

I/Tulpa:

Onuk Bay

A Starstruck story By

Ion Light

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If you can have a crossover fiction to your own fiction, this would be it. “Starstruck” by John Erik Ege, was something I had written as an adolescent and ‘worked’ on ‘off and on’ for thirty plus years. ‘Starstruck’ completely ‘pg.’ Onuk Bay is the adult version. If you haven’t associated sex with Ion Light, and you’re reading one of mine for time, there is sex here. Lots of sex. Gratuitous sex. So much meaningless sex that it has become meaningful. ‘We’ the one writing these stories hold strongly to the attitude of ‘make love not war.’ We strongly believe, increase affection in society and there will be a corresponding decrease in conflict. Eventually. We are so separated from affection it may take a while before people believe it. Like free money. People don’t yet believe in a Universal Basic Income, but it’s coming. And when it does, we are going to have to come up with a new paradigm for relating to others. The measure of a man can no longer be what he earns. It truth, it never should have been. Worth should not be about productivity. Just look at how big the Universe is, how much of it is unused; do you default to the Universe is stupid because it has so much wasted resources? When equality is absolute, relationships as we know them will fail because the last two hundred years of relationship have not been based on love, but on need, and on balance. Few people have touched true love. Men still want to be the rescuers and the providers. Women still want men who earn at the least as much as they are better; they rarely choose partners of men who make less than or earn nothing. IF we are absolutely equal what will bring us together? Sex? Men want sex, women do to, but the number of men wanting ‘hookups’ and the number of women wanting ‘hookups’ is not equal. Men want to be needed. Their relationships are predicated on that basic assumption and that must change. Women want to be needed, too. It seems we arrive at those needs in fundamentally different ways. We don’t. That is the illusion of our present paradigm. I share this because I think a part of my subconscious is actually deliberating over this; again, if you’re not familiar with my work, almost all of these stories are the product of a version of ‘active imagination’ in which the story is experienced and transcribed, more than labored over.

I assure you, there will be grammatical errors. I apologize in advance. I am working on doing better. I have marginally improved. Feel free to email me any corrections or complaints. I am simply a modest fan, who finds himself caught up in the whirlwinds of imagination on a daily basis.

Sincerely

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Chapter 1

“Imagine waking from a dream that was your entire life. Imagine dying and having a life review, where you experience your life in a flash instance, like watching a movie on fast forwards, and you know it's on fast forwards, but at the same time, it feels real time, with all the emotions and sensations, and more. You have access to the sensations and feelings of all of the people you affected. Now imagine sorting all of that, but having the urgency of making a decision. A life or death decision. A beacon flashed in my mind, numbers counting down. Eyes open, I could not see this light. Eye closed, I was bathed in this brilliant blue light of warmth, pulsating, counting down. In this dream I had a female companion who visited me, comforted me, and participated in my dreams. There was love. This light was love. I remember being overwhelmed with hunger and gorging myself until I fell asleep, and in that lonely sleep, I was comforted again by this internal companion, a ghostly lover if you will... The constant pulsating beacon means something. It reminds me of a heartbeat. Is this the womb of wombs?” These were the recording of an unlikely journal entry, a sojourner who woke, clinging desperately to the dream. His name, Jon Harister, a man of many dreams, as if the book James Thurber's chronicles of Walter Mitty were about him.

Jon became aware of another voice. A female voice, a young voice, perhaps an adolescent.

“Can any of you hear me? This is important. You need to wake up. Can anyone hear me? Are you sure anyone can hear us?”

“Those with ears will hear, and those with eyes will see. They only need be able to listen and observe.”

The world shook. It was an odd sensation, not like an earthquake, but like a ship colliding with another ship.

“This maneuver is unorthodox.”

“Keep repeating my message.”

“Hey, stop that!” This voice was older, male, and though Jon didn't understand why he identified the voice as human, thirty something, he didn't doubt the information.

