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94,600 words

Ghost: Regia Anglorum

by
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Athelstan Cying

In 12,496 ATA (Ancient Terran Accounting), the Twilight Lamb, a Family Trader Vessel, detected a derelict Imperial courier ship, the Athelstan Cying along its flight path. The spaceship was over two thousand years old. Its status was due to a misjump, and its crew had long ago turned to dust. What the Twilight Lamb's crew did not know was the ship once held escapees from an ancient Rep prison camp. They were all psyonic masters, bred for telepathic skills, and all members of the House Imperial.

On board the Athelstan Cying, the spirit and intellect of one of the crew was incredibly still alive. He was bodiless, but conscious and aware. When the Twilight Lamb approached the Athelstan Cying, the spirit prevented its destruction by disabling weapons secreted on the ship, and when the salvage crew came on board, he tried to protect them.

Den Protania, apprenticed in shuttles, was one of the members of the salvage team. Den was angry and disillusioned about his life among the families aboard the Twilight Lamb. He was the captain's only son. And he was already a self-made failure in astronavigation and command.

The clouds moving through the evening atmosphere of Lojirne were sodden and supercharged. Great gouts of cloud to cloud lightening blazed across them filling the air with ozone and deep rolling booms. The thunder reverberated through the skies giving a challenge to the upper atmosphere supersonic rumbles of shuttles coming and going from the great ships orbiting high above. In the evening glow, the shuttles were bright streaks across the horizon, and the great Family Trading Ships large planets like glistening stars, ever changing, ever present, the life blood of Lojirne.

Natana watched him. Every few steps, Den would glance at the heavens and frown, then smile when he made out the position of his ship, their ship, the Regia Anglorum. Each time she looked up, Natana smiled. She could immediately delineate their ship in low orbit. The biosynthetic chip in her brain registered all the ships in orbit. It marked them for her and told her their motion in four dimensions, orbit, approximate loading and weight, their type, category, and destination. She hummed her special computational hum, and Den glanced back at her. He didn't say a word. He didn't need to. He knew what she was doing. Maybe knew it before she could think it. His mind was linked with hers as tightly as the chip implanted within her brain.

The only ship missing from the constellation flooding the sky above them was the Twilight Lamb. The Twilight Lamb had slipped away on its next trading run many sevendays ago. It took their fathers and mothers and many of their friends—the crewmembers they had known and worked with all their lives. They had celebrated a huge party that mingled tears with festivity. The passage of the Twilight Lamb should have left a hole in their lives, but the Regia Anglorum now flooded that empty space as surely as the Twilight Lamb once filled it. Many of the Twilight Lamb’s crew had shipped to the Anglorum, and many new crewmembers signed on from Lojime. They all came to experience the excitement, promised opportunities, and promotions of a new Family Trading Ship.

The Regia Anglorum was crewed almost entirely by youth--the youngest and the newest Family Trading Ship in space. Den and Natana did manage to steal away some middle aged and more experienced masters and journeymen—in that they were lucky.

Natana took Den’s hand. Her touch was electric, like the clouds filing the skies. She knew him and immersed with him—one in mind. One in bodies whenever she could get him to remain long enough in their cabin to, um... rest.

The building ahead of them was typical of late Empire construction. It was low and large—it settled deeply into the ground, almost overwhelmed by the environment around it. The permacrete was aged, but though over a thousand years old it seemed new. Only the intruding trees and great prairie-like expanse of sod that encompassed it gave away its true age. It had once been the headquarters of the Intergalactic Combine, the industrial transportation forerunner of the Family Trader Cooperative. Here, long ago, bureaucrats controlled the trading of a thousand planetary systems. Now the Family Trader Ships alone determined their schedules and

competed with a thousand smaller corporations that filled the niches of trade on many more worlds than anyone really knew or could fully comprehend.

The universe was much larger than anyone conceived it and yet small enough that it was within reach, within the grasp of traders like them.

The clouds were bursting, but they would not rain tonight, not over Lojime's capital, Tønsberg. Weather central planners had not programmed rain to allow good weather for Regia Anglorum's five shuttles. The last were scheduled to take the Regia's remaining crewmembers aboard. The final shuttle Regia Anglorum Passenger zero two, RAP02, would carry Natana and Den to their new command. Den and Natana were only planetside to collect the final obligations and papers from repair and fitting of the Regia Anglorum.

Both the Twilight Lamb and Regia Anglorum sustained damage during a pirate operation against them in interstellar space. The Regia had been a luxury liner and was claimed by the Twilight Lamb as a result of capture. Den and Natana together sold everything from the Regia they would not need on a Family Trader Vessel. The Twilight Lamb had first claim on the credits from sale of components from the Regia. Every centicredit left over went into the transformation of the Regia Anglorum in to a Family Trader Vessel. Even that wasn't enough. The Regia Anglorum owed the Family Trader Cooperative a huge sum that she would pay back over time—with interest, of course.

