

THE DRAGONS OF SUMMER

By John D. Boenke

As Related To Him
By Grand Lord Nur Xand
During The Summer Of 1997

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John D. Boenke was born in 1926 in Rossford, Ohio and grew up during the Great Depression. He served in the U. S. Army in 1946 - 47 in the Medical Corps. In 1951 he received a degree of Bachelor of Science in Physics from the University of Michigan. After college, Mr. Boenke worked in research and engineering for the General Electric Company. Later he was the Manager of an engineering test laboratory for Lau Blower Company, then Chief Engineer for Halsey Taylor Water Cooler Corp. and Senior Design Engineer for The Werner Ladder Company. Before retiring in 1989, Mr. Boenke also owned and operated a small motel in Ashtabula, Ohio.

Since retiring, Mr. Boenke has been interested in reading and studying in the areas of Cosmology, Theoretical Physics and Philosophy. In addition, he has an interest in the origins of religions. He has privately published several short stories and some poetry.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

I am indebted to Miss Denise N. (Nikki) Kittrell for many of the ideas in this story. Some of these ideas are, that Dragons are kind helpful beings, that they are space travelers, that they have a very advanced civilization, they live long and useful lives, and it is possible for them to live in human form under certain conditions. In discussions and correspondence, Miss Kittrell has helped me advance the story line

Dedicated to Nikki
And to All The Friendly Dragons

CHARACTERS:

Grand Lord Nur Xand. space captain, scientist, retired philosopher Dragon, and father of Ekk Xand.

Lady Cosmo Zea Tiex, early space explorer and life partner of Nur Xand. Dame of the realm of Malan, one of the ten realms of the Dragon Empire.

Ekk Xand. a Lord of Ratha, another of the ten realms of the Dragon Empire.

Neth Olana Life partner of Ekk Xand and a Dame of the realm of Argno.

Tran Kettra, a dragon child of Argno, currently living as a human: Katie Maureen Callen, a 15 year old girl.

Elsbeth Miranda, Katie's new friend and bad influence.

Orf NaArgno, Human Contact Minister of the Dragon Empire, old relative of Neth.

Kaul Lando, a dragon child of Ratha currently living as a human: Alfred Fargo, a 35 year old government employee.

Gort NaKalkan, a Lord of the Kalkan realm. Overseer of the space warp portals and time tunnels.

Bill Harlow, College student friend of Elsbeth's brother.

Alice Martin, a friend of Katie's since the third grade.

SETTINGS:

Dugan's Mill, a small mid-western town, main scene of the story,
Ragonton, state capitol, scene of intrigues.

INTRODUCTION

In the human earth year of 1997, Grand Lord Nur Xand, an elderly Dragon, decided it was time to let the humans know more exactly just how the Dragons interacted with the earthly creatures, and how dragon influence helped humans to deal with the unusual demands of physical existence. Nur Xand is, of course, the retired but still very active, leading philosopher of the Dragon Empire. The information and supporting stories contained herein were transferred to the writer, John Boenke, by Nur Xand using the customary method of thought transfer during human sleep. The writer then formulated the ideas and stories into understandable human language.

This book is the result. It is hoped the situations described and the events explained will give a greater insight to the valuable assistance the Dragon Empire renders to the human world almost on a daily basis. As the transcriber, I ask you read with an open mind, and look for the meaning the great philosopher, Grand Lord Nur Xand wishes us to absorb.

John D. Boenke, Transcriber

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Since beginning this transcription, and allowing helpful critics to read some of it, questions have arisen which have been submitted to be asked of Lord Nur Xand. One of these is, "If Dragons have the form which we have come to know, how can they have the physical dexterity to have achieved such advanced abilities and knowledge as is evident in their accomplishments?"

When posed to Lord Nur Xand during a thought transfer dream, his initial reaction was to laugh in a most uncontrolled fashion. Then he went on to explain that humans do not have a "corner on the market" when it comes to manipulating the physical world. In the same way that humans use various tools, from the simplest screwdriver to complex electronic devices, Dragons have their own tools and instruments adapted to their unique physical characteristics. These tools work for them just as well as human tools work for humans. In fact, the Dragons know of other life forms in other parts of the cosmic universe which have advanced very far in controlling their worlds, but who have physical shapes stranger than we can imagine. Yet they have their own unique tools, which work quite well in their situations.

Another question was, "How do the Space Warp Portals work and how are they different from Time Tunnels?" Lord Nur indicated that the inner working of Space Warp Portals and Time Tunnels was too complex to try and explain through the limited contact he has with humans in thought transfer. But he described the simple difference is in the effect the two structures achieve. In his words, "Time Tunnels can be traversed to other places and other times, whereas Space Warp Portals only work between places which are in co-incident time. My best interpretation of 'co-incident' time is that both places remain in their 'present' time." The intricacies of this concept is not altogether clear to the writer.

J.D.B.

PROLOG

The Dringo Event

In her light sleep Cosmo dreamed horrible dreams reliving the experience of their ship being invaded by the Dringos, the crew and Nur being captured, her own risky escape in the emergency vehicle, and her eventual re-contact with Nur on the surface of Dringo

They had been on a routine expedition exploring new Worlds to establish friendly contacts when the unexpected had happened. All of the security protocols were followed in the initial contact, but In spite of their apparent amicable attitude, the Dringos had suddenly attacked and seized Dragonship 858 and all the dragon crew.

The overwhelming numbers of the Dringo contingent had made resistance impossible, and the dragon crew was subdued and transferred to the Dringo warship. Luckily, Cosmo had been below decks near the escape vehicle, and as soon as she realized the gravity of the situation, she had made the decision to vacate while she could. In the confusion the Dringos did not notice the small vehicle disengaging from the larger ship. She established a parking orbit above Dringo and waited for further developments.

Nur Xand had been put to work developing equipment for the Dringos, as they recognized him for the scientist he was, and wanted to utilize his talents. In his spare time, and secretly, he had improvised a communicator, and had been pleasantly surprised to hear Cosmo answer the first time he tried it. From that time on, it was only days till he built the mass transfer unit and escaped while not being observed. This was possible since he had been working on the theory and necessary mechanisms for the device for many years, and he was on the verge of completing it before they had started this voyage. That knowledge became very useful now and with bits and pieces of equipment “liberated” from other machinery around the laboratory he had managed to construct a working model which only he could operate.

He seized an early opportunity and using the coordinates Cosmo had sent to him, he transferred himself from the Dringo laboratory to the escape vehicle. Appearing into the small escape vehicle out of nowhere, he was the prime object in the first material transfer trial which was ever successful. Due to his good planning, he had arrived from the alien Dringo laboratory only slightly off the target. Unfortunately, he had slammed into the wall of the cabin with great force. Nevertheless, the transfer was successful due to his careful calculations and meticulous attention to details. The equipment was imperfect and improvised, but it had worked.

Cosmo stirred slightly and opened her eyes. Nur was collapsed into the resting spot on the other side of the cabin. His wings were at odd angles and the other wounds were only slightly crusted over. He breathed shallowly, but he breathed. That in itself was reassuring. She had been taking only short naps since he returned in such amazing fashion. Cosmo wondered whether the Dringos had yet figured out to where Nur had disappeared.

Nur was injured severely and needed immediate medical attention. He shifted slightly and moaned in pain. Cosmo had been doing her best to keep the wounds dressed, feed him whatever he could absorb, and wait patiently for the signal from Ratha. She quietly went to his side and refreshed a dressing on his head. A brief smile passed over his face and he relaxed. As she drifted off again into a troubled sleep, the emergency vehicle silently and stealthily orbited Dringo. She had sent the message to Ratha it seemed eons ago and yet no answer.

Cosmo woke suddenly to a blue signal light flashing on the message console and jumped up hurrying to the controls. Flipping a switch, a message came on and she listened to the message as it recorded.

“Captain Cosmo Zea Tiex. This is Dragon Base, Ratha. Congratulations on your outstanding recovery mission using the Dragonship 858 Emergency Vehicle. The safe return of Commander Xand and yourself is now your primary mission. You will have noted both you and he have been advanced a rank in your Commission by field promotion due to your performance at the highest levels of Dragon excellence.

“Your further orders are to send one more coordinate check to us for verification. then begin the trip to Dragon Base Ratha immediately. A hospital ship is already on its way and you are to meet it halfway. Transfer yourself and Commander Nur Xand to it as soon as contact is made

“A rescue fleet is leaving now in sequenced array in sufficient force to rescue our personnel being held captive by the Dringos. As they pass you, give them any updated information you may have to aid them in releasing the prisoners. Act now! Talons up for a job well conducted in emergency conditions. This is Dragon Base Ratha, done and out.”

Quickly, Cosmo did as directed, then released the small space ship from Dringo orbit and powered up for the trip home. There was a long way to go.

SPACE WARP PORTALS

Nur recovered and went on to have an outstanding career in developing the Space Warp Portals necessary for expediting contacts with other worlds. The dragons became the stabilizing influence in the universe, and made themselves useful in monitoring other civilizations in their growth into peaceful and satisfying places to live for many sentient animals in a myriad of worlds. In later life Nur turned to Philosophy as a less strenuous pursuit, but remained quite active. This story takes place late in his life and concerns the influence dragons have had on planet Earth. It deals mainly with a young human girl.

CHAPTER ONE THE SITUATION

Ekk stirred slightly, and exhaled a great breath. He could feel increased warmth as the stars in their slow, stately way inexorably came into juxtaposition, heralding the beginning of the active season. He felt another sensation, and realized Neth was staring at him. He heard her voice.

"We have to do something. YOU have to do something. She is in danger."

"Settle, Neth, settle." replied Ekk, "There is time, and I wish to sleep a little while yet. Let the season advance to its fullness, then will I go and observe."

"But she is in danger, and she is of my line."

There are never more than a few dozen Dragons living as humans at any time. Each one is assigned to another Dragon from one of the ten Realms of the Dragon Empire who has been appointed to oversee them and assume responsibility for their effectiveness in the human world. Tran was assigned to Ekk to supervise and guide. He had visited her several times in the few years she had been on earth. Visitations to humans are always a little delicate and must be conducted with great caution.

The Dragon-humans do not consciously remember the dragon world. They must be in the time of human sleep when the human mind in their Dragon brain is receptive to communication with a full Dragon mind. Their Dragon overguard must be physically close enough for this to be possible, since the human mind has a very limited transfer range. A Dragon must make the perilous trip through the Earth Space Warp Portal to the human world and assume a physical shape. Then the overguard must travel to their ward under the cover of darkness to communicate by thought transfer during the Dragon-human's sleep cycle. All of this, of course, is not a simple procedure, but can be replete with danger and chances for mishaps.

Ekk never enjoyed going through the portal, since it was on the smallish side and Ekk was a fairly large, well proportioned Dragon. Actually in the Dragon world he was one of the more magnificent specimens. Neth was happy she had berthed with him and they had developed a close, understanding relationship as life partners.

"Neth, I know. I have sensed the problem now for several weeks. Patience is required also. She has a Dragon brain. She will be all right yet a while. Now settle, or I will deal with you severely."

"Yes Ekk."

"That's LORD EKK!"

"Yes LORD EKK - Sire," Neth returned in a mocking teasing tone. Neth flicked Ekk firmly with her tail then wrapped it under herself. Ekk grimaced at her, and she

stuck out her tongue at him. They settled, and soft breathing noises resumed.

Nevertheless, Neth Olana could not sleep. She was concerned for Tran Kettra of Argno. Tran was living and growing as a human in her turn to serve the human world. But she was entering a dangerous time. In the human world there were all kinds of dangers and traps for one so young. "Yes, she has a Dragon brain, but that does not guarantee anything. There is still the human influence on her mind, and she is capable of being corrupted. Ekk is too much like his father," she thought to herself.

Ekk's father was the renowned Dragon philosopher Grand Lord Nur Xand who had done so much in guiding the Dragons in their efforts to serve the physical world. As a young Captain in the Space Patrol he had an outstanding career, then he had made significant contributions in developing space warp portals and time tunnels. In later life he devoted himself to the questions of Philosophy and the fine arts. Nur was certainly a gentle person, but sometimes not as aggressive in accomplishing deeds as some would have him be.

His aggression was in articulating the needed reforms and supporting them rationally. Others then had to make actions happen in fact. True, it was the females who had the real aggressive traits, but these were limited mainly to sexual concerns and the reproductive rites. Interaction with the greater universe was more a male thing, however inept they were at it. Neth sighed and gradually settled.

Starlight bathed their dragon mansion. It was located below a hill far from the concentration of other dragon homes. They had chosen to live apart, not to avoid their friends, but to enjoy the beauty of the natural vegetation not marred by the skyline shapes of the food processing installations. Friends were within easy flying distance, and the relative isolation of their hill home appealed to Ekk and Neth.

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Katie Callen's full name was Kathryn Maureen Callen, but everyone knew her as Katie. Long, dark Irish hair graced her ivory white features, and teasingly hid her luminous, variable greenish, bluish, gray eyes. Small but well proportioned, she did not stand out in a crowd, but that was as intended. It fulfilled the plans of the image makers. Katie had grown up in a fairly normal stable human household. Her father was a bit too opinionated, her mother often not grasping the needs of the teenage stage of life. Of course, no human family was perfect, and Katie's was as good as the average.

Summer vacation was beginning. It offered a chance for a little work, beach parties, dates maybe, more time for friends. She had a new friend also. Elsbeth Miranda was interestingly different than other girls she had known. Somehow more exciting or lively or - or, she did not know. Just more beguiling in a strange way. Elsbeth had hinted at a garden party in a few weeks. "Just as soon as my parents leave on their European trip," she had announced to her friends.

Katie was glad vacation was here. The school year had been hard and long. She had done well. She always did satisfactorily, but not quite as successfully as she wished. Intuitively she felt that being first was not necessarily the best place to be, but she did not understand why. She always had felt these strange sensitivities, and could not explain them, but she trusted them as being right and natural. These unusual emotions were associated with the strange dreams that intruded on her at times.

Unlike most dreams, these unique dreams she remembered in fairly great detail. She felt she was listening to some imposing presence, who showed her scenes and explained events in an interesting way. She was always at peace after such a dream, and felt elated and special because of them. Special, but a little confused. It seemed this great presence in the dream always referred to her as Tran. What a strange name - Tran. Who would ever call a person such a strange name? It certainly did not fit her.

