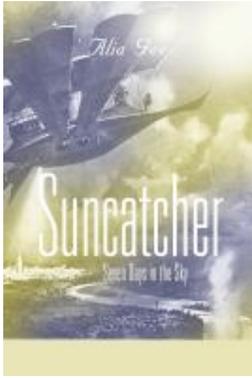




Alia Gee

Suncatcher

Seven Days in the Sky



Professor Radicand Jones has survived climate change, pandemic and peak oil- but can she protect her sister's airship flock from pirates, and hunt down their shadowy sponsors before the aether drives her mad?

Suncatcher

Seven Days in the Sky

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SUNCATCHER:
SEVEN DAYS IN THE SKY

Alia Gee

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June 1st, 2075:

Just off the coast of Florida, aboard the Solar Harvesters Union
(SHU) airship *Judy*.

Chapter One

--Problems and Precipitates--

Dr. Radicand Jones removed her goggles and gloves and rubbed at the shallow indents on either side of her nose. An urgent message had pulled her out of the aether, but she needed a moment to acclimatize herself to reality before she answered.

A moment was all she got; the admiral's override cut into her wrist cuff's tiny speaker, "Annie, meet me in navigation. Now.... Please."

"Yes, of course," she managed to say before the admiral switched off.

Radicand groaned and pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes, trying to clear away the mental fog of early morning aether-walking. At least today she would actually get to talk to the woman, and not merely observe her older sister from the other end of the airship.

For several semesters Radicand had fantasized about taking a sabbatical, but it had seemed both ridiculous and impossible. Her fellow teachers never complained about their course loads or the new head of the department. Her mother would certainly never consider retiring as long as she could lift a pipette.

"Escape what?" the senior Dr. Jones had asked, the one time Radicand brought up her growing discomfort. "My dear, you live in a city filled with unique cultural specimens, your room and board are

paid for by the University, and you're one of the youngest professors they've ever offered tenure—younger even than your sister.”

Radicand gulped; that conversation had not ended well. And she had still felt like something was missing from her life, whatever her mother might say. When she had received a brief note from that same brilliant sister, inviting Radicand to visit the *Judy* while it was docked at Penn Station's airship terminal annex for supplies, it had seemed a simple and elegant solution. She shoved an old t-shirt into her rucksack and set out for adventure.

When they left Penn Station and Radicand was still on board, she assumed it was just the first in a series of victories through which she would win her sister's approval... or at least her attention. But no matter how carefully she washed the delicate solar sails or how thoroughly she checked the batteries for corrosion, Pari kept her distance.

Radicand slipped on her new split toed shoes and zipped up her fleece-lined jacket. Both were from the communal stores, a generously supplied cupboard on one of the other, bigger airships. Despite being well-prepared for new crew members, the flock didn't seem to have made any provision for paid guests or weary travelers. Doe, Pari's second in command, had taken Radicand under his wing and set her up with basic supplies and general directions. If Radicand had thought about it more, she might have given up in the face of Pari's indifference. But she hadn't thought, for once. She had just worked. Hard. She wondered what she had done that had finally irritated her sister into action.

She closed her cabin door firmly. Best not to think about it too much, she admonished herself, and just go. She walked down the whitewashed hallway and climbed the spiral staircase at its end. It was close and crowded, but the view from the small deck above it was almost limitless.

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Radicand paused to admire it all. Just beyond the clean sweep of the observation deck, the solar sails spread wide and tilted at an angle to collect as much direct sunlight as possible. Slits in the gauzy fabric helped guide the wind past so it didn't affect the ship's movement too much. The first time Radicand saw them, the sails had been tucked in and their multiple spokes swept back along the hull of the *Judy*. She would have assumed they were used to steer the ship if she had time to assume anything as she stowed her bag and got a handle on the basics of life in the sky.

A few days later, though, once the *Judy* disembarked from Penn Station, Radicand had grabbed onto the high white railings around the deck as all the spokes were cranked out and the solar sails unfurled into silky semicircles. They hugged the long sides of the gondola like the fins on a tropical fish. Smaller sails hung from the huge, rigid bladder above her were occasionally used for steering.

Only the bladder and the dozens of other colorfully painted airships that made up the flock in the middle distance blocked her view of the clear sky and dark sea. She paused now, as she always did when she saw that almost empty sky, wondering if there was a clue out here that she was missing, some key to open up her sister, or at least the clockwork under her feet.

Doe promised that she would get used to the low and constant hum of the engines, "like a tribe of mechanical crickets." She had thought at the time that was an apt description of the bouncy crew itself. Even after three weeks, the thrum was still a constant reminder that she was floating in the sky on the sufferance of devices and people she didn't really understand.

She paused outside the navigation room, breathed in and out, and pulled a little too hard on the door handle. It bounced behind her as she stepped inside, slamming shut. Radicand frowned; she had expected Brian, the ship's navigator, to be here, too, but Pari was alone. The admiral ignored Radicand's entrance and frowned down at the map table. Above a rough outline of Miami's seawalls, the

holograph projector displayed high wispy clouds. A small blur in the furthest corner pulsed red.

“You wanted to see me?”

Pari’s monkey, Joshua, bared his teeth in silent welcome from his perch on the admiral’s well padded shoulder. This morning, he was more interested in playing with the older woman’s green silk scarf than chattering at Radicand.

The admiral glanced up. Her fierce expression wavered a moment, before she said in flat tones, “I’m afraid you’ll have to leave.”

Radicand sputtered, “What? Why? You just ordered me to come *here!*” She tried not to wail, “What did I do wrong?”

“Leave the *ship*, Annie,” her sister repeated, “Pirates are coming.”

Radicand blinked. That was different... and also very strange, “How?”

“By jury-rigged airship, I think. I can’t imagine real pirates would have anything like jets at their disposal.”

Radicand shook her head, “No, I mean, how am I supposed to leave? We’re several hundred feet up in the air.” She frowned, adding, “Aren’t we all in danger, here? Why can’t everyone leave together?”

“We’re too slow,” Radicand thought she saw genuine feeling flicker across her sister’s face for the first time since she boarded the *Judy*, “We can’t reach Miami before the pirates reach us.”

Radicand’s eyes widened, “What do you--”

“We’ll all stick together, I hope, and fly free... eventually,” Pari reassured the holographic projection, refusing to meet Radicand’s

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eyes, “But if the pirates are really determined they could destroy the *Judy*’s bladder with one oil-soaked rag and a spark.”

“That’s... horrible,” Radicand said, her overactive imagination supplying her with a lurid image.

“This is our life,” said Pari quietly, as if she talked about dying in flames all the time, “We all chose to live here in the sky, to accept whatever challenges it brought us.”

“But-”

“But it’s just a vacation to you,” Pari glanced up briefly, then back at the map, “We have enough parasails and life rafts to spare for you. Leave while you can, go before the pirates make it impossible for me to guarantee your safety.”

“Oh,” whispered Radicand. She stood up and turned her back on her sister; it seemed like the only way to get a quiet moment to think. She looked down at her new boots. The strange split-toes made her feet look alien and bird-like, and she could feel her heart trying to split in two, as well.

She wiggled her toes and flexed her ankles. She didn’t miss her cozy bedroom slippers, left behind in a storage locker without a second thought. She missed her older sister.

She had been missing her for the last ten years, really.

Radicand turned around and leaned across the table separating them. She used to be able to talk to her sister, reach her when her parents couldn’t. Now she planted one hand on Miami Island, one hand in the holographic sea, and glared at her dear, frustratingly distant sister, “Fuck safety, and fuck you if you think I would leave you to die,” she snarled. “So could I. Die. Here, now, before the pirates come... of food poisoning.” She briefly considered last night’s mystery miso, and hoped that wasn’t true. The pause slowed her

down long enough that honesty forced her to add, “Or maybe just choking on my own bile.”

“Annie,” Pari’s voice almost trembled, Radicand couldn’t be sure, “Be serious. I... I can’t lose anyone else...”

Radicand pursed her lips, “I submit a respectful suggestion that you pretend I’m not your little sister. Pretend I’m actually smart and useful and tell me how I can help you. Tell me what the problem is.”

Pari’s voice was still flat, but Radicand thought there might be a spark of the girl she grew up with glimmering in her eye, “The problem is you don’t take orders.”

“The problem is you’re lousy at giving them. I thought that was why you loved building consensus so much,” she frowned, “In fact, why aren’t you asking everyone else what they think right now?”

“I love consensus... as long as it agrees with me,” muttered Pari, “And in fact I called a meeting with the whole flock right after I paged you.”

“You didn’t mention that sooner because?”

“We were rather busy talking about other things, don’t you think?” Pari let one side of her mouth slip into a smile, “I could still force you off the ship at fork point. I’m not sure why I haven’t yet.”

“You hate a challenge?”

“And you’re still here because?”

Radicand stuck out her tongue, “It’s the masochist in me; I always choose the underdog.”

“Woof.”

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Radicand grinned, “So now that you admit you’re barking mad, do you actually have any tactical plans? Or were you just going to invite the pirates over for tea?”

“Oh, plans aren’t a problem,” sighed Pari, “The problem is none of this actually makes any sense. Why would pirates be in the sunshine corridor? What could they want from us?”

“What do we have of value?”

“We, dear sister?”

“Shut up and answer the question. Are you hiding treasure chests anywhere?”

“No; gold’s too heavy and the babies chip their teeth on rubies,” Pari’s arch smile faded, “Really, any value we have is intangible. Up here it’s just us and the clothes on our backs and the sun in our sails.” Radicand frowned and looked around at the neat little room. The servers were not exactly state of the art; even her own particular priorities couldn’t see anything valuable enough that a pirate would risk life indenture over it.

She wished she had more data, but didn’t want to offend Pari by putting on her goggles mid conversation. Still, Pari ought to know as much about her flock as the aether did. “Are your batteries valuable?”

“The batteries we use are old and cheap, not worth stealing for the hardware,” Pari frowned slightly, “Energy prices are high around here, but not high enough to reward piracy. I grant you our solar collectors are unique. They might be worth something to somebody else, except they’re so huge. Pirates would have to capture a whole airship to move them, and the crew to handle the rigging as well.”

Radicand grabbed onto that point, “So they want to steal an entire ship, maybe even its crew?”

Pari looked down, “We will have to work under that assumption.” Then her shoulders slumped and she pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes, “I hate assuming anything.”

Joshua chirped at Pari and gently patted her head. Radicand briefly wished she had someone to pat her head. Since the puzzle remained unsolved, it was time to work a different angle, “How do you know there are pirates at all?”

Pari waved her hand at the projector and the computer zoomed in on the image, turning the red blur into three separately menacing dots, “A pleasure craft with up-market engines found them. The ship escaped before its sensors could collect much data, but the captain sent a message out.”

Joshua chattered and pressed a toggle on the machine. A burst of feedback startled Radicand before a frantic voice cut through, “Three pirate ships. Repeat, we have visual confirmation of three pirate ships headed south southwest in an oblique approach towards Miami. All ships within broadcasting range alter your flight paths accordingly.”

Radicand frowned. That sounded... dangerous but vague. “So... what now?”

“Time to meet with the others,” decided Pari, “I don’t suppose you’d like to lead a valiant charge or anything? I always preferred to leave that sort of active command thing to younger, more hot-headed companions.”

“Fuck you, did I mention?” Radicand smiled sweetly, “Fuck you with an amusing cucumber.”

Joshua screeched and clung onto the woman’s shoulder as Admiral Jones threw her head back and laughed.

Chapter Two

--Rock and Roll--

On her way to where the *Judy's* crew was gathering, Radicand stopped at her quarters and picked up her rifle. The sense of security it gave her might be false, but she had spent enough time in the aether to fervently believe in the power of symbols. She slung it at her side, wishing she had something a little smaller. Symbols were great, but small symbols wouldn't hang quite so heavy at her side.

