

Grand Virtues

The first novel in a series of
female adventure stories in
life, love and well beyond.



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Grand Virtues

Some of us are born to a path of destiny.

We recognize the path fate set before us and follow it.

We will not evade, but embrace the future as it guides us.

This is about three average women who live their destiny.

I proudly present for your reading enjoyment: Grand Virtues

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This is the first of several Grand Virtue novels that follow an amazing family from earth to an adventure into our galaxy and back home again.

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Grand Virtues - Chapter 01

William Cann retired at thirty-six years old. The first eighteen years of his life was one of the average American boy with one exception, he was adopted by a Japanese couple who immigrated to the United States. During his last year in high school, he met the first true love of his life, Marcy Smith. It was obvious to everyone he worshiped the ground she walked on.

At age eighteen, before prom, the love of his life sent him away. Overly distraught, he joined the Army and became a Para-Rescue specialist. A very high risk occupation in the military.

After four years of active duty as he put it ‘in third world hell holes’, Bill had fulfilled his military obligation and was honorably discharged. That very day he was recruited by Black Creek Solutions. A company who hires ex-soldiers who have specialized warfare training. They hire them as mercenaries, highly paid soldiers for hire.

Depending on the assignment, the pay could be as much as eighteen hundred dollars a day tax free. William was at the top of his pay grade for almost all of his fourteen years of employment.

He became the top personal bodyguard for the Kingdom of Choam Royal Family. A small middle-eastern country sitting on an ocean of light crude oil. He eventually became the personal bodyguard and pseudo confidant to the King and the royal family.

William had left Kansas City when he was eighteen. Because he did not have a firm understanding of the financial world, he sent his entire payroll of eighteen hundred tax free dollars a day to his sister for safe keeping and investing. The owner of Black Creek steered his sister to some very exclusive investments. Those

investments paid huge dividends over the years. William became a double digit millionaire while in his early thirties.

He was planing to retire on his thirty-sixth birthday. He was critically injured during the last day while on his last assignment. (He was struck on the left side of his skull with a machete.)

Because of the severe nature of his injury, Bill was airlifted to a trauma center in Israel. After being stabilized, he was air lifted to Edgebrook Hospital in Kansas City for emergency brain surgery. The surgery for removing the bone fragments was successful and a metal plate was installed to replace the missing skull section.

While in the hospital recovering from his injury, he met Nancy Swenson, a girl half his age. Her biological father left town as soon as he learned his girlfriend is pregnant. While William was in the middle of a life threatening psychological breakdown, Nancy Swenson cast a spell of friendship on him. They bonded as father and daughter.

After Bill was released from the hospital, he was pleased to see his sister had purchased one of those huge pre depression era buildings for him. It has a newly rehabilitated vacant movie theater, an on the verge of bankruptcy restaurant and several store fronts. There are two apartments on the second floor; one on either side of the building and four offices above the theater.

Bill's adjustment to civilian life had begun. It was not what he expected. One of the strangest turns of events involved his new found friend Nancy.

Following a heated argument with her mother, Nancy left home and moved in with William, much to his dismay. Over a short

period of time, the two became so close, they adopted each other as father and daughter by contract.

Marcy Smith and Nancy were best friends before William returned to the United States. With help from Nancy, William found his long lost girlfriend from eighteen years ago and they were married a few months later.

William became a real father to Nancy. Her dream was to attend college and study business. He paid for her dream. Over a short few years, Nancy lived with Marcy and William in one of the Parkway Theater building apartments.

After college, Nancy worked for an accounting firm. She married her boyfriend Karl Hess, bought a house from her adopted father and started her own business with her college roommate Vanessa Sanchez. Nancy rented all the Parkway Theater Building office suites for her business.

Her and Karl's careers accelerated. Over the next few years, Nancy gave birth to three girls. She was so inspired by her adoptive fathers living by a code of honor and virtues, she named her daughters Faith, Hope and Charity.

Faith was born nine months after her first wedding anniversary. Hope was born two and a half years later. Charity was born two and a half years after Hope.

When her last child was born, Nancy vowed to never to have another. She thought Charity came out sideways, kicking, screaming and trying to hang on to anything she could to prevent coming out.

Karl is estranged from his parents. Nancy's mother Jillian worked six days a week with long hours. Marcy became the pseudo grandma. Because Nancy is renting all the offices above the theater, and Williams apartment is in the same building as the offices; he became the backup babysitter.

Bill spoke fluent Arabic and Japanese. When he was babysitting, (which was quite often) he would only speak Arabic or Japanese to the children. When the children were young, they would speak a combination of English, Arabic and Japanese. As they became older, Arabic or Japanese is all they would speak so their parents wouldn't understand them. This greatly upset their mother.

William used to take the children to the park and watch the ducks during the warm weather months. During the school year, the children were mostly taken care of by the sitter. In the summer, Nancy would drop off the children by Bill.

Like both parents, all three girls have blonde hair and deep blue eyes. Karl is six feet tall, medium build and a lawyer. Faith resembles her father with the exception she's skinny. She used to watch the courtroom shows on TV and always wanted to become a lawyer.

Hope resembled her mother. A fraction of an inch over five feet tall and round. Not much of a talker, but she could sense wrong doing like a bloodhound.

Charity the youngest is another matter. The child is bold and brash. She would watch old martial arts movies whenever she could. One day in Williams apartment when she was about five or six, she removed a Samurai sword from the antiques case and was practicing with it. She managed to break a lamp, slice the living room rug and destroy the sofa.

As their grandfather, Bill tried to get the children involved in sports; that was a failure. Faith and Hope had no interest in any sport. Charity is more interested in martial arts and weapons. As the years passed, Faith resembled her father in facial structure and height. She went to college to study law.

Hope, built like a barrel, the resemblance to her mother is uncanny. Like her mother, she had a head for business and could sense fraud. Faith and Hope looked rather average. Not beauty queens, but cute.

Charity is the shortest of the children (under five feet). What she lacked in stature, she more than made up with personality. She had a face that could warm the coldest hearts. She was by any standard, absolutely gorgeous. This did not go unnoticed by her sisters and was the source of many arguments between the siblings.

Grandpa has a habit of taking afternoon naps. Sometimes Nancy would come to her office to work on weekends. She would drop off her children at Williams' apartment. While the two eldest sisters would find cookies, milk and watch TV; young Charity has other plans.

While William is trying to take a nap, Charity would rub her fingers back and forth across his stitch scars on his head where the metal plate was inserted while making motor boat sounds with her lips; he did not enjoy this. She thought it's funny. He would always ask her to please stop and take a nap with him. She would climb onto the bed and lay next to him.

One Saturday while the children are in Williams' apartment, Faith and Hope wanted to go downstairs to his restaurant and get some ice cream. The two siblings walked into grandpa's bedroom where

Hope whispered to Charity; “We’re going downstairs to grandpa's restaurant to get some ice cream. Are you coming with us?”

Charity raised herself up and peeking over Grandpa Bill's chest and whispered; “No. You remember what mama said about grandpa having bad dreams. I'm going to stay and guard him. Bring me back a bowl of strawberry ice cream with chocolate syrup on it. I'll have it in the kitchen when he wakes up. I don't want to leave grandpa alone. He might start having bad dreams.”

Years melted away when one day, Faith is about fifteen now. She asked her father; “Why don't any of us look like Grandpa? He's mom's dad, but no part of mom looks anything like him.”

Karl looked at his daughter and did the only manly thing a father should do; “Go ask your mother; he's her dad.”

Faith went to the next room; “Mom; I asked dad a question and he told me to see you. Why don't any of us look like Grandpa? He's your dad, but no part of you looks anything like him.”

Nancy entered the room where her husband is sitting; “Don't you need to go mow the lawn?”

“No dear, the lawn service did that yesterday.”

“Then go empty the garbage.”

“I emptied the garbage this morning dear.”

“Then go watch it and make sure it's still there! Sometimes you're so thick, I can't stand it. I need to have a talk with Faith.”

“Oh. I'm going to the store for a loaf of bread.”

Karl left the house. Ten year old Charity is playing in the backyard. Nancy thought Hope is in the basement watching TV. Nancy and Faith went upstairs to the master bedroom for privacy. They left the door open.

“Your Grandpa Bill is not my biological father. I met him when I was working part-time at the hospital. I was eighteen and grandpa was a couple days out of surgery. He had a metal plate put in his head to repair the part of his skull that was missing. That’s why the big zipper looking scar is on the side of his head.”

“What happened?”

“I was working one evening when I heard a male patient was very depressed, so I went to his room to see if he wanted some company. He started screaming at me and threatening to kill me. He yelled he was going to rip my arm off and beat me to death with it.”

“Grandpa yelled that to you!?”

“Honey, he yelled it so loud, it almost knocked me over. He had the staff in the hospital so scared, almost nobody would enter his room. He threatened to kill everyone if they didn't leave him alone. I ran out of his room as fast as I could. He apologized later and that evening we became the best of friends.

That night, things happened that allowed me to look and see deep inside his soul. What I seen frightens me to this day. I know grandpa better than his wife Marcy does. We've been bonded together ever since.”

She told her eldest daughter most of her history with Grandpa Bill. The child is fixated with the stories. When Nancy finished, they noticed Hope standing outside the doorway.

Hope broke the silence; “So he’s not our real grandfather. He’s just some guy who’s been nice to us because he likes you. Well that’s wonderful. What a way to find out I’ve been lied to all these years. None of us have ever met daddies parents, so we really don’t have a grandfather. The guy you told us is Grandpa is a fake, a fraud, he’s a phony.”

Nancy instantly became super pissed; “Where the hell do you get off thinking because he’s not biologically connected to you, he’s not worthy of being your grandfather?”

Nancy is flustered and looked like she was about to cry. She’s so angry, her lips are quivering. Faith looked confused and sad. Hope did not answer. She stood there pouting.

“Hope, don’t you even think of talking to me until I calm down. I’m so mad at you right now, I could slap that smirk off your face so hard, it would knock you into last week.”

Nancy stormed out of the room super distressed.

Faith looked at Hope; “You self-righteous bitch! You better never tell Charity what you just said to mom. You know how she feels about Grandpa.”

Hope left and went directly to the backyard where Charity is practicing martial art sword moves with a long stick. She approached Charity and told her Grandpa Bill is a fake and a fraud. He’s not our real grandfather. Then she made the biggest mistake of all.

“You’re a fool for thinking that big and ugly scarred up old man is anything but a friend of moms. He’s some crazy old man mom found in the hospital and took a liking to. That fake Grandpa means nothing to us but stupid birthday parties at his restaurant and lame Christmas presents.”

Nancy and Faith are in the rear doorway watching as Karl is exiting the garage when Charity dropped her make believe sword, reared back and punched Hope so hard, she was knocked off her feet. Charity jumped on top of Hope's chest and started punching and screaming at her sister. Karl dropped the bag of groceries and pulled Charity off her sister.

While crying; “She said Grandpa Bill isn’t our real grandpa. She said he’s a fake and a fraud; YOU BITCH!”

When everyone calmed down, Karl and the entire family went inside. Nancy shocked everyone; “I’m calling my dad and asking him to come over and talk to us. If this is the way you feel about the man I consider my dad, maybe he shouldn't be your grandfather anymore. Did any of you think of that?”

The silence is deafening. She picked up her phone and in front of everyone called Bill; “Hi dad, are you busy? ... Good. Could you come by my place please? ... No, it’s the girls are having a Grandpa crisis. ... How did you know? ... Okay. I’ll see you in twenty minutes. ... Bye Dad.”

Karl surprised everyone; “Your dad already knew didn’t he.”

“Dad’s on his way to have a talk with the girls. He told me he knew this day would come. He told me what he has to say won’t take more than a minute or two, then he’s going back home. Marcy isn't feeling well.”

Twenty minutes later, William arrived in a taxi and asked the driver to wait. The entire Hess family is on the huge front porch waiting for his arrival.

“Hello Karl, daughter; girls.”

After the greetings were exchanged; “Nancy and Karl, I would like to speak to the girls alone if you don’t mind.”

Without another word being spoken, Nancy and Karl went inside and shut the door.

“Girls, get together and sit on the porch with your feet on the steps. What I have to say is not for the neighborhood.”

The girls sat on the edge of the porch in the following order from left to right; Hope, Faith and Charity.

“Girls; I am not your mothers biological father. I had nothing to do with making her. I met your mothers birth father, your biological grandfather once before he went back to prison. He was some worthless redneck who wanted nothing to do with your mother until he found out she had access to wealth. He didn’t even know the name of his own daughter until he seen her on TV. He only wanted money so he would go away and stay out of her life.”

“Did mom give him anything?”

“Not a penny. Let’s backup a little and let me tell you how I met your mother. I met your mom at the worst time in my life. I was in the hospital recovering from a very bad head injury that should have killed me. It was the day I had been fired from the only job I ever had and my mother died. I was lower than low and my soul had fallen into the abyss.

I really wanted to die to end the pain and sadness. Despite the warnings from people, your mother reached in and pulled my soul to safety. I love your mother as if she was my very own flesh and blood. I have done things for your mother I can't tell you about. One thing I can tell you is ask grandma Jillian about the guy who gave your mom a bloody nose."

The girls started asking questions; "Is that the fat guy who thought mom was his girlfriend?"

"Is he the guy you were choking to death on the street?"

"Is that the guy who you told the last thing he will ever smell was your bad breath before you kill him?"

"Oh. You must have been talking to Grandma Jillian haven't you?"

"Yeah. She told us all about it."

"That was the day you bought the restaurant.

"Mom gave you a new shirt because your old one was ripped."

"Yes, I remember that day very well. I was a angry young man back then."

"Grandpa, what ever happened to the man who gave mom the bloody nose?"

"He's dead sweetheart."

"How did he die Grandpa?"

"He and his buddies were going to do some bad things to a young girl in the park when he was killed."

"How do you know that Grandpa?"

Before he could answer, Charity surprised Bill with; “Did he smell your bad breath before he died Grandpa?”

Bill stood there in shock and surprise. He thought for a moment before he continued; “I have never lied to you girls and I never will. My honest and truthful answer is; I can’t tell you because you don’t need to know.

Anyway, back to the matter at hand. Yes it's true. I'm not your blood grandfather. I don't know what blood relatives are. I'm an orphan. My adopted parents had a child after they adopted me. If I'm your grandfather, then my sister Minori is your great aunt. I think of you as my grandchildren and I love you as my grandchildren. If you want me to be your Grandpa; I will continue to be your Grandpa. If you don't, it will sadden me, but I won't be your Grandpa Bill anymore.”

The girls sat wide eyed and speechless.

“Hope; what happened to your eye and the side of your face? Did you get in a fight with someone?”

Charity started to speak when Faith cut her off; “Hope said something really rude and Charity had a strong difference of opinion.”

“Girls, no matter what you decide; I will not love any of you any less. I need to go home now. Marcy is not feeling well, so I don't want to leave her alone for too long. All of you know you are always welcome in my home. I love you girls. Please say goodbye to your mom and dad for me.”

Bill turned and walked through the gate towards the waiting taxi.

Three times in succession he heard; “Grandpa wait!”

The girls all hugged him and Hope hugged the hardest and cried the most. In the mist of her tears; “I’m so sorry grandpa. I thought because you weren’t moms real dad...”

“Please don’t feel bad. Sometimes we need to find ourselves so we can see who we really are. Be very thankful you’re not an orphan like me. I was lucky because I had adoptive parents who loved me. Other than Minori and Marcy, the Hess family is the only family I have.”

They all hugged and agreed he will always be their Grandpa. Bill went home a very happy and satisfied man.

Karl and Nancy were watching from inside the house and are satisfied the crisis is over. The girls went inside their home and started speaking Arabic about grandpa. Karl always thought it's rather humorous. Nancy would become very annoyed with her children's antics.

“You know the rules in this house, you only speak English. Karl, tell your daughters to stop right now.”

“Now girls, listen to your mother, she knows best.”

“Thanks, you’re a real help.”

In Japanese, Faith responded; “Mom doesn’t speak Arabic. You know how upset she gets when we don’t speak English.”

Hope continued; “Then why are we speaking Japanese? Mom can’t understand that either.”

Charity injected; “To get mom more pissed at us than she already is; hahahaha.”

Faith broke the language barrier; “Mom, did grandpa have anything to do with the guy who gave you a bloody nose being killed? Grandma Jillian told us about grandpa choking that man and threatening to kill him.”

“She is Grandma Swenson to you and my mother tells you too many stories, that’s the problem.”

“Grandma Swenson also told us you fired her from her job at the restaurant.”

“My mother, your grandmother made a couple of very foolish mistakes in judgment that made Grandpa very angry. He had already fired her once, so he told me to take care of the problem. I did. I fired her. I hired her back the next morning. She learned a valuable lesson.”

“What lesson was that mom?”

“Don’t screw with my dad.”

Charity knocked everyone over with; “That’s what must have happened with the guy who gave you a bloody nose. He must have screwed with grandpa in the park. I’ll bet that guy smelled grandpa’s bad breath.”

The look on Nancy’s face spoke volumes.

Faith asked; “I asked Grandma Jillian about the man who gave you a bloody nose. Grandma told me nothing would surprise her when it came to grandpa. When I asked her what she meant, grandma smiled and turned away.”

Karl seeing where this is going jumped in; “Okay girls, enough talk about grandpa. I went to the store and bought a box of those

cake like cookies grandpa and you girls like so much. Let's have some milk to wash them down."

End of chapter 01

Chapter 02

Over the march of time, the children were regular visitors at Grandpa Bill's apartment. Especially for a few months after his wife Marcy passed away. The girls went through their educations with Faith entering the workplace after college. She gained a job working for the Anderson and Anderson law firm. There she started making political contacts. Because Nancy's business partner Vanessa ran off with her boy toy; Hope started working in her mother's recovery and buyout business after completing her second year of college.

Charity graduated high school and started college. She met a young Arabic man named Bashir Ma'd Daher. They hit it off as a couple. Bashir isn't the sharpest knife in the drawer, so Charity never told him she spoke Arabic or Japanese. She felt it would be better to play the part of a dumb blonde. It's more fun that way.

One afternoon, Charity and Bashir are in his dorm room learning the lessons of love. The lessons are well on the way to their logical conclusion. Both of them are down to only briefs when Charity felt she needed to slow things down.

"Bash, I'm so thirsty right now; could you get me a bottle of water please?"

"You must have been reading my mind. I was about to suggest the same thing."

He went to the small college dorm refrigerator and removed a bottle of water and set it in front of him. Bash searched around for a moment moving stuff before he pulled out a second bottle. Charity thought this is a little strange because she looked inside the

refrigerator earlier and there were at least a dozen bottles of water on the shelf. He silently opened her bottle and handed it to her.

When Bash opened his bottle, she heard the seal break. Why did he have to search for the bottle he gave her? Why didn't her bottle make a sound when being opened. It's spiked!

“With all this talk of water, I have to go to the bathroom. I’ll be right back.”

Charity went to the bathroom and poured the contents of the bottle in the toilet. She flushed and filled the bottle with tap water to make him think she's washing her hands. Then drank about half the bottle and let out a belch.

She yelled through the closed door; “I didn’t realize how thirsty I am. I’m going to be in here for a few taking care of business.”

She sat on the toilet and contemplated what to do next. She asked herself; “How do I get out of this?”

While trying to come up with a plan, she heard him talking to someone. His voice is so low, she couldn’t make out what's being said. She opened the door and stuck her head out to hear what's going on. Bash is on the phone.

In Arabic; “That GHB date rape stuff you sold me is working fast. She’s in the bathroom right now. Bring everyone over in twenty minutes. I’ll be done with the infidel bitch and the rest of you can have her. We will give her an Arab baby; hahahaha.”

Charity silently closed the door and is fuming mad as she devises a plan.

Through the closed door she started talking while moaning; “I don’t feel good. Could you help me from the bathroom please? I need to lie down for a while.”

He opened the door with the biggest of smiles on his face. His eyes went as wide as saucers while his right arm shot up to protect himself. Charity clobbered him with the toilet tank lid. The first hit broke his arm and grazed his head.

Screaming; “You infidel bitch! You broke my arm!”

He started to run, tripped and fell. Charity took aim with the toilet tank lid and aimed for his head. Lucky for him, he winced in pain and the floor took most of the impact from the tank lid and broke before the jagged edge cut his head, face and ear. The impact knocked him out.

Charity is still only dressed in her briefs as she started searching the dorm. She found the stash of the GHB in the nightstand. She removed the bottom dresser drawer and put the drug inside the dresser body and replaced the drawer. Bashir is starting to regain consciousness, she hears him moaning. Knowing customs and the value of the right hand to Muslims, she came up with another plan.

She gently moved his right hand so it lay palm down on the wooden floor. She picked up the big half of the broken toilet tank lid with both hands, raised it over her head and slammed it on her target; his right hand. He instantly became conscious and started screaming in agony before his screams went silent.

She lifted his head with a hand full of hair and looked into his eyes; “Hey! Wake up. I’m talking to you. So you wanted to dope me up and serve me to your friends to be gang raped so I would have an Arab baby.”

She started violently shaking his head while slapping him.

“Hey; don’t you pass out on me again. I’m not done with you yet. So I’m an infidel bitch. Yes, look at me with surprise in your eyes. I speak Arabic you asshole.”

In Arabic; “I hope you enjoy wiping your ass and eating your meals with your left hand for a while. If you ever screw with me again, the last thing you will ever smell will be my bad breath before I kill you in the most disgusting and violent manor I can think of and feed your body to the pigs.”

She proceeded to get dressed and then kicked him in the groin several times before she left his room. While walking down the hall, around a dozen Middle Eastern male students are passing her with looks of surprise and shock on their faces. They are mumbling to each other about why she's not in Bashir's room.

His friends obviously found him and called the campus police. Within twenty minutes, Charity was arrested for assault with intent to do great bodily harm.

Her first call is to Bill; “Hi grandpa. How are you today? ... That’s great to hear. Are you real busy right now? ... No? That's good. I’m in jail. Could you come and get me?”

Bill made a few phone calls and Charity appeared before a judge with her eldest sister Faith as her attorney. The bail bond was set at five hundred dollars. Faith had appeared before this judge several times before. (At Faith's requests, Bill had donated to the judges re-election campaign several times also) That’s why Charity received such a low bail. Faith requested Charity be released to her grandfather’s custody. Bill paid her bail and she was released.

Outside on the court house steps is another matter; “This is going to be great grandpa. Since I’m in your custody, I get to move in with you. It will be like mom did way back when you first met her. You and I can be together all the time. It's going to be great!”

William has a stern look on his face; “No this is not going to be great or possibly acceptable. Faith, stick around for a while. I have to sell Susan on this. We’re living together.”

“I’m sorry grandpa. I thought since Marcy died, you were living alone. That’s why I asked the judge to place her in your custody.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’ve been busy with your family and career. It’s not like I sent a note telling everyone I’m living with a longtime friend.”

The trio went to his apartment where Bill told Susan what happened. He asked her if Charity could move in with them.

Susan’s answer was given with absolute authority; “Let’s get the ground rules straight Miss Charity. This is my home and you are a guest here. There will be no boyfriends in my home and you live here like a civilized human being. When your grandfather and I want privacy; well I’m sure you understand why and know what to do. Are we clearly understood?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“Good. Call me Susan and welcome to your new home. Bill, I think you have some serious explaining to do with your daughter.”

“Girls, let’s go see your parents. Faith, you stand in front and protect me from your mother.”

Faith drove William and Charity to her parents' home. The meeting with Nancy and Karl went surprisingly well. Nancy kept her cool most of the time, although the meeting was less than a couple of minutes long. The parents went to the kitchen briefly to talk to each other before returning to the living room.

Karl spoke first; "I have complete trust in my wife's decision. I wouldn't think of disagreeing with her. Not if I want to continue living here that is."

Nancy looked sternly at Bill; "Dad, are you up for this? I mean you and Susan are not young anymore. You're both in your sixty's. Can you tolerate an out of control eighteen year old like her?"

Before he could answer, Charity popped in; "It's okay with Susan. She told me when her and grandpa want to get it on, I need to leave and give them privacy."

"God damn it! I'm tempted to throw her ass back in jail where she belongs. Maybe she would straighten out with a couple of months in the county jail for being an idiot!"

"Oh daughter dear calm down. I'll get the charges dropped and I have some plans for your youngest. Remember when you were protected because you were in the arms of the dragon? Now it's her time to meet the dragon."

"But dad, she's a renegade, a radical. What's next; she hijacks a plane? Or better yet, you've taken her out for shooting lessons for years. What's she going to do next, start a war somewhere?"

"Oh you have so little faith in your youngest; you will be so proud of her someday."

While the somewhat unpleasant conversation was taking place, Charity gathered some of her clothes so she could move in with Susan and Bill tonight. She would return tomorrow for the rest of her things. While Faith drove them back to the apartment, Charity told them the entire story leading to her arrest.

Bill called a detective friend of his and ‘arranged’ a search for illicit drugs in Bashir’s dorm room. The narcotics detectives knew exactly where to find the date rape drug. In the dresser, behind the bottom drawer.

William’s sister Minori has a very high level position with Homeland Security. She arranged to have Bashir’s name added to the terrorist watch list. His student visa was revoked and he was deported long before the trial. With no complainant, there can be no trial; case dismissed.

