

# **A (Not So) Healthy Dose of Chaos**

**A New World**



**Edo-chan**



*Terms exist in every language to state that one's skill may be lacking at a particular task. One of those terms is "Biting off more than you can chew."*

*Another one is "In over your head."*

*That's the one that was running through Ken's head over and over. He'd been hit several times, albeit lightly. His opponent was toying with him. There was no other reason he could think of. Ken couldn't land a single blow, whether swinging or shooting, and he was getting frustrated.*

*Schove had more combat experience than he did, and was making Ken well aware of it.*

*On the other end of the spectrum, Silver was giving his opponent a hard time. His speed was greater than his opponent's, but Streyes was showing more frustration than anything. Silver looked like he hadn't a scratch on him.*

*Ken continued to flail at his opponent, each of the attacks being blocked or dodged. Schove glanced toward the ground and then smiled if noticing something. His eyes turned orange and a streak of blood ran down the corner of his mouth. He lunged forward and attacked with such force that even by blocking it, Ken was sent toward the ground.*

*He landed safely and looked around and saw Cassandra – motionless – on the ground several feet away. He wanted to check on her, but with enemies around he couldn't. He didn't see Katrina anywhere. He hoped she was safe.*

The *A (Not So) Healthy Dose of Chaos* Series

**Book 1: A New World**

# A (Not So) Healthy Dose of Chaos

## Book 1

### A New World

Edo-chan

A (NOT SO) HEALTHY DOSE OF CHAOS  
Book 1: A New World

Presented by “Edo-chan”

PUBLISHING HISTORY  
First published January 2013

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The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author. And for those that read little notices like this, yes, there is indeed a spoon.

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A (Not So) Healthy Dose of Chaos

**A New World**



*For dad and mom*



# ***ONE***

## **Or, A (Not So) Healthy Dose of an Offer!**

Kenaeth Goldwrite was watering plants on the red wooden deck behind his house. It was a July summer: hot, not to mention humid. It had rained a few days earlier, but the mugginess just wouldn't go away.

Since he was outside, he had the radio on to listen to through an open window in the dining room. He had a talk radio station on, and it had broken for a commercial. Ken used that as a signal to take a break from watering for a while. He looked at his watch and realized it was noon, and decided to stop longer for lunch.

He pulled a hand towel off of his shoulder and wiped his brow. He noticed his reflection in the glass of one of the windows. His dark red hair was too dark for summer, and since childhood it had absorbed an abnormal amount of sunlight. His hair was getting a little too long for his taste, and he made a mental note to get it cut soon.

A bulletin chimed in as a commercial.

*“Have you ever thought about sharing your culture with others that know little about Earth? Have you thought about someone from another planet, and learning about them? The Earth-Entine Planetary Commission is starting a program for otherworlders from planets in the Entine Republic to stay on Earth. Representatives will be in your*

*area soon. Here's your chance to make a positive impression on those from galaxies far away!"*

Aliens.

The way the story went, aliens – or ‘otherworlders’ was the appropriate term – made themselves known to Earth about five years prior. They were from a galactic conglomerate known as the Entine Republic. It was back when he was twenty and in his second year of college. Ken remembered it quite well, since news and interviews were broadcast on every news outlet for weeks.

Ken didn't really care about aliens being on Earth. As long as they followed the rules and didn't cause trouble, it didn't matter to him. They could live next door for all he cared. He only cared about making a living. He wasn't working for various reasons, so money was a bit tight. He had some inheritance left over from when his parents passed away, but even that wouldn't last forever.

Ken looked up at the sky. Going into outer space might have been really spectacular. One teenager from around the same area Ken was living in was chosen as the first to go up when the aliens came knocking on the door of planet Earth. He'd been about three years younger than Ken at the time.

To Ken, life was boring.

He shrugged, mourning his no-luck life. He scanned his big back yard, realizing he would have to mow it in a day or so, along with the front yard. That caused him to remember he needed to go to Misses Ling's house, his next door neighbor, and mow her front and back yards as well.

He went right from the deck though the back door directly into the kitchen to make some lunch. He decided on a sandwich, a little macaroni and cheese, and a drink.

Pulling the macaroni and cheese box out of the pantry caused him to knock over some junk mail he had set on the counter next to the stove. He pulled out the box, bent down, and picked up the mail. He tossed it toward the

trash can, after mentally complaining to himself that they should at least write his name correctly. Most of the junk mail he received was addressed to ‘*Kenneth Goldwrite.*’ Most people tried to pronounce his first name that way, but his parents wanted the name for their first child to sound unique, so it was pronounced ‘*Ken-eighth.*’

He’d opened the box and was about to dump the macaroni into the boiling water when he heard the doorbell. He considered ignoring it when he heard the bell for the second time.

“Always when I’m in the middle of something,” he muttered.

He turned the burner off and walked down the stairs to the landing of his split-foyer home and opened the door after the third ring of the doorbell.

A woman with black hair and dressed in a dark blue business suit was standing on his welcome mat. She was holding a briefcase. Ken thought she was nuts for wearing dark clothing on a hot summer day.

“Good afternoon,” she said, giving him a bright smile.

“Good afternoon,” he said back, with no smile. “What can I do for you?”

“I was wondering—”

“I’m not interested in buying anything,” Ken cut her off.

“No, I’m not here to sell anything—”

“Not interested in any surveys, either.”

“It’s . . . not entirely a survey,” she said, getting a little flustered.

“Okay. What is it?”

“Have you considered opening your home as part of an exchange program?”

“Exchange program?”

“Yes, the Entine Interplanetary Exchange.”

Ken remembered the radio commercial from earlier. “Oh. The aliens, right?”

“Yes. The exchange program is going to be in full swing in the next few months. Of course, participants are looking for cultural immersion and experience—”

“Not interested,” Ken cut her off again.

“I see,” she responded, sadly. “Thank you for your time,” she said with another smile. Ken knew it was forced. She turned and walked back down the sidewalk.

Ken had his own problems. Taking care of the house, looking for work, doing his best with what little he had. If he had problems taking care of himself, how could he even consider showing someone the ropes on planet Earth? The empty house was a hassle in and of itself.

Empty?

Ken reflected back on what he had thought to himself earlier in the day: *Life was boring.*

He opened the screen door and saw the woman as she headed around the side of the house to the driveway.

“Wait!” he shouted.

She peeked her head back around to respond. “Yes?”

“I’ve reconsidered.”

\* \* \*

Ken handed her a cup of coffee. “Here you go, Miss . . . speaking of which, I didn’t get your name.”

“Nanaia. Thank you.” She took the cup. “You didn’t have to go through the trouble of making any.”

Ken sat down on the sofa across from her seat. “I already had a pot brewing, so it’s no trouble.” He took a sip from his own cup. “Now, what is this exchange program about? I mean, there’s got to be more to it than the little introduction you give when knocking on people’s doors.”

“Quite right. I’m honestly not sure about every detail myself.”

“Come again?”

“I’m a realtor. I was handed this assignment about three days ago. My name was given to someone higher up on the food chain, since I know this area.”

Ken let the skepticism show on his face.

“Hey, don’t give me that look. I’ve read through the material. It’s actually not that different than a normal exchange program.”

“Never been in one, so I can’t relate. But you would think there’re a lot of logistics involved. Languages, passports – or what they use for passports – etcetera.”

“Probably. But that’s beyond the scope of what I’m here for. I’ve only been asked to find perspective lodging.”

“I see. Is there an application or anything?”

Nanaia opened her briefcase and pulled out a folder and a small stack of paper, stapled together. “This is the application, and an introductory guide.” She passed them over the coffee table.

Ken took them, reached to the side of the sofa, and picked up a thick, hardbound art book to write on, and then he leaned over and grabbed a pen from the coffee table. He flipped through the application. “Doesn’t seem to be too many questions on it.”

“Well, this is just the first step. I’ll hand over the applications to one of the coordinators, and after compiling the entries, a selection process will narrow down the candidates.”