Pari also stopped at her cabin, directly across the hall from Radicand's. Pari put Joshua into his cage above her desk and put away a small stack of papers there before nodding to herself and tugging at her coat's hem one more time. The monkey blew the women a raspberry, but seemed otherwise content.

"Can't have him distracting you?" asked Radicand, leaning against the doorframe.

"Can't have him pooping on my shoulder," muttered the admiral. Radicand noticed that Pari had left her own pistol in its holster on the wall of her quarters, as well as any other item that might signal her power and authority.

"So what's going to happen, at this council of war?" asked Radicand. The sisters walked down the other end of the hall, past sets of orange and red doors, to the staircase that went down to the next level.

Pari shrugged, "We'll talk... I'll start it since I called the meeting, but after that I'll mostly listen. You should, too." Radicand started to bristle, but Pari continued, "After all, I'm basing my suggestions on your ideas. You should correct me if I get them wrong."

Radicand gulped. "Me? What'd I say?"

Pari smiled grimly, “That they’ll try to steal our ships.”

Radicand blinked, but Pari continued, “I’m too close, too enmeshed in the community. It’s a whole, complex system to me. They can’t steal a community—but they could steal a ship.” Even if Radicand knew how to respond, they had reached the bottom of the stairs and had a very public audience. She pressed her lips together.

A dozen crew members of the good ship *Judy* were gathered by the main monitor in the rec room, a space that doubled as dining hall and communal living quarters in the space-conscious design of the ship. It was the only room Radicand had seen that used the full width of the gondola. High round windows along both exterior walls let in plenty of late morning light without blinding anyone. She assumed the handful that were missing had patched themselves into the *Judy*’s communication network to keep track of what was going on, even if they couldn’t be there in the flesh.

Brian, the flock’s navigator and chief aether walker before Radicand’s arrival, ran the ships’ cameras and screens from a canvas chair slung between servers. It was a lighter, sleeker version of the harness he used in the navigation room. Pari took a seat that had been left open directly across from the monitor. Radicand dropped down on the floor near the entrance. Across the open doorway, Doe leaned against the bulkhead and kept his arms crossed. He wasn’t the only crew member standing, but most either sprawled on thick woven mats or perched on old peanut butter buckets that had been painted and cut and bolted into interesting shapes.

Brian nodded at the admiral when she arrived, and flipped a switch on his right.

The monitor focused on a red-cheeked man with a sleeping newborn strapped snugly to his chest, “Milo, here, of the *Sunflower*. All crew present, except Gardener—she’s asleep.”

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Radicand couldn't figure out why there was a ripple of gentle laughter throughout the room, until Doe took pity on her and leaned his balding head towards hers, "Gardener is his wife, and the baby is about six hours old. I'd rather live on fermented algae paste the rest of my days than wake her up." Doe winked at her, Radicand nodded mute thanks to him. Of course, now that he mentioned it, that name was vaguely familiar. Gossip was as much a part of the background noise up here as the propellers' constant thrum.

Eventually, Brian indicated that representatives from all the crews were assembled and ready.

Pari calmly announced, "We have received word that there are three pirate ships in the area. We cannot outrun them." She very carefully did not make eye contact with Radicand. No one else seemed to be surprised that she was included in this discussion, anyway, which was a small relief.

Pari let the shocked murmurs of those assembled die down before she continued, "I have consulted with Dr. Jones, and we have concluded that if the pirates attack us, they are most likely going to attempt to capture one or more of our airships. With this in mind, I believe our strength is in our numbers, and we should stay close together to offer mutual aid and support."

Now eyes did dart towards her, but there was no hostility there.

Then Brian paused from his work, "There is another possible scenario. If they're part of a blood cult, they might want to just destroy us all rather than capture one or two of our ships. In that case, we would receive the least damage if we spread out."

The admiral's eyebrows rose, but she remained composed, "Thank you, Brian. Anyone with access to newsfeeds, please share any relevant information with the rest of us."

Radicand pulled her goggles down over her eyes. Her fingers tapped on the ear pieces to guide her search. While she hadn't fully submerged herself in the all-consuming virtual reality of the aether, she could just feel the others nearby who were also wired in. They were friendly ghosts in the aether and didn't trouble her. It would have been nice to work together with them, of course, but she couldn't count on them understanding the same visual metaphors she did, and speed was of the essence.

Besides, anyone could check the newsfeeds to see if a blood cult had recently formed—one with enough sense to become pirates would certainly be headline news. But Radicand specialized in patterns and inferences, and the basic logic of Brian's suggestion required some active thought and programming.

Pari cut through the quiet hum, finally, with a curt, "Brian, have you found anything that suggests a blood cult attack is likely?"

"No, ma'am."

Radicand clarified her notes into a few relevant points and tapped one more code at her temple to download her search route and conclusions to the local shared network. She raised her goggles onto her head and coughed to get Pari's attention. "My professional assessment is that while there is always the possibility of a blood cult forming from a local charismatic figure, our flock is not a plausible target.

"Blood cults usually either hit areas with concentrated populations or structures with symbolic significance. While the flock is large and important to us, even the destruction of every airship would not make much impact on the social or religious institutions below us."

Radicand realized she had gone into lecture mode, and blushed slightly. The crew members who weren't watching the aether through goggles were watching her dubiously. Radicand considered what she

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had said. Perhaps she shouldn't have so blithely suggested the entire flock could be destroyed? She needed to work on her bedside manner, it seemed.

When most of the other goggles in the room were perched on heads, Brian shared the aetheric consensus, "We agree with Dr. Jones." He seemed more relieved than upset that his pet theory had been dismissed, and that cheered her right up.

Pari nodded, "We must prepare for an attack, then, whether the pirates mean to strike us or not. The question is do we do this best by staying together and fighting back or separating into many parts and fleeing? I've told you my thoughts. I leave it to you, good gentles, what our collective answer will be."

Radicand watched in rapt attention, but no lights flickered. The other crews were each having discussions in private, it seemed, though the *Judy's* own crew was silent.

Radicand crooked an eyebrow at Doe, and he took the hint, "We're the flagship. We won't leave unless every other ship chooses to, and even then we'll be the last to go. We made our choice when we signed on to the *Judy*." This news did not make Radicand regret her brash words in the navigator's room barely an hour ago. In fact, she felt a pleasant warmth in her stomach; she, too, had made her choice and was content with it.

The *Sunflower* was, again, the first to flicker onto the screen. Milo's face was redder than before, but his voice was steady and calm as he outlined his crew's decision. "You all know we're a family ship, here. I've got my wife, my uncle and," he paused and gulped, "Our child. Just want to go on record that Miz Maggie and a couple teenagers from the *Forward Momentum* have been helping us out, and they were a full part of our decision. We want to stay with the flock, but realistically we can't do much if the consensus is to fight. We request a spot in the core. In exchange, we'll take in any

sick or wounded and bunk them here so Miz Maggie can keep an eye on them.”

Doe tipped his head towards Radicand again, “Miz Maggie’s the best midwife in the whole flock, and a damn fine general nurse, so that makes good sense.”

Admiral Jones nodded and said, “Thank you, Milo.”

The second captain to report in was half the size of Milo, and at least twice his age.

“Hansuke Sensei,” Pari bowed slightly from her seated position, which caught Radicand’s attention.

He nodded back regally, “The *Mostly Harmless* will play scout,” seemed an oddly brief report back after Milo’s delivery, but the old man smiled at Pari as he said it and she, to Radicand’s astonishment, flashed a grin back.

“Josie?” she asked.

“Finishing her preparations, as are all my crew.”

Pari nodded and smoothly gave her attention to the next captain, leaving Radicand with a mouthful of questions.

“Captain Teasel here, greetings to all gathered,” spoke a grey-clad woman, older than Pari, Radicand judged, but too vigorous to be more than late middle aged, “We are committed to non violence. We also value the community that has been created here, and cannot in good conscience abandon this experiment before its natural conclusion. *Traveling Light* shall go where the *Judy* goes.”

Radicand leaned towards Doe, “But are they saying they’ll stay in the core with the *Sunflower*? Or are they saying they’ll wander around and just... get hit? Turn the other cheek or solar sail or

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whatever?” Doe squinted as if he could see through the walls and into the sky where the flock chose its fate ship by combustible ship.

“Captain Teasel is an odd bird,” mused Doe, “I don’t think she values her own life more—or less—than a pirate’s. *Traveling Light* will be a ship to watch, if you get a chance to see anything.”

Two ships had to bow out completely—both were small and slow, and one had gotten in the way of some geese the day before. “I’m sorry, everyone,” said the captain with a wince, “We’re still pulling feathers out of our gears and would just get in the way. The *Horde* has offered to stick with our *Carousel Rose* until we can get to a garage. I promise to stand a round of drinks in Miami.”

After that the captain of *Fishing Boat Proceeds* tipped his head and said the ship would prepare to fight but would go wherever Brian needed them. That started a flurry of similar quick responses from captains, to Radicand’s relief. She tried not to obviously stare at the time on her cuff, but consensus was slow and pirates were fast.

“We should catch,” *Freebird’s* captain said suddenly, “We’re fast enough and we have six life rafts. That’s two more than the *Judy*.”

Admiral Pari had grown more thoughtful and quiet as each captain shared their plans. She leaned forward at this, “Captain Max, thank you. Will you be willing to add our rafts to *Freebird’s* matrix?”

Doe whistled softly and leaned over before Radicand had to wrench his shoulder to get his attention, “Sometimes we talk strategy for different situations we might find ourselves in. We usually expect the *Judy* to take the bottom position, because we’ve had the most life rafts and Brian to run them. But *Freebird* has been recruiting a lot lately; I expect it’s safest if that ship is close to the water during the battle while its new crew members get their skylegs. If Max wants to be the flock’s catchers, we can take the top position.”

“And that’s good?”

“That’s... interesting. With Brian free from life raft duty, he might be able to try... well, we’ll see. Depends what the other captains are up for, in the end.”

Max agreed to control the *Judy’s* life rafts, and Pari turned to the next captain’s cautious report back. The rest of the captains, from the tiny *Lightning Bug* to the elegant *Nautilus*, turned control of their ships over to Brian’s aether care. Radicand wasn’t the only one who exhaled when Brian finally confirmed, “All captains have registered plans with me.”

Pari glanced through her cuff’s notes, then smiled up at the large screen and the assembled crews, “Thank you, everyone, for what you have agreed to contribute. Brian, can you confirm that we have enough support for the *Judy* to help at the top?”

Brian smiled, “Yes, we do. As long as everyone maintains radio silence after we’ve reached our final positions like we’ve discussed before. Gentles, we can *do* this!”

The other ghosts seemed fine with losing their connection to the aether for an unspecified amount of time; Radicand chafed at the loss and was unsure what good the sacrifice would do. She glanced at Doe.

The man was positively beaming, now, “Without broadcasting our existence electronically, there’s a small chance *Judy* can surprise the pirates. It might give us an advantage, at least for a few moments. We’ll also have the best view of the battle. Of course, we’ll also have the furthest to fall if something goes wrong,” He grinned at Radicand, “But I’d rather know what was up than hunker down, wouldn’t you?”

Radicand tilted her head, enjoying this unexpected taste of camaraderie, “Yes... me, too.”

Chapter Three

-- Fast and Furious--

The meeting broke up after the admiral thanked everyone again, and then she spoke to Radicand briefly before rushing off to sneak Joshua a banana. Radicand watched everyone else attend to their unusual duties with a pang of envy. While she had mucked about all over the *Judy*, she still felt very much like a fish out of water. She grinned despite her unease—a shimmering goldfish flapping through the sky would be fun to ride. Perhaps she could find some use for one in her aether library.

