

Tales of the Dreamer Witch

5 Fantasy Stories

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written by
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Story 1: Theft of a Dream

Maybe you have heard my name.

It is Sandra Nox

But I am mostly known as The Dreamer Witch.

I once served prince Venor, first son and heir to the throne of the Palladian Empire that has its seat in the Constellation of Boötes.

After their catastrophic clearance through the abutting galaxies, the Palladian Fleet attacked my home planet in the solar system of Aldebaran.

I happened to be one of the few survivors taken prisoners of war and implanted to become perfect servants for the Empire.

However, I managed to escape two Palladian years ago, having fully developed psychic powers till then unsuspected; moreover, I allied Arion of Tifereth, the Empire's worst enemy.

Now I am wanted in 172 solar systems of the Palladian Dominion.

....

I am flying high over endless green fields; I'm entering a narrow foggy path that gradually takes shape between two lines of leafy trees. I relish an exhilarating sense of freedom, but soon everything around me seems to be melting away. I'm trying to envisage it as clearly as I can, but the only thing I finally achieve, is form a colourless

relief picture sculpted on the astral substance, the ethereal matter all universes are made of. A new path is now being formed before me, hardly discernible between the white tree trunks that spout up towards the alabaster sky. However, I cannot complete my creation: Everything remains motionless, translucent white, incomplete; suddenly, at the end of the path there is a sphere of sparkling light that grows brighter and brighter, obliterating the trees, the path, me, the world...

Right at that moment I woke up from the nightmarish experience, which had just repeated itself for the third time since my arrival on planet Phaon. Apparently, the recurrent psychic experience was a message warning me about an imminent danger and this was understandable, since the planet is within the limits of the constellation of Boötes.

I could have never imagined coming so close to the seat of the empire, I have always considered it suicidal. On the other hand, the Palladian royalty was unlikely to suspect I would ever dare attempt anything within their dominion. Besides, the information I had gathered was too important to ignore: Here, on Phaon, which orbits quasi-forgotten around the dwarf-star Sigma, in the fringes of the Palladian Empire, there was hidden a relic of an ancient civilization long ago lost and forgotten. To the moment I had only a vague idea about what it was exactly; I only knew I wanted it for myself and my interstellar travels.

....

My inquiries had finally led me to the mountainous city of Darrak where, behind the whitewashed walls, the tiled roofs, the unpaved alleys and the surrounding barren hills, a dreadful curse lurked behind every corner. That was a wide-spread superstition on Phaon, ever since a mysterious disease first appeared on the planet six months ago. The

most common symptoms were loss of weight, hemorrhage, madness, suicidal attempts -all resulting in an agonizing death.

People attributed the disease to a so-called Archangel Assar, who always lied in wait for his victims in the dark. There were many sects that worshiped the Archangel, considering him a godsent entity who had come down on Phaon in order to give the iniquitous a deserved punishment. On the other side, very few know that *Assar* is the secret ancestral name of the Palladian royalty. In all probability, the “curse” was another biological weapon of the Assars, secretly being tested on the primitive population of Phaon.

A couple of days had already passed in annoying tranquility. I wasn't particularly worried about contracting the disease, it was not contagious anyway; besides, Arion of Tifereth had reassured me that my *Alvesten bracelets* would protect me against it.

I stared out of the half open window, into the moonlit cobbled street below. At this late hour of the night it was completely empty. I had perfect confidence in Arion, I knew that at the time being there was nothing I could do but lie low and wait for further instructions, but now all I wished was that this tantalizing wait was over.

“Be careful what you wish, Sandra,” I heard a man's voice whisper near me. “What you wish might come true!”

I gasped in astonishment and turned at once, simultaneously drawing my laser weapon, ready to defend myself.

“Arion!” I exclaimed in surprise and relief. “How did you get in?”

“Silly question,” he replied calm.

He was wearing a tight blue uniform, his red hair shim-

mering in the moon light, his green eyes sparkling watchful. As he came closer, I noticed that he was holding something that looked like a bulky book, wrapped in a black cloth. He unwrapped it fast and threw it on my bed with a quick movement. I was taken aback as I read the shiny red letters inscribed on the black leather cover: *The Word of Alagor*. It is a rare book of ancient magic and forgotten sciences, destined to be in possession of enlightened mystics only.

“Where did you get this, Arion?”

“Don't ask! Just study it well, as fast as possible!”

....

The biggest part of Phaon is covered by endless ochre deserts studded with petrified dunes, bleak villages and small primitive cities built in the sparse oases. Thousands of people are crowded there, living lives of misery and perpetual fear, their heads constantly bent before the powerful Palladian authority of alleged “divine” origin. Now, with the outbreak of the new disease, fear had turned to terror.

The arenas are the most popular form of entertainment in the cities of Phaon, where the masses have the opportunity to exhaust their oppressed aggression by watching star gladiators fighting each other to death or being torn apart by gigantic alien beasts. It all happens for the amusement of the uproared crowd and, eventually, for the glory of the winner in a supposed sacred tournament.

Three weeks after my arrival in the capital city of Thanda, I had already won a very good reputation as a gladiator. That new career of mine had already cost a dozen of slaughtered opponents, *but it all served a good purpose...* First, I had to disguise myself in a way that not even my own mother would ever recognize me; then, I introduced

myself as an experienced gladiator coming from “beyond the deserts”. That explanation was not satisfactory enough for the Reverent Judges, who claimed there is nothing beyond the deserts. Yet, my identification papers looked perfectly genuine to them. Last but not least, gladiators are always welcome to the arenas of Phaon, especially once they have succeeded in a certain fight-test.

....

So, there I was once again, wreathed in the dust of the arena, waiting for my rival to appear and the final duel to begin. I could hear the crowd buzz in excitement, countless inquisitive eyes fixed on me. I was wearing a violet tight-fitting uniform, embedded with variegated shining gems around the waist and my left hand was tightened to an invaluable Simisen sword. That time I had dyed my long hair lilac -which is considered the colour of wisdom in Phaon.

I could hardly contain my impatience when my opponent finally entered the arena. The spectators burst into cheers of exhilaration for he, the renowned Zygor Amherst, was not any gladiator; he happened to be the champion of Phaon for five consecutive years. And he was their strongest hope to see an arrogant warrior woman -that is me- defeated and dying on the sand of the arena.

Looking quite impressive and powerful in his close-fitting blue uniform made of some metalized material, Zygor approached slowly, armed with a steel dagger and a round shield. He had a set face with an air of determination, curly brown hair and sparkling emerald eyes. It *was* mesmerizing to look straight into his eyes; so had I heard many times but found it hard to believe, until now that I was facing him in the arena of Thanda.

A dagger can be a very dangerous weapon in skillful hands, and Zygor soon proved to be more than this: he was extremely agile and fought with a vehemence I could hardly repel. He was constantly on the attack, very confident of himself, forcing me to retreat most of the time. I could hear the crowd roar, impatiently awaiting my fall; especially the women were yelling continuously, in ecstatic mania. I knew I wouldn't be able to resist that kind of concentrated negativity much longer; for the time being, all I could do was recede all the way back, barely parrying a cascade of terrible blows, unable to fight back.

Very soon I ended up in a corner breathless. Zygor Amherst riveted his flaming eyes on me and suddenly the sword was too heavy for me; after a swift blow of his, it was no longer in my hand. I could only stare at the enemy stunned, as he was raising his shiny dagger to deliver the ultimate blow. For a moment of despair, I thought of resorting to some psychic technique that would neutralize him; of course, something like that would probably betray my true identity. So, I span round into a high kick instead, which unexpectedly disarmed Zygor's hand and sent the dagger fly away through the dusty air. Next moment I was rolling down on the sand towards my fallen sword; I grabbed it fast and stood up to my feet in a split second. The enemy stared at me in utter surprise, still unarmed. His self-confidence had obviously waned, as he instantly glanced back in anguish -a fatal mistake for any gladiator- possibly looking for his dagger, which was nowhere to see.

There was a stony silence among the spectators now, while the red sun was setting behind the ancient pyramids that rose up to the violet sky beyond the upper tiers of the arena. All at once, I was abashed at the tension on Zygor's face, as he stood there fully alert, determined to fight with bare hands. My personal principles urged me to lay my

weapon down on the sand and continue with a fair fight. The crowd burst into wild excitement.

Charging with a loud martial cry, Amherst rushed at me in a frantic attempt to knock me down with his powerful fists. I managed to deflect a terrible punch with a quick blocking movement and then sent him fall back with a sharp sidekick. In no time he was up on his feet again, launching another assault. I ducked immediately and rolled on the ground away from his outraged blows, amidst whirls of gray sand. All at once, a strong kick made my head spin and I collapsed; the crowd roared in wild excitement. I hadn't lost my senses yet, but I no longer knew where I was or what I was doing; I was only vaguely aware of imminent danger. Instinct alone saved my life, as right at the correct moment I came to myself and swept the opponent down with a low kick. He certainly hadn't expected that, for he finally lost balance and fell on the sand. Right after, I pounced on him with a loud martial cry and brought the fight to an end with a sharp blow between his eyes. Zygor Amherst sank to the ground unconscious.

For a few moments I stayed there motionless, pondering on how lucky I was that time; not only had I survived a very dangerous opponent, but I had also avoided one more meaningless killing. The buzz of the displeased crowd irritated me, but I didn't really care. I considered this an ideal ending to my career as a gladiator, which also brought me one step closer to my original purpose.

....

I could barely contain my suspense, as six silent acolytes were guiding me to the *Great Hall of Honour*. This is where the king of Phaon himself awards champion gladiators -a sanctum accessible only to those who deserve it. When we reached the black metal portal, here known as

The Last Gate, I was astounded to see that the clerics knew how to type the secret digital code which allowed entrance to the vast room. When the portal was open at last, I saw the king sunk in his carved ebony throne, obscured in his dark-coloured royal garments. The grimness on his face showed he did not like at all the fact that he had to reward a female gladiator; yet, he couldn't otherwise now.

As I stepped in, my heart leaped with wonder: The dark gray walls were hidden behind a complex of heterogeneous pieces of machinery; odd-shaped outgrowths; giant glassy spools matching each other in paradox manners; sharp-edged levers jutting out in hinted aggression; numerous hexagonal hive-like cavities beaming inside with a soft light; interspersed gemstones of various shapes and colours shed an uncanny soft light in the whole room; most of the pieces were covered with a protective network made of some membranous tissue. The ceiling consisted of big metal slabs, carved with relief representations of dreadful aliens. But what impressed me most, were the space navigation systems, the vast polyhedral screens, the odd-shaped furnishings, all symmetrically placed around the king's throne.

It was all true then, what I had read in the *Word of Alagor*: The Great Hall of Honour, its origin unknown to its present residents, was in fact the legendary starship Zephyrus: a work of extraordinary science and incredibly old age, a myth for many civilizations, resting there, on that insignificant planet, for millennia. Certainly, the primitive people of Phaon could have never imagined what it really was; to them, it had always been a god-sent temple of kings.

....

