

The Princess of Caldris
The Pandoran Age Chronicles, Book 1

DANTE D'ANTHONY



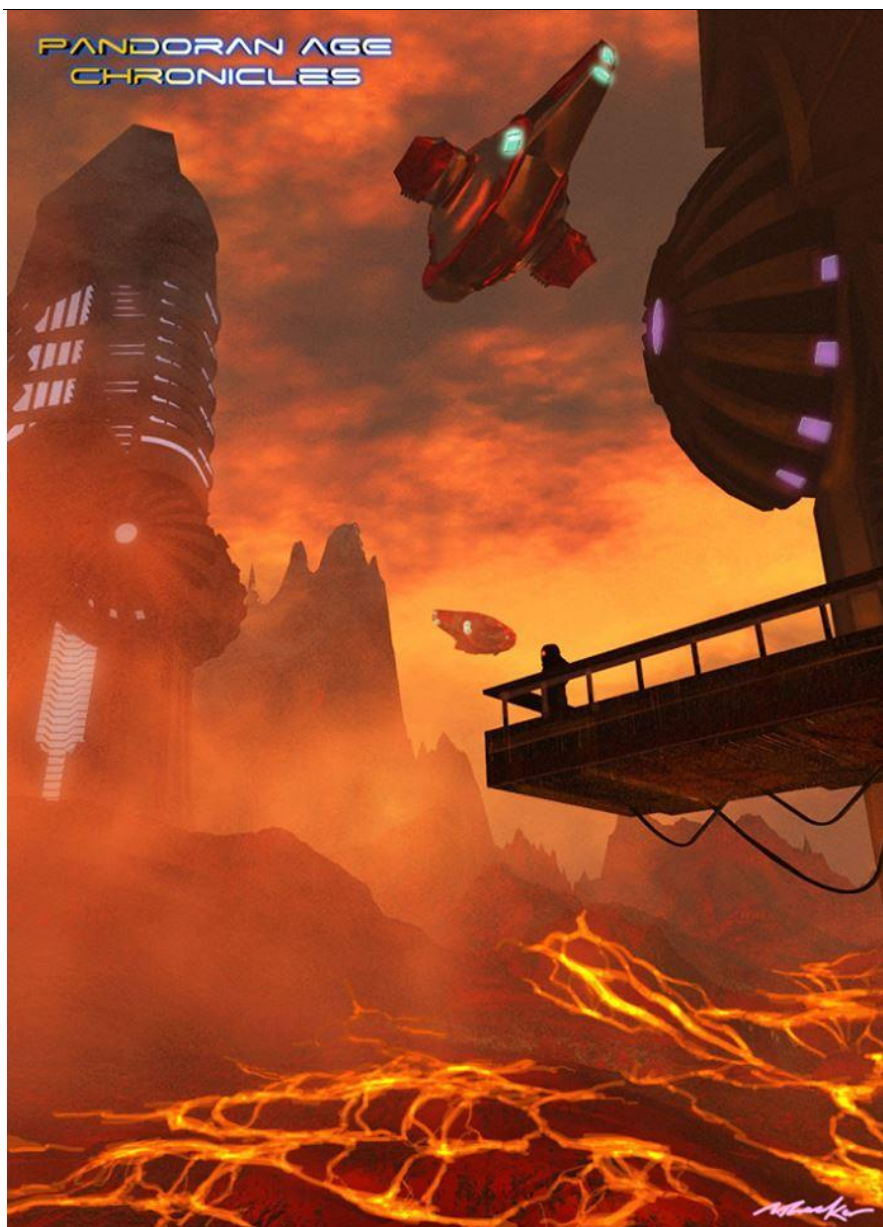
The Princess
of Caldris
The Pandoran Age
Chronicles Book 1

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Eliane CK

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For Joey and Jackson

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I would like to acknowledge all the members of the Chronos Productions team for their ongoing work in bringing the Pandoran Age Universe to life. The Artwork, animation, music, and acting. It has been a delight to watch the vision take form and color, sound and aspect, persona and personalities. Life must either be, indeed, a grand adventure or it is nothing at all -Dante D'Anthony



Clairissa Maggio, Caldris palace Library archaeological log. 3983, Moonsweek, Apogee, Threeday.!:55 E.H

The Arcturian O'Neal station is a testament to their space engineering. Fifty kilometers long, the station had apparently been the largest settlement in system, and directed high energy farming from a solar panel array. The array, of some note in archaeological architectural circles for some time, remains still in various conditions, in orbit.

