit, although none of us can tell if we are heading for Heaven or Hell.*

*As we go up the white, marble stairway, I am surprised to see a feathered creature leaping up the steps one by one, right before me. It looks like a hawk; it has thick, brown feathers and a strong, hooked beak. As it turns its head to the left, I can see its shiny, piercing eye and I shiver. What can it be? I wonder; right then, I hear people say “it's a good demon”.*

*Next moment the hawk leaves a terrible cry and it starts to transmute wreathed in a bright, golden light. I am still in agony, as I am not sure whether it will turn into an angel or a demon. No, it will be an angel, I finally conclude. Indeed, the bird turns into an angel with white, luminous wings. It has the form of a beautiful woman with smooth, blond hair long to her waist. She is dressed in a long, white, silk dress and she beams with tranquility and wisdom.*

*All at once, the woman changes form again: She is holding an infant in her hands now and she hasn't got wings anymore. I recognize Mother of God, as believed in many religions. She leads us all into a spacious room full of bright lights, high arches and wooden chairs. Some kind of sermon is about to begin in there. The front rows are already taken by numerous*

*listeners, and more are coming moment by moment. I am surprised to see Magister Horvath behind the lecture desk; he acts as if he hasn't noticed me at all.*

*Soon the room is crowded and the Magister begins his fervent speech by announcing himself as the spiritual leader of the New Age of Awareness, which will set all souls free from any kind of tyranny. He emphasizes he is here only for those who wish to follow him on their own will, and he declares that the people of Magnipoor have proved themselves to be mature enough to accept his guidance and protection...*

I woke up in my bedroom with an intense sense of fulfillment. The astral projection had been successful, revealing that Magister Horvath was indeed behind the revolution on Magnipoor; nevertheless, some questions had been left unanswered.

I was impatient to meet Venor at the *Balcony of the Heavens* once again, after sunrise. I told him about my night experience and I assured him I would do anything in my power to learn the whole truth. A little later, I got on my spacecraft and departed for planet Emanon.

\* \* \* \* \*

“How naive of you to spy on me in the astral planes, Sandra!” the Magister's first words were as soon as I faced him.

I replied nothing; I just looked at him in embarrassment.

“What you experienced was more or less distorted by your agitated subconscious, of course”, he went on. “Let alone you did so in order to help Venor find out my intentions!” he wound up grim.

“The throne prince invited me to Jeiri-4 and asked me to find out whether you have been undermining his power and why!” I confessed.

“I know!”

“However, Venor eventually managed to stop the revolution you started on Magnipoor; how did he achieve that?” I was curious to find out.

“What will you do if I tell you? Go to Venor and tell him all about it?” the warlock retorted bitingly.

“I have promised to get you back the stolen Book of Avaton and I will do so; but I need to know the whole truth first”, I dared say.

“All right then; Venor's victory was just temporary, based on sheer threat. Magnipoor has revolted against the Yrkanians, yet in a peaceful, non violent manner; this means they no longer follow the ways of living by the dynasty. They work less, they socialize more, they fight less, they wander more. This renders them insufficient, in not useless, to the Empire”.

“The Yrkanians annihilate all those who oppose their tyranny anyhow”, I went on. “Venor wouldn't just leave things like that, especially now, after the crash of the comet Radilev on Jeiri-7 and the prophecies regarding it and the subsequent fall of his dynasty!”

“Assar the Great intends genocide”, said Horvath then, with a bitter sigh. “Mass death for the three and a half million human beings on Magnipoor! This is why I decided to interfere!”

“And how do they intend to achieve this?” I asked in a feeble voice.

“The psychics of the Assars have managed to bring a certain virus from an infernal world by using the Book of Avaton. The miasma first invades the mind, causing madness; then it affects the body and literally splits it apart, causing a horrifying death. However, things may get even worse, since the Yrkanians disregard the fact that such viruses may pollute

even the astral planes, affecting huge populations all over the universe! Once they set the virus free, no living creature in the worlds of light will be safe!”

“I... I can hardly believe this!” I stammered stupefied.

“They intended to release it in the atmosphere of Magnipoor pretty soon, but after my audience received by Assar the Great, this plan was postponed. Moreover, as long as they have the Book of Avaton in their hands, and they can use it in many unspeakable and unpredictable ways!”

“Do you think they would attempt anything like that, now that you've threatened them in person?”

“If they are reasonable, no, they wouldn't. But one can never trust the logic of tyrants!”

\* \* \* \* \*

It was early in the afternoon when I reached the Assar palace in my personal spacecraft and sought to land among high rocks and bushes nearby. The edifice was magnificent, rising over the wild torrent of Ayer; it was a wonder of Yrkanian architecture, masterly built among the cliffs of a long gone waterfall. Its numerous chambers sparkled like gigantic crystals among the rocks, producing a magical effect of lights.

I had already communicated Venor but, curiously enough, he hadn't arrived yet. I didn't like that but I decided to wait for a few minutes, admiring the majestic view of the palace.

Suddenly I had a glimpse of a flitting flash among the bushes; then, I heard a noise that sounded like rushing footsteps. I was startled and sought to draw my laser gun, but it was too late. I was already surrounded by Yrkanian soldiers in grey, leather uniforms with helmets, and they were threatening me with their weapons.

Before I knew it I was attacked by Xavier himself, who had suddenly sprung up out of nowhere. I had been taken by surprise and the enemy's strong hands were already around my throat, choking all air off my lungs. The pain was excruciating and the sense of being strangled made me feel weak and helpless; I would scream of terror if it were possible for me.

“You may be fooling my stupid brother but you can't fool me!” roared Xavier, full of wrath.

I lost my balance and fell back on a flat rock; the enemy was over me, still squeezing my throat with his hands, tighter and tighter second by second, and I could no longer breathe. Yet, I found the courage to get my knees close to my chest and push Xavier back with all my strength, forcing him to release me. Then I sprang up at once, ignoring the lack of air in my lungs, and stood on guard ready to defend myself against the numerous Yrkanian soldiers who were already arrayed around me. Too bad my laser weapon was nowhere to see...

I had to fight really hard for my life; I sought cover behind the cliffs, I punched, I hit, I kicked, I swept them off their feet any time it was possible for me. However, with every step I took I got nearer and nearer to the wild torrent rushing below...

At a moment I was aware of a laser gun aimed at me, almost at breathing distance; my heart lost a leap and I stepped aside in an instinctive attempt to protect myself. The laser ray flashed grazing past me; right then, my left foot slipped off the rock. Next instant I was tumbling down the steep cliffs; I hit my head against a jagged outgrowth, fell into vertigo and sank into the torrent, while Xavier's sonorous voice was echoing all around:

“Find the body! Now, you dead losses!”

Well, it seems to me that men never learn: How could they ever expect Sandra Anderson to perish so easily?

It was certainly not easy for me to maintain my senses in the rushing waves of the torrent, but I did it because I had to. Although my head was spinning, I finally managed to climb up the steep cliffs and hide myself among them, while the Yrkanian soldiers were scouring the river.

After a while, when they gave up the search at last, I left my hiding place, climbed all the way up the craggy precipice and silently followed the squad of Yrkanian soldiers from a safe distance.

I was out of breath and wet to the bone, and I could see the situation was going out of hand. Obviously, for some reason, I was no longer Venor's guest. Therefore, I had to find a way to sneak into the palace undetected. *The hardest part of the mission is about to begin now*, I pondered.

Thank Goddess, I was given the right opportunity quite soon: Having outrun the soldiers without their taking heed of me as I kept hiding behind thick trunks and high rocks, I finally climbed up a leafy tree and waited patiently for the last one of them to pass by. He was left a few steps behind, which served my purpose perfectly...

I collected one of the big, yellow flowers of the tree and threw it right in front of the soldier. He paused and watched it bewildered for a second – and that was all the time I needed to act: I jumped down the tree, pounced on him at once, and knocked him down with a fast blow on his neck; he didn't even get the chance to shout. The others just kept on walking, without even noticing he was no longer with them. After they had been further a little, I began undressing him.

\* \* \* \* \*

“So, you are telling me that Sandra Anderson is dead!”

exclaimed Venor in disbelief.

“That's right, brother! She was fired at and fell off the cliffs into the Ayer torrent...”

“However, you haven't found her body!”

“The stream is very rapid there and its bottom is rather uneven, full of rocks, cavities and gaps. Anyway, she can't have survived such a fall!”

“You wish she hasn't!”

Next moment both princes stood still as a soldier stepped in and asked permission to speak, emphasizing it was urgent.

“The Book of Avaton has been stolen! It has disappeared!” he announced.

“Oh, no”, lisped Xavier. “This can't be true!”

“Unfortunately it is true, your Highness”, said the guard hastily. “Besides, soldier Malikut has just returned to the palace almost naked!”

Venor sighed and brought his hand on his forehead. “I don't believe this”, he said in a low voice. “She and the book must be found at once! And, as usual, I must do everything by myself!”

\* \* \* \* \*

Although I had been expecting that to occur any minute, I was rather startled when the arched door of the underground crypt was suddenly open; bright light came in and Venor appeared at the threshold. I hid behind the odd-shaped, stone construction, on top of which the Book of Avaton was lying until I found and carried it down. The guard who had seen it was missing hadn't bothered to look for me inside, as he probably thought I had already escaped. So, I just stayed hidden behind the stone bulk and waited breathless.

“I suggest you give in right now, Sandra!” cried the prince in a sonorous voice that echoed all over the dimly-lit room.

Then I noticed the heavy firearm he was holding, as he got ready to fire; next moment he pulled the trigger and the whole place shook of terribly powerful, almost palpable air waves that thrust the stone construction into whirling dust. I barely had the time to jump aside and avoid being thrust as well; I was hurled vehemently against the opposite wall and collapsed to the floor stunned, feeling as if all my bones were about to break into pieces.

For a couple of seconds I lay motionless on the paved floor. Venor approached with the dreadful weapon in his hands, aiming to fire again. This time there was no way I could dodge the blast, so I decided to stake my all and play dead.

The trick seemed to be working, as Venor stood over me, tending the weapon towards me in hesitation. He sought to make me stir with its long barrel, but I stayed completely motionless, even holding my breath. Then he came even closer and sought to touch me with his hands. At that moment I assaulted him with a sudden side kick, sweeping the weapon off his hands. Taking advantage of his surprise, I sprang up and hit him hard on the nape with my right elbow; next instant he fell down unconscious.

Taking a quick, searching look around, I saw the Book Avaton lying on the floor a few metres away. It was completely intact, and its black crystal cover with the engraved red seal shone in the feeble light coming through the open door.

I didn't get enough time to enjoy my victory; I could already hear rushing footsteps approaching; soon the crypt would be full of armed Yrkanian soldiers. So, I had to act fast...

I rushed forth and took the book in my hands; I placed it on Venor's chest and sat next to him, while pondering on a quick

spell of disappearance. The pages fluttered before me by themselves, finally opening to the right page. As soon as I uttered the magic words, the whole room was bathed in a soft, blue light. When the soldiers trooped in, they were astounded to find nobody and nothing in the crypt.

\* \* \* \* \*

Venor woke up in candle light. He tried to move, but somehow that was not possible. He gasped in despair when he realized he was lying on a kind of altar, his hands and legs tied with chains to the sides of the stone slab. The Book of Avaton was open on a silver bookstand on his right. An arched, latticed window let plenty of scarlet sunlight come into the stuffy room.

“What... what...?” he stammered; then, he fell silent as he took a glimpse of the shining silver dagger hovering right over him. “What are you doing, Sandra?” he asked finally, shaking of fear, as he saw me standing next to the Book of Avaton, ready to bring that dagger down on his chest.

“I’ve beaten you once again, Venor”, I replied in a low voice. “Unfortunately for you, I have to sacrifice you to the Insane Gods so as to seal the door to their world once and for all!”

“...!”

“An adolescent man would be ideal for this kind of sacrifice”, I went on explaining. “You are not that young of course, but your blood could seal that door anyway!”

“No! This can’t be so!”

“I’m sorry, Venor!”

Within a split second the dagger came down to his body and cut him a little on the right shoulder. The prince shut his eyes and screamed of terror; then he gasped of surprise and relief, as he realized the wound was only superficial, producing just

a small streak of blood. I took some of it on my blade, held the dagger straight up and uttered the correct magic spell:

*“Ujctidi sfalder dei tor... Ujctidi gaydor... Zmergen Zherge, zmergen Bsihlufar, zmergen Drifuor... Alafur donq laaaher...”*

After the invocation was complete, the room was bathed in a bright white light that was gone in a few seconds. I smiled in unspeakable relief, for I knew the door to the Insane Gods had been sealed at last, having also taken the infernal virus back to where it belonged.

My most precious reward was the dazed look in Venor's face. He looked so adorably helpless, bewildered, still frightened.

“It's all over, Venor”, I assured him smiling.

He kept on staring at me speechless with wide open, stunned eyes.

“Or, maybe it isn't!” I uttered right after, simultaneously tearing his uniform with one stroke of my dagger, all the way from his chest to his groin.

The prince cried of fright, which turned to lust as I was already over him. Sighing of relief and pleasure, he just leaned back and stretched his body in a most sensual manner; then he surrendered to me as well as his wild carnal desires for all those wonderful hours that followed...

\* \* \* \* \*

Magister Horvath's tower rose imposing before me in misty, enigmatic twilight as I approached its finely carved, wooden front door. I felt quite excited when I delivered the Book of Avaton to the Great Magister himself. Strangely enough, he didn't make any questions; nonetheless, he seemed to be more than satisfied with my success.

“You have been loyal, Miss Anderson, and you will be properly rewarded”, he announced with a friendly smile that

made me feel great.

I was nominated an honorary member of his main sect and I was invited to spend a couple of weeks in his ashram on Emanon.

To say the place was paradise, would be an understatement. I was accommodated in one of the wooden huts next to a serene pool surrounded by high palms and green bushes with colourful flowers. There was a lovely, stone bridge over the pool and a small green island decorated with marble statues near its furthest shore.

I felt exquisitely tranquil every morning, while swimming nonchalantly in the turquoise water for hours. The crystal pool was wonderfully serene; not even the slightest wave rippled its surface. I was not at all alone there; in fact, there were many others who revelled in the fine morning breeze and the calm waters. However, the place was divinely quiet; no loud voices or other annoying noises disturbed this outlandish tranquility. During all these days, I experienced an unprecedented, inner bliss entrancing me day and night.

What surprised me most, was the quality of the people living there – the Magister's closest disciples. All of them were spontaneously friendly, polite and unobtrusive. None of them felt the "natural" need of the average human to show off by yelling, gossiping or making trouble. Nobody ever shouted or swore for any reason. Even the children were quiet; they neither squealed hysterically, nor did they annoy everybody with stupid mischief. As about missions, adventures and dangers, they just seemed to be extremely far away from here, nothing more than elusive dreams fading in the corners of my mind.

Exploring the land further from the settlement of huts, I had the opportunity to relish unique natural beauties, such as the Alabaster Lagoon. A cluster of impressive, volcanic white

rocks rose above the crystal, turquoise waters. I swam along the coast, in and out of picturesque, mysterious caves with emerald waters and prismatic cliffs. Then, I reached the middle of the gulf, where a lofty arched rock emerged shimmering to the bright sunlight. Every time I swam under it, I was always bedazzled by the colourful pebbles of the sea-bed that sparkled like gems.

I consider those few days as the culmination of my whole life, since I had the unique opportunity to relish unprecedented experiences which led me to the limits of nirvana...

# Story Twenty-Four: The City of Gold

*originally handwritten  
from 7<sup>th</sup> January to 15<sup>th</sup> June, 1996*

I was feeling rather melancholic that quiet afternoon, for I knew it was the last time I relished swimming in the crystal ponds of Magister Horvath's ashram under the golden sun. I can always tell when it is time for me to move on; so, when the day was over, I packed up as quickly as possible, bid farewell to Magister Horvath and his disciples, and left the ashram without even looking back.

Soon I was flying away from planet Emanon, all alone in my spacecraft, with a bitter sense of paradise lost in my heart. On the other hand, I had a strong feeling that something new, something extraordinary was about to come up. *What does fate have in store for me this time?* I wondered.

It wasn't long before the dream came to find me – the same persistent dream I had had for an unusual number of times lately: I was in a spacious, completely empty glasshouse that loomed over me under a clear, blue sky. There was absolute silence, until a certain verse began to resound in my ears:

*Nothing is left alive  
in the City of Gold;  
but what is hidden in there,  
is the key to eternal life...*

The strange poem was recited by the sweet voice of a young woman I could not see, and it got louder verse by verse. When I woke up, the last words were still echoing in my ears. I

could swear the voice sounded familiar, but it was impossible for me to recall to whom it belonged. Nevertheless, I had the impression it was someone I had met long ago, someone not benevolent at all...

Not much time had lapsed when I noticed that anxiously flickering signal on my radar screen. I tried to locate its source, and I was intrigued to find out it didn't come from another flying space vessel but from a certain site on a small, deserted planet named Horam.

Later on, the signal was followed by a coded message I got in my telecom device. Initially it didn't seem to be intended for me but I did my best to decode it, and I was really astonished when I found out it went on like this:

*Nothing is left alive  
in the City of Gold;  
and I must be gone too,  
before it's too late...*

At first I was reluctant to give it any more attention, since it was transmitted in an unusual, now abandoned Yrkanian frequency. *It's none of my business; besides, it could as well be a trap*, I reckoned. However, curiosity took over me fast; *no, no, no... I'm not going...* I tried to dissuade myself from looking into it.

