

# T H E T R A F F I C S E A

by Ryan Dunn

THE WRITTEN  
CONFESSION OF  
ALEX JAMES

YOU WANT TO know about the battle. One of your guards came into this holding room with equipped with a carbon quill and an empty journal. He said something to me in a crude gurgle as he jabbed his fore claw at the blank page. I knew what he meant. But before I write of the battle, however, I'll begin with the crash. Not to stay my execution, but if someone reads this, then I want them to know the truth.

SOMEWHERE ALONG THE traffic sea, past the Starstrain Tunnel (on the Trystanian side), thunder struck our ship. Souxie and Dave—the former my lover, the latter her twin brother—were in the middle of an all out war at the chess board while I sat silently in the captain's chair, lulled by the final movements of Beethoven's Ninth. A second later, we were plummeting into the atmosphere of a traveling planet.

We spiraled down, gaining speed at an alarming rate; our starboard wing had broken free. Gravity swallowed us in earnest, and my stomach dropped. There are memories, you know, the tragic ones, they play back in slow motion whenever you dig them up, regardless of how short they truly lasted. In that ship, for the first time in my whole life, I believed I would die, that we all would.

The ship began to tremble as it tore through the air on its way down, and then a sudden explosion of metal and wires and glass snuffed out the bleeps and sirens, the emergency woman's voice. An instant later the sounds imploded, replaced by a thunderous boom, and then punctuated for good by utter silence.

When I reopened my eyes (a minute, a day or more later I'm still not sure) it was dark. A dim green glow lingered in the air, just beyond our shattered windshield.

"Souxie? Dave? You guys all right?" The words sent stabbing

pains from my shoulder to my rib-cage and back again. A moan broke the silence. (Imagine my relief!) “Can you move, love?” I asked her.

Souxie moaned again but didn’t speak. I coughed away the dust from the crash and tried to move. Nothing. With my free hand, I could feel the stone pinning me down—a pillar of sorts, triangular in shape. I strained against the pillar, trying for escape, and managed to wedge my leg beneath the column and roll from my seat.

I fell clear to the back of the ship, which had apparently landed upright. I crashed against a wall of knobs and dials, most of which shattered beneath my weight. The wind exploded from my lungs and I flailed in a panic, certain I would suffocate and die right then. An ironic way to go as I reflect upon it now.

An arm patted my bad shoulder, and Dave whispered “Don’t move.” But I was just regaining my breath, and violently sucked the air back in. My sudden movement preceded my stomach dropping by less than an instant, and the ship was falling again.

“Hold on!” Dave screamed, but the ship came to an abrupt halt before he finished the words.

“Find your sister,” I wheezed, unable to climb in my present condition. “She wasn’t talking.”

I rolled to my side and Dave was gone. I focused on the far side of the ship where light spilled in. Our main hatch broke off in the crash. The opening framed a shimmering landscape broken up in the foreground by large translucent green stones. The terrible beauty of this strange planet cut through the tragedy of it all, and for a moment I didn’t care. Above the bitter smell of singed wreckage rose the sweet fragrance of hewn grass and evergreen. And then it went black again.

A hooded child stood over me when I woke. I remained frozen,

trying to study her face for signs of her intentions, but nothing made any sense. Her body and posture resembled a young girl, no older than nine, but deep, weathered lines of age defined her unnaturally woman-like features. She began speaking in shrill, nonsensical spurts, pausing after each outburst as though waiting for me to answer. I could only stare. That was, until she said “How many of you are there?” in a perfect mimicry of my own tongue.

I raised my hand to silence her, which seemed to work. I explained there were three of us, and that we’d crashed from the traffic sea (I pointed to the sky to indicate the latter). She looked up past the moons, startled at first, then smiled terribly.

“You are human. And I am Voya.”

“Yes,” I think I laughed, more out of fear than relief of her sudden recognition. “My friends. Are they alive?”

“Souxie. Dave.” Voya mouthed the words slowly. “Not here. Follow me. Can you walk?”