A matrix of panels encompassing a full inner orbit of the star, its Herculean scale remains impressive; one more testament to the greatness of the ancients and that era. No modern array equals

it size in any of the Republics and Kingdoms, save Imperial CCCE of course.

Yet the O'Neal station was not the only find, and from here luck turns to legend. A Sunrider war frigate is lodged in the side!

It is a timely find as well. The two artifact menagerie's decaying orbit would reach a soft cloud corona sometime in the near future, and with the hull breach caused by the Sunrider impact, not even the hard shielded O'Neal could shelter the plethora of artifacts inside.

Apparently the Sunrider had careened into the hull of the O'Neal. The Sunrider's Stasis Shields had flashed on and off, moving through the O'Neal first like butter, the ragged ultra steel against ragged ultra steel. Back and forth, again and again in a matter of half a minute. The interlocked ultra steel then held her in like a stinger, while the entire atmospherics on the interior of the O'Neal bled out furiously to space.

The other environmental habitat compartments in the O'Neal Station were breached. We're not sure why. Further examination will surely provide the answers. The breech safeguards should have preserved them. We have found no intact environmental compartments yet.

Conceivably, in a colony station of this size and sophistication, biome environment compartments could still contain living forests-with fauna and ecosystems still thriving. Unseen by human eyes for centuries, the life support still servicing away soft rains and light.

Now that would be all the stars in a jewel box, aye! Ha! My Archaeological Avarice is showing! Great Space Ghost, what the technological systems on that Sunrider will be worth to the reverse engineering departments of numerous corporate interests...

Snakes in the Cradle.



Neil Thacker

My name is Winteroud Sole and I am twelve standard Caldri years old. The name “Winteroud” was my father’s idea, an homage to my mother who was not born on Caldri, but on the far away world of Erial, which is always cold.

He and my Mother met in college at the University world, Lux, where the NeoWrightians settled. I have never been to Erial, or Lux, but I have studied them both extensively on the hypercasts, and in the family computer libraries.

Today the Royal Security detectives came and questioned me at length. I could feel their eagerness to know all about me, for I am an empath and that is a very special gift. Mother was furious. Father was somewhat proud actually.

I think Officer Hammerstein is a good egg.

I could feel Officer Hammerstein was deeply troubled over many things. A desperation has formed in his mind and he believes I may be able to help him sort out his most current sleuthing.

He is probably right, although I fear he doesn't understand that it may kill him if we untangle this particular mystery. Him and many others. In his mind I perceived a layering, a mentality of his military background that sees everything as a war.

I have always been an empath. Caldris is known for producing an abnormal number of us. Some say it is the massive amounts of heavy metals in the planet. Others say it is how the metals interact with the complex fields which stream into the higher dimensions. I don't know. I have always been this way and although my mind swarms with the impressions and feelings of others, I have not yet learned exactly what it means to be a human without empathic powers.

My Educator at the school says, "You will learn with time how they live their lives in solitary realities. There is a sadness about them, alone in their thoughts. But not now. Not yet. Now when you feel their thoughts and emotions across a room it seems you are one with them. It is not so, Winteroud. You share their reality, and they are immune to yours."

Officer Hammerstein is very sad. That much I could tell right away. He is a man with a mission, as they say. His mission has hit a "platinum wall, me boy, a platinum wall with heavy-duty military defense shielding wrapped around an enigma." More accurately, I realized the machinations of very bad and powerful men who wish to keep the Officer on one side of the truth.

I think my mother knows best, and rages against the dangers of my involvement in the Hammerstein case. Father is carried away with the pride of his son being treated by the Royal Security Detectives as someone important and worthwhile. Later, I know, he will pass through the sudden pride and begin to mull over dangers to the family and the estate.

We are an old family, long in the business of mining the volcanoes. Danger and opportunity our twin fellows for generations. He will see the danger soon enough.