Well, maybe I should have ignored that message, but the temptation was just too strong for me to resist...

\* \* \* \* \*

It was breaking dawn when I reached the planet Horam. Hovering around for a while, I figured out there was no sign of fauna there, apart from some sparse vegetation and strange, beautiful trees with high, thin trunks. It proved to be quite difficult to locate the source of the flickering signal since

there was no trace of civilization all around, nothing to indicate the planet was inhabited by intelligent beings.

I sighed of relief when I finally discovered what must have been the City of Gold; it was a cluster of well-preserved, ancient temples located in a small valley among steep mountains. I decided to have a quick look and then get out of there.

The edifices were quite impressive with their extraordinary architecture, the finely elaborated pediments and pyramidal towers, all adorned with thick strips of gold. I was taken aback at their beauty and splendor, but I also wondered at the fact that the place had not been plundered so far, during all those centuries of isolation.

I wandered among the ancient temples for a while, forgetting completely my initial decision to get away from there as soon as possible. The site was wreathed in a nostalgic aura of long gone glories and tales of valiance.

*Nothing is left alive  
in the City of Gold;  
but what is hidden in there,  
is the key to eternal life...*

*Nothing is left alive  
in the City of Gold;  
and I must be gone too,  
before it's too late...*

The rhymes came into my mind as soon as I passed the threshold of the main temple, which was the biggest and the most splendid of all. I wandered from room to room for an indefinable span of time, mesmerized by the vivid colours of the walls and the finely elaborated, gold finishes of the gaping

doors. I gradually came to feel disappointed as all rooms proved to be completely empty; I had hoped to find either someone stranded there, or ancient treasures, or some unholy secret...

Entering the main chamber, I paused for a moment and wondered at the bulky stone altar trimmed with gold, which stood in the middle. Then, my attention was distracted as I suddenly perceived a kind of air draught dashing in. It made me shiver, as it gave me the impression of a presence – an invisible, sinister presence lurking all around.

Next instant there was a sound of hasty, heavy steps rushing towards me. I got my laser gun in hand and turned around at once, expecting to see someone or something dangerous rushing in through the door.

“Sandra! We must get out of here at once! This place is extremely dangerous!” I heard a man shout at me, as he got into the room running.

“Venor!” I cried stupefied as soon as I recognized who it was.

“Come with me! This way!” he urged me, and I just couldn't say no.

I followed him all the way out of the temple in frenzy, trying to escape from that eerie draught of air that seemed to be chasing us everywhere.

As soon as we were out in the spacious yard, I realized I was surrounded by Yrkanian soldiers, all of them aiming their laser weapons at me. *How silly of me... of course it was a trap...* I thought.

“What do you want this time, Venor?” I asked, right after they had taken my laser gun.

“I can as well ask you the same, Sandra!” he retorted.

“I received a signal in my radar, and a coded message in my

telecom device transmitted in an Yrkanian frequency...”

“And you came here to see what it was all about”, he mocked.

“It gave me the impression someone was in danger; but since this is not the case, there is no point in staying here any longer, right?” I said in a casual manner and turned my back, as if I were getting ready to leave.

That cheap trick wasn't meant to wash, of course. Venor's strong hand on my right shoulder forced me to stop at once.

“Ouch!” I exclaimed in surprise, as I felt a sudden sting at the spot where he touched me.

“You aren't going anywhere, Sandra Anderson!” his voice rang in my ears before I passed out.

\* \* \* \* \*

I woke up in a stone chamber, hardly recovering from an inexplicable torpor of indefinable duration. Apparently, one of the temples had been converted into a makeshift Yrkanian base for the needs of their new mission. I gasped in surprise and despair, as I realized I was stark naked on a metal bed with fine, silk sheets. I tried to get up but it was impossible; I was feeling too weak for that. I breathed out and stretched my body in lustful expectation, for I knew what was coming next...

Next instant I felt his hand on my throat; I opened my eyes wide and faced prince Venor, stark naked too, lying next to me – just a moment before he was on and inside me, again and again, and I groaned and sighed of pleasure all those times. He wasn't violent, no; on the contrary, he was more tender than usual, being excessively careful so as to keep me satisfied. In fact, he often gave me the impression of pleading me for something – maybe for help... *But why? What kind of trouble are you in this time, Venor?* I wondered but passed it in silence; I hugged and kissed him all over, with genuine

passion, revelling in his wonderful affections as long as they lasted...

Soon I was breathless on that bed, my eyes shut of sweet exhaustion, while he was still lying beside me taciturn. All of a sudden, I thought I heard a soft sound of footsteps right outside the latticed window. *Has anyone been watching?* I wondered. Right then I heard a woman's laugh fading away in the blowing wind.

A few minutes later the prince got up and put on his blue, tight-fitting, V-necked uniform hastily. I preferred to feign I were asleep, but I secretly watched him as he put on his dark purple boots, black belt, and chased gold bracelets. I couldn't help admiring the sight of him; he looked so incredibly attractive...

He left the room without making a sound; *not a sound...* At that moment I was surprised to realize he had forgotten -or not minded- to lock the door.

“All right, Venor; Keep underestimating me!” I soliloquized smiling; then I sprang off the bed and god dressed quickly.

I used my martial art skills so as to get rid of the two guards who had been guarding the room. I grabbed their laser swords and got away at the double. Pretty soon I had to put out of action some more Yrkanian soldiers. I didn't intend to leave the base, though; first, I had to find out more about Venor's true intentions.

Later on, while hiding behind a gaping door, I overheard an Yrkanian warrior inform the prince through his telecom bracelet that “Anderson has escaped!”

*That was too easy, wasn't it?* I realized right then.

“Fine, that's fine”, Venor replied in a calm voice – but I couldn't hear that.

*Something is very wrong here; but I intend to play this game to the end, I only reckoned.*

\* \* \* \* \*

It was not long before I located Venor in the yard of the main temple – which was quite predictable. At first I stayed hidden behind a nearby massive rock, and watched every move he made, patiently waiting for the opportunity to follow him without being detected. When he got in, I took a searching look around so as to make sure there were no witnesses; then I left my hiding place, approached the temple cautiously and entered with stealthy steps. All at once, I had an intense sense there were tremendous secrets from the past and the present lurking for me inside that resplendent monument...

A few minutes later, I located Venor in a spacious chamber with crimson walls and gold-trimmed pillars. He was not alone.

“I have received your signal”, the prince announced with a serious mien. “Take me to the Mirror Lake now! The time has come!”

“That's right, the time has come”, responded the albino young woman with the long, white-blond hair who was standing next to him. “I will take you to the Mirror Lake, the Gate of Worlds that can lead anywhere in this or other universes, as well as to the Lands of the Dead” she went on, while I was listening flabbergasted. “This can render you omnipotent and also immortal, but it takes time to learn how to use it wisely; otherwise it could lead you to eternal loss!”

*Astrid! He has met Astrid again and he has made a pact with her -again!* I realized shocked, hidden behind the gold-finished door, hardly believing my eyes and ears.

“I know and I accept the challenge!” said Venor in a firm voice.

“Moreover, I will be by your side for all eternity, showing you realities you've never imagined! Have you understood this part well, Venor?” Astrid asked him stern.

“I have no objection; we have already discussed this hundreds of times!”

That was the last sentence of theirs I could eavesdrop. I followed them stealthily through chambers and stairways, and they kept on talking in low voices, as if they knew someone was watching them. But I kept on doing so anyway...

“What is Anderson doing here, Venor?”

“As you've told me, we are going to need a human sacrifice; she is the ideal prey for the beast that guards the Mirror Lake!”

“The last time you contacted her, you sought to betray me, I haven't forgotten that!”

“Don't worry so much, Astrid! That was long ago and things were entirely different then!” replied the prince with a soft smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

After a while, Venor and Astrid entered a block of oddly-shaped underground chambers, lower and lower into the earth, rooms that were possibly not meant for humans but for amphibians, as I reckoned. Nevertheless, the two allies kept walking fast, without looking around, until they reached the narrow threshold of a cavern wreathed in a soft, azure light. There was a dark blue lake in the middle of the cavity; its waters were perfectly still, enchantingly streaked by silver-coloured underwater currents which made the place look magical and sinister at the same time.

As soon as they reached the shore, the witch tended both

hands towards the lake in a most graceful manner, and started chanting a familiar rhyme that made me shudder:

*Nothing is left alive  
in the City of Gold;  
but what is hidden there  
is the key to eternal life...*

*Tadwog nyf tebti Egor  
dgodehb bnuv Egor...*

The last two verses were unintelligible, probably a magic invocation that summoned a specific entity. Just then it occurred to me I had been led into a horrible trap.

There was a sudden, slithering sound that made the blood run cold in my veins; I stood still and tried to listen more clearly: Indeed, there was something slithering through the underground tunnels, coming fast towards me, while the last verses of Astrid's invocations were ringing in the air:

*gwog gfaed Egor  
dkihsa glyd Egor...*

There followed a moment of dreadful mental pain; then, within a split second, a dark terror, practically invisible among the shadows, pounced on me.

My loud scream accompanied Astrid's unholy song, as I was now facing an incredible amphibian monster: In the feeble light of the cavern I could make out a huge, round mouth full of jagged teeth in rows among countless, thick tentacles. I could not make out the whole size of the monster, but its tentacles seemed to be everywhere around me, all intending to grab me, while Astrid's laughter was echoing demonic all over the cave.

At first it was one of my laser swords that saved my life, as it

chopped off quite a few mucous tentacles. For a moment or two I just stood there motionless, staring at the advancing horror before me. Then I brandished my weapon again and cut off some more tentacles, but they were still innumerable. The monster kept on approaching, and it was obvious I could no longer stay there and confront it.

I retreated fast and I sought to escape through the stalagmites and stalactites towards the lake; I ran as fast as possible, avoiding those dreadful tentacles with acrobatic jumps and moves, always using my weapon whenever it was possible.

Finally I reached the shore of the Mirror Lake only to come across Venor and Astrid, who were watching the whole scene in astonishment. The abominable creature was still behind me; it left an awful, screeching sound through its fat lips, riveting its three, gruesomely shining eyes on all three of us. It gave me the impression it was somewhat confused...

“You are going to give me lots of explanations about all this, Astrid!” I shouted.

“Let me explain then”, she shouted back triumphantly. “Egor, the Guard of the Mirror Lake, is the name of you death, Sandra Anderson!”

In the meantime the monster was rushing to the lake shore, even more aggressive than before, leaving behind it a repulsive, mucous trace. It was still making that screeching sound with its dreadful mouth, while its tentacles kept on lashing the stuffy air threateningly. Right then, Venor pulled out his laser weapon and fired at it repeatedly. Some tentacles were fried and the creature flinched back for a moment – but only for a moment. Astrid looked at him flabbergasted, as if she couldn't believe what she had just witnessed.

“What... what are you doing?” she only asked.

“I don't intend to become the monster's meal!” replied Venor

and fired once more.

“Egor is the Guard of the Mirror Lake!” she reminded him in a stern voice, “Sacrifice must take place!”

The prince looked at her in disbelief and kept on firing, while the monster was about to assault all of us. I chopped off some more of its tentacles using both my laser swords, but that didn't seem to daunt it.

All at once I was too close its horrible mouth, and it just occurred to me to throw one of my laser swords, turned on at full intensity, inside that mouth. There followed a small explosion in there; next instant, numerous pieces of dark gray flesh were tossed all around. Some tentacles darted through the air for a few more seconds, then they settled down slowly. The three bulging, black eyes closed one by one, and what had remained of the monster moved no more.

“It's dead!” I exclaimed, hardly believing what had just happened.

“Better so; such entities are not to be trusted!” announced Venor in obvious relief.

“The Guard of the Mirror Lake does not sleep but for a very short time”, uttered Astrid enigmatically.

As I turned to face her, I saw there was something floating on the calm surface of the lake, far in the distance. We all stood still and watched dumbfounded; it was a kind of spectral boat, a luminous vessel glowing with an eerie, golden light, coming towards us little by little, until it moored to the shore near us.

“You have just lost a most invaluable opportunity, Venor”, declared Astrid grimly. Then, she turned to me: “It was his idea to use you as a sacrifice to Egor; he insisted on that!” she informed me in a firm voice, before embarking on that boat with slow, graceful movements.

Next instant, the spectral vessel with its very special passenger began to sail away, further and further from the shore, until it faded away in the semi-darkness of the mysterious cave.

“So, Venor, is it true I was intended to be sacrificed to that monster? And was it really your idea?” I demanded to know right after.

Receiving no answer, I turned round and found out that Venor was nowhere to see.

In vain did I seek the prince in the chambers of the main temple in the City of Gold. In that wondrous monument I was completely alone, which made me feel somewhat strange and blissful; “I am the planet now”, I soliloquized in a low voice, without minding whether that was logical or not.

Next moment I felt a cold air current rushing into the room, which made me shiver; I took a deep breath, opened up my eyes and had a searching look around. I felt as if I had just woken up from an illusory dream; all I wished now was to get out of that place as soon as possible. I ran to the nearest exit, with the intention of leaving far behind me the splendor and the mysteries of the City of Gold forever.

I saw Venor as soon as I got out of the temple; he was riding an impressive ground vehicle of scarlet colour, and he was already speeding away from the City of Gold and me. So, I was left all alone there, among the majestic ancient temples; only then did I notice their impressive pediments were finely adorned with fascinating mermaid statuettes. *How come didn't I notice those before?* I wondered but pushed the question in the back of my mind at once...

\* \* \* \* \*

It wasn't too difficult for me to sneak into Venor's quarters in his spaceship, which rested among steep sand hills a couple

of miles away from the City of Gold. Certainly, it wasn't the first time I had fooled his guards and hacked codes on Yrkanian locked doors. I was particularly excited when I discovered a strong net in one of his drawers, which he kept there for multiple purposes.

I didn't have to wait for long, hidden inside a latticed closet, for him to come in and lie in bed. He sought to relax for a few moments before deciding his next steps; he did look irresistible, half-naked and entirely unsuspecting of what was going to happen to him pretty soon...

“Just do not move, Venor!”

My voice sounded to him like a bolt from the blue, under the gray full moon that was rising outside the window. He didn't have the time to do anything so as to avoid being trapped in the net I threw over him; he only stared at it in astonishment as it embraced his fine, muscular body. He sought to scream but I pounced on him immediately, sealing his lips with a long, passionate kiss that left him overwhelmed and breathless on bed.

“So, Venor, it's time you and I had a discussion!” I told him then, with a stern face.

“If you believe you will get away with this, you are out of your mind!” he responded, vainly trying to get out of the net.

“You've been a very bad boy lately”, I went on mockingly.

“You intended to offer me as food to an ugly, gigantic monster! I hope you have a satisfactory explanation for this!”

The longer he stayed trapped in the net, the angrier he got – which made him look even more adorable.

“It's not like that! Astrid deceived me...”

“Really now, you thought you could become immortal, Venor? I can't believe you were so credulous! How did she

convince you, can you tell me?" I asked, gently caressing his broad chest.

"Come on, Sandra, I knew you would be able to confront that creature; besides, I never really trusted that woman!"

"She promised to offer you immortality... in exchange of what, Venor?"

He refrained from answering; he only ground his teeth as he was getting more and more impatient, trapped in the net.

"Maybe we could return to the City of Gold, you and I together; maybe we could unravel the mystery of death by ourselves", I said finally, amused at the expression of bewilderment on his face.

"What she would offer in exchange, I can offer too!" I said, kissing him again all over his body, in a most sensual manner.

His feeble reaction showed he intended to resist no more; I could feel he was erect under me and we both sighed in sheer lust.

"Once again you will be mine, Venor!" I uttered in a hoarse voice and rode on him, while he was already writhing under the net, making me wild.

"But... you know something?" I said then in an equivocal tone.

"What?" he asked sighing.

"She won't give up on you so easily!"

At that moment I thought I heard a familiar rhyme fading away in the soft breeze that blew in through the open window:

*Nothing is left alive  
in the City of Gold,  
but I will come back;*

*I promise I'll be back!*

Then, as I closed my eyes for a moment of contemplation, I thought I had an instant hallucination of Astrid winking her right eye at me...

# Story Twenty-Five: Reminiscence

*originally handwritten  
from 16<sup>th</sup> January to 18<sup>th</sup> March, 1998*

My name is Sandra Anderson; I guess you've heard about me. Now, let me narrate how it all began, how I became who I am, for I was not always who I am now.

Once I had a home, a social life, a job; my life no different than any other young woman's, apart from a fondness of martial arts and metaphysical matters.

However, there is almost nothing left from that life now; my memories of those times seem to be nothing but an insignificant engram in my mind, like an old dream that fades away day by day.

That life ended when the Yrkanian Fleet attacked and conquered my home planet. I happened to be one of the few survivors taken as prisoners of war on the planet Jeiri-4, destined to become servants of the Interstellar Yrkanian Empire.

Having served the Empire conscientiously for a couple of years, one day I decided I just couldn't endure it any longer. Therefore, making use of certain mental powers I had secretly developed in the meanwhile, I abandoned my duties and escaped from my worksite in Isova.

I have been following certain conjunctions of circumstances as well as my instinct ever since, but I no longer know where my steps are taking me, as I sink deeper and deeper into the unknown, leaving behind the safety and stability of everyday life.

