

# The Unknown Tomorrow



Art by unbelievable2

Story by Laurie

*A Glimmering From Afar series*

I see, or think I see,  
A glimmering from afar;  
A beam of day, that shines for me,  
To save me from despair.

William Cowper

*Joy and Peace in Believing* by William Cowper.

Set free from present sorrow,  
We cheerfully can say,  
E'en let the unknown tomorrow  
Bring with it what it may!

## Chapter One

“Why is a bastard working here? I saw the tattoo on his hand,” a querulous voice said two floors below the Major Interplanetary Crime floor where I kept my desk. As a sentinel, I was constantly screening all kinds of sensory input and I knew how to let most of it just flow past me, but there were a few words that would bring my full attention to bear on the speaker.

Bastard was one of them. So were guide, sentinel, Blair, Sandburg, and Yana. And of course, my own name. Jim Ellison.

I closed my eyes, leaning back in my chair so I could slip slightly into a zone to focus better. Blair had gone down to that level earlier to clean the floors, since we were waiting for some witness statements to be sent in from Jack Pendergrast. Jack thought they might help clear up an old case of Blair's and mine. One that meant a hell of a lot to the both of us.

“That guy? Name's Sandburg and he belongs to Protector Ellison.” Now that deep voice belonged to Mitchell Farmington. He was a big macmoose of a man, bigger than Simon. “He helps Ellison out mostly. Does some cleaning around the offices, enough to keep Probation off his back.”

“But he's a bastard.”

“Look, New Guy. Ellison doesn't care. Banks doesn't care. So you and me, we don't care, get it? Besides, he's a decent sort. Smart, too. As a matter of fact, I think he just got awarded his doctorate. I heard Banks made a big deal about it, announced it at a meeting of his top people.”

“You said he belongs to Ellison? Did you mean 'with Ellison' instead?” New Guy asked and that made me want to snarl. Blair did not 'belong' to me, but that was how almost everyone saw us.

“No. I meant that he belongs to Ellison. See, Ellison, he's a sentinel. He picked Sandburg to be his guide, only the way I heard it, Sandburg, he didn't get much of a choice. Like that old Earth saying, the kid was stuck between a rock and hard place.”

“I don't understand what you mean by that,” New Guy whined. Listening, I smirked a little. Blair was fond of Old Earth sayings and he'd said them so often everyone else who talked with him ended up saying them, too.

Farmington snorted. “It means Sandburg had been convicted of smuggling and selling Yana, but Ellison and his lawyer argued that Ellison needed the kid, and only the kid would do, because of Ellison being exposed to him or something along those lines. Old time sentinel stuff that pulled rank on just sending the kid to be mind-wiped and sent off to work for twenty-five years. You ask me, Ellison just liked the kid's looks and decided he wanted him, and his lawyer found a loophole.”

“Kid? That guy's no kid.”

“Habit of mine to call him that,” Farmington said, a shrug in his voice. “Picked it up from Banks. Sandburg was a young guy when Ellison bonded with him. But he's been here longer than me, and I've been here ten years.”

“So Sandburg's a bastard and a guide and a criminal? And he and Ellison are sex partners? I heard about what happens with bonding.”

“Yes to all four. Although about being a criminal, most people think he just got in over his head or was tricked into smuggling Yana in his ship. He was convicted, only he can serve out his time as Ellison's guide. Ellison's good to him, so don't try to make life hard for the kid.”

“I don't associate with bastards,” New Guy said, sounding disgusted.

“*Like* I said, Sandburg's okay. Ellison is too, but he can be a surly son-of-a-spacer, especially if someone decides to have fun at Sandburg's expense.” Farmington's voice grew hard. “So let me give you some friendly advice. Either steer clear of Sandburg, or play nice, because you don't want Jim Ellison to think you're a problem, not if

you want to work here. Now, are we done with the history lesson? Because we haven't even started on your responsibilities yet...”

“Jim, I know what you're doing. I can feel it” Blair calmly muttered under his breath, still two floors down. “It's obvious that Farmington is talking about me to that new protector, since he keeps glancing over. Don't make a fuss, okay?”

I switched to telepathy. “*You know me, Chief.*”

“*Yep. After twelve years together, I sure do. So don't go glaring at those guys, okay? Hey, have you heard back from Jack yet?*”

“*No. Don't get your hopes up, Sandburg. He said it was a long shot, at best.*”

“*I'm trying not to. But to finally have a lead again, it's hard to wait on the news.*”

“*I know. I want to clear your name as much as you do, Qhusi. See you be a free man.*”

“*Even if this tip doesn't pan out, it'll be true in three more years.*”

“*But if we can't prove you had nothing to do with the Yana being found on your bird, then you'll always be a convicted criminal.*”

“*To most people I will anyway, no matter what happens. Look, I'm almost done down here, then I'm coming back up. I can always straighten out that mess you call your filing system to keep from climbing the walls.*”

“*There's nothing wrong with my filing system, Sandburg.*”

“...”

“*Yeah, Yeah.*”

“*Bye, Jim.*”

It was late by the time Jack contacted us. Blair, now on his own time, was writing an article about the properties of one of the jungle healing plants he'd researched on Quyllur. He

couldn't publish it on his own, though. One of his probation restrictions; one of many. He'd be credited in a footnote only.

I was restless, and I envied Blair his ability to channel the edginess I knew he was feeling into something productive.

"Which one of those freeloaders is going to ride to glory on your coattails this time?" I asked Blair, channeling my restlessness into wishing I could kick the ass of whichever professor was going to benefit from Blair's hard luck this time.