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Ekk roused himself. Not too rapidly. It was well not to try to wake immediately. Changes of state were important and should be absorbed gradually. He slowly rose to his full height and stretched his wings as wide as they would go. He was an imposing sight, and certainly merited the respect he had earned in the Dragon Empire. Warm light drifted down from the skylights in their enormous high ceiling halls. Neth had taken special effort to make their comfortable underground home surround them in beauty. The hardened walls were covered with varieties of art work. Some was representative of the scenery of Ratha. A large part of it was simply patterns of warm colors arranged in such a way as to create pleasant feelings. One whole vestibule was decorated only with the art of Argno, Neth's homeland.

As Ekk emerged from the sleeping chamber, he reviewed in his mind the tasks facing him. Of prime importance was contacting Tran, and implanting some guidance ideas into her subconscious. That would be easy, getting through the Earth Space Warp Portal would be the tricky part. He must remember to ask Gort once again to do something about that portal. "Perhaps after I return from this present trip will be soon enough," Ekk murmured to himself.

But now it was time to go to Earth. Tran needed his assistance and he prepared himself for the trip. His first duty was to inform the Minister of Human Contact about his plans. The minister was a fairly old Dragon by the name of Orf NaArgno. Neth claimed him as a distant relative and the two of them had spent happy times with Orf on many occasions. Ekk respected Orf for his great experience and knowledge. He could always be trusted to exhibit the Dragon traits of understanding and acceptance in the most useful way. Neth slept on, as Ekk left to visit Orf. Ekk stepped through the shimmering door curtain and rose to the sky.

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"Hi, Katie, wait for me."

Katie turned to see Elsbeth coming out of the school doors for the last time until fall. She was carrying her fancy school bag stuffed and bulging with odds and ends of her belongings gracelessly stripped from her locker in her haste to be out and away from the building.

"Hi, Elsbeth, what's up?"

"Nothing yet, but wait till two weeks from today. My folks will be gone by then, and I'm planning that night for my party. Will you come?"

"Sure, why not? I think my folks will let me. What's going to be happening?"

"This is going to be my best party ever. My brother is bringing some of the guys from his fraternity house at the University home with him for a few days, so there will be some new faces to see. Ready for a sexual conquest?"

Katie looked down self-consciously, "No, I don't think I'm interested in that, but I'd like to meet some new guys."

"Well, you better start thinking about it. That's what guys are lookin' for you know."

Katie didn't reply, and Elsbeth rambled on about the party, the plans, and who would be there. At the end of the block Katie spoke up, "I have to turn off here. Let me know about the time of the party. Okay?"

"Sure, count yourself in. It's going to be a blast."

Katie walked home slowly, thinking about Elsbeth and the party. "It will be fun to meet some new people," she thought. "Perhaps, who knows, maybe there will be an especially nice guy there." She daydreamed the rest of the way home. The next few days were uneventful. Re-adjusting to the slower, sleep late, summer schedule was easy enough. But after several days Katie became bored and restless. One afternoon she decided to go swimming. Her friends were either not at home or did not want to go with her, so in her independent style, she set off alone.

The local swimming place was a small man-made lake with a clean sand beach and several well kept floats anchored just off the shore in water deep enough for diving. It was fed by a small clear running river, and the water always looked sparkling and reasonably transparent. The beach was usually well attended during vacation season, and today was no exception. There was a good crowd on the sand as Katie came out of the bathhouse.

She swam up and down between the floats for several minutes, then climbed out on one of them to rest. The sun was warm, not too hot, and she relaxed to soak up a few good rays. A group of smaller children, mostly boys came along splashing in and out of the water in a game of tag. Katie gave them an annoyed look, then decided to move to a less popular float.

She dove in and swam lazily to the float at the farthest end. Climbing out she lay down again to enjoy the sun. It took only a few minutes for the game of tag to find its way to her float, and again she was beset by noise and splashing. This forced her to sit up and watch the proceedings to protect herself. One of the boys jumped quickly off the float to avoid being tagged, and Katie noticed a surprised look on his face as he hit the water.

She watched for him to come up, but he did not appear where she expected to see him. She kept looking, and as the seconds passed, she suddenly became alarmed. Jumping up and racing to the edge of the float, she dove towards the spot where he had disappeared. Opening her eyes under water she pulled down and down. Yes! There! A still form. She grabbed desperately and got a hand full of hair. Hanging on with all her strength, "Now up!" she thought and struggled to the surface. Luckily she was near the float and started yelling "Help" immediately.

Swiftly she was surrounded by many persons pulling and hauling the youth from the water. Several held his head down to drain his mouth and lungs, then another

began to do mouth to mouth resuscitation, in only a few seconds the boy began coughing, spitting and trying to catch his breath. He was calmed, and one of the lifeguards took charge of the situation. In the confusion, Katie quietly slipped away, and swam back to the beach to return to the bathhouse. That event had been enough excitement for the day. She dressed slowly, then leisurely walked back home enjoying the early summer breezes.

Sleep came easily that night, but in the early hours of the morning, a dream came to her. It was the imposing presence again, speaking to her. "Tran, listen to me. You did a marvelous thing today. We are all proud of you and your instant action. But this event emphasizes the prevalence of the dangers around you. Be wary this summer of the negative influences on you. Be aware that even though you are perceptive and intelligent, you are young, and there is still much for you to learn in the human world. Do you hear me?"

Katie, in her sleep, smiled and nodded. She relaxed further and opened her mind to the amiable voice talking to her. She willingly paid attention to the pleasant sounding thoughts echoing in her mind. The dream continued. "In the next few weeks of this summer you will meet many temptations. You have the intelligence to resist the bad ones. You must grow your understanding of your human emotions and use them constructively to choose good from bad. You are not disposed to rash actions and that is good. That quality itself will protect you in many situations, but there are other events beyond your control, and you must be cautious. Your long life of service can depend on how you learn now and the actions you decide to take. Trust your intuition. You have an excellent Dragon brain. Use it to the fullest."

Katie felt peace and contentment. She felt herself floating, as in a warm stream of water. Gentle lapping and gurgling noises relaxed her and made her feel an intimate connection with the earth, the skies, indeed with the whole universe. It was satisfying and soothing. It regenerated her psyche as she flowed into and through all time and space. It was a most pleasant experience, and she wished it to continue forever.

"Tran, you have done an excellent job to the present. We know you are capable of a great life. Believe in your human self, and your Dragon self will serve you well. Let caution be your watchword. Use your intelligence and your rationalism in dealing with the realisms you find in the world around you. Remember, if there is anything which is sacred in the human world, it is your human body. Be conscientious with how you treat it, and have care with what you do to it. We will be watching over, and do our best to guide you. Trust yourself in all situations. You are an exceptional human being."

A series of scenes passed before Katie's eyes in her sleep. Scenes at the park and the lake. A party scene that shifted from one part of a large dimly lit yard to another. Scenes at home reading and some scenes at a strange place she had never seen before. Scenes inside a car racing along, then inside the parked car. Gradually, the activity subsided. Katie slept. She found herself slowly coming out of sleep with the warm glow of a bright sun peeping around the edge of the shade on her window. She felt well rested and ready for a busy day. But it was vacation time. What to do?

Mid morning brought one answer to the question. Katie's mother called her down to the telephone.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Katie? This is Alice Martin. How is vacation treating you so far?" Alice was a friend Katie had known almost all her life. They had been in the same classes since third grade, and were old friends.

"Well, pretty well. I haven't done much except to go swimming. And I'm planning on going to Elsbeth's party in a few days. Have you been invited?"

"Yeah, but I'm not sure I'll go. My mom isn't too keen on Elsbeth for some reason. But I'm calling about something else. I've been working at the Community Hospital as a volunteer, and they are looking for more volunteers to provide some time helping with small jobs around the hospital. Would you be interested in being an Auxiliary Aid?"

"What would I have to do?"

"It's easy, just guiding people around or taking them to the proper department. Sometimes we take books and things around to the patients. It's a lot of fun really. You get to meet a lot of interesting people."

"Well, I might."

"Could I pick you up tomorrow morning? I'll walk over there with you and show you around. You don't have to decide right away. You can think about it for a while."

"Sure, Alice, I'd like to go and find out about it anyway. I'll see you in the morning."

"Good, see you then, bye now."

CHAPTER TWO THE DECISION

"Orf, old friend, I have an idea I must discuss with you." Grand Lord Nur Xand spoke quietly as he sat with Orf NaArgno in a secluded warm space on Ratha. Orf did not respond, but simply waited. Orf and Nur had been together in the human world once long ago when they were young. They appreciated each other's understanding even beyond Dragon wisdom which caused them to have great mutual respect. Orf waited since he knew Nur would speak again when he was ready, and there were no other demands on either of them just now.

"I have decided to take an unusual action," Nur continued. "I want to improve the effectiveness of our help to the humans. It is my belief that if more of them were aware of the help we offer, they would be more open to looking for it and accepting it."

Orf sighed, "Letting them know us too closely is counter to the prevailing philosophy which has been accepted as the best policy since The Beginning. I did not need to say that, but your idea seems so unlike you. You are the greatest Philosopher the Dragons have ever known. Your training, experience and knowledge all reflect

the best of the Dragon Empire. The Realms all look to you for guidance and counseling in the traditions and the Dragon Way. Why now is it no longer appropriate to conceal our actions as in the past?"

Nur smiled and slowly went on, "I did not mean to imply we should be completely open. Even if we were, there are those who would not hear or not recognize the message. I do think though, that more of our interaction with humans should be made known in a way that those who are capable of understanding may find the way, without causing commotion and consternation among the average persons as was the case in the olden days when some of our kind appeared physically to them. I am not thinking of that, necessarily. My plan is to plant the seed of Dragon knowledge in the mind of a human writer who can then communicate it to other humans in a story form, which will be suitable for general information and entertainment."

Orf sat quietly a long while, then spoke. "How can you accomplish this? Where will you find a human with the capability of hearing and understanding you? It is difficult enough communicating with Dragon brains in human bodies as you well know. Where will you find a means to convey your ideas to a human brain in a human body?"

"There is one such possibility. I know of a writer who has a Dragon-human as a distant ancestor. Through genetic variations he exhibits some Dragon qualities, especially great compassion and understanding. I will try to contact him and tell him the stories. Because he has some Dragon attributes, it might just be possible. I have decided it is worth the effort. Will you join me in convincing the Council that it is the path to follow?"

"Nur, you know I always defer to your judgment. I will trust it as I usually do. Bring on the Council." Their dragon laughter rippled through the skies.

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The Grand Council of the Dragon Empire met only as necessary. Gort NaKalkan was annoyed at the current call to meeting. Gort felt he had more important tasks than visiting once again the question of human relations. Nur Xand certainly had the authority to call such a meeting, but it interfered with plans Gort had made some time ago during the last active period. Gort was pleased to spend as little time as possible at his duties as Lord of Kalkan, and any extra time for the administration of the Dragon Empire was wasted time in his view. Nevertheless, Gort was obliged to attend the called meeting. The Assemblage spot was designed to be used only for Empire meetings and provided all the space necessary for the Lords and Dames and other authorized officers of the realms. This meeting brought 25 attendees who moved ponderously into the Assemblage. Grand Lord Nur Xand was already in place at the center with Cosmo Zea Tiex, his life partner, at his side. He seemed to be anxiously awaiting the rest of the council members to move in and settle.

In due course the group quieted down and Nur Xand began to speak. "Lords, Dames, and Officers, I have called you here because I want to propose a change in our relationships with the humans." Nur was not one to beat around the bush, but came directly to the point. "We have sometimes not been as effective in our efforts to help humans as we would like to be, because they have not recognized our assistance when it was offered." There were a few nodding heads as the Dragons heard his words.

"As you know, our policy has disapproved of direct contact with humans since The Beginning. Our contact is through our own kind living as humans, and it is only indirectly through these Dragon humans that we try to exert our influence. We have not appeared to humans nor contacted them directly now for many ages. Only during the early times while the humans were still developing their knowledge did some Dragons appear physically to them. I have always maintained these visitations caused more problems than they solved. That is why the proscription on Physical Exhibitions was put in place."

The multitude of Dragons sat quietly and attended to all that Grand Lord Nur Xand spoke. "Now however, the humans have advanced intellectually to a great degree. Many of the more perceptive humans are learning about space-time, the inner working of matter from atoms to galaxies, and the fundamental forces. The mental capacity of their science leaders has expanded greatly and the educated ones of their science community are now able to understand much of what was not available to them during early times." There was an undercurrent murmur and glances were exchanged which acknowledged this new situation in circumstances. "Because of these new conditions, I propose we have a more direct, but yet controlled contact with certain ones of the human race."

At this point there was an interruption. A large Dragon in the rear raised up and roared, "Nur, you are entirely wrong in this action, and I, Gort NaKalkan, oppose what you say. It can only lead to trouble. Why must we waste our time in this frivolous pursuit which has been considered and rejected before?"

Up till this time Lady Cosmo Tiex had been listening intently to Nur's words. With Gort's outburst, she rose up angrily, but calmly, and spoke out, "Gort, if you spent half the time on Empire business as you spend in your own self indulgent pursuits, you would know what Nur says has merit. Times have changed! We have changed! And humans have changed, also! It is appropriate to reconsider our actions and improve our usefulness in the universe. I suggest you be quiet and listen."

Murmurs of approval drifted through the gathering, and Gort re-settled in his place somewhat chastened. Nur continued, "I realize there are serious matters to consider in any such changes and I have given them many hours of thought. What I am proposing is no massive change. It only allows the release of information slowly and gradually to those who can handle it. They can then interpret it in a manner that will be acceptable to the human race in general. There should still be no physical confrontation, except in the most unusual situations. I propose contacting through the sleep transfer method a receptive human, and let him learn some of our purposes and ideas, and even some of our history. This will heighten the awareness in particular humans of the existence of Dragons and the valuable help they offer."

Again Gort arose and loudly proclaimed, "Now you are talking nonsense. How can you contact a human brain? Do you suddenly have super-Dragon powers? Mind contact is difficult even with our own kind in human bodies. How do you propose to accomplish this? Please explain to the council."

Nur was well prepared for this question. After the assemblage quieted down, he confidently went on, "In recent years, we have been doing some research. I and some of my co-workers have made trips to Earth to try probing human minds. We have found that in many humans who have had ancestors who were Dragon-humans, there is some slight contact possible. Although our studies are not complete, there is evidence, given the right combination of factors, such thought transfer would be possible. I am asking the council for permission to go ahead with the next step which is to contact one particular human and implant some ideas. We would soon know whether this will be useful or even work."