Needless to say, Charity was thrown out of college the day after being arrested. Susan and Charity became good friends. Since college is out of the question, Bill insisted Charity learn some type of skill. He made it clear lying around the apartment all day watching TV is out of the question. He insisted she work in one of his businesses or do something else to learn a skill.

Susan being a former professional photographer, agreed to teach Charity the skill and trade of photography. Sue was a professional photographer until her eye sight failed to the point she could not operate her business.

The two women would go to the health club every morning and work out. It was during their first visit to the fitness center, Charity seen Susan dropping her shower towel while reaching into her locker; “Susan, I’m not a lesbian, so don’t misunderstand me. But are those real or did you have work done?”

Susan turned her head slightly; “All natural kid. I’ve been working out for an hour every morning since I was your age. I have a baked apple or fruit and some protein for breakfast. I’ll have a healthy lunch and moderate dinner. I’ve been the same dress size for the last forty some odd years.”

“I’m trying not to sound rude, but at your age; how do you keep your breasts so firm?”

“Watch the exercises I do. Half of them are for my chest and upper body. Unfortunately, time and gravity have been taking their toll.”

Charity started working out lifting weights and doing bust exercises. Over the next couple of years, Susan became her mentor of all things personal and success related. Including how to avoid being used by men who's only interest is having sex. She gave Charity lessons in grace and beauty, how to conduct herself and how to dress for success.

Some of the advice Susan gave was; “Blue jeans and a tee shirt are fine for doing laundry or cleaning the bathroom. They are not appropriate to conduct any form of business. Casual dress is for picnics and other dress down situations. Proper business attire is to be your daily clothing. You will need several pantsuits for the cooler months. Respectable skirts at or below the knee and blouses for the summer months. Pantyhose are an absolute must.”

Charity also became quite proficient at photography. The woman who owned Monica’s Beauty Shop in the theater building closed the business and retired. With Bill’s blessing and Susan’s giving all of her photography equipment to Charity, she started her own photography business in the former beauty shop storefront. She called her new enterprise; ‘The Susan Braden Photography Company.’

Life was doing well for about a year or so when one evening during a shower, Susan found a lump in one of her breasts. Bill went with her for the mammogram and later biopsy. Several medical tests later, she was diagnosed with stage four breast cancer. Like any woman, she was devastated by the news.

After a double mastectomy, one of their bedtime conversations went; “I never had children to tie me down. I ate healthy and exercised all my life. Now they cut off my breasts and tell me it’s too late. The cancer metastasized to several of my organs.

If I go through the chemo and radiation, I might get another three to six months with you. Damn it. We’ve only been together for a few years and cancer has taken our future away. First I lose my sight, then my breasts and now my life with you. The first time I met you, I only wanted to be with you. I waited for years for us to be together. It's not fair.”

Susan went through the first round of Chemo and the first round radiation. Every hair on her body fell out. She's bald as an egg and rapidly losing weight. Charity in sympathy for her friend, cut off her long blonde hair and shaved her head.

Soon it became obvious the chemo and radiation is not working so Susan stopped the treatments. Charity knew her friend and mentor didn’t have long for this earth. She came up with the idea Susan and Grandpa should get married. She proposed the idea to them at the dinner table.

“That's a wonderful idea! Susan, we’ve been living together as a couple for quite a while now.”

For the second time in his life, Bill lowered himself to one knee; “Miss Susan Braden; would you accept my hand in marriage?”

She had confusion on her face and tears started to form; “Would you really consider marrying a woman like me?”

“I loved once before and lost. You've given me the opportunity to fall in love again. I would consider it an honor and privilege if you would allow me to marry the woman I love.”

Within the week, they were married at City Hall. Less than two months later, Susan is in the hospital on a morphine drip to control the pain. One afternoon, she passed away with William holding her hand.

After the funeral, everyone went to Williams' Restaurant. When the meal was finished, everyone is sitting with a cup of coffee in front of them. Nancy brought up the inevitable.

“Dad, you know you’re not getting any younger. With Marcy gone and Susan's passed away, I think we should talk about succession of your LLC.”

“Okay, you get all the businesses, all the bank and brokerage accounts, everything. Just like it’s always been. ”

Karl entered the conversation; “Honey; are you sure this is the best time to talk about this?”

“Yes it is. Dad, I can’t take over your businesses. I'm maxed out running my own business. I can't afford the time to oversee your LLC. And before you say it, you can’t give it to my girls. Faith is knee deep in her own career in politics and law. Hope is an equal partner in my business. Since Vanessa left with her boy toy a few years ago, I'd be lost without Hope as a full partner. Besides, both girls have families to consider.”

Bill sat expressionless with his fingers turning the cup of coffee.

Slowly; “I've buried so many friends over the last few years. I'm too tired to go on. Nancy my wonderful daughter, Karl is right. Now is not the time for this. I can't deal with all this right now. Let's talk about this in a few days when I have a clearer head.”

She paused for a moment before she dropped the bomb; “You still don't know how to operate any of your businesses. As my business grew, I turned over more and more control to your accountant. Mister Moody has been managing things for years. Every decision you've made was on the advice of your managers and the okays from Mister Moody's accountants. I've looked at this and I have no choice other than to sell the entire LLC to an investment group or sell off the different businesses. I don't have any other option.”

“I understand you don't want the LLC. What I can't understand is why you would be willing to put so many people out of work? You know a new owner would slash the payrolls to increase profits. They would dissolve all our partnerships with the managers and hire a bunch of minimum wage workers. They would throw our loyal employees out. How could you allow that to happen?”

“They're your employees, not mine. I take dying and marginal businesses and make them more profitable. That's the business I'm in. There's nothing personal; it's business.”

Bill leaned back in the chair and folded his arms. He thought for a minute before he spoke.

“I can't make major decisions while I'm in this frame of mind. I need time to think this over and figure out what I'm going to do. The one person you missed during this conversation is your youngest daughter. Charity, you've been very quiet. What are your feelings on this?”

With authority in her voice; “I’ll take over your LLC tomorrow morning if you allow me. I’ll keep the Parkway Theater Building LLC alive and well for decades to come.”

Nancy spoke in sarcasm; “You’re barely twenty-one! So you have a photography business that was handed to you on a silver platter and spoon fed to you. Where the hell do you come off thinking you can run my dad’s LLC? That’s several different businesses, not including your little picture store.”

With the conversation between Nancy and her youngest becoming heated, Karl stopped the conversation before it became ugly and someone said something that couldn’t be unsaid.

He proved to be the voice of reason; “Bill, I know in my heart you’re going to do the right thing. Over the years, you’ve made decisions I thought were totally wrong. You made decisions that were not in your best interest, but in the best interest of the other person. You always have and I believe you will do the right thing.

With that being said, my two eldest daughters need to be with their families. I think my youngest daughter is going to have a long talk with her grandfather tonight. My only advice is do what you do best and make the right decision you can live with. Emotions are a little high right now. Nancy and I are heading home before something is said that everyone will regret.”

The group broke up and everyone went to their respective homes. Charity and William went upstairs to their shared apartment where the conversation became somber.

“Grandpa; do I have to leave now that Susan is gone?”

“Absolutely not. You can stay here until you decide to be on your own. Speaking of Mister Right, it seems young Michael Webb Junior has had a crush on you for a couple of years now. How often does he come by your studio?”

“The kid makes excuses to stop by my studio. He empties the garbage and washes the windows without me asking. Oh he’s nice enough; but he’s so young. I’m nine years older than him. I don’t need his mother bitching at me for robbing the cradle.”

“Did you know Michael’s mother Amanda is a few years older than her husband? I remember Michael senior’s mother Linda being very upset at Amanda for stealing her son. I had just purchased the construction restoration business and made Michael the managing partner. Linda was a server and part-time manager of the restaurant at the time.

She thought Amanda was a gold digger and was out to ruin her son. The restaurant was buzzing with rumors for weeks about how pissed Linda was at Amanda.”

“So what happened? Linda still manages the restaurant now that Grandma Jillian is retired. I see Michael’s mom and dad eating in the restaurant all the time. They all seem very friendly to me.”

“Linda and Amanda made peace with each other long before baby Michael was born. I wouldn’t worry about age separation.

Remember the theater managers Donna and Pete? They had almost twenty years difference between them. They met when Peter recently turned twenty-one and Donna was, as she put it: ‘knocking on the door of forty.’ I remember they were married on Peter’s twenty-second birthday.”

“How much of an age difference was there between you and Marcy?”

“About four months. Before you ask, I was about six months older than Susan. Speaking of ages; Grandma Jillian is a few years older than her husband Randy.”

There's a long pause before Charity asked; “My sisters and I talked about the guy who gave mom a bloody nose in front of Marcy's store. He was found in the park dead. Did you do that?”

Bill sat in the chair and did not respond. He looked deep into her eyes before answering; “Remember when I told your mother you would be in the arms of the dragon like she was?”

“Yeah. It didn't make sense then and it still doesn't.”

“You can't see it, but the dragon is all around you. Nothing bad can ever harm you while you are in the arms of the dragon. Sometimes people wake the dragon and that is a very dangerous thing to do. If you're in the arms of the dragon and someone tries to hurt you, the dragon would come out of its den with all of its might and fury.

Someone was foolish enough to make plans and brag about how he and some friends were going to violate your mother and Marcy before they killed them. The night the would be violators were killed, the dragon was released from his den with the mission to protect those he loved. By sunrise the following morning, the dragon was back in his den sleeping soundly. He knew his loved ones are safe from harm. That's the best answer you're going to get from me. I will never lie to you. But there are things I cannot answer for your own good.”

“That’s okay; Grandma Jillian told my sisters and me you could be a very bad man. We didn’t believe her and we still don’t.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Now unless you have something else, I would like to go to bed. I’ve had a rough day and I’m mentally exhausted.”

“There is something else Grandpa. When can I take over your business so my mother doesn't sell it?”

“Which one would you like to take over? The Dreams Prep Kitchen? The Cooks Dream Emporium? Never Lost Restorations? The Restaurant? The better question is which one do you think you could take over? I don't think you know how to run any of my businesses any more than I do. Your mother made that perfectly clear. Besides, I have very good people as managing partners running those businesses.”

“You don’t understand me. When can I take your place? Everything you own is under the Parkway Theater Building LLC. Your name and my mom’s name is on all the paperwork. I want to remove her name and put mine in her place. I won’t sell the businesses like she wants to. I’ll keep them alive and strong.”

“Oh you're so young and eager; I'm amazed with you. Now answer me this and think very carefully of your answer. You have one chance to get the answer right. Are you ready number three granddaughter?”

“I'm ready number one and only grandfather.”

“Without boring me to death with details; how would you run my LLC if you became the owner?”

“The exact same way you do. You’re right. I don’t know how to run any of the businesses any more than you do. But I’m smart enough to learn from you. I would keep managing partnerships with people who know how to run a particular business and pay them a percentage of the net profit. That’s what you’re doing with all the businesses. Believe it or not, I actually do listen to my mother.”

“What’s going to happen when you meet Mister Right and he wants to marry you, take over and maybe run the LLC into the ground? Are you going to roll over, let him divorce you and take half the LLC in the divorce settlement?”

“No. I’m going to have an iron clad prenuptial. Not that it matters right now. I haven’t had a boyfriend since that bastard Bashir, and we never went all the way.”

“Thanks; but that's way too much information I didn’t need. Let me think this over and we can talk tomorrow. I’ll be in the den for a few minutes. I need to think and make a phone call.”

Charity went to the living room and planned to watch TV. The den door is closed, so she couldn’t hear what's going on inside. She pressed the mute button on the remote and put her ear to the door.

Bill is on the phone with someone; but who? She's leaning so hard against the door trying to hear, she fell when Bill rapidly opened the door. He never missed a beat while talking on the phone. He walked back to his desk and sat down.

“I need you to bring all of her paperwork tomorrow. ... Yes I’m going to need her birth certificate and social security card. ... We’re going to the bank tomorrow and changing the names on the accounts. ... No I’m not insane. Well maybe, but not concerning

this. ... No, I did not void our contract and I never will. ... I know what I'm doing. ... Nancy, you're made it very clear you're too busy with your business. I'm making life easier for you. ... You will be my daughter forever because we made a pact by contract and more importantly our souls.”

The conversation went on for a few more minutes with Charity standing inside the doorway of the den. It's obvious Nancy does not want the changes to take place. The question in Bill's mind is Nancy out for her own personal gain or is she trying to protect him from making a bad mistake. He instantly decided it must be to protect him from himself.

After the phone call was over; “Your mother is pissed at me. She thinks I'm making a bad decision. Let's prove her wrong.”

Charity smiled, walked over and gave him a big hug; “I won't let you down grandpa. I'll become your dragon if you'll let me.”

“I know you will; but I'll settle for going to bed right now. With everything going on and dealing with your mother, I'm physically, mentally and beyond emotionally exhausted; goodnight.”

The pair went to their respective bedrooms. The burden of having buried the two loves in his life is weighing hard on his emotional well-being. The added weight of his adopted daughter being angry with him is more than he can cope with; tears started flowing.

The following morning, he's sitting at the kitchen table fully dressed. The front door to his apartment opens and his adopted daughter Nancy walked in carrying a large envelope. She set in on the kitchen table.

Bill asks; “Would you like a cup of coffee or aren’t you talking to me anymore?”

Without saying a word, Nancy let out a deep sigh, walked to the cupboard and retrieved a coffee cup. She went to the refrigerator for milk and poured herself a cup of coffee. She sat at the table and looked at Bill in silence for a moment.

“I’m at a loss for words. I don’t like what you’re doing, but you’ve done some crazy stuff before and everything worked out okay. I’ll go to the bank with you in case there’s a question or problem.”

Now keep in mind William is muscular, just under 6’ 3” and varies between 275 and 285 lbs.

As Nancy finished speaking, Charity came out of her room wearing nothing but Bill’s sleeveless tee-shirt that is way too large for her 105 lb small frame and bikini briefs. She walked to the cupboard to retrieve a coffee cup.

While reaching up, she extended her left arm to needlessly hold onto an upper shelf. Then she reached deep into the cabinet to retrieve a coffee cup. These actions caused Bill’s shirt to raise exposing Charity’s scantily covered bottom. Bill instantly turned away in embarrassment.

Nancy went into hyper mother mode; “What do you call this? Running around naked in your grandfather’s apartment is not appropriate for a daughter of mine.”

“Oh mother, I turned twenty-one on my last birthday. When you lived here, you walked around like this. I’m not naked, I have underwear on. You’re such a prude.”

“When I was your age, I wasn’t built like you are. Good grief, cover yourself. I’m still your mother and that will never change. Get dressed this instant. You’re embarrassing your grandfather.”

Charity pouted and went to Bill’s room. Moments later she returned buttoning one of his cotton button down shirts, which is also way too large for her almost five foot frame. Bill sat at the table grinning at the theatrics going on in his kitchen.

“I remember an eighteen year old who used to live in this apartment and would walk around wearing briefs and a tee shirt. Some mornings she’d be naked except for a towel wrapped around her. Oh do I remember those days.”

“Yeah, but I was almost flat chested and round as a barrel. You can see she’s been working out for a few years now. Twenty-one and too much exposed thru the arm holes of a sleeveless tee-shirt is not what I expected to see this morning.”

“I think that was for your shock value. Normally she comes out wearing a normal tee-shirt and sweat shorts. This was the first time I’ve ever seen your daughter without a bra on.”

After their morning coffee, Charity dressed and the trio went downstairs to the restaurant for breakfast. The conversation was warm, friendly and somewhat conservative. When breakfast was finished, they mulled around until the bank opened. Within thirty minutes, Charity Hess is the primary account holder with William Cann as the second signatory. Nancy Hess is now a third on the list.

Nancy wished her daughter luck with her new found responsibility. She went to her offices to conduct her business. The next order of business is for Bill to introduce Charity as the new President of the

Parkway Theater Building LLC. Everyone only knew her as Bill's granddaughter.

They stopped to see Linda the restaurant manager, along with the other LLC businesses. When they arrived at Never Lost Restorations. Introductions were made and after the visit was almost complete, twelve year old Michael Webb Junior has questions.

"Does this mean you're going to be my mom and dad's new boss?"

"Not completely. I'm your Mom and Dad's new business partner."

"Are you going to close your photography business so I can't come over and visit anymore?"

"I'm keeping my photography business open and you can still come visit anytime you want."

Everyone is satisfied and relieved with Charity taking over the LLC. All the managing partners were worried about Bill's mental health and him selling everything because of Susan's death.

Charity and Bill went to the lawyers and had all the business ownership records changed.

End of chapter 02

Chapter 03

The years melted away and with Charity overseeing everything, Bill has nothing to do. During bad weather he would try to help out one of the businesses everyday of the week. When the weather is good, he would sit behind the restaurant on a milk crate and talk to the delivery people and passersby.

The garbage man found a good lawn chair being thrown out somewhere and gave it to Bill. Now when he wasn't talking to the delivery people, he's sitting on a lawn chair reading newspapers and drinking coffee.

Every morning William would wake up and use the bathroom. Charity thought his flushing the toilet awakens her. While it was her turn using the bathroom, he would put on some sweats, animal slippers and go up to the roof to watch the sunrise (weather permitting).

Charity would start making coffee. While it's brewing, she would put on some sweats, then bring two cups of coffee up to the roof.

“Grandpa, what are you thinking about when you come up here in the mornings?”

“I think about losing Marcy and then Susan. I think someday, somehow we'll be together again. I hope that day is far away because I really enjoy your company.”

Like every morning, after the coffee on the roof, they go to breakfast in their restaurant. Afterwards, she would drive them to the fitness center in Marcy's old car. Charity would perform her hour plus workout while Bill walks the jogging track.

After needed showers, they would change into their daily attire, return to the apartment and drop off their athletic bags. Then retrieve their wallets, keys and anything else they needed and off to their daily routines. Charity would go to her photography studio and Bill would do whatever he does all day.

This morning was to be different. When they returned to the apartment, Bill is complaining of leg and arm pains. Charity told him she would take him to see the doctor.

“Oh never mind. I must have over done it a little while walking the track this morning. I’m going to sit and rest for a bit.”

“I’ll sit with you for a while. There’s nothing going on this morning that can’t wait. The photography business isn’t going anywhere without me.”

She poured each of them a glass of orange juice; “How long did my mom live with you grandpa?”

“It seems so long ago. We lived together for around three years. Then she married your father and the rest is history. Why would you ask such a question?”

“Well, I’ve been living with you for several years now. I haven’t seen you with a woman since Susan left us. I’m worried about you.”

“Don’t worry about me, but thank you. I’ve loved two women in my life. I’m so frightened the next woman I fall in love with will die also, I’ll just live life as it comes. With that said, I want you to know I love you and thank you for keeping an old man company. I’m not sure I would have made it without you.”

“You’re welcome. I’m so glad you took me in when you did. I remember my mom wanting to throw my ass back in jail.”

“I remember that evening like it was yesterday. There was an eighteen year old girl with multi-colored hair who was in some serious trouble. My number three granddaughter was looking for help because she attacked her boyfriend with a toilet tank lid.”

“That was stupid on my part.”

“By the way, I haven’t seen you with a male companion since you moved in with me. Other than Michael Junior, I haven’t seen you in a social situation with anyone of the opposite sex.”

She turned on the warm smile which could melt the heart of any man; “When the photography business is slow, I go on those modeling jobs, there's always plenty of men around. Most of them are more interested in each other than me; if you get my drift. The others are looking for a quick tumble in the sack. Susan warned me about them. I'm not interested making babies or getting some sexually transmitted disease.”

“What about young Michael Webb? It seems he only has eyes for you. Is there any spark of interest in him?”

“Soon he's is going to be twenty. He'll forget his infatuation with me when he finds a girl his own age and moves on. He’s a nice guy, but romance with him is absolutely out of the question.”

“Why don’t you do something special for him on his birthday?”

She has a suspicious look on her face; “What did you have in mind?”

“Take Michael Junior to the tavern and buy him a beer.”

She relaxed her look and started to smile; “I thought you were going to suggest something a little more personal and intimate.”

A worried look came over Bill's face; “Oh no! I would never suggest anything like that.”

The two continued to talk about love and romance or the lack there of while drinking their orange juice.

“I'm so damn proud of you, I can't put my feelings into words. You run the LLC, you have your own photography business and you find time to model. I told your mother she would be proud of you and I'm right.”

“Come on grandpa, we need to get to work. I have some studio work to finish and you have to work at nothing today.”

They went downstairs to their respective destinations.

Later that morning, the restaurant manager Joseph barged into the photography studio; “Charity, it's your grandfather. I think he had a heart attack behind the restaurant; come quick!”

“Get my mother from upstairs. Did you call nine one one?”

“I called before I came here. One of the police officers who was drinking coffee is doing CPR on your grandfather right now. The produce deliveryman found him on the ground.”

Michael Junior was hanging around in Charity's studio. She threw him the keys and told him to lock up. Out the backdoor she went to be with her grandfather. Her mother arrived shortly thereafter.

With Bill still not breathing, Charity watched in horror as the police officer continued CPR. Suddenly Bill started breathing on his own. He went from blue to pale white. The paramedics arrived

and stabilized him. They transported Bill to the hospital with Nancy and Charity following close behind.

Bill was diagnosed with having suffered a myocardial infarction (Heart attack). They brought him into emergency surgery. Several hours later, he's in recovery. Karl and Faith flew in from working with the governor in Independence. Hope flew in from Seattle and went directly to the hospital.

The doctors told them to go home because Bill is in the Intensive Care Unit and unconscious. He will not be able to see anyone until sometime tomorrow at the earliest. The Hess family waited in the hospital for him to regain consciousness. They stayed the night in the waiting room. The next morning, he asked for his daughter Nancy while Karl and the girls had gone for breakfast.

Nancy walked into a semi-dark room. It was quiet except for several small machines spinning, pumping, whirring and rhythmic beeping. A couple of machines have LED's displaying numbers and some have blinking lights. There are bags of medicine hanging all around connected to her adopted father.

She leaned over and softly; "Hi dad. You asked for me so I'm here. You should see yourself. You have wires and tubes everywhere like you're wired for the internet."

His eyes slowly partly open. In an almost inaudible voice though the oxygen mask; "Be proud of Charity and your girls."

"I'm very proud of Charity and the girl's. How do you feel? I can come back later if you're feeling bad."

Slowly in a heavy labored voice; “I hurt so much right now, I can't find the words to describe how bad it is, but I must tell you something.”

With hurt in her voice; “You’re hurting dad. You can tell me later. I’m sure it can wait until you get better. I’ll call someone to get you something for the pain.”

He grasped her hand and squeezed it. With intense importance in his weak voice; “Charity and the girls are the chosen ones. It came and told me your girls have been chosen. They have a destiny.”

“What are you talking about? Who told you that?”

Bill pulled on her hand and tried to raise himself. He pulled off the oxygen mask and tried to yell; “The one who holds the Dragon!”

Alarms started going off and things started loudly beeping. He released her hand and fell into unconsciousness. The nurse on duty barged in and insisted she leave the room immediately.

While Nancy was visiting with her dad, Karl and her daughters had returned from breakfast. She joined them in the waiting room and shared her concerns.

“I think the heart attack affected his mind. He told me I should be proud of my daughters. Then he said somebody told him the girls are the chosen ones, they have a destiny. When I asked who told him, he tried to sit up and yell; ‘the one who holds the dragon.’ That’s when all hell broke loose. The alarms started, several of the monitors started beeping and he passed out.”

Everyone is speechless for the most part. Karl suggested it was the heart attack and the medications made Bill delusional. Charity wasn’t so sure about that being the correct answer.

Nancy told the story; “When I was eighteen, my dad made me write down his predictions. He predicted the year and month your father and I were to be married. That wasn’t such a big deal. He predicted I would give birth to three girls within six years. He was absolutely correct. He predicted the delivery of the first two will be easy, they were. The delivery of the third child will be so hard; I will have my tubes tied so I never have to go through giving birth again. Dad was right on that one too.

He also predicted I’ll have a management consulting business specializing in fraud and buyouts with one of my former college roommates. Dad was right again. He went wrong when he predicted my friendship with Vanessa would last my entire life. She left with her boy toy and I’ve never seen or heard from her since. I guess there’s no predicting crazy.

Karl, my dad predicted you would become a lawyer and your real claim to fame will be in the political world. He was right on with that also.”

The girls are silent with the look of amazement on their faces.

Karl turned to his youngest; “You’ve been living with Grandpa for quite a few years now; what do you think?”

“I don’t know. Grandpa taught me so much about almost everything. I’m not sure where to begin. He taught me how to live life and not be greedy. Maybe the best thing he taught me is the value of love and life. But there were times when it was like he had a sixth sense. Like the time Hope called grandpa a fake. Remember mom, you called him and grandpa already knew.”

“Let’s let my dad rest. We can see how he feel’s tomorrow.”

They all left the hospital with Faith and Hope going home to their families. Nancy, Karl and Charity stood outside talking.

Nancy started the conversation; “You’ve been living with my dad for years now. What do you think is going on?”

“Grandpa believes what he said. I have a feeling there may be truth and that scares the hell out of me. Only time will tell.”