“Seems simple enough. Just information about my house, right?”

“Yes. Number of rooms, bathrooms, and living areas.”

“Let’s see. Four open rooms, two open bathrooms, one with bath and shower.”

“Wow. That many rooms?”

“Yeah. My father did some remodeling years back.”

“I see. Where might your parents be?”

“They passed away a number of years ago.”

Nanaia went silent. “I’m . . . sorry. I guess I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s not a problem. I’ve gotten over it. Well, I do have a younger sister.”

“Where is she?”

“Somewhere in Europe spending whatever money she received in the inheritance. But for all I know, she could be on the west coast, and married with three kids.”

She gave him a confused look.

“We lost touch after my parents passed on. Plus, we were never that close to begin with.”

“I see,” she fumbled with the words, regretting opening up the can of worms known as Ken’s family history.

“Done,” Ken said as he signed his name and dated the last page. He handed the application back to her, and put the art book on the cushion next to him.

She looked over the application. “Do you pronounce your name ‘Kenneth’?”

“No. It’s ‘Ken-*ighth*.’ You know, like the number. If you don’t mind me asking, how many applications have you received?”

She sighed. “Truthfully speaking, you’re the first one.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I was getting pretty worried that I wouldn’t find anyone.”

Ken leaned back. “Well, you have to take it from the perspective that most people don’t even want people they don’t know from their *own* planet staying with them, so people from *another* planet would be out of the question.”

“I guess you do have a point. But tell me something.”

“Fire away.”

“Why did you reconsider?”

“Dunno.” Ken continued. “Maybe a dose of chaos would be good for me.”

“If that’s what you think, I’m not going to complain.” She put the application into her briefcase, and snapped it

shut. "It should be about two months before you hear anything."

Ken shrugged. "I'm not getting my hopes up."

She stood. "Thank you for the coffee. I should be moving on now. I appreciate your time."

"Good luck on the rest of the search. I'll show you out."

They walked down the stairs, and Ken closed and locked the door after she left.

A dose of chaos. He looked for a reason that he had filled out the application, but couldn't find one other than he was simply looking for something to fill the void.

It was strange. The house seemed even emptier when the woman left.

Ken sighed and went back to making lunch.

\* \* \*

Ken went next door to the house of a dear neighbor, Misses Ling. She had helped him out when his parents passed on, and she had lost her husband around the same time. Her two children were grown and had left the family home years ago. He had visited her home many times when he was younger, but didn't often have much contact with her children, since they were far older than he was. They made visits two or three times a year, around Christmas and Misses Ling's birthday.

She and Ken both lived alone, and relied on each other, and she took to him like he was her son. He went over to her house when she needed help, which usually consisted of odd jobs around her home, fixing things, moving furniture around, mowing the lawn, and the like. Ken was by no means a handyman, but did what he could for her.

He checked the house and saw her car wasn't there, so he started the ritual he did every week and a half during the

summer: he checked the gas in her riding lawn mower, filled it up if there was a need, and mowed the back yard.

It took him less time than he thought, and since it was still hot out, took a break underneath the shade of the umbrella on the table on her back patio. Thinking back on it, he should have waited until later in the day so it wouldn't have been so hot.

He heard the back door slide open, and he glanced back to see Misses Ling. She was an older, refined woman with an Asian complexion. She always wore dresses, and her face was framed by red glasses, her hair pulled up into a bun. Some acquaintances of Ken's had commented she had a stern look about her, but he had never seen anything other than a soft expression when she talked to him.

She was carrying a tray with two tea-filled glasses, and a hand towel on it.

He nodded to her. "Good afternoon, Misses Ling. Did you get back while I was mowing?"

"That I did, dear," she said, placing the tray on the table and handing him the towel.

"Thanks." Ken took the cool, damp towel and wiped his face.

"I needed to do a little shopping. I pulled in when you were behind the house. It's rather hot today, so I knew you'd need a drink."

Ken took one of the glasses and sipped the ice tea from it. "Say, a lady was in the neighborhood and stopped by about an exchange program. Did she stop by your house?"

Misses Ling shook her head. "I was out for some time today. What's this about an exchange program?"

"It looks like aliens will be staying with families around the country. Like a home stay, or something like that."

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of having anyone else stay in my house. It's enough to take care of one young man who lives next door."

"I think the same about the lady living next to me."

She laughed. "And she stopped by to see if you wanted to offer your house to aliens?"

"She was looking for perspective homes, so that's pretty much it in a nutshell."

"What did you tell her?"

Ken took another drink of his tea. "I filled out an application."

Misses Ling smiled. "It seems like something you would do."

"Come again?"

"What I mean is, you're always helping someone else out with something. I wish you'd be a little more selfish, but then again, that's why you're so dependable."

"If you say so."

"Then there will be someone from another planet staying at your house?"

Ken shrugged. "I'm not sure. It was just an application. She said the commission would be in touch. I don't know anything else."

"It would certainly be exciting."

"A change, at the very least."

Ken finished the last of his iced tea, and put it back on the tray along with the towel. "Thank you for the tea, Misses Ling." He stood up and held out his hand, which she had taught him a long time ago to do for a lady. "Since it's hot out, do you mind if I finish the front lawn later on?"

Misses Ling took his hand, using it to rise from her seat. "That will be fine, dear."

She went into the pocket of her dress, pulled out an envelope, and put it into his hand.

He knew what it was, and shook his head. "I can't take that, Misses Ling."

"Take it, dear."

"If you insist," Ken acquiesced.

She smiled again, and took the tray back into the house.

Ken opened the envelope to find two-hundred dollars. She did things like that. She knew his money wouldn't last forever, and her offering would at least stem the tide. The money would help pay for the utilities and food.

"You're too good to me, Misses Ling," he whispered.

\* \* \*

It was about two months later when he heard a reply. It was morning and Ken had been going through his canned goods in the kitchen pantry when the phone rang. He went to the living room to pick up the cordless phone.

"Hello. Goldwrite residence."

"Would you be Kenaeth Goldwrite, who filled out the Entine Interplanetary Exchange lodging application?" a female voice came over the phone.

"Yes, that would be me."

"Good! My name is Amelta Tayon. I'm with the selection committee."

"I do have to commend you for getting my name right on the first try."

"Nanaia, the lady who took your application, wrote the pronunciation down for me. Did I catch you at a bad time per chance?"

"Talking with you beats going through canned goods any day of the week."

"Good! The reason I've called is two-fold. One, I'm pleased to tell you that you've been selected as one of the finalists in the program."

"Glad to hear it."

"Second, I'm already in the area viewing some other applicants, so would it be too much trouble for me to stop by so that I could see the premises first hand?"

"Not a problem at all."

"Good! It will take me some time, but I should be there in about two hours."

“Got it. I’ll be here.”

“Good! See you then.”

“Likewise.”

He pressed the ‘hang up’ button and replaced the phone on its stand. He considered if it was her habit to add ‘Good!’ to the beginning of every other sentence, and then went back to finishing up looking at canned goods.

Ken became concerned when it came to the two hour mark and hadn’t seen hide or hair of the lady on the phone. He thought she was just running late, and started working outside near the driveway to be there when she arrived.

In the end, it was three hours before she showed up. Ken had been sweeping the driveway when a minivan pulled into the driveway.

The driver turned the minivan off, opened the door, and stuck her head out. “Kenaeth Goldwrite?”

“That’s me.”

“Good! I’m sorry, but I’m *sorely* behind schedule.”

“Not as if I had much to do.”

Amelta was, in a word, cute. It didn’t really matter that she had the skin color of a peach, or dark spots that went from her brow, down her face and neck, each about the size of a small chocolate kiss.

She had an exasperated look on her face, as if she was always on the go. One glance at her and anyone could tell she was an oddball: the kind of person that even small animals chase, and one who trips over buckets full of water.

