



# **Under the Moons of Venus**

**A Tale of a Princess Altivolant**

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**Illustrated by Kurt Huggins**

I nstead of indulging in the festivities, I spent the evening evading Lamprecht, while Herschel evaded me.

I had come to Bath not just to soak my body in healing waters, but to bathe my mind in new thoughts, to browse with the great William Herschel at the buffet of diverse and interesting ideas. In these the heart exults, and without novelty as sustenance, the curious mind withers and fades.

I had been crafting the latest volume of my current opus, which I expected to be no less celebrated than the previous twenty-three—when I found myself confronted by a conundrum, which had confounded the most contemplative minds. Perhaps Herschel could help me! But he was averting his gaze, hiding his face behind a glass of red Bordeaux claret.

Eventually I had him trapped in the vivarium, when he sat with his accompanists to play the harpsichord—an allegro decorated with pleasantly cascading quarter-notes. He then switched to the oboe, which his father had played, before launching into a delightful viola concerto. These pieces he had composed himself, and they were full of surprising shifts and playful themes, jostling each other like the myriad marvels in my cabinet of curiosities (as detailed in my previous works, which remain available at fine booksellers throughout Europe).

Between concertos, while others politely clapped or refreshed their glasses, I snuck closer and closer to Herschel, until I was standing directly behind him. I was close enough to read the sheet music, to see where his playing varied from strict time, just as his restless mind, I suspected, secretly wandered from his professional duties.

Of course, just as I had Herschel trapped, so I had entrapped myself. For hiding visibly in the surrounding crowd was my nemesis Lord Albrecht Lamprecht. He was leaning on a column, idly tapping his breeches buckles with a cane-like bludgeon. But I had to take the risk. I had come here for new ideas, and I refused to leave without them.

Having finished playing, Herschel bowed to much acclaim, then handed his viola to an assistant. He glanced briefly in my direction, then turned sharply away.

I called out, “Mr. Herschel, Mr. William Herschel! But a moment of your time, good sir, please, if you will.”

He pretended not to hear me, so I repeated myself in his native German.

“Ah! My warmest greetings, Professor Boxhammer,” he said to me. I had never met him before, but I had been told of his politeness, and he bowed with a sincere-seeming smile.

After we exchanged assorted felicitations and inanities, I asked him pointedly why he had been avoiding me. When he hesitated, I pressed him until this allegedly pleasant man became quite disquieted.

“I am avoiding you, Professor,” he finally confessed, barely above a strained whisper, “because you repeatedly misquote and mischaracterize the subjects of your books. I have no desire to be made a mockery.”

“I can assure you that my mistakes appear on no more than one page in twelve! No worse an error rate than our Lord’s selection of disciples.”

Herschel smiled slightly at my little joke. “To be precise, my chief worry is that you will write, as you have with others, that my music somehow cures a horrible disease.”

“Indeed, sir,” I said, “you flatter me in referencing my lecture on the ability of bagpipes to heal infections of the guinea worm.”

“Yes, I would love to hear the explanation for that.”

“Certainly! The sound of the bagpipes is so obnoxious,” I said, quoting myself, “that the guinea worm, afflicted by these vibrations, flees its victim’s body, like an audience fleeing a concert hall.”

Now more at ease, Herschel finally asked why I had sought him out.

“First, congratulations on your election to be choir-master and chief organist for the fine Octagon Chapel,” I said cheerfully. Then I drew him near and whispered, “However, I have heard that you value this post only for its monetary compensation, rather than as a medium to make a joyful noise unto the Lord.”

Herschel shifted uncomfortably.

“Already your restless heart wanders from your paid work, like a comet in the heavens, unbound by any one world.”

Herschel tugged at the ruffles at his throat and on his wrists, looking around nervously, lest the Bishop of Worcester overhear.

“On the contrary,” Herschel suddenly protested, too loudly. “I wholeheartedly agree that the Heavens declare the glory of God! As

the poet Edward Young once wrote, devotion is the daughter of astronomy, and an undevout astronomer is mad.”

“Indeed, indeed,” I said, amused by Herschel’s obviously prepared answer. “But I am not come to doubt your faith, but rather to ask you about the God-glorifying Heavens. For a question has vexed me like the guinea worm, and your mind might supply the cure.”

“And what is that?”

“What do you know about . . . the moons of Venus?”

At that, Herschel’s demeanor completely changed. No longer cautious and defensive, a broad smile crossed his face. He then launched into an excited lecture, and I was delighted to be rewarded for traveling so far!

I summarize:

Most astronomers agree that Venus has no moons, just as Mercury and Mars have none. Of all the terrestrial planets, the Lord has granted only our fair world a moon to rule the night.

And yet . . . On a cold but clear winter night over a century before, Neapolitan astronomer Francesco Fontana had made an astonishing discovery. He had been studying the heavens with a telescope of his own invention; his compound scopes were the finest in the world, the playthings of kings and the envy of other astronomers. His maps of Earth’s moon were the most accurate then available, and he had been the first to correctly draw the Tycho and Copernicus craters, along with their rays.

That night in 1645 he saw something no one had before: a moon circling Venus, flitting back and forth like a dancer dressed in red, as stately as the quartet of Galilean courtesans circling Jupiter. Within a fortnight he had discovered a second moon of Venus.

Others looked to the heavens, mainly with inferior equipment, but most saw no Venusian moons, dancing or otherwise. Finally, Fontana went to his deathbed, dizzy and feverish with the plague, while his rivals branded him a buffoon and his greatest discovery an absurdity, an effrontery, or a knowing fabrication.

Yet, in the following decades, the mysterious Venusian moons remained too intriguing not to continue the search. Only those with the finest telescopes saw the moons, and then only rarely. But see them they did! Even Short, Louis Lagrange, and Cassini!

And Horrebow, using his nine-and-a-half-foot scope in Copenhagen. He was so excited that he wrote in his journal, “I have never before seen a spectacle in the heavens which has captivated me more. I felt happy in my heart that the Lord had provided the inhabitants of Venus with a satellite, just like ours!”

Horrebow’s sighting had been confirmed at the time by two witnesses. Still, most astronomers, with their inferior scopes, argued that Venus had no moons.

“How will we resolve this debate then?” I asked.

“Not how,” Herschel said, “But when. When do you plan on publishing your study of Venus?”

“Imminently, once I resolve this mystery. My publisher is eager for the revenue!”

“I respectfully suggest, in the name of science, that your publisher wait until next year.”

“Why?”

“In a little more than six months, on June 3rd to 4th, 1769, from our planet’s perspective, Venus will pass directly in front of the Sun. In this silhouette, the transit will reveal all.”

“Will you allow a visit on that day?”

“Yes, of course!” he said, now enthusiastically embracing me.

“Thank you, and together, we shall solve this mystery, and know with certainty whether Venus has moons!”

With his promise to send me further documentation, I turned to hurry from the vivarium and from the entire manse. I even had my hand on the doorknob when a voice called me from behind.

I should have fled into the night, but please understand. My works are read throughout the world, and everywhere I go I am accosted by would-be acolytes and disciples, all pestering me with adulation.

Without thinking, I turned around, only to see my nemesis, Lord Albrecht Lamprecht, bearing his staff, which he rolled about in his hands menacingly, his face red from excess of wine.

“Do you intend harm upon my person, as you have done to my reputation, Lord Lamprecht?” I glanced warily at the two gentlemen flanking him. It took me a moment to recognize them as Professors Lechmere and Haas, both from Wittenberg.

"I sincerely apologize, Professor Boxhammer," Lamprecht said, bowing to me, "for any inconvenience my trifling jest has caused you."

I could never tell if Lamprecht was lying.

Indeed, when last—and first—we had met, he had introduced himself as an admirer, and had spoken highly of my translations of hieroglyphics, which I had based on the Bembo Tablet. He had read with interest my seventh volume on Egyptology. Therein I had compared the pyramids and ziggurats of Giza, Khufu, Teotihuacán and Atlántica, and found similarities between the ancient tongues of Egypt, Mexico, and Atlantis. All this lent credence to my theory that the former were founded by refugees from the last. Lamprecht had then humbly presented me with a newly discovered specimen of hieroglyphics, pleading with me to find time to translate it. I did, publishing a two-volume set translating this marvelous artifact, and explicating its implications on world history. My book became celebrated and widely read, and only after that did Lamprecht publicly announce that the specimen was, in fact, a fake.

My reputation had mostly recovered since, but I was determined that Lamprecht's person would not, if he were to initiate an exchange of blows.

Again he apologized for his childish prank. I do occasionally try to imitate the Christ, so I accepted his apology, noting that he knew not what he did, though silently I still wished to manifest my anger upon his nose and ears.

He then seemed to threaten me with his cane, which was capped on either end with rounded bludgeons, and I began to wonder at his further lies and chicanery. However, he did not strike me with the cane—but rather bowed and presented it as a gift, noting that he had heard from other scholars of my recent line of astronomical inquiry.

Under his instruction, I unscrewed a cap and unclasped a lock, and the canister ejected a small roll, which I almost caught before it hit the floor.

"Another forgery, Lord Lamprecht?"

"Oh, no, no," he said, and indicated his two colleagues.

Because they vouched for Lamprecht, I cautiously unrolled the scroll. It was covered with Egyptian hieroglyphics, but lacked the texture

of papyrus. Nor was this paper of wood pulp, sheepskin or linen. Rather, it was translucent, like onion skin, but with a greenish tint and the faint whiff of sulfur. I'd never seen paper of its like before.

The hieroglyphics were a mix of those I'd already deciphered, and some I would have to parse by context or homology to other tongues, perhaps Enochian or Adamic.

"As I mentioned," Lord Lamprecht said, "we present this gift because we had heard of your astronomical inquiries, as confirmed by your conversation with Mr. Herschel, about the elusive moons of Venus." He pointed at the scroll canister, then again. "You do not see what is right before your face!" Then I saw it.

I, Professor Ludwig Boxhammer, have written over a million words, but that moment I was struck as mute as old Zechariah beholding the angel Gabriel.

Had I understood earlier, I would have run *toward* Lord Lamprecht, not away.

The mysterious text—a frolicsome adventure tale, a translation of which follows—might indeed solve my mystery . . . but so might the scroll canister itself. The spherical cap in my hand was decorated with a large scoop on one side and clustered holes on the other, with miniature machineries interposed. I was about to pommel Lamprecht's pate with it, when I realized that the canister described the cap as a detailed model of an artificial Venusian moon.

With dainty gloved hands, Denjira rolled up the ancient paper, careful not to tear it, not this time. Then she slid the scroll into its proper bin, but felt it hit something, and heard the clasp break off and rattle around.

Luckily, though, her tutor Manemon was too old to hear.

After retrieving the clasp and hiding it in a pocket, she said, "May I ask an impertinent question?"

"Always, my Great Royal Princess."

"I read that earlier queens, before they became queens, toured all the floating cities of Zephyrium. If I'm going to ascend at the festival, when do I leave on my tour?"

"I have inquired, but the regent has yet to declare a departure date."

"How can I rule a kingdom if I don't know it?" She stared at the endless clouds outside

the window, its panes cut into a profile of the Ibis-headed god Thoth. “I hear that pirates are poaching our resources, balloons are slowly deflating . . .”

Manemon did not respond further, but stared intently at a ring on the windowsill. She stared back at him, until she relented and obediently hooked in the tether around her waist. The clouds outside were bottomless. “How much more deterioration will you let happen, before I am allowed to see it, to learn how to stop it?”

It had been four orbits now.

She missed her school friends, and the jokes and the conversations that bounced along merrily.

Denjira had seen her father the king die when she was little, had grown up with her mother being queen—until that shocking moment that Regent Gnath told her that Mother had been killed by Aeolian pirates. Anka Tiri, the divine queen of Zephyrium and most beloved of the Gods, her mother—slaughtered by pirates! How could anyone let this happen? Then, being too young for the throne, Denjira was taken from her school and her friends “for her protection,” and relegated to this dusty old library with this dusty old tutor.

“But no one can stop your mind from roaming . . .” Manemon turned to wave at the shelves and bins, overflowing with scrolls. “Even the constellations, as broad as the universe, and I am your humble guide to their wisdom.”

Once her old tutor had his back turned, Denjira leaned over a small desk to see if she could touch one wall with a fingertip and the opposite with a toe.

When Manemon turned around, she quickly sat down. Almost, almost.

At the end of the festival, she would be old enough to be crowned with the Crown of the Red Cobra, becoming Denjira Tiri, The Great Royal Queen of Zephyrium, transcendent, incandescent, a goddess, a phenomenon. But how does one become a phenomenon? She didn’t even feel ready to be an adult.

There was so much to learn before then!

If only her mother and father were still alive to teach her, instead of this one old tutor!

A gentle thump came at the door.

Denjira gasped in anticipation. Visitors! A

new face, a new voice. Maybe ministers or old school friends? Oh such luxury!

The visitor wore a ceremonial wooden breastplate of the Zephyrian Great Royal Guard, emblazoned with a Red Cobra.

It was Mesi, Chief Steward of Water! She drank in the sight of him, now more muscular and handsome than she remembered. Trapped with old Manemon, she had felt her social skills erode, had felt herself become more self-conscious and awkward in the rare moments that she spoke to other people. Now Mesi stood in her doorway, and without him even moving or speaking, she marveled at the way he carried himself, his eyes impressive but not imperious, confident but not condescending, forthright but not feral. He made her want to stand up straighter and taller, and as she did, he looked at her. She realized that she had been staring and turned away.

He cleared his throat. “Begging your pardon, my Great Royal Princess,” he said, falling to one knee before her.

“We are, um, uh, pleased by your visit . . . For what, um, do you approach us?”

Mesi presented an artifact, rarer and more valuable than almost any scroll.

It was a mechanical device sheathed in acid-resistant *plastikos*, with folding wings, a collapsible balloon, and a small motor.

“Humbly begging the Great Royal Princess’ forbearance, may I, your loyal subject and obedient servant, address your tutor?”

“Uh, you may.”

Mesi lifted the device onto a worktable. The helmet was shaped like a falcon head, like Horus, the glass faceplate in its open beak now fogged and yellowed. The framework holding the wings had been patched and re-patched to ward off the acidic rain. Since the Aeolian pirates had captured Zephyrium’s foundry two generations earlier, there was no way to make new metal. So several spars of ferrum had been replaced by wooden ones, and the skin of one oxygen tank scraped thin, to scavenge materials for another project. What a way to treat this gift from the Almighty Ancients!

The god Thoth himself had gifted this to her ancestors, when he had rescued them from the Great Flood on the third planet. He had flown from that world’s moon, and carried his

people to this new world, Hypoxium, to the floating cities he'd made for them, on foundations built from clouds.

According to the ancient scrolls, Thoth had originally provided hundreds of these flying machines, but now, millennia later, Zephyrium had only half a dozen still in working order. Without these mechanical flying contraptions, her subjects would have no water, and without water they would thirst and rebel. Water was life.

"The throttle to the engine stopped working," Mesi said. "I barely made it back to the platform."

"How urgent is it?"

Mesi glanced at the open door and then closed it. Then he made his way across the room, around bins of scrolls, finally stopping at the large ibis-shaped window.

They gathered at the window, hooking their tethers to rings in the sill. Denjira looked at the plumes of the volcanic Mount Tahut, and then down at the fiery inferno.

"No, my Great Royal Princess," Mesi said, pointing. "Don't look down."

Layer upon layer of clouds moved above them, each traveling in its own direction, at its own pace, according to its own plans. "Look up, far up! Do you see the slightly bluish clouds?"

Their ancestors had clung to the narrow banks of a river in a desert. So too now they clung to a narrow altitude range, death above and below, in an otherwise-uninhabitable world. Below them was an inferno, above frozen wastelands, and yet . . .

"I see it! Clouds of water ice, formed high enough that the heavier sulfuric acid has fallen out. Water! Drinkable water!"

"How much time do we have?" Manemon asked. "Before the clouds dissipate, that is."

"Very, very little."

"I understand," Manemon said. Denjira watched as her tutor and Mesi locked eyes for a moment, seemingly trading messages she did not understand.

After Mesi left, Manemon re-locked the door, checking it thrice.

"Now you show me what is wrong with this flying machine—" Manemon said.

"I thought you said you'd give me more boring lectures about the 53rd dynasty!" Denjira interrupted.

"Always be prepared to change plans, if facts or circumstances change."

Denjira pulled out copies of copies of the ancient scrolls describing the mechanical wing's construction.

"Find the problem, quickly," Manemon said. "Your mother always could. She called herself a Scientist-Queen. She knew everything, even that hidden inside a device or a heart. That way she saw the future and the dangers that orbit a throne."

*A Scientist-Queen*, Denjira wondered. *What kind of queen will I be?*

"Pay attention," Manemon said. "This is important. What's wrong? Quickly now."

Everything looked fine. From the valve, the throttle line connected to the controls on the chestplate, just like the diagrams in the scrolls. "Mesi said the throttle—"

"Why believe someone who broke something?"

"Humph." She searched more until—"That's it! The methane tank is empty, so the throttle has nothing to add."

"Why?"

The device took carbon dioxide from the air and water made by decomposing sulfuric acid in the clouds, and mixed it with a nickel-bearing compound, to create fuel. The nickel drove the reaction but was not itself consumed. And yet . . . "The nickel well is empty. Wait, it shouldn't get used up?"

If the nickel wasn't recovered, where did it go? Normally, the reclaimers should be faster than the fuel flow. Ah! "He throttled up too rapidly and blew his nickel out with the exhaust!"

Manemon's proud smile made his wrinkled face look like a cloudstalker. "Exactly. The fool was seeking thrills."

Then he retrieved an almost-empty flask and dumped the remaining shaved nickel into the well.

As the pressure in the methane tank rose, Manemon glanced at the locked door and said, "When you repair, don't just fix the part requested. You can't always fix everything, but do what you can, even if they won't notice."

Ignoring her protestations, Manemon showed Denjira how to wear the helmet, how to tuck in her long, straight black hair. Then he looked at the door again and hoisted the

contraption onto her back, which required unhooking and retracting her tether.

The straps had been set for the muscular Mesi, and she felt self-consciously small wearing them, even “scrawny.” But Manemon showed Denjira how to adjust them to fit her thin frame, and then, sensing her embarrassment, reassured her that she would grow stronger, just as her heart and mind would expand to fill the throne chair.

Glancing again at the door, Manemon quickly pointed out how to adjust the flow from the air tank, how to work the controls.

“I don’t know why you’re wasting time teaching me this,” she whined. “I’m never going to use it.”

As she said that, there was a bang at the locked door. Mesi was back!

No—this wasn’t Mesi’s respectful knock, but a crash, like someone forcing their way in.

With a great thwack, a crack appeared in the door right next to the lock. Moments later, with another crash, splinters from the door exploded toward them, and a hatchet with a huge metal head emerged.

“Go! Go!” Manemon cried out to Denjira.

With a few more hard whacks, a rough opening formed and a hand in a metal-armored glove poked through, struggling with the handle.

“Where? Go where?” Denjira screamed. The room was small, but crowded with scrolls, worktables, and reading desks, with only one door.

With another mighty crash, that one door flew inward, exploding into pieces.

An armed man, taller than Mesi, strode into the room, wearing plate-metal pauldrons and a breastplate painted the blue-white of water clouds.

Blue! This was the color of the Aeolian pirates!

The pirate’s helmet was shaped like the head of a jackal, like Anubis, the god of death. His ferric breastplate was decorated with seven wasp-shaped amulets, one for each enemy he had stung.

“Old man, you’re coming with me. Where is the Princess?” He carried a hatchet with a handle upturned and pointed at the bottom, like τ, the Greek letter Tau. “I demand to see her—now!”

“She’s not here, Kharkulo!” Manemon

shouted, even as Denjira stood behind him, plainly visible.

“Out of the way, old man!”

“I say she’s not here!” Manemon was shouting louder than Denjira had ever heard before, and he began throwing priceless scrolls.

Lord Kharkulo shoved Manemon to the floor, bowling over a bin of scrolls, and then carefully prepared to throw his hatchet at Denjira. He held his arm straight forward, aiming at her, the hatchet upright, then he bent his elbow at a right angle, and raised it.

Denjira screamed, and just as he stepped forward and released the hatchet, Manemon stood, moving faster than she’d ever seen.

Then he stumbled toward her, bloody axe embedded in his chest.

“What are you doing, old man?”

“You were supposed to go!” Manemon shouted at Denjira.

“Where?” she shouted back.

Manemon wiggled the axe out of his bleeding chest, and then used both arms to heave it toward the window, shattering it.

“There!”

Beyond the frame of the broken window was nothing but a sheer drop into the burning, crushing depths.

Then, with his last dying strength, Manemon shoved Denjira out the open window.

Now she was falling, falling, endlessly falling.

She grabbed at handfuls of air, flailed at a tether connected to nothing. The white clouds were soft and warm but offered no help.

She saw above her the great floating city, held aloft by many balloons, with the Aeolian ship parked near the palace gardens, its gantry disgorging pirates.

They were all rapidly shrinking.

Then myriad droplets of sulfuric acid began to pummel her. Her suit of black plastikos channeled the raindrops into rivulets, running off before they ate through the fabric. But if she tore the material, the acid would flood her suit, drowning and burning her—unless the hungry clouds got her first.

Mesi’s predecessor, untethered, had fallen off a platform and plummeted to the deadly clouds a thousand khet below. According to

legend, he had taken exactly one hundred breaths before being crushed and burned alive.

Denjira was supposed to be the beloved of the two thousand Gods and soon inheritor of Zephyrium—but she'd lost everything. First her father, then her mother, then the throne to Regent Gnath, now the entire kingdom—and her life. Ninety.

How could old Manemon have let this happen? He was supposed to protect her! That's why she'd let him lock her in the library.

Soon she would die—unless Thoth and his fellow gods rescued her.