She fingered her goggles, hanging loosely at her side. The person in the flock most likely to put her to good use, now that her sister had disappeared, was the ship's navigator. Of course he was one of the first to leave the room as well, scooting through the crowd on his modified skateboard faster than the pedestrians around him. There was no question that Brian would be back in his perch in navigation by now, directing everything he could until the enforced radio silence restricted all the aether users.

Having convinced herself that the most useful place for her skillset was near the best technology, she knocked on the navigation room door with hardly any nervousness.

“Would you like any help up here?” she asked, stepping into his space. It might be shared by Pari and any others who needed the holographic maps, but Brian was settled so comfortably in his corner it was obvious this was his domain. Radicand glanced around. There were no rugs or painted walls like in the communal living quarters below, just technology and Brian's well-padded harness. This room should have seemed spare and intimidating, but the wrap-around windows on all four sides were all the decoration it needed. Since airship designers had an excellent working knowledge of computers, not to mention an excellent not-working knowledge of computers, it

had become standard practice to give the navigator as good a view as possible without technological assistance.

Radicand supposed that was good, considering the radio silence that would be imposed on them soon. Brian's hand gestures were familiar enough to Radicand that she knew he was in the middle of complex aetherwork and she patiently waited for him to have brain space to answer her. Not for the first time she carefully didn't stare at the place where his legs ended in strangely smooth stubs above the knee. Instead she stared out the window and wondered how he could be so comfortable riding hard data and yet seem to consider half an hour or more of aether silence with pleasure. She would feel useless without her goggles, and yet she fervently hoped she wouldn't have to use her rifle, either. She had never seen Brian carry anything more dangerous than an off key tune. Maybe they weren't as similar as she had hoped.

"We're about to do some major rearranging of personnel and ships; if you want to help, I could use another pair of real eyes out on the rigging," suggested Brian. The genuine warmth in his voice made Radicand pleased with her decision to come up here, even if it wasn't the high tech help she had hoped to offer.

It also gave her the courage to bring up another subject, "I was wondering how you move the ships, actually. I mean, in general we all stay together but each ship seems to move independently. I wondered if you used a variation on the algorithm that flocks of birds use?"

"Yes," he said more brusquely. He made a firm gesture; she couldn't decide if it was to move the data along or her, "Adjusted for the extreme variation in size of airships while maximizing solar input." His glass eye-patch sparkled in the afternoon sun, alive with the glitter of the passing data streams.

She wondered if he was still upset about her dismissing his blood cult theory earlier, after all, and struggled not to show her

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disappointment. Maybe he was just very busy preparing the flock for battle.

She paused, but he seemed to have no interest in adding to her attempt at conversation. She shrugged and said calmly, “I’ll go, then.”

Radicand let the door close completely behind her before she paused to adjust her coat and her small but sturdy parasail harness. Pari had ordered everyone on the *Judy* to wear one the rest of the day or face being thrown overboard naked. Radicand side-eyed the rope ladder next to her. It vibrated from use; it looked like half the crew had already gone up into the rigging around the bladder, safety belts clipped to whatever they could find. Knowing she was surrounded didn’t make her feel less lonely. Everyone and everything was tucked up and put away; even the secondary sails were bound up under the bladder.

Radicand breathed in and out, trying to ignore the way the wind made her eyes water. If she stood in the prow, she could even claim that she was prepared to repel an attack on the navigation room and its really very extremely busy navigator.

While the *Judy’s* interior walls were painted brightly, the outside hull and balloon were delicate shades of blue. From a distance, she might--briefly—be mistaken for just another piece of sky. Between the radio silence and the attempt at camouflage, the *Judy* and her crew seemed to be betting on invisibility. Radicand bit her lower lip; surely the pirate ships would have decent technology, radar at the least. The *Judy* would be just as visible as any of the other ships.

She crouched down in the prow. The danger, as far as Radicand and a quiet moment with her goggles researching airship battle records could figure, was from above. Flying up against gravity was hard, falling down was easy. And the quickest way to disable an airship was to damage the hard balloon its gondola was suspended from. Doing that without putting one’s own airship at risk was the

dilemma of the thinking warmonger. Fire was illegal, but then so were pirates...

Her cuff buzzed at her just as the last of the warmth seemed to seep out of her huddled body. "Sorry" scrolled across the small screen. A small text rose appeared, then broke up and formed the words: "It's strange having someone else here care how I do what I do. I've wired you permissions into my 'net; go ahead and poke around once radio silence is lifted." She blinked. Maybe she had made a friend, after all.

Now Radicand felt up to appreciating the glorious view. Though there was a thick layer of cloud high above the flock, it was clear and blue at their current hovering level. She watched airships bring their children and elderly into one of the five large ships in the center of the mass. As Pari had explained before she left Radicand in the rec room, they were circling the wagons in three dimensions.

"We have the core that we protect at all costs," her hands shaped an invisible hemisphere, "The *Forward Momentum* will be there, and they'll have most of the children. That ship has the best entertainment system and a huge gym; Brian tells me the children are demanding we get threatened by pirates more often."

"Ha," muttered Radicand.

"Then there will be the smaller sized ships in the middle layer, as backup for the medium sized ships. Those will make up most of the outer layer with us and the scouts at the top." She nodded to a few other stragglers and prepared to leave.

"But why are the medium ships furthest out?" protested Radicand, "Won't that make them the easiest to attack, with less ability to defend themselves than the really big ships? That doesn't make sense."

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Pari glanced over her shoulder at Radicand, “Today, we have enough warning that we could just scare off the pirates. But we might not get much notice, next time. I don’t want to encourage next times, so we’ll have to do... more.” Pari’s last smile was peculiar, but she strode away before Radicand could ask her any more questions.

It was that odd smile that Radicand thought of, as she watched the restless patchwork around her. A few other ships had chosen pastel colors for their bladders instead of simple white, but almost all of the hulls were a joyous celebration of color. The wide vertical stripes of gold and blue on the side of Milo’s *Sunflower* were one of the more subtle paintjobs bobbing past.

Radicand frowned, and then leaned forward as the airships slowly jockeyed into position. The *Judy* hovered at the very top of the dome, just like they planned. But three other ships were at roughly the same height, including the *Mostly Harmless* and Teasel’s *Traveling Light*. They were far enough away that the *Judy* couldn’t get to more than one to offer assistance before the other two got captured. If these were the scouts that Pari had mentioned earlier, they seemed particularly vulnerable.

Ten years ago, Pari had been so safety conscious she tested her prototype airship, which should have had a crew of at least ten people, alone. For a week she wrestled with it, before letting her grad students aboard for a long weekend. But she was also reckless enough that a week after that pleasure jaunt, she went on a second voyage with a dozen of those students and never came back. Her resignation letter was all that was left in the university’s hangar. Years later, Pari still hadn’t abandoned the sky. And now they all were riding in an airship that was trying to hide in plain sight, while a handful of “scouts” drifted at the same height as the *Judy*. Radicand’s left hand tapped a tattoo while her algorithms chewed on the data. What was her sister planning? What were the scouts for?

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She bit her lip hard when the potential answers scrolled across her field of vision. For once, she wished the numbers lied.

“Bait,” she whispered, and made it both curse and prayer.

Chapter Four

--War and Peace--

The crew above her, it turned out, were busier than Radicand had at first realized. Covered in loops of rope and bristling with bludgeoning weapons and small guns, they arranged themselves all over the balloon—to protect it from puncture, Radicand reasoned, and perhaps take out a pirate who came too close themselves.

Doe noticed her and waved, but climbed up the rigging before she could ask him whether or not she was right about the battle plan. She couldn't fault the others for ignoring her, as they seemed to have some trouble managing the heavy ropes and were focused on fighting gravity.

A beep and a ticking bomb icon on her cuff alerted Radicand that the *Judy* and her flock would be cut off from the aether in two minutes. Radicand felt a pang. She had her rifle—she had named it *Pwned*, after the tiny Welsh village her father had been born in—but she felt disarmed without immediate access to the virtual world her goggles opened up. That impending loss coupled with her sister's clumsy attempt at protecting her by dismissing her had left her feeling rather useless.

Brian's voice from her cuff cut through her reverie, "Radio silence in one minute, repeat, one minute. Last record of the pirates indicates they will come at us roughly east, from out of the sun if possible. I will position the airships accordingly."

With less than her usual care, Radicand shoved her goggles into their case on her belt and tried to use her naked eyes in some practical way.

Traveling Light, true to her captain's promise, drifted serenely just in front and to the right of the *Judy's* position. From her vantage point, Radicand had an unobstructed view of *Traveling Light's* deck.

The gondola was decorated with a simple black and white motif repeated in slight variations around the edge. The busy crew wore simply-cut black coats as they went about their tasks. Most skyfolk wore dark colors outside, as it gave one that extra edge of warmth in the high, harsh air.

To Radicand's left, the *Mostly Harmless* bobbed at roughly the same height as *Traveling Light*. Her hull was mostly white, with a wide red stripe around her lumpy middle. Additions had been tacked higgledy-piggledy onto the basic shape of the gondola, and the red paint was so old in some places it had faded to a warm pink. Extra-large stabilizers stuck out of the sides of her balloon. She looked like she would waddle, if she ever touched ground.

Six of her crew members, gaily rigged out in dark green coats like attenuated leprechauns, swept the top deck. Every now and then, it looked like there might be a pattern to how they danced around each other. They tossed the brooms back and forth, faster and faster, the dark red linings of their coats flashing. She wondered what sort of "preparations" this strange dance could be a part of. Finally they collected all their gear and disappeared down into the hold.

Radicand glanced to her right and a bark of laughter escaped her cold lips. The people of *Traveling Light* were setting up solar ovens on their observation deck— shiny bowl shapes five feet across that reflected the sun towards their middles. Her own stomach gently complained about working through breakfast.

Most of the other crews had cleared their decks of people as well, either moving up to protect the bladders or inside to protect themselves. Or maybe just to have lunch, Radicand couldn't tell.

She checked the permissions Brian had sent her earlier... she couldn't run them yet, but she could certainly set things up so that as soon as the radio silence was lifted, the goggles would pull her into the aether and let her properly see what the *Judy* could sense.

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When the sweet smell of warm baked goods wafted over, Radicand's attention snapped to the right. *Traveling Light's* crew seemed to be enjoying a delightful high tea on their spotless deck. Several of them were singing an old sea shanty.

"I wonder if they're drunk on moonshine or love?" murmured Pari, handing her a cup of tomato soup in a wide-bottomed mug. Radicand stopped gawking at the queer scene before her and gawked at the queer woman next to her.

She sipped at the mug, grateful for its warmth, and raised an eyebrow, "So, fearless leader, what will the flock do when the pirates get here?"

"I have no idea; I'm not in charge. The title's just to make the paperwork easier."

Radicand begged to differ, but kept her thoughts to herself, "You have a plan, though, right?"

"Of course. But I don't expect the pirates to follow stage directions," said Pari, "Brian will have control of the ships, the crews will do what they can. There's nothing more I can do; today, I'm just a witness to events."

Radicand shoved her hands into her coat pockets and tried to be content just watching. The *Mostly Harmless* bobbed awkwardly, further from the flock. Radicand glanced around, confirming her earlier observation—most of the flock was bunched tightly together, but *Traveling Light*, *Mostly Harmless*, and *Angels of Elevation* were definitely hovering a bit further out and away, just like the *Judy*.

One small woman walked onto the *Mostly Harmless'* deck wearing a faded red coat. She sat down cross legged on the deck and pulled out a penny whistle. After one experimental toot, she began playing it in earnest. *Traveling Light's* crew stopped singing their

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own songs and, after a brief pause, took up the words, “Dona Nobis Pacem” in unearthly tones. Radicand closed her eyes.