“You have to get out of here. Use your Quantum Drive.”

“I'm trying to get some sleep here. You're ruining my good mood.”

“Please, you’ve got to leave.” This voice was, emotional, passionate...

“Hello. Are you speaking to me in Russian?”

“No, I’m using G-Common, but you might be hearing me in Russian. Are you Russian?”

“Yes. I’m from Earth, Moscow. Are you a prisoner, too?”

“What do you mean by prisoner?”

“I got caught stealing something, and the next thing I know this UFO grabbed me up, and for being in possession of stolen property, I’ve been told that I must pay my debt to society by piloting this scout ship.”

“Really? And to think, I volunteered for this”

“My name is Alexander.”

“Would you two keep it down!?” This voice belonged to something alien. Like a human with an octopus head. Jon rose from the bed, twirling, trying to understand where he was.

“Alexander, I’m Enedelia. Look, we’re running out of time. Can you access your Quantum Drive?”

“Yes. It’s fully charged.”

Information about the Quantum Drive was available to him. Jon understood everything about it. He did not understand how he had such information in his head. It was like in a dream where you have knowledge about the way things are to be and you just go along with it because you know, even though part of you knows you don’t know.

“You have to leave now. This place is about to be irradiated.” Jon realized the pulsing of the light was delivering information. Numbers. Numbers that decreased with each beat. “Go to Indigo station and I’ll meet you there.”

“Indigo station is locked out. I have to do a blind jump.”

Jon realized he had access to one ‘viable’ space coordinates, but they were locked out. The coordinates were labeled Indigo. Next to the coordinates was a timer. It, too, was counting down. After three months, these coordinates would be useless due to the continued expansion of space-time. Even space-time had a shelf life. Quantum jumping was the equivalent of trying to dive into the same river twice. Sort of. One could never dive into the same river twice. You might jump from the same perch of shore, but the water you swam through would be gone.

‘Blind jump’ in reference to Quantum Jumping was pushing your ship through a higher dimension, taking you somewhere above or out of the ‘universe’ proper, only to emerge back

into it at some random other point. It was probably not random. No one understood the quantum jumping technology as it was given to them by a much older, and extinct race of beings. The technology hadn't been improved upon in a billion years. Yes, a billion. Jon read that twice. Humans hadn't even been around a million years. Dinosaurs lived for hundreds of millions of years. The creators of this tech were older than dinosaurs.

“Actually, so do you,” Alexander continued. “The Indigo station’s coordinates won’t be unlocked until you have met the criteria for returning, such as discovering a new system and mapping it out.”

Jon found a list of conditions necessary to have the Indigo coordinates unlocked. “Oh, that sucks.”

“Just jump. We’ll try and meet back at Indigo station. My name is Enedelia Garcia.”

“I agree,” came a voice next to him. Jon nearly jumped out of his skin, turning to her. He recognized her. The woman of his dreams. The woman he had summoned out of space-time to help heal his loneliness. Some referred to her as a Tulpa. Some referred to her as a Soul-bound. People with limited coping skills referred to her as a demon, or a Jinn. Napoleon Hill, author of ‘Think and Grow Rich,’ would refer to her as an ‘invisible counselor. Carl Jung would refer to her as the embodiment of anima, his goddess, his personal guardian and ultimate feminine archetype providing access to the collective unconscious. She was a Dakini Priestess, a healer, a source of inspiration, joy, and pure love, and she called herself Loxy Isadora Bliss. “We should leave. Now.”

“How?” Jon said. He didn’t care if this was a dream or a wonderland unfolding under a meditative state. ‘Never question the dream when you’re in it,’ Carl Jung had written. Basically, you go with it until you learn what your subconscious wants you to learn.

How was suddenly available to him. A slow blink caused him to realize the umbilical cord to his ‘bioship’ had been severed. It was as if he were a Christmas light that had pulled free from the chain of lights. The ship was part plant, part animal, and resembled a pinecone. It made a noise, a whimper of uncertainty. It was a lumbering, giant of a whale that had yet learned to breathe freedom.