Den and Natana finally arrived at the enormous clear ceriplast entrance to the headquarters of the Family Trader Cooperative. Their identification chips allowed them directly in. They made their way along that all too familiar path to the Office of New Ships and Services. Den and Natana wore their best shipsuits. They had little other finery and anything more than shipsuits here and in this place would have been considered pretentious.

Chief Master Services Clark Polar, the director of the office met with them immediately. He was expecting them. He knew not to offer tea or anything else. Den and Natana were here for only one reason, to sign all the remaining paperwork and get their final trading schedule.

Although each ship determined her own trading, the Family Trader Vessels had to compete and schedule the routes among themselves. A Family Trader Vessel was generally over five kilometers long and only a little less wide. If too many showed up with similar cargo around the same planet, the result could be a devastating economic loss for all the ships involved. The orbital facilities of most planets could only handle a few Family Trader Vessels at once. Some could only handle one at a time. Some scheduling of the ships was necessary.

The schedules were agreed to by the Family Trader Vessels by order of precedence. Since, the Regia Anglorum was the youngest and the highest mortgaged ship in the fleet, she had the last pick of the routes.

Master Polar laid out the final documents for Den and Natana to sign. Because Den was the acting Captain and Natana the acting First Office, they represented the entire crew and council of the ship. This might be the last time they held that absolute authority. Usually the ship's council, which was made up of the Chief Master in Command, Astrogation, Merchant, Services, Life Support, Shuttle, and Engineering, decided together everything of importance for the ship. In spite of that, the ship's papers were always in the names of the Captain and First Officer.

Natana could detect the edge in Den's thoughts. He was both nervous and excited. She was terrified. Still, this was a once in a lifetime opportunity. Perhaps the only time in the future history of the Regia Anglorum that such papers and decisions would have to be made. The Twilight Lamb, their last ship, hadn't needed new papers in three hundred years of trading, at least those issued by the Family Trader Cooperative.

Den signed and Natana signed the many spaces on the thick sheaf of papers. Their signatures were computationally coded the moment they touched a stylus to the thin plasteel sheets. The permanent paper provided a record for all time. The computer files repeated, coded, and sent everything electronically to the necessary databanks across the known universe. Den and Natana and the members of their crew might never see this paper record ever again. It would go into the vaults of Lojirne. Perhaps on a fieldtrip someday, their children might get to examine these papers and know their mother and father signed them on this very day. The thought was intriguing to Natana, and she glanced surreptitiously at Den. The moment she and Den signed in the last space, Natana knew on the Regia, a party had begun. She glanced at her wrist to check her chrono, realized she never wore one anymore and made a millisecond computation in her mind—the chip. In less than a blink, she noted the absolute time, converted it to Lojirne zulu, then to Regia standard, then overlaid the ship’s shift schedule. The first and second watches should be having their party. The third shift would be waiting in anticipation. Natana suddenly realized that she and Den wouldn’t get to celebrate, not with their old or new friends. They had the first shift. As soon as they came aboard they would officially commission the crew and begin preparations to depart Lojirne.

She sighed. Maybe she and Den could celebrate together later. She gave another sigh. She knew she would lose him for watch after watch—already had. He worked too hard. She’d have to get the ship’s doctor, Medical Master Dieter Larsen to order Den to their cabin. That was a fun thought—she might act preemptively. She forgot for a moment that Den understood almost her every thought, and she hadn’t been masking anything.

He whispered, “Mutiny already.”

She returned, “You already owe me big time.”

Master Polar looked over the electronic and physical papers. He ran an electronic check on them. Then he pointed to a video camera, “Look there Master Command Protania, raise your right hand, and repeat after me:”

Den repeated the oath, “I, Master Command, Master Astrogation, Master Shuttle Den Protania, a born Family Trader of the Twilight Lamb, do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of Captain of the Regia Anglorum and will support and defend the Constitution and vessel of the Regia Anglorum against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same. So help me God.”

Master Polar put out his hand, “Congratulations, Captain Protania, the first captain of the Family Trader Regia Anglorum. You may execute your commission, sir.”

Den touched Master Polar’s hand.

Natana looked on Den with pride. She gave him a celebratory kiss.

“That will look great on the official video,” Den remarked quietly.

Master Polar told Natana and Den, “Look into the recorder.”