It proved to be rather difficult for me to overcome a certain nervousness that night, until I finally managed to calm down and go to sleep for *I had to dream*. Before long I

gained awareness of myself and the dream became lucid; I explored the astral fields for a few moments, then I forced myself to awake instantly, only to sink to the hypnagogic state again -this time envisaging the expressive face of the notorious outlaw Arion. The image of him grew clearer and clearer before me, his shiny red hair waved in the soft breeze, his slit green eyes sparkled in the light of dawn. The haze gradually melted away and I was *elsewhere* now, watching the infamous Lord Diodor, ruler of the Abyssal Realms, cautiously climbing on the purple cliffs that rise above the dark waters of the Nameless Lagoon. He looked impressive in his black uniform with the metal epaulets and the heavy firearm in his hands.

“All right, Arion, give me back my Jade Sceptre and I shall spare your life! Maybe!” he bellowed harshly.

“Why don't you come and get it?” echoed a daring voice behind a high rock.

“You will regret this Arion!” cried the enemy full of wrath, as he climbed higher on the steep rocks, scanning the coast with his narrow, cunning eyes. All of a sudden, a scarlet laser beam hissed down the mossy crags and hit the stone just an inch away from the Lord's head, leaving him breathless for an instant. Right then, I heard Lord Diodor command his mercenaries with a rough voice: “Get him now, dead or alive! Move, you morons!”

Hidden behind a shell-shaped rock, I watched Arion fighting six of them. I had no doubt he would prevail once again against the sluggish warriors of the Abyssal Realms, thanks to his determination and his excellent martial arts. I didn't have to wait long: Just a few seconds later, he had managed to kick them all off the crags. However, Lord Diodor -undoubtedly more efficient than his ruffians- kept on climbing up the cliffs, always full of anger, while Arion

had taken cover behind a massive arched rock. Then I realized he was completely unarmed. *He must have lost his laser weapon during the fight*, I thought, feeling a clasp on my heart.

As soon as the enemy came near enough, Arion pounced on him at once, defying the enemy's deadly firearm; he barely dodged a thick luminous beam that shattered the purple rock behind him into burning dust. Right after, a set of impressive kicks made Lord Diodor lose his balance, stumble back and fall off the cliffs. The heavy weapon slipped off his hands, and a terrible scream echoed all around. A soft thud was heard and Arion rushed down the precipice in search of the Lord's body; yet he found nothing. An ominous silence reigned all over the coast.

All of a sudden, a dark shadow sprang out of an oblong gap among the rocks and assaulted Arion like a crazed beast. It was Lord Diodor attacking barehanded; he managed to take his rival by surprise, throw him down by the edge of a flat rock and grab him by the throat, in a furious attempt to straggle him. After a few agonizing moments, Arion finally got rid of the deadly grip and pushed the enemy off with his strong legs. The Lord cried of pain as he crashed upon jagged crags; yet, next moment he was back on his feet again, ready to continue the duel. I watched the rest of the fight in anguish, until Arion got impatient and sent the Lord meet his men into the cold waters of the Nameless Lagoon, with a set of impressive high kicks. I left my hiding place and ran to him for a long kiss of love.

Time to return: I forced awakening at once, all my attention focused on Arion's enchanting face and the warmth of his hand in mine. Almost immediately, I woke up in my quarters in Phaon with a burning mind. The outlaw was with me now, his slender figure outlined in the

moonlight that came through the latticed window.

“Does Venor know anything about this?” he asked thoughtful.

“Venor? Of course not, how did this occur to you?”

“I don't know; but he's been after you for the last two years!”

“He's been after you, too. It was you who helped me escape from the Palladian Fleet, remember?”

“He had been after me long before that,” he corrected me.

....

We wound our way through the endless dark corridors like flitting shadows, perceived by guards only when it was too late for them. We had just disposed of the last ones, when we finally stood in front of the Last Gate. My heart sank in uncertainty, as I typed the digital code memorized from the *Word of Alagor*, upon the odd flower-shaped keyboard embedded in the centre of the portal. When we entered the bridge of the legendary starship *Zephyrus* at last, for a few moments we stood still, hardly believing we had just achieved our purpose.

“Do you really know how to navigate this? I'm not so sure if it still functions, anyway” said Arion then in a broken voice, actually spoiling the magic of the moment.

“We shall see...” I replied, trying to sound as certain as possible.

I had studied a lot about the *Zephyrus* in the *Word of Alagor*, -though I often had the impression some parts were missing- so I thought I knew how to put an end to its age-long apparent death and pilot it back to the vast lacunae of outer space, where it once belonged.

With hesitant steps, we walked to the navigation panel which was made of a light green iridescent material.

“Arion, give me the Jade Sceptre,” I said softly.

He took the stolen item out of its sheath and handed it to me; all I had to do now, was place it in the respective cavity and wait for a few agonizing seconds. To my great excitement, it gradually turned transparent and luminous, shedding a soft white light all around. I sighed in relief, for the first step had been successful: It is the Jade Sceptre that provides the *Zephyrus* with neutrino-naser energy. After that, I felt a lot more confident: I lowered the correct levers, pressed dozens of keys, gave mental and manual orders to the Artificial Intelligence Unit and finally stayed still, full of suspense. Innumerable lights flashed one after another, the weird-shaped screens lit up; a vibrating whirr filled the air as incredible quantities of energy were streaming into the powerful engines, bringing the ancient starship back to life. Like a giant night butterfly, with its sinister wings glittering in the starlit sky, breath-taking and dreadful, the *Zephyrus* took off at last, after eons of idleness. It slowly started to ascend into the night sky of Phaon, reducing to burning dust a large part of the miserable city below, while the red star Zenobe was pulsating outside our window.

For an indefinable span of time, all sense of reality seemed lost for both of us and our everlasting passion, as we crossed vast intergalactic distances towards a final destination: a small, semi-material asteroid known as Tifereth, in the centre of the constellation of Argo -Arion's home and kingdom.

....

What we should have foreseen but unconsciously chose not to: Someone had been after us during all that time, probably taking into account the information given to him

on planet Phaon, as well as the data of another source I don't want to talk about; the fact is that during the last two years it has been impossible for me to hide from him for long. As soon as the enemy's spacecraft suddenly appeared in our radars, we both froze in astonishment.

“I don't believe it! A Palladian spacecraft!” I cried perplexed.

“Venor's spacecraft!” gasped Arion.

At that moment, a terrible suspicion occurred to me.

“Where did you find the *Word of Alagor*, Arion?” I asked him in feigned calmness.

“I had to steal it from Venor; but I assure you, he doesn't know who took the book and I left no trace behind...”

“Does this look like he doesn't know?” I snapped out, as the enemy's spacecraft appeared in our screens and seemed to be approaching steadily.

“I had no choice; I almost bumped into him while he was taking it from the Ancestral Library of Phaon; unfortunately, he had been there before me, but I can assure you he got wind of the theft a long time after I was gone...”

“You should have told me that from the start!” I interrupted stern.

“Sandra! This is not the right tie to quarrel! We can talk about it later!” he retorted impertinently. I was mad at him but he had a point.

“You are right; we can talk about it later. After the prince has taken an unforgettable lesson!”

Confident of our military superiority, I set the Zephyrus on a war footing. However, the very next moment the enemy managed to anticipate my attack, but that was no

reason to worry: just like I had expected, his reinforced lasers proved to be totally ineffective against the protective shield of the Zephyrus. Right after, I felt a strange vibration in the air and I quivered. "I don't like this," I muttered and then I focused my attention on the main screen, where the most dangerous weapon in the known universe had just appeared, slowly unfolding itself to the form of a gigantic spectral cobweb: an abominable horror, a living organism known as the *Lethe*, practically indestructible and everlasting, feeding on all kinds of energy. Nothing less than a cosmic vampire, controllable only by its master, the prince Venor of the Palladian Empire.

"What are you waiting for? Destroy him now that you still can!" cried Arion.

"Too late, Arion!" I said breathless.

Although I inwardly knew it would be pointless, I attacked repeatedly with reinforced lasers which Venor dodged easily; in the meantime, the *Lethe* was growing bigger and bigger, unfolding its countless horrible tentacles faster and faster, imposing its dominant presence in the starlit vacuum of space. I sought to launch neutrino-naser shells against it but there was not enough energy left to fire them; I fired nuclear bombs at it, then an antimatter shell, but they all proved to be like sugar cubes to the hovering monster, already reaching its full size -no smaller than a lesser planet.

Very soon all gauges showed low levels, which meant that the cosmic vampire had already started to absorb energy from the Zephyrus. A few moments later the whole spaceship shook vehemently because of Venor's next attack. Arion hastened to fire the lasers again and again, before I could say or do anything. Such a swift reaction would have taken any warrior by surprise, but not an excellent fighter like

Venor, who swerved just in time and escaped intact.

“Arion, don't do anything like that again!” I shouted at him, while the gauges were now reaching the alarm zone. He muttered something between his teeth and threw his fist against a black piece of furniture of indefinable material and use.

“We must get out of here!” I uttered thoughtful.

“How shall we do this, you smart aleck?”

“I opened my mouth to say “I don't know” but I passed it in silence instead.

“I have an idea,” I said finally, in obvious uncertainty. “Let's just hope it will work.”

I stood in front of the Artificial Intelligence Unit and gave an order for a *cosmic confluence*. My heart was pounding in my throat, hoping to have followed the correct programming procedure, hoping it wasn't too late for that.

To my great relief, the complicate order was eventually accepted, in spite of the enormous energy loss. Only one second of sheer agony elapsed; then I sank into a sweet vertigo, my conscience lost in a seething vortex deep inside, and the entire universe seemed to be melting in its awesome eye.

....

I was flying high over endless white fields; I entered a narrow foggy path that gradually took shape between two lines of leafy trees. I relished an exhilarating sense of freedom, but soon everything around me melted into the astral substance, the ethereal matter all universes are made of. A new path was now being formed, barely discernible between the white tree trunks that spouted up towards the alabaster sky. For a split second everything remained

motionless, translucent white, incomplete. Suddenly, at the far end of the path there was a sphere of sparkling light that grew brighter and brighter, until it obliterated the trees, the path, me, the world...

The blinding light gradually started taking material forms again; I was rather scared at first, but I felt a lot better when I saw that we were still on the bridge of the Zephyrus and everything seemed to be in place. Yet, it was obvious we were no longer travelling; the starship seemed to be inert. I had an impatient look on the main screen and I was relieved to find out that dimensional transposition had been successfully completed: We had landed on a vast desert of bluish quartz, studded with turquoise glimmering rocks. A strong wind was blowing over the barren land, lifting clouds of azure sand into the air; a scarlet dawn crowned lilac mountains in the horizon, as a huge golden moon was rising in the crimson sky.

No more than a few seconds had passed, when I noticed a little sparkling light trace a curved line on the sky, beyond the high mountain crest in the horizon. It looked like a distant shooting star, but I had no doubts about what it really was. Without explaining anything to Arion, I retired to my chamber with the excuse of feeling tired. I lay down and let my mind be still; my heartbeat gradually decelerated and became fainter and fainter, as I was gradually falling in a state of deep hypnosis. When the time was right, I prompted my astral body out.

The astral projection verified my suspicions: the flying object *was* a spacecraft, no other than Venor's personal spacecraft. I watched the prince of the Palladian Empire walk out of the pilot's cockpit and call his men. All of a sudden he paused and looked around carefully. His set face with the clear-cut features looked stern and his blue

eyes narrower. *Can he somehow sense my presence?* I wondered.