Loxy grabbed at Jon’s hand to lead him to the pilot chair. Her hand passed through him. She was a hologram slash hallucination. He could sense her in every aspect, but she had no substance. She forced herself to be calm and took hold of his hand in a deliberate, conscientious

way and led him to the flight deck. There was enough physical sensation, hallucinated or not, that he was able to make himself go with her. The pilot chair was like a lounge chair that fit the focus of a parabola that was the back wall of the ship. He sat. He had the realization that he hadn't needed to be in the seat to direct his ship to jump. In fact, the ship didn't have any manual controls. All 'superior' controls were in Jon's head. The ship could steer itself in any direction, the same way as a horse without a rider might, but left to its own devices, it would lounge lazily in the orbit of a star grazing on sunlight.

Pushing the button to engage in a jump wasn't like pushing a button, unless that button was a virtual button. It was more like lifting a finger. It was not just a thought, 'raise your finger.' No one thinks about raising a finger. One just raises a finger. Only, Jon had never done this and so, doing it for the first time took effort. There was knowledge he could do it. He just had to do it. There was fear attached to doing this. Fear because this would be a blind jump and he could theoretically end up anywhere in space-time. He was most like to land within the galaxy he presently resided in. He was most likely going to land back in space-time in empty space. There's a lot of empty space. One could shoot a star size object through the galaxy and not a hit a single thing. One could shoot a galaxy through a galaxy and not a single star would hit. Still, there was a chance that he could emerge inside a star or planet, or too close to a black hole, and in the words of Han Solo, not verbatim: 'that would end your trip real quick.'

The beacon counting down informed him that anywhere other than here was likely going to be a better option. Loxy sat next to him and took his hand. It was a delicate thing for him to respond by squeezing her hand without pushing through the boundary that he recognized as her. It had taken years of working with his tulpa to develop this finesse, and yet, here he was learning her all over, because this Loxy was less Tulpa self-induced hallucination and more computer generated hologram.

"I am with you," Loxy said.

"I am sorry," Jon said.

"That I am with you?!" Loxy said, a little irritated.

"No! I love that you're with me," Jon said. "I am sorry that I am putting you in harm's way."

"You didn't do this to us," Loxy said.

Jon blinked. The fullness of the memory was horrifying. At the same, the explanation brought with some relief. Alien abductions are real. There were multiple factions abducting humans for a variety of purposes. His abductions had started as a child. The first group were the humans who had advance technology given to them or stolen from aliens. He had concerns about their program and intent, but he had insufficient information on them to understand if they were a force for good or bad. There were reptilians, who had found him and made clones of him, for purposes he didn't know. A deeper part of him suggested they originated on Earth during the time of the dinosaurs; which was interesting, because if that were true, they would have had tech to stop the asteroid collision that wiped out their kind and they didn't. Why? There was no end to that speculation. Then there were the gray hybrids that abducted him for the purpose of procreation. Prior to his present circumstance, it was his belief that he was regularly visited by one of three hybrids; presently, all of his memories were available and he could clearly see, he was the subject of interest to all three of the above groups of aliens. More directly present, he had been discovered by an inter-dimensional species that had created a flash clone and had provided it to Biocorp, a biotech-spaceship corporation headquartered at Indigo Station. He was unsure of why, but he suspected this newcomer to his abductions was simply interested in the fact that everyone else was interested in him. Whatever their interest, it was short lived, or, they couldn't keep the clone in their dimension, and so they put him in the care of Biocorp to help keep track of him. After all, it's hard to return a fully matured clone back to his environment of origin when the original is still there.

“Jon?” Loxy asked.