I could have avoided all that, of course; I could have turned my back on the challenge of destiny – but not after I had had all those extraordinary experiences, certain acquaintances I call "links", and accumulation of knowledge regarding the domination of evil in the world and what could be done about it.

\* \* \* \* \*

My ongoing inquiries finally brought me to Ladang, a small village perched on Mount Leng, one of the highest mountains on Jeiri-4, thousands of miles away from the dangerous capital Isova. Most houses here resemble small pagodas and they enhance the stunning panorama of the high, snow-capped mountains. The village is built on an altitude of 4350 metres; the atmosphere is very clear and thin, making breathing somewhat hard.

The sun was setting slowly behind the lilac mountains and the wind was blowing icy among the trees and the inclined roofs, when I finally located the residence of my next "link": it was a small, yet robust hut, which stood isolated at the edge of the village.

Kadij Sao was a young woman with an enigmatic face, long black hair, slit eyes, and a well-trained body. Her skin was not swarthy, as I had expected; it was white, uncommon for a local woman. In fact, all the "links" I had met so far were uncommon persons...

“Come in; I have been waiting for you”, she welcomed me smiling softly, and stepped aside for me to enter.

For a few moments I paused at the threshold, taken aback at the sight of the interior: The furniture was wooden, well-carved, without pointed corners. Opposite the front door, resting on a fine console table, there were diverse ornamental items from various parts of the world, each one of them

carrying its own history. On its left there stood a jade statue, about a metre high, which represented an ancient goddess. On the right there was a large bookcase full of books, magazines and newspapers from different countries. Next to it there was a narrow arched door, which led to another room, probably a kitchen. The wall on my left was all covered with a huge, strange fresco in a marble frame: it depicted a panorama of galaxies over moonlit mountain tops. The impressive painting attracted all my attention spontaneously.

We made ourselves comfortable in the cozy living room. The round table looked very old and had a strange, multi-coloured, intricate pattern on its surface. After the first introductions were made, I was curious to know about that pattern.

“It's a coded map”, explained Kadij Sao. “It shows the way to an underground oracle renowned throughout the world thousands of years ago. What remains of it now, is ruins from the main temple and the tomb of Alba, the last diviner. The whole cave bears dangerous secrets, and some of its passages are entrances to other dimensions. The tomb is your final destination. Right here!” she concluded, pointing at a certain spot near the centre of the “map”.

“How far is this cave from here?”

“It's not very far away from Ladang; however, the mountain side happens to be very steep and inhospitable. The locals consider it cursed and nobody dares approach there. As about the cave, they refer to it by the name “Realms of the Long Night”. By the way, what is the *real* reason you want to get there?” she finally asked in a provocative way.

“I've dreamt of this place -the underground temple, the tomb, and the sleeping diviner- lots of times lately”, I confessed hesitantly. “I strongly believe something very important has been waiting for me there, something that will change me and

my whole life radically”.

“Many have walked the same path”, she interrupted me. “Whoever gets the correct information, may reach a certain point; nevertheless, very few have made it to the end!”

“I have no alternative but go on”, I replied calm. “I am a fugitive from the main worksite of Isova, and Yrkanian soldiers have been after me ever since I left, about a month ago. Nevertheless, they have lost my tracks; in fact, they always do any time I approach a "link", like you!”

“We have our ways to make ourselves inconspicuous, my dear”, she answered enigmatically. “Take into consideration, however, that unless you prove your worth, this kind of protection can't last forever!”

Her stern look rooted me in my chair.

“It's not too late for you to go back”, she went on solemn. “You may return to your work in Isova, and we can arrange that you don't suffer any serious punishment!”

“There is no way back for me”, I retorted in a firm voice.

“Big words! Tomorrow you will go through a certain trial!” she announced then. “I will escort you all the way, but we might confront insurmountable obstacles; we might not even manage to reach the Realms of the Long Night...”

“What kind of trial? And what kind of obstacles do you mean?” I asked impatiently.

“You didn't expect it would be easy, did you?” chuckled Kadij Sao. “There are so many things you don't know... Anyway, if you make it tomorrow, you will finally get all the answers you need, as well as a very special gift from the ancient diviner!”

“What??”

At this point our interesting conversation ended abruptly.

Kadij Sao stood up silent, walked to the next room which proved to be kitchen, approached the round hearth and began preparing dinner with calm, graceful movements.

\* \* \* \* \*

Having left the hut a few minutes ago, we walked down the weedy mountain side taciturn until the terraced roofs of Ladang disappeared behind us. We were holding simple battery lanterns made of a glass case and a metal frame. Kadij Sao had also provided me with a laser gun which I kept in an inside pocket of my overcoat.

The cold was getting sharper and sharper as the sun was setting slowly behind the scarlet mountain tops in the horizon. The sky was clear but the winds kept on blowing furious, lifting up clouds of dust that whirled continuously. Because of the great differences of temperature in such altitudes, the rocks were full of deep fissures and countless stones were scattered around. Vegetation was sparse, just a few willow and poplar trees bowing passively to the vehemence of the winds. The growing windstorm made our trekking harder and harder, even dangerous, as the mountain side got steeper and steeper.

I felt a lot better when the descent was finally over and we found ourselves at the beginning of an earthen track. However, my relief didn't last long as the track soon ended up to a winding, narrow path at the edge of the mountain. The precipice that gaped below looked rather threatening; at least the wind abated there.

The untrodden gorge spread wild, almost frightening before us. The opposite side was even steeper, full of wild herbs and thorny bushes. Few trees rose like alien trespassers among the bald, glistening rocks. Far in the distance, where the sides of the gorge got nearer and the precipice ended to a crooked ravine, a wooden bridge was discerned. It was built on a solid

scaffold firmed on the sides of the ravine.

After some more trekking, I was able to observe it better; it looked rather old and fragile as it lurched and creaked to the violent winds. An appalling clang echoed around any time the wooden poles rubbed each other, making me doubt about the safety of the whole structure. My initial enthusiasm waned considerably as soon as I realized that the only way to get to the opposite side of the gorge and reach the "Realms of the Long Night" was to cross that bridge.

Kadij Sao stepped on it first; I followed her, holding tight the railings with my hands. The wood was cold to the touch, maybe wet; some of the boards were out of joint, hanging down. The bridge stirred more and more as we came to the middle of it; I wondered how long it was since the last wanderer had crossed it.

Next instant, a strong sense of imminent danger overwhelmed me: Suddenly, I had the impression we were no longer alone in that wilderness. I could feel a presence somewhere there, a rather hostile presence lurking among the rocks and the trees. I looked around impatiently but saw nothing suspicious.

We had just passed the middle of the bridge when I noticed a silver glow coming from afar, from the dark depths of the gorge, flickering behind the branches of the trees that rose on both sides of the ravine. *What can it be?* I wondered. *Maybe a piece of glass or a smooth rock reflecting a sun ray?* I really wanted to believe so...

"Kadij..." I murmured diffidently.

"Yes?"

After a short hesitation, I pushed her to hurry up, shouting: "Run!"

Both of us had rushed to the end of the bridge in no time –

just a second before two laser beams had struck the scaffold, blowing it into gray clouds of ashes already being carried away by the winds.

Next moment I was taken aback at the sight of a round air vessel taking off from the depths of the gorge, now flying towards us.

“What's that?” I asked. *Stupid question...*

“I suppose you have seen an Yrkanian spacecraft before”, mocked Kadij Sao.

“But how...”

Before I had finished my sentence, Kadij Sao dashed towards me and pushed me aside with unexpected strength. A luminous ray blew the nearby rock up in a black cloud of suffocating dust. We crawled among the jagged boulders as fast as we could, in a hopeless effort to avoid the successive mortal rays that ploughed the ground around us, until we found cover behind a big bush of thyme hidden among lofty rocks. Kadij Sao sat up next to me, as the laser rays had stopped and a sinister silence reigned all over.

“So, they have lost your tracks”, she whispered in an ironic tone.

Then she fell silent and my eyes followed hers, as she seemed to be watching something interesting in a short distance beyond the rocks that protected us.

\* \* \* \* \*

The mysterious enemy had appeared all at once, behind a clump of thin poplars, and he was coming towards us with unfaltering, confident steps. *Draw your weapon*, a feeble inner voice ordered me, but somehow it was impossible for me to do so. I only stayed motionless, watching the man who was approaching firmly, until his figure could be clearly

discerned in the light of the stars.

“I suppose you know who this is”, Kadij Sao told me in a low voice.

I certainly knew who that man was; but it was the first time I met him in the flesh.

“Venor, son of Assar the Great, is heir to the throne of the Interstellar Yrkanian Empire. The power of his dynasty over numerous galactic civilizations is based on an age-long alliance with the Dark Forces” I said slowly, subconsciously trying to figure out what his presence here meant...

All at once I shivered, maybe from the cold, maybe from something else; then I was astounded at myself for not being able to take my eyes off the well-built body of prince Venor, as it was sensually outlined under the platinum-coloured uniform with the crimson epaulets and belt. His long, blond hair waved at the gusts of wind. In his right hand he was carrying an impressive firearm. The imperial pride and the unshakeable self-confidence made him radiate with a strong, almost perceptible aura.

“How did you find us, Venor?” asked Kadij Sao.

He didn't bother to give an answer; maybe he hadn't even heard her. He only smiled enigmatically as he lifted his firearm with both hands. *This weapon must be unusually heavy*, I reckoned. After he had made it steady on his right shoulder, he pulled a side lever. A soft, white flash came out of the wide barrel, together with a dull, humming sound. Kadij Sao and I stepped aside and rolled on the ground automatically; however, no mortal beam was launched against us, as if the weapon had not worked at all. Curiously enough, Venor didn't seem to care, nor did he seek to fire again. He just left the firearm on his shoulder, waiting. *What is he waiting for?* I wondered.

Next moment a wild roar of indefinable origin broke violently the silence of nature, so dreadful that paralyzed any reaction. Right after, the earth shook from a strong earthquake. A big, flat boulder nearby was torn in two pieces. A wide, zigzag fissure was formed on the ground and began unfolding itself fast, like a rushing snake. Kadij Sao's lantern tumbled down into the fissure, while mine was nowhere to see.

“Kadij!” I shouted in despair, as the ground sank under her feet and her cry of fear faded in the wind.

With a spasmodic jerk I managed to stand up on my feet and ran towards her. Before I knew it, I was precipitating too, among dark masses of stone, until I landed awkwardly beside her, on a soft hummock under the surface of the earth. We both let ourselves roll down, instinctively protecting our heads with our elbows, trying to avoid being hit by stones, broken rocks and ground that fell from above. Venor's triumphant laughter was fading in my ears, as the landslide was closing the fissure and the dim light of the evening was gone.

Absolute, musty darkness reigned in the underground cavity. Staying remarkably calm, Kadij Sao started fumbling the place all around, till she found her lantern and switched it on at once. The glass case was broken and the orange light was flickering weakly in the iron frame.

“That was close!” she uttered finally.

“I... I could never imagine...” I stuttered without finishing my sentence; *that the throne prince of Yrkania would be after me himself*, I meant to say.

“We are very lucky, you know”, went on Kadij Sao. “If this cavity wasn't right here, we would have been smashed by the rocks. Venor's weapon produces powerful supersonic waves that can demolish a whole block of flats or disturb the balance

of a sensitive territory, like this one”.

“So, what are we doing now?” I asked confused.

“The ancient tomb can't be very far, yet it will be difficult to orientate ourselves down here; let alone that Venor's appearance makes things even more complicated! We must get to the temple before he does!”

“I think we can make it...”

“We must be very careful from now on; the cave is a labyrinth and most paths lead to traps... I only hope the earthquake hasn't closed the correct passages!”

We followed an obscure tunnel that gaped on our right; it seemed to be endless as it wound itself in tortuous, rocky passageways. I slipped and fell many times while trying to climb up some heap of earth or stones, while Kadij Sao didn't seem to have the slightest problem with such obstacles. At certain points the tunnel was so narrow that we could hardly walk through, stooping one behind the other. I kept following Kadij Sao without saying a word, yet the claustrophobic, musty atmosphere made me feel more and more pessimistic.

At first I couldn't make out what that heap of rags thrown on the ground exactly was; a few minutes later Kadij Sao was passing by them, avoiding to look. It would have been certainly better for me if I had done the same, but I couldn't resist my curiosity: It wasn't a pleasant sight, all those human bones under tattered clothes. Three or four steps ahead there was a second skeleton, better preserved than the first one, holding on the stone wall with its right hand.

“You said nobody dares approach the Realms of the Long Night!” I whispered to Kadij Sao in a broken voice.

“Almost nobody!”

“What do you think killed those people?” I asked then, but

got no reply.

\* \* \* \* \*

Reaching the exit of the tunnel at last, we found ourselves before an immense, underground cavity full of impressive stalactites and stalagmites that sparkled magically in crystal tints of azure and pink. A small, shallow pool shimmered in the centre, its water slightly waving in the feeble air draughts. For a few moments I stood there motionless, enchanted by the natural beauty of the place. The cavity was softly illuminated by an eerie, gold-green light emitted from bright, green gems embedded on the walls, on the stalactites and stalagmites, on the ground, on the roof, everywhere.

“How wonderful! Let's go this way!” I suggested, ready to walk towards the lake.

“No!”

Kadij Sao grasped my arm firmly, preventing me from walking on.

“Why not?” I wondered.

“Those green gems can kill! The radiation they emit is so strong that it destroys tissues within minutes! Who gets in there, never comes back!”

We had to avoid lots of such cavities and tunnels full of those deadly gems. Many passages were obstructed by rocks and ground still settling after the artificial earthquake. Therefore, we often found ourselves repeating the same routes, going around in circles, in growing anxiety.

Maybe as a psychological reaction to my disappointment, my mind tended to stray; my thoughts were rather confused, without cohesion; more often than not, the figure of prince Venor was formed clearly in my imagination - dynamic, imposing, irresistible. *Why didn't I use my weapon when he*

*threatened us? Neither did Kadij Sao! Why, why indeed?* I wondered, without finding a plausible excuse. Quite a few times did I try to banish his image from my mind, but it kept on returning again and again. Luckily, Kadij Sao could not hear my heartbeat...

Crossing a semi-dark tunnel for the umpteenth time, I noticed a shallow, dirty brook fading into a narrow passage on our left, which was almost invisible at the dim light of the lantern. Kadij Sao didn't like the idea of our following that brook, yet she admitted there was no other alternative. I shivered with cold any time my back touched the cold walls, while the tunnel got very narrow at certain points. The lantern light was flickering dangerously, as the battery was low, but luckily it didn't go out. When we reached the end of the passageway at last, another immense, underground cavity spread before us, beyond the flat rock we were standing on.

\* \* \* \* \*

The whole sight was a phantasmagoria: the walls of the cave glowed smooth and translucent, as if vitrified, in soft shades of all colours of the rainbow. The stalactites and stalagmites took odd forms which urged the imagination to run wild. The place was studded with small, delicate, enchanting, vaulted buildings adorned with thin columns and finely carved pediments, all made of a white, iridescent material that looked like marble. The shallow brook, now clear and topaz blue, was winding its way among them. Everything was so calm and peaceful, as if no evil could ever reach this isolated, wonderful world. I took a deep breath and sighed, deep inside wishing I would never have to leave that fairy land...

We went down the rocks carefully and set ourselves to explore the vast cave; we lingered a lot, pausing and delaying more and more often before some fascinating edifice or odd stalagmite, admiring the unique beauty and the subtle magic

that emanated from every corner.

Then, as I let my eyes wander around, I saw her and hastened to her at once: There was a beautiful, young girl over there, knelt by the bank of the brook. *How come didn't I notice her before?* I asked myself. She was wearing a fine, light blue dress and a ribbon of the same colour on her long, flaxen hair. She didn't seem to perceive our presence, as she was fully absorbed in playing with the golden sand.

For a few moments I watched her like hypnotized; the sand was passing through her delicate fingers, over and over again, like liquefied silk. *Life is always escaping us, slipping through our fingers, and we just stay still, watching it running out moment by moment, until there is no more left, and the same is repeated through the centuries, from one incarnation to the other, and we always follow similar steps, in this relentless soul trap...* I pondered. A violent feeling of sorrow took over me for some seconds, an insupportable clasp in my heart that prevented me from moving on.

Suddenly the girl turned her head slowly and looked at me with two big, all white, blind eyes without pupils.

“Come to me”, she pleaded in a soft, sad voice.

Without even realizing it, I offered her my hand, having completely forgotten Kadij Sao, who was still next to me, watching the scene terror-stricken. The girl sought to touch me, but right then, a deafening inner voice woke me up; I withdrew my hand and stepped back with a start. The vacant eyes of the sprite got grim, and she frowned at me with anger. Her charm was still affecting me but I didn't stir. The following moments lasted an eternity, until the girl moved her hand slowly and showed me an obscure passageway on her left.

Next instant the apparition began to melt away in the air, little

by little, like a deceptive nightmare which fades in the light of consciousness. The same happened to the mysterious underground city with the enchanting, marble-like buildings. We were in an ordinary, chilly cave now, crowded with stalagmites and stalactites that looked inhospitable and aggressive; the dirty brook kept on murmuring its sad song among them.