“No, watch,” insisted Pari urgently, and nudged her sister. They both had their eyes wide open, then, when the first pirate ship lurched out of the dissipating clouds above. Its sharp prow pointed directly at the tiny piper.

Chapter Five

--Up and Down--

The pirate ship was narrow and grey. Flat black eyes had been painted on its front, as well as snarling teeth. Radicand was unsurprised to see “Shark” printed in precise capital letters on its hull.

“How does it go so fast?” she wondered aloud.

“I expect the engines can burn some cheap bio fuel like ethanol,” said her sister, “Besides, it’s been designed to be aerodynamic, not comfortable.”

A second pirate ship, painted a dark and angry red, rushed forward and down now. It circled to engage *Traveling Light* and her assembled crew. Some pirate had roughly lettered “The Red Baron” across its port side. Black lightning bolts shot out from the name.

“You have three minutes to abandon your ship, before we board and remove you,” boomed a thunderous voice through the *Red Baron’s* speaker system. The harmonics on it had been subtly tweaked; Radicand shivered as she felt an unspeakable doom approach. Suddenly the mug in her hands was in the way, and Radicand set it down by her feet to deal with later.

The crew on *Traveling Light*, however, seemed unshaken. They set down their mugs of tea, and brought their song to a glorious finish. Then they stepped off the rails of the ship and leapt into the air. Their parasails snapped cleanly open. They all swooped down and away from the assembled aircraft to land on one of the many waiting life rafts below. Most of the other airships had donated one or two to the cause; it would take genuine effort for a falling person to land on the hard water.

Radicand was faintly disappointed by this anticlimax.

The *Shark* approached the *Mostly Harmless* silently. Its sleek design could not have been more different from the *Mostly Harmless*' unwieldy and awkward shape. The *Shark* shot grappling hooks from its stern. They hooked onto the bow of the *Mostly Harmless*' gondola and vibrated with the shock of contact. Eight pirates slid down the wires and landed on the deck. They approached the tiny woman with slow, deliberate steps, long coats flapping open in the wind. Radicand could practically hear the winches grind on the *Shark*'s deck as they shortened the lines. The two ships were drawn closer and closer together in the sky.

When the leader was just three yards away from her, the woman in pink stood up and bowed. Her face never turned away from the lead pirate's. As her body returned upright, she brought the whistle to her lips again. She blew one short sharp note and a dart shot out of its tip towards the pirates. Then the woman flipped backwards away from them.

The leader slapped his inner thigh right above his thick leather boots and roared. Another flip and she was gone, off the edge of the deck and falling free. Three heartbeats later, the pirate slowly sagged into a heap; his great coat spread around him like a puddle of oil on the wooden boards.

The pirates left standing might have shouted, but Radicand couldn't hear them; the *Mostly Harmless* was being dragged too quickly away by the *Shark*. They were headed back towards the third pirate vessel: a small black thing squatting much further to the east.

Radicand grimaced, "Is that it? Are both of the airships just giving up?" She knew she ought to be grateful not to see bloodshed, but this was no way to protect a community.

"Patience, little sister," murmured Pari, "Watch."

Her throat was tight. There was only one kind of watching she could calmly do. Radicand blinked; now that the pirates were

actually here and engaged with the flock, radio silence should have been lifted. She pulled her goggles on and waited for Brian to open the aether gates.

The Red Baron's ship unloaded its boarding team onto *Traveling Light* and attached the two ships together with stout lines. The pirates slowly and suspiciously prodded the tea kettles. The leader stalked back and forth and barked orders at his men but Radicand couldn't understand why he wasn't already securing the...

"Where is the navigation room?" Radicand asked, frowning, "I thought it was in their stern?"

"I suspect the pirates are also wondering the same thing," said Pari. "If they could get control of the rudder and turn it, the ship would drag less. The less strain they have to put on their own ship's engines the better. As it is, all the entrances and exits that should be there... aren't."

The grappling hooks that attached *The Red Baron* to *Traveling Light* stretched tight. Radicand could hear *The Red Baron's* winches creaking as the pirate's navigator fought the wind and the extra weight of *Traveling Light*. The pacifists had—against all normal safety procedures—not tied their secondary sails down tightly before they disembarked. As the pirate ship lurched hard, one sail swung across *Traveling Light's* deck and smashed three pirates off the ship entirely.

One look at her sister's troubled face reassured Radicand that not every step of this unfolding drama was going according to plan.

Finally Brian wired the flock back into the aether. She decided Pari could guard that corner of the deck as well as she could. Radicand was excited to finally see the battle with her normal enhancements in place, but as her vision reconciled the different realities she was seeing, she flinched.

A pack of huge black birds was attacking the navigator's tower. She gasped—even in the lightest layer of the aether she was willing to use in the middle of a battle, the black swans looked deadly as they threw themselves against Brian's aetherial defenses.

They seemed to be working in parallel—Yes, she could just see glimmering lines that harnessed them together and also connected them to the third pirate ship. Those leading strings could slow them down—or, if the hands that held them were skilled, make them more powerful.

With a wave of her gloved hand she let loose her own aether attack, a pack of large snarling beasts. Radicand couldn't get them inside Brian's firewall. At least he was competent enough to hold all outside aether creatures back, friend or foe, but the birds were a distraction Brian didn't need if he was going to try and wrest control of the flock's scouts from pirates.

Radicand's menagerie went on the attack, snarling and leaping at the birds. Each of her dozen animals was a package of different attacks. The birds were large objects but not complex, seeming to rely on persistence rather than finesse. Radicand blinked and let the beasts fight it out without her. Pari had gone silent; Radicand just hoped Brian could use this respite to his advantage.

She focused her normal eyes on *Traveling Light*. The pirates were still struggling with how to control it. At least if they were getting the airship without a fight, retrieving it wouldn't be easy for the *Red Baron*.

She blinked and used her goggles to zoom in on the pirate's ship. Radicand frowned. She had thought the pirates were all inside their airship, but she could still see four pale blue figures hanging from the *Red Baron's* rigging. Four.... Familiar figures. She hadn't managed to make it to many group meals what with the odd hours she kept, but in such close quarters even the shyest hacker made nodding

acquaintance with those who lived nearby. One of the blue people even looked suspiciously like Doe.

The four bodies leapt away from the rigging and snapped open parasails to glide away, just as tiny explosions popped the *Red Baron's* bladder open in a dozen places. She hadn't studied the engineering enough to know how long there would be enough undamaged helium cells in the bladder to hold up the pirate's gondola, but that couldn't be good.

Pari didn't seem surprised to see her people or the explosions they left behind, so Radicand flipped her aether sight back on. Her four beasts were taking bites out of the enemy data; nothing crucial, their wings were ragged but still in place. However, the malevolent programs had been harassed off the deck and back to a point in the middle of the sky. The aether landscape superimposed itself over her normal vision smoothly now; in both worlds the third pirate ship crouched darkly in the sky.

Radicand had wondered earlier why the third pirate ship hadn't attacked the silent *Angels of Elevation*. Whether it had hoped to steal secrets from the *Judy's* servers or was merely launching a DOS attack out of pique, the other pirate ship was participating in the battle on a different level than the flock had expected. Its code grappled with hers, and the aether-snarls and hoots in her ears were a strange counterpoint to the distant, silent battle between the humans trapped by flesh.

The *Red Baron* was sinking. It moved slowly, majestically, but definitely down. It was now at the same altitude as the *Judy*. The pirates safe on *Traveling Light* were shouting to their comrades still stranded on the *Red Baron*. And stranded it was—*The Red Baron* was a write-off; there was no way they could patch its ruptured bladder mid-air. A few pirates shook their heads and flung themselves into the sky. They aimed their parasails towards the third pirate vessel. There was just enough time for it to send out fast life rafts before the men hit the water.

The pirate parasails fell through the ghost dogfight in Radicand's double vision. Her beasts were slowly grinding the enemy creatures down, but she didn't want her programs getting so far away that they got trapped in some new web the other silent ship might possess. Radicand knew she was good, but she was alone out here without aether backup. Throwing her own dogs a bone to keep them from harassing the birds any further away from her, she blinked and focused her sight on the other flock airships.

With the new permissions Brian had bestowed on her, she should have been able to see inside the *Mostly Harmless* no matter how far away it was towed, but it was a black hole in her aether vision. Flustered, she pulled out and looked back at *Traveling Light*. It also had no cameras or sensors inside, but at least she could see its deck with her own eyes.

The pirates still on the *Red Baron* pulled the vessels closer using the grappling hooks. Cursing and straining the winches, they leapt across to the deck of *Traveling Light*. The last man to jump waited too long, as by now the *Red Baron* was much lower than its intended victim, and he missed the outstretched arms that were held out to him. Several oaths later, she saw his parasail engage, and he coasted down and out of sight.

The pirates still standing on *Traveling Light*'s deck now chopped single-mindedly at the grappling lines to remove them. The ship listed dangerously to the side as the *Red Baron* towed her down along with it. The solar ovens were secured to the deck, but their kettles were not—they tipped over two pirates, scalding them with over-boiled tea and making them roar in pain.

Finally the pirates got rid of the last of the grappling hooks, and the ship righted itself with a cheerful swing that sent the loose secondary sail sweeping across the deck in the other direction, taking out another pirate. Radicand was unable to confirm whether he regained consciousness quickly enough to engage his parasail or not and found, to her vague concern, that she only cared in a distant and

unemotional way. A cold numbness seemed to have overtaken her body and senses; she was a witness to these real and violent events, but could not summon the will to feel much passion about them.

Without access to *Traveling Light's* steering controls, the pirates still on board were completely at the wind's mercy. A few inspired pirates climbed into the rigging, and Radicand wondered if they would now smash the hard envelope from below, so as to slowly lower the gondola. They might hold the airship hostage, or merely destroy it out of spite before attempting escape to the third pirate ship. That one still hovered malevolently in the sky beyond them all.

She dived into the aether briefly, to check on her furry charges—but they were pacing back and forth on their leashes, growling. The pirate birds, at a signal she had somehow missed, were swooping back across the sky towards the third pirate ship. As they neared it, they disappeared into the ship's aether matrix. In both worlds, that airship's engines engaged and it started to move. She squinted, willing her goggles to find some new magnification, but the pirate ship was too far away for Radicand to tell which flock airship they were going to target next.

A ragged cheer jerked her attention to the left—the *Shark* was swooshing back to the flock. It struck her as a little arrogant that the *Shark* hadn't first tethered the *Mostly Harmless* to the third pirate ship before returning. The pirates on *Traveling Light* felt no such censure. They hooted and waved their arms in celebration. Any moment now, Radicand expected the frustratingly agile *Shark* to attach itself to *Traveling Light* and tow both ships and crews away.

Radicand pulled out her rifle and checked the action out of habit. If ever there was a time to use her gun, now must be it.

"Annie, no!" said Pari, grabbing the barrel before Radicand had quite raised it into position. "For the love of—look, go ahead and look through your scope but please take your hand off the trigger. Please."

Radicand slowly raised the rifle while looking daggers at her sister. She slowed her breathing so the barrel was steady and looked through the eyepiece on her scope.

To her complete and utter astonishment, on the deck of the fiercest looking ship she had ever seen, a half dozen green-clad figures waved cheerfully at the *Judy*. The captain of the *Mostly Harmless*, Hansuke, dangled upside down from the pirate ship's railing, grinning. She swung her scope to scan the whole deck, but there wasn't a pirate in sight. She hesitated—there was one glowering figure, but he reached down and helped the little captain upright when it appeared the old man was stuck, so maybe he was a friendly pirate. Then the captain knocked him down... they wrestled... but they both came up smiling and alive, so she wasn't sure.