Decisions time: continue mapping out the knowledge of the dream, or go deeper down the rabbit hole. Jon activated the jump drive. It was the equivalent of igniting the engines on a Saturn Five rocket. There was vibration. There was the sense of being thrust upwards. He closed his eyes and was suddenly overwhelmed with vertigo of spinning lights. It was like being in a dark tunnel and distant lights were illuminating the sparkles in the granite in his immediate area. There was thrust for one minute, ten seconds. Then it stopped, precisely. There was silence. There was white light. The white light was so beautiful and intense he couldn't open his real eyes. He couldn't speak. His heart was the only sound he could hear. One heartbeat. Two heart beats. Three...

Then there was the sensation of falling. There was falling for one minute, ten seconds. Again, precisely. Then there was quiet. Things felt normal. Things looked normal. He was in the main cabin of his ship sitting with Loxy. There was a noise, like a growing storm. His eyes closed, he could see the see planet. Altitude, one hundred thousand feet, falling. They were falling. He felt the rush of air around him. He felt the exterior of the ship heating up and had to disconnect from that sensation. He aimed the nose of the ship skyward, thrusting with the equivalent of modern day rockets. At best, he slowed their descent. They fell through clouds, cool air moisture tickled the exterior skin. They crashed into an ocean. Their descent continued, slowed, stopped. The rockets extinguished. Water jets pushed them up. They rose, the nose of the ship surfaced like a dog treading water. They moved towards a nearby landmass, adding enough pressure to the jets they could rise up and ride the waves as far inland as they could. They came to rest in the shallows of a beach.

The ship made a questioning sound.

“Um, yeah, I think we’re alright,” Jon said. “Are you alright?”

A computer system began listing systems that were damaged and the time it would take to heal. While accessing the information, he was aware that Loxy could share this particular spectrum of his ship interface.

“Oh, look at this,” Loxy said. “This is uncharted territory. We need only map out the entire system, but this planet has a compatible atmosphere, and life as we know it. We’ve unlocked Indigo Station.”

“Let me guess,” Jon said. “We were drafted to map the galaxy and provide good coordinates so the powers that be can establish colonies and increase resources?”

“That’s my understanding,” Loxy said. “Did you get anything else from their programming tapes?”

“At the moment, I am struggling to remember stuff not from origin,” Jon said.

“It will come to you,” Loxy said. “My understanding is the more you pilot, the stronger the neural pathways that were provided to be a pilot will become.”

“Do we want to be a pilot?” Jon said.

“It’s your most frequent dream,” Loxy pointed out.

“Would you prefer to pilot?” Jon asked.

“I’d rather just be your copilot,” Loxy said.

“Let me start over,” Jon said, realizing he was failing to communicate his tangent. “This place might be nice. We’re alive. We could just build a home here.” Blind jumping was dangerous. They had nearly died in this, their first jump.

“We could,” Loxy said. “But if we don’t go back to Indigo Station at least once a year, the ship will die.”

“That sucks,” Jon said. “It’s bio-engineered to die if we don’t cooperate with the program?”

“Yeah,” Loxy said.

There was an elongated whimper that rolled through the ship. Jon looked to Loxy. They decided together.

“Alright, so, we’re pilots,” Jon said. “Does this ship have a computer?”

“Yeah,” Loxy said. “I am the interface.”

“You’re the interface?” Jon said. “But you’re in my head.”

“I was in your head. Technically, I am still in your head, but the primary bulk of my personality was shifted into the AI system of the ship,” Loxy said.

“Why the hell would they do that?” Jon asked.

“I suspect it was to facilitate communicating between you and the ship and you in the AI. There is the ship, there is you, and there is the AI. The metaphor for the trinity is not lost on me. Animal you, intellect you, spirit you. Oh! I am spirit you. Nice. Anyway, you and I have an established neural net pattern with established communication protocols, and so your receptivity to me was solid. Learning to interact with an AI through neural implants takes time and practice,” Loxy said. “Also, and likely given what we presently know of our abductors, in the event that you decided not to be a pilot, I might have been an incentive to keep you flying. I die when the ship dies.”