My return was abrupt and awkward, leaving me with a vague impression of an ethereal wave thrown back into my physical body and the bad temper that usually follows a violently interrupted astral projection. Anyway, I was back in my chamber again, my heart pounding in anguish. I sprang to my feet, dashed to the door and froze there, as I heard rushing steps and harsh soldiers' voices echoing right outside my room. *For heaven's sake, did my trip take so long?* I worried -for I had to try something even more difficult now...

....

The squad of ten Palladian soldiers stood still as they suddenly saw someone blocking the octagonal corridor before them: it was the notorious Arion of Tifereth, challenging the intruders with a laser weapon in hand. There was a moment of mutual hesitation; then, one of the soldiers launched an attack and the battle burst out. Arion fought each one of them with undaunted courage, remaining surprisingly cool during the unequal fight. His laser beams flashed deadly in the ionized air, soon exterminating three of his opponents. He seemed to enjoy the tension of every single moment, as if the result didn't really matter to him, winning or losing, living or dying; he looked proud and fearless even when he was forced to retreat and captured in the end. His green eyes glowed with fury, although Venor's firearm was now pointed at his chest.

Right at that moment, my astral experience was altered abruptly and I could no longer control it; this meant that something was going wrong, as I consciously recognized the revival of an old, painful memory, and at that time I could do nothing to escape from it.

... The door of the throne chamber was suddenly open wide, one of the guards got in and announced the arrest of an intruder. Both Palladian princes glared in surprise.

“An intruder? Here? That's impossible!” exclaimed Venor in disbelief.

Two more guards got in, holding a third one as a captive, his hands tied behind his back.

“He certainly isn't a guard,” said Venor and hastened to unmask the intruder with his own hands. As soon as he removed the characteristic casque worn by Palladian warriors, the prince was taken aback, as he faced the most wanted outlaw in the Palladian dominion.

“Arion of Tifereth!” he exclaimed. “It's you, once again!”

Seeing Arion captured by his worst enemies, my heart leaped in my chest and my ethereal copy fluctuated in agony between the physical and the astral field -just like I had suffered then...

“Kill him at once!” ordered Xavier with a sarcastic smile.

“Not so fast, brother,” dissented Venor then. “If we kill him in cold blood, we'll only make his legend stronger. Better use him for our purposes first...”

“What are you talking about, Venor? We'll never have another chance like this!”

“Killing him would be too easy and magnanimous; besides it would make him a symbol of revolution all over the known universe.”

Xavier sought to disagree again but Venor paid no heed and raised his voice: “I have special plans for you, Arion: You have no implants in your body, right? Well, pretty soon this will change and you will be my most loyal servant!”

“You can't scare me, Venor. No matter what you do, I will find a way to escape. And it won't be the first time...” retorted Arion audaciously.

“Don't be a fool, Venor! Kill him now!” cried Xavier full of impatience.

“He certainly didn't manage to infiltrate in here all by himself,” went on Venor with an arrogant smile. “I'm sure there is a traitor in the base, a secret ally who provided Arion with all the information he needed. Let's give him an hour, while we'll be scanning his mind; if Arion manages to resist the scanning or if his ally doesn't make a move in the meanwhile, then the hero dies anyway!”

At that moment, Venor turned to his right and stared at me, as though he could actually see me. *Can he actually sense I'm here? I was worried for an instant; right after, everybody in the throne chamber was dumbfounded as they saw me entering through the door of the throne chamber...*

... But enough retrospection; trying the same trick twice on the same enemy is not the best tactic, but I had no more time to think of a better alternative. As I got out of my room with slow, stealthy steps, Venor turned round fast; his long blond hair waved over his broad shoulders and he riveted his bright blue eyes on me.

“How did you find me here, Venor?” I asked as calm as possible.

“You know that my spacecraft can carry out space dilations; Besides, there is no way you can hide from me, you know that too, Sandra.”

“So, what do you want this time?”

“At first I doubted whether you would ever be able to locate the Zephyrus, let alone steal it; but now that you have finally

managed to do so, I want it for myself. Am I clear enough?"

"I think so..." I paused and looked at him straight into the eyes -which distracted him for a moment or two. *But what if he suspects anything?* I worried as my right hand slipped to the side of my belt, where a laser gun was fastened. Of course, such a move would have never taken by surprise experienced Palladian warriors, who fired immediately.

When my astral body -this time thick enough to be visible- vanished into thin air before their eyes, they all gasped in amazement. Right at that moment, I opened the door of my chamber, rushed out in frenzy and fired twice. That unexpected attack caught the soldiers off guard and two of them collapsed on the floor lifeless. Arion grasped at the opportunity at once; with a sharp movement of his arms he managed to free himself from those who held him captive. I shot once again but missed, as the rest of the soldiers stepped aside just in time and got ready to fight back. Yet Arion reacted instantly, sweeping them all down with a set of fast high kicks. Then we both fled at once, while Venor's raging voice was echoing behind us: "Get them! Now!"

I ran frantically along the dark corridor, barely dodging the successive mortal beams that flashed around me; I went up and down spiral stairways, entered odd-shaped rooms I barely took a look at, the enemies' steps always a few paces behind. All of a sudden, I shivered; I had no idea where I was. My agony reached a peak as I realized that Arion was nowhere to see. Moreover, I was now standing in front of a black metal door at the edge of a narrow passageway, the soldiers' rushing steps echoing closer and closer behind me. I saw no other alternative but pass through; next instant, a shock: I was virtually trapped in a bizarre room with even more bizarre furnishings, whose

utility I couldn't at all imagine; my pursuers were already by the door, and there was no other way out. I gasped for air, almost worn out.

“Sandra Nox! Give up!” Venor's commanding voice reverberated into the dimly lit room.

I stood motionless, pondering on the situation; it was no use trying to escape any more. I hid quickly behind a high translucent pillar filled with a yellow effervescent fluid inside. I waited there with all my senses on the alert; seconds later the Palladian soldiers trooped in, with their heavy firearms in hand. Once they had approached near enough, I extended my hand out of my hiding place and fired at once; one of them dropped dead on the black tiled floor. Right after, I moved fast and took cover behind a lofty metal construction on my left, barely dodging the concerted counterattack of the others.

All of a sudden, I felt a violent grasp around my waist; strong, muscular arms seized and lifted me up, so tight that choked all the air out of my lungs. Defying the sharp pain in my ribs, I managed to throw a direct kick to another Palladian soldier who sought to pounce on me; then I twisted my body rapidly and my left elbow hit my captor hard on the chin. That made him loosen his grip a little, and I landed him one on the nose with the back of my fist; he let go, screaming in pain. My feet finally touched the ground, and I was free again. Next moment I felt a bad sting on my armed hand and I dropped the laser gun with a cry of pain. To my astonishment, I saw it was Venor who had fired. *How could I ever forget about him, even for a split second?* I wondered about myself. His firearm was now pointed at me and I was scared stiff. “It is all over, Sandra,” he announced firm.

Two or three seconds of deathly silence had elapsed, when a dreadful crash echoed all around and the translucent pillar was split apart by a luminous laser beam. We all covered our faces instinctively, as innumerable jagged bits of the glassy material, together with thick drops of the yellow fluid, were shot around in a moment of incredible tension. Once the air had cleared out a little, I tried to peer through the green fumes emanating from the liquid substance which was now spilled all over the place. To my surprise, I discerned the slender figure of Arion emerging from the haze; he had appeared out of nowhere, just at the correct moment, and was watching the slightest motion in the room with rapt attention. In a split second, he sprang and rolled in the air with an unbelievable somersault; before anyone could react, he managed to seize the prince from behind and press the barrel of his weapon against the enemy's throat. Venor gasped in consternation and let his firearm fall down.

“One wrong movement and the prince dies!” cried Arion.

The remaining three Palladian soldiers were disarmed and forced to get out of the Zephyrus. The prince thought he would go last; but, as he was about to step out, I grabbed his arm and pulled him back into the antechamber, just a second before the main portal was shut.

As soon as Venor realized what had just happened to him, he immediately burst into wrathful frustration and sought to attack Arion, entirely ignoring our weapons being pointed at him. I had to stick the barrel of my laser gun on his right temple, in order to make him freeze; he gave up and leaned his back on the gray wall, breathless.

“First of all: how did you manage to break into the Zephyrus?” I asked to know, although I could see he had no intention of speaking at all.

“He brought the *Lethe* here; I had to shut all power off, or there would be no energy left,” explained Arion hastily.

“Why, Venor? The greatest battleships in the known universe are under your command. What more did you expect to find in the Zephyrus?”

The prince stayed silent. I didn't expect him to answer, anyway.

“I can't understand why you are keeping him here, Sandra”, Arion broke in. “We should have blown all Palladian brains out, instead!”

“I don't agree, Arion! On the contrary, I believe that the prince will prove to be of great help if he stays here with us for a while” I said mordantly. “Firstly, he will secure a safe departure for us; and I suspect he knows secrets about the Zephyrus that we cannot even imagine! Am I correct, Venor?”

The prince stood still, always silent, his cold eyes fixed on me. My unexpected decision to keep him prisoner had surely bewildered him, just like it had bewildered Arion; but I had to be near Venor that night, if I wanted to get from him all the information I needed.

....

That night was a night of victory for the prince of the Palladian Empire. Having finally disposed of his worst enemies, he stood triumphant at the bridge of the legendary Zephyrus, heading for new worlds to conquer. All he had to do now was utter the correct vocal orders, in an old-forgotten language once used only in rituals of ancient magic, and the Artificial Intelligence Unit would allow him unprecedented cosmic experiences like time travel, entrance to the multiverse, multiple existence in parallel dimensions. There was nobody there to hear the forbidden words,

nobody but his wise and trustworthy droid counselors, who all looked exactly the same in their titanium panoply with the opaque glassy casque. Venor could not at all suspect that one of them was me.

A few minutes later he woke up, as the effect of the soporific gas was over; the prince sighed in disappointment when he realized that his great victory was only a dream. Then, he turned his head to the left and saw me smiling to him through the window pane of his cell. His face turned pale and frowned in dismay, when my lips formed clearly one of the invocations he had used in his dream.

....

“What are you going to do with me?” he asked later, after we had almost reached a certain destination.

“We? Nothing!”, I chuckled. “We 're just going to leave you on a nice planet with beautiful nature and very friendly residents!”

“The people of Gonast have been my friends for ages. As long as you are with them, we shall be sure that the Fleet will keep away from the Zephyrus”, explained Arion.

“No need to worry! They aren't going to keep you there for ever!”, I said sarcastically.

“Gonast? But it is inhabited by women only! Descendants of Amazons!” exclaimed Venor.

“Masters of superior sciences and magic!”, added Arion.

“The Palladian Fleet has never been there”, I reminded Venor. “I wonder why...”

Story 2: Distant Planet

Night had fallen when I finally hovered past the rocky mountains beyond the city of Hydra, capital of the solar system of the white sun Tadiran, on the fringes of the Palladian Empire. Under a starry sky with a full moon, a vast stretch of barren hills and tortuous rivers unfolded before my eyes. The landscape was fascinating, but I had neither the time nor the inclination to slow down and admire it.