"Dickerson."

"Mick the Dick? Environmental Anthro?"

"That's the one." Blair shot me an unimpressed look over the top of his glasses. "You're not helping, Jim. You know how I have to work the system, or else I'd never get any of my work published. It's all about the data, anyway. What I'm learning could help make breakthroughs in the medical field. So just chill on those impulses to teach my lead authors a lesson, okay."

Sometimes Blair just amazes me; he's such a good person. Always striving to help other people, always finding a way to work around the restrictions placed on him but stay within the rules. Most of the time. Whenever he'd crossed that line in the past it had been for me. I wouldn't even be alive if he hadn't.

I felt the air currents near me changing and without looking I snatched the ball out of the air that Blair had winged at me.

"Why do I feel like you're treating me like my spirit animal?" I complained, but I started bouncing the ball against the wall.

Blair laughed, and turned his attention back to composing his article on his slave.

Thud, thud, thud, thud, thud, thud. Repeat. Repeat again. I found my thoughts circling back to the beginning of my relationship with Blair. My first case with MIC, to break the smuggling ring that was flooding New Rainier with Yana, known on the street as Black Death. Blair was the main suspect because of the correlation of his trips from Quyllur with the drug hitting the streets of New Rainier. Getting to know him when I went undercover, liking him despite myself. Falling for him. Arresting him. Soul bonding to prevent him killing himself. Believing in his innocence but not being able to come up with the proof to clear his name. Taking the unorthodox strategy of using my status as a sentinel and his as a guide to stop him from being sentenced to twenty-five years as a mind-wiped convict. Instead, he'd had to bond with me.

It wasn't right. But it was the best I could do to save him, since I hadn't been able to clear him of the charges.

Ten years of his sentence was later forgiven because of his undercover work on a case, although before it was over Blair had been raped by the terrorist he and I took down, Garrett Kincaid. Just one more injustice that he'd endured. Was still enduring, and if this intelligence from our old friend Jack Pendergrast didn't pan out, then even after his sentence was completed more doors would be slammed in his face from being thought guilty of his

charges, more even than those that would be because Blair was a bastard. He had no family that would claim him. No status in our society. My father could have done it, adopted him. But he had never even met Blair. I'd swallowed my pride, gone to him to ask for this. He'd refused, and I hadn't seen him since.

But Blair was loved. By me. By our friend Meghan. And he had people on his side such as Simon Banks, the head of MIC, and Joel Taggart, his probation officer, who was putting off retirement until Blair's sentence was done, just so he could look out for him.

Thud, thud, thud-- The ping of a holo-message arriving caused Blair to look up from his slave, and I grabbed the ball and dropped it on my desk. Blair jumped up and I joined him in the holo-booth, where we would be scanned and our images and voices would be sent to Jack.

Jack Pendergrast's image was suddenly there, within the space delineated by the holo-emitters for receiving messages. It had been three years since we'd seen him, and he looked a little grayer on top, a little heavier in the belly.

But his smile was as welcoming as ever. "Jim. Hey, kid. Still got that mop of hair, I see."

"Jack, you old son-of-a-spacer. Since you're not undercover any more, we got to get together," I said, glad that Jack had gotten out of this latest case with his skin intact. Word was that it had been a tough one; Jack had been under for over two years.

"Sure. When I finish wrapping up this case, we can meet on Quyllur. I've still got my beach house and it's been years since we drank down a bottle of Agrasa." Jack's expression turned serious. "Jim, the guy talked, but I had to use a truth test on him. He did business with the three you've been looking for, but it was eleven years ago. He said, well, you can hear his testimony yourself. I've sent it to you. Jim, Blair. It's not looking good."

"Why? Blair asked quietly, but his hands were clenching.

"My informant, he's got a finger in every illegal pie there is and he said nobody's done business with Iris or Chance or Rob for over a decade. Not since he heard they stole the Orb of the Sanorans."

## **Chapter Two**

I woke up feeling disoriented from a dream where the jaguar, my spirit animal, had been snarling, standing guard over a bleeding wolf with blue eyes as predators moved in from the jungle towards us. My eyes snapped to where Blair was huddled in a chair in the dark, his slave in his hands. He wasn't reading anything at the moment; he was lost to his thoughts.

Like all my dreams that took place on the spirit-plane, it had felt real to me. I had smelled the wolf, Blair's spirit-animal, laced with the iron scent of his blood. I'd felt the heavy humidity of the jungle surrounding us, seen the bright red and yellow flowers of plants, the green-tinged air from light filtering down through the canopy of the tall trees, smelled the shrubs and bushes with their own pungent odors.

I got out of bed, our bed with the bright yellow sheets and blue comforter that Blair had picked out because he said it reminded him of days we spent on the beach at Quyllur, with its vivid blue ocean and hot sunshine. I padded quietly over to where Blair was sitting, staring out at the darkened street, the streetlights and cityscape lighting making it look more beautiful than it actually was, and I laid a hand on the top of his head and let my fingers delve into his curls.

“Enquiri,” Blair said, in the language of our people. He kept to our adopted family's language as he told me that he was sorry if his thoughts had pulled me from sleep.

Dropping the need for spoken words, I told him mind to mind about my dream and he pulled his legs up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them. In the same way, he shared with me the feelings this news about the criminals who were responsible for his being convicted had resurrected. Hopelessness, anger, despair, and self-recrimination for not seeing who they really were, for agreeing to their barter of using his ship for transport in exchange for ship repairs by Rob. The repairs that had transformed his bird into a smuggler's dream.