Ken quickly checked to see if there were any buckets of water around, and was relieved to find none.

She fumbled in the back of her car, pulled out a briefcase, then walked up to him, extending her hand. Ken shook it, noting how soft it was. He put the broom against the edge of the windowsill and led her into the bottom floor of the house.

“Here’s a living area. I usually stay down here during the summer, because it’s cooler.”

A couple of feet away, he showed her a storage room, and farther back on the first floor, showed her two bedrooms.

On the top floor, they went through the living room, dining area, kitchen, two more bedrooms, and the bathroom with bath and shower. Ken was using the master bedroom, so it was off limits to any guests.

He led her back out to the living room, and she sat down on the sofa as Ken made coffee. Amelta was writing down notes at an insane pace, and as he brought over her coffee, glanced down and saw the notes that were written in some alien language. He placed her cup on the coffee table in front of her, but she seemed to be completely oblivious to it.

Without looking up from her memo pad, she picked up the cup and started gulping down the coffee.

“Hey, that’s—”

He wanted to say it was really hot, but she drank it like it was lukewarm. He swore she had chugged the whole cup.

“Whew!” She put the cup down, and then continued: “When can you start having guests?”

“Wait. I’ve been selected already?”

“Yes. I came today to give your house a final look and meet you in person.”

“I guess I passed then.”

“That you did. To get back to the question, when can you start having tenants?”

Ken thought a moment. “Ideally, since this is short notice, I’d like a week to do some final preparations. Cleaning, moving of some personal items, and other miscellaneous tasks.”

“That seems fair. I have a group coming in ten days. Does that give you enough time?”

“More than enough, I think.”

“Good! It’s nice to see the house is furnished. I believe Nanaia said you have a sister, correct?”

“Yes, but she doesn’t live here.”

“Married?”

“I don’t think she is, but I don’t really know.”

“No, no. I meant *you*.”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Did Nanaia talk about compensation?”

He thought back to two months ago. “Come to think of it, I don’t think she did. I guess there is more upkeep than if there was only one person in the house.”

“Of course. Health care, including dental and vision, are included for you, the landlord. And remuneration is one-thousand dollars per month.”

“That seems low, but we can probably make do with it.”

“*Per guest*.”

“Per . . . guest? How many people are going to be staying here?”

“Well, you have four rooms, so at least four. Plus, one of the guests I’m thinking of doesn’t take up much room.”

Ken’s attention was caught on the ‘doesn’t take up much room.’ Was the tenant the size of a pixie?

Amelta continued. “That’s a total of five I have in mind for this place.”

“*Five* tenants!? I could handle one or two, but five is over doing it.”

“If you can handle two, what’s a few more?”

Ken’s mouth went agape. A few more? They weren’t pets; they were people . . . or aliens . . . or alien people. Something like that.

“Good! Then it’s decided,” she said.

Ken hadn’t given her a response, so she must have assumed it was all right. Most people would think that if someone was staring at you with their mouth hanging wide

open, they must have *some* reservations about what you were asking them.

Except for the person sitting in front of him. Ken shrugged, and then something dawned on him.

“That’s five grand in all, isn’t it?”

“Yes. It’s paid out by the commission, funneled from their respective planets. However, there is one thing that I must tell you,” and her face took on a serious look. “This is a cultural exchange. Each of the tenants has their own job or such role while on Earth. Your goal is to teach them cultural aspects of Earth.”

“Like what?”

“That’s up to you to decide. But you have to take an active part in their education. It’s not as simple as just offering them a place to eat and sleep.”

“Do they understand English? I know a little bit of Entine Standard from a DVD I got as a door prize, but that’s about it.”

“Not to worry. One of the prerequisites for taking part in this program is at least a basic mastery of the language of the country they will stay in.”

“So, I’m part teacher, part dorm father?”

“Precisely!”

“I think I get the picture. Well, no choice but to do my best.”

“Good! You know, this house will be perfect for the tenants I have in mind. They wanted some place quiet. Not quite the city, not quite the country, but somewhere in the middle.”

“The suburbs?”

“Yes.”

“I guess we’ll see how this goes.”

Ken thought this was going much smoother than anticipated. The commission or group must have put a lot of thought into it. On the other hand, Earth was just a new member of the Entine Republic; there was probably a

template for this kind of exchange floating somewhere in the headquarters of a galactic public relations office.

“I do have a question about how things should go if, and I’m just preparing here, something doesn’t turn out right?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“What if a tenant doesn’t take well to the planet, or there are problems and I would no longer want them in my house? I know it’s a blunt question.”

Amelta nodded, understanding. “There are times when participants aren’t up to the challenge. There are clauses in the contract that state if there are any problems, the handler – me – will investigate it, and decide whether or not if the tenant should be removed from the current lodging. A tenant can also leave of their own free will.”

Ken stopped in mid-drink. “Is there a contract?”

Her face went blank. “I forgot to give it to you!”

She went into her briefcase and pulled out the contract.

“If you hadn’t reminded me, I would have walked out of here without you signing it!”

Ken resisted the urge to give her pitiful look. She put two contracts in front of him, and both had been marked with removable stickers on the side. He opened each page and quickly read through for anything out of the ordinary. Finding none, he signed each of the pages that were marked.

“I’ll take this one, and the other is yours to keep.”

“Thank you.”

“No. Thank *you*. I think the participants are going to enjoy it on Earth.”

“Last question: how long are they going to be staying here?”

“It’s up to the tenant if they want to renew their own contracts. They will do that yearly, if you have no issues with the tenant continuing to stay. The program is for

three years, but in extenuating circumstances can be extended.”

“I see.”

She put her documents into her briefcase, stood up, and extended her hand. Ken rose and shook it.

“I’ll see you in ten days, Mister Goldwrite. If any of the tenants show up a little before I do, just sit tight.”

“They’re not all going to be arriving with you?”

“Just between you and me, galactic transport isn’t as reliable as you might think it is. It’s kind of like airlines on this planet. Weather and other things can delay their arrival.”

“Here’s hoping they’re quiet, and everything will be stress free.”

“I do have one last question for you, though.”

“Yes?”

“You didn’t seem particularly concerned with my appearance, and didn’t even make any comments about knowing your language. I mean, I can’t be mistaken as being from this planet.”

Ken shrugged. “Was I supposed to?”

Amelta shook her head, and gave a relieved smile. “I suppose not. Other landlords have when I showed up, and it’s . . . refreshing to meet someone who didn’t.”

# *TWO*

## **Or, A (Not So) Healthy Dose of Tenants!**

Ken wasn't in a hurry. He had plenty of time, and there wasn't much to clean or move. Most of the furniture was empty of anything important, and had been for years. There were a few books on miscellaneous shelves and a sweater or two in the closets, but everything could be done in a day, two at the most.

It was three days later when the money was transferred to his bank account. He spent two days replacing towels, sheets, pillows and other things, putting the old ones into large plastic tubs in the downstairs storage room.

A day before they were to arrive, Ken bought enough food for a cookout for eight, in case the woman who gave him the application and Amelta showed up.

“Hopefully they're not vegetarians.”

He packed what he could in the refrigerator and freezer, and chuckled. It was the first time in years he'd seen it resemble 'full.'

A few days later, Ken was in the driveway sweeping away the dust and leaves from the previous day's wind when the first tenant showed up.

He heard a car stop farther down the street. He couldn't see it, but he heard someone get out of the car, said something, and closed the door. He heard rubber grinding

on pavement; the car must have made a U-turn, and the sound of the vehicle vanished down the road.

Ken noticed a woman walking up the street, carrying a large duffle bag – something like the military on Earth would use – and holding a small piece of paper. She was looking around as she walked, and stopped in front of Ken’s mailbox. She looked at the mailbox, then at the paper, then back at the mailbox. She nodded as if confirming something, then turned toward Ken’s house.

“Yes?” Ken asked from down the driveway.