The not-pirate turned to look at the *Judy*, and suddenly Radicand wondered if he could see her and her rifle. His not-glower suddenly went up a notch, becoming a full-fledged grin aimed directly at her. It made her stomach twist in a confusing way. She put the scope down. One mystery at a time...

"Is that... ours?" she turned towards Pari, her hand waving at the pirate ship and its green clad occupants.

Her sister grinned back at her, "Tell Brian, Captain Hansuke and his crew were completely successful."

She looked out at the third ship—now it was clear that it was actually retreating as fast as its engines would allow. The *Red Baron* had sunk out of sight, and her crew was either scattered or stranded on *Traveling Light*. As for the *Shark*...

"Brian," she sent, pinching herself, "I think *Traveling Light* has captured a crew. And... the *Mostly Harmless* has captured a pirate ship." She could almost hear him whooping in delight across the aether.

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Pari's grin was infectious, "I don't know about you, Annie, but I think we need a party."

Chapter Six

--Now and Then--

No one hailed her assistance in the battle as tide-turning. Brian gave her a brief but heartfelt hug around the knees when he rolled out of the bridge, though, and that was enough. Whether he put in a quiet word with her fellows on kitchen prep duty that afternoon, or the change was all in her head, Radicand finally felt like a real part of the crew.

Not so much that she was ready to participate in the foot races across the solar sails that had been spontaneously held in honor of the *Sunflower's* new baby; only the most wild-eyed young people thought leaping across the gaps between ships was a good idea. But she cheered the passing runners on as loudly as anyone else.

Now the flock had finally settled at an altitude low enough that they could almost hear the waves lapping Miami's dikes west of their position. The sun had set hours ago, or they might have been able to see more of the island city than the shining circle that lit up her Great Wall.

On the *Judy's* deck there was a close circle of friends and comrades wrapped around a table brought up from the rec room. Small lights along the ship's railing echoed the circle below and made the cluster of friends on deck glow. *Mostly Harmless* and *Freebird* hovered above, keeping an eye on both the trapped pirates and the jubilant flock.

Radicand's anxious curiosity finally reached the breaking point after Doe told them all about a fight he managed to avoid by oversleeping, several decades ago. "But what about today? Where were you, Doe? Now that the battle is finished, can you please explain to me what happened?" Radicand asked that to the group at large, though she couldn't help but dart a peevish glance at the admiral. The numbness from the fight had left her at some point in

the day, but the uncomfortable anger at her sister was taking over all the space it left behind.

Doe cracked his knuckles, but otherwise remained silent.

A cough, a scuffle, and Pari shrugged, “Do you mean tactically, or strategically?”

Radicand sighed, “Let’s start with the practical. I can *almost* understand why *Traveling Light’s* crew did what they did. But how? And...I’m sure I saw people leaping off the top of the *Red Baron*,” she carefully didn’t look at Doe, “How did they get there? What happened to them?”

Admiral Jones nodded, “They were my crew. They flew a thousand feet above us strapped to, well, giant kites, basically, tethered to the *Judy’s* stern. No tech for the pirates to detect, but also no tech for us to contact them even if we weren’t maintaining radio silence. Once it was time for them to swoop in one of my crew in the rigging cut their strings.”

Doe picked up the story, “When we lost that connection, we stripped off our harnesses and just fell, like rocks out of the sky. We used parasails at the very last minute, and by then the *Red Baron* and her crew were firmly focused on what was happening below them. They forgot the first rule of flying: danger usually comes from above.” Doe smirked a little at that, but Radicand figured that was his due. “We had one casualty, young Stephan. But that was him just landing on the life raft wrong, twisted his ankle. He’s recuperating over on the *Sunflower*, now, cooing over the baby and impressing the teenagers with his prowess. He’ll be fine just as soon as they ask him to change a diaper.”

Radicand tapped her thigh. It would be rude to put on her goggles, but her fingers still danced when she thought deeply about things without their aid. There were still gaps in her understanding,

but she would have to ask the crew of *Traveling Light* directly to get the rest of her questions answered.

Finally she nodded, “Fair enough. But the *Mostly Harmless* ... I couldn’t see what happened, and I couldn’t patch in and see through their ship’s cameras!” A bright chuckle came from behind her, and three figures joined the *Judy*’s crew around the long table.

Radicand stared.

“You!” she cried, sloshing her drink, “You were the one who shot the pirate!”

The tiny woman grinned, and bowed—her eyes never leaving Radicand’s face. The professor steeled her own back, and nodded graciously in return. Then the old woman clapped her hands together and chuckled again.

“I’m Josie, and you couldn’t see inside the ship because we don’t have cameras there. As to what we did and where we went, that’s why we’re here,” and she gestured to herself and the two men who had arrived with her.

“David, so good to see you again!” said Pari, as one of them sat down next to Brian.

Brian beamed at David and squeezed his well-muscled thigh, “Very good,” he murmured. David, for his part, casually draped an arm around Brian’s broad shoulders. Radicand gulped and looked away.

Josie continued, “And this other fine fellow is my son, Toby. Adopted, of course,” she added with a wink. Radicand had never prided herself on easily following the subtleties of social discourse. While Josie was as pale as anyone could be who worked above the clouds on an airship, Toby’s skin was naturally dark brown. Yet the deep losses everyone had suffered in the plagues had made it awkward to discuss family in public. That Josie would claim him and

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not claim him at the same time was rather unsettling. The old woman perched herself on the ship railing and grinned into the strained silence.

The gentleman in question took the only seat in the circle still empty, to Radicand's right. She couldn't see his face very well out of the corner of her eye, but she thought if he smiled she could positively identify him as the man on the *Shark's* deck who had tussled with the *Mostly Harmless'* captain. Now if she could just get him to smile...

Doe poked Radicand in the ribs, "Don't mind Josie. She's still buzzing from adrenalin, and thinks she needs to rattle everyone's cages. Let it go, you old hag."

Josie sniffed, "I'm not old; I'm experienced."

Doe grunted, "Move along with the story or I'm going off to bed. Tomorrow we land in Miami, and I don't plan on sleeping much then." Josie gestured regally, yielding the floor to David.

"After Josie shot the leader, they were pretty unsettled. We let them enter part of the ship that we had previously prepared," David paused a moment, choosing his words carefully, "We... unsettled them some more."

Doe grunted, "That isn't a debrief, that's a tease. Where's the 'No shit, there I was?'"

David leaned back in his chair, "It was dark, my friend. I couldn't see for shit. Perhaps you'd like to tell us a story, instead?"

Doe frowned, and Radicand shifted in her seat.

"Now boys," Josie interrupted, "Kiss and make up or I'll throw you over the railing." Radicand snorted, and Toby tilted his face a fraction closer to hers. Not that she was monitoring his face.

Pari leaned forward in her seat, “This is the first I’ve heard of these particular events. I think he can add the color commentary later, Doe. Besides, our friends on the *Mostly Harmless* have some secrets, and I respect that. I expect my crew to respect that, too.”

Doe grumbled, but didn’t complain again when David continued, “We were able to subdue and capture the pirates who entered below decks without killing them. Most of the pirates remain in our custody on the *Mostly Harmless*.”

Radicaud wanted to ask about the pirates that weren’t in their custody, but Pari asked, “Any injuries to your people?”

“Philip stepped on a caltrop, but mainly it was his pride that was hurt,” said David, shrugging. “He got some ointment; he should be fine in a day or two. It was the team that boarded the *Shark* that got beaten up.”

“Is Hansuke alright?” asked Pari, coming to attention.

Josie nodded, “He broke a rib, but he won’t let anyone fuss about it. We would have come over sooner but I had to make sure he wasn’t going to try and train through the pain.”

“How did you manage to do that?”

“Miz Maggie’s sleeping potion.”

Toby finally smiled, “I’m not sure he wasn’t faking those snores.”

“Which is why I also locked the training room doors. And put sneezing powder booby traps around them. Hopefully that will at least slow him down long enough that Philip can catch him and give him puppy dog eyes until he goes back to bed. The things I do for that man...” Josie’s look of long suffering was ruined by her own wicked giggle.

“Was Hansuke the only injury?”

“Besides some bruises and sore joints that will heal by the end of the week, yes,” said Toby, “At least, on our side. We caught the pirates by surprise, coming at them from below. But they wouldn’t surrender control of their ship and we didn’t have time for finesse. Six dead there, three sent to join their crewmates on *Traveling Light*.”

There was a pause while the group digested his words. Radicand didn’t want to think how bad it could have gotten, if the *Shark* had returned to the battle as an enemy. Her programs might have kept the third ship from doing aetheric harm, but the *Shark* would have caused real hurt without the *Mostly Harmless*’ crew. And yet, she couldn’t help but close her eyes and send a private prayer of peace to the lost souls.

“Which brings me to my part of the tale,” interrupted Josie, and Radicand’s eyes flew open. The old woman’s voice sounded joyfully grim, “I got a chance to take a good look at that pirate, before I shot him.” Radicand bit her lower lip. Even Doe was silent.

“What did you see?” asked Admiral Jones.

A cold gust of wind made everyone shudder, but Josie never lost her balance on the rail, “A brand, tattooed onto his neck years ago. He’s a company man. There are a couple more branded folks in the pirate crews. The ransom on them will be ten times the ransom of the other survivors. I expect the rest are contractors, and we’ll just get the regular bounty for them.”

Radicand shuddered. She considered branding barbaric—but it did give people a group identity and the promise of protection and care from the organization they served as long as they lived. Indenture was only slightly less awful: you couldn’t terminate your own contract before it was up, but at least you could negotiate some of the terms before you signed on.

Alia Gee

Toby spoke across the mutters of the group, “The ransom is not the point, though. Our flock has attracted unwanted attention before, but we deflected it or outflew it.

“This time is different. We weren’t arbitrarily attacked by local pirates; those were corporate raiders.”

Chapter Seven

--Heaven and Earth--

“I signed up to get my degree and save the world at the same time,” said David, “Clean energy and sustainability with elegant style. I never thought I’d be facing goon squads.”

“What was the tattoo?” asked Pari, ignoring her ex-student’s reminiscence.

Josie shrugged, “It’s old and faded. Looks like a sunflower, to me. Has some squiggly bits in the middle, they might have been letters, once.”

Social niceties be damned, Radicand put her goggles on. Brian hummed to himself as he alerted the other flock members who were patched in. Ghosts appeared in the aether, buzzing and tapping and joining their data streams. The data flowed in and the answers flowed out. Sometimes, there were too many answers, and sometimes they were the wrong answers. But there were always answers in the aether. It was a source of some comfort to Radicand.

She set her own search parameters: Money. Power. Who could afford to outfit three fast airships, let alone fuel them? What power could be gained from the flock’s destruction?

Brian spoke for the other ghosts, “The best tattoo fit we can find is Mosoco. Its logo is a yellow sun with an M in the middle, and it leases Miami’s power grid. They take a percentage from all the electric energy coming and going through the city in return for keeping the grid running. But they make money from the flock, too. After we plug in at the port, our power gets sent through the grid same as everyone else’s. Why would Mosoco attack us?”

Radicand had been vaguely aware of the discussion around her in the aether, now she popped her goggles off and paid attention to the

confusion on deck. Doe and Josie and Pari were quiet, watching and listening as everyone else argued around them.

Radicand squirmed.

Josie's sharp eyes focused on Radicand, "What?"

Radicand blinked. "Mosoco makes a percentage of what each node in the grid charges customers. Mosoco makes money from you, but they make less money from you than they do from other power sources--if I have read your accounts correctly, Admiral. The flock only charges what you need to earn in order to get to your next port, not what the market will bear. You aren't following their rules."