Bill was in the ICU for a few days before being transferred to a private room. There he had a never ending stream of visitors. Members of the hospital staff openly wondered if the stream of visitors would ever stop. They are his friends, employees and former employees. A couple weeks after the heart attack, Bill went home to his apartment. He forgot about the stairs and stopped at the base of the staircase.

Charity is right behind him; “What’s the matter grandpa? I thought you would be excited to come home.”

“I don’t think I can manage those stairs right now. As a matter of fact, I’m sure I can’t climb all those steps.”

“Don’t run away. I’ll be right back.”

“Trust me, I won’t.”

Charity went over to the restoration company office. Michael Webb Sr. and his wife Amanda are there, along with their son Michael Jr.

“My grandfather is out of the hospital and he needs help making it upstairs to the apartment. He can walk, but the stairs are another story. Could you give him some help please?”

Amanda and her husband told whoever they are on the phone with; “Something important came up. I’ll call you back.”

Michael and his son helped Bill up the stairs. He didn’t need help as much as security to keep from falling down. Once in the apartment, he sat at the kitchen table and told his guests; “I guess all the sausage I had for breakfast over the years caught up with me.”

Amanda and Michael Jr. helped Charity carry all the get well cards, flowers and gifts from the car up to the apartment.

Amanda told Bill; “Uncle Bill, you know I’m always downstairs in the office during the day. If you need anything at all, just call. Nancy and her office staff are available too. Charity and I are both downstairs. We all have each other on speed dial. Don’t forget about the ladies in the prep kitchen, the cooking store and the restaurant staff.”

“Thank you for making me your honorary uncle for all these years. I don’t think I ever thanked you before; thank you very much.”

She hugged him; “If you need anything at all, call me.”

Michael Sr. and Jr. echoed her thoughts. The Webb family returned to the construction office. Charity sat down across from Bill. His head is down and she's about to ask him if he wanted anything when she heard him snoring.

Softly; “I hope Michael put the ‘CLOSED’ sign on the studio front door.”

She sat silently at the kitchen table reading the newspaper until Bill woke up about twenty minutes later.

His head went up and he looked around; “Oh my; they told me I would sleep quite a bit. It’s part of the healing process. I had no idea it would take on a life of its own.”

They chatted for a few minutes. Bill walked slowly to the living room and sat down on the sofa. Charity brought him a tall glass of water, turned on the TV, handed him the remote control and the telephone.

“I’m going to leave the front door unlocked so people can come and check on you.”

“I’ll be fine as long as daytime TV doesn’t kill me first.”

“I’m going to ask Linda and some of the other employees to come up from the restaurant and check on you every hour. I’ll come up and check on you too.”

A big smile came across his face; “You are too good to me. I couldn’t ask for more. Now go take some pictures and I hope to see you for dinner tonight.”

“You hope to see me for dinner? Are you planning on going somewhere? Do you have some sixty-something hot woman hiding in the apartment somewhere? You know what the doctors said; no nookie for you mister. Hahaha.”

“I don’t believe that came out of my granddaughter’s mouth. Trust me. That is the farthest thing from my mind right now. I think a good woman and a stiff drink would kill me.”

“I’m going to work now. Your phone is on the table next to the TV remote. If you go to the bathroom, don’t lock the door, just in case.”

“Yes mommy. I’ll behave because I know there are monsters under the bed.”

“Grandpa, you’re a nut. I want you to know that. I’m going to work before you start singing like you did to my mother.”

Bill started his wake up song; “Wake up, wake up you sleepy head. Wake up you sleepy head; you’ve got a big day ahead. Wake up you sleepy head; you’ve got bad hair and helmet head.”

“Oh my god. I know you sang that to my mother. That’s one of her favorite stories to tell about you. Did you ever sing to Marcy or Susan?”

“I sang it to Marcy once, she told me not to give up my day job. I sang it to Susan only once also. Her response was not very lady like if you get my meaning.”

A look of extreme sadness came over his face and he started crying; “I’m sorry. I miss them so much.”

“I’m sorry I brought them up. The last thing I wanted to do is to cause you pain.”

Composing himself; “No, that’s alright. They still live inside me. The doctors warned me I would become more emotional. I guess they’re right. I’m looking forward to seeing some visitors today. By the way, what other stories did your mother tell you about me?”

“Mom told us how you were hyperventilating when she asked you on the phone to get her tampons. She must have told us the tampon story at least a dozen times over the years. She still busts up laughing with tears in her eyes when she tells that story.”

“It wasn’t funny for me at the time. People were watching me carrying those things around the store.”

“She also told us about the time you scolded her for not wearing pajamas.”

“I think it’s time for you to go to work now. I’ll see you later.”

She kissed him on the forehead and left for her studio downstairs. Charity tried to get some work done. It wasn’t twenty minutes when she returned to check on Bill. She walked in to find several visiting well-wishers. When she asked who these people are, she was informed they’re former employees of the various businesses from the last thirty years or so.

Bill eventually recovered to the point where he could navigate the front steps of the apartment and back steps to the roof with ease. Soon thereafter, he started going to the fitness center with Charity and life started returning to normal. One morning he went to the roof and Charity brought up the coffee.

“You seem to have fully recovered from your heart attack. I see you looking at the sweating senior citizen women wearing leotards in the fitness center. There is no denying what’s going on in your mind, judging by the glare in your eyes and smile on your face.”

Smiling; “That’s true enough. I guess you can say I’m really alive. Now we have that settled; isn’t it about the time of year you and your sisters go on vacation?”

“My sisters and I canceled our vacation. We’re staying in town this year.”

“Why did you do that? You girls have been going somewhere on vacation for years now. No husbands, no kids, only the three of

you going somewhere exotic. Are you girls staying home because of me?"

A look of coy shyness came over Charity's face; "I can't go because I'm worried about you. My sisters won't go if I won't go. We'll make it up next year when you're better. Don't worry about it. I owe you so much, my not going is no a big deal."

"Charity Hess, I smell something going on here that you're not telling me. You girls are up to something or something is bothering you; which is it?"

"When you were in the intensive care unit after the heart attack, you told my mom, my sisters and I 'are the chosen ones'. You also said her girls have a destiny. When mom asked you who told you, you said; 'The one who holds the the dragon' and passed out.

We know you were recently out of surgery and on some serious medications. The doctors told us you most likely died before the policeman revived you behind the restaurant. Then you died for several minutes while on the operating table. It's been bothering us, but we waited until you are better. Who holds the dragon? What the hell is this dragon and what is our destiny?"

Several moments of silence passed with Charity patiently waiting for an answer. Bill has the look of confusion on his face.

"Grandpa, you're one of strangest men I know. Now answer me; who holds the reigns of the dragon and what the hell is this dragon?"

He looked at her with almost tears in his eyes; "I can't describe it in words exactly. It came to me when I died in Choam after the Al-Qaeda motel incident. Something entered my head and told me it's

not time to die because I had a far more important mission. I woke up in the recovery room after my midsection was stapled together.

The second time was after my skull was broken open and ended my career. It was the same entity entered my head again and told me I would meet a young female who will be my savior. I was to be her guardian and protector. I was to be your mothers dragon. It told me again it was not my time to die. I woke up in the hospital with a metal plate in my head. That's when I met your mother.”

“Holy shit! And I thought I had some strange ass dreams. Did it ever come back again?”

“It came to me while I was lying on the ground behind the restaurant when I had the heart attack. It told me I am not allowed to die because my mission is not yet complete. While I was on the operating table, it came again and told me to guide the offspring of the savior.”

“Is that when the voice told you my sisters and I have a destiny?”

Bill wiggled a little in the chair before answering; “Yes.”

“Grandfather; is that all? I’m waiting.”

“It’s more of an urge than something I can write down or put into words. I ordered three hand-held GPS units, six heavy duty flashlights and two sets of the best heavy duty batteries for everything.”

“Why would you do that?”

“I had the most uncontrollable urge to do that. I couldn’t stop myself. When the stuff arrived, I had the urge to write down some numbers. I couldn’t get them out of my head. I figured they are

longitude and latitude numbers. I looked them up online and they intersect in the mountains northwest of Los Alamos New Mexico.”

Charity is looking at the boxes the items came in; “These were all shipped within a couple of days after you were released from the hospital. Why have you hidden them from me?”

Tears started welling up in his eyes and his voice quivered; “At first I thought you would think I lost my mind. I became fearful of you and your sisters going and never coming back. I’m afraid you will meet your destiny and never return.”

She hugged Bill; “You’re shaking like a leaf! You’re really frightened about this.”

Bill composed himself; “I know in my heart and soul it’s true. I’m an old man who’s afraid for you and your sisters.”

“That settles it. I’m calling my sisters and we’re going on our vacation. We’re going to search for the Dragon in the mountains of New Mexico.”

She called her sisters and told them the story. They became more determined than ever to go on their adventure. She told Michael Junior about going to New Mexico on vacation. He told Charity his parents have a home up in the mountains, Northwest of Los Alamos.

It was left to his mom by her mother and her 2nd husband after they passed away. Maybe Charity and her sisters could use it while they are out exploring. Charity went to see Amanda about renting the house for a week.

“Hi Amanda. Your son told me you have a house northwest of Los Alamos. My sisters and I would like to rent it for a week if we could. We’re seeking adventure in the mountains of New Mexico.”

She told Charity they are welcome to use the place as long as they want. There will be no rent, just have a good time exploring the trails. She dropped off the keys to the house the following morning.

Within a couple of weeks, Charity finished all her photography business commitments. She could go on vacation without worrying about business matters.

End of chapter 03

Chapter 04

The three sisters drove to Amanda's house in New Mexico. The first night there, they went into town and celebrated their freedom by having pizza and adult beverages. The celebration for Faith and Hope is to be away from their husbands and children for a week. For Charity, it's to be out in the open and away from the concrete jungle called Kansas City.

The following morning, they checked their hiking gear, loaded their backpacks with energy bars, bottles of water and toilet paper. They set off to see where the GPS units would lead them. The first day, they hiked several miles into the mountains and arrived at their destination.

The women looked at the GPS units and Hope is the first to complain; "What a great view! Thanks for having us hike for hours to have this wonderful look at the mountains. I'm exhausted, thirsty and I want to rest."

Faith added; "I think Grandpa has really lost it. I mean the scenery is wonderful and all, but we've had better vacations. The only redeeming fact is Ryan is home with the children and I'm out here smack dab in the middle of nowhere."

Charity looked confused; "I don't know what to say. Grandpa really believed what he said. Something has to be around here somewhere. I know it."

Two of the women hiking through the mountains are totally exhausted. Charity is the only one in top physical shape. Faith and Hope are working women with children. Between taking care of their homes, husbands, careers and children; fitness centers are out of the question.

The women stopped on a rock shelf with what seemed to be a natural outcropping providing cover for the weary travelers. Faith is looking around and spotted dark storm clouds moving directly towards them. As the clouds rapidly came closer, they hear claps of thunder. It's obvious a nasty storm is approaching.

Hope heard the thunder while lying on her back; “Thank goodness there is enough room under here for all of us to stay the night if we have to. Hey, there's an opening in the rocks. It looks like a cave up here. Let's see what's inside. Maybe we can stay out of the rain and wind.”

The three women climbed up through the opening and found themselves in what looked like a natural cavern. It's more or less round and about twenty-five feet in diameter. They examined the cave and there's nothing alive inside. It looks as if nothing has ever been in there.

Charity seized the moment; “If anyone is thinking of going to the bathroom, you better go outside and do it now. If someone goes in here, I think it will be a very long and unpleasant night.”

A couple of hours later, the weather outside is lightning, windy and raining. The women setup their gear in the cave to stay the night. They have adequate provisions and supplies. Hope and Faith tried to call their husbands but there is no cell phone service.

They spent the evening conserving flashlight power by talking mostly in the dark. They finally decided to get some sleep before the journey back tomorrow. Charity woke up in the early morning hours because something is bothering her. She woke up her sisters. Faith is first.

“Why did you wake me? I was sleeping like a baby. Go relieve yourself and go back to sleep.”

“Hope; are you awake?”

“I’m going to kill you if you don’t go back to sleep. Once a year when we go on vacation, I don’t have the kids waking me up or Ben getting frisky. Go back to sleep.”

Charity continued; “Don’t you hear that hum? Don’t you feel the vibration? How could you sleep with that going on?”

The two elder sisters questioned her sanity by telling her she’s as nutty as Grandpa. They’re going to put her and him in a home if she doesn’t let them sleep.

“There’s something going on here. Ever since the lightning started hitting the mountain, I feel a low humming like a vibration. Can’t you two feel it?”

There's silence in the cave when Faith and Hope realized there is an ever so slight, almost unnoticeable vibration. They all arose, turned on the flashlights and started searching the cavern in earnest. Hope noticed the cave didn’t have the ‘look’ or ‘feel’ of the other caverns they explored. It's missing stalactites and stalagmites.

Faith who asked; “How can there be a cave on top of a mountain?”

Charity is searching for a possible source of the vibration. When the beam from her flashlight came in contact with a shiny object, she alerted the others; “Look, up there! A metal bar is sticking out of the wall.”

Hope asked; “What the hell is a metal bar doing sticking out of a wall in a mountain? None of this is making sense.”

Charity instructed her sisters to fold their hands and interlace their fingers to make a hand step so she could boost herself up to grab the bar and pull it out of the wall. After several attempts, up she went and grasped the metal bar with both hands.

There's a blinding light, a loud electrical sounding crack like a lightning bolt and she fell to the floor. While lying on her back, she looked around to see the walls of the cave dissolving.

Within moments, the women realized they are not in a cavern, but in some type of control room. Lights came from nowhere to illuminate the room. The walls seem to glow a soft white light. In front of them is a instrument cluster atop what looks like a console. There are dials, knobs, switches, gauges and flashing lights. There are also several chairs with seat-belts.

There is a huge monitor above and behind the console. It has to be six feet square. It started flickering, buzzing and popping. Whatever they're in, it's becoming active.

Faith is first; “This isn't right. We need to get out of here now!”

Hope echoed her thought; “Let's get out of here!”

She then peaked through the access hole in the floor that they came through and yelled; “It looks like the sun is rising, let's go!” Through the opening she went and Faith is right behind her.

Charity is the last one through the exit when she said something that stupefied her sisters; “Wait! Our supplies and cellphones are inside.”

Both sisters started yelling for her to forget everything and get as far away as possible. Much to their dismay, Charity climbed back inside. Faith and Hope are at least twenty feet away looking at the outcropping and wondering what happened to their sister.

Most of their supplies started falling from whatever that room was, then stopped. Several moments later, their sister emerged from the access hole. She's white as a ghost and her eyes look like saucers. She sat on the out cropping next to the gear in silence. Faith and Hope started yelling at her, but Charity only stared into the distance.

When she didn't answer or move, her sisters cautiously returned. They started grabbing their supplies and cellphones. Both of them are nervously talking to her.

“What the hell's the matter with you? Why didn't you run?”

Charity is still sitting with her legs folded calmly replied; “A man's voice spoke to me in English. He means us no harm. The voice told me he is the keeper of the Dragon and has been waiting for us for a long time.”

Faith asked in a cocky fashion; “Did the voice sound familiar? Did it sound like grandpa?”

Charity shot her a stern look; “No it did not. But it was a man's voice.”

“Hope, when we get back, we're locking her and grandpa up in a home. I'm willing to bet this is a hoax from both of them. She's lived with him for so long, she's as crazy as he is. Let's get out of here. None of this really happened. This is a charade.”

Charity sat with a crafty smile on her face; “If either of you think this is a charade, why not go back inside and make sure you didn’t forget something. Come to think of it, I left some batteries inside.”

Faith and Hope are chattering trying to convince themselves this is a practical joke. Not to be out maneuvered, Charity went back inside.

Hope mumbled something and also climbed back inside. While complaining, Faith followed suit. They realized they are in some type of control room. They looked around in awe thinking Grandpa spent some serious money on this hoax.

“Welcome ladies. I have been expecting you for a long time. I am who you may call the keeper of the Dragon. Are you the chosen ones who were sent here?”

Faith answered; “We are not answering questions or talking to an unidentified disembodied voice. Did our grandfather put you up to this? Is this grandpa’s idea of a joke? If it is; tell him it's not funny.”

“I understand your apprehension. I was known as Landau. Look to the video display above the control console please.”

The huge video display showed an image of a man who looks to be in his late fifties or early sixties. He has a graying goatee and mustache. The man appeared average looking except for his eyes. The iris look like cold steel on a light gray background. They looked exactly like Grandpa Bill’s.

Hope asked; “You said you were known as Landau. Why would you say that? We can clearly see you on the monitor.”

“At the moment before my death, my essence was captured. It was recorded onto what you would call a computer memory chip. It was then placed into a computer and here I am, conversing with the three of you.”

“So you’re a computer generated image on a screen. You’re not real flesh and blood. So why should I even be having this conversation with you? You’re not even here. You’re probably an image being transmitted from somewhere else. How much did our grandfather pay you for this act?”

“You asked several questions and made several statements. Please allow me to put your minds at ease. As I told you earlier, I was known as Landau. You are known as Faith the eldest, Hope the middle and Charity the youngest. To get you here, I told you I am the keeper of the Dragon. In truthfulness, I am a passenger on this vessel. I asked all of you earlier; are you really the chosen ones who were sent here?”

Charity stepped forward; “Our grandfather sent us because the keeper of the dragon spoke to him several times in his dreams. He encouraged us to come here and seek our destiny. Now answer me; what is the dragon?”

“I can not tell you what the keeper of the Dragon is because you would not understand. Now please retrieve all of your personal items you removed and bring them inside. I have something to show you. It will give you proof what I say is true.”

After some reluctance, Faith went outside and handed Hope all their belongings. Charity is trying to quiz Landau for information without success.

When Hope finished, Landau instructed; “I need all of you to sit in the chairs provided for your own safety.”

The women sat in the chairs. After a few moments, Hope had enough; “Okay Landau, cut the crap and get to the chase. What the hell is going on here?”

The image on the screen looked surprised and paused for a moment like it's thinking; “Let's cut to the chase as you say? I asked you if you are the chosen ones. You said your grandfather sent you. That is not an acceptable answer. Let me ask all of you this question. If one of you had to die right now to save the other two. Which of you would stand forward?”

Faith arose; “I will stand forward because I'm the eldest. My children are in good hands with my husband. Hope's children are younger and need their mother. Charity does not have children or a mate. She needs to experience life.”

Hope arose next; “Bullshit! You've been protecting me all my life. Ben could take care of our children. I'm sick and tired of you playing over protective big sister.”

Charity silently arose and walked in front of both her sisters directly to the control panel; “Forget those two. They have children and husbands who need them. I don't have anyone except grandpa and I know he can take care of himself. Send these two back and I'll go where ever you want for whatever.”

“But what if you were killed on some lonely outpost where nobody would ever find you? You died in the dark all alone. You never had a family or children to call your own. What would you say to that?”

“Is it Landau or Mister Landau? Ah never mind, it really doesn’t matter. When I die, I die. Grandpa died at least four times and that’s a fact. If I need to loose my life to keep my sisters alive, so be it. That’s my answer and I’m sticking to it.”

The sisters are arguing with each other as to who should sacrifice themselves so the others may live. The altercation started to become mildly physical.

Landau yelled; “STOP! I believe you are the chosen ones. All of you are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for each other. Now please return to your chairs. I will tell you everything.”

The women returned to their chairs and the verbal arguing started again with Charity; “Remember when you called grandpa a fake and a phony in the backyard? I punched your lights out and I’ll do it again if you try to keep me from saving your life.”

“Try it now brat. I’ll jump in front of you so I die and not you!”

“Ladies stop please. Let me start from the beginning. Humans are not the only sentient beings in the galaxy. For the most part, most all the sentient beings are what you call humanoid. Two legs, two arms, torso and one head.

Many years ago, my crew came across this ship. It was derelict orbiting Jupiter’s moon Europa. It became obvious this ship came from a far more advanced civilization than ours.”

“You expect us to believe this?”

“Yes. Now if I may continue; I was the medical officer on a deep space salvage ship. When we entered the derelict ship, our second in command, Mister Ifill checked for atmosphere; there was none.

He arranged for oxygen to be pumped into the derelict ship so we could examine it in comfort.

Within a few minutes, this ship was habitable. Mister Ifill was examining the craft when he came across the control panel. He set his light down on the panel, the light went dim and out. He set a second light on the panel, it also dimmed and went out. When we seen a tiny glowing light on the monitor, we figured the ship must be absorbing the energy from the flashlights.

Crew member Dete touched the control panel with his bare hand and died instantly. He looked like he died of old age. The ship absorbed his life energy and killed him. Several instruments became illuminated. I ran a power cable from our ship to this ship.”

“So what happened? Don’t leave us hanging. What happened to the crew?”

“Our ship started losing power so rapidly, I had to break the connection. When I did, this ship started absorbing power directly from our engines. We seen our engines reaching critical mass, so we had to abandon ship and make this vessel our new home. ”

“Didn’t the explosion damage this ship?”

“Just before the engines exploded, the monitor above the control console turned on. We watched our ship explode. Then we witnessed something none of us has ever seen before. All the energy released from the explosion was absorbed by this ship. The lights became brighter, the controls became active, this vessel came alive.”

“So where's the rest of the crew? Are they hiding? Are they waiting to jump out and go BOO!”

“He tells better stories than Grandpa and Grandma Jillian combined.”

“Landau; why are you waiting for us on a mountain top in New Mexico?”

“Ladies please allow me to finish. Mister Ifill, my sister Adia Landau and the other crew members wanted no part of this vessel. Keep in mind all of us were being hunted by the Galactic Empire. With this solar system being dozens of parsecs from the nearest trade route, we looked for a habitable planet. We flew this ship to earth. My crew members decided life on earth is better than being on a ship that kills. They must have died of old age decades ago.”

“Why didn't you go with them?”

“When we arrived here, I was dying from radiation poisoning. So I decided to stay and see if the prophesy is true.”

Charity started to get snippy; “You avoided questions like a politician. Did this ship talk to you and why were you waiting for us?”

“My apologies. I was monitoring the ships status and I became preoccupied for a moment. To answer your questions; I was searching this ship and lay down on what I thought was a bed. I went to sleep and the ship talked to me. It must have sensed I was dying. It made me an offer to live on in the ships computer. I accepted the offer.”

Hope isn't convinced at all; “Okay Landau. If you're really dead, where is your body? Or did it magically float out into space like

your fellow crew mates. Speaking of hooey; what's the 'prophesy' crap all about?"

"There is a prophesy known to almost every sentient civilization in the galaxy. Three great warriors will come with an indestructible starship and topple the Galactic Empire. After watching you three; I believe you are the chosen ones."

"And your body is where?"

"It remains on the Dragon in the room where I died and became one with the ship. Do you really want to go, see my corpse and live your destiny?"

The women looked at each other with looks of worry, apprehension and curiosity.

"Since I'm the eldest, we're all in for whatever comes our way. Grandpa, you really pulled off a good one this time. Alright Landau, show us our destiny. When you're done, are you going to get us some coffee?"

"Ladies, sit in your chairs please."

The ever serious Hope commented; "Let's get this crap over with. This charade is getting old. We only have a few days before we have to be back to work."

"The passage of your time is not an issue for this ship. As you would say; you will be returned to this location in plenty of time. In the interim, you will see and experience things no human has ever done before."

They felt a slight bump, some vibration, a few moments of acceleration that made them feel like being stretched. As they

watched the monitor, the women watched the sky go from blue and fade to black. Then there are more stars than they've ever seen before. Seconds later, it looks like they are passing the moon and heading into deep space.

“You may watch our forward journey on the monitor. You will be able to see the asteroid belt in about fifteen minutes. Afterward, Jupiter will be in full view. The total time to Europa should be about thirty minutes.”

Charity in her usual cockiness; “You're telling us this is a spaceship?”

“This craft is only a shuttle. We will dock with the main ship called the Dragon and all your questions will be answered then.”

Hope became agitated; “I'm done with this! I'm going home.”

Charity is watching the monitor intently when she heard her sister yell; “Hey! Where's the hole in the floor? Where's the cave opening we came through?”

“I'm sorry ladies. The porthole had to be closed for the journey. The total vacuum of space would have made your survival null. Now if you look at the monitor, you will see we are traveling through your solar system at slightly below the speed of light. We should reach Europa in less than thirty minutes where the Dragon is waiting for you.”

With calmness in her voice, Charity asked; “Why is the Dragon orbiting one of Jupiter's moons?”

“The ship is orbiting Europa because that is where my crew and I found it. The beings on Europa did not mind if I left it there. They are very xenophobic. I do not think they like any sentient beings.”

Sarcastically Faith asked; “What would happen if humans were to set foot on Europa? Would the little green people get angry and have a hissy fit?”

“I don't think they are green and no other beings have ever set foot on Europa. If anyone would try, their ship would be vaporized long before it landed. I have had dealings with them before, but never direct physical contact. It's always audio communication only. After I died, I asked them if I could put the Dragon there for safe keeping; they agreed.”

“Why didn't you park it around earths moon? Its not like someone is going to steal it.”

“I could not leave the dragon orbiting earth or the moon. It would be discovered sooner or later. The different nations on your planet would start a war to be the first to seize an alien vessel. That would not be good.”

“Why not?”