“Oh great Shu, son of Re and god of cloud and wind,” she pleaded, “please hear my cry and have mercy on—”

She was stopped mid-sentence, when a gust of wind appeared from nowhere, grabbing her, spinning her around. Eighty.

Suddenly she was actually rising toward the floating city. Home!

Then, just as suddenly, the fickle god shifted the winds and she was falling again, faster than ever. Seventy.

Denjira had never really thought about her own death before. Why should she? She was young and had done nothing wrong. She hadn't even had a chance to start her life. It all seemed so unfair.

Manemon's history scrolls gave her more perspective. Her death would not just mean her end, but the end of the 53rd dynasty, the end of her family line, the last dream of her parents, now wiped off the planet. It was doubly unfair! Sixty.

She started crying, deep heaving sobs that fogged her facemask and scraped her throat and shook her whole body uncontrollably. Then she stopped herself mid-sob, when she realized she had a choice. Manemon had given his life to save her; how could she just waste his sacrifice? Fifty.

If she were to ever become queen and a phenomenon, now was the time to grow up, stop sticking out her tongue, stop feeling sorry for herself, and comport herself with honor! Or she could just choose to die, and then have to explain this embarrassing end when she saw her parents in the afterlife. Forty.

Yes, she was wearing a mechanical wing, but she'd never used this machine before, and had only a theoretical understanding of how it

worked. Her fingers worked the controls, tentatively, careful not to break anything. She wasn't very strong, but the metal was old and brittle. Thirty.

Slowly, wary of the wind's force, she worked the controls to extend the metal framework of her wings. They were more beautiful than the huge ostrich feathers on the god Shu's head. Twenty.

Now she was zooming away, her exhilaration palpable! She wasn't falling, she was flying!

But downward. She was flying herself downward!

She pawed frantically at the controls for the flaps and the motor, careful not to expel the nickel, as Mesi had.

It worked!

She felt like the bones in her arms and legs would snap as the wind buffeted against her, shaking her violently. But as she rose through the clouds, an exhilaration pulsed through her. She would be The Queen Who Flew!

Closer and closer, she saw the underside of the floating city. She'd spent her entire life on the platform, but had never seen it from the outside. It did not look like the beautiful castle in the sky drawn in the scrolls. No, the floating city was a messy patchwork, eons of different architectural styles smashed into one, each trying a different method to keep the city aloft with dwindling resources. Some of the balloons holding the city up were filled with hydrogen, some helium, some with ordinary atmospheric gas—now mostly carbon dioxide—heated by mirrors reflecting the nearby sun's bright light. Woody vines crawled all over the city, lashing the disparate parts together, Thoth's original work maintained by lesser human hands. It was the ugliest and most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

What was her plan? Perhaps when she returned to the city, she could hide and cling to the more decrepit buildings around the periphery, tracking down Mesi and the others.

She and Mesi would raise an army and take the throne that belonged to her, by force if necessary!

But first she needed to get back to the floating city. She adjusted her rudder and found she was still rising toward it, but slowly, almost as slowly as Manemon shuffling across the library.

In her impatience, she decided to deploy the balloon between the wings on her back.

Surfaces on her wings flipped from their black sides to mirrored, and the sun, so close and huge, warmed the air inside the balloon. As it inflated, she rose, faster and faster!

The platform approached, and she saw a railing on an exterior catwalk. If she could catch the railing, she could swing herself over and—oh no!

Her fingertips brushed the railing but slipped away, the surface slick with rain laced with sulfuric acid.

No matter. There were balloon cables, just a little above her, almost in her grasp—when suddenly she was yanked sideways. The wind screaming between two buildings rocketed her through the narrow channel.

Now there were no finials, spires, weathervanes or other architectural frivolities above her, lest such things puncture the balloons. No, the rooftops here were rounded and smooth, as undecorated as the top of Manemon's old head.

Nothing for her to grab, as she flailed and flailed, and then it was too late. The city and its balloons were past her.

Still she rose.

She turned and reached up at the balloon on her back, awkwardly trying to squeeze the air out, trying to smash it down, but utterly failed.

Eventually she got the mirrors turned away. Without added heat, the balloon would slowly cool and deflate. All she had to do was wait and she would gently float down to the city—unless she lost it in the endless clouds.

A buzz went off in her ear. This old device could no longer convey voices from afar, but it could still send messages coded in buzzes and clicks.

"We're keeping an eye on you, my Great Royal Princess!" It was Mesi. "Stay where you are and we will come get you."

Denjira's heart leapt at the news that she was not alone!

"Come get me now!" she messaged.

"Not until it's safe for you to return; not until we've defeated the pirates."

She would have her revenge on the Aeolian pirates for killing her mother, and her tutor.

A rage slowly built inside her, until it was uncontrollable. "I'm coming home!"

"No, stay up there."

"I can't. My methane tanks are getting low."

"It's not safe yet!" Mesi's message cried.

She ignored him. She closed her eyes for a moment, and thought back hard on what she had read. Everything depended on what she could remember.

She had to descend and quickly. But how?

The solution was obvious!

The fastest way to go down . . . was to go up first.

Who had used this mechanical wing before her, and what was his position? Mesi, *Chief Steward of Water*.

She would simply do the thing that her flying suit had been designed to do. She would rise and rise! Follow the steam! The nearby volcano Tahut was a rare wet one, and the air above her was cold enough that the steam would freeze into ice.

Ballast.

Through rough sheets of invisible turbulence she rose, as if climbing a staircase made of nothing.

Once high enough, once she saw that the clouds had a slightly bluish tinge, she deployed the electrostatic collectors. She swooped through the clouds, allowing the collectors to gather the ice of pure water.

She had to move quickly, before she froze. The air around her was shimmering, as if full of tiny diamonds. She'd never seen anything this beautiful. The crystals playfully tickled her, softly pelleting her arms and legs, and all around her body, and her wings left glistening streams and vortices in their wake.

Whereas the clouds around her floating city were mostly ghostly grays and dingy duns, here the sun sparkling through the ice crystals made myriad colors. Here she saw . . . Blue! But not the heavy, ominous blue of dark azurite, but the bright and playful blue of Mefkaht. Greens, like beryl or peridot, the color of renewal, rebirth, and resurrection. And bright yellows and gold, like the color of a god's skin, the color of perfection and the everlasting.

Just as a river of water on their old world had sustained the people of the desert, so now this colorful river of ice would sustain her people, the people of the clouds.

Eventually, her ice bags became full, and it was time to nose down in a controlled descent.

She remembered everything the scrolls had taught her, everything Manemon had said. Denjira could slightly tilt her wings this way or that, carefully lift and lower the various control surfaces.

Denjira almost felt as if the god of winds were whispering in her ear, helping her read the clouds and the currents—it was exhilarating.

She steered with her rudder and drew in her wings, adjusting the trailing edges, accelerating toward the floating city like a cloudstalker diving on prey. The ice made good ballast.

For the first time, she felt like she was actually in command of her flying ability, perhaps even in charge of her own destiny.

She followed the signal to the platform, and as it approached she spotted the pirate ship, now hovering above the palace grounds.

The Aeolian ship had a disc-shaped flying wing, filled with buoyant air, trussed over a fuselage. The wing had a tail at the rear, and the fuselage had propellers on either end. Using ducted fans perforating the wing, the ship now hovered, the flaps ringing the wing and the fuselage's two propellers pointing down.

Below her, Mesi and a few loyal guardsmen—why were there so few?—battled Aeolian pirates.

The pirates had gathered crates along the deck, readying to load them onto their ship. They were full of ancient scrolls! Now they were also rolling barrels, probably laden with the most valuable commodity—water!

But . . . why? Had the volcanic plume that the pirate city orbited run dry?

Some of the thieves wore the Red Cobra, the symbol of Zypherium. Were they pirates who had killed her troops and taken their uniforms, or were they traitors?

“Thieves!” Denjira called down. “I command you to stop!”

“Thieves? We’re not stealing anything!” the pirates shouted back. “We have Regent Gnath’s blessing!”

“You lie!” she screamed. *Why would he do that?*

She came down behind Mesi, just as her fuel ran out.

Denjira tried to imitate the enemy fliers around her, but her landing was awkward and uneven, her feet stumbling, one wingtip al-

most touching the deck, but she was back on the city!

“Great Royal Princess! What are you doing here?”

“Trying to stop the pirates from stealing more from us!”

In a move more hurried and risky than he would have liked, Mesi dispatched the pirate he was fighting. Then he quickly turned to Denjira’s back, unbuckling bags built into the suit, scraping the precious ice from her wings and the wires and into a cask. Then he folded the wings down and released the air from the balloon.

Denjira was terrified that the pirates would attack them as Mesi fooled with the water ice—but they didn’t. They simply stood by, weapons in hand, watching patiently from a distance.

Was this an unwritten rule? Maybe water was too precious.

“This is a pretty impressive load you collected, my Princess. But what are you doing here?”

“I’m fighting!” *I will be the Warrior Queen!*

“You shouldn’t be—”

“You and I, Mesi, you and I will take on all these pirates.” As two pirates approached, eyeing the ice cask, she recalled some drawings she’d seen and shouted, “We’ll fight back to back!”

“Yes, my Great Royal Princess. I will be your sword and shield.”

She realized that she didn’t have a weapon.

What could she do?

She looked around and saw arrows planted in the wooden planks around her. Untethered arrows. Only pirates would be so wasteful. A tethered arrow could be retrieved if it missed its mark. An untethered arrow shot off the side was lost forever—along with the precious metal in its tip. But now they gave her a weapon!

She plucked arrows from the deck, and then held one in either fist, thrusting them wildly at the Aeolian pirates. A thrown bludgeon knocked an arrow from her hand, and she grabbed another, defiantly.

Mesi wielded a wooden sword, hardened with resin. An Aeolian pirate approached, grabbing at the ice cask and wildly and amateurishly swinging a metal sword. Although he fought with wood against metal, Mesi had

greater skill and quickly disarmed his opponent and killed him with his own weapon.

But as soon as Mesi felled this opponent, another took his place.

New pirates seemed to appear out of nowhere!

Then Denjira realized that they were dropping from the Aeolian ship now above and to her left. The pirates were jumping from the ship!

But they were not simply falling—they were flying, or more likely gliding. There was fabric stretched between their spread arms and legs, like a batwing.

One pirate coming out of the air did not wear a simple batsuit, but a pair of mechanical wings, like hers. While she'd been tossed about by the winds, barely able to control her flight, he was strong, swooping confidently. The way he turned so quickly, and seemed to gather winds to his wings, his engine firing merrily as if opening a bag of winds! As he flew, he grabbed a flagpole as he passed, swinging himself around, to turn back suddenly on his enemies. Maybe she could learn to do that. It would have been most impressive—if he weren't using an axe to strike the heads of her troops as he zoomed over them. His helmet, shaped like a jackal's head, confirmed his identity—he was the same fiend who had killed her tutor Manemon!

She looked to Mesi. "Who is he?"

"That's Lord Kharkulo, Champion of the Pirate Queen."

This elegantly flying villain was swooping one moment then suddenly pitching his wings upward at a high angle, allowing him to smoothly land on his tiptoes. Even as he was coming down, he was lashing out at Mesi, who stumbled back, blocking his axe blows with the metal sword taken from the dead pirate. Mesi easily blocked three blows, but the fourth broke his sword in half. Relentlessly, Mesi stabbed with the broken blade, but the murderous pirate Kharkulo easily dodged, and stepped forward, and slashed again with his axe. Mesi spun and Denjira saw that Kharkulo's blow had struck him in the gap between his helmet and breastplate, severing the tube to his carbon dioxide scrubber.

He gasped and fell wide-eyed to his knees. Kharkulo stepped aside, signaling for the archers to pepper Mesi with bolts.

"No!" Denjira screamed as Mesi fell.

Who would be her sword and shield now?

She was truly alone.

Without thinking, she charged forward and plucked Mesi's broken sword from the flooring.

Kharkulo laughed and said, "Look at the little girl trying to fight me, with a broken sword no less!"

Then he grabbed a metal sword from another pirate and slid it across the deck toward her. "Let's give you a fighting chance!"

As he laughed again, Denjira dropped her broken sword and picked up the intact one.

Now—the blade balanced, with gentle downward pressure on her wrist, just as the scrolls had said—scrolls she had read at night because her mother had disapproved of her studying such things. She held the blade with the point slightly upward and advanced. The pirate Kharkulo swung his axe, aiming directly for her chest. Denjira let the blade rise to intercept the blow and then, when metal touched metal, forced her arm down and outward to parry. Her heart raced, first in fear and then in exhilaration. It worked!

The pirate scowled and slashed again. Denjira parried the blow once more and stepped aside for a counter thrust, screaming out, "This is for Manemon and now Mesi!" Kharkulo blocked her thrust easily.

"How did you learn to fight?" the pirate asked.

"Reading."

"Apparently where you also learned to 'fly,'" the Aeolian pirate laughed. "But have you read the words of Sophistes?" The pirate brought his axe down with a heavy blow from above. Denjira blocked it, but the force of the blow stung her arm, the bones in her forearms feeling as if about to splinter. Sophistes hadn't mentioned *that!*

She retreated, holding her sword at the ready. "How about the unknown swordmaster of Derrida?" Another blow, another parry. The pain was tremendous, but she refused to let it show, refused to give up. "Palunius?" She was quickly running out of space behind her.

"When I am crowned with the Crown of the Red Cobra, my Great Royal biographer will write of your death!"

Kharkulo laughed, a musical rolling bass that she might have found charming in other

circumstances. "I see no scroll-writer here! You stand alone, princess! Surrender!"

She spared a moment to scan the battlefield. Three of her troops still stood, but they were outnumbered and too far away to help.

Her adversary released a blood-curdling scream. She returned her eyes to Kharkulo in time to see him in the midst of a mighty overhead swing with his axe. She raised her sword to block the blow. In the moment before impact, the pirate dropped his left arm and shifted his footing. This move placed him on her flank with the blade sliding over the top of her sword and below her chin, coming to a rest over her suit's breathing tube.

With Denjira immobilized in his arms, Kharkulo looked at a pirate and gestured at the ice cask with his eyes. The pirate dutifully took the cask away.

Denjira considered an escape, a pirouette away from the blade followed by—but no, this warrior was stronger and faster and more experienced.

One of the pirates threw a rope, and it wrapped itself tightly around her ankle. She wasn't going anywhere.

"You are surrounded, Denjira. Put down your weapon!"

Someone said: "No, Lord Kharkulo, you put yours down!"

Who was this newcomer?

He was taller than Kharkulo, and broader of shoulder. His helmet was shaped like the head of a crocodile.

The stranger drew a sword, but instead of stabbing Denjira, he thrust it at Kharkulo.

"Who are you?" Denjira asked.

"The one keeping you alive—for now." Turning to Kharkulo, he said, "You were sent to retrieve Manemon, not slay him!"

"He killed himself."

"Queen Khalija will find that a meaningless distinction. What of his pupil?"

"She will be fun and easy to dispatch." Kharkulo held Denjira even tighter, his axe still at her breathing tube. "She learned to 'fight' from the scrolls."

"Yes, but what else did she learn?" Turning to Denjira, the stranger said, "Tell me, why do the acidic raindrops run so quickly off our suits?"

"Why are you asking me this?"

"Just answer!"

She remembered what Manemon had taught her and said with a growl, "The plastikos is coated with, hmm, alternating stripes of water-repellant and attracting material, so, uh, the acid runs off before it can dissolve the matrix of..."

"You see! We should keep her alive because Queen Khalija may find her knowledge useful."

Kharkulo growled at him.

"Or . . . should I tell her you have failed at all the tasks assigned to you? Again?"

"How can you, if you are dead? I will tell her you died bravely, in the confusion of battle."

"What of all these witnesses? Are you sure they will lie on your behalf? My mother will be extremely displeased, and you know the force of her wrath."

Kharkulo grunted and sheathed his axe, then turned away, shoving other pirates out of the way.

"And you, my Great Royal Princess. Will you please lower your weapon, too?"

She scowled at him. Despite her frustration and anger, she thought of gently laying the sword down on the deck. Instead, she slammed the sword into the wood, tip-down, with all her remaining strength. The sword stuck hard and fast in the wood, useless.

"A wise choice," the stranger said, sheathing his own sword.

"May Set take you!" She stood and spat the words like cloudstalker venom. "When I am queen of Zephyrium, I will show you no mercy!"

The newcomer faced Denjira, his eyes smiling at her through the glass faceplate—which was held in the jaws of his crocodile head-helmet—the effigy of the god Sobek. Indeed, Sobek was a god who protected with apotropaic magic, and this newcomer had certainly protected her from Kharkulo!

"Great Royal Princess Denjira," he said, bowing to her, even as she stood surrounded by pirates. "I am Rinaldi, Prince of Aeolus, and I respectfully ask that you please accompany me aboard our ship."

"Do I have any choice?"

"We always have choices."

For far too long, the only men Denjira had seen had been Manemon, Mesi, and a few assorted guardsmen, all significantly older than she was. But this man, this Prince Rinaldi . . .

this golden skinned, sharp jawed, silk haired man seemed to be within a hatchet's throw of her own age.

Her anger softened for a moment—but how could such a man be in league with scoundrels and murderers?

She looked at the hardened faces—and even harder sword points—around her.

Something about this Rinaldi silenced her anger. She wanted to believe him, and it wasn't just his golden skin and piercing eyes. No, it wasn't just that. It was the way he comported himself, like he was a nobleman, too. Was he someone worthy of trust?

As she was led away, Rinaldi bowed again and said, "My Great Royal Princess, may Osiris keep you in peace."

But soon other hands had taken her to the pirate ship and stripped off her mechanical wings—yet another thing she had lost—and locked her in a small cell, in her thin bodysuit of black plastikos.

As Denjira sat alone in the room, she stared out a round window and wondered.

Who was left to help her re-take Zephyrium? Who?

All she had left was a handful of wind. Even the Slow Moon, a constant, majestic presence in the sky, hid its face behind layers of clouds. And the Fast Moon, which should be approaching soon, was also unseen.

Yes, she was to be crowned at the Festival of the Two Moons, but even they had abandoned her.

She allowed herself a small cry, and then she thought of Mesi and old Manemon again.

Now that they were gone, who would advocate for their souls?

The pirates surely would not.

No, she was still a princess—wasn't she?—and this was her job.

A Royal duty. She was the only one left. It didn't matter if she didn't want to.

Manemon had taught her: Prayer is an act of obedience to the gods, not an emotional condition.

But here in this prison she had no ale or cakes of saffron to make a sacrifice. All she had was words.

"O Thrice Great Thoth . . ." She hesitated. "Scribe of the Gods and, uh, Lord of the Scales, may wise Manemon be blessed as he, um, enters the Hall of Double Right and Truth

. . ." She took a couple of deep breaths to calm herself. "I, the Great Royal Princess Denjira, do testify that he has not shut his ears to the words of truth, and like you he is one who loves knowledge." Denjira's voice grew stronger and clearer. "May his heart weigh well against the Feather of Truth, and may the nine parts of his soul remain with him together in the House of the Underground, Forever and Ever. Amen."

Then, as the pirate ship continued on to the floating city of Aeolus, she repeated the blessing for Mesi.

In this prison, though, there were no materials to make shrines. So she would need to be a living shrine to them. Now it was triply important for her to be strong and clever—and alive. For if she allowed herself to be killed, who among the living would keep advocating for Manemon and Mesi's souls—and hers?

When the ship arrived at the Aeolian floating city, rough hands took her from her cell.

A gantryway led to a large room, opulent in décor but dimly lit. The tapestry on the wall depicted a battle, pirate ships firing on a city platform in flames. A closer look revealed that the tapestry was worn and threadbare, patched in places, faded in others. But the air in the room was fresh, full of oxygen, unlike the mostly-carbon dioxide outside the walls and windows.

Pirates emerged from doorways lining the room to watch the procession of treasures stolen from Zephyrium. *Am I just another piece of loot?* Denjira wondered. At the far end, a grand stairway of polished wood—only a little marred by gouges and scratches—led up to an even grander hall, cheerfully lit by skylights and opulently decorated in golden hues and shiny black. These were pyrite and galena, crystallized midair from minerals boiled off the surface. Rinaldi explained: they had been collected generations before, by the Aeolian hero Ra Nadaq, who had daringly dredged them from the deepest depths of the atmosphere, all the while fighting vermicular and pterofom monsters.

Across the hall sat an imposing woman on a grand wooden throne carved like rising flames. She was the one entrusted with the Fire of Life, distributing it to the blessed and withholding it from the cursed. Centered around the throne

was an enormous pair of falcon wings, like Horus's, that spanned the length of the room. The queen sat with her head positioned where the eye would be. She was the Eye of Horus, who refreshed the vigor of the heart that the blessed might never lie down in death. Her presence, her solid build and baleful stare, gave Denjira pause. Yes, she was the enemy, a pirate, but there was a royal majesty about her that Denjira could learn from.

Meanwhile, the brute who had murdered Manemon moved to the queen's left flank and stood wide-legged, arms folded. Rinaldi took her right flank. The armed guards moved in close beside Denjira, eying her warily.

"Khalija, beloved of the two thousand gods, Queen of Aeolus, I present to you Denjira, the Great Royal Princess of Zephyrium!" Rinaldi called out.

"How utterly delightful to finally meet you," Queen Khalija said.

At this point, Denjira didn't care about royal niceties or protocols. "Why are you trying to have me killed?" she shouted.

"How indecorous. No one is trying to kill you."

"He is!" Denjira stabbed a finger at Lord Kharkulo.

Queen Khalija turned to Kharkulo and said flatly, "On whose authority would you attempt such an unsavory task? Who authorized this?"

"I did."

The voice came from behind her, dark and familiar. She turned to face him. "Regent Neferu Gnath!"