“I can,” I said. I did my best to follow Voya out of our ship and through a maze of toppled emerald boulders. As I walked, I kept a safe distance, still unsure of this alien creature leading me away from our ship.

I looked up and saw a rounded wall formed from the same giant stones, ten stories high at least. We crashed inside a translucent silo, as evidenced by the hole high in the wall.

“You’ll need to crawl,” Voya said, which startled me. “Are you understanding?”

I dropped to my hands and knees without answering her (regretting it the moment my shoulder shrieked in protest) and followed the child. I felt I might never return to this silo, so I stopped and looked back at our ship. I didn’t recognize much beyond the hatch opening I emerged from. Torn aluminum and a splayed, tangled skeleton lay crumpled upon a dusty patch of bare ground.

That was when it sank in. We were abandoned on a planet without ship to take us back, and was Souxie even alive? I doubted these child-adult aliens had ships that would hold us, but held onto the notion, hopeless as it seemed.

I hurried as best I could and emerged from the silo, into the night air. The smell of evergreen stung my nostrils. I scanned the horizon beneath the light of two moons—one large like Earth's, the other egg shaped and smaller. I still smell the evergreen when I close my eyes and think hard enough.

Voya asked me something about the smells on Earth, which I ignored. "Where are they?" I asked, and the child walked ahead, expressionless. I followed her around the silo toward the sound of a slow trickle. The trickle grew louder until I could see—beneath a bizarre fountain of ruby spires—the limp figure of my lover Souxie laying on her brother's lap Dave, her eyes closed, face serene.

I ran to her aid as quickly as I could manage, given the pain in my shoulder. Voya veered from her path to the far side of the fountain, but I barely noticed her leave. I don't know that it would've mattered, but I wish I'd paid more attention to the child's movements. As it was, I fell down next to Souxie, ignorant of the flask of water Dave poured into her mouth.

"Souxie," I said as the water spilled onto her shirt. When she didn't answer, I asked Dave if he thought she would live.

"She will, Alex. This water is..." he paused at this, his eyes on Souxie. "Well, it's different." Dave gestured past the first-aid kit sitting by his side, unopened, to the fountain behind us.

"Different how?"

"Her skin was blue. See there?"

Dave pointed to Souxie's fingers, which were indeed blue, and cold when I clasped them with my own. Her shoulder and forearm, however, radiated with the flow of warm blood. Despite the healing

water and her warming skin, Souxie shook violently. This, more than anything that happened since our ship had flown off course, left me feeling helpless, hopeless.

“May I?”

Dave lifted Souxie onto my lap. “Let her drink,” he told me. “She’s said a few words to me, in and out of consciousness mostly. Whenever she wakes, give her the water. If she runs out, refill it in the fountain.”

“Where are you going?”

“You came with a stranger. I’ll find out where we are, and how we can get back to the sea.”

I told him to wait, without knowing what I meant to say.

“I’m here,” he said, a touch of sarcasm in his voice.

“Thanks. I mean it. For helping her.”

Dave smiled then walked away, leaving me with Souxie on the ground next to the fountain. I remember every moment, and could write of it for hours. For what seemed to me a long time, she didn’t fully wake, but gulped the fountain water I offered to her every time she stirred. Her shivering eventually subsided and then, unexpectedly, her eyes opened. I’m sure I cried, though Souxie never spoke of it.

“Souxie.”

She smiled, then traced her finger—still cool to the touch—across my cheek. “Alex,” she replied.

The moment my name had left her lips I pulled her close, a tight embrace I meant to never break. She kissed my neck and then my cracked lips. I tasted the fountain water that still dappled hers. The subtle savor of honeydew melted my mouth and face, and I kissed her harder, until a surge of warmth coursed through my body, my soul, cleansing my thoughts, healing every ache. If Souxie hadn’t pulled away to catch her breath, I would’ve kissed her forever.

"This is my fault, Souxie. If I hadn't—"

Souxie pressed her finger against my lips. "I'm thirsty, Alex."