It's Moonsweek and all four moons are purple in the evening skies. The tides are frothing at the ancient steps of the estate. Each evening now I have sat on the sea steps and felt the minds of the

balloon crabs eager for Silver-darters swarming in the shallows. Hunger and gluttony, simple creatures.

The silver darters have no minds at all. They have the most primitive of neural nets, their existence all stimulus and response. The universe to them is not even a place. Stimulus. Response. That is all. In their swarming, however, wonderful patterns emerge which can be thought of as a hive mind. Although such is a poor analogy; when one thinks of the great and terrible hive mind of the Imperials at far away Deneb IV, with all its billions of humans and millions of Transhumans, I embarrass myself with the analogy.

My android, Edward Gibbons, sits mechanical behind me, ever watchful. Father came around to fear as I knew he would and cautioned the android, "Watch for assassins," he said simply, grim and fingering his disruptor. It is an antique, like so many things at the estate. It was old when our ancestors first plunged onto the world in a fiery ship after crossing the void.

I felt Hammerstein and his men before the bells announced the arrival of the aircars this time. They came in the morning as the moons set and the sun, blue and gleaming, lifted itself with its intense glory among the cumulonimbus clouds, like marshmallow mountains in the sky. Six Royal aircars came, like they owned the clouds, which in a sense they did.

Father stood defiant at the agents strolled coolly to the gate at the landing pads. "I've considered your offer for my son to work with you on the case, Officer Hammerstein. I think it's best he not."

I could feel Hammerstein's regret like a... "*heavy-metal core drill*"...he thought, disappointed that he would have to resort to intimidation.

"Your family charter, granted by Queen Altair. How many generations now?" Hammerstein said darkly. "A shame if it were withdrawn, having been such a long and fruitful benefit to you, and to yours."

Now father's eyes darkened. "You resort to extortion? There are other Empaths! Why does it need to be the boy?"

"We've tried others. Older Empaths are too sensitive. One died, another is in intensive care. It is the boy's very limitations that will make him at once useful to the case, yet not in danger of damage.

Any older and he too would be of no utility. This case moves into the direct security of our entire stellar system-this world, and all the others under the dominion of the Royal family.”

I could feel father was ready to hand the charter back rather than place me at risk. I could also feel a deep sense of loyalty to the Royals. For many generations they had stood excellent in good government of the worlds under their care. “What is this case that you ask my child to involve himself with? Such that ruins the minds of older Empaths?”

I answered for Hammerstein, “The Princess has been taken.”

All the people at the gate exuded shock. My family for the revelation, the detectives that I knew.



Vindication ran deep in Hammerstein now, “The boy is right, and now you see, indeed, his gift is true. I am the only one in this group that was aware of the Princess’s abduction.”

He glared at me, solemn-yet sympathetic. “Say no more about it, young man, of what you sense lest we are alone.” Then, sharply,

at his men: "A word from any of you and your rank is gone and you'll find yourselves transferred to the loneliest moon in the belt."

There came a clicking of heels. One of his younger officers, a woman of great beauty and self discipline, ached with the shock, and struggled with all her being to maintain her composure.

Quite grand, such discipline and depth of feeling. I will never forget her overwhelming pain at the loss of the Princess, and her stolid chin as she held back her tears, I think, as long as I live.

I determined then I should find the Princess, with Hammerstein, and root out the devils who did this. "Duty, father." I stood, small but somehow towering now in the minds of the detectives, "Duty and honor. For the Royal family, for our own."

"Duty and honor," he whispered. "But the boy takes his personal android, and a disser.

He tossed me his disser and I caught it easily, knowing afore he announced it, *and felt the generations of my forefathers (and a particularly self possessed Grand Matron) land in my hands with it.*

A half smile curled up the side of Hammerstein's face, "But of course."

And I gathered with the Royal Security detectives and we took to the clouds in their aircars. The last of the moons had faded and the volcano littered Tangerine Sea glimmered beneath us. Thus began my first great adventure.

I could feel mother's fears as the estate seemed to diminish with distance like a toy. A dark winter had of her own had come now. I knew she would not feel the light and warmth of Caldris again until she held me safe again in her arms. That day would come, I pledged. This was not that day, but I am an Empath and I know: there are greater things in Cosmos and Worlds than men imagine. That day would come.