She reacted as if she hadn’t seen him in the first place. She walked up the driveway to meet him.

“This is 7-3 Mary Drive, correct?”

“That it is.”

She looked completely human. Nothing about her outward appearance set off any bells except for the odd style of dress and the—

—sheathed . . . sword?

She had black hair to her shoulders. It looked like she was wearing some sort of uniform. It was dark blue, with a crimson trim on her slacks going down to her ankles.

“Then you’re Kenaeth Goldwrite?”

“That I am, but everyone calls me Ken. Are you one of my tenants?”

She tipped her head toward him. When she looked directly at him again, he noticed she had striking eyes: the left was jade green and the right was ice blue.

“My name is Cassandra Pyredom. Thank you for your hospitality.”

Ken felt a little embarrassed, being thanked so formally. “Would you like me to help you with your bag?”

“No. I can handle it.”

“I guess the others are due any time—”

Two pure white feathers drifted down right in front of them. One even lightly bumped Ken on the nose before it continued to the ground. Ken and Cassandra looked up. A

woman, with blonde hair and decked out in a white and green dress was about fifty feet off the ground and descending, flapping her—

—wings!?

“Holy . . . moly . . .” was all Ken could say.

The woman descended on the edge of the driveway, and looked toward Ken and Cassandra.

She walked up to Ken and bowed. “Kenaeth Goldwrite?”

“Y . . . yes . . .” Ken muttered, trying *very* hard not to be distracted by her large ‘endowments.’

*Boing.*

“I am Angelica Elegance. Pleased to make your acquaintance.” She turned to Cassandra. “Your wife, perhaps?”

“No!” Ken and Cassandra shouted at the same time.

“Oh my,” he reacted, putting her hand to her mouth in embarrassment.

“Um, do you have any bags?”

“Mine arrived on an earlier flight. Amelta said she would deliver them when she came here today.”

“Okay. I guess the others are due any time—”

They heard a low volume, panicked voice that sounded something like “Watch out! I can’t stop!”

Something fast hit Ken on the side of the head. It didn’t hurt, but the surprise of it all knocked him off balance, and he fell to the ground.

“I’m sorry!” the voice said.

Ken sat up and looked up at his first two guests, then, not finding a third, looked around, and then noticed the woman standing near his left foot.

“Are you all right?” she asked, fluttering her own pair of gossamer wings. “I’m really sorry. I was just flying too fast and couldn’t stop myself with my bag.”

“Not a problem. Just surprised me a—Geez, you’re *tiny!*” Ken shouted.

She certainly *was* tiny, only being about a foot tall, and dressed in a bodysuit, with four translucent wings sprouting from her back.

Ken thought back when Amelta had told him that one didn't take up much room.

She was most certainly pixie-sized.

She had a small suitcase next to her. Her hair was a little longer than Cassandra's, and the tips seemed to be white.

She'd been staring up at him with a worried look on her face until he said the word 'tiny,' and she frowned.

"Aww. I'm sorry." Ken stood up, and as he did, she fluttered up with him.

"Um," she began, "could you stick out your hand?"

"Like this?"

"Palm side up."

Ken did so and she landed on his palm. She was very light, almost half the weight of an apple.

"I'm Katrina Faerblood. Thank you for letting me stay here."

"My, aren't you a cute one?"

Katrina shyly smiled, and then turned to the other two guests. "Who are they?"

Ken pointed to Cassandra and said "That's Cassandra, and the one with the wings is Angelica."

"Hello!" Katrina said in a cheerful voice.

"Nice to meet you," Angelica said. And then the dam broke. She scooped Katrina up in both hands. "You're absolutely adorable!"

"Th-Thank you . . ." Katrina replied, trying to maintain her composure. "It's getting . . . a little hard . . . to . . . breathe . . ."

Angelica let her go, and Katrina took a deep breath.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance," Cassandra nodded to the newcomer.

Katrina went down, picked up her suitcase, and then went back up to Ken's hand.

Ken looked around. "I guess the others are due any time—"

All four of them turned when they heard a vehicle pull up in the driveway. It was a black, stretch limo.

"Wow," they all breathed in unison.

A sharply dressed chauffeur exited the driver's seat, and opened up the rear door on the driver's side.

"If you would, miss."

A woman, decked out in what Ken could only think was an expensive dress, stepped out. She looked about with a haughty turn of her head.

"Not entirely what I expected, but I suppose it will do."

As she ran her hands through her long brown hair, Ken lifted an eyebrow at her, hoping that there was some mistake and someone who would say something like that right off the bat would not be staying at his house.

The girl's gaze finally came to rest on Ken and his entourage. She walked forward, and stopped in front of them.

"Kenaeth Goldwrite?"

"Uh . . . yes. And you are?"

"Natalia Greentyme. I'll be staying here, starting today."

The chauffeur had finished unloading the *eighth* suitcase from the limo's trunk, and put them close to the house.

Once he had put the last one down, Natalia glanced back at him and said, "You can leave now."

"Understood, miss."

He got back into the limo, backed out of the driveway, and disappeared down the road.

"Well then," Natalia continued, "could you show me to my room?"

Ken wanted to ask her why she didn't even want to know the names of the other tenants, but mentally shrugged. "That might be a good idea for everyone."

A familiar minivan pulled into the driveway. Ken could see Amelta through the windshield, and someone in the passenger's seat.

She got out of the van. "Good! Everyone is here!"

The passenger's side door opened, and a petite woman stepped out. She had short black hair, and oddly enough, dressed in blue jeans and a T-shirt.

"Let's see. It should be Cassandra Pyredom, Angelica Elegance, Katrinia Faerblood, Natalia Greentyne, and the last one is Alisa Maestral."

Alisa didn't even blink.

"Shall we all go inside?" Amelta said.

"Do you want to turn off your minivan first?" Ken asked.

Amelta's face faulted, and she ran back to her vehicle.

\* \* \*

"So, if all of you have your paperwork, I'll sign off on them."

Each of them handed over a sheet of some kind of plastic, and Amelta started looking over them.

Sounds of gasping made their way up the stairs, and the source of it – Ken – collapsed at the top of the landing.

Katrina fluttered down next to his side. "Are you all right?"

Ken's hand shot out and pointed directly at Natalia. "You! You're taking a room on the bottom floor!"

Natalia nodded. "That was the intention."

"What do you have in those bags!? Concrete blocks!?"

"It's none of your business."

Amelta looked unsympathetically toward him. "Sorry, Ken. Can you make some coffee?"

“At least let me put my lungs back in my body, would you?”

Katrina sympathetically patted him on the head.

\* \* \*

“I’ve got cell phones for all of you,” Amelta said, pointing to the five cellular phones strewn out on the coffee table. “This will allow you to get in contact with me in case anything happens. Oh, and I’ve programmed all the phone numbers of the other phones into each of them, including my cell phone and Ken’s home phone. You’ll just have to change the names in the address books.”

The tenants looked at the colors.

“Katrina, I’m sorry. They don’t make them in your size.”

Katrina frowned.

“I’ll take the green one.” Angelica picked up her phone.

“I want the brown one,” Natalia said, taking hers.

Cassandra put her hand on the blue one. “I’ll have the blue one.”

“I’ll take the black one,” Alisa said.

Ken came in from the kitchen with a tray of coffee cups. As he came around, Amelta picked up a cup.

“Ken, there’s a phone for you, too,” she said.

“What color?”

Katrina patted the only one left. “Pink!”

\* \* \*

“Now that we’re all here, why don’t we go over the introductions?”

Cassandra stood up from the sofa. “Cassandra Pyredom, from the planet Talsenia. I’m twenty-two, and I’m here attending a local college for a linguistics degree.”

Ken raised his hand. "Question."

"Yes?"

"What's with the sword? I mean, there's no one I know of that walks around with one."

"It's customary on Talsenia."

"Everyone carries a weapon?" Angelica asked.

"The overwhelming majority of females do, as part of the warrior caste."