“I should have suspected it from the start”, said Kadij Sao thoughtful. “The brook carries a narcotic substance from the soil of the banks, which allows communion with other dimensions or causes illusions; either explanation is correct. If you had let the sprite hypnotize you, you would have been lost for ever, who knows where!”

“Why didn't you stop me?” I wondered.

“You wouldn't have listened to me anyway; but what's most important is that this trial proved you have a strong spirit!”

We walked to the tunnel the apparition had pointed at, and entered it in tense silence. Suddenly, I felt extremely impatient: I just couldn't wait any longer; I wanted that endless exploration in the Realms of the Long Night to be over at last...

\* \* \* \* \*

Fortunately, the sprite had showed us the correct way: When we reached the end of the tunnel at last, we saw the temple of the Last Diviner, now dilapidated but still enigmatic and eerie, dominating a vast cave. We walked on taciturn among the prehistoric ruins, the spectre of a long oblivion reigning in the melancholic atmosphere. There were lots of broken, carved stones scattered all over the place; only the marble gate of the ancient temple loomed before us lofty; we passed it hesitantly and entered the empty spaces that once were parts of the sacred site.

Finally, our steps led us to an old, metal, unexpectedly well-preserved door that seemed to be fastened in a rectangular cavity carved in the rock. It receded creaking to the pressure of my hands, revealing the relief lid of a sarcophagus inside the ancient crypt. There was a woman's figure engraved on it, and an embossed inscription under her feet.

“Alba, who shines for ever”, explained Kadij Sao in a low voice, fumbling the ideograms with her fingers.

I could feel the blood running cold in my veins as I was opening the lid of the sarcophagus with great difficulty. I stood dumbfounded when I faced the mummy inside. I didn't dare lay a finger on it; I only stared at it like mesmerized. Alba, the last diviner of the Realms of the Long Night, still looked reverend and majestic in her gold-embroidered garments and impressive jewels. On her head there glittered a diadem adorned with amethysts, emeralds, rubies and other valuable gems. All at once, a strange sense of familiarity took over me...

I can't really tell what exactly happened next. My eyes began to sting and tear, probably because of the insufficient light and the ancient dust swirling around. I was also feeling dizzy due to the musty fumes and the humidity of the place; in fact, I could hardly breathe.

Then, all of a sudden, as if something had broken inside me, I experienced a violent inner transition – a radical change in my perceptive potentiality, as if my sense of reality was expanding rapidly. Without even being aware of my doing so, I lifted my hands slowly, took the diadem off the head of the mummy and put it on, as if it were mine.

What I experienced right after is beyond description; all at once, I sensed an overwhelming surge of awareness rushing in my conscience; every cell of my body was suddenly filled with an incredible load of energy that made me feel more

alive than ever. I looked around with wide open eyes, dazzled, for I was having a transcendental vision: I was now elsewhere, in a spectral edifice that could be the original temple of Alba, splendid and imposing in its marble perfection, just as it used to be at the time of its glory, thousands of years ago. I could perceive strange alterations in the spaces, odd angles and rotundities, translucent or shining surfaces – what I would later recognize as characteristics of the astral planes.

Alba was standing before me, in front of her alabaster throne. Her impeccable face radiated with unearthly, inner calmness. The bright, blue eyes sparkled out the wisdom of centuries. The long, golden hair waved softly under the rays of a spectral, white sun. How strange, though; as I was standing there observing the ancient diviner, it felt as if I identified myself with her in some uncanny way. There were moments in time when I was Alba; her world was my world, her extraordinary knowledge, incredible experiences, rare mental abilities and psychic powers were mine. For a moment in eternity and for all eternity Alba and I were one.

The torpor was slowly gone, the storm in my mind settled down, my conscience was gradually set free from the spiritual influence of Alba. An unprecedented, unbroken inner peace filled every piece of my soul. I felt as if I had returned home after countless years of pointless wandering; I had just reached the end of my journey, yet I was only in the beginning...

\* \* \* \* \*

Once again I was wreathed in the darkness of the cave, broken only by the trembling light of Kadij Sao's lantern. After I had closed the lid of the sarcophagus and the metal door of the crypt, we both turned round silent, ready to take the way back to the village.

“Don't hurry! You are never going to get out of here!”

A minute ago I did not even remember his existence, but now he was standing there facing us, wrathful and threatening, having just stepped out of the opposite tunnel. It was the throne prince Venor of Yrkania, impressive and haughty in his crimson uniform. In his left hand he was holding a heavy laser weapon. Five of his soldiers were already ranged around him, all of them armed with laser guns and inexpressive like droids.

“You dared defy the Yrkanian Empire, Sandra Anderson, but you are too insignificant for something like that!” Venor's voice sounded sonorous all around.

Next moment he lifted his weapon, ready to fire at me. I didn't even stir.

“Here is your first mission, Sandra”, announced Kadij Sao calm. “You must get us out of here alive!”

I felt a sting of doubt in my heart. *Can I?* I thought. Right then, the enemy fired.

I dodged the mortal beam with an acrobatic jump which surprised even me: I sprang backwards, up on a rock and then down, performing an impressive somersault on air. I acted instinctively and in absolute ease, as if I had confronted such challenges countless times in the past. I had become someone else indeed; I was united to my real self, I now knew who I was, what I could do and what my purpose in life was. My real life was just beginning.

Venor repeated his attack again and again with growing stubbornness, while I was actually enjoying my skillful dance amongst the mortal laser beams. At a moment I sought to counterattack with the laser gun Kadij Sao had provided me with; I was astonished at my marksmanship, as I managed to put out of action one of the enemies with one sole fire.

Taking cover behind a bulky rock, I took a glimpse of Kadij Sao who had got into the battle as well. I was astounded to watch her use her martial arts skills effectively and neutralize two Yrkanian soldiers who had initially believed they had trapped her. I wondered at her fast movements, as well as her extraordinary strength and suppleness.

Seconds later I had to abandon the protection of the rock, so as to avoid being struck by multiple laser beams; the two remaining armed soldiers had come too close, attacking and covering each other in wondrous synchronization. I rolled on the ground really fast and found cover behind a group of thick stalagmites near the furthest end of the cavity, however the enemies got even nearer, scanning the whole place lynx-eyed. As they came quite close, I slipped stealthily among the stalagmites, until I reached the spot I considered right for my next attack. I knew there was no margin for mistakes.

Overcoming my last hesitations, I jumped high and dealt a front kick at the face of the soldier who had approached too much; simultaneously, I fired at the other one. They both collapsed on the ground motionless. I hid myself behind a lofty stalactite and watched prince Venor facing me. He was all alone and uncovered.

“Kill him now, Sandra! You will never get such a chance again!” cried Kadij Sao.

It would have been very easy; all I had to do was pull the trigger. However, my hand refused to obey...

Right then, I discerned an imperceptible smile at the prince's lips. All at once, he turned and rushed backwards like a flash, seeking cover behind the rocks, firing like crazy against both of us. It was only instinct that saved us, as we fell on the ground and crawled fast among rocks and boulders, till we found cover behind the ruins of the temple.

At an unsuspected time I looked up and saw Kadij Sao who had cunningly slipped through the rocks and stood up behind the marble gate. She was aiming at Venor with her laser weapon. No, she wouldn't miss...

Without even thinking about it, I sprang up and, performing a super fast set of unforeseeable jumps and air somersaults among rocks and boulders, I got closer and closer to the stunned enemy. Both my feet kicked his chest hard, making him lose balance and fall down; there followed a final blow with my elbow on his right temple, and Venor lost his senses.

If I hadn't been quick enough, the prince would have been dead by that moment. Kadij Sao had watched the whole scene dumbfounded, hardly believing what she had just witnessed. There was an ionized silence between us, and our eyes met in equivocal acknowledgement.

\* \* \* \* \*

It wasn't long before we found the moonlit exit of the cave called Realms of the Long Night at last. We had to climb up a high heap of broken rocks in order to get out to the fresh air, but that seemed to be nothing more than a child's game after all we had been through. The golden full moon loomed over the lacy mountaintops, slowly going down to its setting, as dawn was about to break. Innumerable stars were still sparkling on the night sky. I felt wonderful, as if the whole universe was my home.

After a lot of trekking, we eventually reached the edge of the gorge; just then we realized it would be impossible for us to cross over the same way we had arrived, since the wooden bridge was no longer there.

It was not too hard to discover Venor's abandoned aircraft; it was silver-coloured and round in shape, full of oval windows at the sides. Kadij Sao hacked the code of the entrance door

with considerable ease, and we embarked right away. She sat at the pilot's seat and programmed the air vessel to take off right away.

For a few minutes the air vessel soared above the mountainous area, until it landed on a big, flat rock at the opposite side of the precipice. To say I was flabbergasted at Kadij Sao's skills would be an understatement.

“We had better get rid of the craft”, I suggested then.

“That's right; let's make Venor's life a little more difficult!” smiled Kadij Sao and set the automatic pilot with quick, accurate movements.

After we had walked away, I heard the dull humming sound of the engines again. With mixed feelings I watched Venor's aircraft rising fast; it soared over the gorge for a few seconds, then it started to lose height until it was lost in the dark depths of the crooked ravine.

Next moment the whole gorge shook of the explosion, shining like an erupting volcano. A fiery glow lingered for a few seconds; we watched it fading away little by little, till it was all swallowed up by the blackness of the night. When there was peace and quiet again, we headed for the village without uttering a word.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the morning I bid farewell to Kadij Sao and left Ladang and the mountains of Leng, as well as planet Jeiri-4, setting off for a space travel that would be never meant to end.

So, that was how it all began...

*My interminable exploration through the infinite worlds of the multiverse, as far as the most remote areas of the cosmic network, fighting all kinds of evil in every world and every plane.*

*Fateful choices, traversing the spiral vortex of time and space, lead beyond the insupportable earthly reality to alien dreamlands or, even, nightmarelands.*

*Each adventure is a personal magic ritual. I cannot foresee the result of such rituals, but there must always be a result for there are synchronicities between dimensions, or points of contact between the material world and the astral planes.*

*More is yet to come.*

# Story Twenty-Six: Descent to the Nether Zone

*originally handwritten  
from 22<sup>nd</sup> June to 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 2000*

It was an enchanting evening on the semi-material asteroid of Eldyla. The sun was setting beyond the prismatic cliffs that rise above the always smooth Selenian Sea. Peter of the Stars, ruler and king of this world, and I were sitting on a purple reef near the shore and talked in low voices under the carmine sky. Two young lovers together in the sunset; it could have been a romantic scene, but our conversation was not romantic at all.

“Eldyla is no longer what it used to be”, said Peter, with a dismal face. “I’ll try to explain as simply as possible: The atmosphere seems to be heavier now; the elemental fairies are getting harder and harder to meet; the sirens are hidden deep into the sea; even the sun seems to have lost some of its brightness; but the worst of all is that my people are changing too: The once joyful inhabitants of Eldyla have become uneasy, stressed, aggressive; they are neither innocent nor carefree anymore. Moment by moment they resemble more and more the inhabitants of the Material World: They have started to claim property, they compete each other for social prevalence, they even seem to be aging faster... It is as if an adverse wind was blowing all over Eldyla, an insofar unknown evil marching into our souls, and nobody can do anything to stop it...”

I was listening to him carefully, without uttering a word. I had

never seen him so dejected before. I wished I could tell him that he was wrong, that it was all a bad phase he was going through, but no; I couldn't say that. Unfortunately, he was right about everything he said; for some strange reason, I couldn't experience the familiar sense of bliss and lightness I once experienced in Eldyla. The landscape was still exquisite of course, but the magic seemed to be fading fast. It almost felt like one of those exotic tourist resorts, where everything looks great but you get the impression it's all a kind of stage scenery which might fall apart the very next minute.

“How can this be possible Peter? Have you got any idea about what has caused such a sinister change?”

He lowered his eyes only to give a hesitant answer: “The Ethereal Flame, our most sacred gem which balances energies all over Eldyla, has been lost, Sandra! I know it sounds incredible, but somebody managed to take it from the Ancestral Sanctuary...”

“What? Who... How?” I stuttered in astonishment. “Ordinary spaceships cannot reach Eldyla! Only my *Zephyrus* can travel to semi-material dimensions...”

“I don't know how, but a dimensional vortex has been opened”, he answered quickly, averting his eyes.

“In this case, Eldyla is not inaccessible anymore! Our enemies will find out, sooner or later!” I exclaimed, hardly believing I was uttering those words.

The breeze got colder as the sun was sinking in the fiery horizon, under the scarlet sky. A sudden chill made me shiver. No, this place was not the Eldyla I knew; it still looked the same, but quite soon this would change too.

“What can we do, Peter?” I asked, fearing what the answer would be.

“There is only one way,” he sighed. “If we enter the

dimensional vortex and follow it all the way back, it will lead us to the Ethereal Flame and to who stole it.”

“But there is no way to know our destination before it is too late...”

“I'm afraid so...”

“We shall do it anyway; we cannot allow a fairy world like Eldyla to be destroyed”, I assured him.

“I knew I could count on you, Sandra”, he smiled and kissed me softly.

We spoke no more; we just stayed on the purple reef in each other's arms for a while, observing the dying sunset in melancholic reverie.

\* \* \* \* \*

Contrary to my expectations, I was disappointed to see that the Ancestral Sanctuary had turned into a rather obscure site. It was splendid and impressive once, but now it stood half-ruined and muddy, as signs of violent intrusion were visible everywhere. In the centre of the stone cavity there was an elevated base which had the shape of a perfect circle; two separate flights of stairs led to it. The whole construction was made of a shiny, green material that could be found only on Eldyla. Under the base there was a strange cylindrical chamber with transparent, crystalline walls; oddly enough it stood in perfect condition, unlike the rest of the ancient edifice.

“This is where the Ethereal Flame had been kept safe for centuries” explained Peter, pointing at the chamber. “The Dimensional Gate is right on top of it, as you can see.”

I had to run in order to keep up with Peter, who was already entering the crystalline chamber. We both stood in front of an odd control panel made of some iridescent material. Peter

commenced the necessary operations on the calyx-shaped keys, reciting sternly as if to himself:

“A random horizon can be crossed in nine dimensions... a reproduction of this horizon can be achieved with a dynamic distortion of these dimensions... a dynamic transposition of a range between 10 to 23 dynes is possible for macroscopic periods...”

“What did you just do Peter?” I asked to know.

“I've made sure we'll be back here before it's too late”, he explained in a flat voice. “The dimensional vortex is due to open in five minutes,” he went on. “It opens more and more frequently ever since the holy gem was stolen. For the time being, it opens once an hour for three seconds. Unless we find the Ethereal Flame and put it back in its place, the Gate will soon be continually open...”

“This doesn't sound good,” I acknowledged, full of concern.

“If this happens, an alien dimension will invade Eldyla and will cause it to collapse – and this for starts!”

Right after, we ran up the stairs to the round base and entered the green circle of the Dimensional Gate. Neither of us uttered a word, but we could both sense an aura of intrinsic danger lingering inside its perimeter.

Peter had insisted on taking neutrino-naser guns with us, which surprised me a lot. We rarely use such weapons because they consume a lot of energy, they can cause extreme damage to anything made of matter and reduce to burnt dust any organic tissue in a split second. Apart from that, he decided to also carry a laser sword.

“We must stay inside the Gate, remain as calm as possible, and wait for the vortex to open,” were his last instructions.

Then, we both stood still in the middle of the circular base,

facing each other. We held hands, closed our eyes, emptied our minds, and waited.

\* \* \* \* \*

At first there was absolute darkness, nothing but void stretching to infinity. Multiple layers of space and time fluttered in a rhythmic alternation of existence and non-existence. Then, the void began to whirl into a black spectral vortex, carrying my conscience into deeper and deeper levels of nothingness; soon the vortex became a reluctant vision of blurred images that shook violently together in a horrible dance.

Suddenly, there was a strange, acute odor – a suffocating, sulfuric stench. The blackness was receding now, slowly giving way to ash-coloured images of immense size that stirred ominously before my tear-flooded eyes. The atmosphere was still too hazy for me to see anything; I sought to lean on a wall, a rock, anything, in order to stand up on my feet. I finally touched down but I had a peculiar, loathing sense on my fingertips, as if I were touching raw meat.

“Peter? Where are you?” I asked in a faint voice.

No reply.

“Where are we, Peter?”

Still no reply.

After a few long moments, I heard him shout: “Oh, no!”

“What's the matter? What's happening?” I asked impatiently.

At that moment my eyes cleared and I was stunned at the sight of the weird environment surrounding us. However, I was certain that Peter had seen something else here, something extremely dreadful I still couldn't make out.

“That needn't be so; I hoped it wouldn't be so...” he cried, ashen with despair.

The ground we were standing on was a smooth, greasy surface in the colour of vomit; the walls around us were an abhorrent structure of dark green flesh and jointed bones, interlaced and distorted in unbelievable combinations. The sulfuric stench was still there but somehow it grew fainter and fainter; I assumed I was getting used to it.

“I'd hate to see the inhabitants of this place,” I uttered in a low voice.

Peter gave me a look that made me freeze.

“We had better hurry,” he said. “The Ethereal Flame can't be far from here; it's only that these walls... hmm... change every now and then!”

“What?” I cried.

He had already moved on, with his laser sword in hand; while walking, he kept testing the blade on the fleshy walls, causing them to bleed here and there – to my great astonishment and disgust. *Why is he doing that?* I wondered, but didn't dare ask. All of a sudden, a big hole appeared beside him, as a mass of gristle withdrew at the touch of his luminous blade.

