

Astrology Court

Part 01

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FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

Astrology Court awoke next to the only possession in the world that mattered to her: her sword.

The blade of the hand-and-a-half sword that she called Verity was beginning to rust at points, especially around the chips in the edge. The blade was slightly curved forward, getting thicker the farther out it went, then coalescing in a dramatic point. She picked up the sword below the hilt and looked around at the ruined apartment. Only a few feet from her, the rain was still lightly sprinkling on the bare concrete floor. The gaping holes in the wall let in wet air but it gave her some modicum of privacy and security since the door was surprisingly sturdy. The roof overhead was waterlogged and molded at points, but it held. The walls were eroded, but still held the slightest hints of paint and decoration that the elements had not yet stripped.

Astrology rolled up her sleeping pad and affixed it to the bottom of her backpack. The torn lashes she used to tie the blanket were threadbare and would tear before the year was out. Astrology studied the worn fabric for a second, then put the concern away for the time and rose, approaching the nearest hole. She peeked out at the crumbling corpse of an old-world apartment complex that, built against the side of a hill, meant the upper levels were accessible by bridges that had all collapsed. The small gully between the hill and the bottom apartments was a little stream of clean-looking water.

Astrology carefully slipped through the largest of the holes in the wall and looked in either direction, mindful of her every noise. She checked up the hill of thick stones dotted with tufts of wild grass, then ducked low as she darted against the wall opposite the apartment she'd slept in. On the opposite side of the gulley, she peeked up at the hilltop again. This time, she spotted a gallu.

Gallu were flesh-eating things that roamed the wilds of the countryside. Astrology dealt with them rarely, for they never seemed to exist alone. This one was thin and sickly-looking, with yellowish skin and a visible ribcage along with bony limbs. Its lips were gone and its pointed teeth chattered a bit as it looked about. Gallu didn't move like people. There was never any smoothness to their motions. Instead they lurched about in fits and jerks.

Astrology waited for the gallu to turn away, then she rose into a low crouch and hugged the cement barricade that kept the soil of the hill from spilling into the ravine. She moved as quietly as possible, stealing glances back at where the gallu had been, all while keeping Verity ready. She reached the end of the apartment building and checked on the gallu one last time before she darted into the open air of the cement field.

Husks of machines sat neglected in the paved field. Ovals and other oblong shapes, the machines were eroded by rain and wind. Astrology ran past them, keeping an eye back for the gallu. She almost bypassed one vehicle that was little more than a rounded box, catching movement out of the corner of her eye. She backpedaled, only to realize she'd seen her own reflection in a window. Yet when she looked through the transparent glass, she saw a treasure. The rusted heap had managed to survive moderately well, most of the glass still intact. Inside, in the backseat, Astrology saw a pair of military boots. Her breath caught at her good fortune and she looked down at the ankle-high moccasins she currently wore and had almost worn through.

Deciding a gallu was worth the risk, she took Verity and struck the window with the knife pommel, shattering it. She reached inside and grabbed the boots, holding them against her moccasins. She gasped with delight when it appeared like the black boots would fit her. She smiled gleefully and glanced into the vehicle again and saw a camouflage jacket. She grabbed it and bundled up all the larger shards of glass she'd just broken. She checked back the way she'd come, knowing the gallu had heard the clink of glass. She carefully tied her haul in the jacket and she raced on, leaving the apartment complex behind.

An hour later, Astrology was inspecting the glass she had taken from the broken vehicle. She tapped at a piece with a rock, chipping away at it until she'd nicked it into a viable knife-like shape. She took some of the fabric she carried and began to tie off the handle until the tool was secure. She tested the cutting edge of the knife on some blades of glass, pleased with her results. She sat the knife down with a half-dozen of its brethren.

She picked up the last large piece, ready to work on it, when she heard a shriek. She jumped up from the woodland thicket she'd stopped in, grabbing up Verity. She began to turn slowly, surveying the forest devoid of bird or insect, until she heard the shriek again. This time, it came in the form of someone shouting "Help!"

Astrology left her belongings behind and, aided by her new boots that fit like a dream, she charged through the forest. Verity was held up as she ran. She dashed around trees, zipping through the woods like an arrow. She came to the edge of the trees to find a mother and two children at the mercy of highwaymen. Dressed in skins, with half-armor made from animal bones, the two men had torn the mother from her kids, pulling her away as the young children screamed.

With a glance to make sure the two men were operating alone, Astrology stepped out of the forest, her sword visible and ready. She announced with lethal intensity, "Stop!"

The two ruffians froze. Seeing their single interloper, they smiled. The one on the right threw away the mother, tossing her thoughtlessly back onto her children. Astrology pointed her sword at the two men and said, "Off with you." They declined her demand by drawing swords of their own. Each drew out simple falchions from their belts, pounded metal carelessly ground to a blade. Astrology swallowed, worriedly, then took up a stronger stance. She moved onto the more-level ground of the pastoral road and let the men come to her.

Men of opportunity and shock, they did little more than charge, swinging their swords with nothing but strength. The first man, the one on Astrology's right, swung his sword like it was a hatchet. He drew back and ran at a full clip right at her, as though he expected her to stand still for his swing. Astrology let him near and let him swing, letting him mistake muscle for power. The mighty swing rocked Astrology when she blocked and it cost her another fragment of Verity, the meeting of the blades chipping her sword a bit more. After that blocked strike, though, the fight went differently.

Verity didn't have the weight of the falchions but the sword had slightly more range, which helped to offset some of the brigands' reach. Astrology circled the sword around her head with a quick swirl of her hand and struck the man on the side of the arm. Her blade cut deep into his skin, blood billowing out from the wound. She didn't wait for a follow-up strike, but instead riposted at the man's back as he stumbled away, piercing only armor but doing enough damage to cause his animal skins to begin to unravel from around him.