I knew the ride across the Tangerine Sea well, straight to the Capitol, Cezanne Mons. The tangerine is from the reefs, thousands of square kilometers of them. I understood the name was from an Earth fruit. I had seen them in a garden once, at the palaces in fact, where we were headed. I had never tasted one. I had eaten oranges though, and they too are an Earth fruit, similar it is said.

Hammerstein's angst impinged on my senses like his soapy smell. He had his aircars decked out with some serious weaponry. They were flying in military formation. I picked up bits and pieces of his memories of Navy days. Caldera Squadron, edge of the system duty. Hard duty, the ships had gone into hyper then orbited the entire system. Over, and over and over again. No communications with command. Silent. Waiting.

I sensed the man's patience was like a continental plate. Slow, persistent, and capable of volcanism when pressed. I also sensed he cared about what happened to me. Didn't want me harmed, was determined to watch my back even if it cost him his life. That was a good feeling, a rare one I was to learn. Few people are willing to die for their comrades. Hammerstein wouldn't have blinked. He was ready to make the ultimate sacrifice for his duty. Any time, anywhere.

His thoughts that morning, however, were like a hover-tank in a moon battle; not about sacrificing his life for his King and Star System, but about finding the kidnappers and making them pay with theirs. It was the first time in my life I had actually sensed an anger ready to take life. It was frightening. Mother and Father's minds had always been about the family estate. The most anger I had felt from them was when they were ready to fire an errant employee. Hammerstein wanted blood justice.

I hoped it wasn't clouding his judgment. Even my young mind could sense an array of people he suspected, all of them powerful across worlds, all of them deadly-even for a battle hardened Navy veteran, even for a grisly old detective.

The aircars moved in unison over the Tangerine Sea. The Detectives were silent, quiet as adults often get when lost in their thoughts. How quickly they forget a boy. A boy who can sense their thoughts even. Thus the quiet was only broken by the hum of our flying machines, but in my mind their thoughts and feelings were a symphony-sometimes sublime, courageous, and determined. Sometimes dramatic, grim, and portentous.

When Cezanne Mons appeared in this distance, swathed in clouds and even smoking that early morn, I felt my usual excitement at visiting the capitol. The city hugged the base of the

huge volcano with the casual ease of a people who had learned to ride and manage volcanoes like the pack animals of some semi-primitive world.

The Legislature buildings stood biomorphic, with curving lines, a sweeping and expressionistic architecture. The Palace buildings, smaller and on a higher ridge, echoed the more formal and traditional symmetries of palaces back through the ages, before the dawn of the space age. They could be any palace perhaps, such as on ancient Earth before mankind took to the planets beyond the world of our race's birth.



Steve Allman

The rest of the city, private businesses and such, spread out along the shore lines in various combinations of towers and conglomerations of buildings. Haphazard, come as you are. Sometimes opulent, sometimes tawdry, sometimes respectable. Sometimes-even I knew at twelve standard years-*sometimes very naughty*.

People, they create new generations, out among the stars, genetic copies of themselves, and ever the same tawdry dramas replay. No wonder.

The Detective's aircar's windshields were graced with special displays-many of which not visible to the ordinary aircar mind you-and I could see the force field domes over the palace. The general public is not privy to such things.

"Hammerstein, six cars. Royal Security. Arriving with Empath to review crime scene."

We hovered for a moment and holes appeared in the force domes. I could sense the hidden guns in various parapets of the palace engaging on us. They trusted naught. I hadn't noticed them on visits to the palace before, field trips with my teacher. Mr. Gibbons sat mechanical and glistening behind me.

My father's disser stuck out of a pocket on my vest like an old Earth cow man. This was no frontier shack however. The Royal Palace at Cezanne Mons was storied and fabulous and built with the finest refined metals mined from the very volcano poised behind it. Platinum mostly.

Some said it backed the currency. I felt that was hyperbole.

We followed a flight path illustrated in hologram on the windshields, Hammerstein was looking grimmer than ever. I sensed he was hoping against hope the Royal family would be away today, and he would not have to look in to their eyes having no news for them, *but another Empath and a boy at that.*



I steeled my resolve.

We traversed the holes in the force domes and they resealed behind us. The tension I read from the gunners at the parapets remained high until all six of the aircars were down and we stepped into the courtyard.