“Bad night,” I said out loud. “How can I help?”

Blair let go of his slave and pulled my hand from his hair, and I thought he didn't want my touch, to be reminded that I had forced him to live, that he'd had to choose between two terrible choices, being mind-wiped and reduced to the intellectual level of maybe an eight-year-old for the rest of his life, spending twenty-five years in forced labor, or bonding with me and being tied physically, mentally, spiritually to the man who had helped put him into custody.

But Blair didn't drop my hand, instead he gripped it tightly, and I stepped around the chair and pulled him up and into my arms.

“I felt that, Jim. Quit kicking yourself, man. You are the only good thing that came out of this whole horrible situation. Yeah, I'm having a bad night. Make it a better one, okay?” He pressed himself against me and I kissed him, feeling the stubble of his beard, his warm lips, my hands tracing the muscles of his bare back.

I hooked my hands around his thighs and lifted him and he wrapped his legs around my hips, his arms around my neck. He kissed me, losing himself in the sensations, letting the bond open wide between us, where emotions flowed together like streams entering a river, and I let those strong currents carry us as I strode back to our bed and laid him down like an offering to a demanding god. I stripped him of his one piece of clothing, tugging it down his legs, and did the same for my own. I bent over him, one knee on the bed, and licked his penis slowly, so slowly, and felt Blair hardening before I reached the head. I swirled my tongue around it, and he said my name like he'd just been broken.

His hands clutched at me, fingers kneading the muscles of my neck and my shoulders, and he breathed out, “Fuck me. Fuck me, and then I'm going to fuck you.”

I climbed on top of him, and he wrapped his legs around me. “Not just yet. Not yet,” I whispered and I let him feel my intentions to overwhelm him with sensation, to make his skin and nerves scream with anticipation and to let him stay on the edge of an orgasm until he was incoherent with desire and need and passion.

Blair let out a whimper and I began to translate intention into actions.

“Argh!” My normally cheerful partner threw up his hands. “I’m blocked out again. Damn it. I need to see this research on the Sanorans and I keep getting turned down. I even promised to do grunt work for my department, proctoring tests and grading papers, if any of my colleagues could get me in the door, but they haven’t got enough pull either.”

He got up from the couch where he’d been camped out with his slave and started to pace in front of the window.

“What’s the problem?” I had been wrestling with my own set of difficulties about this case for the last two weeks. To start with, even though Simon was willing to reopen the case, the oversight committee had shut us down. In desperation, I told Simon I would be taking some well deserved time off, as soon as Blair figured out where we should start looking. It was a big galaxy, and nobody knew what direction those three crooks had taken after swiping the orb from the University of the Pacific research facility that had been studying it.

Blowing out his breath in a frustrated huff, Blair said, “The guy funding the lab put a lot of restrictions on Pacific U. Only people he vets are allowed to even look at the Orb or any research about its properties or the ancient tablets and scrolls from that long dead civilization. Even this guy’s name has been kept on a need to know basis.”

“Sounds like a real jerk,” I said.

“Maybe,” Blair said with a sigh, “if I appeal directly to him, I can take a look at the research on the legends. All I know about it is that the Sanorans worshiped it as a relic of their gods, and seeing it unshielded would send you to the overworld for your next life.”

Fervently, I said, “I’d like to send the three that swiped it to the overworld, helped along by my boot, but from how you described them, they didn’t seem like the religious type.”

“No. They’re the greedy type. So there must be something in the legends that they thought would make them a pile of credits. If I had more time I could probably trace back source after source until I found something we could use, but Jim, that could take years.”

“So, let’s find out who the mystery benefactor is.” Wryly, wishing this was an official case, I said, “I wish I could show up on the lab’s doorstep and flash my badge but Simon would fry my balls for lunch if I did that. He’s made it clear that our investigation has to be strictly as private citizens.”

“For you. I’ll never be a citizen,” Blair said, then shot me a look. “Forget I said that, okay?”

“Someday it’ll be true,” I said, but my partner waved off my words.

“Sure.” Blair stretched and cracked his neck. “Okay, I’ll try to track down who this guy is through academic informants.”

“I’ll follow the credits. If there was one thing my father taught me, it was to always pay attention to a credit trail. This lab is still part of the University of the Pacific, and their records have to be made available to the public. Could take a while, though.”

Blair sighed and walked into the kitchen. "I'll make a pot of kaffee."

A week of late nights later, because Blair and I had cases, and he had work for his department at Rainier University, we started to finally sort out the puzzle.

"He's got a summer home in Marna," Blair said. I shot him a look. "What? One of the researchers was griping on his blog about not being able to get some funding approved until our mystery guy was back home. I didn't go poking where I wasn't supposed to go."

"He's a middle elite, like me," I said. "His status had to be included by law on the lab funding paperwork. He's very, very wealthy."

"Huh. Say," Blair drawled out, thinking out loud. "Jim, we know a middle elite guy who's too rich for his own good and has a home on Marna. Maybe he knows this guy?"

"Or," I said, feeling exasperated, "he is this guy. When we were his guests on Marna, we noticed all the rare artifacts he has from other dead civilizations. Remember?"

Blair started to laugh. "The universe is playing with loaded dice, if Halford Loomis the Ninth is this mystery patron. I mean, what are the odds of us crossing paths again?"

"More like the universe's idea of a joke. Let's get him on the comm."

After rummaging around in his desk drawer, Blair came up with a battered small card. "Got it. It's been years since we talked, though, so it might not be any good."