His partner charged at Astrology with almost the exact same attack as the first brigand. Astrology narrowly dodged under the wild swing and slashed from low to high, carving up the man's side from his waist to armpit. It wasn't a deep slash, but it sliced through clothing, armor, and skin, drawing just enough blood to make him back away. The two men gathered together, their swords held defensively. Astrology stood her ground, Verity held at arm's length with the tip pointed at the two men. They growled, scowling, even as they backed away. In only a moment, they turned and disappeared entirely.

Astrology stood her ground until the two men were out of sight, then she slumped to the ground and panted with relief. "Thank you!" yelled someone. Astrology rose and realized she'd completely forgotten about the woman and her children.

The two kids clung to their mother gratefully and fearfully as she said, "Thank you for helping us."

Astrology felt self-conscious and nodded and smiled curtly. She didn't say anything and simply turned to head back into the woods. "Wait," the woman said. "I'm Demora. These are m-my children. H-how can we repay you?"

Astrology stopped and turned back to the woman. "Can you sew?"

"You make knives?" the woman asked as she handled Astrology's pack. Emptied and turned over, the woman was sliding a needle and thread through the straps that would secure her blanket. Already, the lashes looked stronger and more secure.

"I make whatever I can," Astrology said as she pushed another thick stick onto the fire. She turned the spit with a large rabbit and a woodland grouse. She looked out into the woods and asked, "Are you sure your kids are alright?"

"Liam and Audrid know to run if they see trouble," said Demora, focusing on her seams. "This is a dangerous land, but I still want them to explore." Astrology smirked cynically and watched the food cook, unable to will it to cook faster. "Are you heading to the city?" Demora asked as she tugged thread through the backpack strap. Astrology nodded. "We are too. After my husband died, it seemed the best option, though I don't know if they'll have a place for us. If even half of what I've heard about it are true..." She lowered the project and sighed, kind eyes clouded with worry. "I find it hard to believe. Flying machines? Immortality? It can't be real." She resumed sewing.

"I've seen the flying machines," Astrology told her. "Overhead."

The mother chuckled. "My son, Liam, says the same, though when he showed me, all I could see was a thing. Might well have been a bird."

"No, this was in combat," Astrology clarified. Demora looked up, amazed. Astrology sat up and began to unwind the braiding on Verity's handle. She placed the blade across her knees as she worked. "I've seen their ground machines too. I've seen two different walkers." Demora was even more entranced. Astrology proceeded to remove the pommel and gently-molded handle from the sword's thick tang. Lastly came the simple ring where the crossbar should have been, little more than a placeholder. All were rusted, all were well-used. "They are very different from the hollowed-out remains that litter the forests and fields."

"My son has a knife of some quality," the mother suggested, noting Astrology's masterpiece of a sword. "It was left to him by his grandfather, my husband's father."

"Reliable tools are hard to come by," Astrology agreed. She checked the food, then glanced at Demora. The woman looked at her only fleetingly, then averted her eyes. She resumed working. Astrology turned the food, lest from need and more from nervousness. "I've..." she started, stopping herself. "I've heard the, the city is quite a distance."

"Distance doesn't concern me," said Demora. "My family and I can traverse the land easily enough."

"There are other..." Astrology stopped, then verbally lurched forward. "Would you care for some company?"

Demora kept sewing, smiling as she did. "I would like that very much."

Astrology nodded and turned the food yet again. "Good," she said awkwardly.

The first signs that they were approaching the city was the vapor trails in the blue sky. Long stripes of white crossed through the heavens overhead. For two days, they'd seen other travelers periodically but the distinct patterns in the sky were the first indicators that their destination loomed. And then soon after, the roars. There was a distant rumble that swelled and dwindled throughout the day. But it wasn't until they found the road that they saw why.

Along the beaten path, winding through the plains near the seashore, Astrology Court, Demora, and her two children, crested the last hill before the sea would be within sight. And over that hill, they were greeted with the sight of the spanning city.

Built on a great grassy plain between two rivers that had carved through the land and let out into the ocean, the city was made of brick and cement, a long-lost relic of an ancient age. However, in the very center of the city, in the delta that let out into the sea beyond was a massive silver-gray craft of impossibly advanced technology. Gleaming like the sun, the water-based fortress was half the size of the city itself, a massive structure

that dwarfed all around it. Meanwhile, flying overhead, a trio of jets soared through the air, leaving subtle vapor trails in their wake.

Liam and Audrid clung to Demora as they often did but Astrology watched the ships fly past, wary of their vantage. She looked down into the city and the perimeter wall that surrounded it. A single gate was open, where a small crowd of several dozen had already gathered. Evidence of camps around added to the sense of crowding. She turned to Demora, about to speak, when a pair of shuffling vagrants passed them. Astrology let them pass, then asked Demora, "Certain are you that this is where we should go?"

"This is clearly the city," Audrid told Astrology.

"True," Demora acknowledged of her elder child, "But Astrology wishes to make certain we are prepared. That we will behave." She added a look at Liam. He smiled and blushed simultaneously. Demora turned to Astrology and nodded as confidently as she could.

"Very well," said their guardian, turning for the city.

Down the road, at the single gate that operated, they spotted guards. Three figures stood at the gate, accompanied by a large hulking robot. "What sort of humunculous is that?" asked Demora. Astrology simply shook her head before she started down.

After crossing an ancient stone bridge, the four approached the gate at the eastern portion of the city. One of the two humans was directing people into a line on the right side of the road, calling less instructions and more placating directions. Once she spotted Astrology approaching, however, he turned around and called ahead. From the front of the line stepped a woman in identical gray-and-white camouflage. She saw Astrology, and specifically the sword at her side, and left the line behind. Nearing, she called ahead. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but I need you to hand over your sword." The others in line, all refugees like the family, turned and watched the exchange warily.