It was full of tangerine trees, and I felt the echoes of many long evenings which others had spent there pleasantly. A good portent, I thought, but it didn't last. There was a shadow of dread hanging over the palace, and a few steps forward the tangerine dreams faded and sadness prevailed.

Caldris is, of course, a slightly higher gravity world than old Earth standard, and as such most Caldrisians are in fact more muscular and shorter than say, a typical Earth person. Hammerstein, his fellows, and now the Palace Guards, however, I noted, were tall. Even for Earth and worlds of comparable gravity. The guard that approached us in the courtyard was exceptionally tall. He must have towered over the King and Queen.

Impressions assailed me; *the guard didn't think much of Hammerstein and the Royal Security team in general. The guard felt it was their fault to begin with and their investigation was a bumbling farce.*

Hammerstein's methods were circumspect however, so I rejected the guard's opinion as self important judgmentalism by a person unqualified to actually assess Hammerstein's efforts.

"Agent Hammerstein." The guard said coolly.

Hammerstein bowed, "Captain Venkatesan." He turned to me then, "May I introduce Master Winteroud, heir of the Sole estate, certified empathic. He will review the scene with us, slowly, and in phases."

Captain Venkatesan's immediate emotion was concern that I would be harmed. This surprised me. He didn't strike one as a soft hearted man with maternal instincts toward young people. One of the things one learns as an empath early; people's exterior appearance is entirely meaningless more often than not than as a reflection of their deeper selves. Captain Venkatesan looked as cold an uncompromising as the business end of a disser. In fact his essential nature was to protect the weaker around him.

"I don't like it, Hammerstein. Any harm comes to the boy and I'll have the Kings ear that you face negligent homicide charges."

Hammerstein had been expecting that. "I've conferred with the top planetary experts regarding Empaths. Firstly, the boy's sensitivity to the quantum echoes hasn't fully developed. Secondly, we move toward the scene slowly; the first sign of discomfort we withdraw him."

"On your authority then, and with my stated reservations." The Captain's face was flushed, but he stepped aside and we moved through the gardens past a series of low, long fountains with holograms of sea creatures leaping. We came at length to a tall pointed arched doorway to an exterior antechamber. A stainless steel door of immense size was carved with geometric triangular motifs and inlaid with mother of pearl and brilliant blue lapis lazuli.

I sensed things then. Doorways are like that, capturing the passing thoughts of people busy with tasks. This was the Royal libraries and private schools of the Royal children, and some of the more esteemed nobles, but there was something else. I could sense the Princess, though I had never actually been close enough to sense her before. A muddled compilation of self images came through-*as she thought the world saw her, as she saw herself, and a grave concern regarding a task-she had been researching something...*"The Arcturian Wars." I said aloud.

"This is the Library and the Princess had been doing research-she was profoundly concerned that an aspect of the Arcturian Wars had completely been misunderstood by the public."

Hammerstein's female officer spoke then, "Brilliant!" At which Hammerstein felt obligated to introduce her at last, "Winteroud this is officer Tokushima."

I already knew that, of course. I bowed, and wished I was older. I could sense she thought I was a "cute little boy", which was infuriating to no end. She was in the full flower of womanhood; all I could do was wait, grow, and dream. I also sensed she was in love with Hammerstein, which was funny because he didn't have a clue and thought of her as far too young for him, and more or less a distraction with all her beauty moving through criminal investigations like a fine art piece at a demolition site.



Steve Allman

“*Maam.*” I said, which I immediately regretted.

“She was indeed researching the Arcturian Wars. Specifically New Galen. Had even funded a small expedition there, a couple

bots,” Hammerstein looked at Mr. Gibbon who had been dutifully following, “No offense.”

“None taken.” Gibbon lifted his chin.

“A couple of bots, nothing Major. An analysis of the remains of ship building facilities on an outer moon had her convinced the Arcturian Fleet was far smaller than the Transhuman Imperials at Deneb IV have long asserted. Much of her research, however has been deleted from the Royal Archive.” he said.

The doors opened and I felt the well of time like a vortex. I stepped back a moment and Captain Venkatesan held my shoulder. Hammerstein’s chin went forward like a fist, he stepped in ahead of

me like a prize fighter, like he would protect me from the quantum streams. He still didn’t get it, I managed to muse with a smirk, that this wasn’t something he could find and wrestle to the ground.