Den stated to Natana, “Raise your right hand and repeat after me:”

Natana repeated, “I, Master Astrogator and Master Psychologist Natana Protania, a born Family Trader of the Twilight Lamb, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution and vessel of the Regia Anglorum against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the Captain of the Regia Anglorum, according to the Constitution of the Regia Anglorum and the model law of the Confederation of Human Space. So help me God.”

Master Polar touched Natana’s palm, “Congratulations First Officer Protania. I’ll get your official negotiated schedule.”

“See,” Den poked her and whispered, “You have to obey my orders for a change.”

“Doesn’t say I have to like them,” she scrunched her nose, “That’ll sound great on the official transcript, too.”

At that moment, Master Polar returned to the office with their negotiated schedule. They knew what was supposed to be on it, but this was the official record. He handed a data chip to Den who tossed it to Natana. Natana laughed and connected it to her tablet computer. Her computer was a thin device that could be used with various input and output devices and connect seamlessly to almost any computer system anywhere. She ran through the schedule, “This looks just like what we were expecting. The El Rashad, Centri run in multiples followed by El Rashad, Saint Perth, then Saint Perth, Acier, Belgesa, Sigil, Arienth followed by repeats to complete the year and bid on the next year trading runs. Okay, that wraps it all up. I’m transmitting this to the Regia. The ship should be ready to deorbit when we arrive, Captain.”

Master Polar held out his hand, “Congratulations again, Captain and First Officer Protania. You may be the youngest Captain and First Office, and the only married command pair we have ever had in this office.” He chuckled.

Den touched Master Polar’s palm again and Natana after him. Den asked, “If you could call our transportation, please?”

Master Polar laughed, “Already on the way. We know how quickly you want to get back to your ship once everything is complete.” He shook his head, “It’s in your blood, that’s the way I felt for a long time myself... By the way, some of my immediate family are onboard the Regia. I’m proud to have my family represented on her. You will do fine. You’ll make the family proud, I’m sure of it.”

Den gave him a half-hearted grin. Natana knew he was thinking—that he wished he could be sure of such a thing.

Den and Natana left the office together. Outside the door, Natana grabbed Den around the neck and put her lips to his. He didn't complain. She pulled back reluctantly, "Congratulations, Captain. I expect you in place after first shift to properly celebrate."

She could only watch the play of emotions across his face since he blanked his thoughts to her.

Natana warned him, "I promise, I'll get Dieter to put you on quarters."

Den shook his head, "I told you mutiny already—I knew it." He grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the entrance to the facility.

A little off balance, she called breathlessly, "You better get used to it, Den Protania."

Their gravvehicle was waiting for them. They quickly entered the vehicle, and it whisked them to the spaceport. There, Master Steven Larsen, the Regia's Shuttle Section Master greeted them at the base of the airstairs that led up into the passenger shuttle, "Captain, First Officer, welcome aboard."

Den frowned at him, "Come on Steven, that's a bit formal."

Steven Larsen shook his head, "Formal or not Captain. That's the way it's going to be on all my shuttles, so you better get used to it."

"Do I get to fly?"

"Not on your life. I have plenty of masters and journeymen. I'll pay you to train them on the virtual sim, but the council would have my skin if I risked you unnecessarily."

"I'm the best pilot you have, Steven."

"Yeah, and you're the only Captain the ship has—got it."

“I got it.”

Natana took Den’s arm and whispered, “No use getting hot about it, Den. You can’t neglect me if you aren’t splitting your work.” She spoke louder to Master Larsen, “Steven, thanks for taking him off the shuttle schedule. I’ll let you know, if I want him off the training schedule as well.”

Steven bowed, “Yes, First Officer, your wish is my command.”

Den mumbled as he started up the airstair, “Surely, this is a conspiracy.”

Natana giggled and held tightly on to him.

Steven followed them into the passenger cabin, took a last look around the spaceship, and closed the lock. He directed Den and Natana into the foremost seats and gained another reproving look from the young Captain. Then he began the safety brief.

Den realized it was all a joke when the moment Steven stepped into the passageway to the cockpit and closed the crewdoor, the shuttle’s engines began to start. Obviously, he had another Master in the cockpit who was prepping the shuttle’s systems. Den glanced at Natana, “Good joke at my expense.”

She didn’t get it. She hadn’t trained in any shuttle and wasn’t familiar with the cockpit and crew procedures.

Not much later, the shuttle began to taxi to the runway. Natana held Den close, “I know you wish you were flying this thing, but that’s what happens when you gain these responsibilities. My father told me all the time about it.”

“He expected you to become a First Officer?”

“Of course he did. Just who do you think I am?”

He kissed her, “To me you are the most precious person in the galaxy.”

Natana melted in his arms—as if she needed any excuse.