Astrology came still and stood tall. "I'll not hand it over," she informed the woman.

The soldier didn't back down and told her, "We don't allow weapons within city limits." She gestured to the camp of a dozen or so tents. "You can stay out here if you like, but if you and your family want to come inside, the sword doesn't come with you."

Audrid and Liam looked at each other. "Family?" said the girl. She grinned and looked up at Astrology and her mother.

Astrology glanced to the soldier's belt where a pistol was holstered. "You've one; am I to trust you and not you me?" The soldier readied a response and Astrology added, "From what I've heard of this city and its denizens, you are strangers to my world, and yet I am to relinquish my weapon?"

The soldier was unabated. "Yes," she made clear with a teacher's certainty. "If you want to go into the city, you will."

Demora turned to her guardian, to speak, but Astrology insisted, "I'll give away this sword to no one." She held it at the hilt, steadying herself to draw if necessary.

The soldier, rather than argue, turned her head to the side. She tapped a control on her belt and said, "Sir, this is the main gate. We've got an issue." She spoke into a small patch on her shoulder. She faced Astrology and gestured to the left side of the road. "Please wait right here. I'll let you take this up with my commanding officer." Astrology didn't have the chance to affirm or decline, the soldier turned back to the line and began processing people.

Demora knelt down to her children, to calm them if needed. Astrology eyed the large machine behind the two other soldiers. Bipedal and with long robotic arms, it set a pair of glowing eyes on her, as though staring her down. She made a show of slowly turning away, like the machine was of no concern to her.

After more than a dozen refugees had passed through the gate and almost twice that number had arrived to wait in line, a new soldier appeared. Noticeably older and more seasoned than the veritable girl in the uniform at the gate, he approached the situation with considerably more calm. "Private, what seems to be the problem?"

The soldier snapped to attention and saluted. "Sir!" she called robotically. The CO just waited her out. "Sir, those refugees showed up but that one will not relinquish her weapon."

The commander glanced over at Astrology and Demora waiting a few meters away. Audrid and Liam were in the field, playing with some other kids from the tents. The senior officer took one look at Astrology and smirked. "The weapon ban is for something overt."

"It's a sword, sir," said the private.

"Yes it is," said the officer with some thought. He started to leave and the private snapped another salute. "Yeah," he waved her off. He approached Astrology and Demora and gave them a friendly half-wave and flashed a smile. "I'm Corporeal Roger Daniels. United Terran Navy. What brings you to Mech...Mecc..." He turned to the private and called, "How is this place pronounced again?"

"Sir! Mech'la, sir," she called back like he'd been quizzing her.

"Mech'la?" Corporeal Daniels asked Demora and Astrology.

"My children and I seek safety and to earn a wage," answered Demora with a respectful nod. She glanced at Astrology. "I do not speak for my companion." Daniels looked to Astrology.

"I seek to sell wares and to see if the stories of your miracles are true," she told him with an assertive glower.

Daniels nodded, chewing on his cheek. He looked Astrology up and down, from her new combat boots to utility belt, and especially the sword. "What sort of wares?" he asked, scratching under his white-and-gray camo cap.

Astrology drew out one of the glass knives she'd fashioned recently. She handed it to Daniels who inspected the glass blade, more impressed with the ingenuity than the quality. "Huh," he declared before handing it back to her. "Yeah, that's...that's something." He exhaled and thought, clicking out of the corner of his mouth. "I think, uh, I think the city would..." He stopped talking as Audrid and Liam ran over.

"Mommy, can--" Liam fell absolutely silent when he noticed Daniels. He latched onto Demora's leg, almost toppling her. Audrid half-hid behind Astrology, a little to her surprise.

Rogers chuckled and asked Liam, "And what of you? What brings you to the city?"

The little boy didn't come out from behind his mother to say, "Food, sir."

"Yeah, ain't that the truth," concurred the corporeal. He wiped his face. He was about to say more when he turned his head abruptly. He listened as if to the sky for a second, then touched a control on his belt. "This is Daniels. Acknowledged. I'll be there in twenty." He faced Astrology. "I think we can--" He snapped quiet except for a sour look. "I'm at the Eastern Gate, dealing with a new resident," he said into his earpiece. "I'll be there asap." He shook it off. "Sorry." He took off his cap and wiped down a

shaved head. "Look, I think maybe we can make an allowance here. Keep the sword sheathed, don't carry it out for social events, and I think we'll be fine. Sound good?"

Astrology felt her hackles rise but she glanced at Demora and the kids. Reluctantly, she nodded. "Great!" Daniels said with a smile, like that agreement was a bigger victory than it seemed. "Let's see about getting you all set up, huh?" He gestured for them to follow him. Demora and Astrology shared looks; Astrology worried, Demora encouraged. They followed Daniels through the door with scarcely a nod to the private who had stopped them. Astrology did eyeball the giant robot, however.

Daniels led them down a city street of eroded cobblestone and chipped ceramic pipes. The stone buildings around them were cracked and breaking, yet people were shuffling about. A restaurant had opened, a man at the grill manning food as several groups ate inside.

"This doesn't look like any city I've seen," Demora told Daniels as she followed him. "How did you let it end up like this?"

"We're still...sorting things out," Daniels told her with a certain smile.

"This isn't your city, is it?" Astrology asked, her hand resting on the handle of her sword. "These are ruins, like so many others." She looked at the giant ship that had docked in the delta at the mouth of the ocean. They passed right at the cusp of its shadow. "You've merely claimed it."

"Like I said," Daniels said back to her, "We're still sorting things out." He led them on through the bustling streets.