We ended up just leaving a holo-message. Four hours later, after we'd gone to bed, the holo-messenger pinged me awake. Shaking Blair, and then shaking Blair again, because he had pulled the pillow over his head, I finally woke him up enough so he could stand in our personal holo-booth and we answered the comm.

Halford Loomis the Ninth's projection appeared in our living room, courtesy of the holo-emitters I had upgraded to a few years ago. It was amazing how technology kept improving by leaps and bounds.

"Protector Ellison, you're looking fine, and you, sweetness, are as delectable as ever," Loomis said, his dark eyes crinkling in amusement. That was his usual look, all right. "What brings you to my comm?"

We hadn't wanted to explain very much on a message, and certainly not mention the Orb.

"Hal," Blair said, sounding half asleep still. "Are you the person who's funding the research at the University of the Pacific on the Orb of the Sanorans?"

Loomis cocked an eyebrow. "And if I am?"

"Some information has come to light about the theft ten years ago," I said.



“And if we could have access to the research on the Orb, we might be able to figure out where the thieves might have gone with it,” Blair added.

“This is a MIC investigation?”

“No--”

“Not exactly.”

Loomis is intelligent, although he rarely lets people see that side of him. It's more fun for him to act the good looking, spoiled middle-elite ass. He stopped smirking and looked thoughtfully at us.

“This is private, then. And while I can see Blair being very interested in the Orb for its mystique and lost history, Ellison, you wouldn't care about it. You do care about Blair, but your message sounded too urgent to just be about indulging your lover with a treat of ancient history. I am familiar with Blair's case and his insistence on his innocence. Who are these thieves that stole the Orb away? Are they connected to the three criminals who Blair claims framed him?”

“Yes,” Blair said, and probably only I could hear the bitter tinge to his voice. “The ones responsible for my conviction stole the Orb, according to our informant.”

Loomis gave us an elaborate bow and hand flourish. “Then a quest has presented itself. I am indeed the patron you asked about and I will do more than grant you access to the research. I will accompany you when you search for the Orb. It's been misplaced for too many years now.”

“Thanks,” I said. “We wouldn't dream of dragging you away from your important work, though. We can take it from here.”

Loomis' eyes narrowed. He knew my opinion on most of his waste of time society activities. “And I wouldn't dream of denying myself an adventure.” He smirked at me and winked at Blair. “You're going to need my ship and some rather specialized equipment if you want to have a chance at finding this treasure. And all it will cost you is one kiss.”

He blew a kiss at Blair. Feeling my temper rising, I said, “You've got a deal. We'll leave tomorrow for the University of the Pacific.”

Bowing to us, he said with that aristocratic tone that I despised, “I look forward to renewing our friendship.” He toggled his comm and his projection winked out.

“It's just a kiss,” Blair said. “Don't get upset, okay?”

“I may not like it, Sandburg, but I can justify it. Let's go back to bed. Tomorrow's going to be busy as hell.”

### Chapter Three

The University of the Pacific is situated on a world that is ninety percent ocean. Jim and I had flown in after dropping out of space over blue-green waters in the bird his dad had given him; we'd seen large animals surfacing that reminded me of the pictures of whales from Old Earth. The planet was beautiful and the campus built near beaches that were calling to me to explore. Oceania has a very small moon. It was actually more of a large asteroid that the planet's gravity had captured eons ago, so the tides are fairly weak except for when a king tide occurs, when Oceania and its sun and moon are aligned. According to the data I'd been reading on the planet, that would happen in about a week and a half.

By that time I was hoping we would have found something in the data that would have narrowed our search for Iris and her brother and lover. I was hoping that I wouldn't be here to witness that tide.

Hal was waiting for us when Jim and I entered the research labs the next afternoon.

He was sitting on a lab stool, his back to us, and absorbed in the data he was reading. We came in quietly and he didn't notice that we were there. His bodyguards did, though, and gave us a nod. Evidently they'd been briefed to expect us, since Jim and I weren't searched like I'd been before when I'd met privately with Halford Loomis the Ninth.

Jim muttered to me, "Let's get this over with," and strode over to Hal. He reminded me of his jaguar spirit animal whenever he moved like that, graceful and stealthy and radiating a sense of power and danger.

I followed him, but by the time I caught up, Jim had spun Hal's stool around, yanked him up and had kissed him soundly on the lips.

Hal was so startled that he didn't really respond to what Jim had just done. I knew how he felt because I'd assumed that it was me that would pay Hal's price for assisting us.

Jim pushed Hal back down on the stool. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve and said dryly, "You said you'd charge a kiss. You didn't specify who had to do it."

A look of mirth came over Hal's face. "Let me think back... No, I didn't say that I intended to kiss Blair. On the cheek. I can only wish that you'd given me some notice, Ellison. I would certainly have given a much better showing."

The back of Jim's neck flushed red and Hal laughed. I caught one of his bodyguards rolling his eyes, and the other one gave me a wink. I knew his guards were fond of the Ninth, as they called him, but they also knew he was kind of a dick.

"I can only applaud the gallantry of your gesture, Ellison." Hal turned to me. "Blair, my sweet. The years have barely touched you."

"Hi, Hal. Thanks so much for helping out," I said. "This place looks fantastic. How about a tour?"

"Certainly. Ellison, I thought I might prevail upon your expertise to assess our security. When we recover the Orb, I wouldn't want to see it stolen again." Hal got up from the stool and gestured toward the door at the end of the room. I could see equipment in there that I suspected measured seen and unseen properties of the artifacts that Hal collected.