Regent Gnath wore an open helmet shaped like the head of a snarling hunting dog, the effigy of Am-heh, the Devourer of Millions and Eater of Eternity, who made his bed in a lake of fire. Gnath pressed a button on his sleeve, and flames suddenly ringed his neck and shot from the top of his head. This was indeed dramatic stagecraft, Denjira thought, but also a waste of precious fuel. Then he was joined by two nubile young women, clothed only in flames painted in amber and Lachesian reds. While Gnath would devour the souls of his victims, his mistresses would eat their livers.

"Lord Regent, I am again pleased by your tribute, and you have yet to give me cause to regret installing you as regent," Queen Khalija said. "Furthermore, it is irrelevant to me how you indulge your petty interests, or the per-

sonal benefits of ruling a kingdom. However, I never, ever, authorized you to commit final dissolution against the Great Royal Princess."

"Final dissolution?!"

Regent Gnath clapped his hands together. "Denjira, you are a mere inconvenience to me. You will never be queen of Zephyrium. You would be wise to remember that."

Anger burned in Denjira's heart. "My loyal troops—"

"Are defeated, the survivors scattered."

"I guess I'll just become queen of my own band of pirates, then." Angry words, and she knew Manemon wouldn't have approved. *Always be diplomatic.* Bah. To the acid clouds with that!

"Now we return to the first matter," Queen Khalija said. "Lord Kharkulo, have you brought me old Manemon and his wisdom?"

"My apologies, O greatly feared Queen, but the old tutor killed himself."

"That is unfortunate. The Lotus could have used his knowledge of the old scrolls. Did your troops collect them?"

"They did."

Kharkulo gestured at the vast number of crates holding ancient scrolls being brought into the throne room. Denjira guessed that this was at least a third of the entire library, with more crates coming in.

Some of the other crates were twice as tall as she was. *How much had the pirates stolen from Zephyrium?*

"Well done," Queen Khalija said.

"My mother, I humbly submit that Manemon's pupil may have learned something useful to us." Rinaldi gestured at Denjira.

"Maybe she could work for the Lotus?" Khalija said.

"I'll never work for you!" Denjira shouted. "I'll never work for this . . . Lotus!"

"We'll see," Khalija asked. "But let's test her knowledge first. Rinaldi?"

Rinaldi winked at Denjira. "My Great Royal Princess, tell me how acid-resistant plastikos works."

"I'll never tell you anything!" Denjira snarled at him. "Anything that you could use against Zephyrium! I'll never work for you, the Lotus, or any of you! I'd rather be dropped into an acid cloud!"

"Your mother said exactly that, too." Kharkulo snickered. "At first."

“You!” Rage boiled in Denjira. “You’re the ones who murdered my mother!”

Khalija laughed harshly. “Murdered? No one has done any such thing. She is alive and well. Well, alive.”

“She’s alive? Where?” Denjira turned to Regent Gnath. “You told me she was dead!”

He shrugged. “I am human, and from time to time I may make factual errors.”

Kharkulo’s smiled twisted. “Do you not know that the Lotus is your mother?”

“What? No! Take me to her right now!”

“I knew you’d say that,” Kharkulo said. “But did you not just declare that you would never work for your mother, and would rather be tossed into acid?”

“Indeed, a rather insolent and disrespectful child, isn’t she?” the Queen said.

“I think she could be useful in hard labor,” Kharkulo suggested.

“Regent Gnath, what do you think we should do with the Princess? Send her back to Zephyrium?”

“Perhaps better to tell the people she’s run away in fear, and thus forfeited her right to the throne,” Gnath said. “If we just send her back, then the people will want her crowned queen.”

“And then I won’t get any more of your lovely tribute.”

“My Great Royal Queen, I think—” Rinaldi began to say.

“I have not asked for your opinion!” Queen Khalija snapped. Then she thought for a moment, and said, “Maybe hard labor is not such a bad idea, at least for a few cycles, until we can decide what to do with her. Guards! Take her to the lower deck!” Khalija ordered.

“Are you just doing this to be cruel?” Denjira spat.

Khalija smiled at Kharkulo. “But do not harm her. At least not yet. Make sure she doesn’t have any of your ‘accidents!’”

“Why, yes, of course, my Queen,” Kharkulo said. “Of course, we won’t harm her in any way. No harm whatever. None.” He turned to his guards and said, “You heard that, right? Do not harm she-who-will-never-be-queen.”

Kharkulo grabbed Denjira’s arms.

“No, wait! Tell me where—”

Kharkulo slapped Denjira in the face.

“Mother!” The word came from Rinaldi, and Denjira stopped struggling in surprise. “I promised her she would be treated properly.”

“Then you lied.” The Queen turned to Kharkulo. “Take her away!”

The grip on Denjira’s arms tightened. “No! Is my mother really alive?” She heard Rinaldi’s voice, his tone plaintive, but she couldn’t make out what he said.

She tried to hold her ground, planting her feet defiantly, but Kharkulo lifted her light frame off the ground and carried her away. Denjira tried kicking, but it was useless against Kharkulo’s body armor. Then she opened her mouth to scream, but no, a phenomenon wouldn’t act like that. Manemon’s advice would serve her well here.

Her mind flashed back to when she was a small child, playing in a corner of the throne room. Her father—Pharoum Ptaka Tiri—shouted out in surprise, as his feet tripped on his own royal finery, and he fell down the steps in front of his own throne, hitting the back of his head, bang, bang, bang, until his royal finery turned red with his own royal blood.

So she had seen her father die. But her mother?

It had been Regent Gnath who told her that her mother had died. Now she realized he had offered no proof, no witnesses, and she had foolishly believed him. She was angry at Gnath for lying to her, for robbing her of the time she could have spent with her mother, that she would never get back. But also angry at herself for believing his lies.

If her mother were still alive, then everything changed. Denjira had spent the last four orbits preparing to ascend to the throne when she reached the age of majority. If her mother were still alive, none of that would happen. She wouldn’t get to be—or have to be—a phenomenon for quite a while.

But what now? Every successful royal she’d read about had had a plan. What was her plan? Only one was obvious: to find her mother, to rescue her from slavery to these pirates.

Even as Kharkulo and his guards took her down two more stairways, dark and smelling of mold, a sly smile crossed her face. She didn’t know how, but she was more confident than ever that she would rescue her mother. And maybe together they could wrest the kingdom back from Regent Gnath.

The last passageway ended in a heavy wooden door flanked by two armed guards.

Kharkulo unlocked and opened it. Then he shoved her into a prison room and slammed and locked the heavy door.

Unlike her cell in the ship, this room was not small and solitary. No, it was communal, full of those who had been prisoners of war, now bound for life. Perhaps from these slaves she could recruit an army to retake Zephyrium? After all, most of the people here seemed young and vital.

One of the prisoners surprised her with a headband like those they were all wearing. It was decorated with two wooden disks, one red and one white. Oh! She'd almost forgotten. The Festival of the Two Moons was beginning. At the end of the festival, she was to be crowned with the Crown of the Red Cobra—but she admitted with a sigh that probably wasn't going to happen now.

Since the festival was just beginning, by tradition, they were playing a human Setna game, with rows of boxes drawn on the floor.

One player threw a handful of sticks, and then called out numbers. Others cheered as they stepped from box to box, progressing along a path, learning the true cost of wisdom.

The woman standing next to her had a pretty nose and looked very strong. Denjira turned to her and said, "Hello, I'm Princess—"

"Oh!" the woman said. "Princesses stand in that box."

"No, no," Denjira said. "In real life—"

"I'm sorry, I misunderstood! Dead princesses stand there, but the live ones stand over *here*."

"Be quiet!" A young man snapped at them. "I can't hear the numbers!"

The slaves cheered again as panels irised open in the wall. They raced over to grab large platters of food that appeared before the panels closed again.

Denjira took some sweetmash, in a bowl with upturned corners, and a pair of moonmeat buns. It all tasted like ashes in her mouth as she turned to stare, alone, out the window.

Somewhere in all those clouds was the foundry, where she knew she would find her mother.

But where?

The Festival of the Moons was beginning, but would they show themselves, to remind her of the gods' persistent love?

She stared at the spot where the Slow Moon should be in the sky. Once she and her mother had looked for it, and they had sat for the longest time, looking until they lost sensation in their legs. But they were rewarded by almost seeing it: a bright spot of whiteness behind only a couple of gauzy layers of clouds.

Denjira looked at the clouds for a long time and did not see a trace of the Slow Moon. Only her faith told her it was still there, where Thoth had sewn it like a jewel to the canopy of the sky.

Then Denjira recited the Incantation: "Blessed be you, for though you be the Slower of the Two Moons of Thoth, your force is above all force. It protects us like a nursery from the flames of the Solar Chariot, and it carries the air we breathe in its belly."

She then turned to a different part of the sky, hoping to see the Fast Moon. The Festival would celebrate its nearest approach, but at this time it might still be small, difficult to see, even if the clouds allowed.

She could not believe her luck! Almost immediately, the gaps in the clouds, through layers and layers, all aligned, and there she saw the Fast Moon! It was larger than she predicted, roughly shoving clouds out of its path, just as Kharkulo had done to his guards.

She watched the Fast Moon skitter across the sky like a shiny bauble tugged by Ra's chariot with fusor packs. The rim of the moon appeared to glow with faint orange luminescence, as though Ra's exhaust had become suddenly visible.

Denjira thanked Thoth for granting her the sight of it! She even held up her hand, and her fingers momentarily cast red shadows on her palm, before clouds hid the moon's face again.

"Blessed be you, O Faster of the Two Moons of Thoth, for you show no favor, bringing air to both the inferior and superior. As you ascend from our world to the heavens and then descend again, blessed be your journey, and may you please bless mine."

After a sleep cycle, the would-be future Queen of Zephyrium was assigned to scrubber maintenance. The material that removed corpuscles of carbon dioxide from the air became saturated and had to be baked at high temperature to remove the poisonous gas, then returned to the scrubber. It was unpleasant work,

the air hot and foul with the odor of caustic chemicals. She purposefully undercooked the adsorbent, hoping that her sabotage might hamper the pirates at a critical moment.

"You should be careful," her coworker Nailah said. "If they find your work flawed, well, there are worse assignments than this."

Denjira smeared dirty sweat around her forehead with her forearm. "Can't get much worse than this."

"Tell that to the poor souls working on hot forges with no ventilation."

"At the foundry?" Denjira asked.

"I don't know what you find so exciting about the foundry. Workers there slave in the heat until the sweat burns out their eyeballs, working shift after shift until their strength is gone, and their limbs are so weak and thin, shriveled like twigs, that they snap under the weight of their chains. I think that's worse than this."

Denjira was horrified, thinking of her mother slaving under such conditions. "What kind of evil taskmaster would work them like that? And for what?"

Nailah shrugged. "Last I heard they were working on giant bells. I suppose when they're played they'll be loud enough to be heard two kingdoms away."

"Gigantic bells? That seems like a waste of resources, unless to play music of the gods."

"Who knows? They do what they're told."

"Where is the foundry?"

Nailah pointed out the window at an enormous structure in the distance, hundreds and hundreds of armspans away, barely visible in the heavy mist. It was a quarter of the size of the city and built with ancient, heat-resistant bricks. It was a complex of squarish buildings, storehouses, workshops, silos, and towers, all connected and piled high with a Laocoön of tubes and pipes and vents and shafts. These channeled waste heat, to expand the many balloons keeping the whole structure aloft.

But there was always danger, Nailah explained, so the foundry was connected to the city only via the end of a long spar. It was as if the foundry were touching the city by the fingertips of an outstretched arm, ready to disengage in case of fire or explosion, lest the whole city be dragged from the sky.

But the foundry was where she could find her mother.

How to get there?

Even if she still had her mechanical wings it would be difficult to fly across the gap.

"If one were to try to get to the foundry from here, how would you do it?"

"Why? I suppose the maintenance tunnels, but they are very dangerous..."

"Where are they?"

"A couple levels below us . . . You're not going to try to escape, are you?"

*If I'm caught, Denjira thought to herself, I'll say I have new adsorbent, ready to go, and the scrubbers down there could use refreshing. I'm just doing my job.*

Denjira was hoping to rely on the guards here being lazy. Even if a prisoner managed to open a locked door, there were bars to this cage beyond—even if no more substantial than a thousand khet of empty air.

And if someone escaped into the bowels of the city, where would they go? There was nothing to eat, nothing but drainage pipes full of acid.

Perhaps, Denjira thought, in their laziness, I might induce them to over-indulge during the next meal break, or maybe she could find a way to drug them, and then—

But before she could execute an escape plan, a heavy locked door flew open and rough hands again seized her, dragging her away to a new assignment.

Now she was on a team of workers who climbed the outside of the city, doing maintenance in the acid rain.

She was given an old, unpowered batsuit, with fabric hanging between her legs and between her arms and sides. But without a motor or ferrum-reinforced wings, the suit was not nearly powerful enough to cross the chasm between her and the foundry.

Once she had the suit on, a guard, without her permission, slid a sword between her knees.

As she protested, he drew the blade downward, ripping the fabric. Now her suit had no rudder.

Denjira's work crew was led by an older Lion-Man named Ptalal. The Lion-Men did not resemble lions, but were so called because they were of the flying city Derrida. There they worshipped the war-god Maahes the Lion-Headed, Lord of the Slaughter. Ptalal had been Maahes' high priest and a commander in his army, before he and his fellow warriors

were captured in battle and sold into slavery to Kharkulo.

Ptalal showed Denjira how to repair leaks in the ancient pipes and how to use the batsuit to leap from girder to girder like a grasshopper, tethering and untethering herself along the way.

As she learned to leap about, she wondered if she could use this technique to travel along the edge of the city. She was distracted, dreaming of making it all the way to the foundry, when her tether caught on a spar, slamming her against a girder. She reached to grip the metal, but it was corroded and rotten, a huge chunk coming loose in her hand, just as her tether, unbidden, detached itself.

Denjira was falling again, falling—when suddenly Ptalal grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her to safety.

At the end of the workshift, Ptalal demanded that the guards replace Denjira's defective equipment and give her a new suit without a tear between the legs.

They did not.

Instead the guards took batons and beat Ptalal around his old knees, then dragged him away for "continuing education."

Rough hands grabbed Denjira again.

"Where am I being taken?" she demanded.

The guards didn't answer, but her next question fared better.

"Who ordered this?"

"Kharkulo."

Denjira and a couple of dozen other prisoners were lined up along a railing overlooking the cloudy abyss.

They were given weapons, but not heavy metal swords. No, their weapons were flimsy batons, as long as her forearm, and no wider than her little finger. Maybe they were good against old, unprotected knees, but they'd be useless against Kharkulo and his heavily armed thugs.

Even if she could convince all these slaves to join her in a nascent rebellion, she'd have to find some weapons somewhere. Or maybe they could make some? Maybe they could tear away old sections of pipe, and then flatten and sharpen them into swords.

She looked up and down the line, wondering if anyone else had better weapons. No, everyone was armed with batons. Whatever

happened, she'd have to survive this next attack first. They were obviously meant to defend Aeolus. But from what? An attack from Ombalos or Derrida?

But what if Zephyrium was attacking? Would the archers with arrows pointed at her back force her to fight her own soldiers? Or maybe her fellow prisoners? She had a horrible thought: she wouldn't be forced to fight her own mother, would she?

Then she realized: if Kharkulo sent her here, it was not to fight, but to die. He had probably also reassigned her to pipe repair duty, making sure her batsuit was slit between the legs and her equipment faulty, hoping she would fall to her death.

Now she was doubly determined to survive this attack.

"Get ready!" someone shouted.

Her fellow prisoners braced themselves, raising their weapons. Still Denjira saw nothing, but she gripped her baton tightly in her little fist, scanning the skies for the enemy.

She didn't see it until it was only an armspan or two away. It wasn't a human attacker, but . . . a sky spider!

This wasn't one of those skittering little things she squashed under a toe, but enormous, with legs long enough to wrap around her head and touch tips on the other side.

It was right in front of her, but she hadn't seen it until the last moment. Its body was tiny, and its long legs thin enough to be transparent, with gossamer wings strung between them, making the spider almost invisible against the clouds.

She swung her baton and immediately realized that this was the right weapon. Lighter and thinner than a sword, she could swing it quickly back and forth, lashing out at the sky spiders around her, triumphantly breaking their fragile legs.

Then she looked in horror at the prisoner next to her. Spiders were covering him head to toe, stinging everywhere, injecting him with poison as he thrashed. Like all of them, he wore a helmet, but some of the spiders had found a way under the helmet's lip.

She reached to smash the spiders on him, but someone pulled her back, shouting, "He's already dead!" and pointing at the swarms still in the sky.

Denjira swung her baton in the air wildly,

and when her right arm grew tired, she switched to her left.

As she fought she realized that the body of the poisoned prisoner was sliding around the deck of its own accord. No, it was actually floating a little above the deck, rising slightly into the air.

Just as an electrical bolt can split corpuscles of liquid water into gaseous hydrogen and oxygen, so the sky spider poison could turn the liquids and solids in a human body into gases. Even as he flailed, still alive, his skin expanded, splitting in places, as bubbles formed under his clothing, turning him into an undead human balloon.

A big spider was coming at her now, dangling a thread of silk. At the bottom was something the size of an eyeball, probably acting as ballast, giving it stability as it drifted in the wind.

As the weight landed on the deck, the thread broke and it rolled free. When it stopped, it sagged a little, then neatly unfolded itself, and released an army of baby sky spiders, perhaps a dozen or more. Their legspan wasn't longer than a finger, but they were surprisingly fast, scurrying around while she tried to stomp them.

Squishing them distracted her, and she hadn't realized that several large adults were now crawling on her body. Now she threw down her baton and patted herself wildly with her palms, even as she felt the tips of their legs trying to get underneath her collar, under the cuffs of the sleeves of her wingsuit. At any moment she would be bitten, and turned into a floating human balloon, when—

Suddenly all the sky spiders leapt off her. She turned to see spiders jumping away from the other prisoners, too, away from the deck.

What was happening? Were they running away? What was frightening enough to scare away a sky spider?

Then she realized that they weren't leaping. Nor were they being blown away by the wind. No.

The sky spiders were being chewed up, drawn into the voracious propellers of an even more frightful flying machine prowling just beyond the railing of the city.

The nose of this machine was beaklike and fearsome, with the name "Volantor" proudly

painted on the side in what looked like blood. The landing struts were clawed like Sobek's mighty arms, the fuselage broad, lion-like, and wrapped in protective crocodilian scutes. Three forward canards armed with crossbows waggled threateningly as the engines pivoted and roared. To Denjira, this all made the ship look like it was pacing back and forth in the air like an impatient lion, ready to leap across the clouds, killing and maiming as it pleased, like a murderous gryphon.

Now this gryphothopter had drawn all the sky spiders into its propeller maws, crushing and chopping them to bits before spitting them out. But the machine didn't seem satisfied, and it turned to larger prey.

Another one of the prisoners flew awkwardly across the deck, as if yanked forward by the front of his jacket. Denjira tried to grab him as he sailed by, but missed.

She was now staring directly at the spinning blades, mesmerized, as the prisoner was drawn inexorably toward them—when she realized that a man inside the machine was furiously pulling on the levers.

It was Rinaldi! Why was he killing prisoners? She should have known that she couldn't trust him, either.

But suddenly the engines throttled down, and the prisoner, no longer pulled forward, landed awkwardly. He fell on his face, before rising with a crumpled smile, embarrassed but safe.

Denjira saw Rinaldi breathe a sigh of relief. His quick thinking had actually saved the prisoner! Now he was flying gingerly, bringing his craft down on the deck, careful not to hit anything or anyone.

As the lower hatch of this gryphothopter opened and Rinaldi descended the ramp, Denjira strode happily toward him.

Once he saw her, he dropped to one knee and said, "Blessed may you be, my Great Royal Princess!"

She smiled and said, "Arise! There's no need for that! And thank you, by the way, for saving me from those horrible creatures."

"The sky spiders are actually quite interesting," Rinaldi said, thoughtfully. "Inside them are animalcules that digest the volcanic rock particulates, as those inside termites digest wood."

"What are you doing here? You're not go-

ing to take me to be punished by Kharkulo, are you?"

"Certainly not! No, actually, I'm here to take you to see your mother." Rinaldi pointed at the foundry.

"Really? Let's go!"

"In a moment. Before we go see your mother, I need to inspect my ship. Come with me." Rinaldi walked across his craft, inspecting the skin for damage from the spider impacts. "Look for gunk covering any sensors. What were you doing up here fighting sky spiders in the first place?"

"Kharkulo reassigned me here—probably so I'd die!"

"Just be glad he didn't send you to the Prison-House of Winds."

"The Prison-House of Winds?"

Rinaldi had been running a cleaning tool along the joint of a wing-flap, clearing out dead spider bits. He paused, a grim expression on his face. "Yeah, you're chained to a passageway so narrow that the winds are fast enough to strip off your clothes, then your skin and your flesh."

"That sounds awful."

"Oh! Or the judgment chamber, which is filled with randomly-floating balloons."

"That doesn't sound too bad."

"The balloons are painted with poison. You'll die if they touch you. But . . . you'll be judged innocent, if the god of winds keeps blowing them away from you."

"Yeah, I met him before. Wouldn't trust him."

"You're lucky Kharkulo didn't send you there! But . . . he's not supposed to harm you at all. I have been pressing my mother to punish him harshly for what he did do."

"It seems you have little influence with your mother."

A long sigh. "I fear you are right. If my counsel held weight, you and I would be allies. But she felt that Regent Gnath was the safer bet. Perhaps she was right about that; I see in your eyes that it would be difficult to persuade you to work with former enemies."

"How can you talk about peace?" Denjira snarled. "Aeolus has long raided our cloud-top refineries, burned our platforms, sent hundreds of our citizens to their deaths."

"This is true, but there have been atrocities on both sides." A spider, which had somehow

survived the massacre, crawled across the fuselage toward Rinaldi's head. Right before it bit him, Denjira shouted and pointed, and Rinaldi turned and squashed it with a flick of his hand. Without missing a beat, he continued: "I share my mother's goals for working together, but her methods . . . well, I'd prefer a gentler touch."