Astrology stepped through the rounded doorway first, her sword not drawn but her fingers curled around the handle. She entered the large room with small outcroppings that formed alcoves but not truly private rooms. The walls were smooth stone, the jagged edges of weather erosion barely noticeable, even to the touch. She inspected the shell-colored walls and the seams of the entryways as Demora and her children entered, followed by Corporeal Daniels.

The military man took off his white-and-gray cap as he entered and he waved his hand over a small square of color right by the door. When he did, an alcove in the roof lit, casting soft light through the apartment like it had opened up to the sunlight.

"This is to be ours?" marveled Demora, her steps clacking on the slate floor. Her steps kicked out a few pebbles that were loose on the colorful mosaic beneath their feet. "This is incredible."

Daniels chortled. "Glad you think so." He went over to the single window by the door and opened it by pushing two shutters into the daylight. "I'm really digging this place thus far. I mean, it's old but it's really sturdy."

"But what will this cost us?" Demora asked as she inspected an alcove. She slid her hand along the smooth stone, unsure if it had been sculpted or expertly chipped.

"We're still working that out," Daniels told her, not being coy but genuinely uncertain. "I think the plan is that we're going to do a skill allotment? Since we established our control of the city, we've been trying to allocate resources properly. You're going to need a job, a skill to provide to the community at large. But you'll also received the benefit of the city. It's got a water system that our engineers say they can get up and running. We're going to have centralized food processing. Plus your children will have access to schooling."

Astrology and Demora both turned at that, mouths hanging open. "They are to learn to read?" asked the swordswoman. She looked cautious but Demora seemed to beam at the mere suggestion.

Daniel paused at the window, not sure how to read the room. "Read, write, arithmetic, all of it, I guess. The civilian liaison office still needs to get the curriculum ironed out."

"But no cost," said Astrology with a guarded tone. She looked pensively to Demora, but the mother smiled reassuringly to her.

Daniels could only shrug. "I dunno, sorry. We'll be meeting with everybody and revisiting agreements and stuff as we understand the process and as we figure out this crazy world. But I mean, you're here. We're not going to just chuck you out. You'll be issued a job if you cannot provide a trade or skill that we need."

"So I will work for our housing," Demora deduced.

"Yes," Daniels said with a little hesitancy. "I mean, it's a dialogue. We won't like force you. We'll, you know, give you a list or something." His head jerked to the side as his attention went far off. He listened for a moment, then nodded. He touched the control on his belt and said, "Daniels, understood. I'm on my way." To Astrology and Demora, he said, "Excuse me." He rushed through the door, shouting, "See you, kids."

"Be safe!" called both Audrid and Liam, the two in different alcoves of the apartment.

Demora smiled at the exchange, then looked at Astrology. She turned back to their new home and considered it. "It's wanting for light, but not too bad."

"I'm not sure I am comfortable staying in a city commandeered by these visitors to our world," she told the mother.

"It's a relic, like so many others," Demora told her. "Why should those from elsewhere have any less claim?" She held up the badge that Daniels had given her. "Besides, their devices seem closer to the city's magic than our own technology."

Astrology didn't argue but her confidence in others didn't allow her to feel optimistic. She turned and found Liam claiming an alcove off the main room. It was a small space, but had a shelf in the wall long enough for him to crawl into and use as a bed. He smiled at Astrology and patted the shelf.

Astrology was unable to resist the boy's enthusiasm and she came and sat on the space. The stone was unforgiving but there was enough room for her to sit and she considered the space that they had been issued. "I like this," Liam told her, a youthful pitch to his voice. "I wonder if we'll be able to find some--"

He was cut off when there was a knock on the door. Daniels leaned back inside, waving harmlessly at Demora. He glanced around and spotted Astrology. "Hey," he said to her with forced neighborliness. "So, about that job stuff. But, uh...funny story..."

The sailor turned the handle on the door and pushed it inward. He held it open for Astrology and nodded to her, adding a crisp but quiet "Ma'am." The dark-skinned woman looked warily at the young man as she passed him to enter. Corporeal Daniels passed through the door behind her, echoing the sailor's salute.

Before Astrology was a sweeping room with glass windows on the far side. Three stations were positioned near the windows, looking out into the pristine ocean sky beyond the city. At the rear of the room, to Astrology's left, were four more stations attended to by personnel in different uniforms. At the three forward stations, sailors in matching uniforms were speaking in low and professional tones into headsets. They all afforded her barely a glance as they continued about their responsibilities.

At the very center of the spacious bridge, a seasoned man turned from a half-console. Between him and Astrology was a table built up from the floor, lights gently beamed out from its surface. Several men and women stood around it, each of them wearing different uniforms. All of them stood up to some attention as the man at the center of the situation room left his console and approached. "Good morning," said the man with the most pronounced rank decorations on his shoulders. "I'm Admiral John Freight." He extended his hand. "You must be Ms. Court."

Astrology looked at the seven around the table and wasn't sure why she was intimidated, but her fear bothered her. The six who stood with the admiral eyed her with varying levels of distrust, some openly hostile towards her very presence. "I am Astrology Court," she confirmed for the admiral. She shook his hand. "I understand that you are the one who has had me summoned."

Admiral Freight smiled a bit sheepishly. "I think 'your expertise is being sought' would be a better descriptor." Unlike the others, he didn't seem put off in the slightest to have her present in the command center. "This vessel is the Harriet Tubman, flagship of the United Terran Defense Forces' Navy. I'm the ranking officer."

Astrology looked at the others around the table warily. Most watched her like wolves would watch prey. She asked Freight, "What do you seek of me?"

Freight took a step back from her and joined the others around the table. He readied to speak and noticed she hadn't followed. "Would you join us?" he asked, gesturing to an empty space between him and a woman in a dark green uniform.