“This way!” he urged me to follow him through the opening.

“Tell me, Peter, have you visited this place before?” I asked softly.

Again, no answer.

I had no alternative but follow him into that hole -which was already getting smaller and smaller- climbing up repugnant, fleshy masses that oozed a purulent liquid from bulging cysts. As soon as we passed through, we found ourselves in another revolting place which looked like an abnormally long intestine. The dark, crimson walls were entwined with a thick network of veins; weird, boney outgrowths sprouted up all over the greasy surfaces.

“What is this place, Peter?” I demanded to know once more.

“This is the Nether Zone,” he answered bluntly.

“You are kidding, right?”

“It's very dangerous in here! So, keep your eyes open and your mouth shut!” he announced firm and quickened his pace.

We waded for a while along a shallow stream of gray slime that flowed slowly along the fleshy tunnel. I was constantly striving to ignore my disgust, as well as a growing suspicion that Peter had actually led me into this hell, for I was now certain he knew exactly where we were.

All at once a thundering noise was heard; an abnormal groan (produced by what kind of throat?) echoed deafening all around. We both stood there frozen, watching with wide open eyes the abominable walls split asunder and four nightmarish, gigantic beings troop in with deliberate steps. They all had beast-like heads with huge tusks and long antlers; in the place of their eyes there were emissions of a white steaming gas; their sturdy bodies were well hidden inside a heavy exoskeleton. However, the most hideous thing about them was the aura of pure evil they sent out.

“We have just met the Keepers of the Treasury! The gem must be somewhere near,” announced Peter with a composure that surprised me more than the appearance of the monsters.

“How do we fight them?” I only asked.

“We don't!”

“...!”

“Just try to reach that round gap on your left, alright?” he went on, thrusting his laser sword back in its sheath.

Next moment he launched an attack with his neutrino-naser weapon, trying to cover me as effectively as possible, while I

was running frantically towards the gap that was already closing fast. Once or twice I almost bumped on gigantic arms and clawed hands which I should have dodged a lot more easily, since those beasts were rather sluggish. Nevertheless, for some strange reason, ever since we set foot in that unholy place I felt heavier and less supple than usual – and I was sure Peter felt the same too. Anyway, I didn't have time to think about it at that moment; hardly avoiding another terrible blow from a monster's fist, I finally sprang through the dark gap, having no idea where I was going to end up next. The last thing I saw before jumping through was Peter being swatted down by a gigantic palm and his neutrino-naser weapon slipping off his hand.

\* \* \* \* \*

I stood up breathless and scanned the place quickly with my eyes. It was even darker in there, but I was surprised to find out it looked more like a crypt than a monster's bowels. There were numerous items crowded in that odd chamber; some of them were lying in piles on the floor, whereas others were neatly placed in built-in shelves made of bone. I recognized most of them, since they represented mystic symbols widely known in many human and non-human civilizations, such as swastikas, crosses, pentacles, circles, crescent moons, arrows, as well as idolatrous items and statuettes of gods and goddesses. There were also numerous gems of different colours and sizes kept in transparent showcases, but I acknowledged at once that none of them was impressive enough to be the Ethereal Flame.

I started searching all over the place impatiently, carefully observing all the exhibits one by one; this proved to be a rather difficult task, since the room was poorly illuminated by a soft blue light that came through the vaulted, membranous roof. I can't tell how much time had elapsed, but my joy was indescribable when I finally saw the Ethereal

Flame resting on an elaborate, lofty base built of bones, metal and leather at the furthestmost corner of the crypt. Without a second thought, I grasped the azure gem with the eerie, multiple-layered shine and threw it inside the pocket of my garment. Then I turned round and got ready to flee – only that I didn't know how...

All of a sudden the petrified wall on my right split apart and two of the Keepers rushed in furious. I took out my neutrino-naser weapon and fired at once. The thick, radiant beam struck one of the menacing giants; he froze still for a second, just before he was reduced to fetid ashes whirling in the stuffy air. In the meantime, the other one turned round and disappeared through the gap again, with a quickness that surprised me. *It's a strange but fortunate thing that these creatures carry no weapons at all*, I pondered. My heart was beating like a drum, as I barely had the time to pass through the narrow passage which was already closing fast behind me. This means I actually followed that monster, but at that time I considered I had no other alternative...

Next moment I found myself in a tracheal tunnel, and I was extremely relieved to see there was no sign of the Keepers there. I started running frantically along the grayish tunnel, without even daring to look back.

In the meanwhile, just when he thought everything was lost since he was badly cornered, Peter suddenly watched his utmost dangerous enemies grow indifferent towards him, turn their backs and disappear into newly-opened exits on the abominable walls; and he understood he had no more time to lose...

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I was relieved and astonished to see Peter running towards me along the tubular tunnel with the tracheal walls. *As though he knew exactly where to find me*, was my first thought as

soon as he came into view. It was a most pleasant surprise to see he was holding his weapon again, but that was no time for us to rejoice; the battle with the ghastly dwellers of the Nether Zone was far from over yet.

“I've got the Ethereal Flame and killed one of the Keepers; but how shall we get out of here?” I asked breathless.

“We must be extremely careful from now on,” he replied frowning. “They know we have the gem, so there is an alarm all over the Nether Zone; besides, you have killed one of their kind and they must be outraged. Moreover, the dimensional vortex is going to open in eight minutes; this means we have to last that long and return to the place of our arrival”.

“Can you tell me a few things about this land and these beings?” I wanted to know as we kept walking hastily along the tracheal passageway.

“The inhabitants of the Nether Zone are considered to be the darkest entities in the whole universe; only the most corrupted souls, those who have served evil willfully during their lives, end up here after their physical death”, he answered, constantly on the lookout for an appropriate spot to open an exit.

“It is a land of the dead, then; but we are here, though still alive!”

“Not exactly,” he chuckled.

“Not exactly?!”

“This world belongs to a dimension of very high density of matter; that's why you feel so heavy and sluggish here...”

“You mean... we are virtually dead in a land of the dead?” I asked, trying hard to contain my composure.

“Something like that... We are trapped in the den of the most powerful and malicious beings in the universe. I wouldn't

even try to imagine what will happen to us in case they capture us, but it will be worse than anything you can imagine!” he explained flatly.

Then he fell silent and kept striking the fleshy walls with his luminous blade, opening bleeding holes here and there, not having found an exit yet.

A little later, the tracheal passageway split in two. I was bewildered, but Peter took the left path without pausing at all, as if he knew exactly where we were going.

“Are you scared, or what?” he asked then, and I hated the complacent look in his eyes.

As a matter of fact, I had never been more scared in my life. The surrounding environment looked even more abhorrent now, as the fleshy walls seemed to be thicker, maybe swollen, studded with purulent cysts and long, bulging veins.

“We are shortening the distance,” he explained calmly. “This is the shortest way to...”

“Have you been here before?” I interrupted him.

“Let's stop chatting and move faster, alright?”

I considered that an affirmative answer.

All at once I noticed a membranous opening in the shape of a lozenge, about one metre wide, shimmering on our left. Peter of the Stars paid no attention and kept walking, always looking for a way out. I knew I would regret this, but I was too curious to resist; so, I approached and had a closer look inside the opening. Peter paused and followed me reluctantly.

Next moment, we both stood dumbfounded at the atrocious sight: Inside the vast cavity that gaped underneath, there were countless human and humanoid figures; all of them were tied to strange, thick chains which shone like gristle chords and immobilized every single part of their bodies. All captives

were more or less mutilated, distorted, or transmuted. Some of them had one or more limbs missing; others were growing alien body parts entirely ill-matched to the rest of their bodies; human heads were slowly turning to something I didn't want to know about; others were growing tentacles in the place of their missing limbs; others had membranous wings of various sizes and colours in the place of their arms; all of them were gradually changing into something horrid. I let a strangled cry of terror when I realized they were all not only alive but fully conscious, moaning and groaning in their endless misery.

“So, this is what happens to those who get captured here,” said Peter in a feeble voice, as we kept on walking hastily. “These unfortunate souls usually become undying slaves of the dominant tribe. And this fate is worse than death...”

“Is the tribe immortal?” I asked to know.

“Yes, you could say that...”

“Where is the damn vortex?”

I had barely finished my question when a gruesome, shuffling noise echoed behind us and made my blood freeze. I heard Peter cry “Watch out!” harshly. Turning round at once, I saw one of the monsters entering through a newly-formed gap on the wall, while others were arriving fast behind it. At the same time, the dimensional vortex began to gradually take shape only a few steps ahead of us but not near enough.

Soon the place was full of gigantic, beast-headed monsters with steaming eyes and the worst intentions. Peter and I drew our neutrino-naser weapons simultaneously, while the dimensional vortex of tiny sparkling lights was whirling brighter and brighter, faster and faster.

“We have to hurry! The gate is opening!” cried Peter.

Then he sprang aside with an impressive somersault, hardly

evading a dreadful blow from a huge clawed hand. I, however, didn't move fast enough to dodge a terrible blow from another clawed hand, which tore part of my garment and sent me flying through the stuffy air. I bumped hard against the opposite wall, yet this didn't hurt as much as I had expected and I managed to stand up on my feet almost immediately. Eventually, it was fortunate that those walls were not made of stone...

Next moment I realized I had lost the Ethereal Flame. To my terror, I saw it shining dimly between a monster's skeletal legs. I had no other alternative but dash towards it, recuperate it in a split second and roll away on the scaly ground, in a desperate attempt to reach the vortex on time. Right then, only an instant before it would pounce on me, the creature was struck by a white radiant beam and fell apart in burnt dust; Peter had just fired at it with his neutrino-naser weapon. A horrifying roar of extreme wrath echoed all over the place and the rest of the creatures rallied against us, more ferocious than ever. I heard Peter shout "Move now!", while the spectral vortex was now seething furious just two steps away.

There was no time left; we had to escape immediately or stay in that horrible place for another hour. The latter was out of the question, of course...

Fighting hard to overcome my sluggishness, I barely avoided hideous gigantic arms by performing multiple jumps and somersaults or air, while Peter had to rush down and roll on the bumpy ground amongst monstrous legs. Nevertheless we did it at last – we finally darted together into the swirling dimensional vortex, which shrouded us in a blinding embrace.

\* \* \* \* \*

Our return to Eldyla proved to be more frightening than our descent into the Nether Zone: For an indefinable span of time

-could be moments, could be centuries- I felt like being disintegrated in a bottomless whirl of darkness, my conscience shut down to nothingness. Then, I was born again.

The first form shaped in the gray haze of my mind was Peter's expressive face with the emerald slit eyes and the wavy red hair – a beloved presence that helped me put myself together again. Fumbling around instinctively, I finally touched smooth rock, which meant that transition had been successfully completed. Yet, I could feel something was wrong, for the same repulsive stench was still in my nostrils – the familiar odor of the Nether Zone and its inhabitants. *How is this possible?* I wondered breathless, not daring to suppose anything. Then I noticed Peter was panting in agony; we both waited motionless for the haze to melt away in the ominous silence.

Suddenly there was a tremendous rumbling sound and the earth shook vehemently as if from an earthquake – a phenomenon insofar unknown in the fairy-like world of Eldyla. Next instant the ground burst under our feet with a deafening noise; we were violently thrown off the circular base, while two of the horrid giants of the Nether Zone were rising over the ruins of the Ancestral Sanctuary. I screamed, trying to keep my balance against a lofty, jagged rock that had suddenly risen beside me. Fiery, smoking eyes focused on me angrily, exploding gases still scorching my feet.

As the air cleared out a little, the full size of destruction was revealed: The Ancestral Sanctuary was no more there; only a small crater was in its place now. However, the dimensional base was still intact, which I considered very strange. *Can it be really indestructible?* I wondered.

Right after, I realized I had lost the Ethereal Flame -again. My eyes scoured the whole place full of anguish, and I saw it rolling down towards the centre of the crater, shining dimly

with its eerie light.

Next instant Peter rushed to retrieve the gem, while the taller one of the monsters was casting its huge, threatening shadow over him. I had to distract it somehow, and I had to do it now; without thinking twice, I swooped down with a flying kick and a loud martial cry, fortunately taking the giant by surprise. My left foot kicked hard its broad forehead, forcing him to make one step back. No big victory, but it gave Peter the time he needed to grab the gem, twist his body fast, draw his neutrino-naser weapon and fire at the other monster, who had just rushed down the crater and was about to grab him. Gray ashes swirled up on the purple velvet sky, while another deafening step made the ground tremble. Peter barely dodged a gigantic foot that was about to trample him, dashing towards the edge of the crater. The Ethereal Flame slipped off his hand and ended in a narrow fissure between two boulders; he strove to reach it but his hand couldn't get through.

In the meanwhile, the remaining monster was rising wrathful, ready to seize him with his dreadful hands. Peter turned round immediately but stumbled slightly on a big stone which happened to be exactly behind his right foot. Yet, he maintained his balance, raised his neutrino-naser weapon and aimed at the monster, which had now come too close. He fired at once but, to his and my horror, the enemy just kept standing there. I was taken aback only for an instant; then I realized there was not enough energy left in Peter's gun, not enough to eliminate a dweller of the Nether Zone. I took out mine and fired immediately; I sighed in relief when I saw the giant monster disintegrate into swirling ashes. I ran to Peter, helped him stand up and gave him a long, passionate kiss that made us forget everything else for a few blissful moments.

Then we had all the time we needed to seek and find the holy gem under the boulders. Nevertheless, there were still some problems to be solved:

“The dimensional vortex will open again soon; more monsters will appear. Can't we seal it somehow?” I asked, fearing what the answer would be.

“The Gate must be destroyed. A reinforced neutrino-naser weapon can do that, but it will consume an enormous amount of energy. We need new guns; let's not waste time”, he replied thoughtfully and beckoned we should leave at once.

“The Ancestral Sanctuary has been ruined. Where will the Ethereal Flame be kept from now on?” I wondered, as we were walking down the thorny path to the moonlit Selenian Sea.

“I suppose a new sanctuary must be built in its place, the sooner the better”.

“Such a disaster has never occurred on Eldyla before. How will you explain this to your people?” I was curious to know.

“Frankly, I have no idea...”

# Story Twenty-Seven: The Sect of the Solar Crown

*originally handwritten  
from 5<sup>th</sup> August 2000 to 17<sup>th</sup> February 2002*

There is a certain reason why humans tend to avoid isolated places, no matter how picturesque or peaceful they may seem to be. The grandeur of nature might conceal dangerous secrets in itself, however the gravest perils often emanate from a foreign presence, that is a human presence, which is usually indicated by man-made constructions.

I can't tell exactly why, but I have always considered such constructions as a sign of lurking threat, especially when they rise all alone, in icy silence, on apparently virgin mountain tops or untrodden forests.

A strong feeling of apprehension overtook me as soon I came in view of the so-called Tower of Oblivion. It emerged solitary in the valley of Barynx, up on a rocky hill carved with successive flights of stairs. It stood there bleak and abandoned – a beacon or a symbol of the new reality awaiting anyone who might pass that landmark and enter the territory of the Sect of the Solar Crown: *From now on forget who you are, what you did, what you wanted and what you expected from the future...*

Only for an instant I paused and thought of turning round and going back – but no; this time I had a double mission to accomplish... So, I took a deep breath and walked on until I reached the wind-swept, wooden bridge that led to the tower and beyond it. While I was crossing it, I began to revolve an extempore poem over in my mind, again and again, probably

because it prevented me from thinking I was heading for the castle of the notorious Sect of the Solar Crown.

*There is a valley in the mountains of Barynx  
stretching under the overcast sky.*

*As thunder and lightning dance above me,  
high trees swish like moaning widows.*

*Their howling dirge reminds me  
of how you were lost and how I suffered,  
while I am walking past  
whitened bones on gray sand...*

After I had passed by the Tower of Oblivion, I took the rising path to the foggy mountaintop, under an overcast, never dawning sky. My heart leaped as I finally came in view of the imposing castle that loomed up to the heavy clouds, its vaulted turrets playing hide-and-seek with the roseate haze. Thick shafts of lightning flashed over the old edifice, occasionally illuminating its huge, rhomboid, front windows and the impressive, weird-shaped gateway. Thunder roared and wept all around, ill-omened like a black-dressed bride.

Before long I reached the stone bridge which connected the rocky mountain side with the castle. I paused and stared at the two sizable front windows that gave me the impression of gigantic, glaring eyes. Between them, the arched gateway resembled a monster's wide-open mouth with long, metal, sabre teeth shining ominously in the flash of lightning. The cold wind made me shiver, as it struck me like a messenger of unholy secrets lurking within the veils of the astral planes.

I started to cross the old bridge with slow, careful steps; I knew that things might get really nasty from now on. In fact, I had to hurry otherwise it would soon be too late for anything...

As soon as I entered the sinister gateway, I faced the heavy, stone portal that led inside the castle. After an instant hesitation, I took out my laser gun and aimed at it. However, right at that moment the portal opened slowly with a loud, squeaking noise. I stepped in with rapt attention and found myself in a completely empty hall – which I considered rather strange. At the far end of the room there was a narrow spiral stairway leading to the upper floors. I paused and breathed the musty air for a second; I could sense no sign of danger, just an odd stillness.