“Almost all of your species believe one almighty deity or another created mankind. To your civilizations, humanity is at the top of the food chain so to speak. Your civilization would collapse if it became known there are other life forms that are far more advanced.”

“How advanced are we talking here?”

“Human cutting edge technology is able to propel a craft outside of earths atmosphere at the rate of twenty five miles per second. At full acceleration, this craft travels slightly under the speed of light.”

“I take it this ship is not from NASA.”

“No it is not. Now ladies, I need your answer before we arrive at Europa. Otherwise I will return you to where you entered this transport. You may all go home and think of this being a strange joke played on you. Or you may continue on your journey, have the adventure of a lifetime and live your destiny.”

The women huddled together for a few moments and agreed on their decision.

Charity spoke for the group; “We came seeking adventure. So far, it's been out of this world; pardon the pun. We still don't believe you, but what the hell. We'll play along and see where this leads us.”

Landau spoke in the most serious tone; “You cannot be harmed while you are inside the dragon. As you can see on the monitor, we are approaching Jupiter's moon Europa. I will send the main ship instructions to meet us in orbit. We dare not land on Europa.”

Hope sarcastically; “We can't piss off the beings on Europa.”

Landau responded in the most serious of voice; “No we must not. If you will excuse me; I have instructions to send.”

The women sat in their chairs watching the monitor and commenting on how real everything seems. They watched the monitor while they are commenting how it looked like they were actually on a spaceship and it's about to dock with another spaceship.

Then it happened; they're watching the two ships merge when they felt and heard the connection bump. Landau appeared in what looks like in person. The women reached for him, only their hands passed through. He's a lifelike moving holographic image.

“Now that we've joined with the primary ship, there's enough power for me to appear in this form. You asked for coffee earlier. To my knowledge, it is somewhat unique to Earth.

Much to my surprise, the beings of Europa sent food and drink. They filled the galley with supplies for your journey. I thought they may have visited Earth sometime in the past. It appears my hunch is true.”

Faith asked; “So you never seen the beings on Europa? I don't believe I really asked that question.”

“No I have not. They were not exactly friendly whenever I had audio contact with them. I was surprised when they agreed to hide the dragon. I'm shocked they sent food and drink for you. Now let me show you around your ship.”

They went through a large door that wasn't there earlier. It connected to a hall and there are doors on either side of the hallway. The doors are marked; Galley, Crew Quarters, storerooms 1, 2, 3 and so on. At the end of the long hall is the engine or power room. There's a huge control panel and multiple labeled switches. One huge handle is labeled; ‘Master Primary Power’

Hope walked up to the handle and gave it a tug. Out it came of its socket and she's holding it in her hand. The lights went out, the room went pitch black and the sound of equipment in the background is slowing down and becoming faint.

Shortly, the only sound heard was Charity's voice in the darkness; “Nice going Hope. I swear you could screw up a one car funeral.”

Without warning, the girls felt themselves getting lighter and lighter.

Faith yelled; “Plug that thing back in!”

“I can't hold my cellphone for light and this thingy at the same time. When I go to push the thingy back in, I float backward.”

Charity came to the rescue; “Give me your phone. I'll hold it while you grab the handle next to where the thingy goes.”

Charity held the phone while Hope grabbed the restraint and is able to plug the power switch back in. The lights came back on, background equipment started humming and the gravity gradually returned to normal.

Landau reappeared; “Please do not do that again.”

“What happened? It felt like we started to float.”

“You turned off all the ships mechanical systems, including the gravity.”

Hope is not convinced; “You get the same feeling when an elevator goes down fast.”

Landau escorted the women to the galley for refreshments; “Here ladies. Have some drink and nourishment.”

“What no coffee? What kind of food is this and where did it come from?”

Landau told them it's safe. The women consumed the refreshments that look and taste good, but they had no idea what they're consuming. The food looked like strange fruits, nuts, berries and vegetables. Charity initially refused to eat something that looked like tofu. She finally gave in after Faith told her it tastes good.

While they're enjoying the refreshments, Charity asked; "What's this blue drink called? Can I buy it the grocery store or do I have to order it online? It tastes like some kind of fruit or vegetable juice; but I can't figure out what."

Landau sat at the table with the women and told them the cold hard facts; "Ladies, you know in your hearts you are not on earth anymore. This is not a charade, this is real. What can I do to prove it to you?"

The women agreed something isn't quite right. After their refreshments, they're becoming tired very fast. Landau escorted them down the hall to a door marked in some alphabet they didn't understand. Just before entering, the door markings changed to read Crew Quarters. Inside the room is what look like beds. They all lay down and within moments are asleep.

The dreams they're having are like nothing they ever experienced before. The women are dreaming they are standing alone in a room where they could not see the ceiling, walls or floor. The area around them looked like waves of very sheer silk or fog.

An image of something could be seen in the distance. It seems to have human form, but none of them could identify it for sure. They did have the feeling whatever this being is, it's watching them. They tried moving towards it, except their feet are not touching anything and they could not move.

The ghostly apparition started approaching. It became a human form and is moving without taking steps. It stopped within a few feet of them. The sisters are watching the apparition morph into their father for a moment. Then changing into the image of their mother. Finally it changed to the image of their grandfather.

A non-malevolent voice came from inside their heads; “Please do not panic. I chose to appear in the image which gives all of you comfort. I can see your love and trust of your grandfather in your minds.”

“Why aren't your lips moving?”

“You don't you sound like grandpa.”

The image first smiled and the lips started moving; “I apologize. I did not realize how visual your species is. As for my voice, I am obviously not your grandfather. His larynx was damaged during one of the multiple conflicts he was involved with. This is how he would sound without the damage. To answer your other concerns I see in your minds, all of you are questioning your safety. All of you are completely safe inside this Starship. It is called Dragon.

This vessel is a bio mechanical living trans-dimensional starship with a conscious. On a level not too dissimilar to all of you, it thinks. A part of my conscious is inside the ship. Right now your subconscious are here with me in my domain. It is easier for me to communicate while you are in your dream state. I want to reassure all of you no harm can come to you while inside the Dragon. A part of my conscience will always be with each of you.”

The girls started yelling at the voice in their heads including;

“What the hell is going on here?”

“Have we been drugged?”

“Did you have Landau drug us?”

Charity asked; “Why are we here?”

“Pertinent questions. None of you were drugged. The blue drink provides nourishment and other beneficial effects. In short, it will assist you with the realization you are not on earth anymore.

Why are you here? There are civilizations who need your help because of a scourge called the Galactic Empire that has been expanding its influence throughout this galaxy for far too long.

The Empire currently controls about two thirds of your galaxy with absolute power. Many of the sentient beings who have been suppressed are waiting for you, the chosen ones for a millennium. Your own home planet Earth will be a target soon.”

Faith asked; “Is that all? Why do I feel something serious is missing here.”

“You are very astute. The Empire leadership has also been looking for this starship and the three warriors of the prophecy for a thousand years. They fear the prophecy of ending their reign may be based in fact. If you decide to stay and live your destiny, Landau will guide you.

If you wish to go home, I will instruct Landau and the Dragon to return all of you to where this journey originated. We will continue to search for another three chosen ones while there is still time. Women of earth, the choice is yours.”

The image of their grandfather did not move. It only faded into darkness. The sisters awoke and looked at each other. Each of them commented about having the strangest dream of their lives. They started talking and realized they all had the exact same dream. They discussed whether to go home or continue on. They decided this has to be some type of dream or incredible hoax.

They didn't quite believe the dream they all shared. They felt stuck in some type of dreamscape. So they asked Landau to give them proof. He agreed, they traveled to the Altair system. Before they arrived, Landau pointed to a drawer containing ceramic bracelets.

“Each one of you needs to place one of these on your left wrist. Place them only on your left wrists. They will allow you to communicate with each other and the ship.”

“Why only on our left wrists?”

“Because all of you are right handed.”

Charity complained; “This really clashes with my shirt.”

They arrived in orbit around a small planet called Ariod. It's made up of large areas of desert surrounded by water. Hope and Charity agreed to transport down to the surface. The local inhabitants look middle eastern human and speak Arabic.

They conversed with a man named Davood who welcomed them to the city of Cibara. They spoke of how the empire let loose a plague on their lands. He pointed to a huge area where the sand looked brownish red and is extremely coarse. He walked to the edge of the sand and cut his finger with a knife. A drop of blood dripped onto the sand. As soon as it made contact, the sand started to move. It's alive!

Hope and Charity now understand why the residents called it vampire sand. The Empire conducted experiments on this planet and created biological carnivorous sand. It's kept at bay by walls of brick and stone. Davood told them before the villagers knew what was happening, they lost dozens of animals. Several children were almost killed if their parents did not save them. Many adults

showed huge scars on their legs from the vampire sand attacking their flesh.

Charity looked at Hope; “I don’t think this is a charade anymore. There is nothing like this anywhere on earth.”

“This better be a dream because this scares the hell out of me.”

Hope moved her left wrist to her mouth; “Faith; can you hear me?”

In her head; “Stop yelling! I can hear you just fine without raising your voice.”

“Can you see out the monitor?”

“Of course I can. I'm not blind.”

“Do you see two moons?”

“Yes. And a third one will be rising shortly.”

“Thank you.”

The sisters agree they are not on earth and this is not a joke.

They heard Faith's voice in their heads again; “Hope, Charity; you need to get back up here right away. Landau, how do I get them back here? Oh, this button?”

Hope and Charity are instantly returned to the ship; “I love that transporting stuff!” Charity exclaimed with a big smile on her face.

Faith pointed to the monitor; “I don’t think this is a hoax anymore. Someone is trying to talk to us.”

The face of a very attractive woman who looks to be around fifty appeared on the monitor. She has short black hair and brown eyes.

She has the air of authority and sternness about her. Here are the highlights of her conversation with Faith and her sisters.

“I am the Sovereign of the Clovis Empire. Who are you? Where did you come from? I want you to surrender your ship to me this instant. If you do as I command, your deaths will be swift and painless.”

“I am Faith. These are my sisters Hope and Charity. We are here because our grandfather sent us on vacation. Did our grandfather put you up to this? I don’t know who you think you are, but you need to improve your manors. You’re almost as bitchy as our mother was when she was going through the change.”

The face on the monitor turned to a scrawl; “You three will find out soon enough how serious I am. When I’m done with you, each one of you will be begging for death.”

Charity walked up to the monitor; “You can have my starship when you pry the controls from my cold dead fingers; bitch!”

Sovereign started barking out orders; “They’re in the Altair system. Command whatever assets we have in that area to seize that ship. I want that ship and I want the short one’s head on a pike. ... What are all of you waiting for!?”

The screen went to what appeared to be an outside view and Landau spoke; “Listen carefully. As you know, the dragon is organic with non-organic systems. This is how the ship functions.”

He instructed Faith on manually piloting the ship and Hope in the power systems. He only told Charity about the weapons systems. He informed the women the ship absorbs all forms of energy and uses it for sub-light propulsion, internal power and weapons. The

ship uses matter antimatter (proton and anti-proton) annihilation for beyond speed of light (trans-dimensional travel.)

The first line of defense is the ship is able to generate a stealth cloud. It confuses the attackers scanners because they cannot get a fixed location. The second line of defense is the ship itself. The ship will absorb any energy it comes in contact with.

The three sisters are sitting in the control room discussing their situation. The conversation is dark and gloomy. Charity and Hope decided to search the ship while Faith talks with Landau. They were not gone long before they returned.

Hope broke into Faith's conversation with Landau; "We found the real Landau. He's in a room off the power room; very dead. He's well on his way to being mummified."

"I apologize ladies. I warned you earlier. In earth years, I've been dead for decades. What I told you is the truth. I have not and cannot lie to you. Standby; there is an Empire ship approaching. The empire has found you and is trying to make direct contact."

The ladies turned and watched what appeared to be some type of spacecraft approaching. It did not look friendly at all. It has what looks like several cannon looking weapons. The ship has several dish and pole antennas on the outside. They watched as the cannon looking things are now pointing in their direction. The monitor changed from an outside view to ship to ship communications. A nasty looking scared face appeared on the monitor.

"I am Zarf; Commander of the Galactic Empire Explorer class Starship Sateen. You will stand down, surrender your ship and prepare to be boarded. If you do not obey, you will be destroyed."

Faith asked Landau; “How do I talk to this moron?”

He showed her what switch to press to communicate with the hostile ship; “Hello; I am Faith of the starship Dragon. You and your Sovereign had better learn some manors. You can’t talk to us like that. If our mother was here, she would slap that smirk off your face so hard, it would knock you back into last week.”

Hope got into the act; “Now what kind of a name is Zarf anyway? It sounds like something I might step in and scrape off my boot with a stick.”

Charity yelled; “I got your Zarf right here; asshole.”

The face on the monitor became agitated; “You will all be destroyed in the name of the Clovis Empire!”

The monitor returned to an outside view. The hostile ship started firing what looked like beams of light. They heard the dull sound of something hitting the hull of the Dragon. After a couple of minutes, the hostile ship stopped firing.

The image of Zarf appeared on the monitor; “Your bag of tricks saved you this time. You have not heard the last of the Empire. We will return in force and all of you will be killed!” the ship abruptly left.

“That was very clever Charity. Don’t show the enemy your weapons and at the same time, start replenishing your energy reserves. Next time we encounter a hostile vessel, it may be a good idea to shoot back.”

“I know you’re dead and all; but how do I shoot back? What do I aim with and where’s the trigger? Or should I use harsh language and throw my smelly socks at them? Somehow I don’t think pissed

off people will be frightened by a four foot eleven woman swearing at them while flipping them the finger.”

“Oh, I forgot to show you how to operate the weapons. Here are the actions you need to perform to manually turn on the weapons systems, aim and fire them.”

Landau showed Charity and her sisters how the weapons systems function. He also showed them how to place the ship into stealth mode.

“The ship has one primary weapon and twelve secondary weapons. All weapons fire a consuming pulse energy plasma. When the plasma comes in contact with any surface, it converts the material into plasma; therefore destroying it.

While on automatic, the weapons system will instantly lock on up to thirteen moving targets and fire simultaneously while targeting the next hostile threat. Only the main weapon may be manually aimed. When you target the main weapon at a vessel and fire, it will totally destroy it.”

“How does it do that?”

“Without getting technical, you take general aim and fire the weapon. It will automatically seek the center of mass and release the pulse energy plasma. The weapon will continue until the plasma has burned completely through the target. Once started, it cannot be stopped. On a dreadnought class battle cruiser, which are the largest starships in the galaxy, this would take slightly over one second. The beam will then cut the vessel in half from front to back.

The primary weapons energy system is adjustable from cutting a dreadnought cruiser in half at its lowest setting to burning a one kilometer wide hole through a twenty-five kilometer thick iron asteroid within two seconds. Raise the power level, more power to the primary weapon.”

Charity asked; “On the smaller weapons; is the power adjustable? You know, non lethal?”

“No. Why would you ask such a question?”

“What if I just want to scare someone off? You know, give them a bloody nose so they know we're serious.”

“If someone is attacking this ship, they are trying to kill you. They will not stop until you are destroyed.”

“Oh.”

With a smile on his face; “Charity, you seem to have a good predisposition with weapons. I would suggest you practice with some nearby asteroids.”

She started taking target practice at an asteroid field and enjoying every minute of it. Meanwhile, Landau suggested they line up some allies. Just in case they need a place to hide, regroup or obtain supplies.

They went into orbit around a very mountainous planet called Naha. Perhaps less than 15% habitable. Landau introduced them to the citizens via radio. Much to the ladies surprise, they spoke Japanese. Since Charity speaks Japanese slightly better than her sisters, she's elected to meet with the inhabitants.

When she arrived on the planet, they looked like the Japanese of several hundred years ago. Her first impression is she landed in the Feudal period of Japan. The citizens are very suspicious of a short, Caucasian woman with blonde hair and deep blue eyes.

After much discussion with the tribal spokesman, she met the Daimyo. (lord and leader) His name is Katsu. Charity asked; “How may I prove I am worthy of your honorable trust? How can I prove your enemy is my enemy?”

Several bodyguards to Daimyo Katsu are dressed in full sixteenth century Samurai battle armor. Without a word, they brought in what looked like a large eastern European man with the strangest amber eyes. They stood him in front of what looked like a log table and placed a knife in front of him, untied his bounds and told him this is his one chance to survive.

Katsu told Charity; “We captured this bandit when his group of pirates were trying to steal food from our village. Their transport vessel crashed as it was trying to leave. He is the only survivor from his pack of thieves. We know what he is capable of. He fought and killed several of our warriors before being captured. We do not know what you are capable of.”

“And if I prove my worth to you, will that be enough to gain your honorable trust?”

“We do not welcome strangers. I have decided a fight to the death would prove if you are worthy of our trust. We believe you are a little foolish woman with no skin color, golden hair and eyes like the blue of the sea who is going to die. Here is my tanto (dagger); use it to kill or die with honor.”

The prisoner picked up his tanto and looked like he was going to stab one of the guards. They had already drawn their katana's (swords).

In Arabic; "I'm going to cut you into little pieces after I violate you in every disgusting way I can. There won't be an orifice on your body I will not enjoy before killing you."

Charity picked up the tanto and tossed the dagger up and down getting the 'feel' of the weapon; "Hey tough guy, are you ready to join your ancestors?"

"You speak their language and mine. I hope you can use your skill in the after world. Your sense of humor is going to die with you."

The prisoner moved around the table and took several steps toward Charity. When he was within a few feet, she threw the knife. It lodged in the center of his throat. His face turned to one of surprise and pain. His eyes went wide and his hand went to this throat. He choked, blood came from his mouth. Down he went face first on the ground.

All the warriors stood perfectly still and silent for a moment. They started cheering and the Daimyo called Charity 'Onna-Bugeisha' (female samurai). They celebrated with food and drink. A couple of hours later, they presented her with a katana (Samurai Sword).

On the weapon is inscribed in Japanese; 'From the people of Naha to Onna-Bugeisha, Chiyo Sakura.' (Everlasting Blossom)

Katsu told her; "This katana was made by strangers a thousand ago and given to my ancestors. They were told the prophecy of a female warrior arriving here without transport, with golden hair

and eyes blue like the ocean. The great warrior will slay a powerful enemy of our people.

While we ate and drank to honor you. Our finest craftsman inscribed your name onto the blade. You will be forever known to our people as Chiyo Sakura. You and your fellow warriors are welcome on Naha. You are free to walk our lands with honor and respect as a true warrior.”

“Thank you Katsu. I must return to my ship and prepare for the great battles that lay ahead.”

After many goodbyes, Faith transported Charity to the ships control room where she dropped the katana that was given to her and ran out of the room.

Hope arose from her chair to see whats wrong with her sister; “Landau, where's she going?”

“It would be best to leave your sister alone. She is emotionally distraught and violently ill. She crossed a line none of you have ever even considered crossing. Your sister has violently ended the life of a sentient being.

Even though it was in self-defense, it is weighing heavily on her. You have witnessed a warrior being born. Charity did what she had to do for everyone’s good. Now she hates the act and hopes she never has to do it again.”

A few moments went by. It didn’t take much prodding from Faith for Hope to make her move; “Maybe you should check on our sister. I hope she didn’t lie down on one of those beds like Landau did.”

“Oh no. Look what it did to him!”

Hope ran out of the control room and started looking in every room down the main hallway. She found Charity in the restroom on her hands and knees cleaning up a mess. Their eyes met; it's clear she's been crying. By the looks of the room, her last meal is on the floor.

“Damn sis, you've got barf on your face and even in your hair. Go wash your face and your hair while I clean this up. I see long hair can have its drawbacks.”

While Charity is bent over the sink cleaning herself, she's on the verge of crying again; “You have to promise to never tell mom or dad about this. I feel so strange, different, so hardened. I killed someone. Am I chosen because I can do that? I'm frightened of what I have become.”

“Faith and I were listening up here. It was you or him. You had no choice. You did what you had to do.”

“He was only a few feet from me. I can still see the surprise in his eyes when I threw the knife. I watched him die.”

Hope and Charity talked about what Grandpa would have done and what they should do next.

Faith joined her sisters in the restroom. Charity had composed herself when she asked; “If the three of us are here; who's piloting the ship and where are we going?”

The three women returned to the control room and found it empty.

Faith asked in a panic; “Landau? Are you here?”

The image of Landau appeared; “Yes ladies; I'm always here. I turn off the imaging system when you are not here. The ship and I can fully communicate without my image being present. By the way,

our long range scanners picked up a convoy of pirate ships heading for this sector. I believe they are on a direct course to Naha.”

Being the eldest, Faith assumed command; “Let’s stay here and see why these pirates are heading to Naha. Something tells me this is not going to be a friendly meet and greet.”

“You heard what the pirate scum bag wanted to do to me while I was down there. Believe me; you don’t want them near you. These are probably his buddies coming to pick him up.”

It took several hours for the pirate fleet to arrive. The captain started the communications; “I am Captain Ceylon. Your ship is in between my fleet and our destination. If you surrender, I will take your ship and leave you live out your lives on Naha. Otherwise I will board your ship, kill all of you and take your ship anyway.”

“Landau, can he do that? Can he get on the dragon?”

“You have a defense against anyone entering the ship without your authorization. Charity, push the black lever near your left arm from ‘safe’ to ‘intruder’.”

She removed the safety latch and moved the nondescript lever forward as instructed; “Now what?”

“Any organic matter entering the ship will be instantly absorbed. The ship already has all your DNA's so you will not be harmed. Any others entering the ship will be instantly absorbed.”

“Absorbed? As in eaten?”

“The ship is partly organic. Let's say, consumed.”

“Oh shit.”

Faith turned on the communications; “Hello Captain Ceylon. Let’s not get too rash about this boarding my ship nonsense. I think it’s only fair to let you know we are not defenseless. Besides, that so called ship of yours looks like something out of a scrapyard. From what I can see, that goes for your whole fleet.

Why don’t you turn around and go back the way you came while you’re still able to under your own power. We are allies of the people of Naha. We would not like to see anyone try to harm them.”

Captain Ceylon is becoming angry and started yelling; “Your ship has no shields, no weapons and you are three worthless females with nothing but words to back you up. My crew is on the way to kill you right now. You’re not even worth selling into slavery. When I’m finished killing all of you, I will take care of your friends on Naha by showing them the wrath of Ceylon.”

Stern business woman Hope is watching and analyzing the Captain; “He’s scared of something. He’s way too aggressive for this. I think someone has a fire under his ass. Faith, bring up the Sovereign and see what happens.”

Meanwhile, Charity heard some noises coming from the hallway. She left her chair and opened the hallway door; “Ask the moron how many of his crew he sent over. There are six sets of clothing on the floor in the hallway with some strange looking what I think are guns. Damn do their clothes stink!”

Faith turned on the communications and the Captain appeared surprised; “Why aren’t you dead? My crew are already on your ship. They will blast through your barricades and destroy you any moment now.”

Faith became cocky; “Ah Ceylon, let’s cut this foolishness. The six morons you sent over are dead. I know your Sovereign is going to be disappointed with you and your fellow burnouts. Why don’t you leave before my sisters and I have to teach you a lesson.”

Ceylon looks like the bottom fell out of his soul. He has the look of fear like someone walked on his grave; “I have nothing to do with the Empire or the Sovereign Clovis. I’m going to take your ship and collect the reward. A million credit bars will go a long way. Prepare to die you worthless females!”

Hope relays her observations; “He’s lying like a rug. Typical testosterone poisoning. He won’t admit to being scared to death of the Sovereign any more than he would ask for directions. I’d be willing to bet she sent him to test us because he’s expendable. Why burn your own assets when you can have some fool like this do your dirty work.”

After hearing Hope's observations, Ceylon broke off communications and his armada of smaller ships started attacking the dragon. Wave after attacking wave of smaller ships attacked with their energy weapons. When their weapons are nearly exhausted and having no effect, the main pirate ship approaches.

Landau announced; “This ships status: energy banks are now fully charged. All ships functions and weapons systems are at one hundred percent. Now analyzing the attacking enemy vessels. The small vessels energy banks are nearly exhausted. The main pirate battle ship is fully functional. There is a possibility one system of this ship may be rendered non-functioning for a short period of time if the main pirate ship were to launch a full power attack.”

“What system would be affected and for how long?”

“The auto repair systems would start immediately. It could take up to several minutes to affect the repairs to the clogged toilet.”

The sisters looked at each other. They didn't know whether to laugh or not about the situation.

Charity broke the stalemate; “Landau, am I able to control only the main weapon and place the other weapons on automatic target and fire mode?”

“Yes, it is done. The twelve auxiliary pulse energy plasma cannons are now in automatic targeting mode. With you on-board, I cannot fire the weapons; only you can.”

Charity powered up the main plasma weapon and aimed at the front of the pirate command ship. She looked at the fire control panel and turned off the safety. Then turned the power setting to one percent, and pulled the trigger. The automatic weapons systems engaged.

The women watch a flurry of weapons fire striking and destroying all the smaller ships within moments. The primary energy weapon sliced the pirate command ship in half from front to back. The sisters sat watching the carnage in shock. The smaller ships are blasted into pieces and the fires only went out when the oxygen feeding the flames is exhausted. The primary pirate ship is now a skeleton that is completely engulfed in flames. After a few moments, they saw small explosions in and around the skeletal remains of the main vessel.