"You have her ear."

"As you had Gnath's."

She looked at him sharply. Could he be just as much a victim as she was? Perhaps he was able to wander the world, but his soul was locked in its own cloister, every bit as isolated as she had been in her library. Who was he?

Yes, he had saved her from Kharkulo during the battle and from the sky spiders just now. But learning that her mother might actually be alive had shaken her to the core. Nothing seemed certain anymore. Could she really trust him?

"Just one more thing to finish the check, and then we can launch toward the foundry and find your mother . . ." Rinaldi wiped down a propeller, then ran his bare fingers over it, feeling the edge for invisible divots and cracks. "If the prop breaks, the imbalance can be so bad that it tears the engine right off its mount. That'd be a bad day."

She hadn't realized just how much he had risked to save her from the spiders!

Maybe he was her only friend in this insane world. Maybe she had to take a crazy chance.

"Do you think it would be possible . . . for you and I . . . to form an alliance, perhaps with my mother, and overthrow your mother and Regent Gnath?"

She bit her lip, waiting for a response, when—

The floor lurched suddenly, throwing Denjira into Rinaldi's arms, and then the floor heaved again, smashing them together into a wall. Their hands fumbled for the railing, but the deck lurched once again, and she, Rinaldi, and the other prisoners were tossed into the air and then thrown against the deck.

"What's going on?" Rinaldi said, as the floor slowly tilted back to horizontal.

"Maybe Zephyrium's navy has arrived to rescue me at last!" Denjira shouted. She scanned the sky for incoming ships.

"That didn't feel like a broadside," Rinaldi said. "Maybe one of the city's lift balloons popped?"

“It was a broadside, I’m telling you!” Denjira shouted excitedly.

“Let’s get out of here!” Rinaldi turned toward his gryphothopter, just before debris fell from the sky, slicing a giant hole in his ship’s newly cleaned starboard wing.

Then another explosion ripped through the flying city, catapulting Denjira and Rinaldi, untethered, into the endless clouds.

Denjira watched him flail, tumbling in the turbulent air. She did not have her flying machine, only an unpowered batsuit. Rinaldi didn’t even have that. For a moment, she considered leaving him to his fate, a pirate’s fate. But no, he might be her only ally in this whole place.

Scanning the sky below, she found a cargo balloon in the far distance. It seemed to be rising, moving toward the foundry. Toward her mother. Could she reach it in her wingsuit?

She had no idea how to make that calculation. All she knew was that she had to, or die trying.

First she had to save Rinaldi.

Denjira nosed down and streamlined her body, letting herself fall quickly. Rinaldi was below and to the right, falling spread-eagle. Smart boy. She angled toward him and watched as the gap closed.

Closed too fast.

She spread her arms to slow her descent. Wind buffeted her madly, knocking her off course. She tried to steady herself with the winglet strung between her legs, but it was to no avail. She remembered that one of the guards had earlier sliced that fabric, probably at Kharkulo’s order. So now her suit had no rudder.

A sudden downdraft punched her in the back. The last remaining cubits separating her from Rinaldi disappeared in an instant. She desperately grasped for him before he slipped by. She clipped his body, heard them collide with a terrible *crack*, and then he was gone again, as they tumbled away from each other.

Desperate, she flattened out, and the wings bit into the air and steadied her. As she slowed, Rinaldi caught up to her.

“Grab hold,” she shouted, “wherever you can.”

“You fool,” he said, “now you’ll die with me.”

“Shut up and let me rescue you!”

He wrapped his arms around her waist, constricting her wings. The cloud tops rushed upward.

What could she do to rise, before they dropped together into the infernal acid clouds below?

Most of the winds were moving in horizontal bands, but in the distance she saw smoke *rising*. Of course—this was the volcanic plume of Mount Abydos, belching forth smoke and ash. Aeolus orbited this plume, and now she had to find an updraft from the volcano, but without burning them to a cinder.

She circled horizontally, even slightly downward, gliding, searching for rising columns of volcanic air, falling further than she wanted, desperate to find one before she got so low that they were burned or crushed. Indeed, Icarus had flown too high, too close to the sun; they would die if she flew too low, too close to the acid fires.

Suddenly, she felt her wings catch the rising volcanic plume, and she hollered excitedly as they rose up and up. But they were tumbling, uncontrolled.

She still had no tail rudder. The cargo balloon was not far away, but not nearly as close as she’d like. They were suddenly losing altitude and veering off course.

Rinaldi, his arms still wrapped around her waist, seemed to read her mind. Acting as a living tail rudder, he worked his legs, splaying them or bringing them close together, bending them or twisting his waist, all to help Denjira steady the course toward the balloon. She spread her wings as far as she dared in the turbulent air and glided. How long could she do this before they broke apart? Spiraling, her heart racing, Denjira forced herself to stay calm. She angled her wings to catch the wind and maximize lift.

The wings bit into the air, and they seemed to be slowing, but the cargo balloon, large and round, was approaching too quickly. She unfurled her wings a little more. The air tugged at the surfaces, yanking her arms upward with a painful jerk, slowing her. She craned her neck to look. The dark surface was coming at her fast and—

She extended the wings just a little more, and just in time. The balloon slammed into her—soft, pliable, and unrelenting. The impact forced the air from her lungs and through

the filter tube. Her head swam. The smooth surface slid beneath her. She clawed for a handhold, but her fingers slid off the material. The curve grew sharper as she slid from the top of the balloon around its edge, her speed increasing with the angle.

Through the corner of her eye, in the distance, Denjira saw a pod of four carnivorous cloudstalkers. If they slipped off the balloon, it would be a race between the cloudbests gobbling them up—or the acid clouds burning them alive.

“We’re slipping off the balloon! Grab something!” she called out to Rinaldi. But that gave her something else to worry about.

He wasn’t answering. Even when she asked him again. Then she realized that his body wasn’t moving—it was still acting as her rudder, his arms still wrapped around her waist, his fingers locked together.

Rinaldi just wasn’t moving, as if he had assumed a death pose to save her life. *His last conscious thought was to save me*, Denjira thought.

Nonetheless, he was not going to help now, even as her fingers flailed at the balloon. Finally her hand brushed something as she fell—a mooring hook! She closed her fingers around it and gripped with all her might. Her shoulder wrenched painfully and her body twisted around the arm.

When Rinaldi hit the side of the balloon, she heard him exhale, almost imperceptibly. He was alive! Now he was clearly breathing, but drawing rapid, shallow breaths.

Oh! Carbon dioxide poisoning. His face shield was cracked—perhaps when they had collided.

Clinging with knees and one arm, she removed her mask and held it over his face. His breathing calmed.

After a few more terrifying moments, Rinaldi started to stir. “Where—what happened?”

Denjira kept swapping the oxygen mask between them. “No offense, but you need to shut up and help me scamper down the line.”

“Huh?”

“Go! We should be able to slide down into the payload bay.”

“Right.”

“You’re gonna have to hold your breath, I’m afraid.”

“I can handle it.” His voice was stronger

now, surer. Good, she was going to need some of that oxygen herself.

Clinging to each other, staying close so they could share the air, they clambered, hand by hand, down the ropes on the side of the balloon. From the corner of her eye, Denjira could still see the distant cloudstalkers. The smallest one seemed to notice them, seemed to be staring right at her. She was about to alert Rinaldi, but the largest cloudbest turned that little one aside, and they moved further into the distance.

Finally, Denjira and Rinaldi reached the payload bay dangling below the balloon. They landed feet-first in sand-sized grains of ore, which had been collected by electrostatic and magnetic skimmers from the volcanic plume.

Denjira sank up to her knees in the price-less dirt. Then she got up with a start, and began racing around the small gondola, which was only two or three armspans across. She closed the overhead hatch and pushed ore up against a hole.

“That should keep any more sky spiders out!”

Finally she rewarded herself by sitting down next to Rinaldi, even as grit slid down inside her boots. Then she shared her mask again. After a few puffs of fresh air, he sat up next to her. “I owe you my life,” he said.

“Let’s wait and see if we actually survive this.” She glanced up at the balloon overhead. “This thing is destined for the foundry, no?”

He nodded. “The foundry has a radio beacon, and the balloons home in on it.”

“Then all we have to do is wait, and it will take me directly to my mother.”

“Why don’t you take a nap?” Rinaldi said.

Denjira must have looked as tired as she felt. Sleep would be wonderful, but she’d be leaving him to the duty of swapping the breathing mask back and forth. She trusted him to—a realization that startled her—but he looked just as tired as she was.

Instead, they sat side-by-side trading stories, fueled by exhaustion and the delirium of oxygen deprivation.

Rinaldi told her about the monsters Queen Khalija had sent him to battle, along with his second, Amami of the Flaming Sword, and their band of adventurers. How after protracted deadly fights, Rinaldi and his team sat qui-

etly, meditating with silent sorcerers in the Ghost City of Uluut. There he was slowly transfigured, the dust speaking of his dreams, and he was given a choice of changing or being changed, and as his visage reformed, the wind whispered his true name.

Denjira was endlessly charmed by Rinaldi's tale. She wanted to believe that their world was full of wonders, a magical place, like the ancient scrolls had said. So she told him how she had discovered the lost city of the Cydosella, where she had swum in levitating oceans palaeocean, and flown through the plumes of Mount Rulaam, collecting jewels of opal and golden treasures by the handful. Then she communed with the unmoored mind of a coleopteran potentate, its spirit displaced from a different world in the far future.

Not to be outdone, Rinaldi told her about solving the Invisible Maze of Eryx, then climbing the outside of the Forbidden Tower of the Ugrakhs, its walls slick and slimy with acid, as he battled the Undead Paladins of the Thriim.

This was not as challenging, Denjira declared, as fighting living ice monsters in the graveyards of the cloud-haunted, and then taking on the ancient war machines, which she had accidentally awakened in the midair Caverns of Derrida.

She then told him, truthfully, about the pod of cloudstalkers she had seen in the distance while he was unconscious. He didn't believe her.

Instead, he told her of the time he had wrestled a full-grown bull cloudstalker. His story began with his team hunting a multi-winged cloudstalker with an enormous skull mouth, ten cubits across. By the end of the story, the cloudstalker was four khet long—twice the length of a spinning spear throw—and there was a pod of ten of them, all vanquished by Rinaldi, single-handedly!

After a time that felt all too brief, Denjira heard a shout.

"I got a grapple on it," the voice said. "Give me a hand pulling it in!"

The gondola swayed as the dockworkers hauled the balloon.

Rinaldi grinned and put a calming hand on Denjira's shoulder. "We must look a sight, but surely even the lowest of workmen here know my face. Imagine their surprise!"

Denjira didn't have to imagine for long.

After a bit more banging and jostling, the payload bay was through the air shield and aboard the foundry. Denjira looked to Rinaldi. She was excited to see her mother after all this time, but not sure how to get out of the gondola first. "So do we just climb out or—"

The ore granules shifted beneath her feet. They were draining away rapidly, drawing her down with them. *I'm not falling through the air again, am I?* she wondered. Oh, right! The workers must have opened the chute at the bottom, dumping the ore—and its passengers—on the catchment floor. Rinaldi had dropped away before her eyes, and she had remained in place a moment longer, then joined him.

She found herself next to Rinaldi in a pile of ore, covered in gritty dirt. The nearest workman threatened them with a shovel. "Hey! Looks like we have stowaways!"

Rinaldi stood and brushed himself off indignantly. "Shouldn't you be kneeling?"

"Hah! Funny—oh! Prince Rinaldi?" The man clumsily dropped to his knees, the shovel clattering to the floor. "Apologies, my Great Royal Prince. May you live a million orbits. I didn't—with all the dirt, it was difficult to—"

The other workers began dropping down as the realization dawned.

"I'm only joking. There's no need for that! Arise, my gentle subject. Arise, all of you. We are only beings like you."

"Yes, my prince."

As the workers dispersed, Rinaldi said to Denjira, "Let's go look for your mother."

"Look for? I thought you knew where she was!"

"I only know that she's somewhere in the foundry—on the details I've been kept in the dark almost as much as you."

After quickly cleaning up, they passed through huge doors leading from the ore storage bay into a cavernous room. Inside, the air was blistering hot, fueled by the massive furnaces that were smelting ore and spitting out refined metals. "The riches!" Rinaldi exclaimed. "There is enough wealth here to make both our kingdoms prosperous!"

"From what I heard, they're using it to build something," Denjira said. "Giant bells."

He led the way into the heart of the foundry, into yet another cavernous room. In

this one, workers worked massive forges, making the air even hotter than before, the waste heat siphoned into inflating the enormous balloons that kept all this weight aloft.

As they walked, Denjira scanned the face of every female worker, hoping it was her mother. She also took note of the sledgehammers, wondering if they would be useful breaking her mother out of this prison.

Sweat trickled down Denjira's back. "What is all this?" The finished metal pieces didn't seem to fit together—here, a gigantic pump with complex metal plumbing, there, rings of sheet metal bigger around than the castle watchtower. She saw two of the giant metal bells that she'd heard about. Their outsides weren't smooth, but covered with a framework and complex bracing. Wouldn't that deaden the sound? Curiously, there weren't any clappers big enough for the bells, either.

As they walked on—with Denjira looking at every woman worker's face, and Rinaldi looking at what they were working on—Denjira had a terrible thought. A moment before she had been filled with excitement at the prospect of seeing her mother again after all this time. Suddenly she was filled with fear. What if her mother hadn't been taken prisoner, but had run away? Maybe Denjira got that wrong, too. She remembered how her school friends kept teasing her that she was scrawny. What if there was something seriously wrong with her that everyone else could plainly see, but no one would really tell her? Something so hideous about her being that it would cause her mother to flee, to abandon her. What if her mother didn't want to see her? And would reject her a second time?

Then she saw her.

Her mother was slimmer and livelier than she remembered. Denjira expected to find her chained, in rags and covered with grime. She wasn't. Nor was she dressed in needlessly frilly royal robes. No. She was sitting at a table, dressed like an engineer, in a practical body-suit of acid-resistant plastikos. She was referring to ancient scrolls and pointing at new blueprints, marking them up and rattling off numbers. Others around her took notes, including an engineer with a bright green circle around his faceplate.

As they approached, Rinaldi dropped to his knees. With hands raised and head lowered,

he shouted: "All hail to you, my Great Royal Queen, Anka Tiri! All hail to you, Adored and Feared Queen of Right and Truth, who embraces and dispenses fire with un-burning arms!"

Denjira said, excited but fearful and hesitant: "M-Mother?"

Queen Anka Tiri looked up, startled, and then put on a pair of glasses, looking around confused.

Denjira was now petrified that this was all a mistake. She had been abandoned, forgotten, forsaken. She had been so young when her mother had left her. Would she even remember her?

But her mother pushed herself from her desk and ran, wrapping her daughter in a tight hug.

After a few moments that felt to Denjira like a wonderfully unending eternity, her mother stepped back and said, "Let me get a good look at you!"

Though she still felt scrawny, Denjira stood straight as an untethered arrow, just as Manemon had taught her, ready for inspection. Then she felt a hair in her eye, and as she brushed it away—apparently her fingers weren't as clean as she thought—she unwittingly dragged a long black smudge across her cheek.

Rinaldi, still bowing, looked up and tried not to laugh.

Then her mother said: "Look how tall and beautiful and strong you've become! I can't believe you're here!"

Denjira burst into tears. Nothing seemed to matter anymore! She gave her mother another hug and declared, "I thought you were dead! Regent Gnath built you a shrine next to Father's. He even had me memorize the Ritual of Life! I said so many prayers for you!"

Rinaldi, ignoring protocol, rose.

Anka's expression clouded. "How could you think I was dead? Didn't you get any of my letters?"

"Letters? No."

"And your replies, then?"

Denjira spread her arms wide. "Mother, I sent no scrolls. I didn't even know—"

"Regent Gnath." Her mother spat the name as though it were poison. "He must be planning something."

"Oh, mother!" Tears welled up again. "He's usurped the throne!"

“Don’t worry, my daughter. I’ll ask Khalija to remove the scoundrel and exile him—”

“The pirate queen? Her forces are supporting him.”

“I should have known not to trust pirates.” Anka’s eyes locked onto Rinaldi and burned.

Denjira moved to shield him. “They’re not all bad, Mother. The prince saved my life many times since we met.”

He laughed. “You’ve returned the favor, as I recall.”

“So, what are you doing here?” Queen Anka asked.

“Mother, I propose that the three of us work together.”

“To do what?”

“First, we help you escape!”

“Escape?”

“Then we overthrow Queen Khalija here on Aeolus and use its resources to take back Zephyrium from Regent Gnath!”

“No, my lovely. You don’t understand. I’m not a prisoner here. I’m a visiting scholar, and this is my workshop.” Queen Anka Tiri gestured at the fine metalworking equipment nearby, and several crates full of scrolls—the same ones Denjira had seen the pirates take from Zephyrium.

This didn’t make any sense to her. After being trapped in a library for four orbits, Denjira couldn’t understand why anyone would want to have a library brought to them. “Really?”

“Yes, Queen Khalija agreed to be my host, because there’s something much more important for all of us to do together.”

“What could be more important than the throne?”

“Didn’t you feel that explosion?”

“I thought that was the Zephyrian navy, come to rescue me.”

“Apparently it was not,” Rinaldi said. “You know what it was?”

“Did you see the Fast Moon, burning all the clouds out of its way?”

“Yes, I did see it! I was surprised how red it was.”

“The Fast Moon is supposed to dip into the atmosphere, and release a jet of oxygen corpuscles, on which it flies back to the heavens, only to return with more. I’ve been studying it for many orbits . . . but lately its jets have become weaker, its path has become more and more irregular and now . . . it’s exploded.”

“Well, I guess that means the next festival should be renamed the Festival of the Single Moon,” Rinaldi joked. “Maybe we’ll only get one moonmeat bun instead of two!”

“This is actually very serious. The Slow Moon is still working, still making a magnetic shield for this world, protecting the oxygen Thoth gives us from the harmful rays of Ra’s solar chariot. But without the Fast Moon, our world will run out of breathable air.”

“My apologies, my Great Royal Queen. That is serious . . .”

“The old technologies of the gods are failing. While you’ve been running around having adventures . . . Have you not noticed that we’re running out of breathable air, out of water, out of people—out of everything? This world is dying!”

Queen Anka was silent for a moment, allowing them to think about what they’d just heard.

Then Denjira offered, almost reluctantly, “But you were queen! Are queen. Couldn’t you—can’t you do something about it?”

“I did. I am. We didn’t have what I needed in Zephyrium, so I made an offer of alliance to Khalija. She had the foundry, which admittedly they took from us, but we had the wisdom of the ancient scrolls, and I had the plan to save our people.”

“But you left your throne!”

“Oh my lovely, none of that matters any more. Come, let me show you.”

She led the way out of the workplace, through smaller doors, then up a spiral stairway. Denjira wanted to ask a million questions, but Manemon’s training silenced her. *There is a time for haste, and a time for patience. When in doubt, assume it’s patience’s turn.*

At the top of a long stairway was a grand balcony, an observation deck. On one end was a sculpture of Khepera, the beetle-headed god, in the barque of the rising sun. At the end was Tmu, who had created himself, in the barque of the setting sun. It was open to the air and wind, with only the air shield for protection. They all carefully tethered themselves in.

Anka led the way to the railing at the edge of the deck. Denjira followed and—

Her eyes were drawn in two directions at once. The foundry must have been at a tremendous altitude, because even a couple of

stars were almost visible through the silvery cloudtops. But below, clamped to the bottom of the foundry, spotlights shone on a gorgeous, elegant structure, a long cylinder, sleek and metallic, with a partially completed airfoil and several of those bell shapes attached to her stern. They were engine bells.

"This is the *Barque of Thoth*." Indeed, decorating the side of the ship was an enormous mural, showing ibis-headed Thoth, accompanied by his dog-headed baboon. Thoth was reaching up to open the four gates of the heavens, painted in bright malachite greens and Onisian blues.

Anka pulled Denjira close and pointed an enormous telescope to a spot in the sky. "This is why that matters."

Denjira put her eye to the glass, but only saw swirling layers of clouds. She waited for the clouds to part, but they never did, never revealed what Queen Anka wanted to show them.

But Denjira grew impatient. She had spent her entire life preparing to become a phenomenon. Why would someone who already had that willingly give it up? "Mother, why did you leave the throne?"

"My child, our kingdom is lost. This world is lost."

Finally, in frustration at the endless clouds, Queen Anka took them to see her orrery, with models of the planets orbiting the Sun. She pointed to one carved from a sphere of lapis lazuli. "This is the planet Oxium," she said, "the House of Keb."

"The third world from the Sun?"

"Yes. The ship I'm building here will carry us there."

"You intend to leave? Abandon Zephyrium forever?"

"There is no saving the kingdom, my lovely. The world is—"

Denjira pouted. "But I was to be queen!"

"There are more important concerns now," her mother said. "Like saving as many of our people as we can, before it's too late."

"This is what will happen when we run out of breathable oxygen."

With dozens of engineers, lords, and nobles looking on, Queen Anka Tiri gestured at a small glass cage. It was set before Queen Khal-ija's throne, and Denjira stood on the far side

of the cage, next to Rinaldi instead of her mother.

A sekhakhat—a rabbit-like creature, with small round ears and large round eyes—sat motionless on the cage's floor. Queen Anka fiddled with the controls of a machine and a treat pellet dropped into the cage. The sekhakhat hopped on its four hindmost legs across the cage and merrily gobbled up the treat.

"I'm dropping the oxygen level even further."

The sekhakhat raised its whiskered nose, sniffing at the air. It knew something was wrong, but didn't know what. It started frantically digging at the bottom of the cage, until it realized that pawing was useless. Then it spewed and hopped around, making circles, desperately trying to find a way out, ignoring the second treat.

Finally, it collapsed in a corner, its chest heaving mightily until it completely stopped.