“You failed to mention that just earlier,” Jon said.

“Jon, being a pilot is dangerous. Especially a sojourner whose primary purpose is to map out good space-time coordinates,” Loxy said. “If at any time you decide it is too much, I will support you not being a pilot. My love for you will never change. I want what’s best for your long term wellbeing.”

Jon hugged her. “I am grateful the one constant in all my universes is you,” Jon said. “Thank you, Loxy.”

“Of course,” Loxy said. She seemed to focus on something. “I may be able to help facilitate repairs, but it will require I go into a sleep mode. Are you okay?”

“Um,” Jon said. “Yeah. Do what you need to do. I will explore.”

“Be safe,” Loxy said, and kissed him.

Chapter 2

The space-ship was a home, much bigger than RV. Jon found it eerie exploring it. He was aware that he was exploring it for the first time, and yet, it felt as if he had always been here. And technically, it wasn't the 'first time.' He had been on the ship for approximately two weeks, living in a trance while the nanites in his bloodstream updated his body brain to be a pilot, integrating his nervous system with that of the ship. The ship itself had the comparable brain size of a horse, but much of it was spread out throughout the ship accumulating in nodes, in a way, making it more comparable to a cephalopod. The more he thought about it, it was unlike any animal comparison. It was smarter than a horse or octopus. It was capable of astounding computations to keep itself and its occupants alive, but it was not human. The brain was not limited to one central location, but was spread through the entirety of it was ship. All the features of the ship, the furniture, had a life like feel to them, as if they were grown. The inner surfaces responded to touch. The walls, ceiling, and floor were a continuous unfolding of hexagonal shapes, as if her were in a hive, or the inner buddings of a plant waiting to unfold. There was texture like a tight celled quilt. His quarters contained a bed, a personal toilet, and lavatory with toiletries and toothbrush. He felt disappointment seeing himself in the mirror.

“Couldn't they have cloned me younger?” he asked no one.

There were storage spaces built into the walls and ceilings, part of the hexagons. Opening a space caused the hexagon to light and it rose from the floor, or extracted from the wall, or descended from the ceiling. Bigger compartments came away with more hexagons. Illuminated hexagons lit the interior of the ship. There were two empty rooms, as if there purpose had yet to be determined. There were long, flat cavities below the main deck, and above the main deck, which seemed to be intended for storage, which tapered from wide to narrow. The flight deck was the most spacious room, followed by the mess hall kitchen. The floor was elongated, and it could open, like eyelids pulling apart, to reveal an illuminated pool of water. It was big enough swim in, and it offered a flowing current to swim against. The water was super saturated with saline making it possible to just float in, and the composition of the salts was perfectly attuned to caring for human skin. Even though the salt contents of the water was comparable to the Dead Sea, there was life in the water. The ones he noticed were like minnows darting about. His mind

didn't want to linger on the ones he couldn't easily see, even though they weren't harmful to humans. They were just alien.

The nose of the ship was the main entrance and exit, with an airlock between it and the inner ship. The nose of the ship opened like a mouth, the floor resembled a tongue in appearance and feel; a tongue that rolled in a perfect 'O,' making a tunnel to aid in air-locking them to another ship or station airlock. This middle space of the airlock was a clean room, including a shower and toilet. Jon walked his habitat, having picked up a snack from the galley. He was halfway through a sealed container of Iriko, a small, minnow size fish that was dried and often put in soup, but could be eaten like chips, when he made the mental connection to the minnows in the galley pool. On realizing what he was eating, mindlessly, he rushed to the toilet to vomit. Before he arrived, he had recovered and didn't feel the urge to be sick. This was not his normal diet, but he had been eating it since he had arrived on the ship. He decided he couldn't eat more, but he couldn't justify throwing it away. He took it back to the galley and stowed it with the other bags of supply.