I forced a smile, but the pain and guilt had already begun to bubble. Souxie sat up on her own as I handed her the newly filled flask. She up-ended the bottle and emptied its contents.

"What a beautiful fountain," she exhaled. "Do you think those are real rubies?"

I turned to look then shrugged.

"Is that where we landed?" she asked, pointing at the emerald silo.

"Our ship's wrecked, Souxie. Dave's talking to a child . . . well, a woman I guess. She found us after we crashed. She speaks our language."

"How did we survive?" A sudden look of worry flashed across Souxie's face, like a child after dropping an ice cream cone.

"I think the stones saved us. I don't really know. Maybe Dave has an opinion." Dave always had an opinion. "Did you see the forest?"

I turned and gestured toward the sparkling treeline in the distance, but stopped dead when I saw the procession approaching. Hundreds of small figures hooded in crimson cloaks glided smoothly toward us, each of them holding a single, flickering light below their faces. Souxie clenched my arm and hid behind me. I searched for Dave and found him a few strides past the fountain, staring at the procession with the same stiff posture.

"Dave, get back here."

But Dave didn't move. Instead, the child-woman Voya appeared from beyond the ruby spires of the healing fountain and strode straight for me. She hushed me with her left hand, then extended her right and pointed to my chest.

An instant later I froze up, my chest went tight, breaths short



and strained. Souxie's hand withdrew from my arm; I wanted to scream, to run, to protect her. But all I could do was stare at the alien child who now balanced our lives on the tip of her finger.

The vice tightened around me until every inch of my flesh became completely immobile. I stood like a statue and watched the children approach in their ritualistic garb, closer and closer. I watched Dave go limp and crumple to the ground. And I watched, terrified, as a cloth sack went over my unmoving face.

The dampness of my tears soaked into the fabric, but still I remained frozen, eyelids, lips, cheeks and brow unmoving. The only thing keeping my body from shutting down completely was the sweet scent of jasmine that mingled with the evergreen: Souxie was close, which was all that mattered to me.

I remember the distant voices whispering indiscernible instructions, and then the twinkling of wind chimes coming from everywhere at once.

I WOKE UP LAST. Souxie and Dave were deep in discussion, both of them wide-eyed, when I made my way to the tree they sat beneath. And what a tree it was! Upon its gnarled branches—where cherry blossoms ought to have grown—clung infinite crystalline stones, reflecting the early sun like a million camera flashes.

I squinted and yawned, ready to join in the conversation, but Souxie rose from the ground and squeezed me so tight I flinched. She apologized, then shifted the subject (an art she'd so eloquently perfected). "Can you believe these trees? How come dad never told us about this place?" Dad meant Souxie's dad, Murphy, Chief Traveler on the traffic sea, and the last man in either galaxy I wanted to face. I worked for him as a Traveler ever since I could hold a

permit. He wouldn't forgive my crashing his ship; he still hadn't forgiven my dating his daughter.

"We're prisoners, Souxie, isn't it obvious?" Dave interrupted the otherwise peaceful line of questioning she'd intended. But he was right.

"Have either of you looked for a way out? Where are the children?" As I spoke the words we all three looked around us in salutation to block out the blinding reflections. The diamond grove shimmered endlessly in all directions, an undulating hall of mirrors dancing in the morning breeze.

It was impossible to discern anything standing in one spot. So we began exploring the grove, and found the trees mostly equidistant from one another and not densely spaced. An orchard of sorts, likely planted for harvesting.

"What did they do to you?" Dave asked me. I told him about the cloth sack, how I went stiff then blacked out. His experience had differed from mine, though it mirrored Souxie's closely. They had both fallen limp, unable to see or hear anything. "It felt like I turned into a puddle of water," he said.

Souxie nodded in agreement as she wandered toward a particularly gnarled tree, its thicker branches forking close to the ground. I remember the look on her face just before she began to climb (sometimes I was sure she was only a child herself). The sound the tree made as she shimmied her way up filled the entire grove with a sweet ringing. Wind chimes.