As Nur stopped speaking there arose a gentle murmur through the crowd. Several minutes passed as the Dragons considered with each other all that Nur Xand

had said. As the noise rose in volume, Orf NaArgno moved to the front of the group. He turned and raised a talon for silence and all turned their attention to him. "As Minister for Human Contacts, I believe my opinion carries some weight. All that our great Philosopher Nur Xand explained has merit. I, for one, fully support pursuing this new policy for a year. We can then review it next year to see how it has worked. Unless someone has some pertinent comments, I propose we vote. Would all those who agree with me so indicate?" There seemed to be a sea of talons raised.

"Any against the action?" No one responded. "Any abstentions?"

Gort raised his talon high and bellowed, "Let it be known I will have no part of this nonsense."

Orf summed up, "The action is passed unanimously, except for one abstention."

After the meeting there was a long period of socializing among the Dragons. Most had made a special trip through the Space Warp Portal from their particular world, and wanted to take time to talk with friends not often seen. Dragons are basically friendly and like to talk. They are always interested in exchanging new ideas, and visiting with old friends to renew their acquaintance. Dame Neth Olana particularly liked to talk with the Argno contingent to learn the latest news in the land where she grew up. Her duties and activities kept her from returning to Argno very often, but she maintained a strong interest in the changes and developments in the Argno Realm.

The Dragon Empire consists of ten Realms. Each Realm is located on a different world in other parts of the universe. All Realms are connected to all other Realms though the space warp portal system. Ratha was the original settlement and is therefore the oldest. It is also where the central government is situated. All Empire business is conducted in Ratha's Pan-Universe structures. The seat of the Pan-Universe government of the Dragon Empire is located among some low rolling hills known as The Greenways on Ratha. This pleasant area provides all the necessary space for offices and meeting halls around and under the hills. Although Dragons can adapt to rather wide temperature variations, still the underground locations provide temperature stability, and eliminate the need for heating or cooling. Underground locations are naturally the most desirable for most activities.

Dragons live simply with very little environmental impact. Eons ago, in the early times, they learned the secrets of manufacturing nutritious food from basic ingredients, and thus they make very little demand on the flora and fauna of their worlds. They are equally concerned with the environmental degradation of other life sustaining worlds.

Gradually, the talking subsided and the large group of government officials dispersed. Eventually all that remained were the quiet smooth hills of the Greenways as the Dragons made their way to their various homes.

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Ekk was pleased with the contact with Tran. She was a very resourceful young lady, and it was pleasant making mind contact with her. Perhaps he was pleased because he saw some of Neth's traits in her, also. They were both of the same line, so that was possible. Ekk approached the space warp portal cautiously. It was a small

old one, and he always hated to deal with it. He was tired as he rapidly came upon it. He realized his angle and direction were a little wrong, but they did not seem too badly aligned. He went through. There was a sudden jarring force, then he felt himself slam into something painfully, powerfully wrong. He spun to the side and collapsed outside the far opening and remained still.

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"Hells bells! Now what?" Alfred Fargo was confused and upset. Nothing was going right today. He had gotten up late, had a flat tire, and now this. And it was an important day, too. Events would prove it might even be a critical day for the survival of the World Federation. Alfred was to have met a contact on the fourth level of the Uptown parking garage a half an hour ago. Alfred had been there early, but the time for the meeting had come and gone with no one in sight. It was Saturday and the garage was almost deserted. There was only one other car on this level with him, a black van. Alfred felt conspicuous as he slouched down in the front seat of his old sedan even though no one seemed to be around.

The mysterious agent had hinted in his contact request message to Alfred, of an important development in a threat to the Federation. Alfred waited another ten minutes. Then, sure that nobody was going to show up, he started the engine and slowly drove over to the ramp and headed out. As he did so, he did not notice two figures raise up slowly in the black van and watch him leave. The van then started up and followed Alfred at an unobtrusive distance. Alfred drove home.

On the way he mused to himself of his career. He had been encouraged to get into this sort of duty by the voices he heard at night. Naturally, he had never told anyone about that, but in his mind the voices were completely trustworthy. Nothing they had ever told him had proved to be wrong, and he felt he was doing a great service in the position he filled in the Security Forces.

In his duties as Secretary to the Security Minister, he kept aware of the critical happenings in the World Federation. Alfred often got involved with sensitive operations, and sometimes he was sent on unusual trips. He had learned not to ask too many questions in the years he had held the post and had become a valued employee. Alfred often recalled the strange trip he made once to Niburia. He had been sent off with a briefcase, a code word and a description of a man. He had traveled on three different chartered planes by a roundabout route for ten hours. When he arrived at the Niburian Airport, his man was waiting there, and after proper identification, Alfred gave him the briefcase. Alfred boarded the next commercial flight home and nothing more was ever mentioned of the trip officially or otherwise. He had often wondered what was behind all that secrecy.

This latest event with the no-show agent disturbed him, and he would have no information for the Minister of Security tomorrow. Where would that leave them? They had no other leads. The agent had hinted at a threat to the Federation. What kind of threat would that be? Certainly there was no organization who could launch a military threat against the World Federation. None of the independent states were strong enough to do that. How could the Federation be threatened? It would have to be something quite unusual.

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Nur Xand approached the portal with the practiced eye of many traverses. He slipped in at exactly the right angle and in a second was out the other side. But there

he almost tripped. A Dragon was lying in the path. Turning to look, he realized with astonishment it was his own offspring, Ekk, lying motionless in a heap. Quickly he moved to his side. It was immediately obvious to Nur that Ekk's wing was damaged. He had a brief flashback to that time when He, Nur, had gone through a space warp portal for the first time and almost killed himself. Then it was Cosmo who had saved him. Now it was his turn to save Ekk.

"Are you conscious, Ekk?" he implored.

A flicker of eyelids answered, and a low voice added, "Yes, but I am in pain. Is that you sire? I cannot fly. Something is broken."

"I can see that, but it is only a simple break. Nothing is destroyed. Will you be all right here till I get a transporter?"

"Yes sire, I'm not planning on moving," he added with a wry smile. "Don't go slowly though, I'd appreciate not having to lie here too long."

"I shall return as rapidly as possible."

Later, when Ekk was returned to his home for recovery and was resting quietly if not painlessly, Neth chided him. "Tell me again how this happened. You say you were speeding and didn't notice the portal until it was too late?"

"You know what happened, dear one, and if I get no more sympathy than that, you may expect dire consequences when I am once again able to be about."

"Yes, Lord Ekk, I will try to find more sympathy for you. Now let me see, where did I put it?"

All Ekk could do was emit a low moan, and whisper, "Save some of that sympathy for Gort NaKalkan. His neck will be at risk if he does not get onto his responsibility and start his workers doing something about enlarging that portal. It has needed it for almost an age now and I'm tired of dealing with it. I won't stand for it any longer."

Neth relented in her teasing of Ekk and her mood changed. She asked, "On a more practical matter. What will we do about Tran? What if she needs some guidance while you are unable to go to her?"

Ekk winced as he spoke, "Would you take on that duty for a while? You have had experience, and you know the situation as well as I do." That was true because Ekk had shared with Neth all the problems and activities with Tran since she had been in human form. It was natural that Neth take over, and she readily agreed.

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The black van stopped a half a block from where Alfred parked. Two dark figures observed as Alfred got out, locked up, and went into his apartment. One of them

then pulled out a cellular phone and tapped out a number. Quietly he talked into the small device. "Okay, we know where he lives. We can find out who he is, and put a bug on his phone to keep him under surveillance. We just don't know how much he knows at this time. That will probably come out soon enough."

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"So how is Ekk feeling by now?"

Orf and Nur were relaxing in one of the many pleasant natural areas which were to be found in Ratha. In The Beginning, the long range planning had called for many open places where Dragons could retreat to meditate or just find solitude when that was necessary for their well being.

Nur waited a moment to respond, then volunteered, "He is fine. He needs rest and time to mend, but Neth is a good nurse, and she knows how to handle him. I have already spoken rather severely to Gort, and I think he has gotten the message that the Earth Space Warp Portal needs attention. As a matter of fact I believe I saw some of his workers headed that way a little while ago."

"And your other activity, the human mind contact?"

"That one is not going as rapidly as I would like. The human brain is a difficult thing to penetrate."

With a mischievous grin, Orf asked, "Is this new information? Or perhaps, one's mental abilities at your age may have receded a little? By the way, how are you managing the frequent trips through the portals? You are not as young as the Dragonship Captain I once knew."

"Whom are you accusing of being old, Oh ancient one? My beard is no longer or whiter than yours dear friend. To further your enlightenment, I have visited the writer three times already, and have made limited contact. That in itself is a success. There is only one small problem."

"And what might that be Sir Mind Prober?"

"The human writer gets confused easily. At present he believes he is Nur Xand and I am just his conscience."

Orf roared. Dragon laughter echoed over the gentle hills and poured into the cool dark glades. "He thinks he is Nur Xand? So much for the gentle touch of the experienced prober."

"Careful, wise one, or I may have to Dragon wrestle you to preserve my dignity and reputation. Do you recall the last contest we had?"

The laughter subsided to a chuckle, then silence followed and peace reigned in the glen again. After a while Orf spoke further. "Let us approach this rationally and with reason. What is it necessary to do to intrigue the human mind and raise it to the degree of receptiveness that is needed for you to convey your thoughts most

effectively?"

"Yes - that is the crux of the matter. What if --."

The two Dragons quietly exchanged ideas until they were satisfied a new approach had been discovered, and they had reached a new confidence that the required high degree of contact with the somewhat perplexed human mind would be possible.

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Katie smiled as she read in the Daily World, the local newspaper, a small article giving an account of the incident at the Lake. It named the child who had been rescued. Several other youngsters volunteered as the ones who had pulled the victim from the perilous waters, and others volunteered they had helped drain and resuscitate the young person. So all roles were accounted for, and Katie could put the experience behind her.

"Well and good," she thought, "I'd rather think about Elsbeth's party." The party was just five days away, and Katie had permission to go. "As long as you don't stay out too late," was her mother's firm reply. Katie had minimal preparations, a hair trim, a new skirt to go with her favorite blouse, and selection of the absolutely most appropriate choker neckpiece.

Katie wandered over to Elsbeth's house and found her sitting on the porch busily making lists. Elsbeth greeted Katie with, "My folks have just left, and my brother will be here the day after tomorrow, so there is lots to do. You want to help with the plans?"

"Sure. What do you want me to do?"

"First, count up the names on these three lists, and give me the totals of guys and girls."

The two friends sat quietly going over details of things yet to be done. Katie was impressed at the extent of Elsbeth's invitation list and the amount of food she planned to have. "It's great you're doing this, Elsbeth. How did you get your parents to agree to it?"

"It was instead of going to Europe with them. I knew they would rather go alone anyway. So I could negotiate a good deal with them. I got a good budget to work with, and the only requirement is that my brother be here to oversee all the activity. That's no problem though, he and I have an understanding."

"What kind of understanding is that?"

"It's simple. I get to do anything I want, and I don't tell anyone, like my parents, what I know about his activities last summer up at the lake."

"That sounds like black mail to me."

"Whatever," Elsbeth shrugged. "It works. Besides he likes a good time too, and I'm doing all the planning and all the work for him and his friends. Now, let's start figuring how much stuff we'll need. Should we get more wine or more beer? How much does one person drink?"

CHAPTER FOUR PARTY TIME

Alfred reported the non-event of the previous day to the Security Minister. "I was there and waiting, but no one ever showed up."

"Maybe it was just a crank. Was this someone you had dealings with before?"

"No, but he seemed to know the proper codes and methods to get a meeting. It was not a name I had even heard before, so he's an unknown quantity. What do we do now?"

"I suggest you contact some of your usual informants to see whether they have heard anything unusual."

"I don't want to stir up anything though. If I start asking, perhaps someone will hear about it and know we're suspicious of something coming down."

"Yes, that's a risk, but you know how to be cautious. You have done it before." Alfred went back to his activities rather dubiously. This whole situation disturbed him, since it was not the usual course of events. His intuition told him there was big trouble here, but how to find it?

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"Hello Neth. How's your patient." Lord Nur Xand and Lady Cosmo Tiex had come to visit Ekk, and inquire on his progress in healing.

"Except for being unreasonably demanding, he's doing fine. I'll be happier when he can be about on his own again. Thanks to you both for coming to cheer him up."

Cosmo replied, "He should not be too long in healing, I think. I understand the wing is knitting together well, and he can be up soon. He just won't be able to fly for quite a while afterward."

"Who is that out there making all the noise?" came a voice from an inner room. "Can't a person have a little peace and quiet around here?"

Nur smiled at Neth and remarked, "He is certainly feeling better. I can tell by his tone."

More loudly Cosmo spoke, "Be still youngster. It's your parents coming to commiserate with you in your discomfort."

As Nur and Cosmo moved into the sleeping hall and settled by his side, Ekk relented, "Sorry ancient ones, I didn't know it was you."

"Your apology is accepted, and the disrespect is ignored, offspring. Now, how long before you begin the strength enhancing exercises?" asked Nur.

"I am told only a few more days and I can begin, but I am annoyed it will take so long though."

"Well, wings are delicate structures. They need to be improved slowly or further damage could result. You will be glad to know that the Earth space warp portal is enlarged. Everyone got after Gort, and he finally fixed it to a better size. Even I can stumble through it without much problem anymore."

"Good! I'm glad to hear that. It will make unnecessary my breaking Gort's neck when I am up and about again." Ekk grinned at his Sire while he showed his relief that the portal was now fixed, yet he did not convey a serious intent to threaten Gort's well being. "That's right," he continued, "You have been making frequent trips also, haven't you, Sire? How are you progressing with your project of contacting the human writer?"

"It has begun to go much better. He now understands who I am, and my purpose in contacting him. He seems to be absorbing the ideas easier and easier as I go along. I believe that is because one of his ancestors was a Dragon-human, he will comprehend the whole history from The Beginning up till the present quite well, and he will appreciate the chronicles of the Dragons experiences with humans. Somehow, I think some of these human brains are capable of being trained to understand thought transfer quite well. At least, the writer is showing that ability."

"That is amazing. There are those who did not think you would be able to contact him at all. Do you believe the writer will be able to see the significance of what you are talking about and put it in a form for others of his kind to understand?"