While Faith and Charity are looking on with disgust. Hope noted; “Those explosions must be fuel cells, munitions and oxygen tanks.”

With sadness in Charity's voice; "I only pulled the trigger once. The main weapon cut that ship in half."

They looked at the monitor and watched as the flames finally went out due to the absence of oxygen.

Landau reminded the women; "You realize the Empire and the Sovereign in particular are going to do everything in their power to capture this ship. Our sensors picked up an Empire ship monitoring this conflict. I'm sure they communicated every detail of this encounter to the empire."

The women are staring at the monitor watching the carnage.

Landau broke their concentration; "Wait, there is a communication coming in. It's a one way broadcast from the Sovereign to you. It's being relayed from several transfer points in an attempt to camouflage the location of its source."

The image of the Sovereign appeared on the monitor; "It seems you had a minor confrontation with some pirates. You handled yourselves very well for a bunch of amateurs. Although your main weapon seems to be powerful, it's no match for any ship in my battle fleet. You also demonstrated the value of your ship.

I previously placed a reward of one million credit bars to whoever delivers me your ship. I'm also putting a bounty on the head of the dwarf midget with the long blonde hair and the foul mouth. Ten million credit bars for her alive; none dead.

I don't know where you three or that ship came from. But I will tell you this; your home planet and the planet where that ship originated will be vaporized when I find out."

“I’m not medically a midget or a dwarf. I’m vertically challenged; bitch!”

The monitor went dark and the sisters agreed, the Sovereign Clovis is almost as bad as their mother was when she was going through the change.

End of Chapter Five

Chapter Six

The women left the Altair system and traveled directly to the Procyon system. Then to the Rigel system; all to make allies and track down the Sovereign. They made allies on many worlds while picking up supplies and intelligence on the Empire as they traveled. They learned about a large band operating outside the Empire's influence; organized crime.

When they entered the Regulus system, they found themselves face to face with the center of organized crime in this quadrant of the galaxy. Hope being the toughest and best negotiator of the sisters, went to meet with the organized crime leader; which proved to be a huge mistake.

“Welcome to the Regulus system. I am Nostra, leader of all business conducted outside of the Empires influence. I have heard all about you and your sisters. I have also been informed you have a very powerful ship that the Sovereign would love to have possession of. So how may I help you and your sisters?”

Hope gave the same introduction she had so many times before; “The Empire wants to expand without opposition. My sisters and I are under direct threat from the Sovereign. She will destroy our home world if we don't end her reign of terror. Join us and the galaxy will be a better place for you and everyone after the Empire is defeated.”

“That's very interesting. I already control a large portion of the galaxy. I am free of any Empire influence. I heard the reports of how you dealt with the largest band of pirates in this sector. What a bunch of unclesansed morons. There wasn't a deep thinker in the lot.

That being said, I must admit your starship is a very formidable weapon. But I don't think your ship is a match for the fire power of my fleet. Besides, I could use a million credit bars. I'll even take the cute short one who has a bounty on her head. I need someone to provide me with descendants, she should fill my needs. I can always use another trophy companion."

"Are you really sure you want this meeting to end this way?"

Nostra poured himself a drink and spoke with all the confidence in the world; "As we are speaking, your ship is being surrounded by my forces. Oh don't try to transport out of here. There's a dampening field surrounding this building; you're not going anywhere. One more item, no battle group in the galaxy has ever survived a confrontation with my forces. Not even the mighty Galactic Empire dares cross me."

"So what are you suggesting? I should give up my ship? Should my sisters and I turn ourselves over to you because of your obviously over rated self-importance and delusions of grandeur. Excuse me, this meeting is over and you are about to die."

Smiling; "And you say I have delusions of grandeur?"

"One last thing you should know before I leave. The woman who has a price on her head and you want to make babies with, has her finger on a pulse energy plasma weapon that is going to vaporize this compound along with your ass."

While setting his drink on a table, he scoffed; "For a female, you have a lot of nerve. Do you have anything to say before my bodyguard blows off the top of your head?"

“Charity, target this building and the surrounding compound. A full power, two kilometer wide beam should be about right. As soon as I’m on board, vaporize this asshole and everything here.”

“Are you talking to yourself?”

“Faith, a transport right about now would be nice. Nostra, the next thing you will see will be a blinding light from the energy weapon that is going to turn this place and everything here into their component molecules.”

Hope disappeared before his eyes. Nostra and his bodyguards ran out the door to the center of the compound courtyard. The last thing they seen was a blinding light. Back on board the dragon, a couple of Nostra’s ships started firing.

Faith called out on all communications channels; “Hold your fire. Your leader Nostra is dead. Stop shooting and join us in our fight against the Empire.”

The firing stopped and the image of a clean shaven middle aged man appeared on the screen. He spoke with authority and confidence; “My name is Adelfo. I am the new leader of the syndicate. Your weapon is very impressive on a fixed position target. I wonder how it would perform against an armada of several hundred warships.”

“Hey Adelfo. This is your one and only chance for you and your crews to keep breathing. Are you sure about this?”

“Lady, you are not short of confidence. Before I forget, thank you for clearing the way for my accession. You killed everyone on the ground giving me an instant promotion. Thank you for eliminating

the administrative overhead. They were a costly and worthless bunch to say the least.”

“This is Faith. I'll give you one last chance to join us or join your ancestors.”

“No Admiral or Captain Faith? Just plain Faith? Before we start shooting and making a mess of things, surrender your ship. I will guarantee your safe passage to whatever planet you wish. If you do not, my fleet will disable and board your ship. We will kill all of you and collect the reward.”

“What’s your name again? Oh yeah, Adelfo. Listen tough guy, my sisters and I find your macho posturing, ego massaging, testosterone fueled crap boring. We are sick and tired of self-appointed tyrants like you. I'll give you sixty seconds to align your fleet with us or be prepared to join your ancestors.”

Moments later, the fleet led by Adelfo started firing every weapon from every ship they had. Adelfo’s flag ship turned and fired a massive energy weapon. The dragon actually shook from the impact. The firing stopped abruptly and the monitor is displaying Adelfo’s face.

“Now that you've had a taste of our fire power; are you ready to surrender?”

Faith turned on the communications link; “Adelfo, standby for a minute. I need to talk to my crew.”

Leaving the communications line open; “Landau, what's our ships status from the attack.”

“Hull, energy, and weapons systems are all at one hundred percent. There is no damage to the ships structure. The automated repair is

working on the peripheral damage. The last impact clogged the toilet. It will be restored in a moment.”

“Thank you for your report. Hey self important tough guy. Did you hear my ships status report? This is a message to Adelfo's fleet. If you don't want to be destroyed when the shooting starts; run.”

Adelfo's image is still on the screen and someone is talking to him. When the brief conversation ended, he responded; “My lieutenant tells me we have nothing to fear from your ships energy weapon. My weapons officer has targeted your control room. It's time for you to die.”

“Hope, watch our power systems. Charity, could you chop off Adelfo's ship engines? I don't want to kill him yet. I want him to watch his fleet destroyed first. Now let's get rid of this scourge. I'm tired of looking at his greasy hair. Target his engines first.”

The battle started. Adelfo's ship aggressively moved and before it could shoot, it was cut in half long ways. It's obvious there are no survivors. There are still plenty of ships ranging from cruisers to small fighters. What the pilots of the attacking ships didn't realize is the energy from their weapons is powering the dragon's weapons and other systems.

Less than three minutes later, the battle is over. The majority of Adelfo's organization and fleet are history. When the commanders of the remaining ships realized the futility of the situation, they scattered for parts unknown.

Landau advised the women; “System status; all systems are fully operational at this time. I suggest we move out of the area so we clear the debris field.”

Before anyone could say another word; “Ladies stand by. I am picking up multiple ships on a direct course for our position.”

“Are these people stubborn, stupid or do they have a death wish.”

“Standby. I am picking up a message from the oncoming ships.”

Landau's image was frozen for a few moments; “The oncoming ships are only lightly armed. They are scavengers coming to remove the debris field. There is great value in undamaged ship components and the scrap materials.”

“What about the bodies? Whats going to happen with them?”

“Some of the scavengers are not coming for the ships materials. You don't want to know why.”

Faith spoke with the solemnest voice; “Move us out of the debris field please. Head us somewhere away from here. Anywhere is fine. I don't want to look at the carnage anymore. I'm getting sick from seeing so many bodies floating out there. I didn't realize there were so many crew members on every ship.”

Charity looked like she's about to burst into tears; “Body scavengers? Oh no.”

Landau spoke again; “The toilet is fully functional if any of you are not feeling well.”

All three women ran down the hall to the restroom because they all became violently ill. After cleaning themselves, they went to the galley/kitchen and sat at the table in total silence looking everywhere and nowhere.

While they're drinking the blue drink, Landau appeared. Hope is not welcoming him; “You appear when you're not welcome.”

“I have a rare message for the three of you. It is requested all of you all enter a dream state so the message may be delivered. It originated from your maternal grandfather.”

The women immediately went to the crew quarters, laid down and after a while, went to sleep.

The entity who spoke to them before returned; “Hello Ladies. This is foremost in your grandfathers’ mind. He is trying to communicate with me. Here is his message:

‘I was born, raised and loved by parents who were not my own kind. The loss of the love of a woman turned my soul into night. Dark thoughts and sadness became the meaning of my existence. Into the darkness of the abyss I freely went. My soul became black and cold. May I be forgiven of my years of trespass on others for I had become a weapon against what I believed was wrong and evil.

By an unknown act of fate, I became the instrument to protect the chosen one who found and recovered me from my purgatory. My love for her made it justifiable to vanquish the evil who would cause her harm. I fulfilled that mission long ago. Now her children are the chosen ones. I would without reservation give my life but I am now powerless to protect them.

Oh mighty one, protect the three chosen ones as I have protected their mother, my savior. Please let me see her daughters once more before my time comes to an end.

When my time on earth has ended, I know I am going to Shangri la where I hope to be united with my first true love again.’

I know the thoughts and dreams of your maternal grandfather will give you comfort. Sleep now and rest because there are major

challenges which lay before you. All of you will have to face challenges that will test you to the very core of your souls.”

When the women awoke, they gathered in the galley. The conversation was heavy at times. They discussed the stories and rumors they heard about Grandpa Bill. While they consumed refreshments, they unanimously agreed to see this mission to its conclusion, no matter where it leads them.

They asked Landau to locate the Sovereigns flagship. Since the Empire has no central planetary base of operations, her flagship must be the center of the Empire. The best Landau is able to do is trace an Empire ship to the Ursa Minor system. He's able to do so because it's sending a homing signal.

Faith placed the ship into trans dimensional drive and the journey from the Regulus system to the Ursa Minor system only took a few minutes. Once they arrived, their search began.

Electronically scanning the system, they found a medium sized cruiser from the Empire. It's sitting in the middle of nowhere. What they thought was a homing beacon is actually a message to the women. Faith piloted the dragon to within a thousand meters of the other ship. Charity had opened the primary gun port and targeted the possibly hostile vessel.

Faith opened the communications channel; “Hello Empire ship. I'm sure you know exactly who we are and why we're here. I know you're not going to commit suicide and fire on my ship. So it leaves me with two questions. Who are you and what are you doing here?”

A face appeared on the monitor. It's a very distinguished looking man who looks more like a diplomat than a warrior. He looked to

be around sixty, light brown skin, red hair that is turning gray and a full beard. He looks like what humans would call mulatto.

In a jovial voice; “That’s what I like, a woman who cuts to the chase. Young lady, turn off your defenses long enough for me to come over and visit with you. I am unarmed and I do not care to be blasted or reduced to my component molecules while trying to talk with all of you.”

“Why should I even think of talking to you? My sister has your ship targeted with enough fire power to vaporize it instantly. Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t blast you into oblivion?”

“Oh please young lady, you’re far too pretty and smart to have such an attitude. And please don’t shoot; this is not my ship. It’s a troop transport vessel. It happened to be available when I volunteered to meet with all of you. I’m a peace emissary who brings a gift. Oh I almost forgot; my name is Teten. I am Ambassador at Large for the Empire and I have something I know you want. I have coffee from your home world Earth.”

With the communications channel still open; “Hope, find Landau and figure out how to boil some water. Charity, turn off the intruder security; but keep your hand on the switch. If this is a trap, kill him. Teten, you can come over unarmed and alone.”

Upon arriving; “My visit has several purposes. First and foremost is to meet all of you. Faith and Charity, it’s a pleasure to meet both of you. Hope, I understand you already have a mate. It’s a shame we didn’t meet under different circumstances years ago.”

He reached for Hope’s hand and kissed it. As he released her hand; “On my home world, a women of your physique would be a

goddess. Oh my dear what could have been if things were only different.”

A few moments later, Teten and the ladies are in the galley making coffee. Sitting at the table, the conversation started.

Their guest paused for a moment while smiling at Hope before he continued; “My second reason for being here is to prove we found your home planet in what we call the ‘Terra’ system. Your planet is the blue one. The third one from that medium star.

Oh don’t panic. Our battle cruisers are too slow to get there in a hurry. We don’t have the technology to travel through trans dimensional space to the degree this ship has. We have been watching you travel around the galaxy. You have a very impressive ship.”

“Thank you. We like to think so.”

“You’re able to travel thousands of parsecs instantly. It also seems your ship has not reached its limit to the amount of energy it can absorb during an attack. It would be interesting to find out what that limit would be; if there is one.”

Hope asked; “Let’s cut to the chase. Why are you here? I’m sure it isn’t to drop off a few pounds of coffee.”

Their guest looked inside his cup and took another drink; “When we acquired this product called coffee, we didn’t know what to do with it. As a beverage, it’s really good. I must tell you, before the Empire does anything rash with your home world, we need to take a closer look at this ‘coffee’. The Sovereign may spare your home world for this product; but I wouldn’t bet on it.”

Teten adjusted himself in his chair; “You humanoids have some interesting sayings. Let me put my cards on the table. The Sovereign is grateful for what you've done with some of the annoyances of the Empire.”

“We thought the band of pirates and organized crime we encountered were agents of the Empire or at very least a loose connection.”

“Ladies, as massive and powerful as the Empire is, we cannot be everywhere and control everything. It's a question of asset management. I'm sure all of you fully understand conserving resources.

There are, correction, were some sectors of the galaxy the crime syndicate controlled for us and other areas the pirates controlled. We had some loose partnerships to keep control of everything. Those were business agreements.

Our leadership felt we would eliminate them eventually. We appreciate your taking care of those problems for us. The elimination largest organized crime syndicate in this quadrant cleared our path to control of this side of the galaxy.

The crime syndicate members who escaped your wrath will continue to cooperate with the empire or be hunted down and eliminated. The same goes for rest of the pirate groups you didn't already eliminate. It would have cost the Empire a fortune if you didn't intervene.”

Faith asked; “You must be a politician; you avoided our question. What is your message and how is this going to end.”

“The Sovereign wants you to surrender this ship and give yourselves over to the Empire. The addition of this ship will complement our newest weapon. We created what we call a planet killer. It's powered by a dark matter reactor. It has the capacity to turn any planet's organic surface matter into barren wasteland. It will burn off the atmosphere, leaving the planet completely dead. We know where your planet is and we will use the weapon on your home world Earth if you do not surrender.”

Charity and Hope are about to say something when Faith motioned for them to keep quiet; “Signal your ship to bring you back. Give us some time to think this over. We will contact you in a couple of hours.”

“Thank you ladies. I will leave you alone now to make the only obvious decision you can make. My communications system will be open when you're ready. One last thing ladies; I did not lie to embellish the facts. As Ambassador at Large, I only speak the truth.”

Teten transported back to his ship. The girls went to the galley and started examining their options. They argued about the facts as they knew them. Landau did not materialize until he was summoned.

Charity called out; “Landau, how many warships does the Empire have?”

“The Empire has tens of thousands of warships. It would be impossible to do battle with that many ships. They would scatter to every dark corner of the galaxy as soon as they seen the power of the Dragon. We could never hunt all of them down.”

The sisters are looking at each other and saying nothing. They all have the same thoughts because they knew what needs to be done. They decided to gather as much of the Empire at one location as they could. Then if possible, destroy the Empire to protect Earth and the rest of the galaxy. They returned to the control room and opened up the communications link to the Empire ship.

“Ambassador Teten, this is Faith. I would like to talk with you.”

A moment later Teten appeared on the screen; “Sorry for the inconvenient delay. I was having the crew make me some of the beverage you call coffee. One of the side effects I noticed is it stimulates you. It's a very interesting feeling to be chemically stimulated from an organic beverage.”

“Coffee does that. Now I don't know how to say this without sounding rude, but I don't believe you. You're telling me about this huge and all powerful Empire, but to date, I've seen your ship and one other starship. Oh, I have seen a woman on the monitor claiming to be the all mighty powerful Sovereign of Clovis. But honestly, I think you're trying to blow smoke up my butt.”

Teten looked off to the side like looking at a monitor. He mouthed the words; ‘blow smoke up my butt.’ His eyes opened wide and he started laughing.

“I assure you I am not ‘blowing smoke up your butt.’ You humans have some very humorous sayings. I will contact the Sovereign and let her know you are considering surrendering, but you ladies need a demonstration of absolute Empire power and authority first.

It will take some time to move the bulk of Empire's fleet to a preferred location. Let us meet at the center of the nebula in the Orion system. I know you could be there almost instantly because

of your trans dimensional drive. The starships of the Empire will take a little longer.”

Charity asked; “What happens when your ships start arriving and start a fight with us? You understand we will protect ourselves.”

“You have my word no Empire ship will start a conflict while you're waiting for the Sovereign. She has made the Planet Killer her flagship. Being so large, the ships speed is limited. It will take her several days to arrive. Now if that is all, I bid you farewell ladies.”

Charity heard a commotion in the hallway and flipped the intruder security lever from ‘safe’ to ‘intruder’. The commotion stopped, then Landau appeared.

“The dragon has absorbed eighteen beings. Should we wait for the other ship to leave before we discharge the clothing from this batch of unfortunates?”

Charity arose from her chair, walked to the hallway and examined the remains; “I'm sick and tired of throwing out nasty old clothes. Now we have helmets, uniforms and boots. Not one good cold weather jacket in the bunch.”

It took her four trips to carry all the clothing away. A couple of minutes later there's a whoosh of air and a huge pile of clothes floating in space.

Faith opened up the communications channel; “Hey Teten, we're still alive. Scan the area around my ship. The eighteen soldiers you sent over to kill us are all dead. Is this the type of treachery we can expect from the Empire?”

He appeared on the monitor; “I apologize ladies. The commander of this ship had to try and seize your vessel. If he didn't try to hijack your ship, the Sovereign would have his head on a pike. It's not personal; it's politics.”

The screen went back to an outside view. The rear of Teten's ship started glowing and disappeared in an instant.

Charity asked; “What should we do with all these weapons from the soldiers the ship absorbed?”

“Leave them in storeroom number one along with your katana and all the other weapons we've inherited. We'll be glad to have them if we need them.”

“Landau, are you here?”

“Yes I am ladies. We have some planning to do. I'm sure the Empire is going to meet us in the Orion nebula with every asset they have available. I am certain they will demonstrate the planet killer so you will surrender without a fight.”

Hope asked; “I wonder why Teten chose the Orion nebula?”

Landau offered his opinion; “Interesting question. Every space faring species knows the entire Orion system is completely uninhabited. I believe Ambassador Teten may be an ally in disguise.”

Faith told her sisters; “We need a strategy to confront and destroy the Empire. Landau, how much fire power do you think the Empire is going to bring?”

He stood motionless and expressionless for a few moments; “I'm sorry for the delay. I was communicating with the ship. To answer

your question, the Sovereign will order every asset the Empire has available to the Orion system.”

Hope asked; “Did the dragon have anything to say about this?”

“Yes. Whatever all of you decide, you will find the wisdom and courage to emerge victorious.”

“That’s it? That’s all it had to say? You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“Miss Charity, the Dragon also said; make no small plans.”

Landau suggested everyone go to the galley, have a snack and get some rest. The women followed his suggestions. While they laid on the beds, they started falling asleep almost immediately. As they are going to sleep, they sank into the beds like cocoons. Only their faces are exposed.

The last thing they remember hearing is Landau's voice talking to the Dragon; “Make sure nothing happens to them. Don't smother them. They need to breath. ... Sorry. I only wanted to make sure you knew.”

Their dreams were filled with the ship singing lullabies to them. The same songs their mother, father and maternal grandfather sang to them as children.

End of Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

When the women awoke, they met in the galley and asked each other how they slept. All of them agreed it felt like they were being held while sleeping. They spoke of how the ship sang the same lullabies to them that their parents and grandfather sang to them as children.

Charity philosophized; “Maybe it's trying to tell us we're doing this for our children. But I don't have any children; well not yet anyway. I hope to someday; if I live long enough.”

Faith seen where this line of thought is going so she redirected the conversation; “We know earth is a target of the Empire. We've seen some of what they're capable of. This cannot be allowed to continue here or anywhere. So what can we do?”

The sisters know the dragon can absorb energy from enemy weapons fire and reuse it. The unknowns are how many enemy vessels will there be? Will they have enough energy to destroy the Empire fleet that shows up? Does the primary weapon have the distance to attack a faraway ship?

Landau gave some of the answers; “Ladies remember, the number of enemy ships could number in the tens of thousands. There will be everything from battle cruisers to supply ships to individual fighters. The Empire fleet will span far beyond what you will be able to see.

The energy question is an interesting one. Yes and no is the correct answer. Yes you will have enough power. But the fleet will scatter as soon as they realize the battle is futile. Self preservation is compelling for any species. The loyal ships will fight to the death.

We may only hope many of their ships are not completely loyal to the Empire. I feel many will arrive and not participate, making the wise choice to live. Others may mutiny by refusing to show up. Only time will tell.”

“We can hope only a few arrive for their demise.”

“Young Charity; you have the mind of a warrior. Our trans dimensional drive is powered by proton/anti-proton annihilation.”

“Huh?”

“Matter colliding with anti-matter. You will need to expose the Planet Killers dark matter reactor. Once exposed, Hope would aim our engines output at the Empire ship. She would then start the dragons trans dimensional drive. The engine output of energy coming in contact with the dark matter reactor would start a massive chain reaction which will rival a small super nova.

Considering how many Empire ships may be involved, the dark matter explosion will consume everything in every direction; ships, moons and planets instantly. Absolutely nothing could survive.”

Hope asked; “Landau; could the dragon survive a super nova?”

“I’m sorry; not even the dragon could survive.”

They discussed and agreed this is a suicide mission that must be seen through. The sisters asked Landau to pilot the ship to the center of the Orion nebula. When the Sovereign wants to demonstrate the power of the planet killer, they can be assured no innocent beings will be harmed.

They arrived at the center of the Orion nebula and waited. Time went by while the sisters waited for the Empire. Ship by ship of the

Empire fleet started arriving. While watching the ships arrive, the women would pass the time by looking at the photos and text messages they had stored on their cellphones.

Landau is looking at the pictures Faith and Hope have. They told him the names of their husbands and children. He commented they looked very happy in the pictures.

“Everything I had was lost when my original ship was destroyed. All I have left of my loved ones are memories. Charity; what pictures of your family do you have to show me?”

“I don’t have many photos of my family. This is a recent photo of our father. His name is Karl, we call him dad. This is our mother, her name is Nancy, we call her mom. I have some pictures of grandpa here somewhere. I’ve been living with him for over ten years now. He’s not our biological grandfather. Our mother met him in the hospital. They adopted each other as father and daughter when he was thirty six and she was eighteen.”

She continued flipping thru the photos until; “Here they are. As you see, Grandpa is over six feet tall. With shoes on, he’s just over six feet three. You can see how tall grandpa is compared to our mom. She’s a fraction over five feet tall with shoes and socks on, and I’m shorter than her. I’m just under five feet tall with thick socks and shoes on. Here’s one of grandpa sitting on the roof daydreaming. Here’s a great close up of grandpa posing for the camera. He was sitting across from me at our kitchen table. We used to sit and talk about everything.”

Landau is motionless until Charity switched to the next picture; “Stop, go back. I want to see the close-up photo of your grandfather again.”

This did not go unnoticed by the others. They came over to see what has his attention.

“Your grandfather is a descendant of my people. He is a direct descendant of the Anya Moog Warrior Caste who landed on your planet decades ago. It's the eyes; he has the warrior caste eyes.”

“Are you sure?”

“We thought our DNA was very similar to yours; this photo proves it. No wonder the Sovereign is so concerned. She fears the prophecy of the three warriors with help of the Anya Moog Warrior Caste destroying the Empire. Please tell me about your grandfather.”

The sisters told their host everything they knew and what they heard about their grandfather from their mother and biological grandmother. They told Landau about the rumors and their own experiences with him. Landau's face suddenly went without expression for a moment, then he smiled.

“Thank you ladies. I updated the dragon with all the information you've given me. The Empire has been hunting down and killing Anya Moog Warrior Caste survivors for almost a thousand years. It's a shame your grandfather never had any descendants. Now we need to prepare for the arrival of the Sovereign.”