Astrology approached, only to discover the surface of the island table was glowing. Bright colors contrasted, blue and green mostly, with yellow lines and red dots sprinkled in the very center. She had seen screens like this but never up close and never ones that still functioned.

"This is a topographical readout of the immediate area," Freight explained to her. "It's based off our sensory systems. It seems pretty good but without satellites, we can't get much more information. We understand that you've been vouched for by Corporeal Daniels. He happened to mention," said the admiral cautiously, "that you seemed quite capable of handling yourself. He got the impression that you might be a decent explorer, what with your background as a..." The admiral failed to find an appropriate word. "...how shall we say, survivalist." Astrology looked at those around the table, surveying them like she might a pack of wolves across a river bank. Aware of the stare but not acknowledging it, Freight

continued. "You are, of course, free to decline the offer. We will then hire another person with less experience and less skill, but who will no doubt serve the purpose."

Astrology considered for a moment, looking down at the table that was glowing at her. She considered the casting light and re-appraised those around the table. Taking into account the light source, she entertained the notion that their expressions weren't aggressive or condescending, merely intent. They were listening to her. She looked down coolly at the table. "Is this to be my employment? The exchange that I provide for my room?"

Freight turned exaggeratedly to one of the men to his right at the table. Dressed in clothes different from the others, his was a black suit jacket which he wore over blue denim pants. "It could be, but we're still working that out," said the man. He gave it some thought. "So, I guess, um...yes?"

Freight repeated, "We're still working that out. Right now, though, we need help. Can we rely on yours?" he told her. "Daniels seemed very impressed with you and, quite simply, we're trying to make friends."

Astrology glanced down at the glowing map. She studied it rapidly for a moment when she noticed an inconsistency. She checked Freight's face and he still stood patiently and at ease. She looked at the map again and offered, "Your map is inaccurate."

"How so?" Freight asked.

Astrology reached for the map, then looked around the other senior officers around the display. She reached to the very center of the map and touched the major red dot in the very center. "This is—" The screen zoomed in and she recoiled in shock.

"It's okay," Freight told her, hitting a button on the screen to return it to the previous image. "Please, continue."

Astrology was hesitant but did so. "This is the city," she speculated, pointing at the red dot, careful not to touch it again. Freight nodded. "And this is the alcove," she asked, pointing to various features. "This is the coast." All of this, Freight confirmed silently. "There is a peninsula here," Astrology reported suddenly, having finally orientated herself. She waved her finger around the land north of the ship.

"An outcropping into the ocean?" asked one of the other senior officers. He was a wiry man without any hair or even eyebrows. He wore darker attire than all the others, a slate gray outfit that blended with shadows with

great ease. "Why wouldn't our sensors have picked it up?" he asked rhetorically to the others.

"Sensor abnormalities are happening all the time," reported a scruffy looking man with several days' worth of growth. "This place is wreaking havoc with everything from digital confirmations to sonar and radar. Hell, wireless speakers and headsets are picking up weird static."

"Well, we are on an alien planet," said one of the other women. A few of them smirked at her joke but no one laughed. Military gruffness surrounded the table.

"Thank you, that's exactly the kind of intel we're hoping for," Freight explained with a considerate smile at Astrology. His professional but genuine-seeming friendliness unnerved her. "I wonder if you would be willing to take some of my men to investigate this...omission from our sensors?"

She seemed a little insulted. "It is little more than a few leagues down the coast; they will find it with no trouble."

Freight nodded, almost as an apology. "Let me rephrase: would you be willing to escort my men so that they can report back to me your cooperative abilities?" His friendliness didn't disappear but his carefully-selected words of diplomacy were replaced with militaristic frankness. He told her even more bluntly. "This is a job interview."

Astrology drew back, surprised by the ease with which he navigated so different of tones. Slowly, a smile curled at her lips. She looked at the screen, though little more than being drawn by the light. "Please forgive me," she said genuinely, speaking candidly for the first time. "I will escort your men. I will show them the peninsula, so that they may report my cooperativeness."

"Thank you," Freight told her. "Corporeal," he called to Daniels. He stood at attention crisply. "Please escort Ms. Court back to her residence and make sure she has everything needed." To Astrology, he told her, "When you're ready, you'll be going with Captain Gonzalez. She's captain of this boat's primary exploratory team."

"Yes sir," Daniels told the commander quickly. He approached Astrology and said with a nod, "Shall we?"

Astrology said nothing, only turned. She followed Daniels out, glancing over her shoulder at the others around the table that she hadn't been introduced to. They watched her go until the door was shut. Freight went to a phone by the table and pulled up the receiver. He listened for a

second before saying, "Stevens, this is Freight. I'm sending the scout to you. She says there's a geographical anomaly north of here: a peninsula that's not showing up on our map. Have her go with Gonzalez' team and check it out." He hung up. Returned to the map, he stared at the geography.

The man from earlier, with a shiny head and dressed in dark gray approached his side. "Admiral, I think we need to vet her more thoroughly. We're on an alien world and we don't know how we got here. I don't think we're in a position to trust a local so casually."

Across from him, one of the women in an Army uniform nodded. Admiral Freight noticed and asked, "You concur?"

She began to speak, hesitated, then nodded. "Far be it for me to dispute the admiral's decisions, and..." She stared for a moment at the man in dark gray, "I don't care to be on the same side as Central Intelligence, but I concur that were this my ship, I would be playing things much closer to the chest."

Freight nodded. "I understand." He added quickly, "Thank you, both of you." To the table as a whole he added, "We're out of our depths here. And I welcome timely input, especially from the various branches who are present on this mission, whether that be by orders or by happenstance. But we must include locals in that discussion. This is their world, after all. And we have to trust these people. And while trust is earned, without the opportunity to earn it, we'll never get it."