"That, of course, is the crucial question. All we can do is wait and see."

"I am pleased that you say the portal is improved. You know Neth has assumed the responsibility for Tran and will be making some trips through the portal herself. I would worry about her if it had not been fixed."

"Yes, I have heard that Tran is developing quite well. What are the eventual plans for her?", asked Cosmo.

"Well, that naturally remains an open question until she is adult, and we have a chance to see what other things happen in her life and the course of events on Earth. We need to get through this critical stage first, then we can consider where else she would be most useful. Mostly she will determine where to go herself, since she

is right there in the middle of the human situation."

"It is an interesting time." offered Cosmo, "Many changes are occurring, and we must be prepared for them.

"Yes, I'll be glad when I can participate again." Ekk looked a little annoyed with his present inability to function normally.

"It will not be too long. You need to be patient." Cosmo added most sympathetically. "But now we must go. Unfortunately we are committed to going to a party and having a good time with our friends. However, we will be thinking of you."

"Thank you for visiting me, folks. And you don't hurt my feelings. You know how I hate parties," he added a little sarcastically while sticking out his tongue to emphasize his point. (Dragons enjoy sticking out their tongues even more than humans do. It is more a part of their nature - ed.)

Nur and Cosmo rose rather slowly, and offered a parting salute of "Mamarada" (translation: keep good health till we meet again - ed.) to Neth, and made their way out into the bright day.

After their elders left, Neth turned to Ekk and spoke seriously, "I am going to earth to observe this party Tran is attending."

"Do you think it is wise?" Ekk asked in response to Neth's declaration.

"Wise or not, I think this party has all kinds of trouble associated with it. I'm going down and observe." she repeated.

"You may be right. Certainly it is a precaution which is worth the effort. Be careful though. I need you back here too."

"Yes, poor baby, I know how helpless you are."

Ekk glared at Neth, but then had to smile, "You are incorrigible. Won't I ever get any respect, much less any sympathy?" After Neth left, Ekk settled down again to rest. Actually, he was feeling much better. Now all he had to do was rehabilitate his wing.

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Party day had arrived. Katie ate very little lunch and no supper in anticipation of all the good food Elsbeth would have at her party. Not hurrying too much, Katie put on her party clothes, and casually walked over to Elsbeth's house. The yard was dimly lit with hanging lanterns, and popular music was playing on the back patio. Amazingly the music was not too loud, and several persons were dancing as Katie entered. Katie had previously decided not to drink the wine and beer which Elsbeth would have available. She had tasted beers and wines before and didn't particularly care for either, although she was somewhat interested in exploring the different

varieties of wines someday. Tonight she just wanted to have fun and not experiment.

Noticing her arrival, Elsbeth's brother beckoned to her to join a small group of fellows with him. He introduced her around to several of his friends from college. Katie tried to remember the names, but only one stuck with her. Bill Harlow. He was blond and good looking and seemed to have a pleasant twinkle in his eye. As the others drifted away to the food and drink tables, Katie found herself alone with him.

"So, what are you studying at college?" Katie inquired.

"Nothing special yet. I just finished my freshman year and most of the stuff is the required general courses everyone has to take."

"I see. But what will you go into when you decide what to major in?"

"I think I'll shoot for pre-med, and hope to get into medical school when I graduate. I'm interested in the human body. It's a fascinating work of art and ingenuity, don't you think?"

"Well - yes - I guess so. I never really gave it much thought."

"Sure it is. Now take your body for instance. Petite, well formed, pretty, and the most amazing thing is that it is self contained with all the necessary functions to live, grow, and meet all the requirements of the world around it and to react with other persons and other life situations. I think that is very fascinating."

Katie felt a little uncomfortable, but responded, "I can see you are interested in people. Is that what it takes to be a doctor?"

"Well, I think it's a good start. You can't really help people unless you like them first. Hey, I'm going to get something to drink. Can I get you a beer or some wine?"

"No, I don't think I care for either. I'll just have some of the punch."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. There are better drinks than beer and wine aren't there? I generally carry my own. Stay here. I'll be back in a minute with the punch.

Katie stood and surveyed the crowd which had grown in size since she arrived. She knew almost everyone there except the college fellows. Alice Martin arrived and greeted Katie.

"Hi there, my Mom decided it was okay for me to come for a little while. I see Elsbeth has really laid out a fine party. Who are all the guys, though?"

"They are Elsbeth's brother's friends from college. They all seem very pleasant. See the blond by the punch? His name is Bill Harlow. We were talking and he is getting me some punch."

Alice gave Katie a knowing smile and nodded, "Okay, he's yours. I'll find another one." When Bill returned, Katie introduced them to each other. The three engaged in small talk as they became more at ease with each other's company. They remained in a small group of four or five, as others came and went. The talk was light and frivolous, but enjoyable. Katie noticed the punch had an especially good flavor, and wondered how Elsbeth had concocted it. The full glass went down very easily and she was soon ready for more.

Bill was eager to fetch the drinks and even brought back some cookies and crackers. As the talk continued, Katie began to feel strange and lightheaded. She decided she would rather sit down instead of stand, so Bill guided her out to a corner of the garden. They found a cushioned bench where she could lay back and relax. The music and conversation faded to a background buzzing. All Katie could hear was Bill's soft and entrancing voice.

"Would you like another glass of punch?"

"Yes, but I seem to be feeling sleepy."

Bill put his arm around her and pulled her close. She did not feel up to resisting, and she only weakly brushed his hand away from her breast where it had seemed to end up. "If you are feeling sleepy, I have a pill in the car I know would make you feel better and wake up. Would you like one?"

"Maybe, what kind of pill is it?"

"Oh, just a pill to help keep you awake. You stay here, and I'll go get it and some more punch. Is that all right?"

"Sure, I'll stay here," Katie drawled the words out slowly and closed her eyes.

"I'll be right back."

As Katie sat on the cushioned bench, she began to feel a little better, but her mind was confused. She found it difficult to focus on anything. Staring at the dancers going round and round on the porch and listening to the rhythmic music mesmerized her. Random thoughts rambled through her brain aimlessly. "Where was Bill? He had gone to get something. Yes, more punch. It was very good punch. And something else? A pill. She felt herself fighting against sleep. Sleep? At a party? Yes, that's how she felt, sleepy." She lay back.

Neth was desperate, "Katie, wake up." she thought. Neth had silently settled down behind a high hedge on the rear of the property and watched unseen as the evening progressed. She had seen and sensed all that was happening, and did not like it at all. Then she realized she was being illogical. Neth remembered, "Katie is not yet asleep, only slipping into a stupor. She could not be contacted unless she were asleep, so what is the point of telling her to wake up now?" But what to do to help? The fellow, Bill, would be back soon. Then there would be no way to aid Tran. Determinedly, Neth decided on a rash course of action.

Bill's car was parked in the next block. He had to walk up a short alley to reach it, and the alley was not very well lit. Bill was stumbling back to Elsbeth's yard and mumbling to himself, "How lucky can you get, you rat? She's a lovely little gal and tonight she belongs to you. These pills will do the trick." He chuckled, "Yeah, trick. That's right, trick." Suddenly he was aware of a strange presence. He looked ahead in the dark alley, but all he could see were shadows. Then one of the shadows moved. It grew and became enormous. It seemed to be an animal raised up. But what an animal! Large head, then amazingly two piercing green eyes lighted up.

Bill screamed voicelessly. His mouth was open, but nothing came out. Turning, he ran pell-mell back to his car, hopped in and drove off. He did not stop until he was down the road and well away from the party, then he screeched to the side of the road. Trembling and disturbed, he yelled, "What the hell was that?" It took ten minutes to recover his composure. By then he was no longer in a party mood.

Back at the bench, Katie slumped farther into the cushions. It was so comfortable. She felt so relaxed. Her mind was so tired. She would feel better with her eyes closed. Slowly, she slipped into sleep, but it was a disturbed sleep. Nothing seemed right; noise, confusion, people. Then a small voice came through to her. "Tran, Tran, listen to me." It was not the usual voice, but it was very similar. Katie opened her consciousness to the voice. "Tran, you must go home. Wake up and go home. You have had too much alcohol. You must force yourself to get up. Wake up and go home. Now!"

Katie resisted waking. It felt so good just to remain as she was. The voice sounded so insistent though, and it repeated the message. She must do as the voice said. It had to be the right thing to do. Gradually, she forced her eyes open. The world seemed to be spinning. The lights and confusion were the only reality. Katie tried standing and found her legs were weak under her. She forced herself to sidle towards the yard gate supporting herself by leaning on the fence.

She whispered to herself, "What happened to Bill? Where is Bill? He was going to bring me a pill. I should say goodbye to Elsbeth. Where is Elsbeth? There! Going towards the dark corner with a new guy. She does not look like she wants to be interrupted. I'll leave her alone. I can just leave, no one will notice." She slipped out of the yard.

On the way home, Katie found some steps in front of a little store and sat down. For a long while she sat as her mind cleared. In bits and pieces the whole evening came back to her. "Bill! He must have put something in the punch. No punch has ever affected me like that before. What a rat! I was lucky he didn't come back. Now it's late. I better get home." Cautiously, she walked more surely and soon was home in bed.

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"You what?" Ekk seemed most upset. "You appeared in front of this kid! That's prohibited! It has not been the policy for ages now. What will happen when he reports what he saw?"

"Easy, Lord Ekk. Let us look at it realistically. First of all, from what I understand, exhibitions may be permissible now. Remember what Lord Nur said at the meeting? As I recall it was 'There should still be no physical confrontation, *'Except In The Most Unusual Situations.'* I considered this a most unusual situation. Furthermore, no one is going to believe the youth even if he finds the courage to tell his story. It was dark, his senses were impaired, he felt my presence more than he

saw me, and I achieved my purpose. I saved Tran from some bad experiences. I think she will not soon forget the party or the dangers associated with it."

Ekk grumbled, "Well, I want to see what Nur and Orf say about it." The subject was effectively dropped and eventually forgotten.

CHAPTER FIVE THICKENING PLOTS

Alfred could not sleep. It was 3:00 AM and he had tossed all the night so far. He was worried that he was failing in his mission. Something big was going to happen and he did not have a clue as to what it was. None of his most reliable informants had heard of any plans for disrupting the World Federation conference. Also from what he could learn from the Planning Department, everything was moving smoothly, and all precautions for safety were being taken. What more could he do?

Officially, his non-contact with the unknown agent was regarded as the result of a crank call. It was only intended to harass the department. How could he prove otherwise? Daybreak brought no relief. As Alfred prepared to go to work, his attention was absorbed in trying to find other avenues to explore. His mind would not let it rest. He absent mindedly ate toast and coffee, then set out for the office. He was just out of hearing range when the telephone in his apartment rang. After four rings the answering machine came on. The message given in a flat voice was simple. "Call 555-9089 by 9:00 PM this evening." That was all there was.

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Katie's head ached. She slept late, and everyone else had left for the day by the time she wandered into the kitchen. She hardly ever drank coffee, but there was a little left in the pot and it looked good to her. As she sipped the hot brew, her mind went back to the party of the night before. "What a rat." she thought, "A first class rat. I wonder what happened to Bill? I guess I was lucky he never came back." She decided to forget the whole thing and went swimming all morning. That cleared her head, and made her feel well and pleased to be alive again. The daily paper was just being delivered as she returned. One headline caught her attention, LOCAL TEEN PARTY RUNS WILD.

She knew immediately, it had to be Elsbeth's party. It was a long article. Evidently, when Katie had left was when things really got going. To begin with, the article explained, the neighbors began complaining to the police about the loud music. Activities calmed down for a while after the first police visit, but then grew loud again. The second police visit brought admonitions against underage drinking. The third visit saw the arrest of a Mr. Miranda for a variety of charges from possessing drugs to contributing to the delinquency of minors.

There were mentions of charges of public nudity against two young women which were being dropped. Altogether, the article was described a rather out of control celebration. Katie was glad she had left when she did. It could have been a lot worse. In an inquisitive mood, Katie picked up the phone and dialed a well known number. The phone rang several times then a soft voice answered, "Hello."

"Hello, Alice? This is Katie. Did you see the paper today, and did you enjoy the party last night?"

There was a brief pause, then Alice replied, "Yes to the first question, no to the second. How about you? Did you have fun?"

"Not really, but you tell me first."

"Well, I noticed you disappeared somewhere, and I started talking to this guy. It was one of the college guys. He tried to get me to drink some wine, but I declined. Then he tried to get me to go with him to the back of Elsbeth's yard. I went along reluctantly, and when we got away from the rest, he tried to kiss me. told him to quit but he was persistent. When I tried to get away he grabbed me and in the process he tore my blouse. It was my favorite one, too. I don't know how I'm going to explain it to Mom. Anyway, I left after that so I wasn't there for all the fun and games when the police arrived. I guess I was lucky. How about you?"

"Pretty much the same, only worse. The guy I showed you, Bill, brought me punch several times, but he must have slipped something stronger in it. Anyway, it got to me and made dizzy and sleepy. We sat on a bench for a while, and he got fresh too, but I felt too weak to resist him. Then he went to his car to get a pill for me, but never came back. I felt worse, so I left and came home." (Katie did not mention the part about hearing her dream voice. She was careful never to tell anyone about that.) "I still didn't feel good this morning, but I'm okay now. I'm not going to any more of Elsbeths 'Parties' though."

"Yeah, me neither," agreed Alice. The two talked on for several minutes about their plans for the rest of the summer, and compared notes on their experiences as Auxiliary Aids at the hospital before saying goodbye.

XXXXXXX

Alfred picked up the phone hurriedly, and dialed the given number. He had arrived home late and just discovered the message on the answering machine. One ring, two rings, on and on the phone rang as Alfred held his breath in expectation. After two minutes of ringing, he decided no one was going to answer. Disappointed, he set the receiver back in place. He tried the number several times again later. Even on the following days he tried it several times, always with the same result until a day a week later, when a recorded message informed him the phone had been disconnected.

XXXXXXX

Katie always cut through Adams Park on the way home from the hospital. This was the end of the second week of her volunteer work. She did it only for four hours at a time twice a week, but it was as much fun as Alice had said it would be. Katie had learned her way around the hospital, and had met many wonderful people. The doctors and nurses always had a smile for the Auxiliary Aids, because they realized how important the volunteers contribution was to the health of the patients.