As soon as I came in view of my final destination, I paused for a moment amazed at the sight: At the foot of a steep mountain there was a huge statue of an archangel in panoply, his enormous wings open wide. The gigantic monument stood on a massive tower and the whole construction was made of a black metal material which glittered eerily in the starlight. Unless I had seen it with my own eyes, I could have never imagined that any monument could ever be so high. The wondrous statue that dominated the silver-lined hilltops and the shimmering rivers was considered to be a representation of *Archangel Assar*, the alleged original ancestor of the Palladian royalty. This has always been a common belief throughout the Empire and, most probably, with the passage of generations and centuries, the royal family has come to believe this fairy tale too.

As I finally stood on the pedestal of the archangel, the golden landscape of hills and rivers looked majestic before me. Just like I had expected, the lofty tower soon proved to be a covered Palladian base, with armed soldiers guarding every door. Passing through without being perceived was not particularly difficult for me under the present

circumstances; I searched and searched for an indefinable span of time, until I came in front of an arched black portal at the lowest level of the tower. I paused for a second of hesitation, then my astral copy passed through the thick metal door. The two guards, armed with heavy firearms, didn't even stir.

“... there's no need to waste time any more; now we know that the underground kingdom of *Iridor* is not just a legend and that an item of great power is hidden there. The only thing left for us to do is go and get it!” announced the stately man with the long black hair and the shiny green eyes. That was Xavier, Venor's younger brother, and his presence never bodes any good.

“Not so fast, Xavier! We don't really know what exactly is going on inside the *Distant Planet*. We aren't even sure about how to reach *Iridor* from the surface of the planet; I'll send an exploratory team and...”

“What are you talking about, Venor? There is no use sending soldiers there, this is something we must do by ourselves!”

“You are exaggerating, as always,” said Venor annoyed.

“You know I am right,” Xavier went on. “We have already learnt that this item of power, once known as *Blue Mystique*, belonged to Cyane, the last queen of *Iridor*. It was considered sacred and could be reached only by persons of particular genetic characteristics.”

“We haven't found anything yet,” objected Venor. “The whole story is probably a fairy tale you've read on a tattered papyrus; but even if it isn't, 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 search *Iridor*, we'll certainly find it!”

“I doubt it; in any case, such items can offer extreme power or terrible havoc,” sighed Venor tiredly. “We've learnt that lesson before; or have you forgotten our disaster on Azenkur?”

“It seems to me that you want all the power for yourself!” snapped out Xavier.

Right at that moment I interrupted the astral projection; it had lasted too long, I was running out of energy, but I had learned enough and I knew I had to hurry if I wanted to locate the item before the Assars. Besides, I was looking forward to finding out if I had those “particular genetic characteristics”.

....

Intending to arrive there before the Palladians, I set out immediately for the notorious *Distant Planet*, the fourth one in the solar system of Tadiran. Strange name; when cosmonauts use this expression, they usually mean a hopeless, elusive quest...

Soon I was standing in front of the so-called Cave of Oblivion, at the southernmost end 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 old 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. Of course,

most space explorers believe that all this is nothing but a myth; I, however, had very good reasons to venture a space trip to such an uncertain destination.

Stumping my way among the crystallized boulders, I paused for a moment and stared at the snowy wilderness outside. Having just entered the Cave of Oblivion, all studded with massive rocks and occasional stalactites, I suddenly felt uncertain; yet, the only way I could go now was into the inky-dark tunnel that gaped on the opposite side of the dusky cavern.

The tunnel proved to be so narrow and fusty that made me wonder wonder how it was possible for me to keep going through it. Discomfort soon turned to anguish as I realized that, for some strange reason, the luminous beam of my torch reached a shorter and shorter distance, until it gave light no more. Not a sound was heard, not even my own footsteps on the ground. I don't know for how long, every sense of time and orientation was lost. It was the first time in my life that I had experienced such thick, tangible darkness. Moment by moment, I felt like sinking in thicker and thicker layers of darkness, a blackness no light could ever break through. Nevertheless, suddenly a sea of light dispersed the darkness, a dazzling light that took countless forms within an infinitesimal moment in time, creating a whole new world.

....

I found myself standing in front of an arched gateway in the middle of a half-ruined stone wall; for a few moments I just lingered there, admiring the wild beauty of endless mountain ranges expanding to the horizon: a panorama of purple crests, winding paths, endless flights of stairs curved on the rocks, ruins of ancient towers, castles, temples, all destroyed by the rage of winds and time. To my amazement,

I also noticed 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 lost in reverie, I walked along half-obliterated paths, flights of slippery stairs curved over steep precipices, dark tunnels dug through the mountains, strange natural bridges, decrepit remnants of ancient mansions. I can't really tell why I 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.

I paused for an instant when I reached a downward stairway that went round the steep slopes. Where it ended, I had no idea; I just kept on walking all the way down impatiently, almost ignoring the dreadful precipice that yawned at my feet. Quite unexpectedly, at a turn of the slope the stairs stopped abruptly and a narrow earthen path appeared before me. I was surprised to see that it led to a picturesque oval lake in the middle of a narrow valley, the mountains nicely mirrored 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 I stood there motionless, dazzled by the charm of the landscape and excited about the fact that I had finally found what I had been looking for: The mausoleum of Queen Cyane, the last sovereign 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 as I was following the narrow winding path to the lake shore. Entering the square courtyard at last, I 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 I had seen on the mountains-coiled around the high white pillars. Their gigantic purple petals were all facing me, 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 couldn't remember having seen anything like that before. I shivered at their sight but still moved towards them as the scent gradually smelt irresistibly stronger; a rare tranquility surged within me, as if I were in trance. A sudden gust of wind blew against me as I approached, like a sign telling me to turn back -which I ignored completely. Reaching closer, I extended a hand to touch one of those fleshy petals, which looked as if they were waiting for me patiently. Just for a second the flower seemed to be approaching me too -*but no; that's impossible*, I thought.

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! 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. *There must be something really invaluable behind this door*, I pondered, as I was drawing my laser weapon; I fired immediately, 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 doubts, excitement and cautiousness, I 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. In the middle of the vast room there was a massive construction made of gray stone -obviously an altar, with some instruments of witchcraft lying on it: An impressive *Simisen* sword, three black lancets, two gold chalices, numerous magic seals curved 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.

All of a sudden, light steps echoed behind me and then a soft chuckle. I turned round at once, with my laser weapon in hand, and froze when I saw who the intruder was: “You! It's you again!” I exclaimed, scarcely believing my eyes: It was Venor, the Palladian crown prince who had been following me, *since when?* I certainly didn't expect to meet him so soon.

“You are not the only one who is looking for the *Blue Mystique*, a primeval symbol of wisdom and power”, he answered.

Surely, he was more sincere to me than to his brother.

“You know it is not just a symbol,” I said in a low voice.

“Of course I do!”

“You don't expect me to trust you, do you?”

Venor shrugged his shoulders and stared at me with an

enigmatic smile on his face.

“You can trust me as much as I can trust you,” he answered. “But we can fight and maybe kill each other right now, or look for the precious item together. It isn't going to be so simple from now on, you know that!”, he concluded and approached me, entirely ignoring my gun being pointed at him.

“Don't tell me you've come here all alone,” I said, trying to keep my composure.

“There are no Palladian soldiers here, Sandra; in here I am alone,” he replied calm.

“I... I don't know, Venor,” I stuttered, meaning that I didn't know what to do...

I thought about it no longer, as my eyes unconsciously 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; and, all dominating, a gigantic woman's figure with long blond hair and a fine gossamer gown -who she reminded me of, I refused to admit to myself. She stood supercilious on a dark hillock, having a huge carnivorous flower in her right hand and a demonic smile on her impeccable face. Above the mural there was a chiselled inscription written in the ancient language of Iridor, meaning *Your Pain Makes Me Powerful*. All of a sudden, a terrible suspicion made me shiver: *Is it possible that She has been here? Oh, no, I hope not!* The last time I had met her was nine months before, in the sixth military base of Nabor, when she had allied herself to the Assars for the genocide of

the revolted nations on Azenkur.

“I don't know what's scared you so much, but I assure you, I mean no harm! At least not for the time being!” said Venor then, interrupting my bleak thoughts.

Is he frank? I wondered and stared at him, as if I had never seen him before. Anyway, it was too late to go back now. I had to go on with my quest, even if accompanied by my worst enemy who, oddly enough, seems to always know my whereabouts.

... *But how, indeed?* After all, I always wear my Alvesten bracelets -a precious gift from my companion, the notorious outlaw Arion of Tifereth- which continually protect me from my DNA-interwoven implants as well as electromagnetic mind control. Yet, more often than not I have the impression that I can't escape Venor's subtle influence, let alone I always find him before me. So, no matter how hard I try to ignore the fact, it is obvious that the Alvesten bracelets are not fully effective -and Arion had explained this to me right from the start: “There is no perfect antidote for negative implants; otherwise, they wouldn't have made them in the first place”, were his exact words.

....

We walked up the spiral staircase to the upper level of the polyhedral room and soon came to a hemispherical dais. Right in the middle, embedded in the thick wall, there was an ancient tombstone made of black rock. Venor pulled out his laser weapon and fired at once; 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 young noble woman holding a gold sceptre in her folded hands. Over her head there was a curved 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.

I couldn't tell exactly why, but 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 which was fixed in the centre of the gold diadem on her long, platinum hair. Her flimsy azure 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 belt trimmed with gold and innumerable precious blue stones forming an intricate floral pattern. I smiled in relief, as I knew I had found it at last: The sacred belt of queen Cyane, alias the *Blue Mystique*, the key to supernatural powers and wisdom, once worn only by queens and high priestesses. Yet, I could also feel that something was wrong, very very wrong.

Next moment, a blinding light was diffused in the ionized atmosphere and, 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 something completely different: an extremely malevolent, yet familiar woman of uncertain age, radiating an uncanny, hypnotizing charm. She looked entirely different from the last time I had confronted her, many light years away from here, in the sixth base of the Nabor Dynasty, where she sought power, more and 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 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 finally resulted in the Long Winter”, explained Venor in a low voice. “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 and I wondered:

“Weren't you allies once?”

“Your pain makes me stronger”, Venor went on, as if he had not heard me at all, 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 work-sites!”, she announced sarcastically. Then, with a quick yet 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. Right after, everything happened too fast, as if in a nightmare: Venor and I just stood there numb, watching a bizarre, translucent kind of barrier being shaped around us; within seconds it had taken the form of an immense spectral vault which loomed over our heads, while blurred images were gradually coming to life inside it. Namely, we were trapped in a dimensional dome. 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.

....

Venor 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 are we doing now?” I shouted frightened.

Instead of an answer, there was sullen silence; moments in time passing against us, as Lady Chimaera seemed to have won. All I could do now, was stand there like frozen and watch in despair 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 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 more or less ambiguous purpose; yet, very soon it was clear to me that all of them were slowly building a glorious palace for an omnipotent queen. The busy work-site 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 took my gun out and fired, but it kept approaching undaunted. I repeated again and again, yet my laser beams didn't seem to affect it anyhow. Venor didn't even try to stop it. With a sharp movement of its arm, the metal slave-driver pushed the weapon off my hands and crushed it 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 here, with absolutely no memory of our real selves,” said Venor 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”, the prince went on. “Dimensional domes are not completely compact; they have *chasms* here and there, through which we can escape, if we discover one in time, of course...”