“Sure,” Jim said, and I felt through our bond that he was genuinely glad to do that. As he'd told me on our flight here, he wasn't going to be much help with the research. “Let's get started on finding this hunk of space junk.”

“The question is,” Jim said, “how would a trio of bottom feeders even come across these old legends about the Orb? And break into a fairly tight facility like this one?”

“Iris and I talked sometimes. She'd bummed around a lot of the galaxy, maybe she heard something about it? And Rob, he was a really good mechanic, remember? He could have had a lot of expertise with security systems. This probably wasn't their first time running an operation like this.”

Jim gave a wave of his hand in agreement. I crossed over to where he was leaning up against a wall, next to a bank of open windows that let in the sea breeze. We were both taking a break in a student center; me from poring through translations and archeological reports regarding the Sanorans, Jim from going over witness statements and forensic reports of the break-in. “But maybe they had some inside help. You've been going over the report of the theft. What do you think?”

“Everyone was truth-tested that had access to the lab. They all came out clean,” Jim said. “But I intend to dig a little deeper. Where did Loomis go?”

“Hal's getting his bird fitted with some of the lab equipment. The Orb emits a weak signal that we can pick up when we're close enough. And that's not all, Jim. You know what the Orb really is? Besides being a Sanoran artifact associated with their death rituals?”

“This is what you were so excited about earlier? When you were talking to the scientists in the lab?”

“Yeah. Jim, the earliest reference to the Orb clearly indicates that it was found. It was not made by the Sanorans, but was discovered by them. It's a relic from a much older civilization, one that was immensely powerful, one that appears to have understood the structure of the universe a lot more than we ever have or the Sanorans ever did.”

“So don't leave me in suspense, Sandburg. The Orb's what? Besides being about the size of your fist.”

I smiled at Jim, because this was just so chill, and the information had been restricted from the public. “It's a portal to somewhere else. Maybe to a parallel universe, maybe to another dimension. In the Sanoran death ritual, the man or woman who was ready to leave their world would go to the priest along with all their relatives and friends. The priest would bless the supplicant, and the family and friends would say goodbye. Then they would move far enough away that they could watch but not be in the range of the portal. The priest would take the Orb out of its casket. Then as it would build up power, the Orb would start to dimly glow. The priest would move away, too, and as the Orb grew brighter and brighter the supplicant would be lost in the brilliance and couldn't be seen anymore. Then the Orb would begin to dim and when it was just a clear ball once again the priest would return it to its casket. The supplicant would be gone.”

"Maybe they were just vaporized," Jim said.

"Yeah, that's the other theory. They were just starting to really understand the physics behind the Orb when it was stolen," I said.

"Maybe that's why we haven't heard anything about Iris and Chance and Rob. They got booted into another dimension or were reduced to their molecules." Jim drew me close and I relaxed against him. "Let's call it a day. It's getting late. And you haven't contacted Joel yet to report in for your probation. Once that's done, let's ditch Loomis and go down to the beach. I hear the moonrise is spectacular over the ocean."

Two days later, Jim found the link between the lab and the three who had made me into a convict. One of the researchers, a specialist in the ancient Sanoran language and mythology, had died the day before the theft of the Orb. He'd overdosed on Yana. Until now, there had been no reason to connect the two events, but Jim theorized that Becker, the dead researcher, had traded the information about the Orb and how to get around the lab's security for a supply of the drug. It had been very convenient that the guy had died before he could be questioned by the Protectors. The Yana that had been seized from his house had tested out as twenty times as strong as the typical dose. The guy probably had been deliberately poisoned by Iris and the other two.

I pored over Becker's research. And knowing what would attract Iris and Chance and Rob, I found their motive for taking the Orb.

"So you're saying that the Orb wasn't stolen to sell on the dark market," Hal said, and ran a hand through his nearly shoulder-length dark hair. "No wonder my strategy of spying on my fellow collectors yielded such dismal results."

Hal had insisted that we meet on his ship for dinner when I'd commed him that I thought I might have an idea of where the Orb had been taken. After his staff had served us, Hal had dismissed them for the night. Except for his ever present bodyguards, but they were discreetly keeping out of the way.

Jim said, with an expansive hand gesture, "Fill him in, Chief. You're gonna love this, Loomis." He toyed with a forkful of dessert, something rich and decadent. Sort of like Hal himself, I mused, and Jim caught that thought.

*Funny, Sandburg.*

I shot him an amused look, and Hal rolled his eyes.

"Please," he snorted. "It's obvious when you're talking to each other with your minds. I believe, Doctor Sandburg, that you have a theory to expound upon?"

"I do. I'm basing it on the work Doctor Becker had been doing before his death. He'd been translating a carving that depicted the Sanoran's history of the Orb. And it clearly showed that the Orb had been brought to their planet by another species. The closest word for what

they considered that species is 'Angels.' Maybe it was the race that created the Orb, maybe it was thieves again, because what they used the Orb for was more like a key to a vault."

"What do you mean?" Hal asked, his dark eyes intent.

I said, "The Sanorans spied on these Angels and they would return again and again to the planet and carry things from their spaceship into a high cave. They would set the Orb in there and step outside and the bright light would shine out. The Angels would leave then, with the Orb. When the Sanorans would go into the cave, it would be empty. One day, the Angel's ship crash landed by the cave. They were all killed, and the Sanorans saw they'd brought treasure with them. Gems, platinum and other rare minerals, and jewelry. You have some of it, Hal."