Today the weather was hot. Many persons were walking or sitting in the park trying to keep cool in the gentle breeze. As she approached the fountain in the middle of the park she heard a shout ahead, "Look out, Mad dog! Mad dog! There's a mad dog coming." The young man shouting was perhaps a few years older than Katie, and he was trying to clear people out of the way. Only a few feet in front of her, she saw a medium sized, brown, short haired dog walking slowly and unsteadily. It seemed dazed and was drooling excessively. It's path was taking it directly towards a blanket where a small baby lay sleeping. In

seconds the dog would be on top of the baby.

Quickly, Katie seized an empty lawn chair setting next to the walkway. She held it in front of herself and moved into the path of the dog. Slowly the animal advanced, then hesitated, confused and not knowing what to do about the obstacle in its path. Katie stood still as she heard a commotion behind her. Someone was picking the baby up, and clearing the surrounding area. She heard footsteps as people ran away. She determinedly held her place, and the dog did not move for a moment. Then it turned to head to Katie's left. She swung around and again placed the chair in the dog's path. Several times this procedure was followed, and Katie was able to keep the animal from advancing or running off. By then Katie heard an approaching police siren. The dog momentarily sat back on its haunches and remained still. That was the situation when a policeman came up behind Katie and instructed her, "All right, miss. Back up and get out of the way now please." She had gone no more than a dozen feet when a single shot rang out. She winced but did not turn to look back. Katie did not remember the rest of the walk home, but realized she was dripping wet with sweat when she got there.

A cool shower and a change of clothes worked wonders for the way she felt, but she still cringed when she thought of the poor dog. I was best to dispose of it quickly as there was nothing else to be done for it. She still felt sorry though.

That evening the phone rang. When she answered, a masculine voice asked, "Katie?"

"Yes."

"This is Bill Harlow. How are you?"

In remembering the party, Katie's anger suddenly surged into her voice, "I'm fine. No thanks to you."

"Why, what do you mean? Didn't you have a good time?"

"No. Not after you gave me those spiked drinks. What were you trying to do?"

"Oh gosh! Did you get too much? I was just trying to show you a good time. I'm sorry if it upset you. Can I make it up some way? How about if I take you out to a movie."

"No thanks, I don't think so. Not after what you did, but why are you calling now?"

"Oh, I was just thinking of you. There's not much to do here at home. It's not like being away at college. This is a just a small town."

Katie became a little inquisitive. "I thought you came from college with Elsbeth's brother. Do you live here in Dugan's Mill?"

"Well he invited me, and I came home the same time he did, but yes, I do live here."

Talking with Bill again had relieved a little of Katie's anger, but she was still not interested in getting involved with him. "Thanks for calling Bill, but I really don't care to do anything just now."

"Okay, but I might call you again later. Is that all right?"

"Well, maybe, we'll see. I don't like what you did to me and I'm not sure I can trust you. Goodbye now."

Katie hung up the phone and turned back to the book she had been reading. "I wonder if he can be trusted. He is certainly handsome enough, and interesting to talk with, but I wonder - ?" her thoughts trailed off as she picked up her book to return to reading.

CHAPTER SIX INTRIGUES AND DATES

In a small dark apartment, a man spoke into the phone in a monotonic voice. "We bin listenin' on his telephone conversations for a week now. Only suspicious call was from our late friend, who won't be makin' any more calls. Too bad this guy works for the Security Ministry. There may be someone else who knows how to contact him. I say we should take him out just on general principles." There was a pause while the man listened. Then he continued, "Yeah, I guess you're right. No use stirrin' up more trouble, but if we hear anythin' funny, he's gone."

Another pause. "Okay, you're playin' the cards, but a drive-by shootin' with an unfortunate extra casualty would be easy to arrange. I could do it with practically no notice at all."

XXXXXXX

Nur traveled easily and unhurriedly. His frequent trips to contact the mind of the writer were leaving him a little more tired than usual. He was pleased with the result, however. The writer was beginning to realize that the world of Dragons was an unusual and very highly developed civilization. He understood that Dragons were not to be feared, but welcomed as strong, moral creatures who were involved with the advancement of the legitimate freedom and respect of all sentient beings. Whatever their physical shape or environmental conditions, aware and knowledgeable creatures were to be respected and nurtured.

Nur had even enjoyed the writer placing questions in his mind prior to sleep to get Nur's response to them. Some had been simplistic, but at least the inquiries showed he was taking all these happenings seriously. They had reached an accommodation in the process of transferring knowledge from one to the other. Nur felt certain that the human writer would be able somehow to convey his messages to the human population, at least to those who were in tune to hear them.

As he approached the writer's house in the middle of the night, he sensed the man's receptive brain asleep. Quickly, after settling down behind a hedge, Nur went through the facts and events he wanted to convey. Then he rested a few minutes before repeating the same thing. He had learned it took several attempts to be certain of transferring the thoughts successfully. After several more efforts at transmission, he was satisfied the thoughts had been received. Quietly spreading his wings, he drifted off through the black sky returning toward an open Earth Space Warp Portal. His nights work was completed.

XXXXXXX

The phone rang. Katie gave it a suspicious look before putting down her book and answering it. Somehow she felt it would not be a welcome call. "Hello?" she began, tentatively.

"Hi! Katie, this is Bill. How are you?"

"Fine, now that no one is spiking my drinks."

"Come on Katie, be fair. That was an accident. didn't mean to put so much in. I'm truly sorry if it upset you."

"Well it did, and I don't like it, but where did you get to?. I didn't see you again, and I decided to leave. You never returned with your so called 'pill'."

"Well it was farther to my car than I thought, and I couldn't find the pill right away. Nobody knew where you were when I returned."

"Did you get caught in the police thing?"

"The Police? No, there weren't any police there while I was. But then, I went home rather early." Katie detected a great amount of uncertainty in his voice which she did not understand.

"That's lucky. I guess it got rather wild later on. I was glad I went home also."

"Yeah, I guess we are lucky. But what I wanted to talk to you about is to ask you to a movie. There is a good Sci-Fi on at the pail, and I'd like to take you to it. I remember you said you liked science fiction."

"I'm not sure. Can I trust you?"

"I promise to behave."

"Just to the movie and back home, again?" Katie confirmed. As she spoke she was thinking, "Maybe he isn't so bad. Maybe I misjudged him. He is handsome and

a good, interesting conversationalist. Perhaps I shouldn't give up too easily on him."

"Yes, that's all. Just the movie and back, Okay? Can I pick you up tomorrow at seven?"

"Well," conceded Katie acting a bit reluctant to keep Bill a little unsure, "Okay, but no funny stuff."

"Great! Agreed! I'll see you tomorrow. Thanks."

Katie hung the phone up with mixed emotions. She mused, "Am I doing the right thing? He seemed nice enough on the surface, but -- who knows? At least, a movie is safe enough. I'll see what happens." She lost interest in reading her book and went for a long thoughtful walk.

XXXXXXX

Alfred Fargo spent most of his evenings at home alone watching TV. Days at work were stressful enough that he only wanted to relax when away from the office. This evening was difficult though. He could not seem to lay aside the worries of the day. The Federation meeting was less than a week away now. What if something really was brewing and Security did not know about it? The World Federation might be in serious trouble, and nothing was being done about it. Who would be causing the problem? What were they planning on doing? He slipped into a troubled sleep sitting in front of a droning television set. Suddenly he awoke. The phone was ringing. As he picked up the receiver he noticed on the attached digital clock it was 11.45PM. "Hello?"

A whispery voice responded, "I got a message. Listen careful. There is a new rebel group goin' to bomb the Federation meetin'. In the confusion afterward they plan attacks to take over the government. They got a neat way of doin' it with a new little bomb that ain't detectable. That's all I'm gonna say."

There was a click and Alfred yelled, "Hello! Hello," into the phone. The line was dead, though. Alfred immediately put a trace on the line. In a few minutes the reply came back. It was a pay phone in a rough, deserted section of town. The call could have been made by anyone. Alfred could not sleep that night. He planned on getting an early start for work in the morning to get the message to the Security Minister promptly and warn of the danger.

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Bill pulled up exactly at seven in front of Katie's house. His car was old and beat up, but it seemed to function all right. Katie was waiting as he reached the porch door and opened it for him.

"Hello, Katie," bill looked at her and added sincerely, "You look very pretty this evening."

Katie had taken pains in dressing and although she was wearing casual clothes, they were neat and attractive. "Hi," she responded, noting again that Bill was

indeed very good looking and was as neatly dressed as she was. "I'm all ready. Shall we go?"

They were quickly engaged in small talk as Bill drove off towards the mall. There was a good crowd at the movie. It was exciting and had many good graphics and interesting effects. As they came out, they could not resist talking on and on about all the great parts in the movie. Back at the car, Bill asked, "So what next?"

"You promised to go only to the movie and home again, so I guess it is home now."

"Well, Okay, but I can at least go slowly. Right?"

"Slow is fine, just so we go."

"You know, Katie, I really like you. You are smart and fun to talk with. You are certainly pretty. I'm sorry I left such a bad impression when we first met. That was dumb of me."

Katie was feeling a little better about Bill, but was not going to let him off the hook just yet. "Yes, that was not smart. I expect to be treated with some respect."

They shifted back to talking about the movie as they continued towards Katie's house. When they got within a few blocks, Bill pulled over on a particularly dark street and turned the engine off.

"Now what?" inquired Katie.

"Can't we sit and talk a while? Just like we have been."

"We could, but you didn't ask first. You are going back on your promise, and I think you have more than talking on your mind."

"Gosh, Katie, I can't help it if I'm attracted to you. You are the nicest little lady I have met in a long time. Can you blame me for trying?"

"No, I guess not, but don't try anyway."

Bill slid across the seat and put his arm around her shoulders. "Bill," Katie said warningly, "You're getting yourself in trouble again." He bent down and tried to kiss her, but she ducked and pushed him away. Quickly she opened the door and was out of the car before he could recover.

"Aw, Katie," he deplored, "Come back, I'll be good." But she was off and away down the street. Before Bill could start the car, Katie was out of sight and most of the rest of the way home. Bill followed but could only see her disappearing inside her door, "Dummy," he railed at himself, "Dummy, Dummy, Dummy."

Safely in her house, Katie smiled to herself. She was somewhat pleased Bill had tried to kiss her. She felt it was an innocent exploration. If Bill had really wanted to force her, Katie knew he had sufficient strength to have compelled her in the kiss. There was a warm feeling somewhere inside her as she thought, "I guess he is really beginning to like me." Katie slept well with happy dreams that night. Little did she realize it was the last such peaceful night for the immediate future.

XXXXXXX

"Yeah, I know who called him. Duke has gone to take care of the rat now. But what do we do about Alfred?" A disheveled, roughly dressed man sat waiting for some response from the telephone he was cradling under his chin as he cut up an apple. "Yeah, yeah, I know." He paused in the cutting of the apple. "We can't let anythin' get out now though." Again he listened intently on the instrument tucked between his shoulder and chin. "Well, that's what I think too. You can consider it done." He replaced the phone with a sigh, and finished paring and eating his apple.

When the man was through with his meager repast, he went back to the phone and made two more calls. Afterward he seemed satisfied and lay back in the chair and closed his eyes. In a half hour he roused himself from his short nap and wandered to a window to look out into the murky night. As he waited, he muttered to himself, "Duke better hurry, we ain't got much time."

CHAPTER SEVEN KAUL RETURNS

News item: MAN KILLED IN DRIVE BY SHOOTING, In an early morning incident, a motorist was killed when he was caught in the line of gun fire in a drive-by shooting. Mr. Alfred Fargo was driving to work when his car was riddled with bullets intended for the home of a suspected gangland leader. Bystanders report Mr. Fargo was passing the house just as a large black van came racing down the street and opened fire. Police are looking for the van but have few leads. Evidently Mr. Fargo was an accidental, unintended victim. No one was at home in the house at the time of the shooting. Anyone with information concerning the event should contact the police.

XXXXXXX

Nur was resting in a secluded part of the woods which he considered all his own. Others knew his preference and deferred to his status. None of the other Dragons tried to occupy the spot when Nur wanted it. It was located in the midst of a small grove of a particularly large variety of tree with extremely large leafy structures unlike any other vegetation found on Ratha. Nur enjoyed the star shade the large leaves offered, and found the gentle whispering noises the breeze caused them to make to be especially soothing. He had been lying in the starlight musing over the success he was achieving in his contacts with the writer, and found himself in a pleasant mood.

In the distance he saw Orf approaching. The Minister was flying at a fairly good speed for one of his bulk and maturity. "What is going on now?" Nur muttered to himself. "It can't be anything good." As Orf neared, he obviously was disturbed and out of breath. "Nur, I need - your help. We have - a problem. Kaul - Kaul has returned.

He is in my office."

"Kaul? But he was not scheduled to return for another thirty or so Earth years. Why is he here now?"

"Yes! Kaul! He is in my office. You had best come - and hear his story. I think we have a problem - a big problem."

The two Dragons flew off in haste to the Ministry of Human Contacts. Orf's office had been hewn out of a marble quarry and the walls were the natural stone polished to a high luster. It was not a large office as compared to some of the other administrative offices, but it was not needed as often either. However, it was quite adequate to accommodate a dozen or so Dragons with no trouble.

The shimmering door screen parted as they drew near. When they entered, Nur saw a smallish young Dragon looking rather morose curled up in the center of the solid marble meeting room. Orf greeted him, "Kaul, here is Grand Lord Nur Xand. Please tell him what you have been telling me." The young Dragon looked down rather sheepishly. Then quietly began to speak. "I apologize Lord Xand. I am a failure in my life as a human. I have been removed from my position where I may have served human development."

"Nonsense! Nonsense, Kaul. I am sure you did your best," reassured Nur. "Now tell me what has happened."

"I was remiss and not paying attention well enough. My human was murdered, and I had to return here."

"Now, now, give me the facts. What led up to this event?"

Kaul began describing his position as Secretary to the Security Minister, and the recent happenings with a threat to the World Federation. (As you may have guessed, Dragons do remember their lives as humans after their years of service even though as humans they do not remember the Dragon world. This is due to a flaw in the human brain. - ed.) Kaul explained he had just found a key piece of information and was on his way to tell the Minister, when he was caught in a drive-by shooting. He was killed instantly and forced to leave the human world. That is why he was here now, and he added, "and I was not able to get a critical message to the Security Minister."

"What was this message, Kaul?"