“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, there is 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 and fooled my eyesight; my agony was only making things worse. All of a sudden, Venor 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 could 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, Venor 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 jewellery. *This is not really her, of course; a powerful 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, looked like 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, the moment the sarcophagus was opened. *But I had escaped that danger, thanks to Venor...*

“Time to cast the *Transfer Spell*”, he said then, in a loud voice. “You have only one chance, so don't make any mistakes, or we won't be able to remove the belt!”

Taking into account that the ancient civilization of Iridor was matriarchal, it made sense that the *Transfer Spell* could be uttered by women only -and that explained many things...

“*Ujad quesfin viratur fezz... ujad viratur kuj... ujad lei*”, I pronounced slowly, gently touching the sacred belt with my fingertips. Then, after an instant hesitation, I took in my hands and put it around my waist. I expected something extraordinary to happen, a kind of mystic experience maybe, but no; it was like a wave of energy surging within me, making me feel better, better than ever before. Next moment, Venor 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. After 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.

....

We had just arrived at the cavern, when I heard Venor's commanding voice echo behind me:

“Enough, Sandra! Give me the belt right now!”

“It's not your size,” I joked tepidly -maybe because I had been expecting this right from the start. I turned slowly and faced his stony stare, as he was pointing his laser gun at me. Right then, four Palladian warriors entered the cave, with their weapons in hand. I felt a pang of anguish, but only for an instant...

One of the soldiers fired at once but I dodged the mortal beam with an acrobatic jump that surprised even myself: I leaped backwards in a flash, then on a rock and down again with a somersault in the air -all this with considerable ease and calm. *It is true then; the Blue Mystique does enhance physical and mental abilities*, I pondered, while Venor and his men were shooting at me furiously, again and again; I barely managed to escape their deadly laser beams, running and jumping frantically among the frozen rocks, until I took cover behind a large boulder beside the entrance of the dark tunnel. However, a few moments later I had to move away and roll on the ground as fast as possible, as the enemies came nearer and nearer, rallying round their leader, firing at me continuously. I finally hid behind another rock, which soon proved to be nothing but a dead end.

It was just then that I discerned a slender shadow emerging from the haze of the outside world, soon reaching the entrance of the cavern. Before anyone had noticed anything, the notorious outlaw Arion of Tifereth had approached enough to fire his laser gun and neutralize two of the soldiers. I had asked him to stay in the *Zephyrus* and keep his eyes open for anything suspicious, but...

What took him so long? I wondered, as the enemies were distracted for an instant -just the time I needed to dash among the gray rocks and get closer to the entrance. All at once, a tall soldier popped up in front of me; I jumped high with a loud martial cry, kicked his face hard and fired against the other one who was about to shoot at me. Only the Palladian prince was still standing, alone and uncovered.

“Kill him now, Sandra! You will never have such a chance!” Arion cried.

It would have been too easy; all I had to do was press the trigger; yet my hand refused to obey and I could now discern an imperceptible smile on Venor's lips. Suddenly, he rushed back to the rocks looking for cover, firing madly against Arion and me. We both ducked instinctively and sought cover behind the nearest boulders. Next moment I lifted my head cautiously and took a glance over my ice-cold hiding place; I saw Arion slide stealthily among the rocks and approach Venor from the left. The enemy wasn't aware of that yet, but the outlaw was aiming at his head. *No, he was not going to miss...*

Without a second thought, I abandoned my cover at once; I ran as fast as never before amongst the jagged boulders, and finally managed to come close enough to the bewildered enemy; a well-aimed blow with my elbow on his right temple, and the prince sank to the ground unconscious. Arion watched the whole scene speechless, without belie-

ving his eyes. If I had not reacted fast enough, the prince would be dead now.

There was a sullen silence between us, which I preferred to break immediately:

“What took you so long, Arion?”

“Nothing ever takes me long, Sandra!” he replied mordantly.

In all, I think he was right: Inside Iridor I was in no danger; Venor needed me to utter the Transfer Spell and I needed him to show me the way out of the vampire's trap...

....

Stepping out of the cavern at last, I felt wonderful-like waking up from a most agonizing dream. The freezing winds of the night were whistling mournfully among the icy rocks that glimmered like silver in the light of three crescent moons.

“So, why did you prevent me from killing our worst enemy?”, asked Arion suddenly, with the same expression of anger on his face.

“You don't want him dead, Arion; If he is gone, Xavier will be heir to the throne. In comparison with him, Venor is an angel!”

“I wouldn't be so sure about this!”, he said in disbelief. “Anyway, there is one more thing we have to do! You don't want Venor at our heels while leaving the Distant Planet, do you?”

He didn't wait for an answer; he swung round at once, drew his laser weapon and fired at the massive rocks above the Cave of Oblivion. I only stood there silent, watching the heavy boulders tumble down until the entrance of the cavern was completely blocked.

“This will delay him for a while,” chuckled Arion.

“Let's get out of here,” I said in undertones.

Dawn was already breaking in the horizon when we finally took off from the Distant Planet; before long we left the solar system of Tadiran far behind, resuming a space travel which is never meant to end...

Story 3: Descent to the Nether Zone

It was an enchanting evening in the semi-material asteroid of Tifereth, as the sun was setting beyond the prismatic cliffs that rise above the always smooth Selenian Sea. The notorious outlaw Arion, ruler of this magical 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.

“Tifereth is no longer what it used to be,” said Arion, 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 have 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 Tifereth have become uneasy, stressed, aggressive; they are neither innocent nor carefree anymore. Moment by moment they seem to resemble the inhabitants of the so-called 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 were blowing all over Tifereth, 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 so much to 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 joy and lightness I once experienced in Tifereth. The landscape was still exquisite of course, but all the magic seemed to be gone now; it felt just like one of those exotic tourist resorts, where everything looks great but you get the impression it is all a kind of stage scenery that might fall apart the very next minute.

“How can this be possible, Arion? 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 Tifereth, has been lost, Sandra! I know it sounds incredible, but somebody managed to take it from the Ancestral Sanctuary...”

“What? But how?” I burst out in astonishment. “Ordinary spaceships cannot reach Tifereth. Only the *Zephyrus* can travel to semi-material dimensions.”

“It seems that a *dimensional vortex* has been opened somehow,” he answered quickly, averting his eyes.

“If so, Tifereth is not inaccessible anymore! Our enemies will find out, sooner or later!” I exclaimed, hardly believing that I was uttering those words.

The breeze got colder as the sun was sinking in the golden horizon, under the scarlet sky. A sudden chill made me shiver. No, this place was not the Tifereth I knew; it still looked the same, but quite soon this would change too.

“What... what can we do, Arion?” I stammered, 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 we can find out our destination before

it is too late...”

“Afraid so.”

“We shall do it anyway; we cannot allow that a fairy world like Tifereth to be destroyed,” I assured him solemnly.

“I knew I could count on you, Sandra,” he smiled and kissed me softly.

....

Contrary to my expectations, the Ancestral Sanctuary proved to be a rather obscure site. It must have been impressive once, but now it stood half-ruined and muddy, as signs of violent intrusion could be seen everywhere. In the centre of the stone room there was an elevated round base made of a shiny green material, two separate flights of stairs leading to it. Under the base there was a strange cylindrical chamber with transparent crystal-like walls. Oddly enough, the whole structure stood in perfect condition -unlike the rest of the ancient edifice.

“This is where the Ethereal Flame had been kept safe for centuries,” explained Arion, pointing at the chamber. “The dimensional gate is right on top of it, as you can see.”

“How did the gate first appear in Tifereth?” I asked to know but Arion was already climbing up the stairs to the round base. I had to run in order to keep up with him but we both paused instantly when we reached the green circle, as we both sensed an aura of intrinsic danger still lingering inside its perimeter.

“The dimensional vortex is due to open in a few minutes,” explained Arion. “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 Tifereth and will cause it to collapse -and this for starts!”

....

Arion 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 within a second. Apart from that, he also chose to carry a laser sword.

“We must stay inside the gate, as calm as possible, and wait for the vortex to open,” were his last instructions. Then, we both knelt down 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 dark; nothing but void stretching to infinity. Multiple layers of space and time fluttered in a rhythmic alternation of being and non-being; 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 dream of blurred images that shook violently together in a horrible dance. Suddenly, there was a strange, acute odor -a suffocating sulfuric stench. The atmosphere was still too hazy to see anything as 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.

“Arion? Where are you Arion?” I asked with a faint voice.

No reply.

“Where are we, Arion?”

Still no reply.

After a few long moments, I heard him shout: “Oh, no!”

“What's the matter? What's happening?” I asked to know, just before my eyes had cleared and I was stunned at the sight of the weird environment that surrounded us; yet I was certain that Arion had seen something else here, something extremely dreadful, which had now vanished.

“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 stench was still there but 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 and Arion gave me a look that made me freeze.

“We'd better hurry,” he said. “The gem can't be far from here; it's only that these walls... hmm... change every now and then!”

“What?” I cried but he had already moved on, with his laser sword in hand; as we were walking, he kept testing it on the fleshy walls, causing them to bleed here and there. I was trying to guess why, when suddenly a big hole appeared in front of 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 Arion, have you visited this place before?” I asked

softly.

Again, no answer.

I had no alternative but follow him into the hole, climbing up all those repugnant fleshy masses that oozed a purulent liquid from bulging cysts, only to end up 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, Arion?” I demanded to know once more.

“This is the Nether Zone,” he answered bluntly.

“You are kidding, right?”

“It is 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 the shallow stream of gray slime that flowed slowly all the way along the fleshy tunnel; I was constantly striving to forget my disgust, as well as a growing suspicion that Arion had actually led me into this hell; for I was almost certain that he knew exactly where we were...

All at once there was a thundering noise; 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, emissions of a white steaming gas in the place of their eyes, and sturdy bodies well hidden inside a heavy exoskeleton; but the most hideous thing about them was the aura of pure evil they sent out.

“We have just found the Keepers of the Treasury; the gem must be somewhere near,” announced Arion with a composure that surprised me more than the appearance of the monsters.

“How do we fight them?” I only asked.

“We had better not; you just try to reach that round gap on your left, alright?” answered Arion, 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 nearly bumped on gigantic arms, which I should have dodged a lot more easily, since those beasts were rather sluggish. But, for some strange reason, ever since we set foot in that unholy place I felt somewhat heavier and less supple than usual -and I could tell Arion felt the same too. Anyway, I didn't have time to think about it now; 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. The last thing I saw before jumping through, was Arion being swatted down by a gigantic palm and his weapon slipping off his hand.

I stood up breathless, and began to explore the room with my eyes. It was even darker in there, but I was surprised to see that it looked more like a crypt than a monster's bowels. There were numerous items crowded in that odd chamber: Some were lying in piles on the floor, 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 knew 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 items one by one; this soon proved to be a rather difficult task, since the room was purely 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 discovered the Ethereal Flame resting on an elaborate lofty base built of bones, metal and leather at the furthest corner of the crypt. Without a second thought, I grasped the azure-coloured gem with the eerie dim 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...