Toby nodded, "Stay small, stay fast. Move on before we destabilize a community too much. Leave them remembering there are other ways to trade. Other ways that can work."

Radicand shook her head, "But you aren't small anymore. The *Judy's* flock was already large enough two months ago that you made a small change in local energy prices from the time you alerted a port that you were arriving until a week or so after you left. A week ago, four more airships were granted probationary membership. That, if my models are accurate, was the tipping point. The extra ships make you the largest independent energy supplier for most cities on the eastern seaboard. Your effect on energy prices could destabilize a region for a much longer period of time, now."

"Are you saying we should break up into smaller flocks, then?" David asked thoughtfully, "*Freebird* is strong enough to anchor a small flock short term. The *Forward Momentum* is too, if they had to. If we were smaller then Mosoco wouldn't care what we charged. If anything, we would be able to spread our vision further, faster, with more subtle emissaries."

Radicand shivered. They were asking her questions she didn't want answer; how could she advise them on how to divide up their

community? Toby's solid thigh pressed against hers, and that warmth settled her down and calmed her nerves. She did know how to speak to a crowd, after all.

"If Mosoco was acting alone, that might work," said Radicand slowly, "However, subsidizing pirate ships and employing trained mercenaries is not something they have the resources to do. Mosoco is a local subsidiary of a much larger corporation, East Santos. While Mosoco doesn't have the resources, East Santos does." Radicand was having trouble believing this scenario, but the evidence suggested it was the strongest explanation. Maybe she needed to overhaul her algorithms. Perhaps they needed a vacation even more than she did.

"Do go on," breathed Josie.

She blinked again, "I believe the pirate threat—if it was funded by an external business interest with your flock as its target and was not a random act of poorly planned extortion—was most likely a test to see if you could be easily broken. I think the message you sent was fairly clear. I don't know how they will respond."

"They already saw us as a threat. Now they'll try even harder to make us disappear," growled Toby.

David shrugged, "We couldn't stay invisible forever. Either the *Judy* and a handful of devoted ships become a curious little footnote in history, or we grow and change until we are normal and other systems are considered backward and barbaric."

Pari stroked Joshua's fur. She darted a wide-eyed glance at Radicand, then shrugged and addressed the whole group, "So those are the longer term issues we face and should discuss with our friends and colleagues. Short term, we'll need to take our unexpected guests to the authorities as soon as possible. Please remind everyone to prepare for our arrival in Miami tomorrow morning."

“And we should go down prepared for trouble,” growled Josie, pointing her toes delicately in front of her.

Pari shrugged, “Of course. But I leave that as an exercise for the student.”

The group should have broken up, then, but no one seemed eager to go back to their regular lives on their regular airships. Someone brought out a lap harp and Josie hummed along. Radicand watched the last of her milk collect in the bottom of her melamine mug. Her sister murmured quietly with some of her close friends. Doe was nearly asleep in his chair. She felt restless, the day’s events driving her towards some unsteady action. Brian and David, with their heads together, spoke intently but quietly so that no one but the other man could hear. Occasionally David made Brian laugh. She let the seed of a heart-wish drift overboard and sink deep into the sea.

Radicand stood up suddenly. She had to do something, move something, be somewhere else. She began collecting empty white mugs from the listless passengers to her left. There were some grateful murmurs as she went around the circle.

She reached Pari’s seat but didn’t make eye contact—her feelings regarding her sister were too volatile to risk it. They had seemed to make some small steps towards reconciliation before, but the sky battle had pushed her emotions into new territory and she didn’t have the mental energy to examine her own angry response properly.

Pari released her cup silently, and Radicand kept her eyes down until she made it around the circle to the navigator. Brian smiled at her so warmly she almost chased that seed down and planted it... but it was gone, again, as she saw the smile turn towards David and shine even more brightly.

She jerked her head away, aware that she was being ridiculous. Radicand had felt alone and powerless that afternoon watching the battle, but surely she wasn’t the only one who had stood back while

others risked their lives. Some animalistic urge to have wild and passionate sex was probably a perfectly natural response to excessive stress, but she hoped she was civilized enough to repress it until she had a willing and available partner.

She bumped her head against something hard, and glanced up in surprise. Toby's arms were full of ship's white mugs, too, and she saw that he had collected the empty vessels from people on the other side of the circle.

"Thank you," she murmured.

"Were you going to take these to the galley?" he asked. Radicand nodded, and he turned and went down below decks. She followed him until they reached the back of the ship's kitchen. It was close quarters, and Toby's height and breadth made it even snugger. Radicand had no pretensions towards delicate flower-hood, but the man made her feel positively petite.

She stared for a troubled moment at the industrial dishwasher. Toby glanced at her and she explained her hesitation, "I know how to load it, but I'm not exactly sure how to add the soap or which buttons to push."

"You load, then, I'll pull the levers," he said, and they worked quietly together. Their elbows bumped once or twice, but they smiled lightly at each other and moved on. There were not that many cups from that evening, truth be told, but no one had gotten around to clearing up the pots from the celebratory dinner, either, and the congealing crud was a nagging duty on Radicand's mind.

She sighed, gazing at the stack of copper-bottomed pans. She wasn't sure who was on pot rotation—for all she knew, it was the man who had been injured with Doe. Maybe she couldn't lay explosives, but she could scrub a pot with vigor and brave determination. Radicand went over to the giant sink and leaned across it to turn the hot water on. Here in the galley they were closest

to the purring engines that kept the ship going; piping hot water the short distance from the boiler to the sink was easily done.

“Would you like some help?” asked Toby, just as she almost forgot he was there. The industrial dishwasher was loud, so she hadn’t heard him come over to join her. He already had a pair of yellow rubber gloves in his hands, and looked like he was perfectly willing to use them.

“Yes, thank you,” she said, mentally slapping her forehead. She wanted to come up with something entertaining or at least witty to say, but this man was a puzzle. Clearly he had been in the thick of the fight, but he seemed as interested in dawdling on the deck as she was.

“You’re welcome,” he said, and quietly started rinsing the wooden-handled paring knives as she washed them clean. He did not seem inclined to say any more, and after considering half a dozen conversational gambits, Radicand gave up and focused on the dishes.

Scrubbing, Radicand found, was surprisingly cathartic. She had done her best to pull her own weight, but was aware that finding simple tasks for her to do or teaching her how to do the more specialized jobs on board had just added more work to everyone else’s plate. But anyone, she thought with a grin, could scour a pot clean. She dug into her work, with Toby’s quiet help, until the clock struck the hour. Radicand rubbed a short stray tendril of hair off her forehead with the back of her wrist, and grinned at her assistant.

He smiled back, “I think the other pots need to be soaked.”

She looked down at the dark and grimy water in the sink, and at the few battered pots that were left, and nodded agreement. Together they prepped the pots for the unlucky person whose turn it was to wash the breakfast dishes, and let the rest of the water run down the drain into the tanks to be boiled again. Rubber gloves peeled off and left to dry, Toby tossed her a white linen towel to wipe down her

arms and the damp surface of the counter. She finished, and went to hang it up as well, but Toby laid his fingertips on her arm.

“Your cheek,” he said, and she brushed absently at it with her knuckles.

He smiled, and dabbed at her other cheek with the dry corner of his towel. A few bright bubbles left over from the washing came off, and she grinned up at him. Something must have caught his attention, for he stopped and stared into her eyes. She blinked. While she was used to power plays with colleagues, this did not feel like a threat or a challenge. Radicand maintained her smile, and looked back.

His skin was dark, but in the unnatural light of the galley she saw a hint of freckles on his nose. His black eyes were restful, not severe, and she found she enjoyed gazing into them. Flecks of gold scattered through his iris mirrored the freckles on his nose, and she thought the sparkle they gave to his smile was intriguing.

He abruptly turned away from her and hung up his towel.

“Give my regards to your sister,” he said over his shoulder.

Radicand watched him leave the galley, and let herself admire the way he moved in the dim light around the bulky tables and benches. Perhaps she would send his regards, she thought with a small smile. Or perhaps she would keep them for herself.

Chapter Eight

--Eyes and Ears--

“Annie, will you tell me what the matter is?”

Radicand paused at her door and glanced over her shoulder at her sister. Pari was just coming down the staircase, sleepy monkey yawning but amiably perched on her shoulder. “What do you mean?”

“May I come in?” Pari asked, glancing pointedly at Radicand’s room, “The hallway is no place for private conversation.” Radicand stepped inside her room and gestured for her elder sister to enter. Pari settled in the desk chair, so Radicand perched on her bed and tapped the side of her thigh nervously.

“When we have shore leave, most of the crew book single hotel rooms even though it’s quite expensive,” said Pari, adjusting the chair’s height to accommodate her longer frame. Despite barging in here, she didn’t seem anxious to get to her point.

“I suppose they want privacy for...personal activities...” considered Radicand, who felt uncomfortable thinking about what others might do, though she herself was quite relaxed contemplating her *own* personal activities. They would have been extremely personal at the moment, if her dear sister had not demanded a midnight chat.

Pari snorted, “They just want privacy. To sleep without hearing each other snore becomes a luxury. Even the married couples get separate rooms sometimes. Milo and Gardener snuck into each other’s rooms all weekend, once. The hostel keeper in Atlanta was quite concerned. It was awkward enough that I remember it, nine months later.”

“Nine... you mean?” Radicand stifled an exhausted giggle...

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“Baby Audrie was named after the hostel keeper’s cook, I believe. She made some amazing blueberry pancakes.” Radicand’s smile drifted away, as Pari ran her fingers over Radicand’s papers: a pamphlet an ex had sent her, a patent that the university wanted her to look over that was too hush-hush for electronic perusal, a stern note to herself not to ever sign up for breakfast prep again.

Whether it was something on the desk that steeled her nerve or she had finally gotten the seat into a comfortable position, Pari’s back straightened and she locked eyes with her sister, “Will you tell me what the matter is? All evening you’ve been stiff and formal and strange with me. Where is my sister?” Radicand flinched, but remained silent.

Pari ploughed on, “I will only ask you one more time. If you don’t tell me, I’ll have to order you—again—to leave my ship.” Radicand’s lips pursed together. The anger was getting too close to the surface, she wasn’t sure she could remain polite much longer. Pari seemed determined to goad her into rash words, though, “This time you won’t be able to wiggle out of it, either. I can’t have people up here blaming me because they don’t know how to handle their first battle, even if it’s my sister. It puts the entire flock in danger.”

Radicand considered her options, as her fingers danced along her trouser seam. “For someone who invited me up here, you seem desperate to send me away. Twice in one day. A girl might start to think she wasn’t wanted...”

Pari slammed her fist on the desk, but this bit of theater was lost on Radicand, who was watching Joshua. He had left Pari’s shoulder as soon as she sat down, exploring Radicand’s almost empty shelves above her bunk. Now Joshua picked up a small collection of Rumi poems, flipped through it, and tossed it negligently—but with uncanny aim—at the back of Pari’s head.

The book landed on the floor between the women. Joshua chattered happily to himself.

“Cursed monkey,” growled Pari, rubbing the base of her skull. “Damned creatures who won’t make sense, no matter how much you love them.”

“You mean damned sisters, don’t you?” snapped Radicand, brightly. “Damned sisters, who leave without saying goodbye.” Oh so bright, oh so brittle, “Doubly damned sisters, who don’t blink at sending people out to kill?” She was proud that her voice never hit the high note it crept towards. Pari’s mouth went slack, and Radicand bit back the reassuring words she wanted to say. Her sister didn’t deserve that warmth. Not her cold, cold sister. Not yet.

“You sent me out there handicapped; you kept things—you kept yourself—back. You told me to watch, to witness. As if I had never seen death before. As if I didn’t hold Darwin’s hand as he left us. As if I wasn’t there with you, holding you, when you read the message that Xavier had died.