"Headache, nausea, damage to the internal organs, including the brain, perhaps permanent. As bad as having a heart attack or stroke."

Denjira took a step back, horrified. "Mother! That was cruel."

"A necessary demonstration, I'm afraid."

"Is it possible to hear anything from you without distortion, misinterpretation, or ridicule?" Kharkulo, the Lord Crusher of Bones, tapped on the glass with a sword tip. The sekhakhat did not stir. So he smashed the cage open, and oxygen from the room revived the animal. It rose, wobbling, to its feet, gathered its strength, and leapt from the ruins of the cage. It skittered across the floor, to be lost in the crowd.

"If a room grows low on oxygen, perhaps the poor should just learn to hold their breath!" Kharkulo looked at the gathered nobles, who nodded cautious approval. "Or *we* in our benevolence could simply open the valves of another oxygen tank."

One of the lords shouted: "If the people are using more than their allotted share of our precious resources, perhaps they should be taxed more for the privilege!"

Kharkulo brightened at that idea. "They need to learn personal responsibility, to take shorter lunch breaks and finish what they are assigned. They do not know what hard work

is, and want rewards to simply fall from the sky!”

“But Lord Kharkulo, I have been studying the moons for a long time, and according to my calculations, the air will run out of oxygen in less than a hundred orbits, perhaps fifty.”

“A hundred orbits?” Kharkulo stomped his feet in a happy little dance. “Then why worry about it now? Who among us wants to leave your lovely homes and palaces?” As Kharkulo spoke, his soldiers wandered through the crowd of nobles, handing out sweet fermented milk and candied ginger crystals. “Who wants to leave all this, for an unnecessary journey to an unknown world in an untested ship? All because of an unproven theory and an unheeded plan from an unstable monarch who’s fallen from her throne?”

The lords in attendance roared in agreement with Kharkulo.

“But you all saw the Fast Moon—the one that produces oxygen—exploding. You must have felt the entire city shake.”

“I saw nothing,” Kharkulo said, “other than an attack from Derrida or Aestheria. My Great Royal Queen Khalija, I propose that we dismantle the ship and return the foundry to its primary purpose: making weapons!”

Queen Khalija silenced Kharkulo. “Queen Anka Tiri, our time is valuable. What is your point?”

Anka turned to Kharkulo. “Lord Kharkulo, should we interpret the ancient scrolls literally, or do you doubt the word of Thoth?”

“Do not question my devotion to the gods.”

“Then my ship is neither unproven nor untested, as it is like unto those that Thoth used in ancient times to move our peoples here from the third planet. Now it will return them.”

Anka’s lead engineer, Thonis, rifled through a bin of scrolls. He had a bright green ring around his faceplate, honoring Ptah, the green-faced god, patron of shipwrights. Thonis held up a copy of a copy of the ancient scroll describing the construction of the *Barque of Thoth*.

Kharkulo said nothing, simply glaring.

“In celestial spaces, our barque will meld elementary corpuscles of hydrogen together to form composite corpuscles of helium,” Thonis explained, pointing at diagrams and formulae.

This did not fit anything Denjira had learned about chemistry, but if it was the magic of the gods, it did not need to obey their rules.

“Between here and the celestial realm, the ship uses sulfuric acid to burn corpuscles of methane. This is generated from carbon dioxide using nickel compounds.”

*Ab!* Denjira thought. *Just like in the flying machines. This is something Manemon taught me.*

“But the volcano is no longer providing nickel compounds,” Anka said, “and that which remains will produce the needed volumes of methane too slowly.”

“What do you propose?” Khalija asked.

“I propose a hunt for floating creatures that freely produce this gas.”

“More six-legged rabbits?”

“No, Lord Kharkulo,” Anka said. “I propose that we collect the finest flyers and pilots, from Aeolus and Zyperium, to hunt . . . *a mighty cloudstalker!*”

At that, the gathered lords and nobles gasped and then started gibbering. Their chatter was so loud that it almost drowned out Anka saying, “We don’t need to kill the cloudbeasts, which is nigh impossible, just extract a little of their internal fluids.” Queen Khalija silenced them all and ordered a break for her to confer with her wisest counselors.

“I can’t believe my mother nearly killed that poor animal,” Denjira said to Rinaldi.

“She needed to make her point.”

“So cruelly?”

“Would my mother have listened to mere words?”

He was right about that, and it only made Denjira angrier. If that’s what queens had to do, perhaps she didn’t have what was needed after all. “There must have been another way . . .” She let the sentence trail away, realizing that she couldn’t think of an effective alternative. Watching that poor sekhakhat struggling—suffocating—had made it real. That would be the fate of all the people of Zephyrium, and Aeolus, and all the other kingdoms. She *couldn’t* let that happen. This was a bad situation and had to be fixed. That was what Manemon had taught her. That was what royals did.

Queen Khalija returned and the crowd silenced once more to hear her decision.

"I still do not know if Queen Anka Tiri's theories are correct, though if they are, I deserve credit for supporting her work over these many orbits, even before granting her the resources here in Aeolus to build the ship. However, if she is found to be lying, I remind her that the punishment for stealing from us is being tossed into the acid clouds!

"That said, the cost to Aeolus of completing this ship is but a tiny fraction of our vast riches.

"Therefore, I authorize the completion of the ship, and the hunt for a cloudstalker. This is to occur in fourteen cycles, allowing time for preparation, training, and building equipment. Ten of the finest flyers and warriors chosen from among Aeolus and Zephyrium will partake. You will use special syringes to collect the cloudbeasts' secretions, to make the fuel for the astral barque."

Kharkulo grumbled quietly.

"My Great Royal Queen," Denjira said, bowing to her mother, "if I am to be a leader among my people, I must learn to take more risks, to experience the same dangers and hardships they experience. Therefore, I respectfully request that I may be selected among those who hunt."

Anka stared at her daughter in surprise.

"Since you've been gone," Denjira whispered, "I've been on several adventures . . ."

"You've really grown, my lovely!"

Queen Khalija said: "Denjira, your request is granted."

"You should also volunteer," Denjira said to Rinaldi, "seeing that you killed ten cloudstalkers singlehandedly."

He gulped and started to raise his hand when—

Lord Kharkulo exclaimed: "My Great Royal Queen, I also request the honor of the hunt." As Kharkulo spoke, Denjira, her mother, and Rinaldi traded glances. Hadn't Kharkulo just vehemently opposed her efforts? Perhaps her mother's words had convinced him as well. No, she didn't believe that for a minute. There had to be another reason.

"I am the mightiest warrior among us." Kharkulo pointed at the eleven wasp amulets on his breastplate. "And, as four-time champion of the Festival of Winds, I am the best flyer. I therefore respectfully request the position of Captain of the Hunt."

Khalija responded without hesitation. "Considering your qualifications and experience, Lord Kharkulo, this I also grant."

Denjira paced her mother's quarters.

Just as Anka Tiri had forsaken the sartorial excesses of royalty, so her rooms were bereft of elaborate and expensive trinkets. Instead they were filled with Zephyrium's scrolls. Denjira thought: *It's as if I never left the library!*

Then she turned to Rinaldi and said, "This is what I don't understand. Why would Kharkulo change his mind? Why would he want to lead the hunting team?"

Rinaldi considered for a moment and said, "It's obvious that Kharkulo considers you two threats, or at least question marks. As am I."

"Does he?"

"Anyone with power and riches will fight to keep those, no matter the cost to others. Perhaps he thinks that if we all simply leave on the celestial barque, whether or not we reach Oxium, we will no longer stand in his way."

"Perhaps," Denjira said, "but I wonder if his plans are darker. Remember that he tried to have me killed in work accidents. And he only volunteered for the hunt after I did. What if he plans an accident for me during the hunt?"

"You must be doubly cautious, my lovely," her mother said. "Be always vigilant of your surroundings, and rely on Rinaldi. He is a good man."

"Thank you, my Great Royal Queen."

A devious little smile crept across Denjira's face. "What if I arranged an accident for Kharkulo during the hunt, maybe accidentally stabbed him with a syringe . . ."

"You certainly will not! You will not even undermine him. He is the Captain of the Hunt, and in a life-and-death situation, the troops cannot hesitate, wondering whose orders to obey."

"Then maybe I'll just stab him in his sleep!"

"That's even worse!"

"But he killed Manemon and Mesi and tried to kill me! It's self-defense—"

"Not unless his threat is imminent can you shed one drop of that man's blood."

"Then I'll wake him up, put a knife in his hand, and then I can—"

"No!"

"But why?" Denjira whined.

"In the afterlife . . ." Anka started to explain.

“In the afterlife,” Denjira interrupted. “Mother, the gods will celebrate me, as they celebrated Horus for avenging the murder of his father!”

Queen Anka brushed Denjira’s arm gently. “You have grown so much, but yet you have much to learn! Neither Manemon nor Mesi was your father. In the afterlife, how will you recite your negative confession?”

“My negative confession?”

“Will you be able to look upon He Whose Feet Burn Brightly in the Darkness, and say you have committed no revenge? Or look upon the Lord of Faces or upon He Whose Limbs Are Terrible to Behold, and truthfully attest that you have not acted hastily, or committed murder? If you do this, your deeds will testify against you, in this life and the next!”

“Why do we have to follow the rules and he doesn’t?”

“Because we are diamonds and when a diamond falls into muck, it does not cease to be a diamond.”

“But if we were at war, and there was an enemy combatant—”

“Final action is permitted.”

“Exactly! So . . . if Kharkulo was an opposing soldier . . . or if he came at me, swinging a sword and screaming, ‘I’m going to kill you!’ then I could—”

“Yes! That would be justified self-defense,” Rinaldi said.

“But consider this, my lovely. As the honorable ones, we are constrained to do that which is lawful, even if the law is inconvenient. If he cheats, you must be smarter. You could wait and wait until the perfect moment, when striking is legally justified, but that moment may never come . . . Or you can devise a clever way to defeat him, at a time of your choosing, without breaking the rules and without endangering your eternal soul.”

“But how?”

Denjira’s flying suit now felt like a grumpy old friend hugging her in its warm embrace. Her mother’s engineer Thonis had repaired the wires so she could talk to her teammates, and Rinaldi’s teammate Amami had given her flying lessons. This meant yelling at her for banking too much in a turn and slipping inward, then yelling again for banking too little and slipping out. But he also patiently taught

her to listen to her engine, to feel its vibrations and the wind on her cheek, to learn the subtle profundities of the clouds around her, using—but not being distracted by—her instruments and controllers.

Every once in a while, Amami even demanded that Denjira actually let go of the controls. This was terrifying but it was the only way, he said, of telling what her un-piloted wings would do, and thus what flight adjustments were needed.

Her mind raced through these technical matters as the hunt began, and she remembered her lessons on using the syringe to collect the cloudstalker’s fluids for making fuel for the astral barque.

Denjira was now a better flyer than she’d ever been, but tired and angry and, thanks to Amami, more aware than ever of her own shortcomings.

Flying above her now was Rinaldi’s gryphothopter, with its wing repaired. She saw him waving at her through the ventral window. Screwing on an insincere smile, she waved back and then turned her attention to the skies ahead.

The skies ahead were on fire.

Streamers of orange and red sulfur ores billowed upward, punching through roiling yellow sulfuric acid clouds. Within the maelstrom, four dark strands moved in a diamond formation: cloudstalkers riding a jetstream between churning clouds. At the center of the storm was a dense white plume, rich in strange alkaline oxides churned from the lower depths of the atmosphere as the fast moon catastrophically fell.

Ignoring the foul weather, Kharkulo snarled, “Rinaldi, release the hunters!”

The belly of the gryphothopter opened, and human bodies fell one by one, spreading their arms and legs, letting their flying machines catch the wind. Their flight was powered and controlled, not subservient to the vagaries of the shifting air currents. Then she saw one plummet suddenly, headfirst into the clouds.

Denjira nosed down to follow. If his wing had torn—

But he shot upward from a yellow cloud bank. His tall and imposing form told her who it was. “This is not a game, Kharkulo.”

“Nor was I playing. Or does her highness not understand the tactic of trading altitude

for speed?" He made the word *highness* an insult.

Indeed, Amami had mentioned that tactic in passing but hadn't had time to work it into a training session. So the knowledge hadn't yet travelled from her brain to her muscles. Now, in addition to feeling inexperienced and ill-trained, when she saw Kharkulo's wings, she felt ill-equipped.

When he spread his wings to the fullest, Kharkulo revealed the magnificence of his new flying suit. Unlike Denjira's, which had no canards, Kharkulo's had two adjustable pairs for improving maneuverability and preventing stalling. The wings had extra joints so they could extend out the sides in normal flight, but sweep back for speed. They could even sweep forward for faster climbing. All these mechanical contrivances added substantial weight, but Denjira remembered something Amami had once said: anything will fly if you put in a big enough engine.

And what purpose would Kharkulo's new machine serve? The wings answered that question, for painted on them were the Eye of Horus and the Eye of Re, along with Sekhmet the lioness and Ouracus the cobra, all together symbolizing the wrath and fury he threatened to unleash on any agent of disorder, any force that might challenge his power.

For the moment, though, all the hunters seemed to be united in working with Kharkulo. For the moment.

Racing ahead of her on his large, hungry motor, Kharkulo barked, "All hunters, form up on my flanks!" Now he was flying in the lead, but pulling double duty. In addition to being Captain of the Hunt, he was also leader of the team at his right flank: Ekheria, Orcelio, and Everia from Zephyrium, and Tchefu and Bes from Aeolus. Rinaldi was flying above and slightly behind Kharkulo, and his team consisted of his loyal band of adventurers—Amami, Baktari, and Uatchila, with Denjira added.

Now Kharkulo was leading all these hunters toward the cloudbeast pod, stealthily keeping them low, behind the beasts' bodies, unseen.

As they approached, Denjira thought that the cloudstalkers looked like giant winged snakes in the sky. Their tails were powerfully yet casually sweeping back and forth, effortlessly propelling them forward on four pairs of tail flukes. Each cloudstalker had three pairs of

enormous wings, but they were hardly moving at all, just lazily rowing from time to time. As she watched, Denjira realized that the cloudstalkers were swimming through the air *upon their backs*.

The ancient scrolls had taught Denjira that, of all the myriad swimming and flying and creeping creatures of their world, not a one had the gods bothered to teach the backstroke. No, that secret knowledge was reserved for human beings, who could use it to ease their weary arms and travel enormous distances, driven mainly by the effortless kicking of their feet.

Yet the gods saw fit to impart this secret wisdom to the cloudstalkers, too. Maybe they shouldn't be so cavalier about hunting these magnificent creatures! Well, if they were careful and skillful—and very lucky—at the end of this, no beast or flyer would be seriously hurt.

As they approached the four cloudstalkers, Denjira recalled the discussions before the flight. Kharkulo had decided that all the flyers would attack one of the beasts, rather than scattering among them. That would increase their chances of a successful mission.

Now that they were close enough to study the beasts, it was time to choose one to target.

"Not the bull! Not the biggest one!" Rinaldi said.

"Agreed, that would be suicide," Kharkulo said.

"The smallest one should be the easiest to take down," said Denjira.

"That's right, princess," Kharkulo snapped. "If it's *immature* . . . it will be less experienced in fighting."

"But if that is the bull's child, then he will be highly motivated to protect it," Bes said.

"Let us assume, for now, that this group represents a bull, a mother, a child, and a fourth cloudstalker," Kharkulo said. "We want to split up the group."

"The fourth one has tattered wings," Amami noted. "Maybe it's old and we should try to pick that one off?"

"Interesting point, Amami," Rinaldi said. "Perhaps the torn wings are battle damage, and a sign that it has been in many fights. But also possibly a sign of old age and frailty. Do you see how it is flying unevenly?"

"Perhaps we should attack the child and the old one simultaneously," Kharkulo said. "I pre-

dict that the mother and father will move to defend the child and leave the old one to its fate. Agreed?”

The hunters all agreed.

“Then Rinaldi, your team will attack the child,” Kharkulo said. “My team will attack the old one. We’ll come in from above, and dive down, striking to split up the pod. Then we will re-group and gather at the isolated elder and attack that together.”

The two teams rose into the clouds, but Denjira felt like she wasn’t flying fast enough to climb. So she circled a couple of times to gain power first, which made her fall further and further behind. As soon as she arrived at the top of the arc, Kharkulo said, “Now that the princess has joined the rest of us—all hunters, dive!”

The flyers dropped rapidly, trading altitude for speed, closing the distance to the cloudbeasts. They would perform an extremely dangerous maneuver, flying through the heart of the cloudbeasts’ formation. As they did, Rinaldi’s team would pepper the small one with arrows. Kharkulo’s team would hit the elder. The cloudstalkers were so large that they wouldn’t be hurt—the bolts would be no more than pinpricks to them—but Kharkulo hoped it would cause the young one to move one way, and the elder the opposite. This would split the cloudbeast pod, isolating the old one.

As they sped down toward the youngest cloudbeast, Denjira was amazed how large it was. Bigger than a house, bigger than a castle, almost as long as the foundry itself. The others were even larger, and the bull was hundreds of cubits long, possibly one of the largest creatures on the entire planet.

Making tiny adjustments so she didn’t crash as she flew between the beasts, Denjira fired several bolts into the young cloudbeast. Its body was essentially a long train of bubbles and balloons, and Denjira saw several of her shots hit, bursting two of the beast’s balloons—each no more than an armlength across. But the child cloudbeast wasn’t reacting the way she had expected.

It did not turn away from the arrow-strikes, away from the pod, taking its parents with it. No, the child cloudbeast moved toward the others, toward the center of the pod. Now its various eyes looked up at where the flyers had

grouped before their run, and down at the hunters now gathering.

“They spotted us!” Rinaldi said. The flyers had flown through the pod, but Rinaldi’s larger gryphohtoper had flown around it, and now they met at the bottom of the dive.

“They can see us? We’re like the size of flies to them!”

“Yes—and they’re tightening the pod and gaining speed.”

Denjira remembered this same cloudbeast watching her from a distance when she and Rinaldi were clinging to the outside of the ferum ore balloon.

“The arrows didn’t even sting it. They just aroused its curiosity.”

“So if we want to draw it from the pod . . .” Rinaldi said, “we should hit it from the other side, from the outside of the pod?”

“I think so!”

Rinaldi radioed a new rendezvous point, above and to the left of the pod.

As the flyers rose to make another run, suddenly shear tore at Denjira’s wings. She quickly folded her wings back, lest they be damaged, and she be forced, embarrassingly, to recuse herself from the hunt.

As Denjira struggled to get into proper formation, another wind rose suddenly and pushed violently on her side, shoving her through a turbulent layer. She veered left into a white cloud deck and immediately a bitter taste filled her mouth. Moments later, her eyes stung even though she wore goggles. It was an alkaline cloud, filled with composite corpuscles of hydroxides from the plume. She banked hard and rose out of the toxic cloud.

“Watch out for those white clouds,” Rinaldi said. “They’ll burn you if you’re not careful.”

Ahead of her, there was a gap between yellow and white cloud layers. Sulfuric acid on one side, alkaline dust on the other—between, they should neutralize. Smart.

Rinaldi banked into the seam and instructed the Zephyrian team to do the same. His team was now gathered and in position above the pod, when the child cloudbeast angled up toward them—a lucky break.

“Dive on it! Dive now! Attack the child cloudbeast’s left flank!”

But the child must have spotted them, and enormous spikes erupted in long rows along its sides. Each of the spikes was ten or twelve

cubits long, and they shimmered and waved menacingly, like enormous swordblades.

Amami and one of the other flyers, Uatchila, had now launched bolts into the child cloudstalker and successfully flown past it.

Denjira was readying her crossbow, taking aim at the child's hide, when suddenly she was flipped end over end. It took her a few moments to right herself, but when she did she saw the enormous bull cloudbeast coming at her, its broad wings windmilling, scrabbling, grabbing at clouds like handholds, scrambling forward in the nothingness in the air.

The bull drew all three pairs of wings backward, and then swept them forward. Denjira was relieved to be far enough away to avoid striking those wings.

After a few seconds' delay, two of the hunters, flying side by side, tumbled and collided in the windstorm. Little bits of metal broke off—including what looked like one of the syringes for collecting the cloudbeast's enzymatic secretions.

Moments later, the same huge blast of wind smashed into her. This creature was actually using the air as a weapon, scooping up great wingfuls, and throwing them like cannonballs across the sky.

Denjira tumbled but managed to avoid hitting the child cloudbeast's spikes. This blast wasn't as powerful as the first. The bull was getting tired. Once she had recovered again, she saw the other members of Rinaldi's team, except for the suit with Amami's stripes.

"Amami, are you all right?" Denjira scanned the clouds below. There, spiraling down, uncontrolled, was a limp winged form. "He's below the cloudstalker!"

She swiveled to look for Rinaldi. His gryphohter swooped across the bull cloudbeast's path, trying to divert it up and to the right, away from the oldest one. The thopter's wings shuddered as they fought the turbulent air currents stirred by the enormous tail flukes. The rest of the Zephyrian team scrambled into a group at the beast's left side, trying to reach the massive fin-shoulder.

Denjira swooped down to rescue Amami, but even as she did, it seemed too late. She'd never reach him before he fell into the thick yellow clouds.

"Rinaldi! Rinaldi! You're faster! You need to rescue Amami with the gryphohter."

"What? Where is he?"

"Dive. Now!"

After a moment, Rinaldi said, "There he is! Closing in."

The gryphohter dived, past the spikes of the child cloudstalker.

At that moment, another gust of wind sent Denjira into a tumble. The bull's wingblast was weaker still, but she had been distracted, watching Rinaldi rescuing Amami, and wasn't prepared for it. The blast sent her tumbling right toward one of the child beast's spikes, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

As she closed her eyes and braced herself, she felt the impact—which was surprisingly *soft*.

It felt like the spike was an enormous inflatable. Ah! Of course. The cloudstalker's body was mostly a complex collection of balloons, and the easiest way to erect spikes was to simply move air from one pocket to another.