"You have a caste system?"

"I think 'caste' may be the closest word. Perhaps 'role,' or 'designation of duties' would better explain it. In Talsenia, women occupy the majority of combat and physical roles. Men take support roles."

"Well, women are superior in leadership roles," Natalia chimed in.

Cassandra shook her head. "It's not a matter of superiority. We have clearly defined positions. Even verbally degrading the positions can lead to punishments. Your comment there would have led to an inquiry. But we're not on Talsenia."

She sat down.

"O-Okay," Amelta tried to recover, "next?"

Angelica stood up.

*Boing.*

"Angelica Elegance. I'm from Falldine, and twenty-three years old. I'm working as a nurse at a local hospital."

Ken thought it would be *really* nice to be taken care of by a nurse like her.

Katrina spoke up. "Does everyone on Falldine have wings?"

"Yes."

"Wow!"

Ken looked at Katrina. "Um, you *do* know you have your own wings, right?"

"But not like those!"

Ken could only chuckle. Then he took a look at Angelica's wings. They weren't large ones like in pictures of angels, but a little smaller and thinner. They were obviously strong enough to carry her. He did have another concern.

"Don't your wings get in the way? I can't imagine what it's like to sleep with those."

"Oh, they're compact. If I keep them out, they do get in the way. I remember knocking over things a lot when I was younger. They're actually very flexible."

And then the wings pulled closer to her back, and the lower ends wrapped around her waist.

"See? This is how I usually sleep."

"Doesn't that hurt?"

Angelica cocked her head to the side, thinking. "Not particularly. It's no different than wrapping your arms around your body and sleeping."

"Next?" Amelta called out.

"Me, me, me!" Katrina shouted, holding her hand up and jumping up and down on the sofa cushion.

"All right, Katrina, your turn," Amelta conceded, amused.

Katrina floated to the coffee table, and cleared her throat. "I'm Katrina Faerblood, from the distant planet of Betlin, orbiting the star known as Aiseria. I'm nineteen years old."

"So," Ken asked the obvious question concerning her slight stature, "what is it that you do?"

After striking an inspirational pose, she stated "I'm a Time Cataloguer!"

"Time Cataloguer?" everyone remarked, aloud.

"Oh, I get it!" Angelica said. "Sort of like a living stopwatch."

"Incorrect."

Everyone turned to the girl who had said *nothing* until that point: Alisa.

“A Time Cataloguer is a high-level position among Betlinians, which measures and documents the flow of time and effects of it in relation to the age, expansion and reduction of the universe.”

“Yep!” Katrina gave a smug look.

“You mean like that space-time continuum thing?” Ken asked.

“Precisely!”

“You can control time!?”

“Me, personally? No, but some people I know can *nidj* . . . *nadj* . . .” she tilted her head in confusion.

“‘Nudge’?” Ken offered.

“Yeah! That’s the word I was looking for.”

“What do you mean by ‘nudge’?”

“Time is fluid and can easily be changed, given the proper equipment and frequency. You see, each of the infinite strands of time has a binding frequency. So, if you were to grab a hold of that frequency and either reduce or increase the wavelength, you could cause minute variations—”

The only other person in the room who knew what she was talking about was Alisa. And she was nodding.

Katrina panicked. “I’m sorry! I’ll be quiet now,” she sat down, embarrassed.

“Who’s next?” Amelta said.

“That will be me!” Natalia triumphantly shouted. “I am Natalia Greentyme, from planet Forshe, and twenty-three. I’m here to foster distribution contacts for my father’s company.”

“What does your father do?” Cassandra asked.

“He’s the head of a cosmetics corporation.”

“Wait,” Cassandra remarked in a shocked voice. “You mean *THE* Greentyme Cosmetics conglomerate?”

“Yes.”

“Wow.”

Ken was confused, and leaned toward Cassandra. “Is the company big?”

“Big? It has locations and buildings on every major business world in the Entine Republic. ‘Big’ wouldn’t begin to describe it.”

“So, she’s rich?”

“‘Rich’ wouldn’t be enough to describe her.”

Natalia bent down over Ken. “Impressed?”

“Not really. I was just wondering why someone rich would be staying at my house, of all places, poor as I am.

“Huh?”

“I mean, couldn’t you have just bought your own home here?”

“That’s true,” Cassandra said.

“I can’t argue with that point,” Natalia agreed, though bitterly. “My father wanted me to get some culture and experience in another setting, preferably on some other planet that doesn’t know me or my family.”

“So that you don’t have anyone hounding you for money or prestige. Is that it?” Angelica asked.

“Yes. Probably.”

“Probably?”

“My father’s rather distant when it comes to things like that.” Natalia shook her head, like she was trying to clear it. “But that’s no matter. I’m here, and that’s what counts.” Then she sat back down.

Amelta leaned toward Ken and whispered, “Ken, her father is a very big donor to this program, and has been so for many years. It would only be natural for us to have her in the exchange program.”

Ken nodded in agreement, but had to wonder why she hadn’t been in the program earlier if that was the case.

Amelta cleared her throat. “Then that leaves only one guest.”

The silent-until-just-a-little-while-ago-woman stood up and vacantly swung her gaze around. “Alisa Maestral. I’m

from Kodominé. I'm working at a local college with computers and electronics. I'm twenty-two years old." Then she sat down.

That's it? Short introduction, to say the least. Ken thought she would have gone into some dissertation about her planet, her job, or just a general overview of the final frontier called 'space.'

"Good!" Amelta said to break the silence. "I'll do my introduction. I'll be your handler, so to speak, in several legal and paperwork affairs. My name, as you may have read from your welcome packets, is Amelta Tayon. If you have any problems, you're free to contact me. You can also stop by my office if you happen to be in the area. And I think that takes care of all the introductions."

Katrina raised her hand. "There's one person who hasn't done an introduction," she happily chirped.

"Come to think of it," Angelica said, turning to Ken.

Ken noticed everyone was staring at him. "Me?"

"Well, everyone else has," she said with a smile.

"Okay, okay." Ken put his coffee cup down and stood up. "You've all probably read my name from the welcome packet, but my full name is Kenaeth Adam Goldwrite, and I'm twenty-five years old. I was born two states away. I will be your landlord while you're living here."

Ken cleared his throat and continued. "I consider myself to be easy-going, and while I expect you to follow the rules of common courtesy, there are two major rules that I need to lay down.

"First, take responsibility for your actions. If you don't do so, I will *force* you to take responsibility. Second, you will treat everyone that lives here with respect, no matter what background you may have come from. I can take a joke or two like everyone else, but if you go overboard, I'll make sure you regret it.

"Am I being clear on these two rules?"

Everyone slowly nodded, surprised at the seriousness that he put behind his words.

“Splendid. Everyone, I hope you have a good time here.”

Amelta nodded. “Good! Now that’s all settled, I think I’ll get going now.”

There was a growl in the room, and it was from somebody’s stomach. Amelta gave an embarrassed laugh after patting the source of the sound.

Ken motioned toward the kitchen. “I was going to turn on the grill and have a cookout to celebrate the arrival of my new guests, but it looks like your handler is also going to join us for a barbeque.”

“Barbe—what?” his guests said in unison.

\* \* \*

“Well, what do you think of them?” Amelta asked cautiously.

The tenants had moved onto the deck in the back yard, near where the grill was. Ken and Amelta were in the kitchen. He was hand mixing ground beef, onions and some spices together in a large bowl. He hadn’t cooked handmade hamburgers in a long time.

“They’re a bunch of kids,” Ken laughed.

“What do you mean?”

“They may not seem to be so at first glance, but they’re just a group of scared little girls.”

“Are you surprised? They’re in a completely different environment than their own. It’s no wonder they’re scared.”

“I don’t know if I can relate. I’ve moved only once in my life.” Ken put a patty together, and then placed it on a plate next to the mixing bowl.

“That’s a lot different than a couple of galaxies, which makes it all the more interesting.”