“And now you want me to do—what? Weep hysterically in your arms? Laugh alongside you in jolly camaraderie? Or should I be in awe of my grand sister, who can send ships into battle? Put families in danger? Well done, sister, well done. I’ll tell you *this* only one time: I will not break and I will not bend my knee to you.” Pari slumped in the chair. Radicand considered pitying her, but Joshua crawled onto her padded shoulder. Radicand found she only pitied herself, who had no such comfort in the long nights.

“I didn’t... that’s not... “

“What was, then?”

Pari rested her forehead on her hand. Joshua petted Pari’s hair. Radicand was out of words. She let her eyes follow the curls and curlicues on the cover of the book that still lay on the cabin floor.

“I wanted to prove that I wasn’t running away, when I left; I was running towards,” Pari looked up, and small tears made her eyes

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glitter in the low light of the cabin. “I had lost so much... we had all lost so much. I needed to create something—something new and beautiful and clean. And I was so afraid to show it to the family. So scared you would take it away or dismiss it or misunderstand it. I kept waiting for it to be ready... for me to be ready to face you.”

Radicand leaned forwards, “Am I really that terrifying?”

Pari waved a hand, “You, the family... the past you represent. It weighs like a chain around my heart. The higher I go, the more strongly it pulls me in, like a gasping fish. I am so *tired* of fighting it, but so frightened you wouldn’t be there if I ever come back to ground.”

Now there was finally truth between them. Now was the time for softness, for tenderness. Radicand held out an arm, gently, and murmured a verse even her practical sister had enjoyed in the long distant past, “Friend, our closeness is this: anywhere you put your foot, feel me in the firmness under you.”

Pari looked up, for once, into her little sister’s face, and fell weeping into her arms.

Alia Gee

****An Email****

5-25-2075

To: Dr. Malika Ahmed Jones

Dear Amma,

I received your email this morning. Thank you for your offer to have my mail forwarded to your address. I'm not expecting anything; Charlie won't have any souvenirs to ship to me—last I heard she's holed up in Philly working on her next book. But I appreciate the thought and have arranged things with the post office: they will notify you at the end of the month if they have anything. I wouldn't want you to go all the way to the port for nothing.

Please don't worry; I am keeping up with my responsibilities at the university despite having my head in the clouds. In fact, I spent my first two weeks here grading finals and delivering fiery justice onto the three students who plagiarized. Should I be insulted that they thought I wouldn't recognize my own code? Or flattered that it still remains the best out there, four and a half years later?

You're right that the sabbatical was a bit spur of the moment; however I have felt inspired watching Pari's ships' movements. I looked it up; they are the largest private flock in the air. I think there might be a publishable paper in devising a rule set to make their movements more efficient with regards to wind resistance.

I know, Amma. You're afraid of losing another daughter to the skies. I can't promise to bring her home to you, but *I* promise to return.

Please give father a kiss for me. He is always in my heart. I'm glad his fevers have stopped spiking, anyway. Please let me know if his condition deteriorates further. I have had no luck on my end. You

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know I don't think unplugging him is the right answer, but I trust you to make the best decision you can. I hope it never comes to that.

Your faithful,

Radicand

PART TWO

**** *We Be the Do!* ****

East Santos had a record profit last month, thanks to you, our employees. That makes 47 months in a row of increased revenue. Remember, there will be a bonus to all full employees and contract workers-- and a debt jubilee for indentured employees who have been with the company ten or more years-- if we make it to sixty months of increased profit in a row.

*

Human Resources wants to remind everyone to fill out your paperwork properly. That includes last wills and testaments (LWT-Z), you folks on hazard pay. If you don't know what forms your current assignment requires, ask your manager. If you *are* a manager—ask George!

*

Dear George,

I recently was involved in a high risk assignment; several of my direct reports were MIA, but it is unclear whether they actually died or not. What paperwork do I need to fill out?

Signed,

Weekend Warrior

Dear Weekend Warrior,

We just revamped the paperwork involved with Independent Management Actions here in Human Resources, so your question is a

Alia Gee

very timely one. In cases where there is a LWT-Z form on file, it will be honored if the employee remains MIA for 365 days. At that point, the employee is considered financially dead, and all debts are redeemed. That would entail the usual forms DOA 1 or DOA2, as indicated by your employee's circumstances.

If there is no LWT-Z form on file, and entities approach you claiming they have a legal interest in the assets and debts of the MIA, presumed DOA1/2, refer them to our legal department.

In the meantime, the MIA employee will get their full wages (if indentured employees, room and board will not be subtracted from their monthly pay packet) deposited into their company bank account, accessible by whomever they have given power of attorney (PoA-Xa, Xb, or Xc). Make sure you file a Room and Board Fee Abatement form (RBF-A) for them, though! If the PR department hears you have been charging a potential corpse for bunk and beans, it *will* get taken out of your pay packet.

Thanks for your question, WW, and thanks for helping East Santos march its way forward to record profitability!

*

~excerpts from the company newsletter, *When the Saints Go Marching In: July 2074*

June 2nd 2075

Chapter Nine

--Awake and Alert--

Radicand gave up trying to stifle her yawns. They had used up the last of the instant coffee on board the *Judy* two days ago, but not even a gallon of freshly ground Columbian beans could make up for a night of lost sleep. Still, she was willing to make such a sacrifice in a good cause, and surely holding her sister while she wept out some of her fear and loss was worthy. Radicand hoped so, anyway.

She glanced shyly over at said sister, glorious in her “impress the locals” get-up: Gold trim on her hip-length, narrow-waisted white coat contrasted nicely with her sapphire blue bloused trousers. They in turn were tucked into knee-height black tabi boots with a hint of gold braid at the top. Joshua sported a matching blue and white outfit, minus the shoes, and raced up and down the railing as the *Judy* neared the airship dock at the eastern edge of Miami’s Great Wall. Admiral Jones smiled warmly at her little sister and winked, then turned to address the crew standing smartly on deck behind her.

“Mr. Alvarez is acting commander while I am gone. He will assign shore leave and crew duties while we are in port. For those of you going off ship-- I don’t expect trouble, but keep your eyes and ears and cufflinks open. Dismissed.”

Pari nodded to Brian, who did his level best to wave smartly as he assumed the helm, and collected Doe and Radicand to go down the gangplank with her. This pantomime was mostly for the benefit of the local dignitaries watching avidly below, much to Radicand’s amusement.

The port had several docking towers for airships, but since the *Judy's* flock was quite so large—"You're going to have to change the *Judy's* name to '*Bo Peep*,'" muttered Doe—they were granted an entire terminal to themselves. Even then they could not all be anchored at once. *Judy* landed first, but several other ships, including *Traveling Light* and the *Mostly Harmless*, descended smartly right after.

The three crew members from the *Judy* were graciously welcomed to Miami by the dock master and his many assistants. He was terribly sorry to have heard of her unfortunate encounter with pirates, and was happy to take the villains off the admiral's hands.

Admiral Jones smiled sweetly, but managed to avoid his outstretched hand while turning to present her colleagues and compatriots: A unit of young men and women wearing deep green flowing robes and negligently holding very tall, heavy walking sticks surrounded two dozen bruised and battered mercenaries. Not all of the robe wearers were young—now that Radicand knew what to look for, Josie stood out in any crowd, as did the grinning old man she kept poking with her staff. As the group moved sedately towards the dock master, it became clear that it was a game: Josie poked the old man's feet, and he—smoothly, without breaking his stride or his grin—moved out of the way.

"I appreciate your gracious offer, but I do think this is a matter I must personally see through to its ultimate conclusion," Admiral Jones said gravely, "My guard and I will be visiting the police headquarters first, as public safety is our highest priority."

"Of course, of course!" agreed the dock master, moving out of the way of the unstoppable green guards.

"Unlike his priority, which was getting a cut of the bounty on this group," muttered Doe. Luckily, no one else seemed to hear his comment though it was loud enough that they could have. It was very likely that Josie aimed her stick at Doe's boots as she walked past

him for her own devilish amusement, and nothing more. Doe danced out of the way with an awkward flap of his arms, and Radicand covered her smile with her bare hand. She had left her aether gloves behind on the ship, and their absence made her feel a little naked.

She and Pari had discussed clothing after they had discussed everything else that early morning. “I’m going to be very formal for this outing,” said Pari, as she pulled thin white gloves over her hands, “I need you to be more... approachable.”

“That’s one of the last words I can think of that anyone would use to describe me,” groaned Radicand, but she still ended up in a dark blue blousy linen shirt belted at the waist over dark brown leather pants with blue piping. A brown leather vest with inner pockets sewn into it for ammunition and other essentials, ankle high brown tabi, bare hands and a sour look completed her wardrobe.

“You’ll be hot in this get-up,” warned Pari, “but it serves two purposes: it proves you’ve got resources, so they’ll respect your worth—I don’t want you getting called out on some stupid duel with a local thug. And it’s pretty clearly a uniform, so you have friends with resources who will get annoyed at any local thugs who try anyway. And since you’ll be keeping your rifle with you at all times, you’re not an easy kidnapping target if they start getting ideas about just how valuable you are.”

“Why do I feel like I have a big red targeting laser on my forehead?”

“Cause you’re a suspicious little brat who has excellent survival instincts,” Pari glanced at the rifle, “Are you still a crack shot?”

Radicand shrugged, “I’m good enough picking off big targets but I don’t have any practice with close-in fighting. I have Dad’s old knife, if it makes you feel any better.”

“It does, actually, though I don’t see it on your belt.”

Radicand smiled, “Yes, that’s the part that doesn’t make *me* feel any better. If you plan on dragging me into enemy territory much more often, I’m getting a more delicate sheath made for it. Ouch!”

Admiral Jones adjusted the shiny electronic cuff on her wrist, “Not enemy territory, sweet and innocent sister. We’re all friends here. Of course, in this town a friend might put a bounty on your head. A *good* friend, though, makes sure the price is high and you get a cut of it.”

“Ok, fine,” sighed Radicand, “Just promise to point out which friends I’m supposed to shoot before they sell me, and which ones get the knife in the back after.”

That had earned a chuckle from Admiral Jones as she strode out her cabin door. Now as the sisters walked behind the *Mostly Harmless*’ crew, Pari was relieved that Doe was looking particularly menacing behind them in his bald-headed, tough guy role. The large scar on his right shoulder, visible now that he was out of his high altitude clothes and wearing nothing on his chest but a thick brown leather vest, looked like he had survived some major action. Sandwiched between the green ninjas and the brutal-looking bodyguard, Radicand ought to have felt perfectly safe.

The eyes of the scantily clad locals on the other side of the ten foot tall chain link fence followed them. The razor wire that circled around the top of the barrier would have looked more severe, if thin strands of plastic bags and torn palm leaves had not decorated it. Radicand was already sweating under her leather vest. From her perspective, the halter tops and shorts and bare feet of the curious mob looked less like grinding poverty and more like good sense.

Besides the heat, which weighed thick and heavy on her limbs, the other thing that powerfully struck Radicand was the noise. She had quickly gotten used to the gentle sounds of the sky. People sang and talked and the engines made noise, of course, but nothing like the constant noise of people calling and crying and making and breaking

in a city. She had to fight the urge to push loudly back against the pulsing pressure of a thousand heartbeats.

There was music as well, dueling wind-up radios and homemade bucket-drums fought for attention over the hum of foot and bike traffic. Radicand blinked; the colors of the buildings looming behind the crowds and palm trees were almost as loud as the music, and the contrast of bright sunlight and deep shade was unsubtle. She could tell what the rules were in the aether. Here, Radicand worried, she could easily drown in the city's complex textures and unseen depths.