The impact had not damaged any of her equipment, but it had robbed her of momentum.

She slid down the soft spike, hoping to find part of the body hard enough to launch herself. When she landed she found the skin soft, like trying to stand on an overstuffed pillow. There was no good way to jump off, and then she realized maybe she didn't need to, not right away.

Kharkulo had decided that all the hunters would attack the same cloudbeast, landing on it and extracting the fluids that made the methane—the prize was the fluids, which could then be used to make fuel for the astral barque.

Now that she had unintentionally landed on this beast, there was no reason for her not to extract some of the fluids herself. Of all the flyers, she would be the first to score!

But as she opened her bag to retrieve the collection syringe, her feet slipped on a puddle. Instinctively, she pulled out a knife, to make a hand-hold in the wall. But when she pierced the skin, the pressurized air behind it burst out, blowing her free.

She tumbled, head over heels, through the air, until she righted herself. Perhaps it would be best, after all, to attack the elder beast as a group.

"Denjira! Are you all right?" Rinaldi called.

"Yes, I'm fine! Do you have Amami?"

“Yes!”

“I have an idea!” Denjira said. “I just realized something. What do you think those spikes are?”

“I thought they were like the quills of a hedgehog, or a porcupine,” Rinaldi said.

“I don’t think so. When I was down there, I noticed the texture to the spikes. They weren’t covered with armor or anything rigid. But with little hairs that extended and contracted.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t think the spikes are armor. Or a weapon,” Denjira said. “I think they were some kind of sensing organ, like antennae!”

“That would be consistent,” Rinaldi said, “with the child merely being curious, not threatening us.”

“That suggests a new tactic!”

Rinaldi flew directly in front of the child cloudbeast, then waggled his wings to get its attention. He wanted to be close enough to trick the child into thinking it could catch him, but not close enough to be drawn into its breath and crushed in its jaws.

The hunters realized that they didn’t need to attack the child anymore. Their arrows did nothing but annoy the bull. No, they just needed to gather in a group, ahead of and to the left of the beast, drawing its attention.

This simple plan worked! The child cloudstalker flew after them, like a boy chasing a butterfly. Its parents followed closely, to make sure it was safe.

One of the other flyers, Uatchila, radioed, “I’m starting to worry about fuel. And I don’t think I can keep up.”

“I can’t either,” Amami said.

“Now! Break off!” Rinaldi shouted, flashing his lights. “I’ll keep drawing the child and the parents off. All of you, gather up with Kharkulo at the old one.”

Denjira dropped below the child, out of the view of the adults, and darted away unseen.

Now, after all this effort, the first phase of the hunt was complete. The pod had been split, and the elder cloudstalker isolated, now ripe for attack.

Denjira took a wide, awkward turn to change direction.

To her amazement, she saw a pair of Aeolians not flying away from the child, but toward it. Just before they crashed, they grabbed

onto one of the spikes and swung themselves around, now heading toward the old cloudstalker. Denjira had seen Kharkulo execute a similar maneuver—she’d have to learn that. Another Aeolian was clinging to the top of the child. Even though the top of the creature was soft, the flyer was somehow running along it to build up speed, and then he jumped into the wind to launch himself. She’d have to learn to do that, too.

The flyers regrouped as they reached the shoulder of the old cloudstalker, right above the gland that produced the methane-producing enzyme.

The elder was not defenseless after all. Several bubbles on its side burst, shooting out volcanic rocks, the size of their fists and heads.

One of the flyers, Bes, took several impacts, breaking his wings and shattering his syringe. As he fell uncontrollably, Kharkulo commanded another hunter, Baktari, to rescue him and carry him back to the base.

Meanwhile, Denjira and several others settled on the elder’s hide, next to Kharkulo, hanging onto a fold of skin, careful not to puncture it.

“Stand back, little princess,” he said. “We’re doing man’s work.”

An angry retort bubbled up to her lips, but she forced herself to swallow it. It burned the whole way down.

“You’re doing fine so far, Princess,” said an Aeolian, Tchefu, as he screwed the pieces of the syringe together into something the length of a harpoon. “Perhaps you can help steady it as I work.”

The skin under Denjira’s feet twitched as the harpoon gently pried apart layers of skin, sliding between the walls of two air sacs without puncturing either. Tchefu guided it expertly. Inexperienced, Denjira was as much hindrance as help, but the Aeolian seemed to appreciate the effort.

Kharkulo didn’t. He took every opportunity to denigrate her, making snide comments at every small mistake. She put her back into the work and ignored him.

Not far away, other teams were working on the skin of the cloudstalker.

The cloudstalker seemed to completely ignore them. Perhaps it was so large that their efforts were no more hurtful than a little bloodletting.

Two flyers finished collecting their samples, then flew toward Rinaldi's gryphohtopter, which was now returning after successfully leading the child and its parents away.

"My syringe is full now, too," Tchefu said. "These should all be enough to make fuel for the ship."

"Good work. Let's get this back to—" An electric tingle washed over her, and she felt her hair being pulled toward the insides of her helmet. "Get down!"

She dropped to the beast's rubbery skin and held fast. The Aeolians obeyed her, and just in time—lightning rippled across the beast's back, mere spans above Denjira and her team. The beast spasmed, twitching from the electric discomfort, and banked hard to change course.

"These things are large enough to make their own weather?" Temporarily blinded by the lightning, Denjira clung fast, grabbing fistfuls of skin without puncturing it, even as the surface tilted and rocked beneath her.

One of the Aeolians shouted, "Kharkulo!"

Since the cloudstalker's body was essentially a long train of balloons, as it violently twisted and turned, gaps opened between some of the balloons, like giant mouths lining its side. Kharkulo was sucked into one of these and was trapped between two balloons.

"Get those syringes back to the gryphohtopter!" Denjira shouted to the other hunters. "I'll rescue Kharkulo!" As they took flight, she thought: *Good. Now we are alone. I have no intention of rescuing you.*

The balloons pressing against him were part of a ballonet system—balloons inside balloons, inflated or deflated to provide lift. The airbags were transparent, and Denjira saw Kharkulo, trapped unmoving between them, arms and legs and wings spread. His hoses seemed intact, but the balloons were squeezing him so tightly that his chest couldn't rise or fall. He couldn't exhale to clear his lungs of carbon dioxide. He couldn't breathe. Even with brand new wings and a full oxygen tank, he would suffocate within minutes.

As Denjira approached him, she thought: *He murdered Manemon and Mesi. He tried to kill me. Now I will have my revenge. By just doing nothing and letting the cloudstalker take him.*

Then she saw in her mind her mother's face darken with disapproval. *Everyone on your*

*team is your responsibility. If you let him die, how will you explain that in your negative confession in the afterlife?*

Old Manemon had taught her that justice belonged to the kingdom, not one person, even if that person was a royal. He'd also taught her that compassion for her people—for all people—was a queen's greatest attribute.

*How inconvenient to always have to be the diamond.*

She plunged her sword into the skin of the cloudstalker.

Anka was waiting for Denjira when she returned to the platform. Her mother threw her arms around her and held tight. "I'm so proud of you, my daughter."

Denjira wished that moment could last forever, but there was more work to be done. "How long will it take to fill the ship's fuel tanks?"

Anka released her. "If all those syringes are full, no more than thirteen or fourteen sleep cycles."

"Then it is time to gather our people. Mother, what shall we do about Gnath? If we return to Zephyrium—"

"Don't worry, my child," Anka said. "I've convinced Khalija to send a warship to carry you to the city. With Rinaldi by your side, the people will see that both kingdoms are now united against Gnath. He won't dare stand in your way."

"Mother, you truly are a great queen."

"You might not be so grateful when you hear what I have to say next," Anka said. "The ship is enormous, to be sure; larger than anything we have ever constructed. But there will not be room for everyone."

Denjira's joy drained away. She had suspected as much, but to hear it came as an axe blow. "How many?"

"We hope the next ships will be more efficient, but . . ." Anka paused. "No more than about 220 can be saved in this first ship."

"That's a tiny sliver of the population of Zephyrium. How do we decide who lives?"

"I will be too busy making the final preparations for the ship. Perhaps that can be your decision, my daughter. Maybe use a fair lottery system." Anka grasped her shoulders and looked her square in the eyes. "Being royal is a

difficult job, perhaps the most difficult of all.”

Denjira nodded solemnly. “I will do my duty.”

Denjira had longed to see the beautiful city of Zephyrium from outside, but she never imagined that she would get that view from the prow of a pirate warship. The gigantic balloons that supported the city were ragged and patched in several places, but that only added to the charm. The great rounded towers of the palace rose high above the cityscape, and docking platforms jutted into the clear air. Chaotic winds jostled the balloons, sending shudders through the city. The clouds in the distance, roiling and burning with electric fire, were moving unusually quickly, the winds stretching and smearing them downward, into shapes like ν and μ, the Greek letters nu and mu. Other clouds were smeared sideways, pushed back and forth by powerful parallel winds, making complex compound shapes like ε and ξ, epsilon and xi.

As the dockworkers moored the ship, Denjira turned to Rinaldi. “I fear that Gnath will not take well to my arrival.”

Rinaldi laughed. “My troops can handle anything he tries—”

“But we must not spill the blood of my people needlessly. That’s what my mother was trying to teach me.”

“Let’s hope Gnath sees it that way.”

A sailor approached and bowed. “My Great Royal Prince, we are docked.”

Rinaldi took Denjira’s hand and said, “Shall we?”

An electric thrill ran up her arm at the contact, startling her. She looked at Rinaldi, a dashing figure in royal finery effortlessly leading warriors and sailors. They could unite the two kingdoms. She blushed at the thought but brushed it aside. Later. There were more pressing concerns. “Let’s go.”

The captain of the Zephyrium guard met them on the walkway, accompanied by dozens of warriors. Denjira recognized the captain as Josera, adoratrix to Khenti-heh-f, the god appointed by Anubis to guard Osiris’ tomb, who kept watch with knives for eyes.

Captain Josera strode forward with a wooden sword—then dropped to her knees. “My Great Royal Princess, I didn’t know—I thought you ran away to join the Aeolian navy—”

“Who told you that?”

“Lord Regent Gnath, my Great Royal Princess. If you’ll forgive me for saying, it didn’t seem right to abandon your duties and leave the kingdom like that.”

“I did no such thing! Arise, Captain Josera, and hear the truth. Gnath is a usurper. He made a deal with the Pirate Queen to eliminate first my mother, then me. But my mother has now convinced Khalija to work with us to—”

“Your mother? Queen Anka is alive?”

A crowd was gathering at the edge of the platform, dead silent, straining to hear every word. “Yes, and she’s been working on a project to save the people of Zephyrium,” Denjira said loudly. “Surely you saw the Fast Moon crash.”

Josera nodded. “The air has been turbulent since. The city has lost two balloons, and several others are in dire condition.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Denjira said. There were gasps from the crowd. She addressed the people directly. “The city is doomed, my people. The kingdom, the world is doomed.”

As one, the crowd stepped back as though to distance themselves from the words. Murmurs began to ripple. Josera said, “My Great Royal Princess, surely we can repair the lost balloons.”

“I wish we could! Without the Fast Moon, the air will soon lack its life-sustaining gas. And the Slow Moon is also unstable, and I do not know how long it can keep its place between our world and the Sun. But when it’s gone, we will have no protection from the harmful rays from above the sky.”

“She lies!”

The booming voice silenced the crowd and drew Denjira’s attention. Gnath. His minions must have summoned him as soon as they saw Denjira step off the ship. He was disheveled, as though roused and quickly dressed, and accompanied by his two sleepy-eyed mistresses, their red body paint rubbed off in places and bearing streaks and Gnath’s handprints.

“No, usurper Gnath,” Denjira said. “I speak the words of the rightful queen of Zephyrium, Anka Tiri.”

“The queen is dead. By law, I am the ruler of Zephyrium now.”

“The snollygoster lies again,” Denjira said, speaking more to the crowd than to Gnath.

“Queen Anka Tiri lives, and she sent me to deliver dire news—Hypoxium will soon be able to sustain life no longer. Gather what you can and travel with us to the old foundry at Aeolus, orbiting the Mount Abydos plume. From there, we shall escape to Oxium.”

Gnath laughed harshly. “Oxium? It is but a tiny light in the sky.”

“No, it is another world, one rich with oxygen and water. The holy scrolls—”

“Are superstitious nonsense,” Gnath said. He turned to address the crowd directly. “It’s a ruse to lure you from safety here to the dangerous enemy city, rife with distress and depravity, where her pirate allies will rob and murder you, but only after they corrupt your souls.” Gnath licked his lips.

Rinaldi seethed at Denjira’s side. “We do not prey on the defenseless! We fight only to restore our kingdom, our heritage. But that too is now lost to us. Come, follow your princess, and together our peoples will—”

Gnath laughed loudly. “In one little pirate ship? How many people can you possibly carry? Would you empty your stores of stolen treasure to house them?”

“No,” Denjira said, “you must use every ship at your disposal—Zephyrium’s navy, the merchant fleet, even cloud fishing boats.”

“And you can guarantee us all safe passage to this new world?”

“Well, no . . . and admittedly only a few can ride on this first astral barque, but . . . but . . . maybe we can join the other ships together and convert them into those that can sail across—”

“This princess and her mother are cowards,” Gnath roared. “Cowards to run away from Zephyrium! Now cowards to run away from this world.”

“They were brave enough to fight a cloudstalker!” someone in the crowd shouted.

“Yeah! Even though she’s so scrawny!” a second person yelled.

“When did you ever do that, Regent?” asked a third.

Gnath laughed, a harsh sound. “Do you really expect me to send myself and my people to their deaths?”

“Your people?” Denjira said. “The rightful queen of Zephyrium—”

“Has abandoned the city,” Gnath said. “Her claim on the throne is forfeit, as is yours.”

“You will never be the rightful ruler of anything,” Denjira said.

“Enough!” Gnath shouted. “Captain Josera, place this child under arrest.”

Josera stepped forward, hand on her hilt. Her resolve wavered; Denjira could see it in her eyes. Rinaldi and the pirates behind him reached for their own weapons. “Stand down,” Denjira said. “I’ll not ask anyone to shed their blood just to protect me. Captain, do what you know you must.”

“Yes, my Great Royal Princess.” Josera stared into Denjira’s eyes for a long moment, then nodded to herself. She turned, drew her sword, and leveled it in Gnath’s direction. “Place Lord Gnath under arrest.”

The troops paused, dumbstruck, looking back and forth between Gnath and Denjira. Josera leveled a stern glare at them. Finally, one of them rested a hand on Gnath’s shoulder. “Come with me, my lord.”

“What? Preposterous. Arrest Denjira *and* Rinaldi. Now!”

“I’m sorry, my Lord Regent.”

As they led Gnath away in chains, his mistresses hissed and clawed and bit, until they were taken away, too. Captain Josera returned her attention to Denjira. “I am at your command! All hail to you, mighty Denjira, the Great Royal Princess Who Wrestles Cloudstalkers!”

The crowd echoed: “All hail to you, mighty Denjira, the Great Royal Princess Who Wrestles Cloudstalkers!”

“Th-thank you, Captain. Thank you all. My mother will hear of your loyalty.”

“I fear you are still in danger, my princess. Lord Gnath has his supporters in the armed forces. And among the people.”

“We won’t be here long,” Denjira said. “We need to evacuate the city before the winds become poisonous. Prepare every available ship to carry our people to the foundry at Aeolus. Send word also to the other cities of Zephyrium. Any who desire to join us may do so.”

“I’ll see to it, my princess. I’ll leave a contingent of my best warriors for your protection.”

“No need,” Denjira said. “Rinaldi’s warriors will keep me safe.”

Josera’s eyebrows rose. “Pirates?”

“I trust Prince Rinaldi with my life,” Denjira said. And she realized that she truly meant it.

She caught his eye and saw the barest hint of a smile.

“That’s unacceptable!” Denjira said.

Captain Josera recoiled as though slapped. “Lord Gnath has been quite active, even from his prison cell. His minions are spreading word that the weather will return to normal, and he will keep them safe until it does.”

Denjira looked down on the Zephyrian city streets from the palace’s tower, the place from which her mother must have watched the very same streets so long ago. The thrill of being back in Zephyrium, of fulfilling her destiny, was overshadowed by the turmoil below. “And people actually believe him?”

“Many do, I’m afraid.”

“But Gnath is lying!”

Rinaldi, at her side as always, said, “For many people, a comforting lie is preferable to an unwelcome truth.”

Denjira sighed. “I suppose you’re right. But what am I to do? I can’t just leave my people to die.”

“We’ve known from the start that we don’t have enough room to save everyone on the first trip,” Rinaldi said. “That there would be hard choices to make. It seems the people have made those choices for us.”

“Maybe if we wait a little longer,” she said, “people will change their minds.”

Josera gestured toward the chaotic streets beyond the window. “I fear the violence will worsen, my Great Royal Princess. The longer you wait, the more danger you are in.”

Rinaldi rested a comforting hand on Denjira’s shoulder. “She’s right. You can’t save people who don’t want to be saved.”

“But I can—” What could she do? Execute Gnath? That would only make him a martyr to his followers. Evacuate the unwilling by force? No, even if it were ethical, it would take too long and many more might be hurt or killed in the process.

Rinaldi said gently, “There is nothing you can do.”

“I know,” Denjira said. “But I don’t like it.”

His hand slipped down her arm and rested on hers. “Someday you will make a good queen.”

She laughed and withdrew her hand. “Is that some sort of proposition?” She kept her voice light, joking, but the warmth that lin-

gered in her hand told a different story.

His face reddened. “I would never—”

“Sure you would.” She didn’t know if he’d take that as an invitation, or even if she had intended it as such, but it felt right.

Several cycles later, the preparations for launching the ship were almost done.

The window for departure to Oxium was closing soon, but many tasks remained. Transporting food and water into the ship’s storage would be an ongoing effort right up until launch. Engine bell number three ran hot in testing and needed to be refurbished and retested. Meanwhile, the last of the methane fuel was still under production from the cloud-stalker fluid in the enzyme tanks.

The last few Zephyrian ships were due to arrive at the Aeolian foundry soon, where some of the passengers would be loaded into the *Barque of Thoth*; the others would be taken to Oxium after their ships had been joined together and converted into celestial barques.

Now Denjira scanned the sky for signs of the airships, as she had done with every break from work. This time she saw a fleet just above the roiling cloudtops, approaching rapidly. But something wasn’t right; Josera had told her to expect civilian boats, blocky and ponderous. These were fast and sleek, like—

“Warships!” she said. She charged down from the observation tower and commanded the officer on communications duty. “Get me Josera.”

“She’s already on the line, my Great Royal Princess.” He gave her control of the electro-telephot.

“Princess Denjira,” Josera’s voice said through static, “Regent Gnath has escaped. I’ve been trying to contact you, but he’s been jamming my signals.”

“What? How?”

“He is approaching Aeolus with an attack fleet. He must have supporters, even among my troops.” Her visage on the little screen wasn’t very clear, but it still looked pained. “I have failed you, my princess.”

“You have been nothing but loyal.” Denjira flipped some switches on the telephot. More screens flicked on. “Amami, how close are we to launch?”

“Thonis told me we are close, but not close enough!” Amami said.

“It gets worse, my Great Royal Princess,”

Josera said. "Gnath must be coming to Aeolus to storm the *Barque of Thoth*, maybe to take you captive."

Denjira toggled more switches and Rinaldi appeared on a screen. "He'll have to fight his way through my warriors first."

Denjira said, "Alert the defenses. Tell Thonis that we must launch as soon as possible."

Rinaldi said, "Agreed! If we're going to launch, now is the time."

Denjira raced out of the command center. "I'm going out to help hold them off first."

"My Great—"

"Don't," she said. "I have no intention of standing by helplessly while others fight." She decided: *Saving all these people and her mother's lifework was worth dying for.*

She quickly donned her flying suit and launched toward Gnath's fleet.

Through the suit's electro-radio, she said, "All captains loyal to Queen Anka Tiri, launch now!"

A reply came quickly. "We're already in the air, my princess. We're facing—" A loud thump cut him off.

A shout drew Denjira's eyes upward. In a watchtower above her, a lookout was pointing. Denjira followed his finger and saw a cluster of dark figures descending from a sulfurous cloud, the red Cobras painted on their chests standing out against the yellow clouds.

A handful of Gnath's troops swooped down toward the *Barque of Thoth*. She was surprised to see so many flying suits—probably stolen from Queen Khalija's stores by turncoat pirates. Rinaldi's flyers engaged them and the clash of swords cut through the air. Rinaldi's gryphothopter emerged from its dock and swung in an arc toward the enemy warriors.

In the sky beyond, Gnath's fleet of stolen navy ships harassed a small group of refugee ships—freighters and barges, mostly—that was limping toward the *Thoth*. A couple of ships flying her mother's banner moved to cover them, but laden with civilian refugees of their own, their maneuvers were slow and ponderous.

"We need to protect the civilian ships," she said to Rinaldi.

"And . . . I see Gnath's flagship approaching. I think he's going to try to attack the *Thoth*."

Denjira envisioned the *Thoth's* hull splitting, people pouring out into the sky, scream-

ing as they fell into the burning clouds below. She turned to Amami. "How many warriors do you have aboard the *Thoth*?"

"Not many, my princess."

"It'll have to be enough."

The chaotic winds grabbed Denjira's wings and flung her downward. She faced into the wind and spread her wings wide, gaining lift. Below, a stream of white steam laden with toxic hydroxides rambled, driven by intense winds. Denjira banked and rose away from it.

Denjira fought through whirlwinds and stormclouds and poison dust, until she was finally approaching Gnath's flagship. This was the massive warship the *Barque of Am-heb*, the god to whom Gnath was Chief Songster. The mural painted on the ship's giant balloon was terrifying, featuring the dog-headed god Am-heh and a butcher's block, as he chopped an unrepentant sinner's soul into nine pieces before devouring it. He stood in a burning lake of fire, accompanied by He With His Face Upside-down. Surrounding them were the damned, bound in chains, waiting eternally for the balm to their sorrows that only a beheading could bring.