“For who? Me?”

“Yes. Playing teacher, father and mother, along with older brother . . . You’ve got your work cut out for you.”

“I didn’t volunteer to be a mother.”

“I have your signed contract at the office. So, too bad. You’re stuck with it.”

Ken rolled his eyes. He finished putting the ground beef into patties. He washed his hands, and picked up the plate to take outside.

“I hope everyone likes beef.”

“Beef?” Angelica asked.

“Bovine. An animal that lives on this planet. Everyone here eat meat?”

“Yes,” Angelica said.

“Yes,” Amelta replied.

“Yeah!” Katrina shouted.

“Yes,” Cassandra said.

“Somewhat,” Natalia said.

“Quite often,” Alisa responded flatly.

Alisa’s answer scared Ken.

“It’ll take some time to cook, so why don’t all of you take a walk around the yard? There’s a garden right down the stairs. Oh, and does anyone want cheese on their hamburger?”

“Chee—what?” Katrina asked.

“It’s made from milk, a calcium source.”

“Oh,” she replied.

“No problems?”

Nobody voiced any.

“Okay. Do a little exploring and I’ll call you all when it’s done.”

Everyone but Ken and Cassandra walked down the stairs of the deck, and down the small sidewalk.

“You’re not going?” Ken asked, putting the hamburgers on the grill.

“No. Not yet.”

“I have a personal question.”

“Go ahead,” she gestured.

“Does everyone from Talsenia have different-colored eyes?”

Cassandra shook her head. “It’s not rare, but rather, really uncommon. It’s considered a blessing and a hint at destiny.”

“Hint at destiny? Are superstitions big on your planet?”

“Not really. Since my eyes are blue and green, my mother thought it was pointing at something. Coincidentally, the opportunity to come here was announced when I was finishing my tertiary schooling. Looking at some of the pictures of this planet, you can see a lot of green and blue.”

“A planet of green and blue, huh?”

She nodded.

“Deep . . .”

“I don’t put too much stock in superstitions. It’s probably just a coincidence,” she confided in him.

“Could be. But you can probably talk about that later with the group.”

Ken flipped a few of the burgers.

“You don’t seem that . . . unnerved that there are people from other planets that will be living in your home.”

“Frankly, I’m concerned, but that’s more because of the potential cultural misunderstandings and conflicts. For example, I can deal with, say, any issues between myself and one or two other people. But I have to do that *and* mediate between others who have problems.”

“Looks like you’ve thought this through.”

Ken shook his head. “Not particularly.”

“Not . . . particularly!?” she echoed, not believing what he just said.

“Well, regardless of what planet people are from, people are people. It’ll work out.”

“A positive outlook. I like that.”

“But what about you? No concerns?”

“Embarrassingly, I’m scared, but . . .” she breathed deeply, and then continued. “Relieved.”

“How’s that?”

“It seems nice here.”

“It is. It’s not overly populated, and if you can get over the cow manure smell that comes out during the summer, it’s a great place. It also has a low cost of living.”

“Cow manure?”

“For fertilizer. Didn’t you notice all the farms on the way here?”

“No. I was too nervous to really pay attention. It’s my first day. I can’t help it.”

“Do you normally walk around everywhere with that sword?” Ken asked, pointing to her sword with a spatula.

“I try to. It belonged to my mother.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring up any bad memories.”

Cassandra gave him a confused look, and then realized what he was getting at. “She’s still alive. What I should have said was, ‘It belonged to my mother, but she gave it to me’.”

Ken replaced a few burgers with new ones. “That’s a relief. See what I mean? Misunderstandings.”

Cassandra nodded and they spent the rest of the time in silence.

Ken finished the hamburgers and brought them into the kitchen.

“Do you want me to call everyone?”

“No, I still need to set up in here.”

\* \* \*

“So, here’s what you do. Everyone watching?”

Everyone nodded.

“First, open up the bun to create the foundation. Then, take a hamburger patty, and place it on the bottom bun. Put ketchup, mayonnaise and maybe even some mustard on top of the patty, then add some lettuce, tomato, and perhaps an onion. Put the top on, and your hamburger is complete. Add a few chips, and you’re done.”

Everyone clapped, like they were praising someone who had won a major award at some science conference.

“It’s just a hamburger . . .” he assured them.

“What’s this?” Katrina fluttered around a green and white two-liter bottle.

“Soda. It’s a drink.”

Ken pulled out a small cup, reconsidered, found a thimble, washed it out, and poured a little into it. “Here.”

Katrina smelled it. “That tickles my nose.”

“It’s the carbonation in it.”

Katrina took a drink. “That’s good!”

Cassandra looked at the red-labeled bottle. “I’ll take this one.”

Angelica pointed to the blue bottle. “I’ll try this.”

“No one’s picked this yet. I want this,” Natalia said, staring at the green-labeled bottle.

“This one,” Alisa said, tapping a bottle with a bulldog on it.

Amelta silently poured her own drink from the red bottle.

Everyone built their meal, got their drinks, and moved into the living room, using the coffee table as a real table since the one in the dining area was too small to fix six-and-one-sixth persons.

“This is exquisite!” Angelia said after taking a bite.

“I’ll say!” Katrina agreed, taking a bite from the hamburger that was almost half as wide as she was tall.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full. It’s rude,” Ken warned them.

Ken noticed Cassandra was still eyeing her cheeseburger suspiciously, not having taken a bite yet. She pursed her lips like making some sort of life-threatening decision, and bit into it. She then immediately stopped and stared down at her cheeseburger in shock.

Ken asked the obvious question: “What’s wrong?”

“The combination of additions . . . the delectable ballet of meat and cheese, the crisp feel of lettuce, all in a soft package . . .”

Cassandra looked happy. Really, *really* happy.

“Um, it’s just a cheeseburger,” Ken tried to tell her.

She wasn’t listening.

“Ken,” Angelica asked.

“Yes, what—You’re finished already!? Did you even chew!?”

“I did. It was good I couldn’t stop.”

“As long as you liked it. Go get another one if—”

She was already out of her seat and back in the kitchen.

“I was wondering, don’t you have any family?” Cassandra asked.

“You mean parents, brothers and sisters, etcetera?”

“Yes.”

“My parents died a few of years ago.”

The room came to a dead silence. It was not the answer anyone was expecting to hear. Ken immediately noticed it. Most people reacted that way; even the woman who initially came to give him the application. He decided to move the conversation forward. “I do have a younger sister who’s still alive. When the folks passed away, I got the house and some money, and my sister got money, and she promptly decided to take a trip through Europe.”

“Where is she now?” Angelica asked, having finally returned to her seat.

“That’s a good question. I don’t know the answer, nor care.”

“Seems a little cold,” Natalia remarked.

As if Ken needed anyone to remark on it. “Maybe. You may have gotten the hint, but you can probably tell I don’t have a lot of love for my sister. She’s too irresponsible.”

An uncomfortable silence came across the room again. It wasn’t the same as when he told his tenants about his parents, but the uneasiness wasn’t difficult to spot.

“What about everyone else?” Ken asked, trying to change the conversation away from his family.

“I have a brother and two younger sisters,” Angelica said. “My father’s a police officer and my mother runs a candy store.”

“I’m an only child,” Katrina said. “Both my parents are mechanics now.”

“What about that ‘time catalogue’ thing?”

“That? Well, that’s in my genes. See how the ends of my hair are white? That’s the sign of someone who’s sensitive to time.”

“My father is, of course, alive,” Natalia said. “My mother passed away when I was young. Most of my teachers and my nanny raised me until I was able to make choices on my own. I’m an only child.”

Alisa raised her hand to be next, surprisingly.

“Um . . . go ahead,” Ken said, hesitantly.

“My father is an electrical engineer, and my mother takes care of the home. I have an older brother.”

“Are they as quiet as you?”

“Quieter.”