I was heading for the stairs, when I heard a soft thud behind me. I turned round and stared at the shadowy figure which had just appeared by the entrance. Then, a piercing woman's laugh echoed all around, making the blood run cold in my veins. As she came closer, in the semi-darkness I could make out a slender, young warrior woman. She seemed to have come out of nowhere, and she was glaring at me with fiery eyes. She was dressed in long, loose, colourful garments; in her hands she was brandishing a shiny, silver sword, and she was ready to attack. Her whole appearance recalled ancient, noble times of worlds long gone and forgotten.

Next moment she assaulted me, fast like lightning and furious like a wild steed. I was forced to step back towards the stairway, her silver blade shining ominously in the hazy semi-darkness. Her movements were incredibly quick and accurate, and I could hardly dodge them with acrobatic movements. Indeed, I was astounded at her skills: she was fighting as if her feet were not touching the floor, her loud martial cries resounding all over the place. I used my laser gun against her but she moved so fast that I often had the impression she could predict my intentions. Only once or twice I almost scorched her hair with my luminous beams, but those were too short and doubtful victories. She counterattacked with an impressive flying kick, and next

instant my weapon was kicked off my hand, while I fell on the floor stunned. Right after, she stood over me, aiming to strike the final, mortal blow with her blade on my chest. All I could do at the time was to scream “No!”, tending both my hands towards her instinctively trying to protect myself.

Right next moment, I felt a sudden surge of *power* inside me, and I released a blast of energy through my fingertips against the threatening enemy. She glared at me bewildered for a couple of dramatic seconds; then her silver blade shimmered strangely, like a sun ray, and she actually disappeared behind it, leaving behind nothing but agitated darkness.

“An apparition!” I lisped astounded.

*That was just an apparition, yet her sword cut like real steel,* I pondered, feeling my cheeks turn pale with anguish. Obviously, the mystics of the sect knew I was coming; I assumed they had sent that apparition because they wanted to show me I didn't stand a chance against them.

On second thoughts, however, it was clear to me that the above incident was just a test of worthiness. According to their own inner traits, each would-be disciple had to go through a different test at the time of their arrival, so as to be accepted by the sect. As it was widely known, they always welcomed new members, emphasizing though that "once you are in, you are never out". It was true that nobody had ever left the sect – not even Lysander, the one and only son of the planet's governor.

The governor of the planet Zinra had had no news from his twenty-year-old son ever since the latter joined the sect, so he hired me to find out what was going on with his beloved offspring – and that was the first part of my mission.

First I came in contact with some branches of the sect in different cities on Zinra, and I had managed to extract useful

information about the exact location of the castle, which was the seat of the main sect. The information I got during my inquiries outlined the second part of my mission – which was self-assigned: I had to prevent the main sect from carrying out a certain unholy rite on the night of the Last Equinox, which would be synchronized with the alignment of the sixteen planets of the solar system. This phenomenon takes place only once in 3450 years, and opens a "door" for alien entities to invade our universe with unpredictable consequences. The alignment was expected to take place in three weeks, so I had no time to lose...

\* \* \* \* \*

A week passed and I was still very new in the sect; so far nothing looked too strange or suspicious. Most of their dogmas, rites and rituals were quite ordinary, even borrowed from other beliefs, focusing mainly on inner peace and meditation. They worshiped the suns of the universe as God, but they also considered Light as an agent of cosmic disaster. I often wondered whether the entire story about the Last Equinox was nothing but fanatics' nonsense...

I can say life was very easy there: The disciples spent most of their time luxuriating in the internal swimming pools, meditating in the calmness of the water. They all enjoyed a blissful jauntiness in a stony, equivocal silence that seemed to penetrate the walls, the furniture, the people, everything.

I was quite excited when I recognized Lysander resting languidly on a fine deckchair by a pool. His blond hair shimmered in the sunlight, his big blue eyes sparkled like aquamarines; he was a very attractive man, indeed. I can't tell why, but I refrained from socializing with him anyhow; I just watched him discreetly from then on, expecting to discover I don't know what...

\* \* \* \* \*

A few days later, on a sunny morning, I had to attend a certain mass in the Lasifu temple, together with other new disciples; most of them were sunk in a devoutness I just couldn't sympathize with. When we entered the temple, I was surprised to see the walls were full of very old books, most of them manuscripts, resting on rows of shelves up to the ceiling. Then I had to listen to a fervent sermon regarding the differences between the dogmas of the sect and those of other religions, and I was intrigued to find out they were quite intolerant towards other beliefs.

When the sermon was over at last, I sought to leave that place at once. However, I soon realized the others prevented me from reaching the wooden door, by coming into my way continuously, one after the other, in an allegedly casual manner. At a moment I noticed one of the disciples entered the chamber of the preachers but never came out; yet, nobody seemed to care about that, nobody waited for him to get out. *Something very suspicious is going on there; people get killed in there*, I suspected, full of concern.

“You have no right to judge us!” a middle-aged woman reprimanded me right then, as if she had read my mind.

“Nevertheless I do”, I responded provocatively.

“How dare you?” she went on outraged. “This is the Sect of the Solar Crown you are dealing with!”

“So what? You know where I belong?” I retorted in the same tone. “I belong to the Mystical School of the World!” I mocked.

The woman spoke no more; she only frowned at me, but I already knew I had talked too much.

Being so imprudent was not like me; More often than not, I felt I was becoming more and more passive and thoughtless; in all probability, the teachings of the sect were gradually

affecting my mind in a rather devious manner...

\* \* \* \* \*

Two rather strange incidents took place a couple of days later: In the middle of a small yard surrounded by stone terraces, there stood a very lifelike statue of a man in a reclining posture, which commemorated the sacrifice of a young martyr about twenty years ago. Suddenly, a black-dressed old woman came out of an arcade; she climbed on the granite base quite easily and lay on the marble man as if that was the most natural thing in the world. I just stood there watching, as she got comfortable on the man's body; her arms slowly embraced him, his open arms gently touching her plump shoulders. Within an eerie haze, the embrace got tighter as arms of the statue seemed to be coming alive around her, the two of them being united in the weirdest love affair.

Taking my eyes from that uncanny sight, I accidentally took a look through a latticed window on my left. I was dumbfounded at the sight: a dozen of monks were standing in circle, all of them dressed in multi-coloured robes. They were putting up a very odd fight, trying really hard to keep certain dark figures -demons?- from entering their circle. However, the dark entities kept returning again and again, perpetuating a meaningless, yet inevitable battle that seemed to be going on for ever. *It's impossible to keep evil away; it's like an all-contaminating disease*, I pondered and my heart sank in sorrow.

\* \* \* \* \*

*The scorched desert spreads before me dry, inhospitable, sinister; I am riding a crystalline, two-wheeled speed-cycle, leaving behind the sparse oases and the low dunes very fast. After a while I can see a solitary mansion standing magnificent and shiny by the edge of the desert; I know it belongs to Lysander.*

*All of a sudden, two tornadoes appear behind the round edifice; then a third one is visible, but all three vanish into thin air in a split second; I know this forebodes that something very evil is about to occur.*

*“Dark entities have been surrounding my residence recently; they must be desert demons, feeding on solitary souls like mine”, explains Lysander, as soon as I arrive.*

*Pretty soon I can see them myself; the demons have taken the form of big spiders – abominable, pitch-black creatures that now seem to be practically everywhere. They pop out of their nests in the sand, bursting the lofty dunes like an oozing veil of darkness, gradually covering everything, devouring all living beings, leaving behind nothing but skulls, bones and desert.*

*“Every now and then these arachnoid insects raid the dry land, advancing very fast, stopping at no obstacle, showing no mercy”, adds Lysander with a sad face.*

*Before I can react anyhow, the abominable creatures are already inside my sandals, under my feet; I remove them with hasty, nervous movements, in sheer disgust. I start running frantically so as to avoid them, while Lysander suddenly seems to have no particular problem with them. I learn why, right away:*

*“He has bathed in the holy spring that lies beyond this cursed place”, I hear someone say.*

*What is going on here? I wonder and keep running away from the mansion, for I know I have to reach the weedy path beyond the desert, which leads to the holy spring.*

*Reaching there at last, I bathe in it at once; so, I am now immune to the sting of the arachnoid creatures too. Yet, I still have to return and destroy them. However, this is going to take a while because the weedy path has just been barred.*

*This means I have to take a longer, semi-circular path to get to the mansion again. As about Lysander, he owes me lots, lots of explanations...*

I woke up with a start, but I felt quite relieved as soon as I realized all that was just a dream – a bad dream fraught with dark messages. *I guess I should be a lot more careful with Lysander and the others from now on*, I thought and shrugged my shoulders, trying to ward off the memory of that sinister astral experience.

\* \* \* \* \*

Anyway, from then on things happened very quickly: The very next day, the main purpose of the sect was revealed to me and other novices by a circle of mystics. Those persons were powerful psychics, and they were easily distinguished from the others as they had inquisitive eyes, inexpressive faces and strange, creaking voices. They also had the symbol of a burning crown embroidered on their robes, as well as an air of supremacy which was supposed to show higher awareness and wisdom.

“It is our duty to help the Light take over the whole universe; therefore, cosmic disaster should reach every corner of the universe...” they preached.

They performed certain rites for this reason: On a cold night, during one of their religious masses, I saw some of the advanced members of the sect chuckle and giggle devilishly, having decided -after a kind of ballot had taken place- who would be the next victim for the propitiatory sacrifice. I witnessed with my own eyes their surrounding the hitherto unsuspecting novice cautiously. Among sarcastic smiles and aggressive yet sensual gestures, they pounced on him and devoured him alive with their teeth, like tigers on a fallen antelope. In this way, the "chosen" one fed the "herd" with his own vital energy, according to the beliefs of the sect.

I didn't stir; I either was flabbergasted by the atrocity of the crime or I had already become too passive for any reaction. I guess the teachings of the sect regarding the breakage of ego and the abstinence from any criticism had affected me a lot more than they should have.

Pretty soon, the revelations of the mystics became clearer and more specific: "Alien, superior forces took control of our planet very long ago", one of them confessed to a circle of disciples, me included. "They descended on planet Zinra due to a mistake in one of our magic rituals" ... "We still can't be sure how they do it exactly, but they affect our brains making us passive and inactive, until they can easily replace a human soul with one of theirs, whilst the body shows no considerable difference in appearance" ... "this might seem to be evil to the eyes of an ignorant, but actually it's a divine gift to us; this is how we eventually get rid of our egos and become part of something bigger" ... "The Sect of the Solar Crown has been chosen by them; it is our holy duty to spread the *transformation* all over the planet and beyond, and the time is very near" ... "the day after tomorrow, at midnight, the Rite of the Last Equinox will begin..."

What made me shudder most, was the fact that not only the sect but also most of the inhabitants of Zinra knew about the alien invasion and the replacements. However, they went along with that because they thought they would be turned into superior beings, blissful and wise, free from all kinds of bonds, sorrows and restraints.

Later on, we had the honour to witness a procedure of "transformation". It was a kind of brain operation actually; the subject -chosen because of his absolute obedience to the rules of the sect- was seated on a simple armchair, without opposing at all. After a few minutes only, the operation was completed without any kind of anesthesia; nevertheless, the "chosen" neither stirred, nor cried of pain, nor showed the

slightest sign of malaise. The "reborn" person had a new, supposedly more evolved self, a very calm, inexpressive face and a strange, creaking voice.

\* \* \* \* \*

I can hardly guess what or who betrayed me. Maybe it was that woman I had argued with in the Lasifu temple; maybe it was my terrified face during the above described procedure of "transformation"; or, most probably, it was Lysander who asked for a private audience by a high mystic the very next day.

Obedying an extraordinarily strong premonition, I decided to follow him stealthily that chilly morning. My intuition was right: I saw Lysander enter the mystic's quarters with quick steps; I approached and stood by the latticed window, carefully avoiding any thoughts or sentiments that would betray my presence to the psychic.

"I think there is a traitor among us", I heard Lysander announce to the surprised mystic.

Then, both men started talking in low voices, as if they sensed they were being watched. I could not hear what they were saying and, frankly, I preferred it so.

"This won't do", replied the mystic calm. "She may be dangerous for our cause; therefore, we had better take action at once! But, first, come near, my son; you deserve to be properly rewarded for your loyalty!"

The "proper reward" proved to be an immediate transformation. Within a few minutes, on completion of the uncanny procedure, the young man was one of the mutants – no longer a human being.

At that point I lost all courage and got away at once, as silently as possible. I ran along the paved paths of the terraced yards until I considered I was in a safe distance. I paused and

leaned on a cherry tree, breathless for a few seconds; then, I returned to my quarters and stayed there all day long.

\* \* \* \* \*

Early next morning, while I was getting ready for my escape, I realized they were gathering around me, one by one, slowly and cunningly. Their mouths were distorted with a sinister smile; their eyes shone with malice; their creaking voices made me freeze; and all of them armed with long knives. Lysander was among them.

They kept approaching me step by step, a sick hatred in his eyes. At least, nobody had seen me placing that tiny, yet very powerful explosive device on the eastern wall of the Lasifu temple.

The sun was rising in the emerald skies, bathing the surrounding mountain peaks in a chrysoprase haze. I stepped back to the beryl pillars that supported a long arcade covered with shiny, black slabs. The whole scenery was enchanting, but I certainly couldn't linger and enjoy it. Black crows appeared all of a sudden, croaking ominously above our heads. *Let the fight begin...*

I rolled down and slid aside, as Lysander assaulted me with both his knives. He wasn't an experienced fighter, so I managed to grasp both his weapons with a fast, skillful manoeuvre of mine, which surprised not only him but the others as well. They were all taken aback for a moment, but the moment was gone and they were coming for me again. I punched someone's chin hard; then, I sprang up into the air, kicked some faces with a set of flying kicks; I hurt badly some others with the knives I had just grabbed; nonetheless, the enemies were too many. Therefore, instead of going on with a hopeless fight, I preferred to dodge them all with a set of successive air somersaults and run to the nearest gateway. Pretty soon Lysander was still behind me, now armed with an

impressive sabre.

“That was very impressive, Sandra! However, you have learnt by now that no one here gets out alive!” he uttered with a creaking voice and a sarcastic smile.

I barely managed to block his silver blade with the double knives; there followed a terrible barrage of metal clangs that echoed like a giant's chuckle all over the place. Quite unexpectedly, Lysander proved to be much better a fighter than I had initially supposed. Our duel could go on for ever, while the others were getting closer and closer, and I was getting out of time...

As he tried a side blow with his sabre, I twisted my body fast and kicked him in the abdomen, which made him double in pain. I seized the opportunity and fled at once, after blowing up the stone gate with my laser gun. My persecutors were dumbfounded once again, which gave me the time to dash out of the broken door and down the spiral stairway. I could hear hasty steps behind me, as I was rushing along the stone bridge. A couple of seconds later, a deafening explosion swallowed the dark castle behind me within a second, while I was running down the slope like crazy.

I didn't even dare turn round to see what had happened; I only kept on running frantically down the carved stairways and the narrow paths that spread all over the misty mountains of Barynx, until I reached the valley.

Only then did I remember what my initial mission was, and my heart sank as I realized I had no good news for my present employer. The Sect of the Solar Crown was gone of course, the invasion of alien dark entities into our world had been averted for good, but what could possibly console a childless father?

\* \* \* \* \*

I can't say how long I had been fleeing along the hazy paths of the valley until I finally paused by a picturesque, round lake. I could hardly believe I was elsewhere now, far away from the location where that soul-racking adventure had taken place, and my relief was beyond words. The calm, blue topaz waters made me feel a lot better; there were numerous, sizable pebbles under the soft waves by the shore, but there was only sand around me – luxurious, white sand, sparkling in the sunlight. However...

*What kind of a cosmic allegory was that? I pondered in sudden melancholy. Maybe Evil is more insidious than I have thought so far; maybe there is no point in fighting for Good; maybe Evil has been consuming me in many implacable, unspeakable ways ever since I was born, and there is actually nothing I can do about it.*

*So, now what?*

*So, now what?*

# Story Twenty-Eight: Distant Planet

*originally handwritten  
from 18<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> June 2002*

Though unlikely it may seem, I have been going through a kind of crisis for some months now. I have been lying low all this time, feeling completely reluctant to get involved in any kind of trouble. Sometimes I do reminisce all those extraordinary adventures I've lived, but I have neither undertaken any new missions nor have I been opposed to the Yrkanian or any other tyranny lately. Instead I have been spending my days contemplating my future. I just feel the need to think very seriously about what to do with the rest of my life. I mean, there must be something more meaningful than waging battles of any kind. Anyway, evil seems to be like the Lernaean Hydra: if you cut off one of its heads, nine others pop up...

It was twilight when I suddenly heard a strange sound, like hasty steps scurrying on the inclined, tiled roof outside my attic window. As I walked towards it, the air blew kinda mystical on my face, bringing back memories of not so old, yet almost forgotten magic.

At first I thought I saw a boy standing by the window sill – but no; it was a young man. I was taken aback as he gave me the impression he had just arisen from the hollows, a stifled smile on his lips. It was Peter of the Stars.

His hair was red and wavy like a wild flame, crowned by the setting golden sun on the roseate horizon, under a royal blue sky. His green, tight-fitting uniform reminded me of long lost

paradises.

“How... how did you find me?” I asked bewildered.

“You've changed, Sandra”, he responded in obvious disappointment, as he looked at my long, loose, blue robe.

“I suppose I have”, I replied calm.