Souxie was singing from high in her perch when the sound of footsteps drew near. Dave and I froze beneath the tree as the two children rounded us. They kept a wide berth, as though fearing we might strike at them. I recognized Voya's face at once, though not the man-child standing next to her. Neither of them wore the crimson cloaks, and looked rather like farmers in their tattered

pants and soiled shirts. Shame covered Voya's face, while her companion carried a twisted look of subtle loathing.

"This is Jaun," Voya said. "He is my husband, and we have been tasked with guarding the grove to protect you."

"Protect us from what?" Dave asked.

Voya looked up, startled. "Souxie, get down from there! You'll break the diamonds before they are ripe. You could fall."

I looked up in turn, and still remember the wry smirk on Souxie's face. She'd found an opportunity to rebel, and she glowed like a chin-scratched kitten.

"I told you we were prisoners, Alex." I looked at Dave, still confused I believe. The fear in his eyes outweighed the anger in his brow by a large margin, and I wondered whether the children could see it. I took a different approach entirely.

"Nice to meet you Jaun. I'm Alex, this is Dave, and up there," I gestured to Souxie, still gloating in the tree, "That's Souxie. We're from Earth. We veered into your planet's atmosphere by mistake. We'd appreciate a working uplink, a phone, anything."

"This is where you can communicate," Jaun said, his voice slowly drawn and stiff though easy to discern. The confusion on my face must have been evident, for he continued, "The reflections in the blossoms speak to other worlds."

Voya placed a hand on Jaun's shoulder, and finished for him. "Tri says we must not let you leave. He let us choose where to keep you. We bound you here, even though the blossoms have not shone since the Silverbeaks left."

As bewildered as I was, Dave appeared unphased. "Then why bring us here?" he asked. "To torture us? Why capture us at all?"

"Torture you? It has been written that an Earthling will bring the Silverbeaks back. An even trade, so our leader believes."

"And what do you believe?" Dave pressed.

“I *don’t* believe,” said Voya, at which point Jaun raised his hand and pointed at her throat. She clenched her neck, unable to breathe.

“She is done speaking,” Jaun said, lowering his arm. Voya gasped and wheezed. “I have left food at the top of the hill in the middle of the grove. You may fetch your own water from the well at the top. It is possible to see our village from there. You are free to wander, but do not cross the tree line...for your own safety.”

As Jaun finished, Souxie shimmied down from the tree. She walked past Dave and I, up to Voya (who still panted) and placed a hand on her shoulder. Jaun’s arm rose again, and Souxie flew off her feet, skidding hard on the ground nearly two trees away. Dave and I ran to her. She rose up and patted the grass from her pants, then scanned the grove behind Dave and I. We turned to look, and the children were gone.

WE SEARCHED THE grove after Voya and Jaun returned to their village, and found the hill mostly by accident. As we ate and drank next to the well (made of emerald stones like those of the temple where we crashed, only much smaller), we noticed three small round buildings nestled between diamond trees at the foot of the hill.

The tiny huts—made of an iridescent straw material as vivid as a peacock’s plumage—would later become our lodgings. Each hut stood large enough for one, and Souxie quickly declared the one in the middle, declaring “Someone’s got to keep an eye on you two,” as she skipped through the doorway into her hut.

Dave and I exchanged a brief look. Before parting ways to inspect our lodgings, he said in a serious tone, “Either it’s common practice for three strangers to be held in this forest, or these huts

were erected specifically for us.”

I have considered the implication of Dave’s words many times since that day, and wish I’d pressed the children further. My first conclusion: these alien children were extremely adept at construction, and erected these huts overnight. I also considered the theory that they might have known of our arrival even before we did, and prepared our prison camp in anticipation. I found both scenarios unsettling, though neither of them plausible.

We all three napped on beds made of soft sponge, and reemerged simultaneously to find the forest blanketed by the night. Something had to have woken us, a sound probably, though none of us admitted to having heard anything.