It was a vast circular room, many levels high. A multicolored skylight crowned its dome. In the center of the floor was a holomap of the galaxy. Built even before colonies had spread to the globular clusters.

“Something dark she found.” I said. “*A hatred and hunger!*” I stepped back, away from the room.

“Away, boy!” Hammerstein snapped. “You rescue no Princess if your wits fail you.”

So I retreated, towards the fountains with their hologram sculptures. Away from the geometric doors, away from the room where the hologram of the galaxy glittered across the floor like a toy, *like a barrel full of fish*.

Tokushima, for all her martial arts and weapons training, exuded nothing less than the same emotions my mother glowed with when I was sick or bruised. Men frame it in terms of “motherly love”, but there is something fierce and feral in it for all of that. Men would do better to think of Artemis; the ancient Greeks had it right with that. If one seeks to understand humanity, go to the Age of Bronze.

Of course, even at twelve I was compelled, in the presence of such a female archetype, to find my center; my own archetype. Courage and duty and honor in the face of danger.

So I looked back toward the room. Toward the darkness that had eaten the Princess in her search for truth. Caution sometimes the better part of valor, I was slow in my probing. A great lie had been foisted upon mankind. The Princess had discovered pieces of it, revealed like a beast too large for its camouflage. *A wicked talon here, a fang there.*

“Hammerstein!” the captain of the guard snapped. “No more today! Get this child home or I will summon the King.”

Hammerstein, for all his unbending determination of will, sought hard within himself to grasp and understand my weakness. Hammerstein would have walked into the dark, with not a thought to his comfort or safety. It is what he was. The warrior archetype; there was no retreat for him. It took him time, only moments really, to undue his lifetime of training and instinct to move in to battle. When he was able to detach long enough, he pulled me away from the room.

It seemed like an eternity. The detective’s ethos, “death before dishonor”, almost undid us both. There was a place and time for his code; this was not that day. He struggled with the concept of retreat, found it, and retreated for my sake. We judge such men harshly, I think, in the realms of civility and safety. In their world such pauses more often than not cost life rather than save it. We must give them that much; born fighting it is not the charge into the fray that gives them pause, but the hesitation that garners an enemy time to reconnoiter.

I had learned enough that day. Firstly, the Princess had found evidence that the official histories of the Arcturian Wars were in fact incomplete, which alone put her at odds with great powers in the far away Imperia. Secondly, a darker secret lay even behind that, vile, inhuman, and something not even considered. I slept in Hammerstein’s aircar, all the way back towards the Sole estate I was beyond tired, beyond rest, and beyond reach. Only Mr. Gibbons chromium assurances reached my consciousness, and with a joke at that.

Gibbon’s jokes were not very good. I remember forcing a smile and then fading.

We were high over the Tangerine Sea when I woke suddenly. Something was coming. Something bad. My impressions were of waspy things, cloaked things with bad intent. Dead things, then-no, not dead. Mechanical.

“Assassin bots.” I said.

Hammerstein was like a well oiled matter cannon. His attention snapped to his screen.

“Defensive maneuvers, scan for cloaked bots.”



Gabriel Montagudo

The other Security aircars broke formation like in a floral geometry, spiraling and splining in different directions. High energy defensive shielding glimmering in the bright sun of Caldris, and I felt my seat come alive with emergency protocols; personal shielding. This was not one's grand papa's aircar.

The world moved like a giant toy, first below us, then beside, then above; round and round

Hammerstein dipped and dove. A gravity bubble saved us from hi-gee pulls in the dives. Over and over again he dodged, still unsure where the bots might be. The other Security aircars were doing the same.

The bots finally revealed themselves in a sudden and impossible volley of disser fire. Had I not warned the Security team, we would have surely been killed. As it was I could see cuts and slashes of heat ripping at the body of our aircar.

Sizzling, steaming. Wicked.

Firing, however, they revealed their positions and now Hammerstein and his team paid back. The rapid click of modified guns sung like electronic dance music, a cool mechanical cursing, and vengeance served up cold.