"The meeting room where all the leaders of the World Federation will be meeting in three days in Ragonton will be bombed. A small rebel group wants to kill them all and cause confusion and chaos, so they might have an opportunity to grab power. It is a forlorn hope on their part. Administrative safeguards are in place to preserve the order of succession in the various countries, but the rebels do not understand that. However, this event will cause considerable damage to the progress of the Federation. I could have prevented it had I been more careful. I am a failure."

"No, not at all Kaul, You did your best, but circumstances foiled you. There is still time for us to act. Orf, who else is nearby? Who could get to the Minister and

warn him if we can get the message through?"

Orf looked saddened and disturbed as he spoke. "There is no one except Tran, and she is in the small town of Dugan's Mill which is two hundred miles away from Ragonton. The meeting will take place in the conference center of a large hotel on the edge of Ragonton, I think."

Kaul nodded in agreement.

"Tran? But she is yet a young female human."

"Yes - Tran! She is a fifteen year old girl."

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"No! No! It is a bad idea. What could she do anyway?" There was a good deal of distress in Neth's voice as she responded to the suggestion Orf had made. Neth, Ekk, Cosmo, Nur and Orf were in the middle of a lively discussion. Nur reviewed again the dire situation they faced.

"Evidently a disruptive group is going to bomb the World Federation meeting scheduled to take place in three days. They have a new difficult-to-detect bomb and the plans are in place to use it. This will cause considerable disruption and confusion, not to mention the setting back of progress in the programs of the Federation towards greater stability on Earth. The only person who has any chance at all of alerting the authorities is Tran. Even though she is young, we must use her if we can."

"No!" repeated Neth, "She is too young and may be harmed in the effort. What about your writer friend Lord Nur. Can't you reach him? Isn't he knowledgeable enough to reach the proper persons and stop this?"

"No, Neth, he is even farther away across the country, and would probably have to act by phone. I am not sure I could clearly relay the message to him anyway, nor does he have the committed Dragon brain that Tran has. There is no way to predict his actions."

Cosmo had been quiet in all of the discussion till now, but she felt it was time to speak her thoughts. "Neth, and all of you, we must consider first what our primary objective is. We wish to help the human world in the best way we can. Unfortunately, at the moment, our best hope is that Tran, as a fifteen year old human girl is sufficiently resourceful to solve the problem. When Tran volunteered to take a turn living as a human she realized there *was* danger involved and accepted that. Now we would do her a disservice not to allow her the opportunity to go and do what she volunteered to do. I think we must contact her and send her off. Nothing else makes sense to me."

Orf beamed, "Spoken like the true Dame of Malan that you are, Cosmo. Come to think of it, why did I not put it forth as clearly as you just did?"

Nur smiled at Cosmo, "Well said my love. You have my vote."

Ekk broke into the conversation, "Wait a minute, now. After all, I am her overguard. I believe I should have a major say in this matter." He looked around sternly at the group.

"Well?" asked Nur.

"I say," he paused and looked at the others for a few more seconds, then with determination he continued, "Send her." Looking at his life partner, he added, "And you Neth?"

"You have convinced me." she conceded, "I will give her the facts and tell her to go."

XXXXXXX

Katie felt ill at ease. The day at the hospital as an Auxillary Aid had gone well enough, but she felt something foreboding in the air. It was hot and muggy, and difficult to feel comfortable. She kept returning to the date with Bill and wondering more about him and his intentions. It was too late to go swimming before supper, and she had lost interest in her book.

Quietly she sat on the porch and allowed time to pass. In the evening there was nothing to do except sit around talking with her family. She only listened as her father talked at length about a World Federation meeting to be held the day after tomorrow in Ragonton. She got the idea it was very important for solidifying the gains made recently in world co-operation. She only half listened though as she pursued her own thoughts and daydreams. Eventually, it was time for sleep, and the family drifted away to their various rooms for the night.

Katie had trouble falling asleep and tossed in her bed listening to the tree frogs sing in the warm summer darkness until quite late. Finally she drifted off. Suddenly she was awake! It was early morning, and she was remembering a very vivid dream. It was the new voice again. The one that had warned her at Elsbeth's party.

But WHAT was it SAYING? The Federation meeting would be bombed? No one was aware of the threat except now her, Katie Callen? SHE had to stop the bombing by contacting the Security Minister or the PRESIDENT? She, Katie, contact the PRESIDENT? How in the world could she do that? Was this real or only a bad dream? She now remembered her father talking about the meeting last evening. Was this just a reaction to that? Her mind swam in confusion. Slowly she got up before anyone else. She mulled over the dream as she had some cereal with milk. What was she supposed to do?

After eating, her mind was still in a turmoil. She had to think this through by herself. Quietly, she got her bathing suit and started toward the swimming beach. She kept going over and over what the voice had said, but could not understand why SHE had to do something. Why her? The cool morning water refreshed her. Gradually, she made things seem more rational. The voice before had never misguided her. It was always supportive and encouraging. Now it sounded a little desperate. Perhaps this was right. Maybe now was a time when she had to act without question.

"Okay, I will!" she declared out loud. How to start? Call the Minister. Surely she could do that. That may be all that was required. She could at least do that. With resolve Katie got dressed and headed home. It was mid morning. Certainly people would be in their offices now. With the money Katie had with her, she stopped at a public phone booth. After a long confusing talk with the information operator, she got a phone number for the National Security Office in Ragonton. Taking a deep breath she dialed the number.

"Security Ministry, how may I help you?"

"I'd like to talk to the Minister of Security please."

"I'm sorry, he's in a meeting just now, may I take a message?"

"Well," Katie paused, "It's rather important. I think I need to talk directly with him."

"I'm sorry, that's just not possible, but I will surely give him whatever message you wish, dear." The receptionist had recognized Katie's voice as that of a young girl.

"I'm, - I'm not sure. I really think I should talk with him. Isn't there some way I could do that."

"No, the best I can do is take a message. Now please tell me, or I must hang up anyway as I am very busy."

"Well, he doesn't know me, but I have a message about the meeting tomorrow of the Federation."

"Well, what is it?"

"I have heard it is going to be blown up."

"Oh, my dear, there are always these rumors. The security is very tight on that meeting. I am sure things will be all right. Now you just go back to your playing and don't worry."

"No, no, you don't understand. I have been told by good authority this will happen."

"Oh? What kind of good authority is that?"

"Well, I had this dream, and the dreams are always" - Katie was cut off by the receptionist's firm tone,

"Now my dear, you have taken enough of my time. I really must hang up now."

"No! no!" Katie shouted into the dead phone, then sadly hung the receiver back in place and turned away.

Miles away in Ragonton the Security Minister stepped out of his office and asked, "What was that all about?"

The receptionist shook her head and replied, "Crank calls. Now even teenage girls are doing it." The Minister nodded and returned to his office. Katie felt discouraged. What could she do now? "The only thing left is to go to Ragonton and try to see someone in person," she thought. As she returned home she went over in her mind how to go about doing just that.

XXXXXXX

Bill Harlow was late. He scrambled to get dressed and was stuffing down some breakfast as the phone rang. He picked up the instrument with annoyance, "Hello"

"Hi, Bill?" came a soft voice into his ear, "This is Katie. How are you today?"

"Katie?" he thought, "Why Katie, and why now?" He continued aloud, "Hi Katie. What's up? I can't talk long, I'm just on my way out to work."

"Oh," came the more subdued reply, "I'm sorry to call at a bad time. I didn't know you worked. What kind of work do you do?"

"It's just a summer job at a garage working on cars, but it brings in a few bucks."

"I see, and you have to go to work now?" came the question with a little sadness in her voice.

"Yes, I do and I'm late already. What did you want?"

"Well, I was hoping to talk you into driving me to Ragonton today, but I guess you can't do that, or could you take off from work?" was the suddenly expectant response.

"Ragonton! Why do you want to go there, and no, I can't take off from work today. I need the money and my folks have been after me to get in as many hours as I can."

"Oh," was the disheartened reply. "I wanted to see the events concerning the Federation meeting there."

"The Federation meeting? I didn't even know there was a meeting."

"Yes, and I wanted to see the President."

"Well, I'm sorry Katie. I just can't now, but I'll take you riding another time, if you wish. Now I have to get to work."

"Okay, thanks anyway. Goodbye."

Bill could visualize her glum face as Katie terminated the call. Katie picked up the phone again and punched in a number. She heard it ring several times and held on as it continued. "Come on Alice, answer," she whispered. Katie knew Alice's parents liked short trips at times. Katie had even gone with them to some nearby places. Maybe they could be talked into a trip to Ragonton. The phone continued to ring many times unanswered, and Katie hung up in despair.

"Now what?" thought Katie as she turned and went to sit on the porch to think. Her mind churned, "I have to get there somehow. No one is home to take me. The meeting is tomorrow. I have to leave now to have enough time to contact someone. It's two hundred miles to Ragontown. How will I ever be able to get there in time?"

Quickly she wrote a note and left it on the kitchen table, "GONE TO SEE THE PRESIDENT." Making two sandwiches and putting them with the little money she had in her purse, she was out the door and down the street to the highway.

Katie had not planned anything except to start towards Ragonton. Reaching the highway through town, she stopped and watched the traffic. Occasionally, a car came into the gas station, filled up, then headed out again in the direction of Ragonton. After a few minutes, Katie noticed an elderly couple headed towards the big city pull into the station and stop by a pump. While the man pumped his gas, Katie approached the lady in the car. "Ma'am, I wonder whether you could help me."

"Why, what is it, dear?"

"I missed my bus to Ragonton, and I know my mom will be waiting for me. I need a ride there. Are you by any chance going that way?"

"To Ragonton? Yes, we are. That is; we are going most of the way there. We live about ten miles this side of the city, and could take you that far at least." The woman had made a quick decision, and based on Katie's neat appearance decided she and her husband could help the young girl however might be appropriate.

"Oh that would help ever so much, if you don't mind."

"No, it's quite all right. There is plenty of space in the back seat."

Katie got into the car. As the man returned, she introduced herself to both of them. She was able to pass off lightly the idea she was to meet her mother in Ragonton, but had unfortunately missed the bus. The couple did not ask about that, and Katie led the conversation to things about school and how she was looking forward to getting back to classes in a few weeks. With intermittent conversation the time passed slowly. The man was a cautious driver so it was about four hours before

they approached the suburbs of Eatonton.

Eventually, they reached the point at which her new friends had to turn off, and Katie got out of the car. "Now, dear, you can probably get a city bus at the corner here." advised the woman, "However, I am not sure. I never travel by bus, but I think I have seen them stop here at times."

"Thanks so much," answered Katie. "You have been ever so helpful. I really appreciate it. My mom will be glad too." She waved goodbye as they drove off and Katie turned to find her way into town. There was no bus stop at the corner. Katie started walking along the sidewalk. Traffic was sparse, and she turned to look at each passing car. She felt she had to get to the Security Minister or some other official before the end of the work day. As a decent looking car came along, she decided to try asking for a ride. She turned and held out her thumb pointing down the road as she looked at the driver. Sure enough, he slowed to a stop, and Katie ran to get into the car.

CHAPTER EIGHT INTERRUPTED JOURNEY

Nur felt very uneasy. Neth had suggested he contact the writer and try to alert him of the danger to the World Federation meeting, but Nur had not done it. Now that they had decided to send Tran on the mission, he had time to reconsider that idea. He was settled into his favorite resting spot and letting his mind wander aimlessly. "Perhaps there is merit to that idea," he thought, "but who can predict what the human might do? Of course, he would be more worldly than Tran, and perhaps be better able to get to the proper authorities. Is that the crucial point though. Tran is more committed and is conditioned to help without seeking reward. Who knows what a human might do under the same conditions." Nur sighed, "It is practically too late anyway. Better to stick with the agreed plan." Grand Lord Nur Xand resigned himself to letting events unfold in any fashion they would develop, and slipped into a late afternoon nap.

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Katie was pleased a car had stopped for her. Maybe she could get to the Security Minister quickly, and start back home. As she approached she saw the driver was a middle aged man who had a friendly smile.

"Hi, Are you going into town?" she asked.

"Sure, honey. Where to exactly?"

The immediate amiability, caught Katie off guard. "Well, I'm not quite sure. I want to go to the government offices though." she responded as she climbed into the automobile and pulled the door closed again.

"Well there are lots of them, honey. Do you know which one?" her benefactor asked as he started off.

"No, but if you get me there, I'm sure I can find my way." Katie realized she did not sound too convincing.

"Well, again there are lots of them. If you tell me which one, I could take you directly there, and save you some time."

Katie hesitated. How open could she be with this person? She decided to take a chance. "I want to see someone in the Security Ministry. At least I think that's where he is," she replied trying to make it sound as though she was only looking for a friend.

"Aha! do I detect a certain personal interest there? Is this a surprise visit? I take it you're not from around here."

"Well, maybe it is. Yes, I'm from out of town." Katie felt herself blushing.

"You're in luck, honey. I know exactly where that is. As a matter of fact, I'm heading close to there myself, so there is no problem. I'll take you where you want to go."

Katie felt as though some of the weight had lifted from her, and she felt more comfortable with the man as they traveled along.

"And how long have you known this fellow?" The man had jumped to the conclusion that Katie was looking for her boy friend.

Again, Katie was a bit flustered and responded, "Oh, quite a while."

They traveled silently for a few minutes, then her new friend spoke. "We can be downtown in fifteen minutes, but if you don't mind, I would like to stop at my house to get some materials I need. Would that be all right?"

Katie could hardly disagree, "Sure, that's fine."

A few more minutes brought them to an isolated small house on a side street. "I'll be just a couple of minutes. Or to hurry it up a bit, you could carry a box for me if you want to."

By now Katie had little reason to mistrust the man, and thinking to speed up getting to the Security Ministry as much as possible said, "Sure, I'll help."

They entered the little house and proceeded to a rear room. The man swung open the door and turned on a light in a small windowless room. "There over in the corner. That box is the one I want."

Katie saw a medium sized cardboard box, and started over to pick it up. As she did so, she heard and felt the door closing behind her. Turning quickly, she could see the door swinging shut and hear a key turn in the lock.

"Hey! Let me out!" she screamed, as she ran back to the door and began beating on it.

"Now, now, honey," she heard the man's voice on the other side of the door, "You just calm down and I'll be back for you later." His voice had taken on a sinister tone which sent a sudden chill through Katie's body. Immediately she heard footsteps fading away and the slam and locking of the house door. Katie continued to beat at the door, but gradually realized no one would hear her from deep inside this isolated little house. She recalled the street was vacant as they arrived and entered the building.