The first thing I noticed was the vague rolling clouds my breath had made. Then I saw the thin glints of red bouncing off the infinite crystal blossoms, bathing the forest in a faint red glow. Remembering something Jaun had said, I recommended we have a look at the village from the top of the hill. For a long while after cresting the hill, none of us spoke.

The beauty of what I saw is hard to describe in words. I can only compare it to a grand fireworks display, only instead of sparkling comets flying high into the air, there were countless shooting stars running parallel to a clearing at the edge of the village. When the red glow flickered vermilion, then to purple and emerald green, the diamond grove lit up like a sea of prisms.

Souxie stood atop the edge of the stone well for a better look (against both Dave’s and my own wishes), and had to squint to watch. “What is it?” she finally asked me, to which I’d no answer, for I was thinking the very same.

Dave said, “Remember their candles when they came for us that first night?”

“M-hm,” Souxie answered.

“I think it’s something to do with magic. Like a ritual of sorts.”

As if in response to our piqued curiosity, the pale yellow light streams undulated like bent laser beams then erupted in a pure white bath, lifting off the ground in hundreds of layers to form a giant bird’s head, slowly rotating above the village, ten stories tall or higher. I hold the image close even now, as a haunting a reminder of my failures to the ones I loved.

And then, slice after slice, the bird’s head winked out to black.

I WILL TRY TO recall Souxie’s dream as specifically as I can, for I believe it is important. A few nights after we first saw the vigil from the top of our hill, she ran into my hut, frightened as I’d ever seen her. The nights were cool on Odys, but her dress was soaked with her own sweat. I do not understand many of the symbols in her dream, but perhaps you will find some value in them.

*Her father sits in their den, staring at the firewood popping in the marble hearth. He looks at her suddenly, then hands her a book made of fine mahogany. She is sad at first because she can’t open its pages, then happy once he hands her a reliquary filled with golden emblems. One-by-one, she sticks them onto her book, until its cover reflects the sunny afternoon pouring in from a window she’d not noticed before.*

*He smiles at her then turns to ashes. A sudden gust of wind carries the plumes away, shimmering.*

*She blinks, and finds herself standing alone in a meadow strong with the scent of evergreen. A bird flies onto her shoulder then turns to clay. She strokes the nape of its neck then looks up and sees the sun giving birth. The newborn sun slowly orbits around its blazing parent.*

*Soon, the afterimage of the suns blot her vision with inky specks, twin pools that grow larger until the void engulfs her completely, and she is blind.*

That was her dream as clearly as I can remember her telling it. I have considered the bird on her shoulder, recalling a story Voya told us one day outside our huts. She explained much that day, surely more than Jaun would've permitted.

She explained the significance of their night vigils, how they are intended to lure the Silverbeaks back home. I pressed her to tell us who the Silverbeaks were, and she finally said, "They are who we worship. Gods you might think, but living, breathing gods. Without us, they will die. Without them, our colony will run its course and die as well."

She told us how the Silverbeaks represented fertility—granted it in fact—and how the children had not borne any offspring since the Silverbeaks disappeared one night while they slept. She said, too, that a vision had come to their leader, one where an Earthling returns the Silverbeaks to Odys. I think back to how Voya found joy in our captivity, and in many ways I believe she wanted us to share in her joy.

The nights on Odys were shorter than those on Earth by half. We all three grew weary within the first few days of our capture, and the suns were already beginning to set. Voya left the hill and entered a magenta bath; the blossoms chimed in her wake.

That night, Souxie slept beside me in my hut. We talked about the Silverbeaks. She asked if I thought the children's magic came from their gods, and I told her I did. I told her, also, that I believed they made the diamond trees, an idea Souxie found astonishing.

As I have recounted Souxie's dream, I will include one of my own. This dream came to me that very night—while Souxie nestled her

chin into the crook of my arm. It's hard to say definitively whether the dream was in fact prophetic, or simply a series of naive ruminations.