Demora was inspecting a paper page when Astrology returned. The door opened abruptly and Demora saw Corporeal Daniels standing outside. Astrology stepped inside, not rushing but moving with intention. Demora turned from the sheet, the apartment quiet. "What's happening?" Astrology froze in mid-step, taken aback by the question. Demora rose from the seat they had procured and bowed her head slightly. "I'm glad you are returned," said the mother with a bit more formal greeting. "How did your summons turn out?"

Astrology hesitated for a second, uncomfortable. She started to walk on, stopped, started again, then turned to Demora. "They...they wish me to operate as a guide for them." She went into the main bedroom and retrieved her sword Verity from beside her bedroll. "I am to lead them to the peninsula north of the city, so they may update their maps."

Demora stood in the doorway, leaning against it for support. "You sound pensive."

"I believe this is a trap," said Astrology, her voice low as if she was being watched by a predator. "Whether it is for me, or for them, I do not know, but this task seems too simple. Ergo, I fear it may be dangerous." She froze suddenly and listened. The silence finally registered and she asked quickly, "Where are your children?"

"An instructor from the school came by," Demora told her. "She said they were..." She could see Astrology was only partially following. "They are fine. They are in school."

A strange pain entered Astrology's mind but she pushed it aside. Finishing her preparations, she was dressed once again like she had been when she'd first met Demora, as a traveler ready for anything and everything. "I am off," she told the woman.

Astrology was halfway out the door when Demora said, "I hope you will return safely." She turned back and looked to Demora, who stole a glance at her, then went back to reading the print-out. Astrology lingered in the door for a moment, then pushed out.

The elevator doors parted and Astrology was hit with a burst of hot, smoky air. She fell back half a step, catching herself with her hand already at her sword handle. The private escorting her reached to catch her, but her razor glare kept the man at bay. Through the doors was the bright light of the loading deck at the top of the Tubman. Two aerial fighters were being prepped for launch. Their massive size undermined their sleek bodies as their engines warmed, the loud roar filling the air. A dozen airmen and soldiers jogged about on their duties, crossing paths with only centimeters to spare.

For a moment, Astrology lingered in the elevator, truly stunned by the overwhelming noise and movement. Louder and busier than she had ever witnessed, she could scarcely process what she was seeing. The private turned back to her and tried to calm her, but it was the chiming of the elevator doors that finally forced Astrology out.

"First time on a flight deck?" the private asked with a cheap smile. Astrology said nothing.

The private led her over to the northern side of the ship's deck where two olive-drab jeeps waited, a large all-purpose vehicle just beyond them. A tawny-skinned woman in camo pants and a green tanktop slipped out of the

jeep and approached. "Astrology Court?" she called over the sounds of wind and jet engines. Her eyes were hidden behind the black lenses of sunglasses. "I'm Captain Ezra Gonzalez. I'm leading the expedition." Astrology shook hands with her uncertainly, barely able to even hear her. "We've got a hundred-kilo drive ahead of us, but I'm planning to be back by sundown. Think that's possible?"

Astrology didn't seem to hear her, instead looking as a jet broke into the air. Ezra turned and saw, then checked with the private. "Inform the admiral that we're good and I'm heading out. We're on Channel Two, in case they get the communications up and running."

"Yes sir," the man said, snapping a salute. Ezra turned to Astrology and gestured her towards the nearer jeep.

Astrology got into the large armored vehicle, unsure what to make of the cushioned seats and the computer interface on the dashboard in front of her. The jeep was cleaner than anything she'd ever seen, yet it also bore signs of combat, including dents caused by weapons' fire. Ezra swung into the rear seat behind Astrology as the driver shifted the jeep forward. The trio of all-terrain vehicles kicked into motion and descended a steep ramp that headed down the side of the aircraft carrier, heading towards the sandy soil just beyond the beach.

As they drove, Ezra unfolded a paper printing of the territory. "As I understand it, you are guiding us towards the north along the shore, to a peninsula, correct?" When she didn't get a response, Ezra leaned up through the seats. Astrology looked to her and Ezra said, "I know this is a bit much, but can you give me some intelligence of what we're heading into?"

Astrology struggled to focus but she managed. "This should be a very simple trek," said Astrology. She looked out the front window and grabbed onto the door handle as she processed the speed of their travel. "There is little in the way of meaningful obstruction." She closed her eyes for a moment, adjusting to the velocity.

Ezra sat back and looked out the window as well. "That's what I like to hear. I like easy jobs."

The path along the beach was winding, with the edge of the shore working its way in and out, towards the land, and then pulsing back the other way. The few paths the trio of military vehicles found were meant for wagons and pack animals, not the wheeled jeeps that tore through the dirt. The sky overhead was vibrant and clear. The wind whipped against the

open windows as the jeep rumbled along. In the passenger seat, Astrology bounced a bit, the driver calling, "Sorry."

"Do you get over to the beach much?" Ezra asked, checking the GPS unit on the jeep's computerized systems. She slapped it on the side, jostling Astrology's seat. "Is this thing recording or not?" she asked herself.

"I avoid the open," answered Astrology, speaking up over the engine and the travel. She looked behind them through the rear window, at the second jeep and the larger vehicle at the back. "There are dangerous things in the water."

"You mean like sharks?" the driver asked as he twisted the steering wheel to avoid a dip in the dirt road.

"I don't know what that is," Astrology told him.

"It's like a missile made of teeth," said the driver. The description didn't help.

"They may not have those on this planet," said Ezra.

"I thought we were supposed to minimizing talking about other worlds," asked the driver, looking at his captain in the rearview mirror. The captain just dismissed him sarcastically with a wave of her hand and series of noncommittal grunts.