“Not really!” he retorted with sparkling eyes.

“I am so pleased to see you again!” I exclaimed then, with a broad smile.

My joy was indescribable as we kissed and hugged for a few moments of bliss. Only then did I realize what the most precious thing I had missed during all that time of my isolation was...

However, my happiness was diminished soon, as I began to wonder about the purpose of his advent. When Peter makes such an unexpected appearance, it is always for a very serious reason. No sooner had I asked him if something was wrong, than he took out a finely drawn picture of a dazzling, blond woman dressed in a silky, azure gown, and showed it to me.

“I'm afraid I have a grave problem this time”, he announced stern. “This woman has questioned my sovereignty and claims the throne of Eldyla!”

“But how... how is this possible?” I stammered. “Nobody has ever dared to do something like this before! Who is this woman?”

“Don't you recognize her?” he asked with a sad face.

“I'm afraid I don't...”

“It's Lady Chimaera!” he exclaimed nervous. “She does look different of course, with all that air of fake innocence she has adopted, but it's her!”

“Indeed... I don't believe it!” I stuttered breathless, after I had

had a better look at the picture.

“For the time being, she is an ally and guest of Lord Kochon; she has challenged me to a duel of powers on the next full moon!”

*The duel will be a mockery, of course; there is no way Peter can beat such a powerful witch anyhow,* I reckoned and my heart sank.

“If she wins, it will mean not only my end but the end of Eldyla as well!” Peter went on. “I can't lose, Sandra! I need your help so as to get rid of her before it's too late!”

That was not something Peter of the Stars would normally admit...

“But... how? What... what shall we do?” I lisped, leaving Peter dumbfounded with my faint-heartedness.

“There is one way to prevent all this from happening; but we must travel... very far away!” he said hesitantly.

“Travel where?” I asked to know.

“We must go to the Distant Planet!” he announced decisively.

I couldn't utter one more word; I just looked at him very apprehensive...

\* \* \* \* \*

First I considered it worthwhile to visit Eldyla for a short time, and I was really relieved to see nothing had changed yet: the green mountain peaks emerging over the wreaths of clouds in the horizon; the clear, emerald waters of the countless lacy lagoons; the silky purple and crimson cliffs; the rampant flora; the bright blue skies...

It proved to be rather stressful for me to use skills of lucid dreaming and astral projection after so many months of inertia. Nevertheless, I eventually did it; I broke on through

and got aware of myself in the astral fields once again. So, there I was, standing on the mossy cliffs over the Nameless Lagoon, observing Lord Kochon's spacecraft as it hovered above the jagged coastline in the distance.

I let my astral body soar in the air and approached the space vessel. I took a quick look through all windows, until I located the guest's cabin. I didn't dare enter; I stayed outside, watching and listening carefully.

Indeed it was her, Lady Chimaera; she was wearing an impressive, flimsy dress in all colours of the rainbow, adorned with lots of precious jewels. She was not alone in that luxurious room; he was having a heated argument with Lord Kochon.

“I definitely want this semi-material asteroid as my new dominion! Besides, beating the renowned Peter of the Stars in a duel of powers is something I have always wanted!” I heard her say to Kochon.

“I have unfinished business with that rascal, too!” groaned the space vagabond, giving a strong punch on the metal table with the finely carved finishes.

“And I need you, Lord Kochon, to be my loyal deputy on this little paradise! Forever!”

“I will be proud to serve you, my fair lady! Forever!” he responded at once, slightly bowing his head, his black eyes shining with satisfaction.

All of a sudden, the witch turned and faced me with a very malevolent expression on her visage; her sparkling, blue eyes were riveted on me threatening and sinister. I fled at once. *I only hope she didn't sense my presence*, I thought as I woke up in my chamber, full of concern.

\* \* \* \* \*

“We can't waste any more time! According to reliable information I have had, the underground kingdom of Iridor on the so-called Distant Planet, is not just a legend!” announced Peter sharp.

“Strange name for a planet, though”, I said pensive. “When cosmonauts use this expression, they usually mean a hopeless, elusive quest or an unreachable destination; besides, it is prohibitively far from Eldyla”.

“Distance is not a problem; we can get there by opening the dimensional gate in the Ancestral Sanctuary!”

“All right... but why should we go to Iridor?” I wondered.

“There is an artifact of great power hidden there, and I desperately need it if I want to stand a chance of beating Lady Chimaera in a duel of powers!”

“We don't really know what exactly is going on inside the Distant Planet”, I retorted. “We don't even know how or if we can reach Iridor from the surface...”

“Deep inside you know I am right,” Peter went on. “This item of power, the *Blue Mystique*, once belonged to Cyane, the last queen of Iridor. It was considered sacred and could be used only by persons of particular genetic characteristics”.

“So, you believe you have such genetic characteristics?” I asked jokingly.

“As a matter of fact, I think I do!” replied Peter with a serious mien.

“The whole story is probably a fairy tale you've read on a tattered papyrus”, I objected. “But even if it is true, we actually know nothing about the item, not even what it is exactly...”

“Could be a sceptre, a diadem, a jewel, a gem, or something like that; if we get to Iridor, we'll certainly find it!”

“I doubt it; in any case, such items may offer extreme power or terrible havoc,” I sighed tiredly. “Even if we find it, we can't even be sure we'll be able to handle it!”

“Really, I can no longer recognize you, Sandra! If you don't want to come with me, I can go there by myself!”

I spoke no more and nodded in acquiescence. How could I ever refute such an argument?

\* \* \* \* \*

Before long Peter and I stood by the Cave of Oblivion, at the south pole of a world entirely covered with snow and ice because of a global catastrophe that occurred thousands of years ago. Once the Distant Planet was blue and green like the primeval Earth, but now it is frozen white since most of its surface is covered by snow and glaciers.

I could feel my legs trembling of cold and impatience as I was trying to keep my balance among the slippery rocks at the entrance of the cavern. According to ancient legends, the Cave of Oblivion leads to the underground world of Iridor, which is heated by the fire of the core and has its own seas, plains, mountains, as well as the remnants of a long forgotten civilization. A planet within a planet...

Stumping our way among the crystallized boulders, we both paused for a moment and stared at the snowy wilderness outside. Having just entered the cave, all studded with massive rocks and occasional stalactites, I suddenly felt very uncertain. Nonetheless, I followed Peter into the inky-dark tunnel that gaped ahead, without uttering a word.

The tunnel proved to be so narrow and fusty that I wondered how it was possible for us to keep going through it. Discomfort soon turned to anguish when I realized that, for some strange reason, the luminous beams of our torches reached a shorter and shorter distance, until they gave light

no more. Not a sound was heard, not even our own footsteps on the ground. I don't know for how long, every sense of time and orientation was lost. I had never experienced such thick, tangible darkness before. Moment by moment, I felt as if I were sinking in thicker and thicker layers of darkness, a blackness no light could ever break through. Then, all at once, a sea of light dispersed that darkness, a dazzling light that took countless forms within an infinitesimal moment in time, creating a whole new world.

\* \* \* \* \*

Next instant we found ourselves at an arched gateway in the middle of a half-ruined stone wall. For a few moments we just loitered there, admiring the wild beauty of endless mountain ranges expanding to the horizon; a panorama of purple crests, winding paths, endless flights of stairs carved on the rocks, ruins of ancient towers, castles, temples, all destroyed by the rage of winds and time. I was amazed to also notice sparse clusters of flowers with huge purple petals and thorny leaves growing on the mountain sides – the only indication of life in that wilderness. Occasional clouds of fog shaded the gorges, the slopes, the crests, the ruins, under an eerie, alabaster sky.

As if in reverie, always taciturn, we walked along half-obliterated paths, flights of slippery stairs carved over steep precipices, dark tunnels dug through the mountains, strange natural bridges, and decrepit remnants of ancient mansions. I can't really tell why we preferred to stay away from the flowers, in spite of their enchanting beauty. A nostalgic melancholy reigned everywhere, ionized by smouldering memories, forgotten glories, unholy secrets.

We paused for an instant when we reached a downward stairway that went round the steep slopes. Where it ended, we could not see; we just kept on walking all the way down

impatiently, almost ignoring the dreadful precipice that yawned below. Quite unexpectedly, at a turn of the slope, the stairs stopped abruptly and a narrow earthen path appeared before us. I was surprised to see it led to a picturesque oval lake in the middle of a green valley; the mountains were nicely reflected in the glassy waters. An impressive, polyhedral edifice with a hemispherical, crystal vault commanded the golden shores. It seemed to be in perfect condition, in strange contrast to everything else on the Distant Planet. For a few moments we stood there motionless, dazzled by the charm of the landscape and excited as well, because we had finally found what we had been looking for: the mausoleum of Cyane, the last queen of the once thriving Iridor. It rose up magnificent and lonely in the distance, its primeval secrets well hidden in the deathly silence of the secluded valley.

I could hardly contain my suspense while Peter and I were following the narrow winding path to the lake shore. After we had entered the square courtyard at last, we ran up the white, marble staircase to the translucent, turquoise gate of the mausoleum. I felt a strange sting on my heart when I saw the thick periwinkles of flowers -the same kind we had seen on the mountains- coiled around the high, white pillars. Their gigantic purple petals were all facing us, giving out a sweet floral scent; their big, thorny leaves stirred slightly in the air. The strong roots penetrated the marble slabs of the floor, probably digging all the way down to the ground.

I shivered at their sight but still moved towards them, like mesmerized; their scent gradually smelt irresistibly stronger. I had left Peter behind when a sudden gust of wind blew against me as I approached the pillars, like an omen telling me to turn back; I ignored it completely. Reaching closer, I extended a hand to touch one of those fleshy petals, which looked as if they were waiting for me patiently; only for a

second the flower seemed to be approaching me too.

Obeying an inner scream, I turned away and jumped back to the staircase, barely avoiding the grasp of the insidious enemy that was now dashing and snapping at me, revealing three circles of long sharp teeth inside the crimson calyx!

“Sandra, be careful!” I heard Peter cry.

Even now that I was beyond its reach, the sinister creature still strove to grab me, jolting its thick trunk back and forth maniacally. Right then, I realized in terror that the rest of the flowers had just come to life as well: they all shook threateningly around the pillars, opening up and sucking the air with their abnormal calyxes and the horrible teeth shining inside.

“Are you all right, Sandra?” asked Peter, full of concern.

“Yes... I am sorry about that!” I said in a low voice.

*There must be something really invaluable behind this door,* I pondered, as we drew our laser weapons simultaneously. We fired at once, again and again, quickly reducing to ashes all the carnivorous plants that guarded the entrance to the mausoleum, as well as the translucent gate which seemed to have no lock at all.

\* \* \* \* \*

Full of excitement and cautiousness, we crossed the threshold of the ancient edifice at last. Innumerable sunbeams, in all colours of the rainbow, rushed through the transparent vault, producing a wondrous spectacle of light. In the middle of the vast room there was a massive construction made of gray stone. It was an ancient altar with some instruments of witchcraft still lying on it: an impressive Simisen sword, three black lances, two gold chalices, numerous magic seals carved with weird ideograms, and a round metal hearth coated with blackened ashes inside. A perfect circle, painted

with a dark red substance, was engraved on the ochre marble floor around the altar.

Then my eyes fell on the opposite wall, where an extremely lifelike relief mural, almost untouched by time, overlooked the whole room. I stood motionless and observed it like hypnotized for a few moments: Once magnificent edifices reduced to rubble by bombing; crowds of people mourning and suffering; volcanoes erupting in the background; countless fires burning bright; corpses scattered everywhere; sinister black skies above; and, all dominating, a gigantic woman's figure with long blond hair, dressed in a fine gossamer gown. She stood supercilious on a black hillock, having a huge carnivorous flower in her right hand and a demonic smile on her impeccable face. Who she reminded me of, I refused to admit to myself. Above the mural there was a chiselled inscription written in the ancient language of Iridor, meaning: *Your Pain Makes Me Stronger*.

“Is it possible that she has been here? I hope not!” uttered Peter then, turning pale.

Then we noticed something else, and headed for it without thinking at all: there was a small, marble, spiral staircase behind the altar, which led to the upper level of the polyhedral room. We walked it up silently and came to a hemispherical dais. Right in the middle, embedded in the thick wall, there was an ancient tombstone made of black rock. Peter pulled out his laser weapon and fired; the heavy stone slab went up with a roar. Inside the ancient tomb stood a shiny metal sarcophagus, its relief cover beaten into the form of a noble woman holding a gold sceptre in her folded hands. Over her head there was a carved inscription meaning *Cyane Who Reigns For Ever*. We both had to pull very hard, until the heavy metal cover began to move with a screeching sound.

The blood froze in my veins as I came face to face with the

primeval mummy that stood rigid inside the sarcophagus. At first, what impressed me most was the sparkling carmine gem fixed in the centre of the gold diadem on her long, platinum hair. Her flimsy, scarlet gown ended in fine lace leaves; both her hands were loaded with exquisite jewels that glittered in the bright light coming through the crystals of the vault. However, the most precious treasure was wrapped around her waist: a broad, dark green belt trimmed with gold. I smiled satisfied, as I suddenly acknowledged we had found it at last: The sacred belt of queen Cyane, once called the *Blue Mystique*, the key to supernatural powers and wisdom, destined to be worn only by persons of certain genetic characteristics. Nevertheless, I could also feel something was wrong, very very wrong...

Next moment, a blinding light was diffused in the ionized atmosphere; then, as if in a paranoiac hallucination, the queen's dead eyes opened up and focused on me – piercing, demonic purple eyes glowing in abysmal wickedness. I stepped back terrified, as I realized it was not the mummy of Cyane now standing before me; it was an extremely malevolent, yet familiar woman of uncertain age, radiating an uncanny, hypnotizing charm. She looked entirely different since the last time I had seen her in Captain Kochon's starship on Eldyla, where she sought to establish her dominion in search of more power, always more power, like she always does.

“Lady Chimaera! What are you doing here?” I cried.

“What am I doing here?” she chuckled. “The so-called Distant Planet used to be one of my most important kingdoms; for thousands of years I was worshiped as the omnipotent Queen Cyane!”

“It is her who gradually tainted their souls across the centuries, until she led them to the last world war which

destroyed all living beings on the planet and finally resulted in the Long Winter”, explained Peter in a low, evocative voice that left me speechless. *Did he actually know that from the start?* I wondered stupefied.

“Lady Chimaera is a vampiric entity, feeding on the suffering and worship of her subjects, just like all "gods" do. Every inhabited planet in the known universe is ruled by one at least. Many have worshiped her for millennia, many still do”, he concluded in the same tone.

“Your pain makes me stronger”, I only uttered, acknowledging Chimaera's resemblance to the imperious woman on the mural.

“So, you are becoming more and more clever, maybe clever enough to serve me in one of my worksites!” she announced sarcastically.

Right after, with a quick but graceful movement of her hands, she opened the lid of one of her rings and softly blew a thin yellow dust into the air.

As if carried away by a mysterious airstream, the dust floated towards us before it was dispelled in the hazy atmosphere. Then everything happened too fast, as if in a bizarre nightmare: Peter and I stood there numb, watching a translucent, spectral barrier being shaped around us. Within seconds it had taken the form of an immense, translucent vault looming over our heads, while blurred images were gradually coming to life inside it. Namely, we were trapped in a dimensional dome generated by dark magic. The mausoleum of Queen Cyane, the abandoned kingdom of Iridor, the Distant Planet, were already a long gone past, which would soon become an insignificant memory and finally fade away like a futile fantasy.

\* \* \* \* \*

Peter and I were elsewhere now, in one of the numerous worlds dominated by Lady Chimaera, one of the worlds she plays in her fingers like expensive but dispensable toys.

“What shall we do now?” I shouted frightened.

Instead of an answer, there was sullen silence; moments in time seemed to be passing against us, as Lady Chimaera seemed to have won. We stood there frozen and desperate, watching the dimensional dome gradually melting away. The land around us seemed to be expanding, changing, and... It was so hot! The place was gaunt, without a trace of vegetation, under a clear blue sky and a blazing sun.

Suddenly, I perceived agitation all around us: a jumble of voices, hustle and bustle, high pillars, huge stones, big clouds of dust everywhere. Countless people, all dressed in tattered clothes, performed various tasks of ambiguous purpose. Soon I figured out they were slowly building a glorious palace for an omnipotent queen. The busy worksite was supervised by vigilant droids, and everything seemed to be going like clockwork. Nobody looked displeased or confused; they all carried out their duties eagerly, maybe even proudly. Having surrendered their souls to Lady Chimaera, their queen and goddess, hard work was the ideal way to show their eternal allegiance; and I was already beginning to find the situation not so insane...

One of the droids hastened towards us; I drew my gun and fired, but it kept approaching undaunted. I repeated again and again, yet my laser beams didn't seem to affect it anyhow. Peter fired too, in vain. With a single sharp movement of its right arm, the metal slave-driver pushed the weapons off our hands and crushed them on the ground. Then he started giving us orders in a strange language that I, oddly enough, could understand quite well. *That's too bad; the hallucination has already started to penetrate in my conscience,* I realized in

desperation.

“If we stay here a little longer, we will actually belong to this place, with absolutely no memory of our real selves,” said Peter then, as if he had read my mind.

In the meanwhile, the dimensional dome was getting more and more transparent, its limits more and more indefinable.