The airship crews had barely stepped past the fence that marked the end of the restricted zone before the first street hawkers started pressing against them—"Burgers! Barter or sell! Silk! Chili! Coffee! Bread!" Radicand's mouth watered despite her nerves. Baking was not something that happened very often on board, and the roasting meat smell almost lured her away from Pari's side.

Then she saw Josie's pointed staff, tapping at encroaching feet ever so gently to the rhythm of a nearby busker's drumming, and the hawkers stepped back a little. The seared meat smell wafted away, and Radicand turned her mind to their pressing business with only a sub-vocal whimper.

"We'll go out for lunch when we're done with the police, I promise," murmured Pari, "I know a place that does amazing doner kebabs. You can practically hear them bleat."

It was not a long walk between the terminal and the nearest permanent police station, but it was long enough that they collected a small group of curious street urchins straggling behind and occasionally dancing in front of them, trying to tease the green guards into interesting action.

Just as they reached the station door, Doe stopped and heaved a deep and dramatic sigh. "Bo Peep," he growled, "Plaguing Bo Peep, with all her plaguing sheep."

Radicand giggled but Pari kept her face straight as she swept on and into the small building.

“I have business to do with your commanding officer,” said Admiral Jones primly, when her presence was vaguely acknowledged by the bald and intricately tattooed clerk at the front desk of the police station. The pirates and their cheerful guards had stayed in the front courtyard of the station, placed so that they were easy to see in the building’s security cameras. The office itself was just large enough for Pari, Doe, and Radicand to present themselves confidently. Any more bodies, and someone would have gotten a terrible case of the vapors.

The clerk shrugged and raised her pierced eyebrows, “Looks like a standard citizen’s arrest claim to me. Standard bounty. Nothing to bother him with,” she said, pulling out a set of paperwork from a drawer behind her.

Pari leaned forward and smiled, “Please inform your commanding officer that Admiral Parentheses Q. Jones, president of the Solar Harvesters Union, is here to confer with him on a large and potentially complicated business arrangement. If he is not willing to greet me, having looked over the paperwork I sent him three hours ago, I will take my complaint to the Central Police Headquarters and he will receive none of my generous gratitude.”

The clerk shrugged again, “All right, I’ll check with him. Stay there.”

Radicand leaned against a bare plaster wall and looked around. There were no chairs, but she wasn’t sure she would have felt comfortable sitting in a place this grimy, anyway. A ceiling fan chugged tiredly above her, keeping the cobwebs at bay. On the other side of the cramped room, Doe leaned against the wall next to an older copy of the Local Bill of Rights. Prices were neatly hand-lettered next to what services the city’s politicians felt they could offer their constituents. Someone had crossed out several prices and

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added new, higher ones, in red ink. Inflation, Radicand was vaguely aware, was worse in the south than the north; though since most of her expenses as an adult had been covered by the University she wasn't sure if that was a new problem or a regular state of affairs.

Doe rubbed his nose, and a moment later the Police Chief came out of the back office in a slightly rumpled uniform; his eyes, however, were sharp as they scanned his visitors. Admiral Jones made it easier for him, stepping forward and offering her hand. He shook it, grumbled, "Come to my office, then," and took the three of them back past the desk and the bored clerk, through a narrow hallway flanked by shut doors, and down to the end where the same neat hand had written "Chief Officer Castro" on the sturdy looking door.

When the crew had taken their seats on metal folding chairs, he sat down heavily at a large dark wooden desk and faced them. Sweat beaded his brow, and Radicand sympathized. At least the ceiling fan here seemed to be aided by an open window behind Officer Castro; it occasionally directed some fresh air onto the people below it.

"Admiral Jones, you claim that you were attacked by corporate raiders," stated Castro. "Moreover, you claim that you seized two ships and several human resources during this hostile takeover attempt. You are willing to hand over the generic human resources for the standard city bounty. Our work gang thanks you, of course, for this tax-deductible donation. I remain unclear why you needed to draw me into the business transaction you are having with..." here he checked a large screen inset into his desk, "branded men who, by their own admission, belong to East Santos, Inc." Radicand watched his fingers move languidly in the heat. The small green snake tattooed across his hand rippled as he called up various pages.

"Officer," Pari leaned forward from the waist, exuding earnest citizen like it was an exotic fragrance, "I represent a small collection of freelance solar harvesters. We are not incorporated, nor do we claim any rights as a corporation. While I understand that war is the

continuation of business by other means, there *are* rules. Very expensive rules. East Santos did not file a declaration of war against us with your office, did they?”

Officer Castro rolled his shoulders as he called up a file on his monitor and squinted. “No, no I don’t think so. Though they have many smaller businesses that might have filed on their behalf...”

“Did any privateers file a claim against my flock for property loss?”

Castro raised his eyebrows, watching his monitor with increasing interest, “No. Not yet, anyway.”

“Officer, it seems to me we have a very awkward situation,” Pari clasped her hands together, “By attacking my ships with branded men, East Santos has declared that the *Judy* and her allied ships are a corporation, due all rights and privileges therein implied. Meanwhile, they have broken the law by not declaring as much to the local police jurisdiction wherein the action occurred.”

Castro tapped his finger across his mouth as he considered her story. “East Santos, when its representatives are contacted, might claim they had no knowledge of the actions of their senior managers. Highly placed people in a company often can act without approval if they have a profitable track record.”

Admiral Jones sniffed, “Either they are privateers with East Santos’s generous blessing, or they are senior managers directly working for East Santos that have been given a blank check. Either way, I demand compensation from that corporation for the damages their people have done to our crews and ships in their ham-handed attempt to limit the free market. I believe I listed, in the appendix I attached to the files I sent you, the current costs and fines associated with such actions in the past. As the city representative handling the case, you and your office will, of course, get ten percent of all damages and a large fee for handling the escrow accounts.”

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Castro whistled silently through his white, even teeth. “You speak rather brashly for representing such a small freelance unit. East Santos is huge. Why are you fighting them? Why not let them buy you out? I can see that they’ve filed intent to purchase forms against you before. It would make your fortune.”

Pari smiled benignly, “Sir, I believe in justice.” Castro grunted and frowned, squinting at her and her trim colleagues as if they were fey visitors from another land.

Then he sighed and shrugged, “Well, isn’t that nice. The first case of the day and it’s on behalf of a certified crackpot. No insult intended.”

Pari’s smile became particularly sunny, “None taken. You and your precinct came highly recommended.” Castro raised one idly curious eyebrow, and Pari continued, “You see, Officer Castro, while I believe in justice, I believe in Mook Betterly even more. And he, sir, believes in you.”

Officer Castro’s face paled for a moment. He coughed and continued in a very different voice, “So you want from me...?”

“I would like to please hand over the men and women captured while they were unlawfully attacking property owned by the Solar Harvesters Union to a certified police station of the Free and Independent City of Miami. I would like receipts. I would like to be told any information about these people that might clarify for me whether we have been invited into the corporate playing field or not. And I would like the City’s assurance that while my flock is at rest in your fair city, we will not be further molested by any corporate powers.”

Castro snorted, “I can take the people, and I can give receipts. We’ll see about the information—no no, I’m not trying to get a bribe here. Branded men can be fiercely loyal, and the contract guys don’t know anything worth asking about. But hey, we’ll ask. It’ll give my

boys some practice. Now, about the assurance... We are a free trade city. We don't meddle."

Pari nodded, "I understand, sir, I understand. But they are threatening free trade. If small business owners think they're not safe in Miami, they might have to take their trade elsewhere."

"Like where? No, no, don't answer that," grumbled Castro, shifting his weight in his chair. "Look, these guys are bigger than us. We can't stop them from doing whatever they want to you. *After* they do what they want, we can fine them and hold any property they were foolish enough to leave behind as guarantee, but unless you can bring them to me tied up with a little green bow, I can't help you."

"Will you stop me?" shot back Pari.

"Lady, with the bounty from those pirates you brought in, you just funded my office's payroll for the next 6 months. You can have a fuckin' key to the city with my compliments."

Admiral Jones smiled a toothsome grin, "Why thank you, officer." She stood up, again offering her hand, and Police Chief Castro warily took it. The three crewmembers showed themselves out of his office. Admiral Jones stalked out of the station first, overseeing the quick transfer of the pirates to the waiting police. Radicand hesitated at the door, looking back behind her. Doe smiled boyishly at the clerk, and the woman seemed to finally show a flicker of interest. Radicand hurried out to join her sister in the courtyard.

Most of the green guardians had been disbursed, but one remained. "Good morning, Dr. Jones," said Toby solemnly.

Pari smiled at her sister anxiously, "Humor me, Annie? After the police chief's fetching honesty, I want to even the odds a little bit. Doe is committed to me and my personal safety; would you let Toby watch over you?"

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Radicand tried to shrug nonchalantly. “I’m not sure Doe is *that* committed to you,” she hazarded.

Pari chuckled, “He’s a randy old goat. But he’s *my* goat. Toby, on the other hand, is a fine upstanding man who will stick to you like glue. Annie, I know you’re strong; but I don’t want to be distracted worrying about your safety when I might need to be focused on other urgent matters.”

Radicand frowned, “So you’re asking me to allow a handsome young man to shadow my every waking moment, with me and my needs uppermost in his mind, as I explore a dangerous city I’ve never visited before? And I’m supposed to hesitate out of ...what? Pride? Are you kidding me?”

Pari grinned. Toby smirked. Radicand could live with that.

Alia Gee

****Ebb and Flow****

“...We shared a simple breakfast in the hut by the sea. It was a good trade: I gave them dried apples and goat jerky to complement the rice and government cheese the raft men bring through once a month, their oldest son agreed to show me the safe way through the rainbow swamplands to the solid lands beyond.

“As the sun rose on the silent beach, I wished the Johnsons a good day and climbed down their chain link ladder to where my narrow boat was anchored. The house stilts were surrounded by washed up debris, caught in the wooden poles like soggy nits in the fingers of a comb. The other two children, wearing adult-sized waders that covered them up to their scrawny necks, were already hunting through the rubbish the tide had brought them looking for items of value that their parents could trade with the next traveler who happened past their cove.

“Just as the ocean brings them her treasure, it also takes theirs.

“While we poled our way slowly through the muck my young guide mentioned that his baby sister had died in the last big storm, coughing from the fumes the tangled currents brought. The whole family was sick, but the baby was too small to handle the bad air, he explained, and his parents had sent her tiny body back to the sea in a raft made from empty plastic bottles.

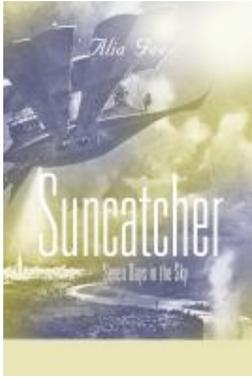
“The swamp was dark and grim, but the Johnsons’ boy seemed unaffected by the gloom. From his own small raft, and with shy pride, Joe pointed out the beautiful colors that shimmered on the surface of the water, remnants of the oil spill here two generations ago.

“After guiding me through the swamp back to dry land, he accepted my parting gift—a red silk handkerchief tied around some glass beads—with glee and hurried off before I—like the inconstant sea herself-- could take back my largesse.”

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“Joe Jackson sees rainbows where I see muck. Our parting trade was a bargain as far as I was concerned—I gave him beads, but he gave me hope.”

“...and that was Charlotte Kuo, in her continuing series ‘Travels with Charlie’, here on NPR, Northern Public Radio. Tune in next week, when she files her report from the next stop on her exploration of this modern United States.”



Professor Radicand Jones has survived climate change, pandemic and peak oil- but can she protect her sister's airship flock from pirates, and hunt down their shadowy sponsors before the aether drives her mad?

Suncatcher

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