Sitting on the floor in desperation, she tried to organize her thoughts. Thank goodness there was a light on. "At least I can see to explore," she thought. Bravely she added, "I will find a way out." As she looked around though, her courage faded. There was nothing in the room. Absolutely nothing, except the box in the far corner. A quick examination revealed it was filled only with books. Big old reference books of some sort. There was no help to be found there. There was just the one door and no windows. The crack under the door was large enough to admit air but little light, since it faced a back hallway. An hasty examination of the walls showed them to be solid material. One even seemed to be brick or something else just as hard. In resignation, she slumped to the floor again and sat for many minutes.

Gradually, as she looked at the door blocking her exit, she realized it opened inward. "Of course," she whispered to herself, "the door opens in. All I have to do is get the pins out of the hinges and I can take it down." She dashed to the door and started pulling at the pins in the hinges. Her hopes fell again as she found they were all rusty and she could not budge them from their well entrenched positions. She sagged to the floor and began to cry. For a long while she huddled on the floor and thought about her plight. "How will I get out of here?" The thought echoed and re-echoed in her brain.

Finally she arose again and went back to the box of books. She dumped it over hoping to find something else of worth there. But no, just books. "Well," she thought "if all I have is books, maybe I can use books." She dumped them back into the box and dragged them over to the door. Taking one of the books she began swinging it at the top of one of the pins. She kept up as long as she could, but the pin did not budge. The book cover began to disintegrate from the pounding, but she kept beating at the pin as best she could. Nothing happened. Slowly the book was pulverized and fell to pieces. Katie's hands and fingers were sore from gripping the book. The occasional missed swing when her hand hit the wood or hard metal had caused some cuts and bruises. She lost track of time as she persisted in her effort with another book. After a long while, weakened and tired she stopped. Remembering the sandwiches in her purse, she took one out and ate it as she continued to think about her problem. Weariness came over her. She allowed her eyes to close.

Sometime later, she awoke with a start. At first she forgot where she was, but the stark room and the locked door quickly brought the events back to her mind. Fear suddenly came over her. Her thoughts turned to her captor, "Surely he will be returning soon. What will I do then? I'll fight my way out. I'll be ready for him. If I'm still here." Little did she know the man was not able to return. At that moment he was being treated in intensive care at the hospital for a severe heart attack. It would be many days before anyone came to the little house again.

She looked at her watch. "Five o'clock," she whispered. "That must be five in the morning. Only ten hours to the meeting. I must hurry." Then she looked at the

destroyed books and realized how futile her situation was. Nevertheless, she grabbed another book and began hitting at the hinges. As she did so, the light suddenly went out. She heard a pop as the filament gave up the struggle and left her in the dark. This was too much.

She collapsed on the floor and cried. After many minutes she regained her composure. "I have to try." she said out loud. "I have to try." Her eyes had become a little accustomed to the dark. A small amount of light came under the door and helped a little. She groped for another book and picked it up, but it slipped from her hand. In doing so, she heard a metallic sound as it hit the floor. Feeling around she discovered a long thin piece of metal. "A letter opener! Of course! A letter opener!"

Carefully holding her prize, she approached the door. Feeling for the middle hinge pin, she pushed the end of the letter opener against the crack under the head and pushed. Gradually the crack opened and the opener slid in. she twisted it and the pin rose slightly from the hinge. She pried it as high as she could, but ran out of leverage. Then she took another book, and feeling and guessing where to strike, she began swinging at the hinge again. After several minutes she stopped and felt the pin. "It has moved," she squealed. With renewed strength she flailed away at it further. It was half way out! She pulled and twisted and reluctantly the pin gave way. It came out. One of the three pins was out!

A wave of relief flowed over her. It was possible to do. She would eventually get out. Until now she had had some doubt, but now she was sure. It was just a matter of time. "Yes, time!" she exclaimed, "Time." But she could not see her watch well enough to see what time it was. Hours must have passed, "But what time is it? Will I get there in time?" Quickly she went to work on the lower hinge with the metal letter opener. It proved to be more obdurate. It took her a long while to get the pin levered up enough that the opener no longer was useful. This pin was tighter, but she began hitting it with a book.

"How many books have I used now? I haven't kept track. Just so there are enough to last for all the hinges." Her thoughts kept just as busy as her arms in beating at the pin. She felt the pin and was disappointed in how little it had moved. Much time had passed. Daylight was clearly visible under the door now. "It has to be late morning. Or maybe even noon. I can't quit now." A book's worth of pounding later the pin moved more easily. Finally with twisting and wiggling it gave up and eased out of the hole. "Two now! Two are out! One more to go."

Katie stood to reach to top pin. Standing on tip toe she could barely reach it. She tried to work the letter opener into the crack but could not exert enough force to make it go. No matter how hard she tried she could not force the letter opener into the crack. Exhausted, she sat and rested. After several minutes, sitting by the door, she reached out and found she could just slip her fingers underneath the bottom. Bracing a foot against the frame, she began wiggling the door. Gradually, it moved more and more. The bottom hinge began coming apart. With renewed effort she continued pulling on the bottom of the door. She began to hear wood splitting. Desperately, she pulled, and suddenly with a splintering racket, the door sprang loose. The bolt had popped out of the latch plate. The battered door hung sadly on a twisted upper hinge, but it swung open far enough to allow a person through. "I'm free!" Katie exulted.

CHAPTER NINE SUCCESS AND TRAGEDY

Two hotel employees came into the meeting room where the Federation leaders would be meeting later in the day. They were carrying a television monitor. A security guard stopped them with a question, "Where ya goin' with that fellas?"

"We were told the daily program monitor wasn't working well in here, and we want everything just right for the big meeting."

"Yeah. that's true," answered the guard, "But we gotta look it over. D'ya mind?"

"No, not at all. Look all you want. We ain't in no hurry. I'd just as soon sit and wait as work anyway."

The security guard, with a couple of his colleges partially disassembled the device and ran various probes over it. After several minutes of investigation, they put it back together and handed it back to the hotel service men. "Okay, you can put it in, but hurry it up."

The two men quickly and expertly switched the monitor with the one already in place. They nodded to the guards as they left, "Thanks a lot guys."

"Sure, no problem," was the response. The guards sat exchanging small talk while in the corner the new monitor shone brightly with the current list of happenings in the hotel. Silently, in an obscure part of the set, a miniaturized bomb was efficiently counting off seconds, minutes and hours to a predetermined prescribed time, when it planned to destroy itself and everything else in the immediate vicinity.

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Katie ran. Her watch said 2:00 PM and the meeting was at 3:00 PM. She was somewhere in Ragonton but had no idea where the motorcade would be passing. Using her intuition, she turned a corner and headed towards what seemed to her to be the direction of the middle of the city. Yes! As she ran, each block had more stores and businesses. She saw other persons hurrying in the same direction and took renewed hope that she was right. She ran as fast as she could even though she was weak from her ordeal in the locked room. Several blocks ahead she saw the beginnings of a crowded area. Her throat was dry and sore from her forced breathing, but she ran on. As she approached the crowd, it was evident everyone was standing and waiting along a particularly wide street. The noise of the crowd spurred her on.

This must be it! But there was no time. How could she get to the President and warn him? He would be surrounded by guards. Precious time had passed. She could think of no plan except somehow to get there. Her throat ached in dryness, as she pushed herself to the limit of her abilities. The noise of the crowd increased as she approached. Desperately she forced her way through the crush of people. She was resisted on all sides by those who also wanted to be in position to view the passing of the motorcade. As she elbowed her way to the front she incurred hostile looks from many who had been standing along the curb for a long while. There! At the edge of the roadway. A line of policemen holding the crowd back. She must get through. Strong arms grabbed her and pushed her back. With all her strength, in a final effort, she burst through the line and stumbled onto the street as rough hands reached after her elusive form. Something huge and black bore down upon her. She screamed! Then darkness!

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An aide dashed into the large meeting room and hurriedly talked to the Prime Minister of the second most powerful country on earth. The Prime Minister sat with a worried look for a brief moment, then stood and addressed the assembled dignitaries. "Ladies and Gentlemen, the President has been delayed." As he spoke he looked at the several vacant seats where the President and his delegation would be sitting. "I understand his limousine has been in a minor accident, and while he has not been injured the circumstances of the accident are a bit mysterious. It seems it was caused by an unknown young woman. Until the purposes she may have had can be determined, our security forces feel it would be better to defer the meeting until tomorrow, as there have also been some other unusual events in recent days, and it has been decided to defer the meeting and vacate the premises. I concur in that decision. Would the delegations leave with all due promptness then? I will advise you later of the further plans." There were annoyed mutterings as the crowd of persons pressed their way out of the room and to their waiting vehicles.

It was 3:17 PM as the last person vacated the building. Five minutes later an ear deafening explosion shook the ground, pulverized the walls, and collapsed one whole side of the structure. In the center of the blast, the meeting room had disappeared.

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Katie was vaguely aware of a siren screaming. She was lying down and hurting all over. She seemed to be in some vehicle which was racing along. She felt bumps and swaying as it sped on its way. People were leaning over her and doing things to her arms and talking at her, but she did not understand. She closed her eyes again, and tried to think. Slowly it came back to her. She had been running to warn the President. To warn him? Of what? Oh yes, the voice had said there was a bomb where he was going. She had to tell him. "But how could she do that now?" she silently asked herself and grieved, "I have failed - I have failed. Now nothing more can be done."

Remorse and disappointment flooded over her and she gave in to the futility of it all. Lying back, she just let time pass. The vehicle stopped and several people rolled the cart she was on into a building and down several halls. Then they were tending to her hurts, putting on bandages, giving her shots and connecting her to some sort of machine.

In a hazy dreamlike world of confusion, official looking persons kept asking her questions. "Who are you? What were you doing there? Why did you run into the path of the motorcade?" Katie could not think straight or put her thoughts together. Suddenly the world was a crazy place and foreign to all she knew. From her foggy mind, all she could bring forth was that she, "Wanted to see the President." She could not recall again why she wanted to see him. In her aching brain, she barely remembered the events leading up to her being here in what was evidently a hospital. She overheard that she had been hit by the President's limousine. In that instant she briefly relived that terrifying moment as the huge car bore down on her and she screamed again. Nurses moved in to calm her.

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"What the hell is going on? Where is the security chief? Would someone please explain how this ridiculous breach of security happened?" The President was practically beside himself in anger. He lashed out at anyone and everyone in his path. "What the hell is the country going to think about us not being able to prevent a

stupid event like this. What about the world leaders who were put into jeopardy. Who is responsible for this attack and this fiasco?"

"We are investigating already, Mister President," an Aide advised. "There are several things we have learned in the preliminary inquiry. If we can sit down here in your Suite, I will begin to analyze the situation." Other Aides moved in and started the machinery of investigation in motion. The President calmed down as bits and pieces of information drifted in. Aides passed the information along as it became known. They learned that the bomb had been placed by a small rebel group which was only recently formed.

Evidently they were well organized, but their plans had been foiled by chance. Most of the group was even now being captured as they attempted to take over several military installations. The Security routines had been reviewed, and all was in order except the last minute change of a television monitor in the meeting room. That must have been the source of the explosive. Security guards had followed all the necessary procedures but had detected nothing. Clearly a new and potent explosive was involved; one which resisted detection by the most sophisticated means.

And the girl? All she could say was she wanted to see the President. Who did not want to see him? Is not that why thousands of people crowded the streets of Ragonton? But what a fortunate accident, if ever there were such a thing. It was enough to stop the motorcade, and to delay and postpone the Federation meeting. The major problem to arise was concerning the new explosive, and that could be addressed now that the rebels were under control. Slowly the wheels of government brought the situation into smooth operation again. Officials regained their composure, and the confusing events were put in order.

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In the subdued atmosphere of Memorial Hospital emergency room on the edge of Ragonton, a police sergeant spoke quietly with a doctor. "How is the little lady, doc?"

"Given a little time, she will be fine. A slight concussion put her out for several minutes, and left her dazed for quite a while. There are the usual bruises and abrasions, but nothing too serious, nothing broken. She was disoriented for several hours, but that is customary in a case like this. She will be fine." he repeated. "Strangely though, her hands and fingers were severely bruised and abraded and scratched. I don't understand how that happened. It is almost as though she had been digging or tearing at something hard for a long while. Obviously, the limousine had almost stopped when it hit her. A couple of days in the hospital for observation and she can go home."

"Well, that's okay with us. Our orders are not to press charges, although there are several good ones we could pursue. The President himself wants us to drop it all, considering the favorable consequences which followed."

"Yes, it is bizarre. An accidental happening like this actually saved lives and preserved order. I understand they have already been able to track all but a few of the rebels responsible for the bomb. In fact, the bulk of them were captured when they moved against the army bases. Isn't it strange what an interesting role happenstance can play in major events?"

"Well, of course, Security was a bit antsy anyway. There had been the usual crank calls. None of them were considered serious, but you never know."

"As my friend Shakespeare would say 'All's well that ends well'. Aside from the little lady being banged up a bit and half a building destroyed, I'd say we got off rather inexpensively. The little lady may be in more trouble though. Her parents have been contacted and are on their way here from Dugan's Mill. That's a small town at the other end of the state. She may have some explaining to do when they arrive."

On another floor of the same hospital, a man in intensive care, who had suffered a heart attack breathed his last and was disconnected from the machines. No one would ever know the connection between him and a seemingly rash young girl who had caused such a commotion on this eventful day.

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"Tran almost got killed," raged Neth. "I said we should not get her involved. We almost lost another valuable connection with the human world."

"Now, now Neth," calmed Ekk, "Tran is all right, and the situation was saved. She showed herself to be a very resourceful young person, just as I expected."

"Oh! I didn't know any of us expected a favorable result. The whole affair was very risky. How did you know she would be all right?"

"I have known her during all her growing years. She is unusually intelligent. She did all the right things as well as she could."

Neth and Ekk had just returned home from Orf NaArgno's office. They had walked all of the way since Ekk's wing was still not completely recovered. He could fly short distances, but it needed a lot of care yet before it would be normal. Neth and Ekk had reported to Orf about the events of Katie's trip to Ragonton and her encounter with the President's limousine. He was much relieved the lives of the World Federation leaders were preserved, but was sorry Tran had been injured, however slight the injury. The stability of the Federation was a direct result of Tran's involvement. "Thanks to both of you for agreeing to the action and for getting the message to her." had been his grateful response.