The caravan of three jeeps kept on, hugging the edge of the land, traveling right where soil began to turn to sand, the ocean to their left and barren meadows with spots of trees to their right. Overhead a plain sky endured, with gray clouds slowly moving in from the ocean. After an uneventful hour, the horizon changed a bit. An outcropping into the ocean appeared in the distance, prompting Astrology to sit forward. "We're here," she announced.

Ezra noted and sat forward. She activated a camera in the jeep's dashboard before she picked up a radio unit. "Eyes open," she said into the mic.

Unlike the waving motions of the shoreline, the peninsula jutted abruptly and unexpectedly out from the land, as though it had been poured, not eroded by time. The ground was bare of grass, the exposed soil still vibrant and fresh as if freshly excavated. Curiouser than that, however, was the large stone tower at the farthest point. Several times taller than a person, the five-sided obelisk stood on a flat stone pedestal, without etching or decoration. A plain stone construct, it stood at the end of the peninsula like some concrete imitation of a lighthouse.

"What's that?" asked Ezra, of the obelisk at the farthest point of the peninsula.

"I do not know," said Astrology. She opened the door of the jeep and leaned out as the jeep slowed. "Whatever that is," she warned, "it's not a thing of either nature or the make of hands."

Ezra looked out the window, asking, "What options does that leave us?"

"Options that should inspire caution," Astrology told her. She hopped off the jeep's runner and drew her sword, Verity. Leaving the three vehicles behind, Astrology began to walk up the shore of the peninsula. Behind her, Ezra got out, clipping closed her tactical vest. She gestured with her hands to the soldiers that got out of the second jeep and the transport. No words were said as the forces fanned out around the mouth of the peninsula.

Astrology approached the obelisk like she would an armed foe. Just a few meters off to either side, the white ocean water crested against the fresh ground, carrying away fragments of soil. Not unlike the way the soles of her boots kicked up the hard-packed dust and fragments of clay. She made it halfway down the peninsula then glanced back to see what the others were doing. A team of seven soldiers were behind her, led by Ezra. The soldiers all carried automatic weapons in-hand but not readied. Astrology didn't know the gun's function or feature but she knew a weapon when she saw one. She left them to their defensive dispersal and kept walking.

Ezra walked a bit faster than her team to join Astrology as they neared the obelisk. "Have you ever seen anything like this?" asked Ezra as their strides aligned.

"I have not," Astrology told her, taking in the obelisk as much as the ground itself. "I knew a peninsula was here, but not like this. This looks...new. Freshly made." She shook her head, unnerved. Astrology turned to Ezra and said, "I've seen many things, but land from nothing?" She shook her head worriedly.

"That's not worrisome at all, but I more meant the mini-Washington Monument there," said Ezra. "Are my people in danger?"

"To live is to be in danger," Astrology told her as she cast a watchful glance to the ocean.

"Are you being deliberately obtuse, or is today just Double Attitude Day?" Ezra countered.

Astrology arrived at the obelisk and for a moment considered it. It was a large stone, not quite sculpted but too uniform in shape to be natural. The dark gray stone was edged on five sides, rising to a point that stood above the ground more than three times her height. Astrology reached out with the blade of her sword. She tapped the stone quickly and stepped back. The metal clang was unremarkable and faded into the noise of the surf and the wild ocean wind.

"Astrology, what's going on?" Ezra asked, her casual demeanor from the drive fast fading for militaristic attentiveness.

"I don't know what to think," said their scout. She looked passed the obelisk into the cloudy sky and listened. "I don't know what this is nor where it came from nor who may have placed it here."

Ezra looked at the obelisk for a moment, then turned to her team. "Alright, gather some soil samples," she told them. "Take some readings and then I want us to—"

The driver of Ezra's jeep pointed to the north, out over the ocean. "Incoming!"

Astrology and the soldiers turned as one to see something moving beneath the gray clouds. In the distance, it was hard to distinguish the movements of the beach breeze and the swirling of low clouds but as the visual texture neared, it was clear something was moving deliberately and against the wind.

"Okay, back up, back up," Ezra told her team, moving them closer together. She reached out and grabbed the motionless Astronomy and pulled her into the group. Astronomy didn't resist, but focused entirely on the approaching targets.

What descended from the sky was neither natural nor constructed. A sphere of soil descended, surrounded by swirling wind. The whirling air was so rapid and intense, the distortion it caused was visible even from a distance. The twisting and turning air flew down to the obelisk and stopped at head-height, right between the soldiers and the obelisk. "What is that?" Ezra asked as her soldiers watched it from behind the barrels of their machineguns.

"I have no idea," Astrology told her. She looked above and remarked, "but it isn't alone."

Ezra looked up as well and saw a dozen or more of the incorporeal spheres of air above them. Without any distinguishing features, merely

clumps of clay and air, there was nothing distinct about them. "Captain?" asked one of her soldiers.

Ezra began to back up and her soldiers did the same. She tapped her radio and reported, "This is Captain Gonzalez, north of the Tubman. We have bogeys. Repeat, we have aerial bogeys. UFOs of small size. We are unsure of their intentions but they may be—" Lightning shot from the sphere, striking the ground right by Ezra. "Correction, we have hostiles! We are under attack!" She ripped her gun to the ready and fired a quick burst. The shots were true but the bullets passed right through the cascading air, only to be caught in the tumult and spun back at the soldiers on the peninsula. The bullets struck the ground near her, kicking up plumes of dirt as Ezra backed up. "Retreat, retreat!" she yelled.

Astrology did the opposite. She rushed ahead and the swirling wind shifted as she neared. It recoiled but not fast enough. Drawing back her obsidian blade, Astrology slashed through the clay at the very center of the disturbance. The air burst like a pocket of vacuum and Astrology was thrown back. She landed on her feet as more strikes of lightning came from the spheres of air overhead. The crackling energy struck the loose soil about her, kicking up debris and dust but the erratic blasts managed to arc away from her.