"This ring, for example," and Hal held his hand up. The gem was a vibrant blueish-green.

"That was never made by the Sanorans. They didn't understand what the Orb was at all when they took it from that wreckage and they never did advance to the point where they could hope to understand it. They never even reached an industrial age before a highly contagious illness killed them all, spreading like wildfire from city to city."

"A vault," Hal mused. "That implies that what went in could also come out."

"If you know how the key works," I said. "And we don't. Maybe the Angels did."

"So the lure was this enormous treasure trove hidden in another dimension or universe. But without understanding how the Orb works, how could our thieves hope to retrieve their loot?"

"Becker was a genius," I said. "He encrypted his work and buried it in files that wouldn't attract attention. Now that we've found those files and broken the cypher, because of the improvement in quantum computing over the last few years, we know that he had an idea about how the Orb functioned. I think he meant to go with Iris. She was probably the bait to lure him in." It had certainly worked on me. Iris was very attractive.

"But they killed him," Hal said. "Rather unintelligent of them to kill off the golden goose." He looked thoughtfully at me. "I suppose you would know the origin of that strange phrase. What is a 'golden goose?'"

"It's from an Old Earth fairy tale," I began, but Jim interrupted me.

"Hold that thought till later, Chief. Becker probably told them enough that they thought they could figure it out, is my guess. We'll probably never know for sure."

"Well, then, I suggest we make ready to depart to Sanora," Hal said, and smiled like a nushark scenting blood. "Let's go retrieve my Orb and find out the fate of your thieves."

We searched Sanora, sweeping the planet with Hal's equipment, but the Orb remained hidden. Either it had stopped emitting signals or it just wasn't there. There were people living on Sanora again, farms, industry, fishing. Almost all traces of the people who had first lived on the planet were gone, except for the occasional crumbling structure.

We held a conference in the galley of Hal's bird, a freshly brewed pot of kaffee on the table. I could feel Jim's concern for me as he entered the room. He sat close on the bench, so that our thighs were touching and I took comfort from that. No matter what happened, I had Jim.

"Perhaps they changed their minds about finding the treasure. Perhaps they never traveled to this part of the galaxy," Hal said quietly.

"Then they would have tried to sell it to a collector. And you've been watching for that for ten years," Jim told him. "They're criminals, not scientists. They would only have valued the Orb for the credits they could get for it."

"They would have come here," I said. "They would have tried for the treasure. If something happened to them, then it happened on the way to Sanora. Gods above and below, though, that's a lot of space to search. So, let's say there was something they wanted to do before they arrived here."

"How," Jim said slowly, "did Jack's informant know Iris and company had stolen the Orb? They needed a shushman, someone who could sell off pieces of the treasure for them. I'm going to watch the holos of Jack's informant again. Maybe there's something there that will help us."

"The Orb wasn't the only thing stolen from the research center. A Sanoran necklace associated with the Orb also was taken and it's never been found," Hal said, and poured all three of us mugs of kaffee.

"If I was a shushman," I said, "and I was contacted with a wild story about treasure hidden by some mystical ball, I'd want some sort of proof first before I agreed to anything. Like seeing for myself an ancient necklace that's worth a ship full of credits."

"So if their ship isn't drifting through space, then they stopped at another planet. To make a deal with their shushman. And since they were never heard from again, that's where the Orb will be," Jim said.

"I want to see those holos too," Hal said.

"And me," I chimed in. "I used to hear things, you know. About where to find what you might need or who to see about it, if it was not exactly legal."

"Because you're a bastard," Hal said.

"Yeah. So maybe my class status will prove useful for a change," I said. It had with my work with MIC.

"I'll get the holos," Jim said and left the galley.

"Sweetness," Hal said to me, after Jim was gone. "If your criminals are dead, they can't be forced to testify that you are innocent."

"I know. I don't have much hope left, but there's a chance that they left some sort of documentation that might clear my name. Iris sometimes recorded a diary and Rob might have kept track of their money. Selling and smuggling Yana is a business, after all."

"For your sake, I hope so," Hal said. "But you'll never truly be free, sweet Blair. Not with being chained by the bond to Ellison."

I rubbed my forehead, tired. "Maybe I wouldn't have chosen to bond with Jim the way I did, but after meeting him, I think we always would have ended up together. The bond doesn't feel like chains to me, Hal. It feels like strong arms holding me. Support, love, strength. And I wouldn't ever choose to give that up, not after having it."

I felt a strong surge of love from Jim, because of course he had been listening.

*Eavesdropper*, I sent to Jim, and returned the feelings of love and affection. I got a mental laugh in return.

"Jack's informant was partners with a shushman named Quinn," Jim said, giving me a shove. I'd been dozing off. Hal was asleep, his head pillowed on his arms on the galley table.

"Ugh. More kaffee," I moaned. After finishing half the mug, I thought about what Jim had said. "Quinn, hmm. He wasn't your typical shushman. He only dealt with high class stuff." I drank the rest of my kaffee; after refilling the mug, I said, "The eye in the sky above your head, one of ten of a yellow mother, the fifth child, with four to twirl around and around her."

"What drivel is that?" Hal said, raising his head and looking blearily at me.

"How to find Quinn. It's a riddle. So let's figure it out."

"Chief," Jim said. "I checked. Quinn's dead."

"I'd heard that. But he wasn't dead ten years ago. Word on the street was that Quinn was paranoid. You met him on his terms or not at all. A slip of the tongue about the actual coordinates of the planet he met people on to do business would get your throat cut. So, somebody made up that jingle to pass along."