Before the planet killer arrived, they turned on the stealth cloud. From the outside, the dragon looks like a rolling cloud of thick black liquid smoke. Inside is clear, but a dampening field exists. The women watch the various ships arrive with the dragons sensors. While they're waiting, several ships tried to transport bombs on-board the dragon.

With the intruder defense activated, non-organic material (bombs, explosives, anything) are reflected back to where they originated. Empire ships exploded from time to time while the women are waiting for the Sovereign to arrive.

Then it happened, they could see a massive ship arriving. The ship has to be the planet killer with the Sovereign on board.

Her face appeared on the monitor; “Hello again ladies. I'm surprised to see all of you still breathing. Did you ever find a box for the dwarf to stand on? Who's that standing there?”

“You are incorrect Sovereign. Miss Charity is not a dwarf. She happens to be vertically challenged. To answer your non-rude question; I am Landau of the Anya-Moog warrior caste.”

Chuckling; “I thought the Empire exterminated the warrior caste part of your race decades ago. Your caste believed they would be the key for the three warriors to destroy the Empire. There you are, alone and with three worthless prissy women from a soon to be dead planet; you're pathetic.”

“It seems the Empire's plan to eradicate my caste has failed. It also seems members of the warrior caste merged with humans. The prophecy is alive and well Sovereign. I hope it comes to fruition shortly.”

Faith added; “Sovereign, you may have noticed several of your ships were destroyed by their own treachery. I would like to turn off my stealth cloud so we could better see each other. Could I have your assurance neither of us is going to get stupid? Or should I have my youngest sister cut a few of your dreadnought class battleships in half to show you how serious we are.”

Sovereign's reply shocked everyone, including her commanders; "Ladies, I am not a war monger. Let me prove it to you by showing how sincere I am. Could I have your assurance if I transport to your ship, I will not be molested and have safe return passage? That way we may meet face to face."

The sisters looked at each other and reluctantly agreed to let their guest arrive and talk. Sovereign transported to the control room; she appears to be unarmed. Charity had gone to storeroom #1 to retrieve one of the alien weapons.

While there, Landau informed her energy weapons will not work on board the dragon because of an internal dampening field. She grabbed the katana she received from the warriors on Naha and returned to the control room.

When the Sovereign arrived, her hands went straight for Landau's throat. They passed through him; "You're only a hologram! It seems the Empire really did succeed in exterminating the Anya-Moog Warrior Caste. The few that are still alive are no threat anymore. Galactic scavengers at best.

The Anya-Moog Warrior Caste were a self important pathetic group of psychopathic nomads bent on killing anyone who angers them. Now it seems even a computer generated hologram like you clings on to the prophecy of the three warriors. You couldn't be more pathetic if you were still alive."

Sovereign turned and looked at the three women; "Now that we are all together, I think introductions are in order. Let's see if my intelligence reports are correct. You are Faith the eldest and obviously the tallest. I didn't picture you being so malnourished.

You are Hope the roundest and obviously the most well fed. You should stop eating your sisters food. It's also obvious you have never missed a meal. And that leaves the vertically challenged Charity with the mouth that is used too much.”

Sovereign walked around the control room and sat on one of the seats like it's her throne; “Ladies, let’s end the niceties shall we? To keep things casual, I will address you by your names and I will allow you the privilege of addressing me by my birth name. You may call me Chloe.”

She arose from the chair and stood next to Hope; “I'm here on a mission of good will. First off, thank you for getting rid of Ceylon, along with most of his pirates and the majority of Nostra’s crime organization. The Empire didn’t have the resources to eliminate them in a timely fashion. So we had to make some arrangements and unwelcome partnerships.

Now let’s get down to business. Surrender this ship you call the Dragon. I can assure all of you will be executed in the most efficient and painless manner anyone could ask for.”

Faith asked; “What about our home planet Earth? No one there ever did anything to you?”

Sovereign laughed and with a smile in her voice; “Let me demonstrate the power of my ship.”

She spoke into what looked like a locket around her neck; “Commence the demonstration.”

There's a glowing emitter on the bottom center of her vessel. Suddenly, there's a beam of energy coming out of the emitter. It made contact with a nearby small planet. The atmosphere was

ignited. The surface looked like the sulfur on a match head burning. Within a few seconds, the fire went out and the planet looks like it's coated with dark brown dirt.

In a confident cocky voice; “Unfortunately this planet was uninhabited by intelligent life; only primordial slime. This is the fate in store for your precious planet earth in the Terra system if you do not surrender your ship to me right this instant.”

Hope is standing next to the Sovereign; “Like we could really believe anything you would say. Get off my ship Chloe!”

Sovereign pulled a weapon she had concealed in her sleeve and held it against Hope’s head.

“Give me this ship or this fat round one dies right now!”

Charity charged the Sovereign with her katana. The Sovereign tried to fire the weapon, nothing happened. She jumped out of the way of Charity’s attack and only her arm was cut. She yelled into her communicator; “Get me out of here, now!”

She disappeared instantly.

Charity is breathing heavy. It was very obvious the adrenaline is flowing; “Shit! I only winged the bitch. I was trying to kill her but I had to stop before hurting you.”

Suddenly there are soldiers appearing everywhere. They are trying to use their energy weapons without success. Charity dropped her katana and flipped the anti-intruder lever. The soldiers vaporized before her eyes.

The sisters spent the next ten minutes picking up weapons and putting them in storeroom #1. Then loading the clothing from newly departed into the airlock.

Once again Charity noted; “Doesn't anyone dress for cold weather? Not a winter coat in the bunch.”

Moments after the clothes were ejected into the vacuum of space, it became obvious to the Sovereign her plan to take the ship by force has failed; the war started. Charity turned on the auto targeting and firing systems for the twelve pulse energy plasma weapons. Each of the dragons weapons are firing so fast, it looked like a huge hail storm outside. Ships are being destroyed at such a rate, it would be impossible to keep track.

Landau made Charity aware that the Planet Killer is being positioned to fire at the dragon. She aimed the main weapon at the positioning ship, turned the power to maximum and pulled the trigger.

The Planet Killer is actually being pushed away from the dragon by the force of the energy weapon. Charity is burning a hole in the Empire ship at least a half mile wide and getting deeper by the second. Suddenly, everything went dark. The weapons fire stopped, the dragon listed and turned with its backside facing the Planet Killer. Both ships looked dead in space.

Charity sat at the controls sweating profusely and breathing rapidly. Faith came over using the light from her cell phone to remove Charity's fingers from the firing control.

“What happened? I could have cut the ship in half!”

“Hope pulled the main switch in the power room. We came up with a plan. Make the dragon look disabled and lull the Empire fleet into thinking we're dead in space. They'll come for the capture or kill. As soon as they get close enough to board the ship, Hope will reconnect the power. I'll start the trans dimensional drive and create the supernova. It will be so long to the Sovereign and the Clovis Empire.”

The sisters noticed all the enemy weapons ceased fire, it's dead quiet. The only sound they could hear is their own breathing.

“I like your plans, there's only one problem. The dragon can't survive a supernova.”

Faith looked at her youngest sister, before she could speak; the monitor turned on. It's the Sovereign; “Hello ladies. My sensors show you're now on emergency reserve power. It seems your starship is not indestructible after all. Abandon ship and I will kill you all swiftly. Don't surrender and I will bring my fleet to finish your destruction. What's it going to be ladies?”

Faith and Charity ignored the Sovereign and went to the power room to be with Hope. They set their cell phones on the control panel for illumination.

Hope sounds determined; “The dragon has the small transport shuttle that brought us here. You two take that home while I start the trans dimensional drive.”

The sisters started arguing who's going to stay behind and purge the Empire from the galaxy. It was starting to get physical when Hope inadvertently pushed the Master Primary Power switch back in place.

They all said in unison; “Now look at what you've done.”

They left the power room and are still arguing as they entered the control room.

“That settles it, you two are getting into the shuttle. Landau; Faith and Charity are going to use the shuttle to escape back home.”

Landau appeared; “The shuttle will not clear the supernova you are about to create.”

The women looked at each other with solemn looks. Charity spoke first; “The trans dimensional drive output is aimed at the Planet Killers dark matter reactor.”

On the monitor, they're watching the Empire fleet moving away from the drifting Planet Killer and moving towards them for optimum firing positions to attack the dragon.

Charity has her hand on the drive ignition button when the Sovereign appeared on the monitor; “Are all of you insane? You can't possibly think you can survive if you start your engines. Who do you think you are?”

“I am Faith. We are daughters of Nancy and Karl Hess.”

“I am Hope. We are also the granddaughters of William Jefferson Cann; a direct descendant of the Anya-Moog Warrior Caste.”

In the cockiest of voice; “Who am I? I'm Charity Hess. The youngest daughter of Nancy and Karl. You ask me who do I think I am? God sent me. I'm beyond your worst nightmare. I'm the left hand of god and the right hand of vengeance. I am death incarnate. And I'm going to be the last living thing you will ever see; bitch.”

Each of the women placed their right hand atop the drive actuator lever.

Charity spoke; “I am my sisters protector. I will gladly avenge those who seek to destroy my sisters. Hope, Faith; I love you both, goodbye.”

The last sound they heard was the sovereign screaming an elongated; “No!!!!!!!!!!!!”

In unison, they pressed the lever and the room instantly went blinding white.

The resulting super nova instantly consumed everything in every direction. A large portion of the Empire and its dark servants were reduced to their component molecules instantly. The event horizon extended at the speed of light for a over 11 hours before it rescinded. (about the width of our solar system)

End of Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

The women woke up laying on the control room floor. They have no idea how they got there or how long they've been unconscious. Upon looking around, they see the very hatch they originally came thru to enter the ship. They are trying to locate their cellphones to see what the date is.

Charity is first; “We’re not dead. ... WE’RE NOT DEAD!”

Faith looked at her cellphone; “It’s Thursday! It’s only been four days?”

Hope followed; “No way! Someone is playing games with us. We were gone for weeks.”

Landau appeared; “This mission is over. For your own safety, gather your things. You must leave the dragon immediately; please hurry.”

“Landau, according to our cell phones, we’ve only been gone for a few days. What happened?”

“When you started the trans dimensional drive, the Dragon's output reached the Sovereigns ships exposed core. Less than a microsecond later, the dragon transported itself and all of you back here, where your mission began. The dragon can fold time as well as space. Now you must leave immediately.”

“What's the rush?”

“Your military noticed the dragon’s arrival. I do not wish to have conflict with your fragile fossil fuel powered aircraft because they would not survive.

Also the population of your planet could never accept there is extraterrestrial life. Your worlds religions and societies would collapse.”

The women gathered everything and exited the dragon. While they're sitting on the outcropping gathering their thoughts, they heard what sounded like a huge rock sliding over another rock. They looked up and the access hole is gone. There is no sign it ever existed.

They felt the mountain rumble, looked up and seen the dragon in full stealth mode. It's a massive black cloud looking like rolling liquid black smoke. It traveled straight up. Within seconds it's nothing more than a black dot in the morning sky, then gone.

“At least we have the bracelets as proof.”

Faith held up her arm. The bracelet turned to powder and blew away with the wind. The same thing happened to the other sisters. Confusion and self-doubt set in. They decided to leave and go back to the house they borrowed. While in route, they are silent. All of them are deeply involved in their own thoughts.

While hiking back to the house, they seen at least a dozen military aircraft buzzing the area where they had left the dragon's shuttle craft.

They reached the house mid-morning and dropped off their gear. Faith and Hope called their husbands to let them know they're fine. The women had enough of New Mexico and are heading home early tomorrow morning. Charity called Grandpa to see if he's okay. The answer to her query came as a surprise.

“You have no idea how glad I'm you called. I've had some of the strangest dreams of my life the last few nights. When you come home, you can tell me all about your vacation and I'll tell you about my dreams. I'm writing them down so I won't forget them. I know it's a long drive back from Los Alamos; so how has your latest adventure vacation been so far?”

Charity's voice started breaking; “Grandpa, I can't begin to tell you what we've seen and done.”

She started crying openly; “Grandpa, we met the dragon and so much more. I'm sorry. I can't talk about it right now.”

“Wow, that must have been one hell of a vacation. Try to relax and enjoy yourselves. We can talk when you come home, if and when you're ready.”

With the phone calls to home out of the way, the women sat at the kitchen table in silence looking at each other. Faith is the first to get up and head towards the bathroom. Hope heard the shower running and called out to hurry and not use all the hot water. When the two elder sisters were finished, they had to assure Charity there is plenty of hot water for her.

About lunchtime, they left the house without saying another word about recent events. They went directly into town and found a restaurant that serves adult beverages along with hot food. They consumed large quantities of both. With the tongues of the sisters becoming loose, the patrons surrounding their table are listening to the sister's conversations.

They started comparing experiences when a slightly inebriated Faith; “Well I can say I was able to pilot a starship”

A somewhat more inebriated Hope followed; “First it was the vampire sand that scared the hell out of me. When Nostra's bodyguard had a gun to my head. I was praying you would get me out of there before he killed me.”

Charity has had too much to drink; “Faith had her finger on the transport button the whole time you were down there. You handled yourself like a pro. I kept my hand off the firing controls so I didn't slip. Once you were back, bye bye Nostra and your compound!”

Faith looked straight into her youngest sisters eyes; “When the Sovereign asked who do we think we are, how did you come up with ‘god sent me.’ You're not even slightly religious!”

Hope parroted her younger sisters statement; “I'm Charity Hess. The youngest daughter of Nancy and Karl. You ask me who do I think I am? God sent me. I'm beyond your worst nightmare. I am the left hand of god and the right hand of vengeance. I am death incarnate. And I'm going to be the last living thing you will ever see; bitch.

I never in my wildest imagination would have thought those words would ever come out of your mouth. What possessed you to say all that?”

Charity took another drink of her third adult beverage; “I was thinking of what would grandpa say and the words just came out. They seemed so right at the time.”

Faith had set her drink down and is twisting the glass with her fingers; “You must admit it was a hell of a sight; all those ships on fire in the Regulus system. There must have been hundreds and hundreds of burning hulks floating all around us.”

The adult beverage fueled exuberant conversation was replaced with silence and the wide eyed looks of excitement are replaced with looks of sadness. Charity ordered another round of drinks and the sisters became silent.

After the fourth round of drinks arrived, they all sat staring into the glasses. Charity started the final conversation. The sound of her voice is filled with remorse and sadness became more prevalent.

“How many do you think there were? Dead ones I mean. I started with killing with a single pirate on Naha. Then there was the pirate fleet. But that don’t really count because the computer system did the aiming. I only pulled the trigger. Now the pirate command ship, that was me from start to its fiery finish. When I close my eyes, I can see that ship on fire clearly. I can see the bodies being blown out of the ship. Some of them were on fire while gasping for air. After a few moments, they stopped moving.”

Hope sees the dark path this is going; “You think that was something; how about when the Sovereign Chloe called me 'the round one?' Or when she put a bounty on your head? That was really something.”

The restaurant is dead quite with the patrons listening to the sisters conversation. An elderly couple walked over and asked them if they are science fiction writers plotting a story or preparing to make a movie. Faith replied telling the old couple they're novice writers working on a science fiction novel. Hope added they had been hiking in the mountains for inspiration.

Charity finished by telling her sisters; “I think we've had a little too much to drink and became a little too loud.”

“I think our little sister is wrapped a little too tight.”

“You have no idea how tightly wrapped I am right now. I'm doing everything I can to hold it together. The realization of what we did is sinking in. If I wasn't so drunk, I'd be shaking like a leaf. ”

The sisters ended their lunch and returned to the house where they didn't talk. One by one the women wound up outside on the deck, looking at the mountain where they had the adventure of a lifetime. They spoke very little the rest of the afternoon.

That evening, the women went to town for a light dinner and no adult beverages. They returned to the house where they prepared for an early start tomorrow. They agreed to drive straight through to Kansas City.

The following day while driving, they decided never to tell anyone about their time in New Mexico. If they did, at minimum their careers would be over. Possibly even locked up for being insane.

As the sisters are nearing the Missouri boarder, Faith called her mother Nancy; “Hi mom, it's me. --- The vacation was out of this world; literally. --- Mom, I need a big favor. Could you go and pick up my children and keep them at your place tonight? --- I have very adult plans for Ryan when I get back. --- Thanks mom; bye.”

Hope called her mother next; “Hi Mom. Since you're going to pick up Faith's children, could you watch Timothy and Laura too? --- Yes, Faith is next to me. --- No. The vacation was very stressful and I really want to be alone with Ben tonight. --- Yes mom. I'm sure Faith wants to be with Ryan the second she gets through the door also.”

Nancy is talking up a storm, being a typical mother; “Mom please wait a minute. We had a vacation that stirred every emotion we have down to our soul. We want to be consenting adults with our

husbands and show them how much we missed them. --- No mom. I'm not blowing smoke. --- You will? --- Oh thanks' mom. I owe you and dad big time.”

Faith and Hope called their husbands and told them their parents are coming over to pick up the children for the night. They are not to go anywhere except to get a bottle of wine and close the curtains. They asked Charity what is she going to do when she gets back.

In a passive-aggressive manor; “I’m going to stop, get a bottle of wine and some cheese. I don't dare buy a bottle of scotch. The way I feel, I'd drink the whole bottle. Then I’m going home to shower, drink some wine and talk to grandpa. Maybe if I cry enough tears and scrub hard enough, I can wash all the blood off my hands. Maybe then I can get rid of this disgusting feeling I have.”

Her sisters tried to talk Charity out of her extremely down mood, but nothing worked. The first stop is Faith’s home. Her husband is waiting out front to help with her luggage.

When they met behind the car, her husband asked; “How was your hiking trip in New Mexico; boring?”

She started crying and hugged him for all she's worth while smothering him with hugs and kisses.

“Honey, there was a time I thought I would never see you again. Let’s go inside and close the curtains. I missed you so much.”

She rapidly walked into her house without looking back. Ryan has the most puzzled look on his face while watching his wife walk away without saying goodbye to her sisters.

“I’ve never seen Faith like this. For her not to say ‘good bye’, you ladies must have had one hell of a vacation.”

“Many life changing events happened to us. Be gentle and give her time. Now get inside. She’s probably waiting for you in the bedroom. Come on Charity, I want to go home.”

The remaining two sisters drove off without saying another word. In their minds, nothing needed to be said. The scene at Hope’s home is somewhat different. When they pulled up, there’s no Ben. Both sisters exited the car and Hope removed her luggage from the trunk. They both walked to the entrance, where Hope opened the door.

“I’m home Ben. Are you here?”

A voice from another room came through; “I’m in the kitchen dear. Your parents have the children.”

Hope bolted in the direction of her husband’s voice. Moments later, Charity heard sounds of kissing, moaning and the sound of shoes hitting the floor.

She yelled out; “I brought your suitcases in. I’ll leave them in the living room and lock the door on my way out.”

She heard a commotion and her two hosts came in from the kitchen. Ben is shoe-less, shirtless and holding up his pants. Hope came in wearing only her underwear and her hair looks like it exploded.

She has an embarrassed smile on her face; “I’m not going to say goodbye to you ever again. I’ll see you later sis.”

“Ben, take good care of my sister. Hope; if you’re able to walk tomorrow, let’s get together for breakfast. I’ll lock your door on my way out.”

As Charity is exiting; “Tomorrow for breakfast? We’ll see. I’ll call you later.”

She smiled; “If you’re able to walk by tomorrow morning, let’s meet at the Parkway at eight o’clock for breakfast. Call Faith. I’ll call mom and dad so they can bring the children.”

Charity shut the door and has a grin on her face as she entered her car and drove off. On the way home, she stopped at an upscale market and purchased a bottle of really good wine and a high end cheese sampler platter with cut vegetables.

Arriving at the apartment, she found a note; “Don’t worry about me. Your dad called and said your mom is stressing out with all the children. He’s coming over to pick me up. I’m staying overnight with your mom and dad to help out. Enjoy your evening without me and take advantage of it. I’ll see you tomorrow for breakfast. Love Grandpa.”

Charity called downstairs to the restaurant and ordered a chicken salad to go. She asked the manager on duty to deliver it upstairs. She didn’t want to go downstairs and get involved with anything that may involve business.

A few minutes later the doorbell rang. She walked downstairs; it’s Michael Webb Junior holding a carryout bag from the restaurant. When Charity opened the door; “My parents and I were in the restaurant when your dinner was ready. I thought I would drop it off and see how the vacation went.”

She changed her posture to one of annoyance and her voice matched her posture; “Your mom’s house was wonderful and we didn’t trash it. We left it exactly as we found it. The New Mexico Mountains are beautiful. I can’t find the words to describe my vacation that would not have me committed to an asylum. I’m super stressed out. I want to be alone and chill out tonight.”

Michael’s eyes are wide with surprise; “Here’s your dinner. I wanted to let you know I’m going to be working full time with my dad now. But I’ll still be around if you need me to fix anything in your studio.”

He stood there staring at her with the look of indecision on his face, like he wants to say something.

“Michael, go home. I have my dinner. I have some wine, cheese and an old movie waiting for me upstairs.”

“Miss Charity, I don’t know how to say this; I met this girl and she means the world to me.”

“Is she around your age and pretty?”

“Yes. That’s why I wanted to tell you I ….”

Charity cut him off in mid thought; “Shush! There are some things better left unsaid. I’d like to meet this girl someday and I’ll be your wedding photographer for free. Good night Michael.”

“Thank you. Goodnight Miss Charity.”

She returned upstairs, had dinner with a little wine. Since this is one of the very few times grandpa isn’t going to be home tonight, she walked to the laundry room and striped down to her birthday suit, put her clothes in the hamper and proceeded to shower.

While there, the flashbacks started. First it's the vampire sand. Then the look of shock on the face of the pirate when the knife entered his throat. His eyes were wide as she watched the life leaving him before he fell face first to the ground.

Then the main pirate ship being cut in half leaving only a burning skeletal hulk that only stopped burning when the oxygen was depleted. She could see the thousands of bodies floating in space grasping for air before they became lifeless. Some of the bodies floated so close, she could see the frozen eyes staring at her. Charity knew it was her actions that caused all those deaths.

The visions cleared and she became aware of the voice in her head she's heard before; "My time with you is short. You have every right to feel the way you do; but do not mourn the deaths of the wicked. Be content your actions will save countless trillions of sentient beings from the tyranny of the Empire."

"I feel so different, so wrong. How do I live with myself?"

"You are stronger than you know. I will be with you always. Your water is getting cold."

Charity opened her eyes to find herself in the fetal position on the shower floor and the water hitting her is getting colder. She exited and dried herself. Being alone, she walked the wet towel into the utility/laundry room at the rear of the apartment.

Then it was off to grandpa's bedroom to find his black silk kimono and put it on. Into the kitchen, grab the cheese and wine; off to the living room for a movie. She indulged herself with a half platter of cheese and an entire bottle of wine while watching Casablanca.

Around midnight, a full bladder woke her up along with the noise of an infomercial. Time to take care of business and go to bed.

End of Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

The following morning, Charity woke up a little after five as always. This time she realized it wasn't grandpa who woke her, it's her own built in alarm clock. She started the coffee and is completely dressed before realizing it's Saturday morning. She poured two cups of coffee and walked upstairs to the roof.

She started talking to herself; "Here I am, alone with two cups of coffee. Grandpa you were right, old habits are hard to break."

She sat on the old bench her grandfather had a contractor construct long ago. She started to imagine all the love and conversations that must have taken place on this bench over the years. Thinking of all the wonderful conversations she had with grandpa here put a smile on her face. After coffee, she went to the fitness center for her daily workout.

The staff asked where Bill is this morning; "Grandpa won't be coming in today. He's at my parents' house helping watch my four nieces and nephews. I'll make sure he makes it in tomorrow."

She completed her routines, showered and returned home. It was still too early for breakfast because everyone is to meet at eight. She started reading the newspaper when the doorbell rang and the phone rang immediately after.

"Hello?"

"It's me Faith. Hope is down here too. Buzz us in."

She buzzed in her sisters. They came upstairs without their husbands.

Faith and Hope looked at each other, then at their sister. Hope spoke first; “How were you last night?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Hope called me last night. Both of our husbands passed out a little while after we came home. Typical men; give it to them and they pass out. I went to shower and that’s when the flashbacks started.

I seen bodies floating in space and starships on fire, then the entity spoke to me. I woke up on the shower floor when the hot water ran out. The exact same thing happened to Hope. We wanted to know if that happened to you too.”

“I broke down crying in the shower. First it was the pirate I killed on Naha, then the vampire sand. There was the pirate ship being cut in half, Nostra and his group and finally the Empire. I heard the entity talk to me too. The last thing it said was; your water is getting cold.”

Faith asked; “Did the entity say it would be with you always?”

“Yes it did, but understand what it meant.”

Faith looked at her youngest sister with a coy smile; “I think you know. It's in our heads.”

Hope asked; “How did you feel when you woke up? Other than wet and cold I mean.”

“I felt at peace with the universe. It's like everything in my life has purpose and is in place.”

Faith asked; “No remorse?”

“When I first came home, I was seriously questioning my reason for existing. I was having some dark thoughts. Now, no remorse at all. Other than missing Grandpa, I feel absolutely wonderful.”

“That’s exactly the way Faith and I both feel. What we did was for the good of earth, everyone and every sentient being in the galaxy.”