Ezra grabbed Astrology's shoulder and yanked her back away from the obelisk, shouting orders to her team the whole time. Astrology was pulled, zaps of lightning striking the ground around them. One pod of air dropped between them and the rest of Ezra's team but Astrology slashed at that pod. The clay sphere ruptured in two and the air burst again.

"Come on!" Ezra yelled, trying to yank Astrology away.

"We can't let these demons live," Astrology yelled back at her.

"The cavalry's coming!" screamed Ezra.

"The what?" Astrology hollered back, just before they heard death from above.

A hellish rumble filled the air. Astrology looked up, even as Ezra pulled her away. Puncturing through the dark clouds, two jets dropped out of the sky. Sleek and narrow, the flying blades aimed right at the peninsula. Astrology barely had the chance to process the sight of flying machines before each jet let fly with a pair of missiles. Streaking through the air with rapid trails of smoke, Astrology heard over Ezra's radio, "JAGMs are go." She saw the missiles pass right by the flying dervishes, and an instant later, she knew only light before she lost consciousness.

Astrology awoke, sitting up abruptly. She grabbed for her sword but found it nowhere nearby. What she did find was the roof of the jeep. Banging her head, Astrology fell back onto the bench seat and grabbed her forehead. "Hey, guess who's awake?" said the team medic. He leaned over and brushed Astrology's hands aside to inspect the impact site on her forehead. "Yeah, that's gonna bruise." He patted her on the shoulder and said in a paternal tone, "Walk it off."

Astrology dismissed his concerns and sat up just as the jeep leveled out onto the tarmac of the Tubman's landing platform. "What happened?" she asked, keeping her panic at bay.

"The birds turned that obelisk to glass," the medic explained as he opened the door as the jeep stopped. He got out, Ezra getting out as well. "She'll be fine," he reported with medical callousness.

"Does she have a concussion?" asked the captain.

"Pssh, probably," the medic said, walking off.

Ezra watched him depart, a little dumbfounded. She turned as Astrology got out. The captain sighed and asked, "How're you feeling?" Her tactical vest already hanging open, she tugged open her uniform shirt to expose the tank top underneath.

"I'm alive," said Astrology. She squinted in the bright light of the ship's landing area. Despite the attack, soldiers and airmen were continuing with their tasks. Life was going on, so many people walking to and fro. Ezra's team of soldiers were disembarking from their vehicles, tactical kits carried in-hand as they headed into the ship. She and the captain were the last two with the vehicles. "What was that light?" Astrology asked.

"Joint Air-to-Ground missiles detonated at way too close of range," Ezra summarized. "I'm off to debrief the Admiral, including tearing the flyboys around here a new one."

"How can they be so flippant about their own people?" Astrology asked, glaring at the nearest fighter jets.

"With great ease," Ezra complained, mostly to herself. "It's not deliberate, just...look, we have six militaries and a dozen uniform services operating on this boat. There's bound to be friction."

Astrology finally declared, "I don't understand you people."

"Yeah, well, you ain't alone," Ezra assured her. She could still Astrology's hesitancy and put a hand on her shoulder. "Look, everybody survived. I'm calling that a win." She searched Astrology's eyes for a second and asked, "You okay?"

"I am fine," Astrology insisted, caustically.

"Okay, but tomorrow, I want you to come down to the medical bay and have them check you out," Ezra told her. "There's going to be debriefings tomorrow, I'm sure. You'll be asked to be there. Just because you're civilian doesn't mean you'll escape it. Debriefings, mission reports, all that fun stuff." Ezra clapped her on the shoulder and chuckled. "Get some sleep." She walked passed, leaving Astrology on the deck.

The door of the apartment opened and Astrology was greeted with the scent of beans and tomato. She entered apprehensively, only to discover the children on the floor of the main room. Both had flimsy books open and pens in their hands. "Where did you get those?" Astrology exclaimed, terrified of the children damaging the books.

"From the school," Liam told her cheerfully.

Astrology froze. "The wh-what?"

"School," repeated Demora. Astrology looked up and saw her at the kitchen entrance. She was wearing denim pants Astrology had seen some of the off-duty soldiers wearing. "They have a school." Astrology looked at the kids again, then at Demora. "The children, they both went. All the children go and they were all issued books. Told to...to play."

"Play?" Astrology repeated.

Liam leapt up. "See here?" He showed Astrology a grid created by lines. Several of the boxes in the grid held numbers. "You try to make all of these numbers add up to the same thing."

Astrology looked at the grid, then at Demora. The woman smiled and crossed the room. She took Astrology's hand and led her into the kitchen. At the stove, a pot simmered. "I was issued a ration card." She nodded at the hard-plastic card on the table. "We are given a ration of food for each day, corresponding to each of us in this home." She turned to Astrology and told her, "We were given extra rations because you went on your trek with the soldiers this day."

"So we were paid for my services," Astrology realized. Demora searched Astrology's face for paranoia but instead she found some comfort at knowing the transaction. Astrology noticed Demora studying her and looked away. Almost as a distraction, she asked, "What are you fixing?"

"Soup," Demora told her, turning as well, facing the kitchen appliance. "I was given a spice by one of the men. He called it 'chili', but it smells like primos powder to me."

Astrology knelt over the pot and pulled back the lid just enough to get a smell. She inhaled the steam and closed her eyes. "It smells wonderful," she told Demora.

"Get cleaned up," Demora told her with a kind smile. "Dinner will be ready shortly."

Astrology headed into her partitioned off room, undoing her belt as she did. She placed Verity on the outcropping that seemed so perfectly sized for the sword. She stepped back from the weapon for a moment and with a bit of thought, smiled to herself. She took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of the meal and smiled wider.

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