Below these horrific images on the main balloon, the hull of the *Am-heb* was studded with equally terrifying weapons: giant harpoons and ramming spars for spearfishing smaller ships, batteries of cannons and crossbows for slaughtering enemy crews, and a projector fitted with Tuoi stones, long, cylindrical, and deep red. When powered, the stones would concentrate the beams of the sun into a deadly skeletonizing ray.

Because the weapons drew so much power, there was little left for engines, so this massive warship used sails, taking advantage of Hypoxium's high-speed winds. And because the top deck was festooned with weapons, with the balloon above them, the sails were attached to the bottom of the ship's hull. Two rows of upside-down masts ran along either side of the keel. The massive sails allowed the ship to travel wherever she pleased, dispensing death and destruction at Gnath's every whim, and right now its path would take it straight to the *Barque of Thoth*.

The rays of the nearby Sun, amplified by the *Am-heb's* Tuoi stone projector, shot out. For a brief instant, a column of air appeared to be on fire. The beam touched one of the de-

fending ships and it burst into flames. With that weapon, the *Am-beb* would not have to get very close to the *Thobth* to destroy it. The warship was now, Denjira estimated, three thousand armspans from the *Thobth*. If it got within five hundred, the projector would be in range.

Angry at the thought of the *Am-beb*'s rays destroying her mother's work, Denjira ordered flyers to shoot arrows into its main balloon before it could get close enough. The flyers attacked, but the *Am-beb*'s balloon seemed to have a thick skin able to seal itself against punctures.

Then a new idea took shape in her mind, and she called Amami to join her. As she approached the underside of Gnath's flagship, the winds became turbulent, and she was terrified that they would blow her into the projector's beam.

She attached her personal tether to a crossbow bolt, which she launched into the underside of the *Am-beb*, where its projector couldn't reach. She started to reel herself in when a burst of air grabbed her. She managed to pull her wings in, right before being slammed into the sky sail, then into a gallant sail above it. Trying to grab a stay, she missed and her tether retractor, now broken, lost speed control, smashing her full-speed into a spar, then into a mast, and finally against the wooden planks at the bottom of the *Barque of Am-beb*. She hit hard enough to knock the breath out of her. Coughing and wheezing, she scrambled for a handhold, clinging to the underside of the ship.

Blood from her knuckles seeping into her gloves, her fingers closed on the rung of a scaffold that ran the length of the keel between the rows of masts. Her arms and sides were sore and aching, but she clung fast and got her bearings. Amami and his team finally joined her. "Crewmen use this as a perch for cleaning and repairs," he said.

Despite the pain, she managed a smile. "We're going to do the opposite. Send a team topside to destroy the projector! And if we can cut the sails and damage the control surfaces, the *Am-beb* won't be able to maneuver."

"Consider it done, my princess." To his men, Amami said, "Destroy the projector! Cut all the stays! Let the sails drift away, free!"

His command was greeted by a chorus of

agreement, and the flyers sprang into action, Rinaldi's gryphothopter protecting them as best he could.

If Amami's warriors worked quickly enough, the *Am-beb*'s crew wouldn't be able to repair the damage in time, and the ship would remain out of action until the *Thobth* launched. If.

Something thumped into the wood next to Denjira. An arrow.

As understanding dawned on her, one of the warriors cursed. Denjira spun her head and saw him with the shaft of an arrow through his thigh.

Another flyer went to his rescue as Denjira scrambled up the side of the ship, staying as close to the wooden planks as she could in order to shield herself from the next volley. When she crested the top deck, she saw Rinaldi's gryphothopter firing at the crossbow teams, while Amami's team destroyed the beam projector in a fiery explosion.

Denjira was glad they were making progress, but it felt too slow. The winds ripped a topsail from underneath the ship as Amami and the others cut through the stays. Then a jib-sail flew away. But it felt like picking a few feathers off an enemy eagle as it flew on, unhindered.

The Zephyrian navy came to their aid, and a Zephyrian frigate moved to block the *Am-beb*, now only two thousand armspans from the *Thobth*. The frigate had smaller guns than the *Am-beb* but large engines, and as Gnath's warship tried to steer around it, the frigate was fast enough to compensate, to keep blocking its path.

Swarms of flyers launched from the *Am-beb*, diving on the frigate. The top deck of the frigate had half a dozen massive propellers, with one more on either end, two more on either side, and four more underneath. These propellers could be pivoted, to provide not just propulsion but defense against attacking flyers. Some of Gnath's attackers misjudged their angle of descent and fell victim to the propellers, but many more landed on the frigate and began to clash swords with the frigate's crew.

Amami said to Denjira, "Down there!" She looked where he pointed. Rising rapidly from a roiling yellow cloud was a group of Gnath's troops, riding six-winged skystriders, which

spat poison and screeched like death rattles. The skystriders were natural flyers, expertly navigating around the propellers, undeterred by the crossbow bolts shot at them.

"They're trying to take over the frigate!" Rinaldi radioed. "To steer it out of the way!"

"That gives me another idea," Denjira said. "If so many of them are attacking the frigate, that will leave the *Am-beb's* bridge undefended!"

Denjira turned into the wind, spread her wings, and gained lift, soaring away from the fighters launching toward the frigate from the *Am-beb's* deck. A gust of wind, sour with acid, swept her laterally, but she had learned to recover from such things, and Amami and other flyers joined her as she dived toward the *Am-beb's* bridge at a steep angle.

The deck rose up quickly, and Denjira spread her wings to arrest her speed. She aimed her feet for one of the ship's archers and dropped on him, sending him sprawling to the deck.

Amami and his team landed around her and engaged the remaining enemy crewmen, again supported by Rinaldi flying above them. The bridge was an open-walled structure just forward of their position, and she saw Gnath shouting orders there. Denjira sprinted forward. In her peripheral vision, she saw Amami drop his opponent and dash after her.

She was almost there, when Gnath's eyes locked on her. He turned to face her, drawing his sword. But just before she arrived, he seemed to change his mind and disappeared down a trapdoor. Denjira pulled at the door, but it was locked.

She turned to see one of the ship's guards standing right next to her, sword in hand.

Denjira said, "You're Aeolian?"

"What's it to you?"

"I'm here with Prince Rinaldi, under orders from Queen Khalija—"

"Who cares? We work for Lord Gnath now. Surrender your weapon, and we might let you—"

Amami charged and bowled the warrior over. He fell heavily to the ground, his sword skittering away. Amami turned his sword on another and engaged him. "Go, my princess!"

Denjira hesitated, then entered the bridge. The helmsman looked at her, startled, and she put her sword to his throat. "Don't make me hurt you." She growled as viciously as she

could, hoping he wouldn't realize she had no intention of harming him. Would he submit to her?

He stared at her in disbelief for a long moment, then put his hands over his head.

"Smart. Now get on the floor, face down."

He complied with no hesitation this time. The clash of swords grew closer; there was no time to waste.

A handful of Gnath's renegades, just a few steps away now, charged the helm. Denjira turned the wheel hard to port and the ship listed as it turned abruptly. The renegades sprawled face-first across the deck.

Denjira clung to the wheel and managed to keep her feet. The prow of the ship lurched. Then Amami and his warriors rushed in, smashing the communicators that coordinated the signals to those working the sails, destroyed controls to the *Am-beb's* small emergency engines, and severed the lines to the rudders. The ship turned more suddenly than seemed possible, away from the *Tboth*, and the sickening groan of stressed wood moaned through the ship.

"Good job, Amami! Well done, Rinaldi!" Denjira cried as she faced into the wind, preparing to leave Gnath's crippled ship, as its last two cannons burst into flame under Rinaldi's endless attack, and more sails flew off from the bottom of the *Am-beb*.

Then she saw four harpoons shot out from the *Am-beb*, and three struck home, mooring their lines to the frigate. More of Gnath's troops were escaping, sliding across the ropes and onto the frigate's decks.

Denjira's crew cut one of the lines. The rope whipped crazily in the wind, flinging Gnath's warriors into the air. The remaining lines were winched in, drawing the frigate inexorably closer to the *Am-beb*, as the frigate's crew clashed with the boarders.

Suddenly Amami and Denjira fell over as the deck moved under them.

Somehow the *Am-beb* seemed to be *turning in place*. How was this possible? With more and more sails cut off? Without a bridge?

The answer came to Denjira when she saw the frigate's engines firing as it was lashed to the *Am-beb*. Everyone she saw on the frigate's deck was one of Gnath's warriors. Apparently they were now controlling the frigate, using

that ship's power to pull the *Am-beb*. They were now only one thousand armspans from the *Thoth*.

"I've seen the *Am-beb* do this sort of thing before!" Rinaldi radioed. "It doesn't need weapons to perform a ramming run on the *Thoth*!"

"We have to stop them!" Denjira cried.

"What can we do?" Rinaldi radioed. "We don't have enough warriors left to regain control of the frigate!"

Denjira looked around the battlefield, hoping something could somehow still save the day, still prevent Gnath's damaged flagship from destroying the *Thoth*.

Nearby, a streamer of toxic yellow cloud whisked by, carried by rapid horizontal air currents. Gnath's warriors on board the frigate were struggling to maintain altitude in order to avoid it.

In the distance, Denjira saw a loyal gunship and several smaller vessels, who seemingly had just defeated some of Gnath's flyers and their skystriders. That gave Denjira an idea.

With Amami's help, she radioed the captain of the gunship. "Captain, I need you to take your ship down into that fast-moving stream of sulfuric gases. The rest of the ships with you, too."

"My Great Royal Princess, that is madness! The fumes—"

"Can you keep the crew decks above the plume?" Denjira asked. "Just immerse the flight surfaces? Or is that too difficult for you?"

"I—my crew—yes, it'll be a complex maneuver," the Captain said, "but I've the finest crew in the navy, ma'am. But why?"

"That stream is moving so quickly you can use it to intercept the *Am-beb*. This is the only way to stop its ramming run. It's only five hundred armspans away from the *Barque of Thoth*! Order as many of our ships to do this as you can! Do it now!" Silently, she hoped that either he was exaggerating the difficulty of the maneuver or that the other ships also had the finest crews in the navy.

Now all she could do was watch from the deck of the *Am-beb* as the stolen frigate dragged it inexorably forward. There was nothing that she, Amami, and the few flyers they had left could do.

Then she saw some of Gnath's warriors on the frigate pointing at them, and soon a cloud

of warriors was flying straight at Denjira from above.

She, Amami, and their last five warriors gathered tightly together. The last one with a crossbow threw it away, as he had no bolts left. They drew their swords.

The gryphohter hovered above them, but they were vastly outnumbered by the approaching horde. Rinaldi said, "I will be your sword and shield, my Great Royal Princess."

"And I will be yours. "

Then the stench of rotten eggs filled Denjira's nose. As the horde approached, the loyal gunboats, riding high in the yellow sulfur cloud, churned up a maelstrom of toxic wind.

A smaller ship filled with Gnath's warriors approached and even managed to dip into a sulfur stream in the opposite direction, but it dropped too far and disappeared into the yellow mist. It came up a few minutes later, its crew gagging and retching.

Denjira's warriors had now successfully cut all lines connecting the frigate and the *Am-beb*, and the giant warship spun slowly, uselessly, without weapons, without sails, without power or purpose.

As Denjira watched the gunboat and its associates attacking Gnath's warriors on the frigate, she thought of the metaphor of sparrows fighting an eagle. Could they win? Yes, if there were enough sparrows.

And thus the main ship battle had ended; the *Thoth* was defended.

More scattered fighting continued, little more than small clusters of men fighting wing-to-wing in last-ditch aerial assaults.

But there was no end to the mischief that could be done by a handful of angry, delusional losers.

Denjira flew over the *Barque of Thoth*, checking it over for damage and watching for any attackers who might slip through.

It seemed to be intact, but—There! A man on the hull, crouching over an open access panel. As she watched, he lifted a heavy tool and smashed it into the pipes below.

She folded her wings and dived full speed to the surface of the *Thoth*. A moment before she landed, the man on the hull looked up, startled by the sound of her unfurling wings. She drew her sword and pointed it at his chest. "Stop what you're doing!"

He lifted the tool, and she nearly ran him

through with her sword. But a flash of recognition stayed her hand. It was the kind of tool she had used for cutting and welding during her brief foray into pipe repair. Only then did she look at his faceplate, ringed in green. This was Thonis, her mother's lead engineer, not a saboteur, and she had nearly killed him. She let her sword hand fall to her side.

"All hail to you, my Great Royal Princess!" His voice wavered with relief or terror, she couldn't tell which.

"Sorry, I thought you were a saboteur."

"The fuel valve was sticking again, Princess," he said, "and nothing loosens it better than a good whack."

She opened her mouth to apologize, but sudden movement stopped her. The starboard wing rose, knocking her off balance. She regained her feet and steadied herself on the listing surface.

"Best fasten your tether, my Great Royal Princess." Thonis did not tether himself, but a mechanical arm emerged from his pack, securing him to the ship.

Denjira unfurled her wings and scanned the sky. Gnath's fleet was little more than a handful of scattered ships retreating into the distance. But there—as the port wing descended, another ship came into view. It had come in from below, in the *Thobth's* blind spot, and was close. Too close. Mooring lines were already in the air, snaking toward the hull behind sleek harpoons. Her mother must have ordered the crew to turn into the attack rather than allowing multiple boardings along the length of the hull.

Denjira took to the air just as the harpoons struck. They struck at an oblique angle, and many of them skittered off the hull, but a few bit deep into it. The lines went taut and Gnath's warriors began crossing.

"Boarding party, port side!" She shouted into her radio. The raiders approached slowly, climbing hand over hand against the buffeting winds. But it was more than just the wind that slowed them; something on their backs weighed them down. What were they carrying? She swooped in to get a closer look. What she saw drew a gasp. "They're carrying explosives!"

What could she do? Only Kharkulo's warriors were close enough to defend. She had no choice. "Kharkulo!" she radioed. "Gnath's at-

tackers are planting explosives on the shell of the *Thobth*."

"On my way," he said, but she was not sure if she could believe him.

She dropped to the hull and started cutting the first line. An arrow thumped into the hull next to her. She looked up and saw four winged figures descending quickly, crossbows in hand. She reached for her own bow and found it missing. She'd lost it during the battle at some point!

One of the attackers went limp and spiraled down into the clouds, an arrow in his chest. Two of the men returned fire. Denjira traced their arrows and saw Kharkulo with three of his own men flying in formation and reloading their bows.

One of the enemy attackers didn't return fire; instead, he dived down and unfurled his wings right before impact with the hull, coming to a perfect landing right in front of Denjira.

Gnath.

"Why are you doing this?" she said. "We're leaving, Gnath. The city is yours. The world is yours, what little time it has left. There's no need for more bloodshed."

"Because I want you dead, little princess. You've taken my people—"

"My people," Denjira corrected him.

"Hah. I am the legally appointed regent," Gnath said. "You have no claim to the throne."

"It doesn't matter, Gnath! Can't you see that? The throne, the city, none of it will be here in a hundred orbits. All that matters is saving the lives of the people of Zephyrium."

"And the lives of our enemies, it seems," Gnath said. "Or did my men lie when they told me that you spared Kharkulo's life?" He drew his sword and took a menacing step forward.

Denjira drew her own sword and held it in front of her, point toward Gnath. When Gnath slashed at her, she didn't parry his blow. Rather, she stepped back, out of his reach. "I will face my final judgment with a clean—"

"Are you afraid to fight me? To shed my blood and risk your afterlife? Fight me!"

Instead Denjira stepped back, again and again as Gnath swung at her, with increasing ferocity, annoyance—and clumsiness. If she had wanted to, she could have taken advantage of him forgetting proper technique in his anger. But she didn't. She didn't need to kill

him, or even fight him. She only needed to delay him until—

A large winged suit dropped to the deck with a thump, standing directly in the gap Denjira had made between her and Gnath. It was Kharkulo.

“Unlike the princess, I have no problem with spilling your blood, Regent Gnath!” Kharkulo shouted.

“Wait—I gave you his location because I thought you were just going to arrest him!”

“In this life, Princess, I shall kill as many as I like,” Kharkulo bellowed, “and in the afterlife, Shesmu will ply me with wine made from the fermented blood of my enemies!”

“I guess, unfortunately for you, Gnath, Kharkulo takes a very different approach to theology than I do.”

“If you—” Whatever Gnath was going to say, his tongue was stayed by a thrust of Kharkulo’s sword. Gnath dodged with a graceful sidestep and countered with a thrust of his own. Kharkulo countered with blinding speed, forcing Gnath back again.

The action became a blur of strike and counterstrike, retreat and advance, and Denjira realized how badly she was outclassed. Gnath would have struck her down in moments if she hadn’t backed off from him, or if Kharkulo hadn’t arrived.

Kharkulo’s powerful thrust drove Gnath back once more, and this time he stumbled over an open panel in the hull. He fought to keep his balance, but Kharkulo moved in to take advantage. He struck a blow that cracked the wooden plates of Gnath’s armor and sent him sprawling to the hull.

Gnath turned to regain his feet, but Kharkulo stood over him, sword to his throat. Gnath dropped his sword. “You think you’ve won, little Princess?” Gnath laughed harshly. “That Kharkulo is your champion? Did you not wonder why I wanted to destroy this ship?”

“To prevent us from leaving,” Denjira said.

Another bark of laughter. “I couldn’t care less where you go. I wanted to keep the ship out of Kharkulo’s hands.”

“What?” That made no sense to Denjira. “My people will be *leaving* in the ship, Gnath.”

“He was never going to let you go, little Princess. Ask him!”

“Kharkulo?”

Kharkulo kept his eyes firmly on Gnath, but addressed Denjira. “With this ship, I can conquer not just Zephyrium, but all the flying cities and all of this world.”

“Don’t you understand?” She spread her arms in exasperation. “The world is *dying*.”

“You and your mother are right. The moons are failing, and we’re running out of oxygen. But we have enough for my lifetime. And with this ship, armed and ready for conquest, what a glorious lifetime it will be!”

“You see?” Gnath said. “I couldn’t allow him to—”

Kharkulo thrust with his sword, ending Gnath’s sentence with a spray of blood.

“No!” Killing in battle was one thing, but this was outright murder. “When I radioed you where Gnath was, I expected you to *arrest* him. You didn’t have to kill him!”

“But I did, my Great Royal Princess,” Kharkulo said. He turned, his sword leveled at her. “And now I must do this as well.”

She backed away. “It’s not too late, Kharkulo. You can come with us.”

“No, Princess, I cannot.” He shook his head, almost regretfully. “I will take this ship from you, and the first step is dissecting your soul from your body.” He charged, sword point first, at lightning speed.

More by instinct than plan, Denjira dodged to her right and let him sail past. Now ahead of him, she ran at a dead run across the hull. Into the wind. Heavy footsteps rang across the hull behind her, miraculously closing on her despite Kharkulo’s bulk.

Just a little further—now! As she reached the point where the hull curved sharply downward, she leapt and deployed her wings. The wind bit into the metal wings, tugging on her shoulders and sending her soaring into the sky.

“Where do you think you’re going, Princess? I’m stronger and faster; you can’t get away.”

She glanced back and saw Kharkulo in the air, his enormous engine firing ferociously. She dove, sacrificing altitude for speed. The roiling cloud-tops rushed toward her. Just ahead, a plume of yellow sulfurous cloud rode a thermal up from the cloud deck. Changing wind currents at different elevations buffeted the plume one way, then another, creating a spiraling zigzag of yellow mist. If she could get to it, she could hide in the obscuring mist.

"Come back, Princess, and I promise I'll make it quick. Painless," Kharkulo said. "If you continue to anger me, it will not be so."

She angled toward the cloud, then gasped as a sudden thought occurred to her. She could hide in the clouds as long as she wanted, but the *Barque of Thoth* was leaving!

She changed course, diving sharply, building up even more speed. Then she pulled out of the dive and angled back toward the *Thoth*.

Then she was past it and rising sharply, and she angled back toward the ship. Behind and below, Kharkulo continued his relentless pursuit. Ahead, she could see details on the *Thoth's* hull now, an oxidizer feed line here, an instrument spar there, an access—

The spar caught her attention. There was a trick the pirates had used. But Kharkulo was gaining—it would be close, but if she timed it right, she'd reach the spar with just the right speed. . . .

It came up more quickly than she'd anticipated. *Too fast*. She grabbed the spar and held fast. Her body pinwheeled around it, the force of the spin nearly ripping her fingers free from their grip. Sharp pain shot through her shoulders, but she managed to hang on. Now, facing back the way she came, she let go. She'd lost some velocity, but was now headed directly toward Kharkulo. He gasped in surprise.

She had him at a momentary disadvantage, but she knew that he'd recover quickly. She focused her attention to the instrument cluster on his chest. She'd get just one chance. He was already moving his sword into position to slash her. She nudged up her thrust slowly, carefully, hoping to reach him before his sword could make its deadly swing.

Approaching . . . approaching . . . now!

She reached for his chest, for the fuel throttle, and grasped it. Her motion did the rest, twisting it suddenly to full throttle. Massive blue flames shot from his propulsion pack, and he darted forward. He skittered across the ledge of the city, tumbling a few times, the engine still firing on full, before it sputtered out. Kharkulo regained control just before going off the edge. He crashed into an old gantry hard enough to bend the acid-scorred metal. The bolts holding it in place, corroded and weakened by acid rain, snapped off one by one, leaving the last two to hold the twisted

structure in place. Kharkulo clung to the precarious platform.

Denjira landed on a platform perhaps ten armspans away, aching and exhausted.

"You should have killed me when you had the chance," Kharkulo said.

"I don't need to kill you, Kharkulo," Denjira said. "I only need to get away from you to do far worse."