“Damn, all this time I thought it was the wine and cheese I had last night. Speaking of euphoria; where are your satisfied husbands?”

“I have Ryan picking up Laura and Timmy.”

“Ben is picking up Jerry and Britney. Mom and Dad are bringing Grandpa. Faith and I knew it would be easier to talk without everyone asking questions and wondering about our sanity.”

The sisters talked for a while reflecting on the vacation turned mission because it felt so real. The hardest part was accepting whether or not it all really happened or only a common dream because there's no evidence. The doorbell rang and it's grandpa on the intercom asking if they are stealing all his fine china.

Faith answered through the intercom; “No grandpa. You don’t own any china; fine or otherwise. Your three granddaughters are searching your pantry for those cake cookies you like, hahahaha. We’re on our way downstairs right now.”

Everyone is already seated in the back dining room by the time Bill and his three granddaughters arrived. The children didn’t even bother to say ‘hi’ to their mothers. They're all trying to tell their mothers about grandpa staying overnight and telling stories about Japanese Samurai Warriors and Shoguns.

One of the children is very talkative; “Great Grandpa told us a story about Grandma being a Samurai and protecting him from a Shogun Leader.”

Nancy looked embarrassed and wanted to change the subject; “I can’t remember the last time my three daughters looked this happy. You girls must have had one heck of a vacation to come back like this. I didn’t think the mountains of New Mexico could have such a life changing effect on all of you. Are you thinking of going back next year?”

Instantly and with great emotion in their voices, the sisters replied in aggressive unison; “No!”

“Well don’t bite my head off for asking a simple question.”

Charity is sitting at the opposite end of the table next to Grandpa; “Mom, Dad, everyone, let me explain. We had experiences on this vacation that will last us a lifetime. At least for now, we want to keep those memories to ourselves. Since we’re all family here, I’m asking everyone to respect our wishes please.”

Everyone sat in silence, Bill wanted to get a conversation going; “I don’t think anyone here will violate your wishes. Now with that said; what do you girls have planned for next year? Are you planning a trip to some country at war in the Middle East?”

Everyone started laughing and started eating their breakfasts. The great grandchildren loved repeating the stories Great Grandpa Bill told them. By the time the meals were finished, everyone is satisfied and content. As everyone's leaving, Nancy cornered her father outside.

“You know dad, you really didn’t need to tell your great grandchildren my dream of being a female samurai. I thought you forgot about that dream years ago.”

Bill hugged his daughter; “That is only one of the wonderful memories I have about you. When I’m gone, that story will live on with your grandchildren.”

Faith and Hope had walked over to see what their mother is talking to grandpa about and are listening to their conversation.

Faith asked; “You didn’t tell my children the tampon story did you?”

Hope added; “Oh my god, my children will be in therapy for years; hahahaha.”

“Oh gosh no. I only told stories about ordinary people who were by no choice of their own transformed into heroes along with stories of good vs evil.”

He paused for a moment.

“I told them stories about everyday people who had a destiny. When their destiny was filled, they returned home to their families and lived their normal lives. Those are the stories I told your children. Now all of you can go home and enjoy your Saturday.”

Everyone said their goodbye’s and left for their homes.

Charity is looking at Bill; “I missed you grandpa. Let’s go home.”

They went upstairs and sat at the kitchen table, not saying a word to each other for a several moments. Bill is looking at Charity while she’s nervously looking around the room.

When she stopped, their eyes met; “Grandpa, I have done and seen things I can’t talk about. I thought I could talk to you because you would understand because you’ve been there. But the words just won’t come out.”

He put his old wrinkled hands on hers; “Yes, I’ve been in your shoes many times before. I have done horrible things that continue to haunt me in my dreams. I couldn’t or wouldn’t talk about them to anyone. I kept everything inside because my actions were too horrible for me to even speak.

One evening, shortly after having the metal plate put in my head, my psychologist gave me something to help me talk. I opened up my soul and your mother heard the most horrible things I had done. When the nurse in the room became violently ill, your mother took her place. Then I had a grand mal seizure. She stayed and held me until I was clear from danger. That is the type woman your mother is.”

“Mom never told us the details about what you said, the seizure or holding you. Mom only said she wheeled you back to your room and left.”

“Your mother is stronger than you realize. You’re stronger than you realize also. When you want to talk, I’ll listen if I’m still here. Somehow, I think some entity may have helped you a little. Besides, I turned seventy-five on my last birthday. I may not be around too much longer.”

“Oh stop that kind of talk. I’m getting ready to start planning your centennial birthday party.”

“Please don’t. I have this feeling you’re going to be too busy with your own family by then. Your wedding, baby showers and you’re children’s educations will occupy your time.”

“Grandpa, you’re a real piece of work.”

She spent the balance of the morning catching up on the financial matters regarding the LLC. Bill walked to the park and watched the young people enjoy themselves. While sitting on a bench, he fell asleep. The dreams he’s having are quite different. When he returned to the apartment, he asked Charity if everything financial is in order.

“Everything is fine grandpa. The LLC is well in the black. All the businesses are in the black and nobody is behind on the rent. Linda moved to Florida, so the other apartment is vacant now. I’m having our restoration company update and decorate it. When that’s finished, I thought we could move over there. Then we can have this apartment updated and decorated.”

“That’s a wonderful plan. Your great aunt Minori had both places rehabbed about forty years ago just before I moved in. Then it was redecorated right before Susan moved in. That was ten or fifteen years ago.”

Charity tried to discuss colors and textures. Bill smiled and agreed to whatever she said.

“I want you to be a partner in the choices I’m making for our home. Agreeing with everything I say doesn’t help the process.”

“I’m sorry. I’m an old man. I put all my trust in you to make the right decisions. Now if you will excuse me, I’m going to meet someone downstairs and watch a movie in our theater.”

“Are you going to see the woman you met in the restaurant a couple of weeks ago?”

With a sheepish grin on his face; “Misses Cooke? Yes I am.”

“Are you having wicked thoughts about that woman?”

“Yes I am and I’m sure she’s having them about me. Besides, she’s been a widow for over ten years now. I’m sure with her being slightly older than me, she can’t get pregnant. I don’t believe I said that.”

Laughing; “Have a good time. I presume it’s going to be her place?”

“Absolutely. I wouldn’t think of asking you to leave your home.”

“It’s our home. I can always sleep in the other apartment if I need to. It’s furnished so the only thing I would need is a change of clothes and a toothbrush. Now go and enjoy yourself. Will I see you later tonight or tomorrow morning?”

“One or the other mommy. And I promise I will look both ways before I cross any street.”

She hit her grandfather with her smile that could melt any man’s heart; “Please call me and let me know you’re alright. You know I worry about you because of the heart attack.”

Smiling; “I’ll call you afterwards and let you know if I’m staying overnight.”

“Grandpa; that didn’t come out right.”

Bill became red-faced; “No it didn’t. I’m going now. Let’s just say I’ll call you later.”

He went downstairs to be with the widow Misses Cooke. Charity is watching through the window with a smile on her face as Bill welcomed his date with a kiss in front of the theater. The woman looks very attractive. She didn't look a day over 65. They disappeared from view as they went inside to enjoy the movie.

Afterward, they had a light dinner and went to her condo. Around nine o'clock, Charity's phone rang. It never rang more than once because she's sitting at the kitchen table waiting for his call.

"Grandpa; are you okay? ... I don't need to know you're better than okay. ... Alright. I'll see you tomorrow. ... Call me when you get up tomorrow morning. ... I want to make sure you're alright is all. ... No I don't want to know how you slept in a different bed. ... Hahaha; you're a bad man grandpa. Goodnight."

Over the next several Saturday nights, Bill is a regular guest at Misses Cooke's condo. One Sunday after Charity and Bill had their dinner in their restaurant, he made the strangest request.

"On the way out, I need to reserve the back dining room for Saturday evening, the thirteenth. I'm having some friends over for dinner along with your Mom, Dad and your sisters. I'll reserve some suites in the hotel down the street. I don't want any of our guests drinking and driving."

"What's the occasion? Was it that damn dream again?"

"Yes. I had the same dream again. This time I was given a date and time to meet with my friends one last time. Let's make it a grand celebration."

"Who's showing up? Should I start calling people and writing invitations? I'm going to need a list of who to invite."

“There's no need for that. In the dream, an entity told me everyone will know when and where to come.”

After reserving the restaurants back dining room, they went upstairs. Charity poured each of them a glass of milk and they sat at the kitchen table.

“I had the dream also grandpa, but I never told you. It was the entity again wasn't it?”

“Yes and I understand why you never talked about what happened when you and your sisters were in New Mexico. In my heart, I know what happened. Like you, I can't put it into words.”

“What's going to happen now? You're only in your mid-seventies. You have plenty of time.”

“We will discuss that later my beautiful granddaughter. For right now, let's plan a party for the Saturday Night after next. Something tells me we're going to fill the back dining room. It's going to be a great going away party.”

Charity has a look of confusion and sadness on her face; “Maybe you're wrong. Maybe it's all wrong!”

“If it's wrong, then the Saturday night after next nobody will show. If they show, we'll have one hell of a reunion party. Can you imagine the Sunday breakfast crowd? That will be something to remember.”

They went upstairs to the roof with two cups of coffee. It's a clear early fall night.

They're looking at the stars when Bill asked; “What's running through your mind right now?”

“I’m seeing the images of thousands of starships on fire off the sword of Orion. Debris and bodies on fire from those exploded ships everywhere. That’s what I see and I’m so sad it happened.”

He put his arm around her; “You see the stars that makeup Orion; he was a warrior also. Nobody hates war more than a warrior my Onna-Bugeisha. The warrior whose life has ended is done with the pain and suffering. The warrior who survives has to live with the horror of war everyday Chiyo Sakura.”

With surprise in her voice; “Why did you call me Chiyo Sakura? How did you know?”

“For the first few months after you returned from your vacation, you talked in your sleep. As a matter of fact, you talked quite a bit. It’s a shame you couldn’t bring back your tanto or the katana the people of Naha gave you.”

“The tanto was in some pirate’s throat. I didn’t want to retrieve it. You know the samurai sword is called a katana. It’s on board the dragon. We left in such a hurry, I forgot and left it in storeroom number one.”

She looked at Bill with question on her face and pulled away; “What the hell am I telling you for? You have to think I’m as nutty as you are! Oh. That didn’t come out right. I’m sorry grandpa. I didn’t mean it the way it sounded.”

He grasped her hand and with the voice of the ages; “Two things and then we can go downstairs. One, I believe you and I believe in you. Two, I’m so tired, I just want to go to bed and get some sleep. The widow Misses Cooke wanted to take me around the world last night.”

“She did? Without giving me too much information; what did you tell her?”

“I told her I didn't want to go around the world, but she could drop me off in Chicago; hahahaha.”

Charity turned on the big smile; “You really are a nut case and I love you for it.”

They went downstairs to their apartment, to their respective bedrooms and slept like they were in the arms of the dragon. Nothing can harm them.

End of Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Time passed and the big Saturday night arrived. Around six o'clock, there's a steady stream of people walking in the Parkway restaurant looking for 'Uncle Bill'. Most of them are in their mid-fifties and older.

"Who are all these people grandpa?"

"The older ones are my very first employees. They were with me in the beginning. Most of them were teenagers when they worked in the theater. Some of them you will remember because you were here when they retired."

While introductions are being made, Charity's parents and her sisters arrived without their husbands. It's one hell of a gathering. There's no shortage of food and drink. Stories were told and sometimes tears were shed remembering the departed.

Around seven o'clock, a stunning looking woman entered the dining room. The woman looks like she's in her early forties. The room went quiet and everyone is looking in her direction.

The whispers between the female guests started; "Is that who I think it is?"

"Is that Tiffany?"

"Oh my god. She must have had some work done."

"Nobody looks like that at her age with that figure, no way."

"She must of never had any children. Look; no wedding ring."

"How old do you think she is?"

“Our birthdays are a few months apart. I know she's fifty six.”

“Look closely, there's no scars! She always was the prettiest girl in school.”

“I wonder what it's like being a supermodel at her age; bitch!”

“Is she wearing shape ware?”

“Not with that outfit. It hides nothing. She's still a bitch.”

The woman drawing all the attention is stunningly attractive. As she walked, everyone stood aside to let her pass.

She walked to where Charity and Bill are sitting; “You aged very well Uncle Bill. You look exactly like I remember you. I see you're still wearing bandannas to hide the scars on your head.”

“Tiffany Amber Crystal! I was hoping you would come. I really missed you. I was beginning to think you wouldn't make it.”

He arose, the two hugged and introductions started all over again.

“I followed your career the best I could. Whenever I seen a magazine with your picture on the cover, I bought a copy. The people at the newsstand got tired of me telling them I knew you in the beginning.”

“It's because of you and Susan, I entered the modeling industry. That was forty years ago. I never stopped thanking both of you for it.”

The two chatted for a few moments before everyone else joined in. Stories about the old days in the theater and Bill buying everyone dinner after work was one of the topics.

When the evening was drawing to a close, Bill told everyone he reserved and paid for several suites in a luxury hotel two blocks down the street.

“Just remember everyone, I paid for your rooms, not the mini-bars.”

Everyone laughed and finished asking each other ‘what happened to whom’ and exchanged contact information so they could keep in touch.

The evening is about to close when Tiffany wanted to speak with Bill and his granddaughters. The crowd also came to hear what's being said.

“I know there's been a lot of stories told about Uncle Bill tonight. Let me tell you about my very first real job. I was sixteen when my best friend in the entire world Lori Donleavy who's standing over there asked me if I wanted to work part time at the Parkway Movie Theater. I came to work that first afternoon not knowing what to expect.

That's when I first time I set eyes on your grandfather. The sight of him scared the hell out of me. The first thing I seen was the knife scar on the left side of his face. Then he was wearing a short sleeve shirt showing all the scars on his arms. I was seriously worried.

When he took off the bandanna to wipe the sweat from his face, I seen the row of scar stitches on his head. He scared me so bad, I wanted to leave right then. I thought he was a serial killer or even worst.”

In defense of her grandfather, Hope asked; “Why did you stay if he scared you so bad?”

“I was too scared to move. Uncle Bill gently grasped my right hand. The moment he touched me, I knew he is magic and I started to develop a crush on him. He led me and the others on a tour of the theater. My feelings were so serious by the next day, I was going to end my friendship with my best friend Lori if she didn’t give me his cellphone number.”

The women talked for a few more minutes. When they are about to leave, Tiffany floored everyone. She bent over and gave Bill a soul kiss. Everyone is waiting for smoke to rise.

“I hope you know I would have given or done anything you desired. With Marcy around, I didn’t have the nerve to offer myself to you.”

He sat silently with a half grin on his face; “I knew you had strong feelings for me. I never allowed the thought of a thirty six year old man to be involved with a sixteen year old girl. The thought of you being more than an employee never entered my mind. You had your entire life in front of you. Remember when I said you were under my protection?”

“I remember that like it was yesterday. If Marcy wasn’t there, I would have offered (pause) well let’s not go down that road.”

“I would have been a failure as your protector if we ever did more than shake hands or the occasional hug in front of many others.”

“You were always a gentleman with everyone who worked for you. Speaking of being my protector; would you mind if I brought up how you saved me from my own stupid mistake?”

“You and the other teenagers were the first people I hired. I told you and everyone if anyone needs help, just let me know. You made a mistake and well, it's better you tell the story.”

“The late Susan Braden helped me get started in the modeling industry. She warned me about people taking advantage of models and I thought I knew everything, so I didn't listen. I was promised the world and signed a contract.

Right afterwards I did some research. The agency I signed with turned out to be a human trafficking operation. Women are promised jobs as singers, dancers, actresses and models in foreign countries.”

Hope asked; “What was wrong with that?”

“I found out the women who left, never came back. They arrive overseas, passports are taken and they are sold as slaves for prostitution. I won't tell you what happens to them when they become pregnant or get some disease. They're never seen or heard from again.”

Bill interrupted; “The day when you called me crying, I knew you had to be in some serious trouble. Sorry for cutting you off. Please continue.”

“It was late morning when I realized I got myself involved with something really bad. I called Uncle Bill and begged for help. Calmly he asked for the name and address of this so called talent agency. I gave him the information.

Bill told me to take the battery out of my cellphone, leave it at home and pack an overnight bag. He had a taxi pick me up.

The driver told me she's taking me to a hotel and check in as Mrs William Jefferson Cann. The suite is already reserved in his name. The clerk told me my husband requested all my meals be delivered to my room. Then he called me Mrs Cann."

Hope asked; "What were you thinking?"

"I wasn't sure what to think. When I got to my suite, the bellman gave me a message; it was from Bill. Do not leave the suite until he says it's okay. The following morning when room service delivered breakfast, there's a folder with a hand written note on top that read; you're free to go home without fear. Uncle Bill."

Faith asked; "What was in the folder?"

"My contract. I woofed down breakfast and went home. A few days later, my curiosity got the best of me. I asked a friend to call my agent. If they answer, just say sorry, wrong number and hang up. My former agents phone voicemail was not accepting messages because it's full.

I went to my former agents office. There was no one to be found. I asked the other tenants in the building where the Ethan Anzu Talent Agency went.

They told me three men came in a couple of days ago and forcibly removed Ethan. Nobody had seen or heard from him since. When I asked Uncle Bill what happened, he only smiled and said to be more careful selecting an agent next time. Then he asked if the hotel suite was comfortable enough.

So I need to ask you Bill; what happened?"

"I was a angry man back then. I didn't put up with shit from anyone.

I went to the address you gave me and asked for your paperwork. Using my powers of persuasion, Ethan couldn't get your paperwork in my hand fast enough.

Then I asked him to put all the other contracts and paperwork for the other victims into a clean plastic garbage bag. When he refused, I chambered a round and placed the weapon against his temple. Ethan realized his continued breathing is in extreme jeopardy. Then he pissed on himself. I left without harming a greasy hair on his comb over head.”

“What did you do with all those other files?”

“I was going to give them to a detective friend. But first, I looked thru them to see if there was any names I recognized. Maybe some of the other girls who worked for me. Do you happened to remember a dark haired girl named Sophia?”

“I vaguely remember her. All the other girls there were blonde. She had some Italian name I think. There was a few of us there signing at the same time. We were supposed to return in two days to get our plane tickets.”

“Sophia Bonucci is her name. She was to be on the same flight to Japan as you and several other girls. Because of the last name, I thought she may be related to someone very important. My hunch was right. She's a relative to one of the big shots of the Bonucci crime family. A niece I think. I gave the files to a known associate of Organized crime boss Lorenzo Bonucci, along with Ethan's address and information of his human trafficking operation.”

“So that's why the scumbag Ethan vanished. Wow.”

“Two days later, I get a visit from a consigliere.”

Tiffany asked; “Who's that?”

Faith answered; “That's a lawyer who has only one client. A crime boss and his organization.”

“This guy wearing a custom made Italian suite rings my apartment door bell. He introduces himself as Wyatt Hagen, consigliere for Lorenzo Bonucci. His client is very grateful for the information provided regarding a dear relative.

Mister Hagen also told me if anyone tries to interfere with any of my businesses, his client would find such actions unacceptable and would take immediate action to stop the violation and prevent such intrusions in the future.”

“Has anyone ever tried to shake any of your businesses down?”

“Twice. On the same day, a city building inspector and a health inspector asked for bribes or they would shut the restaurant down.”

“What did you do?”

“I made a call to Mister Hagen's office and left a voice mail. Within an hour, the two assholes were here apologizing. Since that day, no one has ever tried to shake down any of the LLC businesses for payoffs.”

Tiffany is smiling; “I want to say in front of everyone, I know I would not be alive today if it wasn't for you Bill. Thanks seems so little for saving my life.”

“You're welcome. That's what friends are for. When your back is against the wall and nobody can help, you call a friend.”

After more conversations, Bill addressed the group; “Now I'm sorry to say this has been a long day for me. I am very fatigued.

Once again, there are plenty of hotel suites paid for. Nobody needs to drive home. Valet parking and breakfast at the hotel is included.”

Charity stood up; “Thank all of you for coming to see my grandfather. It's been a real pleasure meeting and talking with all of you. I'm honored you consider my grandfather your Uncle Bill.

But I have questions for all of you. Why are you here? Did you get an invitation in the mail? A phone call? Something? Anything?”

The crowd became almost silent as they looked and whispered to each other.

A very tall thin woman stood up; “Just in case you forgot, I am Doctor Lori Donleavy Stewart. I'm a practicing psychologist. All of us here subconsciously wrote ourselves the same note; Uncle Bill reunion, Saturday the thirteenth, six o'clock at the Parkway Restaurant. No children, no spouses.

Who, what, why? It doesn't matter to any of us. When it comes to Uncle Bill, we don't question anything. I believe you know that better than anyone in this room. Now if you will excuse me, I've had a couple too many adult beverages so I'm taking Uncle Bill up on his offer of a hotel suite.”

Bill walked to the front door, hugged and shook hands with everyone as they left. Nancy, Karl and their two eldest daughters are the last ones to the door. He shook Karl's hand and asked him to continue taking good care of his daughter.

He hugged Nancy, Faith and Hope, then; “Goodbye.”

Nancy has the oddest look of concern on her face; “Breakfast tomorrow dad?”

“Let’s see how things work out. I don’t want to make plans that far in advance. At my age, I only buy ripe fruit. I might not be around long enough for the fruit to get ripe.”

Nancy and the sisters shot him a look before Karl insisted they let Bill go to bed. They left for their homes while Charity and Bill watched everyone drive off before they went to their apartment upstairs.

Bill is getting ready for bed when he asked; “Have all the arrangements been made? Has all the paperwork, deeds, bills-of-sale, leases and anything else been transferred to your name?”

She came to the kitchen from the bathroom; “That’s all been done for years now. Why would you think of those things on a Saturday night after a reunion party? Rhetorical question. You ask weird stuff all the time anyway. I’m all done in the bathroom. Don’t forget to brush your teeth. Good night. I’ll see you in the morning.”

She entered her bedroom while Bill is sitting at the kitchen table; “Goodnight.” Then softly; “I hope to see you just one more time.”

He went to his bedroom, undressed and went to bed. It’s a night of entity filled dreams.

The following morning, Bill arose a little earlier than normal. Charity woke up with what she thought was Bill’s flushing the toilet. She came out of her room in her usual full tee-shirt and sweat-shorts.

After the bathroom break, she barely noticed Bill sitting at the kitchen table. With one eye slightly open; “Too much party last night. I’m going back to bed.”

She tossed, turned and couldn't get back to sleep. Something she seen is bothering her and couldn't figure out what it is.

She opened her bedroom door; "Grandpa; are you still out there?"

"Yes I am."

"Don't go anywhere. I'm getting dressed."

She dressed in record time and found Bill standing next to the kitchen table. He's holding a ceramic bracelet. It's one of the bracelets Charity and her sisters used to communicate and transport with the dragon.

"I was removing the hiking supplies from your backpack when I found this. I wanted to make sure all the batteries were out of the GPS units and flashlights when I found this bracelet. It came from the dragon didn't it?"

"Yes it did. I took a spare that I was going to use it as proof, so I had it x-rayed. It's a ceramic bracelet. There's nothing extraterrestrial about it. Once again, there's no proof about anything."

He smiled; "I remember when I was very young. My dad would take all of us for a car ride every now and then on Sunday. He always tried to visit some place where we've never been before. We would dress up and drive somewhere new."

Charity is looking at him with question on her face; "Is that why you're dressed in the suit you married Susan in?"

"As a matter of fact, you're right. It's a little snug in a few places though. Hey, it's a beautiful Sunday. I was outside earlier. It's going to be a blue sky day and I feel like going on a trip."

“That’s a great idea. But what about coffee and breakfast?”

“Oh I’m fine. I ate and drank too much of everything yesterday. I don’t need anything this morning.”

“I’ll make us some coffee and change into some driving clothes. We can have our coffee on the roof and then go for a road trip. How does that sound?”

Bill walked over and gave her a long hug; “I’m so lucky. I can’t find the words to tell you how much I love you. I’m going upstairs to the roof. I hate goodbyes.”

“Goodbye? You’re only going to the roof. I’ll make the coffee and bring you up a cup. When you’re ready, we can go for a ride.”

Bill smiled, turned and walked out the back door with Charity watching. After he’s out of her sight, she turned on the TV in the kitchen and started making the coffee. She returned to her room to change into some comfortable clothes for the drive. A few minutes later, she’s dressed and while brushing her hair, she hears an alert beeping noise coming from the TV.

“Breaking news; a massive black cloud, several miles in diameter seems to have appeared out of nowhere and is covering a large portion of Kansas City. According to eyewitnesses, the cloud resembles rolling liquid black smoke. Our weather radar cannot penetrate the cloud. The brisk northerly wind is not having any effect on whatever the phenomenon is.

From our studio rooftop cam, the black cloud is now stationary. Wait a moment, we have an eyewitness who’s using his cellphone to send a live feed from what looks to be directly under the center

of whatever this phenomenon is. What's the name on the marquee; Parkway Theater?"

Charity looked on the kitchen counter next to the TV. Bill had taken the ceramic bracelet along with the paper and pencil that is always lying on the kitchen counter. She bolted up the stairs to see a beam of light connecting the cloud directly to the old wooden bench for only a second before it disappeared. Then the cloud went straight up as it did before in New Mexico. Within a couple of seconds it's gone.