That did not satisfy Neth however. Afterward, all the way home, Neth had been second guessing the decision. "How do we know that someone would not have found the bomb anyway?" she continued.

"That was hardly likely. Without Tran the President would have been on time and the meeting would have progressed on schedule. No one was questioning the placement of the new monitor. The device would not have been found before it went off."

"Well, I still think Tran is yet too young to get involved." With that, the conversation was dropped.

CHAPTER TEN THE AFTERMATH

"What in the world were you thinking of?" Katie's mother now vented some of the emotional pressure she had been feeling for two days. Katie's parents had just arrived at her bedside and determined that, indeed, their daughter was not seriously harmed and was recovering rapidly.

Choosing to keep most of her adventure to herself, and hoping to get back into the good graces of her parents quickly, Katie was careful in her reply. "Aw, Mom, I'm sorry. It was a dumb thing to do, but I wanted to see the President. I remember Dad talking about the meeting the other evening, and I suddenly decided to come and look. That wasn't so smart, was it?"

"Certainly not young lady," was her father's quick answer. The tone of his voice belied his angry manner and thinly veiled his basic concern for her safety.

"I'm sorry I caused you both so much worry. I realize I was wrong, but I sure am glad you are here now." This last was followed by a full flow of tears by Katie succeeded by hugs and reassurances all around. Although her parents were upset with her seemingly rash actions, They were relieved she was not seriously injured.

They did not understand why Katie had gone to Ragonton or why she felt she had to see the President. Also, they were hurt that Katie had not discussed it with them in advance, but only left a quick note. Katie knew there was no way to explain herself, and did not try. She had never before mentioned the voices she heard in her sleep, and did not feel it was advisable to talk about them now. She simply let the story stand as it had come out, and kept the other details to herself. She answered questions as necessary, but did not volunteer information.

"But where did you stay that night, dear? How did you get here, and what did you do?"

"There was this really nice older couple that I met at a gas station, and they drove me all the way here. I waited around in the bus station, and even slept a little there on a bench. In the morning I went around looking in the stores, but I lost track of time and almost missed the motorcade. I was late getting there and had to run."

Katie hoped her story was sufficient, and she was relieved that her parents did not ask for more elaboration. In a few minutes a nurse came in to announce the patient could leave at any time. The doctor had discharged her, but advised she visit her own doctor at home to redress the abrasions she had suffered.

The car trip back to Dugan's Mill was mostly quiet. The three were genuinely happy to be back together and enjoyed a pleasant restaurant meal on the way home. Katie found some time looking out the window of the back seat to reflect on all that had happened. She had been gradually realizing the voice she heard in her dreams had real validity. It had known of the problem and had sent her to fix it. She wondered how that could be. She wished she had been able to take care of the situation in a more sophisticated way, but at least the terrible results had been prevented.

During this reverie, she found herself fingering a long thin letter opener which she had kept in her purse. It was from the small room in the little house. The metal was scratched, it was bent, and generally beat up, but it was to become Katie's favorite letter opener, bookmark, and lucky talisman. Reviewing all that had happened, she resolved now more firmly than before never to tell about the voice she heard in her sleep. She was concerned others might not believe her, and she felt somehow it was important to keep it confidential. "It will be my very own secret. I wonder what more will happen to me in the future." she murmured.

"What was that, dear?" her mother inquired.

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking about my duty as an Auxiliary Aid at the hospital. I missed my scheduled time. I hope it was okay."

"I'm sure it was, but I have to say, as long as you mention it, Dad and I feel you deserve some punishment for your actions. We decided to ground you until school starts again. The only exception is your volunteer work at the hospital. We know you like that, and it does do some good in the community." Katie was actually relieved to have such a light punishment. She could still spend a lot of time reading, and twice a week she got out to walk to the hospital and work with the staff and patients.

Life settled down to normalcy again, and the events in Ragonton were forgotten with the healing of Katie's wounds. A week and a half later, while walking home from the hospital, she spotted a familiar figure sitting on a park bench. As she approached, Bill Harlow stood to meet her.

"Hi, Katie. How are you?"

"Fine. And you? Made any conquests lately?"

"Ouch, I guess I deserve that. No, as a matter of fact, I've been thinking of you. I was sorry to hear you were hurt, and I learned you were grounded for running off to Ragonton. I wondered how I could see you again. So I'm glad I was sitting here in the park today, but how are you able to be out?"

"I'm allowed to go to the hospital for my volunteer work, but that is all."

"I see. Is it okay if I walk with you?"

"Well, I guess no one could object to that. It's a public street. You better leave me before we reach my house though."

In the few weeks before the beginning of the school year, Bill managed to meet Katie several times in the park and walk her home. Their relationship became more cordial, as Katie felt Bill was treating her with much greater respect.

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Grand Lord Nur Xand was wallowing in good feelings. Lying in the grass in his favorite spot in the woods, he reviewed the events of the summer season. His

contact with the writer had gone even better than he had hoped. The writer was really beginning to understand the Dragons and the Dragon Heritage. Nur had been able to convey many ideas from the past and had impressed the writer with the cosmopolitan position of Dragons in the universe. Moreover, Nur had been able to convey some of the current happenings between humans and the Dragon world. The most wonderful part of the arrangement was that the human writer had grasped the idea that the dragon influence should be presented in a nebulous enough manner that it would not concern most humans in an adverse fashion. The idea of presenting the concept of Dragon Lore in a science fiction novel was the most satisfying contribution the writer had made. It felt very suitable to Nur, and he knew he was succeeding in his purpose.

As he was enjoying his thoughts, Lord Xand saw another dragon approaching, flying low and cautiously. At a considerable distance Nur recognized his offspring long before Ekk landed.

"Well! I'm glad to see you out and about again. How is the wing feeling?" was his greeting.

"Fine, Sire. I have been able to use it for several days, but this is the farthest I have flown. I knew I would find you here, and wanted to show off my prowess. How'm I doin' Dad."

"Mind your manners youngster. Your total recovery is no more than I expect from you. Needless to say, I am very pleased to see you able to fly again, however cautiously you must do it."

"Your parental approval is noted. Thanks. I won't be able to do loops and steep banks for a while yet though."

"I know, but you are certainly making progress."

"What are you up to today, Sire. I thought you might be off thought transferring to your writer friend."

"No, we have reached sort of a plateau information sharing. He is busy writing now. He may even include something about your ward, Tran. By the way, she did a fine job, considering the circumstances. I have seen the full report on the problems she overcame. She is a most resourceful young lady."

"Yes, Neth and I are quite pleased with her. She has developed a lot during this season. We need good beings such as her. But there is still much for her to learn, also.

The two continued in conversation about Dragon affairs until hunger and a longing to be with their mates made them realize it was time for them to return to their respective homes.

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Katie hurried to pack up the books, the cart, and the associated equipment. She had noticed by looking out the windows of the hospital that a storm of some sort was brewing. She finished her tasks and checked out of the Aides office to head home. As she exited the hospital, she almost turned around to go back. The sky was dark, a wind was blowing, and rain threatened momentarily. She thought of Bill though and remembered he was probably waiting at the bench in the park. What would he do, if she did not show up?

Defiantly, she headed into the wind and started at a fast walk towards Adams Park. A couple of minutes later she was entering the public area and saw Bill at the bench. It was not yet raining. They should be able to walk together for a little way at least. Just as they met there was a stronger burst of air and drops of rain splattered on the ground.

"Hi, I was afraid you wouldn't be coming. I was almost ready to run for cover."

"Yes, It looks bad. You should have gone."

"But I wanted to see you. I'm off to college again next week. I won't see you for a long time then."

Katie felt pleased Bill had waited and wanted to see her. As they turned to go, the wind picked up higher. They almost had to yell to be heard. Bill shouted, "They said on the radio a while ago that a tornado had been sighted south of here. Actually, they had warned everyone to get off the streets because it was going to be a severe rain."

"Yes, it's starting already," Katie hollered back to him. Just then a continuous roar began. They had reached the middle of the park by the landscaped stream. The roar increased in intensity, and seemed to surround them. Bill yelled again at Katie as he pointed to the sky. "FUNNEL CLOUD!! TORNADO!!" QUICK, THIS WAY!!" Almost dragging Katie, he raced into the shallow stream and towards the bridge which carried the footpath over it. The two struggled to get under the bridge. Bill indicated to Katie to wrap her arms and legs around the metal structural parts of the bridge. Then he wrapped himself around her and the metal too. They both held on with all their strength.

The wind screamed, all sorts of noise crashed and rattled around them. They were pelted with rain. A sudden rush of water from the little stream left them drenched. Unseen fingers of fiendishly driven air tore at their clothing and tried to separate their hold on the metal structure, but together they maintained their grip. This continued for what seemed like ages, then gradually the wind abated. The noise diminished and the force of the storm passed on, leaving them strained and exhausted. Slowly they let go of the metal support and crawled out from under the bridge. Standing again on the path, Bill looked at Katie, and seeing her bruised arms asked, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, and you?"

"I'm okay."

"Thanks for holding me."

"You are welcome."

"I might have been blown away."

"Yes, I know. I wouldn't like that."

Bill put his arms around Katie as she tipped her face up to him and received her first willing, meaningful kiss. Their tears mingled on their cheeks as the emotion of the moment engulfed them. Then, turning with their arms around each others waists, they strolled off towards home oblivious to the downed trees, overturned cars, and roofless or destroyed houses they passed by. They were only aware that they had reached a new level of understanding and respect for each other.

XXXXXXX

"Mister President?" an aide entered the luxuriously appointed office.

"Yes, you have the final report on the rebel action?"

"More than that, sir. We have found the design information on the new bomb the rebels used in their headquarters. We will soon be able to duplicate it and learn to counter it as well."

"That's great news. I'm pleased to have most of that event behind us." The president stopped for a moment, then added. "By the way, what ever happened to that young girl the limousine hit?"

"Oh, she's fine. Her parents picked her up and disciplined her. We didn't press any charges because it was an innocent accident. I am sure she is much chagrined by the memory of it all."

"Well, I'm glad she wasn't seriously hurt. Her involvement certainly saved the day as far as preventing a tragedy. We can all be thankful for that."

"Yes, sir, we are all very lucky in that respect."

XXXXXXX

Katie looked up from her reading as the phone rang. She placed an old bent and scratched letter opener in her book to mark her page and reached over to pick up the instrument, "Hello?" she responded.

"Hi Katie, it's Alice."

"Hi Alice, what's up?"

"Nothing much. I was just wondering whether you are all recovered from your accident in Ragonton. How are you feeling?"

"Oh, I'm okay. All my cuts are healed up and nothing hurts anymore. I just feel a little stupid for doing such a dumb thing."

"Well, I'm sure glad it wasn't worse that it was. Are you all set for school to start again next week then?"

"Yeah! I'm very ready. My grounding will be over, and my folks will let me out again. That will feel good."

"Did you hear? Elsbeth is having another party before school starts. I don't know how she finagled it, but her parents are letting her do it. The difference is her parents will also be at this party."

"Yes, she called me, but I told her I couldn't go. I don't mind though. One Elsbeth party for the summer is enough for me."

"I know what you mean," Alice replied. "How much trouble does one need for the summer, anyway."

"I've had my share, but I'm glad I went to the first one. It was an interesting experience. Otherwise, I might not have met Bill."

"How is your relationship with the Handsome One coming along?"

"Well, he's back at college and very busy, but he did write to me. I think we will be corresponding regularly. He actually is quite nice."

"Really? It sounds serious."

"Serious enough for now. We'll see what happens. Being stuck at home the last part of the summer gave me lots of time for thinking, and I have come to realize both he and I have a lot to learn yet. I'm determined to do better than ever at school now. I know it is very important."

"I guess you're right. I wish I had your brains though. Studies don't come easy for me."

"They don't come easy for me either, Alice. We just have to work at it."

"Right, well I'll see you next week. We can talk more then, I'm off to the hospital just now."

"Okay, see you then," Katie replaced the phone and sighed to herself, "Growing up is complicated." But inwardly, she felt a greater sense of responsibility and purpose. Perhaps she was special. Maybe the voice in her dreams is something important too. It has certainly been useful this summer. She resolved to always take the voice seriously. Somehow she knew that it would be very influential in her actions for the rest of her life. She slipped into a reverie and let her mind roam. Strangely she felt a great peace. In her closed eyes, it was as though she could see the farthest reaches of the universe, and she felt she belonged there. Nothing was frightening or foreign. She was at home with infinity and eternity, and she was an important part of them both.

XXXXXXX

Ekk stirred and slowly awoke. He felt Neth's eyes looking at him. "Well, what is it?"

"Nothing really, I was just wondering how your wing was feeling. When do you think it will be fully recovered?"

"Give me a few more weeks. I'll be doing loops and flips with the best of them."

"I don't need loops and flips. All I need is for you to fly normally and safely again."

Ekk gradually opened his eyes, "Do I detect a little concern and sympathy there? Am I finally getting the just treatment I deserve?"

Neth stuck out her tongue by way of reply, then added, "I can't help it if I have pity for those less able than myself." She paused and looked intently at Ekk. "If you must know, I have been very worried. A Dragon who cannot fly, is like a fish who cannot swim. I can't tell you how relieved I am that you are healing well." Her voice betrayed an emotional content.

"I know, dear one. You have been very brave during this trouble. I would not have you any different than you are. If you did not give me a bit of a hard time, I would wonder about your health, also. You naturally wish to make light of problems. At least most problems."

"What does that mean?"

"Well you were very concerned about Tran."

"Yes, I admit that. It's just that she is of my line and I want her to have the best."

"I understand, and she will have the best. She has already demonstrated she has the resourcefulness and courage to perform quite well. You should be proud of

her."

"I am proud of her, but there is so much to challenge her and harm or corrupt her too. I am concerned something will happen which will be too much for her to handle."

"No Neth, Tran will be all right. She has a good Dragon brain, and is learning how to use it well. She will take care of herself. The events of this summer have been a great learning experience for her. If we had planned it, we could not have presented her with a more useful training program. Moreover, she has responded beautifully, but all of you Argno persons are special, aren't you."

"I know, I know. What are you doing now? Trying to flatter me?" Defiantly, she stuck out her tongue, but Dame Neth Olana still reserved a lot of worry and a bit of concern for Tran Kettra, who also comes from Argno.

- THE END -