The crumbling, acid-rotten ferrum of the next bolt gave way. The gantry twisted, placing all its weight on the last bolt. Kharkulo's eyes widened in a moment of surprise as the last bolt sheared off and the gantry fell.

Kharkulo toggled his controls to fire his motor, but it spat and died.

Denjira had remembered what Mesi had done—the sudden burst of speed had blown the nickel catalyst out with his exhaust, along with the remaining fuel. Now she'd played the same trick on Kharkulo.

Perhaps if he hadn't chosen such a hungry, powerful motor he might have had enough fuel left. . . . Perhaps if he hadn't chosen such large and heavy wings, the weight might not have broken the gantry. But as it was, Kharkulo tumbled down, down into the clouds below, his wings useless, his enormous engine flickering in futility.

Would he be skilled enough to break out of free-fall in an unpowered suit? Or would he bite down on his dignity and call his minions for help?

*Possibly, possibly*, Denjira thought. *But that's up to him.*

"Rinaldi, is the *Thoth* ready to launch?" Denjira called on her radio as she made her way to the ship's hull.

"Yes! But it's missing a key passenger!"

As she approached the nearest exterior hatch, she saw Thonis, still working on his repairs, patching holes made by harpoons and spears. "Thonis, get inside! We're about to launch."

Thonis flicked off his torch. "No! Go with-out me!"

"What are you saying?" Denjira felt an odd tingling sensation, and then actinic light flared as an enormous lightning bolt flashed, not up and down, but horizontally all the way across the sky. "We need to go now!"

"Don't you understand? I'm staying!" Thonis shouted over the thunder. "The *Barque of*

*Thoth* is too small to bring everyone to the new world. Everyone else will need a trained shipwright to build them more celestial barques!"

"This has always been your plan, hasn't it?"

"Yes, my Great Royal Princess."

"May I bless you, noble Thonis?"

"I would be honored, my Great Royal Princess."

More lightning flared, but seemingly from every direction, at every bizarre angle.

"May *Thoth* acknowledge your sacrifice, and may none rise up against you, and may no ministers of any god still your hand from its work."

"Thank you," Thonis said. He surveyed his repairs, and when he found them satisfactory, he spread his wings and flew back toward the foundry.

The entire ship shook under Denjira's feet. She dashed across its outer skin, even as the *Thoth* started moving, the winds blowing terribly against her. Her feet slipped, and she skittered across the surface, slick with rivulets of sulfuric acid. She used the slickness to slide across the deck toward an open hatch. As she scrambled in, she grasped the hand of Rinaldi, who slammed it shut, as the ship gained more momentum and more.

Above the clouds now, above even the one remaining moon, the *Barque of Thoth* sailed ever higher. Here there was no air, just the celestial fluid that the gods breathed. Soon even that final moon, fading into the past, would be gone, leaving nothing in the lifeless void but Denjira's dying old world and her unknown new one. Prince Rinaldi and Queen Anka Tiri stood on either side of her, silently sharing her sorrow and uncertainty. She grasped their hands and squeezed.

"Thus we all, exiled by fate, sail from the coast of Hypoxium to Oxium's shores," Queen Anka Tiri mused to herself. "Enduring hardships and trials, and the wrath of many . . . By the will of the gods, just as *Thoth* first brought us to Hypoxium, so now we return the god home to Oxium."

"Will we make it, Mother? Oxium is so far and this ship, large as it seemed back home, is so small and delicate out here."

"You shouldn't think of Hypoxium as home, my daughter. It is home no longer. We are

lucky to escape that place of sorrows with our souls intact." After a long meditative moment, she added, "Yes, we will make it to Oxium. We have to."

Denjira thought of the passengers below decks, packed together on narrow wooden planks lashed together with halfa grass ropes, like Ra's solar barque. How would they fare on this long journey? Here on the command deck there was room, if only because the bulky controls demanded space for the navigators and engineers. But down below, the passengers were like cattle. Could they endure these harsh conditions for cycles on end?

Yes, they would. Because they had to.

"Are you all right with leaving Kharkulo behind, unpunished?" Rinaldi asked.

"Oh, Kharkulo is *not* unpunished."

"Why do you say that?"

"I figured it out. I didn't have to kill him! He and his minions elected to stay on a dying world. Soon enough, when the air is gone, they will all meet the fate they chose. Then no one will remain to sing for Kharkulo in the afterlife. His soul will be shattered into nine pieces and scattered into the winds of Hypoxium, never to be reunited. That's his punishment."

"That's sad."

"Not necessarily . . ." Denjira said. "My old tutor taught me that everything broken needs to be fixed, if possible. But I cannot fix Kharkulo. Only he can fix himself. And if he does, Thonis will build him a ship, and, assuming he's learned his lesson, we can all be reunited on Oxium. He chooses whether or not he gets a happy ending."

"That is very wise. Someday you'll be a great and merciful queen," Rinaldi said. "What do you think we'll actually find when we get to Oxium?"

Anka had commanded that the main viewing mirror face forward and into the future, not back and into the past. Now the mirror showed a bright blue dot. No, not precisely a dot; even at this distance, Denjira could discern a tiny disk, like a chip of lapis lazuli shining in the darkness.

"It is a very pretty blue," Denjira said.

"The color should terrify you!" her mother snapped.

"Why?"

"What will we find when we arrive? Do you

remember, Denjira, why Thoth took us from there, so long ago?"

"The great deluge."

"Correct. But what if the waters never receded, and this is still a drowned world, a planet of storms?"

"We have built cities floating in air—can we not build them floating in water?" Rinaldi said.

"I wonder if this world, so cold, so far from the Sun, is a world of swamps and jungles, with crocodilians the size of cloudbests and ancient long-necked monsters, tearing at each other in the twilight?"

"But a potentially dangerous world is a better bet than a dying one."

"Indeed. You both just need to be wary of the dangers."

"Reasonable. But all we would need is a tiny bit of hard land to build a fortress," Rinaldi said confidently. Then, with a sudden brightness: "Solid ground beneath our feet will grant us access to the ore plumes before they dissipate in the air! Imagine the wealth!" Rinaldi laughed, but Denjira remained silent. "What do you think, my love?"

"What will the people the gods left behind on the third planet be like? Faced with so many dangers on one hand but potential riches on the other . . . Will they be united in peace, or greedy and self-important, devolving into petty arguments?"

Rinaldi had no answer.

"So now that this adventure is over, what is your new dream, my lovely?" Anka asked. "Think carefully. A dream is the only thing that is truly yours."

Then Denjira squeezed Rinaldi's and her mother's hands even more tightly. "What do I dream of? I hope that whatever awaits us, we will face it together. Then we'll build not just a fortress, but a new nation, even greater than the one we leave behind!"

"Thus the manuscript ended," I said, having read my translation of that tale in the atrium of the new Royal Observatory. "The fate is yet unlearned of Denjira and her party, if they survived the perilous journey to this world, or the terrors and temptations therein. But if this manuscript be a true account, then there are surely some clues therein about the moons of Venus."

As I spoke I stood at a historic site. Nearby was the park where King James had hunted

deer, the palace where Elizabeth had lived and died, and the chantry where sad and solemn priests had sung for the soul of Richard the Second.

Tonight, this third of June, 1769, we would make more history!

For tonight, through the brand-new achromatic telescope two floors above me, we would observe a rare and spectacular celestial sight: the passage of Venus before the Sun!

And in that transit, we might test the veracity of the manuscript, and finally solve the mystery of the Venusian moons.

In attendance were not only the sagacious William Herschel and the lemur-like Lord Lamprecht, but a variety of astronomers, professional and amateur, including no less than their majesties, King George and his Queen Charlotte.

Even as king, George often dressed modestly. But he considered this rare heavenly event so special that he was wearing his magnificently embroidered suit, a regal outfit he usually reserved for coronations and royal birthdays. Charlotte was dressed even more spectacularly, her face framed by the glittering diamond cap and necklace she had worn at her coronation, her bosom covered with a constellation of diamonds.

So keen was His Majesty's interest in astronomy that he had commissioned this observatory to be built specifically for tonight's event. He had also paid, out of his own purse, for expeditions to be sent around the world to study the transit of Venus.

Once their statistical findings—and those of observers from other nations—were collected, and processed through the lens of parallax, a lacuna in scientific knowledge could be filled. We would finally know the true size of the Solar System! Not knowing this was a persistent embarrassment to all astronomy—as if a man did not know his own hat size, though in Lamprecht's case, that number be quite small.

Turning to my royal audience, I fell to one knee and said:

"I refer to this fanciful tale as the first *Georgium Volumine Aegyptica*. If I may, I would like to dedicate it to you, your most excellent majesty, George the Third, by the Grace of God King of Great Britain, France, and Ireland, and Emperor of North America!"

The young King was sitting on a small throne, surrounded by his entourage and absently rolling and unrolling a handkerchief. When Queen Charlotte whispered in his ear, he said my name with sudden clarity. The king spoke my name! “Professor Boxhammer, we kindly accept your wisdom and appreciate your scientific knowledge. Does this volume have a specific title?”

“I call it, *Under the Moons of Venus: A Tale of a Princess Altivolant*. For the less erudite among us, and those faffling and zroddering in ignorance”—I turned toward Lamprecht—“the word ‘altivolant’ means ‘high-flying.’”

“You refer to this tale as fanciful. Why is that?”

“I am concerned that—and I would wish to retract my dedication if it be proven that—this text may be another fabrication from Lord Lamprecht!”

With that, from my nemesis spewed a string of invective I care not to repeat here.

I sighed at the chronometer, which had been constructed by the clockmaker to the king. The cherubs sculpted on it declared that it was not yet 7 o’clock in the evening, and nearly half an hour before the transit.

It is sad that Lord Lamprecht would insist that we fritter away that half hour in argument and frivolous flapping of the arms and lips. Soon enough we would settle the matter of the Venusian moons with data.

Finally, the transit imminent, Reverend Demainbray, the superintendent of the Observatory, hand-cranked the gears, making final adjustments to the telescope. He then invited the king the honor of observing the beginning of the transit.

As a more experienced astronomer, Herschel stood quietly annoyed that he would not be able to observe this moment directly. But scientific interests would be well represented by the hundreds of other professionals, all around the world, simultaneously studying this event. In any case, His Majesty had paid for this telescope, and our reward was to be in his presence.

From time to time, George looked down from the eyepiece to scribble quick sketches, while an assistant called out the time in five-second intervals.

It wasn’t until several minutes later, when George’s eyes became weary, that he stepped

away from the scope. Queen Charlotte eagerly took his place.

I looked down at George’s sketches. They were astounding. The first showed just a small circle for Venus, less than a finger-width away from the larger partial circle of the Sun, like a goddess of love approaching a city gate. Unlike the sharp edges seen when the airless Mercury passes before the Sun, a haze appeared around Venus, first reaching toward the Sun’s outer edge, and then lingering even as the planet passed the solar inner edge. This distortion was probably due to the planet’s thick atmosphere, but I imagined the goddess, partially obscured in buoyant gauze, reaching out her naked arms as she neared the gatekeeper, embracing him briefly, with the two still clinging to each other, hardly to be shaken off, even as she was pulled away, into the city.

The drawings were fascinating, but not fully satisfying.

The manuscript had described the faster of the two moons of Venus as having exploded, perhaps leaving only fragments. The orbit of the slower moon might be unstable. Would George look for such subtleties? His drawings showed no moons of Venus at all, fragmentary or whole.

Sometimes, though, people don’t see that which is right before their eyes. I needed to see the transit with my own eyes.

But then it was Demainbray’s turn, and Herschel’s.

With sunset approaching, I was worried I would be relegated to the crowd in the atrium, watching the transit on a crude model, approximating the events with gears and painted wooden disks.

After all this, would I miss seeing this event, which was never to re-occur in a hundred years?

But then it was Lechmere’s turn at the eyepiece, then Haas, then Bostonian Robert Treat Paine. Finally, it was mine, but Lamprecht jumped ahead of me. Minutes later, I had to beg and plead—oh how Lamprecht delighted in my agitated state—until I pulled him forcibly away.

I thrust my face against the eyepiece, nearly damaging myself in my eagerness.

The sight was amazing! I saw the bright face of the Sun, so spherical but looking very flat, and superimposed on it was the tiny dot of

Venus, so small, so dark—but utterly alone. I looked all around the solar disk, for any more dots that might be a moon or fragments thereof, or sunspots that might be mistaken for a moon. I worked methodically over the solar disk, scanning and scanning up and down, then right and left, moving my eye faster and faster, even as the solar disk started to disappear behind the trees on the horizon.

Then, a few minutes later, it was gone.

Darkness had fallen.

But I had beheld the planet Venus in silhouette.

And I had seen no moons.

Polling all the astronomers in the building, I found that no one else had, either.

“Please explain, Professor Boxhammer,” the king said. “If we saw no moon tonight, then why did others before us?”

“I can only conclude that there are no moons of Venus, and there never were. Unfortunately the manuscript I read tonight is a mere fiction. Perhaps each alleged sighting was a delusion, an *ignis fatuus*, a dioptrical ghost,” I explained. “Perhaps an unidentified star. Or a reflection of Venus, bounced off the cornea, then off the lens and back into the eye. These images would only appear on rare occasions when the eyeball and telescope lens, or various heavenly bodies, were fortuitously arranged. The negative data from tonight lead us inexorably to one conclusion, which I’ll use as a chapter title in my next book: ‘Venus *still* has no moons.’”

Herschel nodded in agreement.

“It did—but not anymore!” The voice wasn’t Lamprecht’s, but that of a stranger, a well-built young man, standing with an equally beautiful young lady. They seemed to have been sculpted together, as a pair, by a master. An older woman bearing a resemblance to the young lady stood nearby. Their regal finery of robes and shawls nearly rivaled King George’s in majesty, bedecked as they were with opal and gold, amber heliodor and jasper.

Curiously, a finely striped black material, peeking out from under their bodices and waistcoats, was worn directly against the skin. But they exuded an odd, sulfurous odor, which if bottled might be a useful repellent against my adversary.

“These are my witnesses, those spoken of in the tale,” Lamprecht said.

Thus they introduced themselves, as Queen Anka Tiri, Prince Rinaldi, and Princess Denjira, playing along with Lamprecht’s game.

The three strangers had been studying an orrery, pointing at the model of the planet Venus.

“Should we update Venus with moons?” I joked, watching the various balls move around the Sun as the young woman play-acting Denjira turned a crank. “We didn’t see any evidence of moons tonight.”

“The fragments of the Fast Moon are too small to see,” the woman said.

“The other moon, which may or may not still exist,” the man said, “lies between Venus and the Sun, and is thus not visible from this world during a transit.”

“How do you know this?”

“We have been there,” the woman said.

“What?” I asked with incredulity. “I found your adventure tale no more plausible than Kepler’s story of space-going daemons. Or Lucian’s account of traveling via celestial whirlwinds, or Godwin’s speedy messenger, exploring space on *giant geese!*” I turned to Lamprecht in fury. “Are these more of your japing jesters? Another prank, designed to do my reputation ill?”

The coward cowered as I raised the scroll, ready to beat him until he saw a plethora of planets and a multitude of moons—when someone’s hand stilled mine.

“Enough!” the young woman said. “I have seen enough violence. Enough violence!”

“The young woman is right,” Herschel said. “Let us all be united in truth, against the common enemies of ignorance, greed, and ill-will.”

“Agreed,” said Robert Treat Paine, the Bostonian, but in a low growl.

The young woman in black had noticed Paine looking askance at the king. She asked him, “Is it not a rare and wonderful ruler to be so interested in science?”

“Would that were his only interest!” Paine looked around cautiously. Then he grumbled: “And not vexing us with taxes while refusing us representation in parliament. Or allowing his agents to bully our colonists . . .”

“Indeed, I’ve seen that sort of despotism before,” the young woman said, “in another unfit to be ruler of a free people.”

“What was your solution?” the American asked.

“We fled.”

“Ha!” Paine laughed. “If only the American colonies could fly away likewise!”

“No, but perhaps you might consider . . . dissolving the bands of allegiance binding you to the crown?”

“Declaring independence?” Paine frowned. “At present, despite our grievances, that idea is not generally contemplated. Most find it treasonous, and a threat to peace and order. But I welcome the debate—”

Before she could respond, however, the young man, still playing his part, called out, “Denjira! I’ve discovered another amusing error in their orrery! Tell me if you can see it, too!”

“Something other than the moons of Venus is missing?” Herschel asked.

“Former moons of Venus. But—Yes!” The woman in black spoke up. “Outside the orbit of Saturn is another planet, and also—”

“Another planet?” I called out. “Impossible! In the heavens, there are seven bright orbs! The Sun and Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Just as there are seven seas and seven sins—There are seven lights!”

With heightened attention, William Herschel said, “Tell me more about this undiscovered planet beyond Saturn . . .”

The woman said: “According to the star-maps of Thoth—”

“Thoth? The Egyptian god? Enough! Lamprecht, no more from your mendacious minions!”

No one took heed of my words. Nay, Herschel, Paine, and the others gathered closely round the young man and woman and her mother, further indulging their lively but fatuous imaginings.

As for me, I fled the premises with a dramatic flourish, pausing only to tweak Lamprecht lightly on the nose.

For I had had my fill that night of fakes, fantasies, fictions, and effronteries! ■

**About the science in this novella:**

*Our top story tonight: Venus still has no moons.*

Today.

*But historically it used to have two artificial ones (at least in our story!). The faster moon increased the oxygen level of the Venusian atmosphere. Being in a highly elliptical*

*orbit, it dipped into the outer atmosphere to scoop up loose oxygen (molecular, monoatomic and ionic), converting the latter two into O<sub>2</sub>. It also converted carbon dioxide into oxygen. Then it kept sinking deeper into the atmosphere, until it released all that oxygen in a great jet, providing thrust to replace the energy lost to air resistance, shooting it back out into space for another run.*

*The slow moon was at or near Venus’ L1 Lagrange point—the one between Venus and the Sun—and generated a magnetic field (Venus currently has none) to protect oxygen and hydrogen in the atmosphere from being blasted away by solar rays. For an article about creating artificial mag fields around a planet, see: Bamford et al. 2022 *Acta Astronautica* 190: 323-333. The slow moon had a large solar sail, whose surface area and pitch could be modulated for station-keeping. See the article “Control of Lagrange point orbits using solar sail propulsion” by Bookless and McInnes 2008, *Acta Astronautica* 62: 159-176.*

*Once it was a real scientific question whether there were zero, one, or two Venusian moons. The debate lasted from 1645, when Francesco Fontana first sighted them, to June 3-4, 1769, the date of a transit of Venus. In between, many looked and a few saw, including Cassini and James Short. Even a Lagrange—but not (contrary to Wikipedia) the famous Joseph-Louis Lagrange, after whom Lagrange points are named, but the lesser Louis Lagrange, a little-known French-Italian astronomer.*

*Transits of Venus appear in pairs, about 8 years apart; in addition to the 1769 transit in the story, there was one in 1761. The international scientific community was not organized in studying the 1761 event; they were hampered by bad weather, bad equipment, and worse wars. Despite all that, during that 1761 transit, astronomer Abraham Scheuten reported that he saw “Venus and its small moon in the middle of the solar disc.”*

*The 1769 expeditions had the benefit of better achromatic scopes. Some expeditions were underwritten by the new king of England, George III, then young, mostly sane, and a big proponent of astronomy; and by the new empress of Russia, Catherine the Great, who wanted to prove her country’s*

stature on the world stage. Alas, in the 1769 transit, not a single astronomer reported any moons of Venus. Not one.

But ...

Even a transit might not be fully dispositive. Before the 1761 event, Scottish astronomer James Ferguson cautioned that an extant moon might not be visible if "its Orbit be considerably inclined to the Ecliptic." Alternatively, the moon might move "so slow as to be hid by Venus all the six hours that she will appear on the Sun's Disc." Indeed, a moon, real or artificial, at Venus's L1 Lagrange point would be invisible from the Earth during a transit. These factors would also apply to the transits in 1874 and 1882.

In fact, one could argue that it wasn't until 1962, when Mariner 2 visited our sister world, that the (present-day) nonexistence of her moons was sealed with a kiss.

For an excellent book on the 1769 transit (arguably the first great act of international scientific cooperation, thus paving the philosophical path for CERN and the International Space Station), see *Chasing Venus: The Race to Measure the Heavens*, by Andrea Wulf.

For more on the moons of Venus, see the book *The Moon that Wasn't: The Saga of Venus' Spurious Satellite*, by Helge Kragb; and a related article, "The Phantom Moon of Venus, 1645-1768," by Kurt Moller Pedersen and Helge Kragb, 2008, *Journal of Astronomical History and Heritage*, 11(3): 227-234.

Also check out the article "Unveiling the

*Mystery Planet*," by Willy Ley, in the September 1955 *Galaxy* magazine, which, along with various works by Edgar Rice Burroughs, inspired this story.

Regarding the characters: One is Robert Treat Paine, who later prosecuted (unsuccessfully) the British soldiers in the trial after the Boston Tea Party; he also signed the Declaration of Independence. Paine was one of the few founding fathers with an interest in astronomy; Benjamin Franklin was another; and his paper on the transit, as viewed from Pennsylvania, was presented to the Royal Society of London—the first publication of American science.

As a final note, the authors point out that the character of Professor Boxhammer was inspired by Jesuit "scholar" Athanasius Kircher. He lived a hundred years earlier than the events of our story, and actually believed that tarantula bites could be cured with a frantic folk dance called the "tarantella."

Ultimately, this story is a celebration of the enthusiastic, if sometimes mistaken or misinformed, ideas of Kircher, Fontana, and their ilk.

Francesco Fontana was also possibly the first astronomer to report an artificial structure on another planet. In 1636, he saw "A black cone like a very dark little globule" on Mars. Unlike the moons of Venus, his discovery on Mars was later supported by the work of Giovanni Schiaparelli, Percival Lowell, Richard Hoagland and The National Inquirer.

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