"He met clients on an isolated planet? So," Hal said, "one of ten of a yellow mother. A yellow star, with ten planets?"

"And the fifth planet from that sun, which has four moons," Jim said and stretched.

"But what does the eye in the sky mean?" Hal asked, sounding perplexed.

I could feel the answer coming to me. Slowly I said, "It's a nebula that you can see from the planet's surface. It's shaped like an eye. And to have it be over your head, then that narrows down where on the planet. Probably clients would be contacted at that point as they came closer and escorted to the meet."

Hal went to a slave monitor and spoke quietly. In a minute he turned around, looking pleased. "I've identified the planet. It's not an inhabited one; apparently the severe storms it has discouraged settling it. I've set our course. We should be there in a few hours."

"Let's get some sleep," Jim said, and pulled me up.

"Anything yet?" I asked Hal.

He shook his head. His bird was crisscrossing where we estimated that Quinn had met clients inland on planet WXDFR5, probably due to the very high tides and strong storm systems that wracked the planet. As if to prove my thoughts, turbulence shook the bird and I lurched back to a seat next to Jim and strapped in. Hal stayed at the station that monitored the sensor that scanned for the Orb's signature.

According to the weather pattern information on this planet, this was actually a fairly mild day. I suspected the day that Rob, Iris, and Chance had come here had been much worse.

We waited for close to two hours, the bird shaking at times, before Hal turned to look at us. "It's here. But it's in the middle of a large lake."

Jim and I looked at each other. "I guess we'll have to leave and come back with a boat," I said, feeling disappointed.

"No," Hal said smugly. "When I pack for an adventure, I pack for an adventure. I have a boat on board, in storage. And a land mass rover which can pull it. Diving equipment as well, and robotic arms. Hopefully we can just scoop up the Orb."

"Hal," Jim said. "You're okay."

Smirking, Hal said, "High praise from Protector Ellison. Be still my heart."

"Listen," Jim started to say hotly, but I elbowed him.

"So, what say you, fellow adventurers? Ready to continue the quest on land and water?" Hal said, still smirking.

"You bet," I said, and Hal commed the pilot.

Pulling on his coat, Jim jumped into the rover. I climbed up next to him and zipped up my jacket. The wind was brisk, the light blue sky an interesting mix of dark and light clouds, with two of the moons in the sky pale and huge.

The rest of Hal's crew piled in, along with Hal. Six of us, then, to take the boat to the crash site. Hal had identified wreckage at the bottom of the lake, and it was extremely unlikely that anybody had escaped alive.

Jim and I were silent for the thirty minute drive to the edge of the lake over rolling grassy hills. The few trees we saw were stunted and bent from the high winds that blew through this land.

Five of us climbed into the boat and the driver backed the trailer and boat into the pale lilac-colored water. Then the driver climbed out onto the trailer and was hauled in with the rest of us. Hal's boat looked like a cross between a sturdy fishing boat and a yacht. There were small cabins below but the center of activity was the chart room that was raised off the deck.



“Hal,” I asked. “Where's the life jackets?”

He pointed to a seat bench along the side of the boat. I stepped over and lifted the bench up but the space was empty. “They're not in this one,” I yelled, over the sound of the wind.

Frowning, he checked the other seat benches, then conferred with his men. He turned and shrugged and shouted, “Sorry. They were overlooked. Try not to fall overboard, then, all right?”

I gave him a thumbs up and pulled Jim to the bow of the boat. The water was choppy, the wind sharp. But at last I would know what had happened to the three who had wrecked my life. Hal captained the boat, and we left the shore behind us as we headed out into deeper waters.

Talking was almost impossible as the wind picked up even more. So Jim and I switched to telepathy. We speculated on why the crash had happened, why no one had come looking for the Orb. My guess was that Rob had wanted to be here first before Quinn. That had probably been a mistake because I suspected that Quinn had avoided the worst weather days. I thought they'd crashed because of the severe weather. And when they didn't show up for the meet, Quinn had written them off as changing their minds about dealing with him. Since they'd wrecked in the lake, no debris had been visible to explain that there had been a crash.

Jim put his arm around me. *Cold, Chief?*

I nodded and we stayed like that, watching this water that was the color of Old Earth lilacs, until Hal idled the engine, almost a half hour later. He turned the wheel over to one of his guys and walked over to us, dropping into a crouch, and we put our heads together.

“We're almost directly on top of the Orb. I'm going to send down a light, a camera. Let's see what we have here.” Hal reached over and squeezed my shoulder. “You know I'm here for the Orb and the necklace. But I'll also look for the flight recorder. It might tell you what happened. Also any tech, if it's in one piece. After we take a look, we'll use the robotic arms to bring up what we want. We can let the authorities know about the wreck and they can recover any bodies we find. Well, skeletons.” He motioned to the chart room. “Do you want to watch?”

I nodded, but Jim shook his head. I knew what he was doing. He was using his senses to see if there was any danger approaching and he preferred to be outside to do that.

So I left him there and went with Hal, to where it was warmer and I could look over the debris.

The camera showed jagged pieces of metal strewn on the lake bottom, a good many covered in silt. I saw Iris' skeleton. She must have been killed on impact because she was still strapped into her seat. It had ended up wedged in high among other wreckage, so the silt hadn't covered what remained of her skeleton. She still had on the remnants of a dress.

“Look,” Hal said. “She's wearing the necklace.” He conferred with one of his men, and soon a long, flexible metal arm was plucking at her neck bones. It used pincers to pull the necklace up and off her, and placed it safely in a container.