Hammerstein's eyes gleamed and I sensed the thrill of a grown man in combat. Violent death winged about us with a clockwork impunity such are bots-and there was no fear in him, only an even, amazing sense of "now" and "act" that precluded any of his life before or after.

Now. Act. Respond. Win. Survive.

Existence reduced to a sport, a contest, a ballet of destroying a menace. In the end, he and his team made short work of the bots. I had provided an unexpected ace in the hole for them; the warning they needed to act, to respond, to win-and they did what they were trained to do, flawlessly, beautifully in fact.

I knew then, at twelve standard Caldrys years something most civilized humans never truly understand; the place a warrior goes in combat, a timeless place where they are one with all their ancestors, outside the well of time-with all their descendants hanging in the balance.

Now. Act. Respond. Win. Survive.

"Hammerstein, this is Palace security. We've just recorded the attack and will have a CSI team on it stat!" a small holo-face spoke from Hammerstein's screen. Suspicion ran dark and wild in his mind.

"Sure, you do that. I'll have our unit expect the results as soon as they come in"

He wasn't counting on any of the information being helpful. Whoever had sent the things were professionals. Their trails would be curled and Byzantine. He glanced at me and I sensed his gratitude, and passing curiosity if maybe I could find something even the CSI team had missed.

"Thanks kid, you saved our-err, well...you know. Hope you had that disser ready, aye, Buck? Hit 'em back, hit 'em hard, and hit 'em hot."

I placed my small hand on the disser. "Yeah!" For I am a Sole, and we are from a long line of those who go first, into the unknown; beyond the charted worlds, to settle and build, and fight if need be. That was the first time in my life a warrior had acknowledged me. I held the moment clear and bright, the thick of the fight, glory. My ancestors were with me that day.

"Let's get the kid home, people. Tokushima, staff that estate with a platoon of combat duty guards with tech support. Police orders."

He held back a very ugly and profane expletive, for my sake. I chuckled a little. The ribald words people invent to snap back at the madness of the universe. In a way, they're art form unto themselves.

Mother was furious when informed of the attack, of course. Father's growing pride in his son, his strange and inscrutable boy, well, it was something new and pleasant for me. No longer merely the child with "special needs" who couldn't fit in to the ordinary world, I was instrumental in the search for the Princess. I had just preserved the lives of a number of Royal Detectives.

He had discovered something he hadn't sensed in me before, call it courage. I realized then too something I hadn't sensed in him before, his mind so full of business and tasks, errands, responsibilities as it were. How profoundly he valued this thing. Courage. The essential virtue on which all others depend.

I sensed then too how fragile that virtue-how years of it could be broken with a single moment of weakness, and how often it was so for otherwise brave and worthwhile people. Should that day ever come, should I succumb to fear and fail him, I hope he could find it within himself to forgive me.

For even at twelve I was not fool enough to think the courageous were always so. Fear and doubt; on the edge of our universe always, ready to pull us in to shambling other-worlds of surreal nightmares. At the end of the day, we have no weapon but our courage, our faith. Woe the one that reaches such a state

without a friend. Without a mighty Hammerstein ready to stand in the fire with you.

Mother had a few expletives of her own withheld when she saw the disser marks on the aircars.

I have no clue where Gibbons had gotten this bit of programming, but when we alighted from the aircars he surveyed the damage and amazingly, *whistled*. A long one too. Then he quipped, “Ayie, caramba!”

Tokushima gave him a look of surprise. “Okay!” she said, “I’ll escort the boy to the kitchens?” she looked to my parents.

“Crab cakes.” Father said, “He likes crab cakes.”

I wore the disser in the kitchen while the Chef made the cakes. It made him uncomfortable, and I felt my first guilty pleasure of swaggering machismo. The Chef, an artist to his hypersensitive core, was thoroughly nonplussed.