Ken had trouble imagining that. Were they invisible phantoms or something? He could swear she didn’t even make sounds when she moved. She’d make an excellent spy.

Or axe murderer. Ken shuddered when he thought that.

“I guess I’m last,” Cassandra said. “I’m an only child. My mother and father are alive and healthy. My mother is retired from the military, and my father is a homemaker.”

“Oh! That’s what I wanted to ask you,” Amelta said, out of the blue with an excited expression.

“Yes?”

“I was reading about courtships on Talsenia. They’re really formal, aren’t they?”

“They’re normal to me, but I guess if you compare them to other cultures, they’re formal.”

“How so?” Ken inquired. “I mean, on Earth, one gives a ring to the person they want to marry, usually on one knee. Usually it’s the man that proposes. Usually.”

Cassandra considered what he said for a moment, and nodded. “I guess that’s mechanically similar, but there’s more symbolism on Talsenia.”

“Symbolism?”

Cassandra put her plate aside. “Let’s use my parents as an example. My father was my mother’s assistant in the military. I should tell you that Talsenian men are normally prohibited from entering the military without a specific skill set, and even then, only under special circumstances. But I’ll explain that at another time.”

Everyone was listening as she continued.

“They had been in a long campaign in an urban region where the government had collapsed. They had worked together for six years, and strived to rebuild the region.

“My mother was a very hands-on commander, and often took part in battles. My father voiced his concern at the time, for her personal safety, but it was her prerogative. Even when she and her command were accused of embezzling funds and stealing valuables, it was my father’s meticulous record-keeping that kept them free and clear.”

“So they worked well together,” Ken concluded.

“Yes. After those six years, the government made progress, and they were reassigned, being stationed on different planets.”

Everyone was listening intently.

“It would take some time, but my mother didn’t feel quite right at her new post. It wasn’t the station itself or even the people, but she felt something was missing. The missing piece turned out to be my father, and the connection they had made. She took the first opportunity she could to track him down, and actually proposed to him during a dinner party. She was in her uniform and everything.”

“Wow! That’s romantic!” Katrina said, flying around like a cupid.

“So, she proposed with a ring?” Ken asked.

“No,” Cassandra replied. She unhooked the sheath of her saber and held it forward. “She used a blade much like this one.”

“Come again? How do you propose with a sword?”

“Truthfully, you’re supposed to use a more refined saber for it, crafted specifically to court someone, but my mother felt she had too little time. Anyway, the first step is to unsheathe the sword. Next, both the unsheathed blade and sheath are presented to the intended.” She unsheathed the saber, and held it by the pommel in one hand, and the empty sheath in the other. She then oriented her hands so that she had both palms face up, and the saber and sheath lay on her palms, saber first.

“As a weapon is critical to the status of women on Talsenia, this positions herself at her most vulnerable, and thus trusting the intended with her weakness. The next step is for the intended.

“If he refuses, that is it, and it is highly recommended for the intended to state the reason why. However, if he does accept, he will take up the sword, sheathe it, and then turn the blade around and lay it back into her hands in the opposite orientation. In symbolic terms, the woman is the sword and the man is the sheath. The sheathing represents the intended accepting her weakness and faults, and while not in combat, her consort and confidant, the sheath being

his ‘arms.’ It’s also appropriate for the intended to wear her sword until the wedding ceremony. It’s also culturally significant and ‘allowed’ for the woman to cry if her proposal is accepted.”

“Did your mother?”

“Almost. Especially when she heard him say, ‘I had almost given up on you’.”

“Aww . . .” was the collective response.

“I wish I had a good story like that to tell,” Katrina lamented.

“Me, too,” Angelica agreed. “Nothing really that romantic happened to my parents.”

Ken stood up and started collecting the plates. “On that note, let me show you all the rooms, and you can make your decisions on which to take.”

“I want the largest room, naturally,” Natalia said.

Ken shrugged, assuming he wouldn’t be showing them any rooms after all. “Naturally,” Ken mimicked. “Then you get one of the two downstairs.”

“I want an end unit,” Alisa requested.

“Above or below ground?”

“Above.”

“Then you have the one toward the back there, on the left,” he said, pointing down the hall. “It’s the room right across from mine.”

“I’ll take the one below ground. I like to sleep well,” Angelica said.

“You have the other room downstairs then. You’ll be neighbors with Natalia.”

“I’ll take whatever’s left,” Cassandra said.

“Is a wood floor okay with you?”

“That’ll be fine.”

“You’ll have the one up here, right across from the bathroom. It’s right before Alisa’s, right down the hall.”

“Wait! Then where do I go?” Katrina asked.

“You’re the smallest, so why don’t you choose somewhere?”

“Um . . . how about out here?”

“Here? The living room?”

“I don’t have much, so if you give me the top of a cabinet, I’ll be fine.”

“How about up there on that display cabinet?”

“That’ll be good. I like high places. It makes me feel taller.”

Ken chuckled. No doubt.

“I think there may be a small bed in my sister’s old doll collection, so I’ll check in a little while. But it can get dusty up there. Are you sure you’re okay with that?”

“Sure! I can clean up when I need to.”

Ken nodded. “Okay. I’ll clean it off after I’m done with these dishes. Then you can set up.”

Ken showed them to their respective rooms, and where the bathrooms were. He explained the dining schedule, along with the laundry days. He then left them alone for a while to unpack and get situated.

Amelta started collecting her things.

“Leaving already?” Ken asked as he started pulling some figurines down from the cabinet.

“Yes. I should get started on filing the paperwork. I should have done it almost immediately after getting them, but it seemed like it was going to be fun around here for a couple of hours.”

“I hope I kept you entertained.”

Amelta giggled, and picked up her things. “Don’t worry about showing me out. Mister Goldwrite, I leave these girls in your hands. If you need anything, you know how to reach me.”

“See you the next time I see you,” Ken said.

She left down the stairs. When Ken finished cleaning off the top of the cabinet, Katrina started setting up her little area.

While all of his tenants were busy, he went into the kitchen and loaded the dishes into the dishwasher. After he started it up, he stepped back and leaned against the counter.

“This just might work.”

# ***THREE***

## **A (Not So) Healthy Dose of a Library!**

Somewhere else, across time and space no less, a different kind of meeting was going to take place. However, it wasn't going to be as nice. When people think of the word 'meeting,' they probably think of something between friends, acquaintances, or business associates, and most certainly not something hostile or dangerous, and those same individuals wouldn't call it 'nice' to meet an enemy.

Regardless, it was about to happen.

There was a man of medium-build in a deserted landscape, sitting against a large rock about four feet tall. The sun was hanging halfway in the sky. It was sunset, or perhaps even sunrise, but as the sun never moved from that position, no one could ever tell. It covered the area in a warm, orange-red glow, and it illuminated his silver hair. It wasn't the kind of silver that someone would say when someone had aged; it really *was* colored silver, as if his hair was made of that valuable metal. He wasn't young, but no one he had met thought he was old.

He was dressed casually in a large white T-shirt to move in, blue jeans, and dark blue sneakers. There was a grey metal staff, four feet long, propped up next to him. The top was intricately designed, and was larger than the other end, curving back, up and over to the front, almost like a hook. In the center of the open area of this 'hook'

was a large purple gemstone. Where this hook started along the shaft were three recessed bands, colored a light blue to contrast the grey of the metal.

He was looking through a small, leather-bound journal. It showed its age with many rough spots where the leather had worn down. The tops of the pages were dirty where it had been flipped through many, many times. There were many yellow stick-notes peeking out from the top, bottom and side.

All of the sudden, he looked up into the air, noticing something. He realized there was a change in the space-time field around the area. Not a natural change, but a forced one. Someone was meddling with space-time, and would be coming soon.

Silver, as he was called, glanced down at the staff and sighed.

“Looks like they’ll be here any moment.”

He closed the journal, and pushed it down into mid-air, where it vanished as if putting it into an invisible pocket.