She looked around the roof and Bill is nowhere to be found. On the bench is the katana she left on the dragon. The katana is thru the ceramic bracelet with a note attached.

"You told me you forgot this in storeroom #1. Goodbye Chiyo Sakura. I am the proudest grandfather in the galaxy. I know my end is very near. Landau is going to show me where I can rest. I'm going to be with Marcy."

She sat on the bench holding the note while crying. Her mother, father and sisters were in front of the restaurant while all this was happening. They came upstairs to see if everyone is alright. They found a hysterical Charity on the roof, screaming at the sky and shaking her fist, but no Bill.

The news media made a circus of the black cloud incident. There are TV crews clogging the street in front of the Theater Building. Several military aircraft are flying in the vicinity. Faith and Karl went downstairs to calm down the media. Nancy and Hope tried to calm down Charity and get her off the roof before the news helicopters arrive.

Karl is doing his best to disarm the news media; “It must have been a freak storm cloud or perhaps some type of micro squall line. I can’t imagine it was anything other than that.”

Members of the media asked if it was some type of alien ship.

Faith’s smiling response is; “If there were aliens on board, they must have been coming to the Parkway Restaurant for the great coffee and fantastic food. Maybe they were coming to the theater to watch a movie. But seriously folks, we all know there are no extraterrestrials in Kansas City or anywhere else.”

The reporters kept shouting questions about aliens.

Karl’s retort is; “Sorry to disappoint you, but all of the restaurant customers and employees are fine and upstanding citizens. I can assure you there are no extraterrestrials here. That is nonsense.”

After several minutes of non-answers, the media became annoyed and left because there is nothing to see. Later that day, the military stated it was a unusual micro storm cloud and there is no threat to security.

Faith went into the restaurant and told her husband and Hope’s husband to have breakfast with their children and go home. The wives would catch up with them later. Charity is not feeling well and the sisters need to take care of her. Faith, Karl and Nancy went upstairs to the apartment.

Hope who had stayed with Charity whispered to Faith; “Look at what she's hanging on to.”

Charity is holding the katana, the ceramic bracelet and the note from grandpa. It took the family a couple of hours to calm her down.

When she finally composed herself (and a couple shots of Scotch later), the sisters had a very long and detailed talk with their parents about their vacation in New Mexico and beyond.

Everyone agreed to keep this to themselves otherwise Karl's political career would come to a screeching halt. All the businesses and everyone's careers would end overnight. Nancy felt Charity is too unstable to be left alone. She also felt her daughters are psychotic because they came up with such an outlandish story that also included time travel. Nancy and Karl believed Bill took off somewhere and would be back within a few hours at most.

Nancy tried; "Since my dad is all dressed up, he probably went over to the widow Cooke's condo"

Faith added; "Grandpa probably went over to his lady friends place without telling you. He'll be back in a few hours."

"Since Grandpa never misses Sunday dinner with you, he'll be back this evening."

Charity is barely holding herself together; "No he won't dad. Grandpa left his wallet, keys and cellphone on his dresser. Here's the note he sent me. He is not coming back; ever."

Nancy spoke with absolute authority; "Karl, our youngest should not be left alone today. I'm staying here to support her. I'll stay the night if she doesn't mind."

"Oh Mom, that would be great. I can really use the company. I don't want to be alone right now. Dad; why don't you stay too? There's plenty of room here."

"I think you and mom need some time together to talk. I don't think you two have had a good heart to heart talk for a long time.

Since you've been living with grandpa for all these years now, I think you two may have some thoughts and memories to share."

The early Scotch on an empty stomach is not doing Charity any good. Faith called downstairs and ordered five breakfasts to be delivered to the apartment.

After their meals, Hope is trying to lighten the mood; "It must be nice living above the restaurant you own."

"It has its advantages and drawbacks. The best thing is meals are only one flight of stairs away. That's also the bad part. Depending what they're cooking, the apartment smells really good and that makes me hungry."

The family chatted for a while before Karl, Faith and Hope left for their homes. Nancy and her youngest spent the rest of the day looking at Bill's photo albums and scrapbooks. They had quite the mother daughter day.

Karl arrived for dinner with a change of clothes for his wife. He insisted Charity have dinner somewhere other than her own restaurant. He feels she needs a break from where she always ate dinner with Bill.

They wound up in a small cafe uptown. After dinner without adult beverages, Karl dropped off his wife and youngest daughter back at the apartment. He announced he would not stay tonight because of an early start tomorrow morning. The two women spent part of the evening looking through Bill's closet and chest of drawers.

Nancy made an observation; "My dad has at least a dozen pair of white crew socks but only seven pairs of briefs. He has seven regular and seven sleeveless tee-shirts. He hasn't changed his

habits from when I was living with him. Regular tee-shirts for the winter and sleeveless in the summer.”

“Check grandpa's closet. One winter coat, one spring fall jacket, seven pairs of black jeans and seven button down short sleeve shirts. He has seven long sleeve shirts next to the two hoodies.”

“Four pairs of shoes. Two pair of athletic shoes and two pair of regular street shoes. He never was big on clothing. Does my dad still have the black silk kimono and his taste in stupid slippers?”

“The kimono is on the back of his bedroom door. His slippers are under the bed. Every few years, he would order several pairs of those stupid animal slippers on-line. Lately he would forget and go downstairs to the restaurant with his slippers on.”

Charity started breaking up and crying; “He looked so foolish wearing puppy dog slippers.”

Nancy tried to comfort her daughter, but the sorrow had to get out. Afterwards they talked about his collection of animal slippers.

“Grandpa has different animal slippers for every day of the week. He didn't like the pony slippers because when he walked, the pony head would hit the tops of his feet.”

The women talked through the evening and finally went to bed. Charity went to her room and Nancy announced she's sleeping in her dad's room. Later that night, she could not get to sleep. She walked into the living room to find her daughter red eyed watching TV; “I'm wrapped too tight to sleep.”

“I'm wrapped up too. I thought I could sleep on his bed like I've done when I lived here, but I can't get comfortable.”

“After I moved in with Grandpa, Susan told me she wouldn't have sex on Marcy's bed. So that day, grandpa bought a new bedroom set so he could have sex with Susan.”

“Whoa; that's way too much information about my dad. I think I'll sleep on the couch. Are there any other interesting surprises or insights about my dad you would like to share with me?”

“When we were on the dragon; the ship you and dad don't believe exists, we were able to hear some of grandpa's thoughts.”

“You and your sisters were able to here my dad's thoughts; right. What did you hear while you were listening?”

“He loved you unconditionally. We know he would have given his life to protect you.”

“You talk like he's not coming back.”

Right at that moment, the TV started making hissing, popping and crackling noises. The set started changing channels from the infomercial on channel 2, to channel 83. They watched the snow on the screen as it started to form an image.

Landau appeared accompanied by his soothing male voice Charity and her sisters know so well; “Hello Chosen ones. Just in case you forgot, this is Landau. Your grandfather is on board with me. He was resting when he suffered a fatal heart attack. He felt no pain. His heart just stopped.

At the moment before his passing, the dragon absorbed his memories along with his very essence that made him who he was. Everything that was William Jefferson Cann is now within the dragon. His memory is alive and reliving his life inside the

memory banks of this ship. I wanted to show you how he lives on in his memories. He's reliving this particular event right now.”

The image on the TV switched from Landau to William from forty years ago walking in the park hand in hand with Marcy.

“I couldn’t help but watch his life as he relives it. Oh my; he would have made the Anya-Moog Warrior Caste proud. In case you’re interested; the ship analyzed your grandfather’s DNA. His grandfather or grandmother was one of my former crew-mates.”

The image switched back to Landau; “My time is limited. I need to go before your military gets upset again with the dragon orbiting your planet. I'm sure you noticed all the fossil fueled craft flying around your residence for several minutes after I transported your grandfather.

One last thing. The beings of Europa and many other civilizations send their gratitude. Goodbye Warriors Hess; it has been an honor to serve with you.”

The screen returned to the snowy static and hissing noise.

Nancy is now wide eyed; “I need a drink! Do you have anything besides Scotch?”

While Nancy is looking for an adult beverage, Charity’s phone rang; “Hello? ... Yes I heard Landau and seen grandpa! ... You’re on the way? Good. Hope is on the other line. I'll see you when you get here. ... Hi Hope ... Faith called, we both heard Landau and seen grandpa.”

They talked for a few moments before Nancy heard; “Faith is already on her way here. I’ll see you when you get here. Don’t forget to leave a note for hubby.”

The two sisters arrived after midnight. All of them had insomnia at the same time. The four women sat at the kitchen table drinking milk and eating those chocolate cake type cookies grandpa enjoyed. They discussed what they seen on TV and came to the same conclusions. It wasn't a dream, it was real.

They sat for a few moments before Nancy broke the silence; "I wonder how many times we sat at this table with my dad eating cookies, talking about everything and anything. I know we solved a lot of problems here. Some of the things we talked about I look back at and they meant the world to me at the time."

The women talked about some of their conversations they had with Bill.

Hope started crying; "I really enjoyed the birthday parties grandpa had for us when we were kids. I miss them."

Charity looked at her with surprise; "I remember when we were kids and you said you hated those stupid birthday parties grandpa had for us in the restaurant, among other things."

"Yeah, you punched my lights out and daddy had to pull you off of me. I had a black eye for a couple of weeks after that. I was going into puberty and confusion was a major part of my life. I remember Mom was super pissed at me and Faith warned me not to tell you."

They all talked and relived fond memories of Grandpa Bill. They all cried a little and by two in the morning, Faith and Hope decided the wake for grandpa in his kitchen is over. They needed to get home to their families.

Hope told her mother; "I'm going to be late for work today. You're a wonderful boss. I know you'll understand."

The women laughed and the two sisters went home to their families. Nancy retired to Bill's room and Charity retired to hers. A few minutes later she heard her mother walking around the apartment. Out of bed she went to see what's going on. Charity found her mother in the laundry room searching through the clothes hamper.

"This is very disturbing seeing to you topless, bending over and searching my dirty laundry. Have you ever considered reduction surgery?"

Nancy ignored her daughter for a moment; "Here's what I'm looking for. One of my dad's tee shirts."

She pulled the shirt over her head and put it on.

"The only way I could sleep before I married your father was when I was wearing one of my dad's used tee shirts. They had his scent and it made me feel like he was close by protecting me. By the way, your father hasn't had a problem with my breasts for the last thirty-five plus years."

"Mother, we are not having this conversation. I'm going to bed. Do you want me to wake you up when I get up or leave you sleep?"

"Leave me sleep. If you wake up early, be quite please. Cover the toilet with a towel when you flush."

With sadness in her voice; "Grandpa used to do that in the mornings. I had to hang up the towel before I could open the lid."

"Oh you poor baby; consider yourself lucky. At least he put the seat down."

They chuckled for a moment before Nancy burst into tears; “I feel so empty now. My dad is gone and there was so much I wanted to say to him. I always thought there would be more time.”

The two women consoled each other and eventually composed themselves.

“Look at it this way; how many women can say their adopted father was one eighth alien?”

They giggled and returned to their respective rooms where they went to sleep. Nancy and her daughters had the same dream from when they were younger. It was the day her adopted father came by the house. Bill told the girls he would not be their grandpa if they didn’t want him to be their grandpa anymore.

The entity sang Amazing Grace while the image of grandpa riding off in the taxi faded in their dreams.

End of Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

It was a few months after Grandpa Bill (William Cann) left this world. Charity's life started to resemble something normal. Although her close friends tell her she seems colder and distant.

She's still a professional woman who operates her photography business part time. With the passing of her grandfather, she's taking greater control and management of her LLC's daily operations. Her restoration company has rehabbed both second floor theater building apartments and she's back living where she has lived for over a decade.

Charity decided to rent the other fully furnished vacant apartment. Not because she needed the money. She's on the fence about a revenue source going to waste. She placed a small 'Fully furnished Apartment for Rent' sign in her photography studio window. It's on the bottom window ledge, next to the door where it would most likely go unnoticed.

It wasn't ten minutes later when a very tall, well dressed and handsome man enters her store. She glanced at him and turned to put away some brochures. Her head is facing down.

He placed the Apartment For Rent sign on the counter; "Hello, is the manager available? I'm in need of a wedding photographer. My friend is getting married and the original photographer disappeared with their payment. I warned them not to pay in advance.

I know this is short notice, so I'm willing to pay extra. Is there a photographer available for next Saturday at two? If so; how much would the charges be?"

Charity looks up and it's love at first sight. The male visitor thought she's the most beautiful and desirable woman he has ever seen. He took two steps back and took a deep breath.

He nervously responded; "I'm sorry for my reflex actions. You startled me when I seen your face."

"If the sight of me repulses you; then leave the same way you entered. You should find a photographer who doesn't offend you. The door out is still behind you. Have a nice day."

"I'm so sorry if I offended you. That definitely is not my intention. I have never in my life seen a woman as beautiful and enchanting as you."

Charity composed herself. She didn't want to act like a little school girl with a crush.

She paused before; "I think we started on the wrong foot. I'm going to restart by trying to answer your questions. I'm the owner, photographer, chief cook and bottle washer. I photograph weddings and yes I'm available next Saturday at two o'clock."

"Great!"

"You asked how much; it depends on what you want. Here are my wedding sample albums. Number one is the lowest price, number two is the medium price and number three is the most expensive. As you can see, the base prices are on the brochure covers."

She noticed the tall handsome man is not looking at the brochures; he's looking at her with a smile on his face.

“You’re staring at me. The brochures are on the counter in front of you. By the way; I’m Miss Charity Hess and I’m finding your wearing dark glasses in my store annoying.”

“I’m so sorry. It’s very rude of me. My name is Adrian Landau. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

He removed his glasses, smiled and shook her hand. Charity’s eyes became wide as saucers. He’s her Adonis! He is absolutely gorgeous. When their hands touched, she thought electric is flowing. She couldn’t take her eyes off this stranger. The visitor had the same facial structure as her grandfather.

“Are you alright Miss Hess? I’ll put my glasses back on if you wish. That’s why I wear dark glasses. When I was in the orphanage, nobody would adopt me because of my eyes. That’s also how they gave me my name.”

“How did the name happen?”

“They told me when I was found, I had a couple of pieces of clothing with name patches on them. One name was Adia and the other was Landau. Since Adia is a girl’s name, they gave me the name of Adrian and the last name of Landau.”

He paused for a couple of moments because Charity still wouldn’t take her eyes off him.

“Judging by the look on your face, that was way too much information. Maybe we should get down to the business of the wedding photography.”

Charity became hyper; “Mister Landau, ah Adrian, wait right here for a moment. Keep your glasses off please. My mother needs to meet you.”

“What does your mother have to do with photographing a wedding? Is she a photographer also?”

Still hyper; “Wait right here please! This is very important.”

She grabbed her phone and speed dialed her mother who is working upstairs in her office.

“Mom, is Hope with you? ... Both of you get down here right now! ... I don’t care if you’re on the phone with the president of the United States. Get down here as fast as your legs will carry you. ... No I’m not being raped or robbed. Get down here before he gets away, hurry!”

Adrian is looking at the door, trying to decide if this short woman is psychotic or if she's going to kill him. Charity is staring at him with a smile on her face like nothings wrong. Moments later the door opened, Hope and Nancy arrived.

“Hope and I were working on closing a multi-million dollar buyout when you dragged us away. This better be damn good.”

“Mom, Hope, meet Mister Adrian Landau. Look at his face and pay close attention to his eyes.”

Nancy gasped, she raised her hands to her face; “You resemble my Dad.”

Hope is wide eyed; “You look just like Grandpa as a young man.”

Adrian looks totally confused and he wants to get out of there except the two newly arrived women are blocking the door.

“Not to be rude, but I don’t fall into the age group of being your father or your grandfather lady. If you will excuse me; I have very urgent business to attend to as far away from here as I can get.”

Charity realizes she needs to gain control right away; “Mister Landau, Adrian. I am so sorry for treating you like this. My recently departed grandfather, who was my mother’s adopted father had the exact same eyes and facial structure as yours. He meant the world to us and you remind us of him. I promise you we didn’t mean to cause you any distress.”

“You didn’t? All of you sure scared the hell out of me. I’m still not sure of your motives.”

The women apologized profusely and invited him to lunch. He reluctantly agreed and during the lunch conversation, Adrian told the women he stopped in Charity’s Studio for two reasons. He needs a photographer and while walking in, he seen the ‘fully furnished apartment for rent’ sign in the window.

“I figured I would get two things done at once. I work for Zocalo Pharmaceuticals and I have been living in their corporate apartment for a few weeks now. I need my own place since I’m going to relocate here.

I also needed a photographer for my friend Brandon’s wedding. I must admit I never expected to meet the young mother and the attractive married sister of the most beautiful woman in the world.”

Nancy and Hope are blushing as Charity looks like she's in heaven.

“I’m so sorry ladies. I don’t know what came over me. I don’t think I have ever been this forward in my life.”

They laughed, chuckled and finished lunch. Nancy and Hope returned to work. Charity and Adrian returned to her studio to solidify the wedding photography deal. Adrian called his friend

Brandon to have him and his fiancée Chloe meet him at the photography studio.

The engaged couple arrived and sparks started flying almost immediately. The bride to be, strongly resembled the Sovereign as a young woman. She had the same facial bone structure and hairstyle. She took one look at Charity and the hostilities started.

“These are my friends who are in need of a photographer; Brandon Gillis and Chloe Cloverton.

Chloe told her fiancée; “We need to find another photographer. This one will not do for my wedding; let’s go.”

Adrian asked; “Chloe, you haven’t seen her work yet. How can you possibly judge something you haven’t seen?”

In a snotty bitchy voice; “I’ve seen all I need to see. She’s a dwarf. Too short to photograph my wedding. Is she going to spend the entire afternoon moving a box around to stand on so she can get high enough to take pictures? I’m surprised the midget makes enough money to pay the rent. Let’s get out of this dump.”

Brandon looked confused; “Honey; are you sure you want to go?”

“I’m positive. I can’t believe Adrian, your so called friend would want to hire something like this as a photographer. One look at her and it’s obvious where your friendship ranks. Just like her stature, very low.”

Charity had to use all her reserve to keep from jumping over the counter and punching Chloe’s lights out; “If you weren’t so fuc*ing ignorant, you would know I’m not a dwarf or a midget. I’m vertically challenged you arrogant, self important bitch.”

Chloe launched into an obscene verbal attack complete with her arms swinging and pointing at Charity. At that moment, several employees of Charity's restoration company are walking back to their office after having lunch. Three of them are Michael Webb, his wife Amanda and their son.

The fourth member is a recent high school grad Charity hired named Fergus. He's a mountain of a man. He stood around six six and had to weigh close to two hundred and seventy five pounds.

They seen Chloe ranting and entered the studio to see what's going on. Amanda stood directly in front of Chloe; "What's your problem here?" Chloe became still. (Amanda is not a petite woman)

Michael and his son stood in front of Brandon. Fergus took up residence in front of Adrian.

His head turned to face Charity; "Is this guy causing you trouble Miss Hess? I'll make him leave if you want."

"No Fergus. He's not causing me any problems. If you could ask the other two to leave please."

The big man turned to Chloe and Brandon; "Miss Hess wants you to leave ... now!"

When they didn't move; "Would you like me to help you out?"

Brandon escorted his fiance out of the studio. Adrian put his glasses back on and also left. They stood on the sidewalk arguing.

"Are you going to be okay Miss Hess?"

"I'll be fine Ferg. You don't mind me calling you Ferg do you?"

"You hired me Miss Hess. You can call me anything you want."

“Thank you. Please call me Charity.”

“That's okay. I have too much respect for you to call you anything but Miss Hess.”

With all the arguing going on out front, her restoration crew left the studio though the back door. Listening to what is going on side, Charity hears Adrian raise his voice at Chloe and Brandon. She was shocked and pleased at what she heard.

Brandon tried to apologize; “Chloe got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning. We'll look for another photographer. When we find one she likes, I'll give you a call.”

Adrian is pissed; “I try to do you two a favor. I offer to find and pay for the photographer as a wedding gift. She rejects my offer because the photographer is too short. Both of you are on your own. I honestly don't want anything to do with either of you.”

“But Adrian old buddy. This is just a little misunderstanding is all.”

“Brandon, I really hope she's great in the sack. Chloe, you really need to consider getting professional help. Your megalomania is out of control. I'm going back inside and try to make things right between me and that woman. By the way, lose my phone number. Neither of you exist in my world.”

Chloe and Brandon argued briefly with Adrian. Chloe started melting down and using language that would have blistered the paint on the building. It's so full of venom, Adrian walked inside Charity's studio while Chloe is still screaming with Brandon standing with a stupid look on his face.

When Chloe finally ran out of breath and energy, she and Brandon walked away.

Back inside the shop, Adrian removed his sunglasses and looks Charity directly in her eyes; “I am so sorry you had to experience that woman’s rudeness. I always thought she was a psychotic megalomaniac bitch. Today proves I was right all along. I’m relieved that my friendship with both of them is over.”

“I don't know what to say other than thank you.”

“You're welcome.”

“One question. I'm six three. That big teenager Fergus. What did you hire him for? Your bodyguard?”

“Hahaha. No. He works for my company Never Lost Restorations as a laborer and carpenter in training.”

“Wow. He sure is loyal to you. Should I worry about him?”

“Hahaha no. You don't have to worry about Fergus. When he came looking for a job, he recently married his pregnant girlfriend and borrowed the money to rent an apartment. He's really thankful for having his first job.”

“Good. Now onto the remaining business at hand. Could I see the apartment for rent or do I have to call the landlord? I could pay the rent a year in advance if the owner wants stability. I have excellent credit and I'm gainfully employed with a local corporation. My income is in the six digit range and I have no debt.”

She smiled with that million dollar smile; “That won’t be necessary. I'm the building owner. Let me lock up here and I’ll show you the apartment. By the way; what do you think of old movie theaters?”

“I love old movie theaters. Since I've been in town, I come to the Parkway Theater often. It's one of my favorite places to go. If I had a girlfriend, we would be there every weekend.”

“What do you do for a living if you don't mind me asking?”

“I work for Zocalo Pharmaceuticals, genetic development division. I hold a PhD in bio genetic engineering, so I'm financially secure.”

“Okay Doctor Landau. Let's look at the apartment.”

“Please call me Adrian.”

“Call me Charity.”

She locked the studio. They walked around to the side of the building and showed Adrian the second floor apartment.

“It's ready to move in. All you need is food and your clothes. Everything else is already here. Pots, pans, bed linens and even towels. By the way, do you have dinner plans for tonight?”

“As a matter of fact, I don't. Are you asking me out Miss Hess?”

“Absolutely. My name is still Charity. My mother is Mrs Hess.”

They had dinner that evening at the Thai Food place across the street. Adrian rented the furnished apartment. He moved in two days later. She refused to tell him how much the rent is.

Every time he would ask how much the rent is, she would always say; “Let's talk about it later. Maybe tomorrow.”

He looked in the newspaper to find out what three bedroom furnished apartments are renting for in the area. At his instance, he

gave Charity three months' rent in advance. She never cashed the check.

Because neither of them cook, they are regulars in her Parkway Restaurant for breakfast and dinner. They almost always sat in the booth nicknamed 'Nancy' for her mother's antics when she was living with Charity's grandfather.

Within a week or so, Adrian became a regular overnight guest in her apartment. Charity is concerned because he's two and a half years younger than her. Adrian thought that fact may drive a wedge between them and cause their relationship to fracture.

Almost three months after they first met, Adrian would propose to Charity every morning and she would refuse. One morning he proposed to her in front of her photography studio; she burned Adrian's rent check in front of him, then accepted his proposal.

They were married on the stage of her Parkway Theater exactly six months after they met. It was a civil ceremony conducted by a man who studied to become a Shinto priest. He is her samurai sword instructor. Adrian Landau legally changed his name to Adrian Landau Hess to prove his love for her.

A year from the day they married, Charity gave birth to twin daughters. She named them after her mother and her late friend Susan. Two and a half years to the day after the birth of her daughters, she gave birth to twin sons. She named them Adrian William, after her husband and Karl William after her father.

One clear fall evening the Hess family is on the roof of the theater building looking at the stars. The girls are sitting on the bench with mom and dad. The two boys had their diapers changed and are sound asleep in the arms of their parents. Everyone is looking at

the constellation Orion when they seen a distant light grow larger and larger. It grew and lasted for several minutes before it shrunk and disappeared.

Charity told Adrian; “You see? I told you it would take years for the light to get here!”

“Oh I love your imagination and everything about you.”

Later that evening, they went down to their apartment and put the children in their beds for the night. They went into the living room to catch up on the evening news before going to bed. They were both half asleep when they heard the following story:

“If you were lucky enough to be watching the night sky tonight and looking outward from the sword of Orion, you would have seen a once in a lifetime event. This video was captured by an amateur astronomer of the birth of what we are being told is a small nova inside the Orion nebula. According to our astronomy experts, the light from the nova traveled several years to get here.”

The couple looked at each other. Charity smiled at Adrian; “I told you so smarty!”

“Tell me all about the dragon, Vampire sand and that Landau guy again please.”

A novel written by: Ralph C Johnson

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