Right at that moment, the petrified wall on my right side split apart and two of the Keepers rushed in furious. I took out my neutrino-naser weapon at once and fired; the thick radiant beam fulminated one of the menacing giants who froze for a split second, just before he was reduced to fetid ashes whirling in the stuffy air. The other one had just turned round and disappeared through the gap again, with a quickness that really surprised me. *It was a strange but fortunate thing that these creatures carried no weapons at all...* My heart was beating like a drum, as I barely had the time to pass through the narrow passage which was closing fast behind me. Next moment I found myself in a tracheal tunnel, and I was extremely relieved to see there was no sign of the monsters there. Then 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, Arion suddenly watched his most 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.

....

Before long I was relieved and astonished to see Arion running towards me in 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 that he was holding his weapon again, but that was no time for us to rejoice; we both knew that the battle with the ghastly creatures 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 the hell out of here?” I asked breathless.

“We must be extremely careful from now on,” he frowned. “They know we have the gem, so there is an alarm all over the Nether Zone; moreover you have killed one of their kind, and they must be outraged; and the dimensional vortex is going to open in a few minutes; this means we have to last that long and return to the gate, which is the place of our arrival.”

“Can you, at least, tell me a few things about this land and these beings?” I wanted to know, as we kept walking along the tracheal passageway -Arion constantly on the lookout for an appropriate spot to open an exit.

“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!”

“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 heavier and slower here...”

“You mean we are virtually dead, in a land of the dead?”

“Something like that; we are trapped in the den of the most powerful and malicious beings in the universe. I wouldn't even like to imagine what will happen to us in case they capture us with the Ethereal Flame, but it will be worse than anything you can think of!” he explained flatly, always striking the fleshy walls with his luminous blade, opening bleeding holes here and there, but not an exit yet.

Next moment, the tracheal passageway split in two. I was bewildered, but Arion took the left path without pausing at all, as if he knew exactly where we was going. “Are you scared, or what?” he asked then, and I hated his complacent look as I had never been more scared in my life.

The surrounding environment looked even more abhorrent now, as the fleshy walls looked 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 two-metre high membranous opening in the shape of a lozenge, shimmering on the left

wall. Arion paid no attention and kept walking, always looking for a way out. I knew I would regret this, but I couldn't control my curiosity and approached to have a closer look inside. Arion followed reluctantly. Next moment, we both stood dumbfounded at the atrocious sight: Inside the vast cavity, there were countless human and humanoid figures; all of them were tied to strange thick chains that shone like metal and immobilized every single part of their bodies. All the figures were more or less mutilated, distorted, transmuted. Some of the captives 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; others had membranous wings of various sizes and colours; and all of them were gradually changing into something horrid. I let a strangled cry of horror when I realized that they were all not only alive but fully conscious, moaning and groaning with their endless misery.

“So, this is what happens to all those who get captured here,” said Arion in a low 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 gate?”

I had barely finished my question when a gruesome shuffling noise echoed behind us and made my blood freeze. I heard Arion cry “Watch out!” harshly; as I turned 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 gate began to

gradually take shape only a few steps ahead but not near enough...

Soon the place was full of gigantic beast-headed monsters with steaming eyes and the worst intentions. Arion and I drew our neutrino-naser weapons simultaneously, while a spectral vortex of tiny sparkling lights was whirling brighter and brighter on the eerily illuminated dimensional gate. "We have to move fast! The gate is about to open!", cried Arion and 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 another 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 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 just lost the Ethereal Flame. To my horror, 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 gate on time. Right then, just a second before it would pounce on me, the creature was fulminated by a white radiant beam and fell apart in burnt dust; Arion 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 Arion shout "Move now!" and then I saw the spectral vortex which was now seething furious just two steps away. There was no more time left; we had to escape immediately or stay in that horrid place for another hour -the latter was out of the question, of course. Fighting hard to overcome a relative sluggishness, I barely avoided hideous gigantic arms by performing multiple somersaults, while

Arion had to rush down and roll on the bumpy ground amongst monstrous legs; but we did it at last, we finally darted together into the swirling vortex, which shrouded us in a blinding embrace.

....

Our return to Tifereth proved to be a lot more frightening than our descent into the Nether Zone: It felt like being disintegrated in a bottomless whirl of darkness, my conscience shut down to nothingness; and then I was born again. The first thing I could discern in the haze, was Arion'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?* For a few moments I thought my heart were going to stop and I saw Arion barely breathed, as we both waited motionless for the haze to melt away in an ominous silence.

Suddenly, there was a tremendous rumbling sound and the earth shook vehemently -a phenomenon insofar unknown in the fairy-like world of Tifereth. All at once, the ground burst under our feet with a deafening noise; we were violently thrown off the circular base, as two of the horrid giants of the Nether Zone rose over the ruins of the Ancestral Sanctuary. Next moment I was screaming, trying to keep my balance against a lofty jagged rock; fiery, smoking eyes focused on me angrily, exploding gases were 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 now in its place.

However, the dark green base was still intact, which I considered very strange: *Can it be really indestructible?* I wondered; right then I found out I had lost the Ethereal Flame -once again. Full of anguish, I scanned the whole place quickly and I saw it rolling down towards the centre of the crater, shining dimly with its eerie soft light.

Next instant Arion rushed to get back the gem, while the taller one of the monsters was casting its huge threatening shadow over him. I had to distract it somehow, before it were too late; 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 Arion the time he needed to grab the gem, turn round fast, draw his neutrino-naser weapon and fulminate the other one, who had just rushed down the crater and was about to grab him. Gray ashes swirled up on the velvet sky, while another deafening step made the ground tremble; Arion barely dodged a gigantic foot by rolling fast towards the edge of the crater. The Ethereal Flame slipped off his hand and ended in a narrow fissure between two boulders; he strove hard to reach it but his hand couldn't get through. In the meanwhile, the remaining monster was rising threateningly, ready to seize him with his dreadful hands. Arion turned round immediately but stumbled slightly on a jagged 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 was now too close. He fired at once but to his and my horror, the monster just kept standing there. I was taken aback only for an instant; then, I knew: There was not enough energy in his gun, not enough to eliminate a creature 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 Arion, helped him stand and kissed him more passionately than ever. Then we had all the time we needed to seek and find the holy gem under the boulders. But there were still some problems to be solved:

“Very soon the dimensional vortex will open again. 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 Sanctuary has been destroyed. Where will the Ethereal Flame be kept from now on?”

“I suppose a new sanctuary must be built in its place, the sooner the better.”

“Something like this has never occurred in Tifereth before. How will you explain all this to your people?” I was curious to know.

“Frankly, I have no idea...”

Story 4: A Ship Called Destiny

I was standing behind the black metal baluster of my balcony in the *Hostel of the Fated*, as the huge golden sun was slowly rising on the scarlet horizon beyond the ocean that spread before my eyes. I was feeling somewhat weird knowing that this ocean used to be part of the Offirian deserts; not so long ago, it was turned into a sea by means of elemental magic and terraforming experiments. It had proved impossible to find out by whom and why.

A strange song was echoing all around from hidden headphones, repeating a strange refrain:

*The black tower in Alkmyre
faces the highest mountain top.
As dark clouds hide the sky,
naked branches crack like bones.*

The melodious music with the ambiguous lyrics gradually brought me in a brown study: I have known many aspects of evil so far, I have fought it all my life, I have had quite a few victories; yet, no matter what I do, it always seems to prevail in the long run, one way or another. You can't really exterminate evil; it changes form and returns, again and again. Besides, "good" often proves to be nothing but a pretense, a cover for evil. *Are all things evil inside, indeed?* I wondered, just a few minutes before setting out on my new mission.

As soon as the song ended, the departure signal sounded loud. We all left our temporary accommodation in the *Hostel of the Fated* and silently embarked on the oval-

shaped aircraft that would take us to our new home. I was feeling rather anxious for I had no idea about our exact destination. I only hoped I could stay there long enough to find out what was exactly happening there. According to the information gathered by my precious ally, Arion of Tifereth, there was an interstellar slave trade taking place beyond the boundaries of the Palladian Empire: “Thousands of people go to planet Offir every year, *in search of their destiny*, as it is often reported. Supposedly, they go there to work; however, they never come back and nobody hears from them anymore. Actually, nobody knows what hides behind all this but I have the impression that something uncanny is happening on Offir, the fifth planet of the white star Melian. I don't think the Palladians have anything to do with it but we had better look into it and find out the truth”, Arion had explained in a firm voice.

That's why I had ended up on that small planet, which seemed to be completely cut off from any civilization. So far, I had seen no sign of the Palladians there; most of the planet was desert, there were no cities, no important first materials for the Empire to plunder, nothing. Officially the planet was completely uninhabited, yet it actually throbbed with human life. People arrived to Offir from different solar systems; they all came from lower social classes, they had no future in their home planets, and they travelled to Offir because they expected to find a permanent occupation and a less stressful life. Strange but true...

After an one-hour-flight, the aircraft landed and we all disembarked taciturn. As soon as I came into view of it, I was astounded to recognize an ancient ship -a vessel used for sea travel thousands of years ago. However, this one was never bound to cross the oceans; instead it rested there, among the dunes of the endless Offirian desert. I marvelled at its incredible size, prow and stern melting into the

morning haze. Its numerous decks shone like silver and all its lights were on, glowing bright through the innumerable square portholes. On its black hull, the name of the ship, *Destiny*, was written with sizable red letters. Everybody stared in wonder but nobody uttered a word. Not a sound was heard as we proceeded in line towards an open gateway.

Recruitment on the ship proved to be a lot easier and faster than I had expected: We were only asked to submit a simple identification paper. Of course, I presented forged papers, my hair was dyed blond and I was wearing cheap, casual clothes. Yet, I could see right from the start that I needn't have taken any cover measures; it was obvious that personal identity did not matter at all in there. Right after, we were all provided with the same beige overalls, which would be the only type of clothing for us from then on. Strangely enough, all workers were allowed to keep some of their accessories, as a symbol of the self they were going to forsake -and this is what I had counted on before deciding to undertake that mission. So, I went aboard the ship called "Destiny" wearing my *Alvesten bracelets* which protect me from all kinds of external mind control and the *Belt of Queen Cyane*, which looks like a fine ornamental belt but it actually increases mental and physical powers.

By blood froze as I realized what followed next: All future workers had to go through a mind conditioning procedure, defined as an "instantaneous educational program". The other recruits seemed to adore the idea but I had a strong feeling of disgust from the first moment my eyes fell on the implant ejection. I really wished I could avoid it, since such implants affect not only the physical body but the astral one as well; however, I decided I had better go through it because I didn't want to attract any attention by causing trouble so soon. Besides, this would give me the chance to learn the whole story right from the beginning.

Anyway, my body is already full of Palladian implants and, under the present circumstances, one more won't make any difference, I reckoned but didn't manage to actually appease myself.

As soon as the doctor in charge saw my *Alvesten bracelets*, he got curious and started examining them closely with his eyes and fingers. He looked impressed at their complex star pattern but he said nothing. He tried to remove them, he soon found out it was impossible for him to do so, and I got scared that he would suspect their true utility. Yet, it was obvious that he had never seen anything like that before, so he could not at all suspect that these bracelets neutralize all kinds of mind manipulation and implant effect. He took some notice of the *Blue Mystique* too; however, judging that it wouldn't interfere with my performance at work, he didn't bother any more. Eventually, he let me proceed without any questions and I could barely conceal my relief.