“There is a faint hope to get out of here”, Peter went on. “Dimensional domes are not completely compact; they have chasms here and there, through which we could escape – if we discover one in time, of course!”

“And how can we find such a chasm?” I asked abruptly.

“It may be anywhere there is dark, shadow, void; always in the parts of the dome that fade away last. But we must be careful; we have no time for mistakes!”

I started to scan the whole place, carefully watching the gradual fading of the dome. It wasn't so simple: The bright sunlight formed shines, glazes, blurs on the smooth surfaces which fooled my eyesight, and my agony was only making things worse.

All of a sudden, Peter pulled me violently by the hand and took me off towards a pile of chiseled stones. I discerned a black gap among them and right there the dome was flickering slightly. *This must be a chasm*, I hoped. We had to perform a set of acrobatic jumps in order to avoid two droid supervisors who immediately rushed to stop us. As they were drawing their heavy weapons, ready to shoot, Peter disappeared into the chasm with an impressive plunge; I followed suit just in the nick of time.

\* \* \* \* \*

At first, the place looked alien to me. It took me a few seconds to start recognizing familiar objects: the main hall of the

mausoleum, the gray altar, the blackened hearth, the crystal vault, the hemispherical dais, the relief sarcophagus with the inscription *Cyane Who Reigns For Ever*. Inside the opened tomb, the last queen of the Distant Planet appeared majestic in her gold-embroidered mortuary gown and the fine jewels. *This is not really her, of course, for a powerful psychic vampire never really dies; it is just a semi-organic replica of the queen, nothing more than an idolatrous effigy*, I realized then.

The impressive royal diadem still sparkled on her long, platinum hair. The dominant carmine gem, which seemed to be shining with an inner light, resembled a ruby but now I had no doubt about what it really was: an intricate mechanism meant to produce the dreadful hologram of Lady Chimaera as well as the dimensional dome, at the moment the sarcophagus was opened.

“Time to cast the Transfer Spell”, announced Peter then. “You have only one chance, so don't make any mistakes, or we won't be able to remove the belt!”

I am not at all sure how Peter supposed I knew that spell; indeed I was an apprentice of a nameless, yet most powerful wizard once, but I hadn't held that out on Peter.

“Ujad quesfin viratur fezz... ujad viratur kuj... ujad lei”, I pronounced slowly, gently touching the sacred belt with my fingertips.

After a brief hesitation, I took the *Blue Mystique* in my hands and gave it to Peter, who wore it around his waist at once. He looked at me with wide open eyes; maybe he had expected something extraordinary to happen, a kind of paranormal activity maybe, but no...

As we were wearing that belt, he beamed with self-confidence and courage – courage unprecedented even for

Peter of the Stars. Next moment he slammed the sarcophagus cover shut and we both set out on the way back, without uttering a word.

After an endless hike along winding stone paths and half-ruined stairways on steep mountain slopes, we finally stood in front of the arched gate that leads in or out of Iridor. Taking a last look at the legendary underground world, we entered the inky-dark tunnel that would lead us back to the Cave of Oblivion.

Dawn was already breaking as we stepped out of the cavern at last. The freezing winds were whistling mournfully among the icy rocks that glimmered like silver in the light of three crescent moons. We entered the dimensional vortex that had just been formed by the entrance of the cave right on time, and let it transfer us back to Eldyla.

\* \* \* \* \*

As soon as we stood on the circular Dimensional Gate in the Ancestral Sanctuary, a sense of unspeakable relief and joy took over me. At first I felt wonderful for our mission had been successfully accomplished. Then, I also realized how much I had missed such experiences of transfer through dimensions; I mean the feeling of being disintegrated in an infinite whirl of vibrating darkness, only to be born in another world within a flutter of time... It was just awesome!

However, what made me feel, blissful, fulfilled and more alive than ever, was the fact I had just acknowledged...

*You cannot hide from Evil.*

*No matter where you hide, it will always find you.*

*Then, you have to choose:*

*You either fight against it, or you let it conquer you.*

*What you choose is preordained and it depends on the quality*

*of your soul.*

*I, Sandra Anderson, am one of those who fight against Evil.*

*I have no other alternative, for this has always been my destiny, and this is what I have always wanted to do...*

\* \* \* \* \*

After her defeat on the Distant Planet, Lady Chimaera lost all interest in ruling Eldyla; she didn't even bother to show up at the time and place of the duel – to Peter's and my great relief. The odd-shaped, mossy cliffs at the northern part of the Nameless Lagoon shone magically in the light of the full moon. There was a large crowd of elves, mermaids, fairies and other tribes gathered around to witness the duel. Now that it was all over before it had even begun, everybody was calm, happy and optimistic. However...

“You aren't getting away with it so easily, Peter of the Stars!” a sepulchral voiced echoed all around.

It was Lord Kochon, standing on a lofty rock.

“What do you want now, Kochon?” asked Peter irritated.

“I'm challenging you to a duel here, before the eyes of all your people! I am claiming the throne of Eldyla!”

“You can't be serious!” I exclaimed, hardly believing what I had just heard.

“Challenge accepted!” replied Peter solemn.

Next moment he handed me the *Blue Mystic*, leaving me and all the others flabbergasted.

“I want this to be a fair fight!” he explained.

Lord Kochon chuckled ironically and stood on guard, brandishing his sabre provocatively. At the same time, Peter took out his sword and got ready to defend himself.

Lord Kochon jumped down the rock with a flying movement,

his fiery eyes riveted on Peter. As the vagabond attacked, Peter dashed against him fearless. Dodging the enemy's shiny blade, he counterattacked with a vehemence that surprised me and everybody around. There followed a violent exchange of sword strokes; after a few agonizing minutes, I was happy to acknowledge that was just a routine fight for Peter. His rival was a competent fighter, of course, but not even once did Peter find it hard to parry his sword-cuts.

An incredibly dexterous sword stroke of Peter made the enemy retreat awkwardly, stumble on a boulder, lose balance and fall down the dark purple precipice. A soft thud was heard, which meant Lord Kochon had landed on a cliff below. Peter scurried to climb down, in search for his rival, but he didn't see him anywhere. There was a sullen silence all over the place.

All at once, a black shadow dashed out of an oblong chasm between the rocks, and assaulted Peter like a crazed beast. It was Lord Kochon, safe and sound, taking his opponent by surprise; he disarmed Peter with a fast front kick and pushed him violently at the edge of a flat rock that jutted out over the Nameless Lagoon. Peter was now lying down, unarmed and stunned, at the mercy of his mortal enemy. I felt a clasp in my heart, and all my previous joy vanished in no time.

As Kochon's sabre was coming down towards Peter's chest, the young man gathered all the strength he was left and kicked the sword off the enemy's hand; right after he kicked Lord Kochon hard on the stomach, making him double in pain. There followed a short but wild hand-to-hand fight; it ended with Peter lying on that slippery cliff again, the vagabond's hands around his neck. Lord Kochon was trying to strangle his rival on the spot, smiling sarcastically, confident he was about to win the duel.

However, Peter managed to get rid of the enemy once again,

pushing him off with his strong legs. Lord Kochon screamed in pain as he collapsed on a heap of jagged boulders. Next moment, however, he stood up at once, even more aggressive than before; he looked kinda haughty among the purple cliffs that overlooked the serene lagoon, as well as determined to go on with that fight for ever. Nevertheless, Peter had got too bored of it; he called forth all his mastery in martial arts, and sent the vagabond down the precipice with a set of impressive high kicks. The duel was over at last.

Under the silver full moon the crowd cheered and applauded full of exhilaration, for their king and ruler had successfully defended his throne and his world once again. Peter looked more attractive than ever, radiating power, satisfaction and self-confidence. As about me, I felt more focused and self-aware than ever before.

That was a new beginning for me and Peter on the semi-material world of Eldyla.

Peter of the Stars and I together.

For ever.

THE END

## **Synchronicities**

### **(Points of Contact between Dimensions)**

*First phase synchronicities* are the ones I experienced in the years 1995-2002, while writing the third illustrated manuscript of the series “Memories of Sandra Anderson”.

*Second phase synchronicities* are those I experienced in the

year 2021, while typing and editing the digital version of the series on my computer, with the intention to uploading it on digital libraries.

***Third phase synchronicities*** are the ones I experienced while editing the series for a second time, from October to December 2022. This time all illustrations were omitted and the books were uploaded on publishing platforms.

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**! (third phase):** On 30<sup>th</sup> November, 2022, I chose the cover for the second book of the series; it is a portrait of a beautiful brunette. *Two days later, as I was browsing among some pictures on an image hosting site, I saw exactly the same portrait added on a drawn picture of a sunset.*

**Story 20 (first phase):** On 4<sup>th</sup> January, 1995, that is two days before starting writing this story, I dreamed of Venor and the title *Sexcaged* imprinted on a wall.

**Story 20 (first phase):** On 10<sup>th</sup> January, 1995, in the afternoon, I write about Sandra meeting two old friends of hers, Nikita and Limara; *the next day, at the gym, I happen to meet Mary, an old friend from school.*

**Story 20 (first phase):** In this story Venor is surrounded and loved by many women, Sandra included. *In the meantime, I fall in love with a new aerobics instructor in our gym, who is surrounded and adored by all women in his class.*

**Story 20 (second phase):** On 13<sup>th</sup> July, 2021, at night, I happen to watch an episode of a comedy series on TV, where a Satanist woman makes the protagonist her pawn. Later on, she takes him to a party, where he is the only man among thirteen women; they supply him with a kind of erotic potion

with a view to exploiting him sexually. He tries to escape but he fails; he is finally saved by another woman, who proves to be worse than the others.

*Next morning I start typing this story, where a witch of dark powers makes Peter her pawn. Later, prince Venor ends up on a planet of amazons who supply him with a kind of erotic potion and exploit him sexually. He tries to escape but he fails; he is finally saved by a woman [a cyborg] who proves to be worse than the others.*

**Story 21 (first phase):** On 16<sup>th</sup> April, 1995, in the afternoon, I write about Sandra fighting with double sticks. *A few hours later my little nephew plays with similar sticks, performing similar movements.*

**Story 22 (second phase):** On 7<sup>th</sup> August, 2021, I type the part where Sandra and Peter look for the Primordial Fire and discover it hidden in a crystal forest. *At the same time there are hundreds of terrible forest fires all over Greece; almost all Attica (the prefecture I live in) is on fire, and the air is suffocating.*

**Story 23 (third phase):** On 8<sup>th</sup> December, 2022, I begin editing this story:

a] In the beginning Sandra meets a powerful warlock, who is also a spiritual leader; he wants her to find a stolen book of magic for him.

b] Later she has an astral projection to the Narcoit Cloister, owned by the above mentioned warlock.

c] In the end she is invited to his ashram for vacations and spiritual ascension.

*The previous night my nephew paid me a short visit. While we were talking, I was leaning against my old bookcase.*

*a) Suddenly, a heavy book fell off the shelf and landed on my head; it was an old diary of mine, which contains reports of meditations. My nephew asked to have a look at it; as soon as he browsed among some pages, he exclaimed jokingly: “This book is all about magic! My aunt is a witch!”*

*b) Later, he confided to me that he intends to spend some time in the Mount Athos Monasteries in the future.*

*c) He would also like to go to an ashram of Buddhists for about a month, for vacations and spiritual ascension.*

**Story 23 (first phase):** On 9<sup>th</sup> September, 1995, in the afternoon, I write about Sandra wearing a black velvet, tight-fitting uniform adorned with three broad, black leather belts with metal buckles. *Later there is a music show on TV, where one of the singers is wearing a similar outfit, with the characteristic three belts with metal buckles.*

**Story 23 (third phase):** On 10<sup>th</sup> December, 2022, I edit the whole story for a second time. Sandra has an astral projection, where she visits a cloister. There she sees a kind of hawk leaping up the stairs; next instant the creature starts to transmute and Sandra is in agony, as she is not sure whether it will turn into an angel or a demon. *No, it will be an angel*, she finally concludes. Indeed, the bird turns into an angel, and then into Mother of God, who leads all the people into a spacious room full of bright lights, high arches and wooden chairs. Some kind of sermon is about to begin in there.

*Late at night I happen to watch a short horror film on the Internet. The story takes place in a kind of cloister; the main character is a young man who has strange spiritual experiences. The others are in agony as they don't know if he*

*has the Antichrist or the Messiah inside him. He says that what he has inside him is not evil; indeed, after a certain ritual he has to undergo, he proves to have the Messiah inside him. Later, all the members of the sect are gathered in a spacious room with wooden chairs, where a sermon is about to begin...*

**Story 23 (second phase):** On 20<sup>th</sup> August, 2021, in the morning, I type the part of the story where Sandra and Xavier are fighting on the cliffs over a torrent. Sandra slips off and falls into the wild waves; the enemies believe she is dead, but she manages to climb up the rocks and survive.

*Early in the afternoon I read a comic, where a knight fights a villain on the cliffs over a torrent. The knight slips off and falls into the wild waves; the enemy believes he is dead, but the good guy manages to climb up the rocks and survive.*

**Story 23 (first phase):** On 15<sup>th</sup> October, 1995, in the afternoon, I write about Sandra hitting Venor on the nape with her elbow. *A few hours later, my brunette sister hits (by accident) her blond friend on the nape with her elbow.*

**Story 24 (first phase):** On 15<sup>th</sup> June, 1996, in the morning, I draw a portrait of Astrid winking. *In the afternoon, while I am at the gym, someone winks at me.*

**Story 24 (second phase):** On 2<sup>nd</sup> September, 2021, in the morning, I scan the drawn portrait of the blond, evil witch Astrid, who winks her right eye and makes a promise at the end of the story. *At night there is a detective series on TV; a blond young man, who is suspected to be the Antichrist, winks her right eye at the end of the episode.*

**Story 25 (first phase):** On 17<sup>th</sup> January, 1998, I write about snow-capped mountain tops around the village of Ladang and

I draw a relevant picture. *Next morning there is snow in Athens.*

**Story 25 (second phase):** On 9<sup>th</sup> September, 2021, in the morning, I type about Sandra looking for adventure on snow-capped, steep mountains; she meets a friend in a hut; later on, they both fall into an underground cave that hides incredible secrets and rare knowledge inside it.

*In the afternoon I happen to read a comic, where the hero seeks adventure on snow-capped, steep mountains; he meets a friend there and they find an isolated hut; later on, they both fall into an underground cave that hides incredible secrets and rare knowledge inside it.*

**Story 25 (third phase):** On 14<sup>th</sup> December, 2022, in the evening, I browse among some pictures on an image hosting site. At a moment I happen to find a gallery of photos which has the title “Reminiscence”. *Early next morning I begin to edit this story of Sandra Anderson, which has the title “Reminiscence”.*

**Story 27** was written in parts, in a time span of 19 months approximately, and most of it was inspired by dreams I saw during that period.

**Story 27 (second phase):** On 22<sup>nd</sup> September, 2021, in the morning, I type the part where Sandra walks up a mountainside towards a bleak castle under thunder and lightning. *A few hours later I happen to read a comic, where the main adventure takes place in a castle similar to the one I have described and drawn.*

**Story 27 (first phase):** On 8<sup>th</sup> January, 2002, at night, I dream of a black-dressed old woman lying on the statue of a man, in the weirdest love affair; in a chamber nearby, a dozen of monks stand in a circle and strive to keep dark entities from

entering their circle. Next morning I include these scenes in this story.

*A few hours later, my mother tells me what she has just heard on the latest News on TV: In a church of black people, exorcisms were carried out regularly and a woman dropped dead during a séance.*

**Story 27 (first phase):** On 16<sup>th</sup> December, 2001, at night, I dream of tornadoes in a desert. In the afternoon, I write about tornadoes appearing behind a round edifice in a desert. *At night I hear on the News on TV that tornadoes swept off some roofs in Cephalonia, the island of my origin.*

**Story 28 (second phase):** On 3<sup>rd</sup> October, 2021, I edit the part where Sandra and Peter go to the place of burial of an ancient, evil witch who used to cause pain, suffering and death to the people. They intend to open the tomb and get the witch's powers. Soon they are trapped by the witch and they end up in a worksite, where slaves carry bulky boulders, building who knows what. After they escape, they find the sarcophagus and the mummy inside it. The next day (4<sup>th</sup> October), I write about Peter beating his enemy by kicking him down a precipice.

*At night I watch an adventure film on TV, where the heroine and a man go to the place of burial of an ancient, evil witch who used to cause pain, suffering and death to the people. They intend to open the tomb and get the witch's powers. Soon they are trapped and end up in a worksite, where slaves carry bulky boulders, building who knows what. Eventually they escape, and they find the sarcophagus and the mummy inside it. In the end, the heroine beats her enemy by kicking him down a precipice.*

**Story 28 (third phase):** On 23<sup>rd</sup> December, 2022, I edit the

part where Sandra and Peter travel to a deserted planet, where they find an ancient mausoleum. They go up the stairs to a dais, where there is an ancient tomb. It contains a sarcophagus that generates a dimensional dome; it proves to be a soul trap which imprisons them. Inside it there are innumerable other people, trapped too.

*Two days later (at Christmas night), I happen to watch a short sci-fi film on the Internet. It is about an astronaut who travels to a deserted planet, where he finds an ancient mausoleum. He goes up the stairs to a dais, where there is an ancient tomb. It contains a sarcophagus that generates a kind of dimensional dome; it proves to be a soul trap which imprisons him. Inside it there are innumerable other people, trapped too.*