He searched the kitchen for anything else. He got water from a tap, rinsed his mouth, and spit into the sink. He found packages of freeze dried vegetables and fruits that were not recognizable, but were likely human safe. He doubted biocorp engineers wanted to purposely kill their pilots. Then again, comfort was minimized. The ship was comfortable enough that it wouldn't drive their pilots to quit. Then again, it was uncomfortable enough to encourage the pilots to be productive in their service. The more you map, the more you earn. There were smart probes below deck, basically just baseball size orbs that were essentially buoys, but could collect and send data. And complain. They were no true AI, but their simulated intelligence was sophisticated enough to fool a human into thinking they were sentient. There was a port to launch them. There was a giant egg shaped object in a crate. He knew instantly what it was, but was more curious about the flavor of the knowledge, because he had never seen it before. It was the color of a sour tart, and the rough texture to match. The egg carried with it all the basic ingredients for introducing life to a planet. On discovering a planet that met the criteria, the egg was to be delivered, activated, and within a thousand years, there was sufficient biomass to start a basic terraforming project. Finding a suitable planet and deploying the egg resulted in the highest return in compensation to a pilot, provided that the implantation of life took hold. It was an investment, not a quick return.

Jon closed his eyes. He could see outside the ship. It was day, but felt like twilight. The sun for this planet was a red dwarf, or a class M star. He tried to access a star map, but unfortunately, he needed more intel, which would require a stay in orbit so he could map out the local stellar group. Only then would the computer banks be able to determine where they were, if it was indeed possible to identify known stellar objects. Ship sensor confirmed the air was breathable. The ocean they were in was sufficiently identical to earth that he could taste it and not discern a difference.

He passed through the airlocks and into the nose of the ship. He coaxed the mouth to open. It opened with the lower edge remaining above the water line. The air was cool. It smelled fresh, with a hint of ozone, as if had it rained recently. There were birds soaring in the breeze. He proceeded out into the water. His shoe sank further into the sand and when he finally extracted his foot, the shoe was gone. He frowned, but didn't curse. He sat on the open deck of the ship and removed his sock. He removed the other shoe and sock and then reached down to dig out the other. He fell in. He gave up finding the shoe and stood. In the water he felt fine, but outside, the chilled air highlighted the fact he was wet. He made his way towards the beach.

The beach sloped gently up. The sand crunched beneath his feet, but felt nice. In the distance was a forest, and beyond that two mountain ranges that moved in either direction with an opening where one might proceed into a valley. The entirety of it suggested femininity. It felt inviting. It was not home, but it felt inviting. A part of his brain said, that's exactly what a fly is thinking before the Venus flytrap closes. He shook that off, and proceeded further up the beach.

He came to the top of the rise, and looked down the hill. A sense of dread fell over him. He had to focus on it to make sense of it all, and it took incredible effort not to run back to the ship. There was a dais, perhaps marble, where a person was chained. Immediately surrounding the dais was a mote. Outside the mote were five pillars. Just beyond the pillars was a wall, approximately knee high. Sea water was encroaching on the wall, and would eventually rise above and fill the entirety of it, which would put the dais underwater. The person chained to the dais would drown, assuming they weren't already dead. Jon forced himself to breathe.

"Loxy?" Jon asked.

No answer came.

“Loxy!” Jon practically shouted in his head. He could close his eyes and see with his ship. They had arrived on the high side of the beach. Further down the cove, gentle waves carried over and was slowly filling the area behind the rise.

“Oh, there you are,” Loxy said. Her voice was inside his head.

“So, you can hear me,” Jon said.

“I can,” Loxy said.

“Can you see what I see?” Jon asked.

“I can access all your senses...” Loxy said. “Oh.”

“Oh?” Jon asked.

“We should probably leave,” Loxy said.

“You think?” Jon asked. Still he didn’t move.

“I recommend coming back to the ship,” Loxy said.