....

Novices were led to a department at the lowest part of the ship. It was a dull green environment, where we started working immediately. There were hundreds of persons around me, each one at their own post, performing exactly the same tedious, repetitive tasks with remarkable eagerness, quickness and perfection.

A certain picture caught my attention at once: It covered part of the ceiling and showed two snakes of undefinable length, one pitch black and the other fiery yellow, intertwined in a complex pattern. I recognized the primeval symbol of the two opposite cosmic powers that fight each other eternally for the domination of the universe: fire versus void.

At first I had some difficulty in operating my robotic arm, which soon proved to be building some kind of nanochips. I began to worry as soon as I realized that the other newcomers didn't seem to have any problem with their work, as if they had already been well taught how to make the arm function correctly and at maximum speed. Undoubtedly, that was due to the mind conditioning program, which also served as instant education.

However, the initial impression of ideal organization was soon superseded by annoyance, since I could see no real reason for labouring like this; after all, that type of work could also be done automatically. *Of course, work has always been a basic method of psychic vampirism*, I thought and shivered at the faint suspicion that occurred to me for a moment, but I suppressed it immediately.

Anyway, for the time being I had no other alternative but go on working conscientiously, hour after hour. I could occasionally hear a few words spoken by those of higher rank, who had the additional duty of supervising the novices, making sure that everything went like clockwork.

It's hard to tell after how much time I started feeling confused and worn out; I could no longer think clearly, yet I kept on working mechanically, like an automaton. *Do this kind of work from dawn till dusk for a couple of weeks and your brain gets soft*, I mumbled to myself.

It got even worse when I noticed that all the other labourers maintained more or less the same pace of work, while I was getting slower and less accurate. Had I not been wearing the *Belt of Queen Cyane*, I wouldn't have been able even to figure out what I was supposed to do.

“This is your first day here, right?” a woman's voice rang metallic next to me.

“Yes,” I answered tiredly.

“You are making mistakes, you know, and you are rather slow!” she remarked, full of concern.

“I'm sorry...”

As I turned and faced her, I was surprised at her young age; she had a light silver complexion, long snow-white hair and big purple eyes -typical features of the much afflicted Azenkurian race. Apart from the beige overalls, she was also wearing a fine gold necklace with a round carmine gem in the centre. I could tell from the look in her glassy eyes that she had been in the ship for a long time.

“It's alright, you will catch up soon!” she reassured me calmly.

Apparently, my poor performance had not aroused any suspicions, since not all subjects of mind control are equally receptive; however, day by day the implant effect gains ground.

“Who are you? How long have you been here?” I dared ask.

“My name is Helena and I have been serving the *Destiny* for five Offirian years. Due to my exceptional services, the bio-computer has determined for me another 996 Offirian years of life of board,” she recited, as if mesmerized.

“This equals about 300 Palladian years!” I said in disbelief.

“It is achieved by brain reconstruction in successive young bodies. This is how the High Priestess rewards those who serve her loyally...”

“The High Priestess? Who is the High Priestess?” I exclaimed in surprise. I didn't expect to hear anything like that and I didn't wish it either.

“This is of no importance,” she snapped, obviously annoyed.

“It doesn't matter who you serve, what matters is that you serve well!”

I looked at her dumbfounded, barely believing I was hearing those words.

“Just keep in mind: The more efficiently we serve the High Priestess, the more years of life we get as a reward, and not only on this ship!” she concluded in complacent frigidity.

“Not only on this ship? Where else?” I wondered but the supervisor had already moved on.

I got back to work with a sense of nausea, thinking that I had to get out of that weird galley as soon as possible; besides, I could feel I was running out of time and energy. Anyway, there was no reason for me to stay there any longer, since I had already found out a lot of what I wanted: Hard labour drained life force from the workers with every move they made and the psychic vampire who received it was a so-called High Priestess. As about the “reward”, without doubt it was a mind uploading procedure which resulted to virtually immortal biological marionettes. The workers were actually building the nanochips that might eventually replace their own brain cells.

In the meantime, work was getting more and more complicated and required knowledge that I just didn't have. Suddenly, there was nothing I could do; the robotic arm no longer moved; in all probability, it had been blocked by some mistake of mine -which was unacceptable for any worker. Helena stood next to me again, and didn't look happy about what she saw.

“What are you doing here?” she asked grim.

I stared at her numb, as she fixed the robotic arm with a quick motion of her hands and it started functioning again. I smiled timidly and got back to work. The supervisor glanced

at me scornfully and walked away. I turned round instinctively and watched her touch her gold necklace softly; I immediately knew that this meant trouble. I focused all my attention on her, concentrated harder, and I could now hear the telepathic communication she was having:

“Excuse the disturbance, High Priestess, but I must confess my fears,” were her first words.

“Make it brief,” ordered the High Priestess stern.

“I think there is an intruder in my sector!” announced Helena hesitantly.

“I know!”

“What should I do?”

“You? Nothing! I will deal with this problem, personally. Clear enough?”

“Perfectly clear, Lady Chimaera!”

....

On hearing the witch's name, I woke up with a start in my cabin in the *Zephyrus* which, in the meantime, had been resting on the dark side of Muse, the first moon of Offir. I sat up in my bed breathless, trying to put myself together again after the abruptly terminated astral projection. It had lasted several hours, in a rather thick astral carrier, and I was on the verge of exhaustion. In fact, I wouldn't have been able to maintain it for so long if I hadn't been wearing the *Belt of Cyane*.

I should have been feeling satisfied since I had returned with all the information I needed; instead, I was full of apprehension. I stood up and ran out of the room at once. A few moments later I was in the bridge; my heart sank when I saw there was no one there. I called Arion's name several times but I got no answer. My heart was pounding

like a drum, as I sensed that something had gone very, very wry. Just then I heard a strident laugh behind me; I turned round 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,” responded Lady Chimaera ironically.

The part of the room before me was already changing fast into the witch's den, separated from the rest of the bridge 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. Arion of Tifereth was standing right beside her, looking at me with an air of complacency.

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

“You are affecting his mind!” I cried.

“So did you, Sandra, so did you!”

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

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

“Just to show you how insignificant you are, Sandra Nox! You didn't think you could spy on one of my work-sites and get away with it, did you?”

“Where are you keeping him?”

Lady Chimaera smiled sarcastically and came closer.

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

can!”

I stood there speechless, watching her chuckle maliciously as she turned and embraced Arion, who accepted her affection with pleasure. For a moment I hoped that the dimensional dome would be completed, transferring me into the witch's den just like it had done with Arion, but no; it only began to melt away, until I was left there all alone, with my head spinning. At that moment, there was no jealousy in my heart; there was sheer terror. Although he could not suspect it in his daze, Arion was in extreme danger.

Sometimes I tend to forget it, but there is no such thing as magic; there are secret hyper sciences hidden under the guise of magic and witchcraft. Anyway, it was most fortunate that the Artificial Intelligence Unit of the *Zephyrus* had located the origin of the witch's message: it came from Alkmyre, the fourth and smallest moon of Offir. Just like the other three satellites, it has a habitable atmosphere; yet, Lady Chimaera has been its only inhabitant during the last millennium.

....

*The black tower in Alkmyre
faces the highest mountain top.
As dark clouds hide the sky,
naked branches crack like bones.
Walking up the narrow path
among the ashen trees
I leave behind ancient skulls
rotting in the foul winds.*

I repeated the rhyme again and again, so as to prevent myself from thinking that I was heading for the witch's den.

Sending an astral copy of mine would not be a good idea, since I was too tired to reattempt something like that so soon. I had no other alternative but go there in the flesh.

I walked all the way up the rising path towards the foggy mountain top, near the north pole of Alkmyre, under a never dawning sky. My heart leaped as I finally came in view of the imposing dark tower that loomed up to the heavy clouds, its vaulted turrets playing hide-and-seek with the roseate haze. Thick shafts of lightning flashed around the old edifice, occasionally illuminating its huge rhomboid front windows and the weird-shaped gateway.

Before long I reached the stone bridge which connected the rocky mountain with the witch's tower. I paused and stared at the two sizable front windows that reminded of gigantic glaring eyes; beneath them, the arched gateway resembled a monster's wide-open mouth, its long, pointed metal teeth shining ominously in the flash of lightning. The cold wind made me shiver as I started to cross the ancient bridge with my laser gun in hand, knowing that things would get really nasty from now on.

As soon as I entered the sinister gateway, I faced the heavy stone portal that led inside the tower. After an instant hesitation, I lifted my weapon and got ready to fire at it; however, right at that moment the portal opened slowly with a loud squeak. I stepped in with rapt attention and found myself in a completely empty hall; there was nothing, nobody waiting for me in there -which I considered rather odd. At the far end of the room there was a narrow spiral stairway that obviously led to the upper floors. I paused and breathed the musty air for a second; I could sense no sign of danger, just a strange stillness.

I was heading for the stairs, when I heard a soft thud behind me. I turned round instantly and stared at the

shadowy figure that had just appeared at the open portal. Then, a clear man's voice echoed in the dusk: "Go back, Sandra! Go back while you still can!"

I refused to believe it at first, but there was no doubt: That was my companion, Arion of Tifereth himself, who seemed to have come out of nowhere. He was now standing there, at the threshold of the tower, staring at me with cold, soulless eyes. In his hands he was brandishing a powerful laser sword, and his fighting stance showed that he was ready to attack.

"Arion, what are you doing?" I cried out, but he stayed silent. In fact, he acted as if he had never met me before, which made me feel sad and helpless. I could not remember being in a worst position ever before.

Next moment he assaulted me, furious like a wildcat. I stepped aside just in time, and his laser beam scorched the fusty air. His movements were incredibly fast and accurate, often giving me the impression that his feet did not even touch down. I did my best to avoid conflict with him; I only tried to defend myself, as he attacked again and again frenzied, his loud martial cries reverberating all around. Once again he proved to be an excellent fighter, but this time he wasn't fighting for ideals or liberty; he was just serving the most powerful psychic vampire that has ever existed. I had to fire two warning laser shots at him, which grazed past his wavy red hair. "Arion, stop!" I cried breathless but he paid no heed. He just got ready to counterattack, and he looked even more determined now. I barely managed to dodge his successive strikes for some never ending moments; then, with an incredible twist of his body, he turned his luminous blade aiming at my waist and I hardly had the time to scream "No!"...

Next moment, I opened my eyes hesitantly, looked around carefully, but there was nobody there. The witch's guard seemed to be gone, spirited away. "A hologram! It was nothing but a high-density hologram!" I soliloquized shocked, having just realized it was only hot air I had been struggling against. Still, it was a clear message from Lady Chimaera, telling me to *go back while I still could*. However, there was no way I could possibly turn back now.

....

I rushed up the stairs at once, getting more and more impatient with every step. When I reached the top turret, I found the black metal door provocatively open. Entering the spacious hexagonal garret cautiously, I immediately noticed the characteristic symbol of two snakes I had seen on the Ship of Destiny; however, this one was three-dimensional, enclosed in a crystalline sphere which hovered in the air under the vaulted roof. Right under it, there was a massive altar made of black marble carved with bizarre relief magic seals. The walls were covered with wooden shelves full of sorcery tools, bulky books, bottled potions, as well as skulls and bones of various humanoid and human beings. Outside the narrow, latticed dormers the whole sky kept flashing with tremendous lighting.