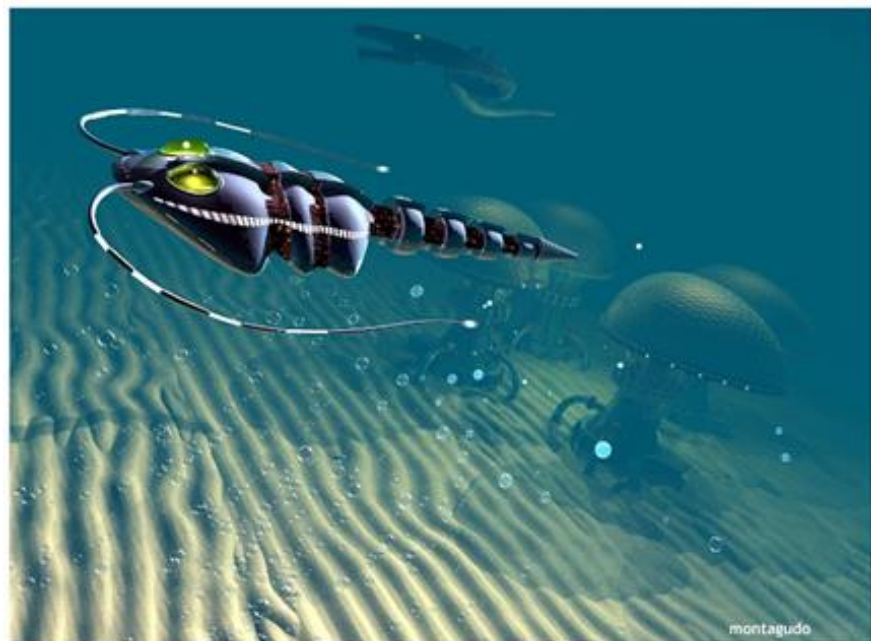
“Dissers in my kitchen? Nyet!” He swatted at me with a spatula.

Tokushima leaned forward, “He saved us from assassins today.” She said softly. “Really nasty assassins. Probably from the Transhuman Imperials out of Deneb IV. Auto-bots with cloaking technology. Only he knew they were coming.”

His eyes widened. “I see.” He turned the crab cakes. “It is, after all, a stylish disser of great antiquity and value. Perhaps worthy of my kitchen after all.”

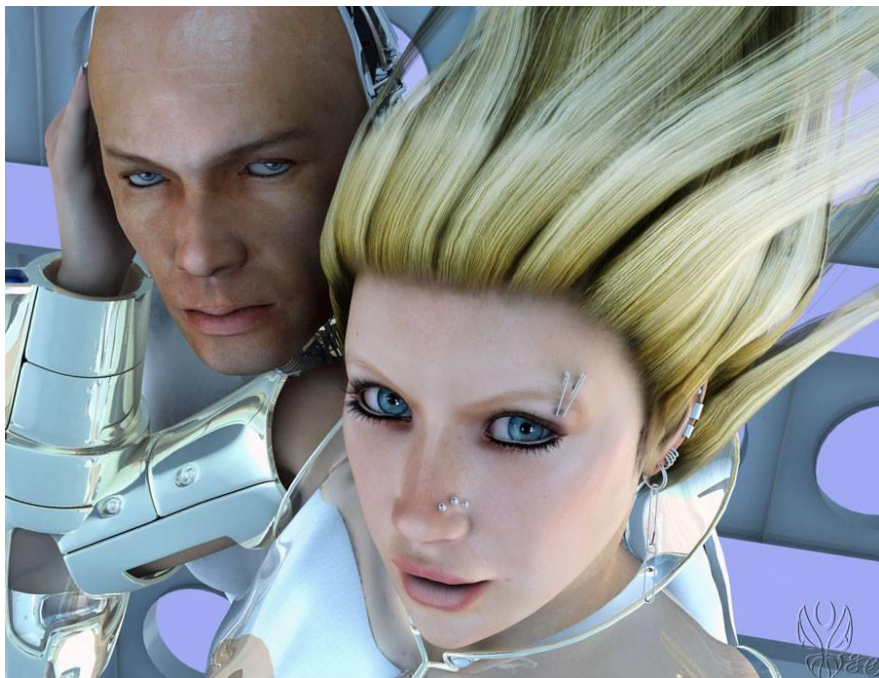
I beamed; glory.

“Should they come again, please kill them cleanly and do not mess up my kitchen.” he added.



II

All the stars in a jewel box.



“Not the fountains and holograms of the palace and its parapets, not the staid Royal Guard with pomp and ceremony deftly done, nay, not the silks and cashmere hauled through hyperspace by stalwart brave star trading guildsmen. Not elegant floating divans crafted in the minds of brilliant architects and engineers-