It made me feel sad to think of Iris wearing that necklace before having to turn it over. She'd been a greedy woman, but there had always been something of the urchin about her that had made me feel sympathy towards her.

Moving on, the camera and light surveyed the rest of the wreckage while the necklace was safely delivered into the boat. Hal took it out of the container himself and held it up to the light. It was lovely, with pale gold gems and made out of a metal not found on any planet that had yet been discovered. Hal put it in the safe and locked it away.

In the meantime, the camera had continued to sweep the wreckage. We recovered the flight recorder and found Chance's and Rob's remains before finding the housing for the Orb.

Delicately, the robotic arm picked it up. But before it could be carefully put into a container and brought up, the housing slipped and the Orb rolled out and landed on the lake bottom.

I gasped, and Hal cursed. Then the Orb started to shine dimly, and I grabbed Hal's arm. “Move us away from here right now, it's powering up!”

“I quite agree.” Hal moved to the wheel and shoved the engine back into gear.

“Wait! Look!” one of the bodyguards yelled and pointed at the camera monitor.

My heart started beating so hard I could feel it.

Jim was swimming towards the Orb. For a moment I felt paralyzed, then horrified because Jim stopped moving. He was limp in the water.

*Jim*, I shouted to him with my mind. *Get out of there*. There was only silence. He was unconscious.

I dashed out of the cabin, unzipping my jacket as I ran to the bow of the boat, Hal yelling at me to stop. Right before I got there, I felt something grabbing my jacket. Twisting, I let Hal pull the jacket off me and I dove into the water.

I swam towards the light that was growing brighter and brighter by the second. Then I saw him, floating with his arms outstretched, still wearing his coat. I again tried to shout out to him mentally, but got no response.

Reaching him, I pulled him to me, his head close to mine, my arm around his chest, and I kicked for all I was worth towards the surface. My lungs were burning with the need to breathe, and the water was numbingly cold.

'We're going to die!' I kicked even harder, the light below us enveloping us. 'Jim and I are going to die or be sent to another dimension.' I wanted to live. I was screaming inside that I wanted to live with Jim and I wanted Jim to live and for us to work together and love each other and we were *not* going to die today. Not today.

I found the strength to break the surface of the water and frantically gasped for air. Below us, the light was becoming increasingly brilliant.

The boat was speeding away. I started swimming after it, pulling Jim with me, but I knew it was hopeless. I couldn't get us far enough away in time before the Orb reached its pinnacle and whatever happened would occur.

Then I heard the crack of a weapon firing and next to me landed a kind of missile, with a rope attached with a hook that snapped closed. I looped it around Jim and me, secured it, and waved a hand, treading water harder to compensate for Jim's weight.

We were pulled through the water, and I did my best to keep Jim's face out of the spray. I didn't think he was breathing and I had never been so afraid in my life, not even when I'd been sentenced by the court to be mind-wiped.

I was half drowned by the time the boat stopped. The incandescent light that shone out of the water was fading again, and we were pulled into the boat. Jim was snatched from me and laid out on the deck, his coat and shirts ripped open.

Hal started doing chest compressions. I wanted to go to Jim but two of Hal's men held me back.

For long moments I watched and bargained with the universe to save Jim. This was my fault. We had chased after the Orb because of me, and I bitterly regretted ever trying to prove my innocence.

Then Jim started to cough and Hal turned him onto his side. I was let go and I fell down next to Jim, half across him. Jim continued to cough up water.

"Get them below into a cabin and warmed up," Hal ordered. "Take us back. I'm going after the Orb." He grabbed a wet suit from a hook and started stripping off his clothes. The motor revved up and we began moving again.

We were taken into the warmth and our wet clothes peeled off us. I hardly paid attention, because I was checking Jim over, both mentally and physically.

Jim was confused for a time as we sat on a bunk. Then all trace of his muddled thinking vanished and he told me what happened.

"It called to me, Chief. I was compelled to come closer, even though I knew I would drown."

"Your senses," I said. "You're the only one who felt that, Jim. I didn't."

"I'm glad," he said, and wrapped the blanket that had been draped over him closer.

"Chief," he began, and I smiled at him.

"I know. There's no way to clear my name now. The camera didn't see any thing useful except for the flight recorder. And I doubt they were thinking of me as they were crashing."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry that it ended this way."

I shrugged. "It's not important, Jim. You and me, that's all that matters. In three years my sentence will be finished, and we'll move on. Together."

I heard the sound of someone climbing down the ladder and Hal entered the cabin dripping in his wet suit. In his hand he held the Orb's container. He showed it to us, and it was beautiful, too, bejeweled with delicate lines. It was firmly latched shut, but I reached out a finger and carefully traced one of the lines.

"I thought you might like to see it before I lock it away," Hal said.

I smiled at him. "Yeah, and you'll send me the data from the lab when the Orb's returned for testing, right?"

"Of course." He left the cabin and Jim and I looked at each other and got up and followed him back up into the light and wind and spray. We watched him put the Orb in the safe in the chart room, and then went on deck and sat down on a bench, watching the boat speed back to the shore.

After a time, Hal joined us. "Are you well, Ellison?" he asked.

Jim pulled me to him. "You've got your treasure and I've got mine. So yeah, I'm fine."

"We're fine," I chimed in, feeling light and free. "And thanks for saving our lives."

"You're welcome," he said. Then Halford Loomis the Ninth gave us both a rakish grin. "I do love a good adventure."

**The End**