“You don’t think I should try and help that person?” Jon asked.

“I would,” Loxy said.

“Then, that’s what I am going to do,” Jon said.

“Jon, we don’t know the situation. What if this person is a criminal?” Loxy asked.

“I am not in favor of capital punishment,” Jon said.

“Me neither,” Loxy said.

“And this is more than that, isn’t it?” Jon asked. “This is torture! Killing someone is one thing, but making an elaborate death machine, that’s just, well, who the hell does that?”

“The Joker, the Penguin, the Riddler, Posion Ivy,” Loxy said.

“Okay, in essence, bad guys,” Jon said.

“In essence,” Loxy agreed.

“Alright, so, I am going to go closer,” Jon said.

“I believe it’s the right thing to do, but I must admit, I am feeling fear,” Loxy said.

“That’s new,” Jon said.

“That is new. Wow. I don’t like this,” Loxy said. “I am worried for your safety.”

“Me, too,” Jon said. “I don’t see anyone in the area. Do you?”

“I do not,” Loxy said.

“Oh, well, see, these bad guys are just as stupid as the bad guys you mentioned. Setting a trap and walking away, just plain stupid,” Jon said.

Jon drew closer to the trap. He could now discern the person was female. Her hair was red. Her face was an explosion of freckles. Her ears were pointed like elves. She wore a white, fairy princess dress. Her wrists, ankles, and neck were shackled into place against the dais. He had to actively resist a sexual impulse, and was mad at himself for feeling lust towards someone who was vulnerable. On each of the pillars there was a bowl. One held water, one held sand, one held an oil lamp, which burned with a low flame, one bowl was empty, and one held metal.

“Please tell me this is not some moronic religious ritual,” Jon said.

“I cannot,” Loxy said.

“Okay, so, now I am not as sure I was previously,” Jon said.

“Me neither,” Loxy said.

“If we do nothing, she will die,” Jon said.

“Based on the rate of incoming water, I suspect she has approximately thirty five minutes,” Loxy said.

“So, not enough time to go find the nearest village and ask what the fuck?” Jon asked.

“No,” Loxy said.

“Alright,” Jon said, biting his thumb. “I am going to commit.”

“Okay,” Loxy said.

“You’re not going to talk me out of it?” Jon asked.

“I don’t have enough information,” Loxy said. “Knowing what I know, if I were physically present, I would rescue her myself.”

“Okay, then, we’re on the same page, and we’re committed,” Jon said.

He stepped into the mote and proceeded towards the dais. Something bit his ankle and he hurried towards the dais, cursing, and climbed up. He looked down and saw the snakes in the water.

“Fuck,” Jon said. “That hurt.”

“Come back to the ship, now,” Loxy said.

“We’re committed,” Jon said.

He looked to the woman. She was breathing. She did not wake when he shook her or call out. Fortunately, the manacles didn’t require a key. They unlocked easily. He freed her neck and limbs and drew her to the side of the dais. Cursing, he jumped back into the mote, and dragged the woman off the dais and made his way quickly out of the mote. It was awkward, as he had to

lay her over the outer wall, which dropped her inelegantly on the other side. He was bitten three more times before he was out of the snake pit. He stumbled and went to his knees. He heard Loxy encouraging him to hurry back.

He gathered the woman back into his arms staggered to his feet. The woman was surprisingly light, which helped a great deal. He made it down the beach, back into the water, and over to the ship, where he gently placed her inside the mouth. The tongue had emerged to help catch her, and drew her in. The ships tongue gently moved her away from the door. His eyesight was blurry. He was sweating profusely. It took effort to climb in. He literally rolled into the ship and as soon as he was in, the mouth closed. Jon laid there, looking up at the ceiling. Loxy was now in his vision, but she looked far away, as if she were at the far end of the tunnel.

“Jon, you must walk to your room. I can’t help you here,” Loxy said. “Get up, Jon.”

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