*I am swimming in deep emerald water, searching. When I reach the surface I don't gasp for air. I squint, and scarcely make out a distant shore. I begin swimming, counting the strokes—one, two, three, and by the tenth stroke I have somehow reached the shore. There is a rocky beach covered with silver feathers. When my feet crunch the rocks, I discover they are not pebbles, but rather a million tiny bird's eggs. Every egg I crack hatches a single chick, shiny and silver and slimy with afterbirth.*

*I stop looking back at the squeaking birds, for something unseen draws me on. I climb a low hill, ever upward, until the sound of the sea is wisped away by a hissing breeze. I eventually turn to see how far I've traveled. Where the emerald sea used to sparkle only silver now shimmers. I realize—to my horror—that every egg on the beach has hatched, every chick grown to human size.*

*The breeze is gone. Silence. I wipe the sweat from my forehead, and find my hand covered in blood and slime.*

*A million naked bodies with the heads of silver buzzards stare in my direction. I feel there piercing gazes might kill me if I don't look away. So I turn to run, and find myself at the edge of a precipice at the end of the world. The sea of birdmen begin to scream behind me.*

*In a desperate attempt to flea, I leap into the bottomless void beyond, and fall forever into utter silence.*

THE MORNING FOLLOWING my dream, I walked out into



the glowing orange grove and found Jaun waiting for me beneath the closest tree. Souxie and Dave were still in their huts. He asked me to accompany him, which I promptly refused. We didn't argue, and he didn't press me further. I'd expected my throat to clench up, or for my body to go limp (as it had with Dave and Souxie) but Jaun only stared.

Then Souxie came to my side. "What's this about?" she asked. I still remember Jaun's smirk after she spoke. He shifted his gaze to meet hers, then extended his arm with his leathery palm facing up. The higher he lifted his hand, the higher Souxie floated off the ground. She was dangerously high before I could react, and by that time I knew that tackling this child would be a mistake. She screamed to be let down, and her voice only intensified when caught by the facets of each of the diamond blossoms.

Had he chosen to torture me instead I wouldn't have conceded to his demands. But with Souxie in a perilous state, I acquiesced, only after she was returned to me safely. Jaun didn't hesitate. He lowered her until she stood again at my side. Then he apologized to her with sincerity, and turned to leave. He was several strides ahead before I parted from Souxie. She told me to be careful and I laughed when she did, though I probably shouldn't have.

At the edge of the tree-line, Jaun stopped. "Hold still," he told me, then dropped onto his knees and traced a path out of the grove. Once he stood outside the trees he rose and turned. "Okay, follow the path to me." The days spent hypothesizing had run its course, for I must have looked like a frightened child as I walked toward Jaun. I crossed the invisible threshold without incident, however, but felt a sudden urge to turn and run back to Souxie, where things had felt safe.

A large clearing stood between us and the village. With the sun at our backs, we walked ahead. I'd made a point not to initiate

conversation, a silent pact Jaun had forged as well, for neither of us spoke until the village was within earshot. What we'd witnessed from atop the hill in the diamond grove did little justice to the curiosity of this small town. A series of small buildings hardly larger than our huts made up the outer edge, each of them stone-built, though the stones shone and shimmered beneath the sun's light.

"This is our village. There are others like this, but ours is the largest. Our leader resides here. None of our villages have names."

The further I examined their nameless village, the less I understood. None of the buildings rose above two stories, but even the most modest sparkled like a priceless jewel. An outer wall made of small emerald rocks lined its perimeter, low enough that I could clear its ridge easily. If the wall had been forged as a means of defense, I could not tell—I saw no watch towers, and until that point I'd noticed no predators roaming the forest.

"Follow me. We are not going into the village but around it."

I can't say why, but this statement comforted me. On their own, there was little reason to fear the children. But their ability to do magic (which is the best way to describe it) created an intimidating air about them.