He stood up, pulling the staff up along with him in his right hand.

A green whirlpool about six-feet tall appeared a hundred feet in front of him, and then two more, to the left and the right of the first one.

From the middle whirlpool, a muscular man in technological armor stepped through. He had rough features, his face bearing a few scars, and his hair was cut very short, like a military haircut. From the left, a woman in light armor appeared, with brown hair down to her shoulders. And finally, from the right, a thin, but obviously fit man walked out. He was unarmored, and his dark brown hair came to spikes in the front.

Silver quickly flicked his staff. The three ‘portals’ froze, and then shattered like glass.

“Impressive, as usual,” the muscular man said.

“Why thank you. Now, could you go away? I’ve got other things to take care of.”

“We can’t do that,” the thin man said. “We need you back,” he said with a smirk.

Silver shook his head. “How many times am I going to have to beat my answer into all of you?” He looked at the unarmored man. “By my count, this is the sixth time, right Schove? On a related note, how’s the arm?”

The smirk of the thin man, Schove, melted into irritation.

“Anyway, these impromptu gatherings are *oh so fun*, but I’m really busy. You keep running under the orders of that old man, so I can’t help you. At all. End of story.”

“Then we’ll take the staff,” the woman said.

“No. Go build your own. All of you can barter for the materials, spend a year testing your creation, and then another ten fine-tuning it.”

“We don’t have that kind of time. Plus, the staff tends to work only for a true time manipulator like yourself, and a Time Coordinator at that,” the muscular man announced.

“Streyes, have you even considered doing the work for yourself for a change?”

Streyes, the muscular man, smiled. “Once again, we don’t have that kind of time.”

“You could have started a long time ago, but it looks like the quick and easy route has replaced your sense of responsibility,” Silver said. He brandished the staff forward. “So, is this going to be round six?”

“It won’t go like last time,” Schove growled.

Silver yawned. “Yeah, yeah. You say that *every* time.”

Irritated beyond all he could stand, Schove dashed with superhuman speed toward Silver, his legs not even touching the ground. A large, metal gauntlet formed over his right arm, sporting large blades over each finger. As Schove closed in for the kill, he slashed with his weapon.

Silver swatted the attack away with his staff. Schove dashed to the side after the parry. The woman followed up in a coordinated attack, dashing forward.

Silver pointed the staff at her. She immediately stopped, and was flung backward, skidding and rolling across the ground.

Schove tried to attack him from behind, but Silver moved even faster than him, landing on another large rock ten feet away.

Silver sighed. "I'm not breaking a sweat here. And the predictable attacks are getting boring. Eventually I'm just going to open to gate to a dimension of pure anti-matter on all of you and be *done* with it."

The woman, back on her feet next to Streyes, stopped in surprise. Streyes was also visibly concerned.

"Sona, would he be able to do that?"

She fumbled for a reply, still staring at Silver. "There's no way he should be able to do that. But . . ."

Silver didn't move, nor blink at the statement.

Schove continued the attack from the front. Silver parried three strikes with his staff, and then swung, catching Schove in the stomach. He was hurtled toward Streyes and Sona.

"I assure you, Sona, I am more than capable of doing so."

"You're bluffing," Streyes laughed. "Otherwise you would have done it already."

Silver laughed in response. "If I would have done it, you would never learn your lesson."

His staff lit up in several different colors, and wisps of energy protruded from his back, taking on shapes similar to the bones in the wings of a bird. The bulb of the staff glowed with a purple light, the light taking the shape of a mace.

Schove struggled to get up. "Why won't you help us!?"

Silver shook his head. “I’ve offered my help several times. You keep turning it down because it’s not enough for you, or your boss. He wants access to the Akashic Library, and thus you three do as well, but it will only lead to your doom.”

“Like hell!” Schove yelled at him. “Do you have any idea what it’s like to have your life ticking down to nothing faster than anyone else!? And you say *you* don’t have any time left!? We’ll cease to exist!”

“I’ll tell you all again: I can save you. But it’s not going to involve the Library.”

“The Library is the only way,” Streyes said.

“That’s what your boss has told you, and you only listen to him, don’t you?”

“He’s the only one who would help us when no one else would. He gathered together people who had the same problem in order to find the answer. The only conclusion was the Library.”

“And he’s wrong. Well, not entirely wrong.”

“Then you know that’s the only way.”

“*Like I keep telling you*, there’s no need for the Library if you want helped. But you’re going to say something nutty in response, so I’ll save my breath.” Silver’s face turned serious. “We can start when you’re ready to get mauled again, so I can get going,” he shouted. He brandished his staff-turned-mace to punctuate his statement.

Schove readied himself, his gauntlet glowing red. Sona’s hands flashed green for a moment, and a kukri – a bladed weapon with a slight curve to its edge – appeared in each hand. Streyes reached into the air in front of him, his hand disappearing into a green portal, and pulled out a dual-bladed axe.

Silver adjusted his stance.

The area around him erupted into a cloud of dust and dirt, creating a smokescreen for his three opponents.

It wasn't enough, as the cloud quickly dissipated with a wave of Silver's mace.

He quickly brought the mace back in the opposite way, right at Sona, who had appeared in front of him. He blocked her two attacks, and countered with strikes of his own. His plan of knocking her off balance worked. After light strikes, Silver swung his mace to the left. She parried with her kukris, but was smashed across the shoulder – Silver had spun around and hit her unguarded right.

"You're too predictable," Silver addressed Schove, who was attempting to attack from behind and overhead.

One of Silver's 'wings' twitched, opening up like a four-fingered hand. It snatched Schove right out of the air, and slammed him into the ground.

Bright light approached Silver from the front, and he realized a beam of energy – a large beam – was headed for him. Silver stuck out his left hand and the beam dissipated, impacting with a large barrier of blue energy.

Streyes swallowed in concern. After all, Silver had negated his attack with a carefree movement of his arm. He thought they might be in over their heads again, but reminded himself that they had been further enhanced since their last encounter with Silver. He realized they were reaching their limit of alteration, but if they got access to the Library, it would all be fixed, and everyone that was flawed as he was could return to a normal life.

Sona tried to attack him from the side, but was batted away again by the mace – and Silver hadn't even looked in her direction.

Silver looked down at Schove, then over at Sona, then back to Streyes. He shook his head, and then looked down at the ground. "You three certainly have been enhanced since the last time we met, but these False Overlaps are going to send you all to the point of no return."

Streyes burst forward and swept his axe toward Silver. His target parried and jumped back. Streyes wouldn't let

up, and continued with progressively stronger blows. Silver easily blocked them all, batted Streyes' weapon upward, and shoved his mace into Streyes's chest.

The gravity shot didn't do much to hurt him, but it did send Streyes flying toward the ground. At the last moment, he recovered, flipping himself over. He landed on his feet, but the momentum sent him sliding backward, his boots leaving two trails in the dirt. Schove and Sona were quick to rush to his side.

"Streyes, what do we do?" Schove asked.

That's when they started to feel the ripples in space-time. Someone was amassing a large amount of space-time into the current timeline.

Then he saw Silver. He was glowing – or rather, the air around him was – energy coalescing like a whirlwind. His hair was sticking up and out, waving based on the energy rather than the air; the strands oscillated in a rainbow. He was pulling an immense amount of power from neighboring timelines, and all three of Silver's enemies knew it.

"What kind of Time Coordinator is he!?" Sona swallowed hard, dumbfounded. "There should be no way he could focus this much energy here!"

They had never seen Silver do anything of this caliber.

Silver threw his left hand up, spreading open his palm, and said two words:

*"Fallen Core."*

A massive, jet black orb, the size of a boulder appeared above him. Space-time swirled into it, creating almost what seemed like serrated blades spinning around with it.

Silver threw his left hand forward and down, like he was bringing a hammer down. The orb quickly descended between them.

The first book of the series *A (Not So) Healthy Dose of Chaos* is now on sale, for \$14.95!

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