"You are here at last, Sandra Nox!" announced Lady Chimaera in a sonorous voice, 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. Arion was standing next to her, holding an odd-shaped firearm in his hands. And this time he was not a hologram.

"What have you done to him?" I demanded to know, aiming my laser gun at the sorceress.

"What he has always wanted, of course, just what he has

always wanted!” she replied provocatively, and touched his shoulder tenderly. I could no longer contain my wrath and sought to fire at her at once. She tended her right arm towards me and then -nothing. No laser beam came out of my gun. The triumphant look on the witch's face meant that she had just blocked my weapon with her psychic powers. Yet I tried again, in vain; my gun was nothing but a burden now and I threw it down in dismay.

Next moment Arion 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 shining as never before.

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

“His mistress?” I exclaimed, hardly believing what was happening.

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

Arion assaulted me with a ferocity I had never seen before. Once again, the *Blue Mystique* helped me react promptly and avoid the enemy's mortal beams with relative ease. He kept firing at me furiously, pushing me back towards the entrance. Just then, the black metal door slammed closed behind me and 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, avoiding to damage anything in the room. All at once he was too close to me, determined to finish the duel as fast as possible.

In the meanwhile, the witch had withdrawn to a corner and was enjoying herself to the fullest, as I was getting more and more desperate. The belt was helpful

indeed, but this couldn't go on for ever.

“You think I would have let you reach my tower if I considered you a worthy opponent, Sandra?” shouted the sorceress scornfully, as time seemed to have frozen. “Besides, you have something that belongs to me!” she went on. She meant the *Blue Mystique* and she was right about that: Very long ago and very far away, she used to be the omnipotent Queen Cyane and the belt belonged to her. But it was mine now and I had no intention of losing it, Arion or my life.

Next instant I jumped high into the air so as to evade another furious attack of the enemy; then I turned aside and swept his weapon off his hands with a fast side kick. As I was landing on my feet, I saw he had already picked up 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 lose balance, topple back, bang his head against the marble altar and lie there stunned. For one long moment, there was absolute silence in the room.

“Arion?” I cried and ran to him. “Are you all right?” I asked but got no answer.

After a never ending moment, 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 I collapsed on the floor together with some heavy volumes, while Arion was already aiming his weapon at me. He fired repeatedly, with the same insane look in his eyes. Strangely enough, this time it proved to be quite easy 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. Her unintelligible words were still ringing in the ionized air, when I first noticed those pools 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 a sorcery requires huge amounts of energy, but that was no problem for Lady Chimaera. Therefore, it would be only a matter of seconds until some hideous demon materialized in that room, under the witch's commands.

Arion 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 hardly managed to duck just in time and 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.

As I turned my head, I was surprised to see that Arion's laser had struck the crystalline sphere above the altar, actually destroying the mystical seal inside. For a couple of endless seconds, I watched the two spectral snakes stir as if they were coming to life; they slowly moved in opposite directions, separated and finally disappeared from sight. Simultaneously, all the white pools of ectoplasm melted away fast.

Lady Chimera screamed in terror and the room resounded with her shrill cry of pain, as Arion fired again, this time 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 mantle and vanished in an ethereal green cloud.

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

“She'll be back! A powerful psychic vampire like Lady Chimaera won't perish so easily!” said Arion in a firm voice.

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

....

“The three-dimensional seal ensured the witch's pact with two rival demons, one of the void and one of the fire”, explained Arion, as we were crossing the stone bridge, having just abandoned the tower. “Lady Chimaera owed her extraordinary vampiric powers precisely to that pact...”

“Which was undone, thanks to you!”

“For the time being, she has lost everything: her precious pact with the two demons, her physical body and lots of energy.”

“And she has also lost control of her subjects,” I inferred satisfied.

“She will eventually regain everything; she will probably need a considerable span of time for that, but she will return,” he concluded with certainty.

The only thing that I failed to find out, was what had happened exactly between Arion and Lady Chimaera during the time he was her prisoner. He sustained he had no recollection of that, since he was not himself while under her influence. It was the bump on his head but mostly my kiss of love that brought him back, he said.

For the time being, I preferred to content myself with that explanation.

After that soul-racking experience, I decided to stay away

from Offir for a long time. I don't really know what happened with the ship called *Destiny*.

According to recent information, some of the slaves got away of their own volition.

Some others didn't.

Story 5: Beyond Heaven

My long space journey had finally reached its end at last. In the main screen of the *Zephyrus* I could see the legendary *cosmic vortex*, the ultimate stargate to infinite universes, that opens and closes rhythmically; it looked like a gigantic spiral galaxy but its eye seemed to be void, giving the impression of a black hole that devours everything. As the eye opened again, I trusted the *Zephyrus* to plunge into it. The very next moment, the stargate closed behind me; I felt like sinking deeper and deeper inside it, further and further from the known world, at an incredible velocity that effaced any conception of time and space.

It's hard to tell how long my fall had lasted; suddenly, the spaceship seemed to decelerate and I realized I was arriving somewhere. Then, there was no sound, no motion; for a few moments I experienced a paradox emptiness. After a short hesitation, I opened the main portal of the *Zephyrus*, stepped out with slow, cautious steps and looked around carefully. The landscape was magical: A vast seaside of rosy sand stretched before me, an odd treasure of tiny pink diamonds turning white under the shallow sea waves in the distance. The endless, dark blue sea stretched calmly to the horizon. For a few moments I stood still and admired the phantasmagorical cosmic vortex rising beyond the ocean; it was sparkling like a spectral spiral galaxy in the night horizon. Everything was so serene, so weirdly peaceful, as if the planet were entirely uninhabited.

Entranced by such beauty, I allowed myself to explore the place for a while. The pink sand was studded with shell-shaped rocks of various sizes and colours. I was especially

impressed by a conch-like rock which was considerably larger than the others -as if it were their sovereign. Like hypnotized, I stood in front of the oblong opening that led to its interior; it gave the impression of an unguarded entrance. I tried to peep inside, but I saw nothing but darkness. At first, the blackness was compact and thick; then, it seemed to be stirring slightly, as if it were a living entity inviting me to enter and reveal its secrets. Before even realizing it, I had already stepped in.

Soon, much sooner than I had expected, I reached the end of the dark passage and I came out of a similar conch-shaped rock. I was surprised to find out that I was standing at the edge of high cliffs, overlooking a vast city. All its buildings had the shape of shells: Striped “conchs”, thin oblong “horns”, dark “clams”, open “oysters” with a “pearl”-house inside, blue “pools” with coral “towers” in the middle. There were many kinds of spectral foliage rising to the starlit sky, giant sea-flowers with shiny colourful petals.

All of a sudden, a winged, fairy-like creature with soft scarlet feathers rushed down from the sky and landed on the ground right in front of me. It paced up and down for a while, actually preventing me from going on; then, it flew away again. I turned and watched its flight for a few moments, until it disappeared behind a thick cluster of coral-trees. Next moment, I was surprised to notice there was a wide cobbled path before me. *Wasn't it here before?* I wondered. As far as I could see, the path led right into the wondrous city, winding along its narrow lanes. I followed it mechanically, like mesmerized. Not a sound was heard, deathly stillness.

Walking along the city's lanes, I finally came in front of a shell-shaped golden mansion, which stood out from the other edifices because of its size and its splendor. For a few

moments I stood there, engrossed in its majestic beauty until, all at once, I sensed another presence near me; only then did I remember why I had come here, who I was supposed to meet in that non-material dimension. I slowly turned and faced him; my heart sank in bitter joy. Many years had passed. The Palladian tyranny was long ago gone and so was Arion. I will never forget how he died, nobody in the known universe will ever forget his sacrifice...

He was fascinating as always, yet he looked more elfin in his light azure uniform. His red hair waved in the soft breeze, his green eyes sparkled like emeralds in the weird diffuse light. However, I could hardly believe it was him standing before me now.

“Is it really you, Arion?” I asked in a feeble voice that could be heard only as a telepathic message in the ether.

He just nodded slightly and I didn't want to ask anything else.

“This is one of the countless *Cities of the Dead*; This is where souls with an affinity to the elements of air and water come, after the loss of their physical body,” he explained with a silent voice and an enigmatic smile.

....

He took me on a slow, timeless walk along the winding paths of the city with the fabulous shell-shaped buildings, the enchanting alleys of coral-trees, the fascinating sea-flowers, the calm azure pools. Before long I discovered that the city was densely inhabited: There were plenty of fairy-like creatures, humanoid or not, winged or not, who appeared and disappeared in a split second like ghosts or apparitions, darting past us like shiny arrows or bright sunrays.

“What are you all doing here?” I asked to know.

“Evolving mentally and spiritually; getting ready for a new life, a new self and a new destiny in one of the worlds of the multiverse.” replied Arion tranquilly.

Then, all of a sudden, a new day started to dawn: The cosmic vortex was already rising on the lilac sky and it was shining even brighter now, like a supernova; yet the light neither blinded nor scorched me; on the contrary, I could feel it was invigorating and energizing me, while everything around me seemed to be changing slowly, following a common inner rhythm. Contours were not so clear any more; semi-material forms seemed less and less solid; everything looked more fluid, more transparent, more magical, and I could feel the transmutation even on Arion, even on me.

“Every time the cosmic vortex rises, nobody and nothing here remains the same,” his voice resounded in my mind, while a torrent of bright white light was gushing down from the skies, building new forms, inundating everything with energy, power, completeness. Universal ecstasy...

I could barely tell how much time had elapsed, when the cosmic vortex began to set in the crimson sky. An eerie haze was gradually covering everything, as the mystic light was fading away. Little by little, masses and forms started to regain a relative solidity, and all was soon shrouded in a deep purple twilight.

“If the setting of the cosmic vortex finds you here, there will be no turning back for you,” announced Arion sadly, while we were standing by the shore of a shimmering turquoise pool.

“I wouldn't mind,” I replied sincerely.

“No, Sandra; not yet. The time for this hasn't come yet...”

....

Before I knew it, I was walking along the cobbled path again, slowly at first, faster then, without even looking back. I could feel my heart sinking at the bitterness of final separation, but there was nothing else I could do.

Reaching the end of the path beyond the fabulous city, I entered the huge conch-shaped rock, crossed the dark passage quickly and found myself at the vast rosy seaside again. For a few moments, I stood there and looked around wistfully, retaining a strange nostalgia for a wonderful experience that now seemed to have happened thousands of years ago. The cosmic vortex was setting setting, the sands of time were running out...

Violently repressing an inner melancholy, I forced myself to board the starship. I turned on the neutrino-naser energy, I heard the turbines humming calmingly and very soon the *Zephyrus* was rising to the night sky over the endless ocean, heading for the eye of the cosmic vortex. Once again I let myself fall inside, just on time before the dimensional gate had closed behind me. I sank faster and faster, deeper and deeper into the eye of the vortex, and all was gone like a long forgotten dream.

Then I was back to the “real world”; my self-awareness had returned again, although I could hardly remember my recent adventure elsewhere. I smiled spontaneously, revelling in a unique sense of inner balance and fulfillment. *Now I know that nothing ever dies...*



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