I followed Jaun along the inner edge of the wall, eyeing the village frequently. None of the children wandered the streets, no signs of life echoed out from the buildings. I realized why this might be just as soon as the answer revealed itself. On the far side of the village, in a clearing no different than the one facing the grove, stood a sea of hundreds of children. They stood in their cloaks, facing away from us as we approached. At the head of the crowd rose a single ruby column, atop which sat a child of equal size garbed in royal blue robes.

"Stay close, Alex."

I realized I'd fallen behind him when I saw the gathering. My

nerves rose to an alarming level, and I skirted the crowd with trembling hands, until I stood next to the ruby column. Once my position was set, a child stepped forward from the crowd to offer Jaun an extra cloak. I noticed (and would've guessed otherwise) that the child was Voya. Jaun left my side and joined the others, all of whom stared not at me, but at the child atop the pillar, which rose just above my head.

Then the child in blue began to speak, though I could not understand the trills and shrieks any better than I might a cat or a horse. Even still, his posturing remained formal, and the onlookers kept an attentive gaze. When he'd finished his address, his eyes locked onto mine. His hooded robe had previously obscured his face up until this point, so I'd not been prepared for what I saw when he turned to face me. If Voya and Jaun appeared forty years of age, then this man must have been a hundred years old or more. Terribly sunken eyes hid beneath his overhung brow, his wrinkles so deep-set that his mouth disappeared when closed.

"Thank you for agreeing to stand before us." I had a mind to argue this gratitude, but held my tongue. "The reason you are here is simple." I looked over to Jaun and Voya, both of whom gazed enamoredly at their leader.

I asked him what the reason had been—as he didn't do so voluntarily—to which he promptly said, "You must describe to us your dream. Many of them can't yet read, and those who can are not always trustworthy." In the corner of my eye, I saw Voya shift her posture. I wondered whether the man in blue noticed as well.

I asked him what he meant, though I believed I knew.

"Your dream . . . the beach, and the Silverbeaks. Please retell it in full, so they may be filled with new hope." He indicated the crowd with a simple gesture.

I must have looked foolish, standing there speechless. My mind

reeled, my stomach sank, and I realized just how little I knew about this planet, and its seemingly clairvoyant inhabitants. I regained my composure. “And what if I refuse?”

The crowd—previously silent as field mice—began to stir. A cool breeze passed over my shoulder a moment later. I felt something electric flood over my body, a whisper of power suddenly stirred to life. I trembled so hard I was sure anyone looking would notice. I could have waved my hand across the crowd, and they would all be killed, as simple as that. I held my restraint, however, as my confidence had not swelled nearly so suddenly.

“Then we will keep you in our village,” their leader replied, “separate from your friends, where our Readers will observe you whenever you sleep. Is that what you desire?”

I’d intended to retell my dream even before I’d asked the question, and only asked it in the hopes of learning more about their ways. I believe I learned much more than that. I faced the crowd and gave them the details of my dream—of which I have already written.

“This is more than I could have guessed,” the child in Blue told me from up high, his eyes wide like the rest of them. “Our Elders will ponder the significance of every detail for days to come.” I think I shrugged, at which point he looked past me and concluded, “You may return him to the grove. But keep a close eye, Jaun.”

Jaun hooked his small arm in mine and led me back to the grove, where I told Souxie and Dave of my encounter. They shared my unease, and we talked further of how to escape. It became harder to sleep after that, and I didn’t dream again.

THE SEASONS PASSED differently on Odys, for the grass remained green and the wildflowers still blossomed, even after the

frost had begun to blanket ground after nightfall. It didn't snow in there, but the nights still stung of ice. Our huts radiated heat, enough at least to keep us warm while we slept. Voya had brought us clothing and bedding early on, close imitations of our cottons and wools, but imitations still.

Souxie and I'd been washing our linens one afternoon when Voya came rushing up the hill. "The Shields!" she yelled as she approached. I told her to slow down and explain. But before we'd learned what the Shields exactly were, Jaun escorted seven massive soldiers toward us, each of them standing five heads taller than Dave (who I indicate for he is two heads yet taller than I). It was the first time I'd laid eyes on a giant of any sort.

Six of the soldiers wore matching navy uniforms with red patches and shiny medals pinned across their chest and arm, while their leader (so I'd assumed) stood a head taller and wore a crimson suit a couple shades lighter than the childrens' cloaks. He wore no medals, and had only one circular patch covering his arm. I'd not seen the emblem before but remember it well. It depicted a black snake curled into a tight spiral against white, over and over, until it met up with a red triangle in the center marking its tail.

I didn't know whether to turn and run or shout joyously that we'd found rescue at last, so I did neither. I believe Souxie shared my quandary, for she dropped our laundry onto the ground and stood at my side with her back slightly arched. The man in red spoke first.

"I'm First Shield Vige, and these are my soldiers. We came here under the assumption that humans had crashed onto this planet. We've spoken with Tri, and he has agreed to allow one of you to accompany us back to our planet, where you will be held under observation while your identities are confirmed."

I looked at Souxie, and saw her gaze locked on Vige. As pale

skinned and dainty as she was, her bravery exceeded mine by a fair amount. "We have not agreed to this," she said evenly. I worried these soldiers might lash out against her, and pulled her closer.

"You want to be free?"

"Yes," I said. "But where are you from? And why can't you take all three of us?"

Vige shook his head. "You're unconfirmed. All of you. Too risky." I realized as he said this that what I took for looks of resolve on the faces of the other soldiers had in fact been those of trepidation, as evidenced by the distance they kept from us both.

"Where's the third?" Vige asked, though not to Souxie or myself but to Jaun.

I interrupted: "He's sick, in his hut. Been retching for two days now," which was mostly the truth. As I spoke, Jaun tugged on Vige's pant seam then beckoned him closer. The giant crouched down to let Jaun whisper to him—a comical sight as I think back on it, though not at the time. I prayed silently they didn't search Dave's hut. Once Jaun had finished, the man-child only stared down. Vige wore a subtle grin and pointed at me.

"You," he said. "What's your name?" I told him, and gave Souxie's and Dave's (which he already had heard) without his asking. I wanted to keep him away from Souxie at all costs. So I spoke out, trying to get ahead of the situation.

"I'll do this," I told him, and Jaun looked startled. Vige remained even-faced, while Souxie suppressed a gasp. "But may I have some time with my friends before I leave?"

Souxie cried then, silently. To my surprise, Vige agreed, stating he had business with the children and would return at sunset to take me away. Souxie and I spent my last hours on Odys talking inside her hut.

"If it will save us, I should do this. It's better to go with them."

“You act like you *want* to go, Alex.”

I told her I did, but only because I knew it would free us, that it would return us home.

“Is Dave all right? I don’t think I’ll see him before I leave.”

She told me he was well, that she’d brought him tea at the edge of the grove, where he’d taken to hiding under the cover of brush to observe the goings on in the village. The day before Vige had arrived, Dave indeed became unwell, and we all believed it was likely food poisoning, that it would soon pass, which it did.

Vige came that evening and took me from the grove. Souxie and I exchanged our goodbyes with tears and promises neither of us could keep with any certainty.

Jaun granted me passage beyond the tree-line, though something in his preparations struck me. The first time I left the forest, Jaun had crawled on all fours, cutting a meticulous path into the clearing, then instructing me to carefully follow that path. This time, he simply waved his hand lazily across an area in front of him, then beckoned us on without slowing.

I realized at that moment—with Souxie back at the hill, probably sobbing over what had transpired—that our captivity had been a falsity, a joke, that there was no binding spell. I wanted to turn and run back to the hill, to scream the truth into the forest, to warn Souxie and possibly Dave. But the seven giant soldiers and Jaun—who had demonstrated he could conjure magic—prevented me from acting out.

Before approaching the soldiers’ ship in the middle of the clearing, I heard a strange whistle calling out from the edge of the grove. I still speculate who or what made that sound, but remember it well, for it was the last sound I would ever hear on that strange planet.