Master Larsen flew the shuttle into orbit, made an approach to the Regia Anglorum, and set the passenger shuttle without a bump inside the starboard shuttle bay of the Trader ship. The great door of the bay closed and shut out the immensity of space. The engines cut off.

The moment the shuttle docked on the Regia, playtime was over. Master Larsen opened the shuttle lock and extended the airstair. At the base of the stairs, the entire council greeted Den and Natana: Services Master Mary Polar, Merchant Master Elizabeth Shear, Engineering Master Kim Lasker, Life Support Master Karl Lasker, and Shuttle Master Steven Larsen. This was a courtesy to the Captain and First Officer, but the formality was necessary. There weren't any celebratory drinks because they would all soon be on duty—were on duty now. The official first watch following the ship's electronic release would be an event recognized in the history of the Regia Anglorum. Their children would review this very meeting and this very ship's day in their classes. Video and audio recorders were trained to pick up everything. Every member of the crew, even those on their free shifts would be watching and listening. The council planned this event for the first shift transition from third shift just to make it convenient for all the nearly five hundred members of their crew.

Den nodded to the ship's chaplain, Chaplain William Polar raised his hands, "The Lord be with you."

"And also with you."

Chaplain Polar bowed his head. On the Regia Anglorum everyone followed him. He prayed for them all, "Dear God of this great universe. We ask your blessings on this new ship, our home, the Regia Anglorum. Bless our family and crew, our officers and leaders. Most importantly protect and aid our Captain and First Officer as they look to You for guidance and

help. Help us to be a beacon in this age and a great benefit to many worlds. Strengthen and grow our family and bless our every dealing, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.”

A great “Amen” cascaded through the shuttle dock and the ship.

At the base of the shuttle airstairs, Natana took out her computer, a sheet of ceriplast paper, and a secured screenpage. The screenpage was a permanent electronic copy of the entire contract and papers for the Regia Anglorum. A special frame was already prepared for it beside the Captain’s office on the bridge. The ceriplast sheet was a copy of the first signatory page of the contract. It was unusual because of anything in this modern world it was actual printed words as opposed to electronically depicted. A special frame waited it on the bridge next to the First Officer’s office. Although, the records were already stored in the ship’s computers, Natana would make everything legitimate by officially sending the contract file to the ship’s computers with the witness of the Ship’s Council. Den gestured to her. Natana cleared her throat and climbed back onto the bottom step of the shuttle airstair, “Members of the council and families of the Regia Anglorum, with this electronic transaction, I am sending the papers that provide us full jurisdiction as an official Family Trader Vessel, a represented planetary authority in the Confederation of Human Space. From this moment forward, the Regia Anglorum is our home, our official planet, and our family.” Natana pressed the virtual button on her screen.

The council members and all the crewmembers in the bay clapped and cheered.

Natana’s face was beaming, “I also have the official permanent screenpage and a copy of the front page of the signed documents. These will hang on the ship’s bridge. Master Command, Master Astrogator, Master Shuttle Den Protania signed and was commissioned the Captain of the Regia Anglorum. I officially heard his charge, oath, and observed his signing. I do attest this as

the commissioned First Officer of the Regia Anglorum under the authority of the probationary council. I will now play this charge, oath, and signing for you.” She touched a second virtual button on her tablet computer. Immediately the viewscreens around the ship replayed the entire event on Lojirne. When Natana kissed Den everyone laughed.

“That’s one for the historical records,” stated Services Master Mary Polar. Master Clark Polar on Lojirne was her Uncle.

The recording continued with Natana’s oath. Luckily it didn’t include Natana and Den’s trailing comments. Natana then led the council members in their oath. At the end she stated, “You are now the official council of the Regia Anglorum. Ensure that all members of the crew in your sections of apprentice rank and higher swear this oath of office. Everyone within this vessel may now consider themselves citizens of the Family Trader Vessel, Regia Anglorum.”

The ship’s official anthem began to play. A young girl, about thirteen, Nichol Muar, started to sing the words from the shuttle dock. Her voice was clear and beautiful. The anthem itself was stirring and regal:

“Our great Family, Regia Anglorum,
cut from courage, God’s powerful hand.
Lead us in the way of promise,
guide us as your holy band.
Keep your love of all before us.
Let us praise you with our lives.
May our family before you
raise a benison of endless praise.”

Many sang along with her. Many couldn’t finish it because their tears stole away their words. Most of the crew had to wipe their eyes after the last note sounded.

Natana whispered to Den, “She wrote it herself.”

“Who?”

“Nichol Muar—she’s fabulous.”

A great cheer rose up all over the ship.

Natana pointed to Den, “I now give you Captain Protania.”

The cheering didn’t stop. Den was a little embarrassed. Natana stepped down from the airstair and leaned over toward him, “Get used to it.”

The noise in the bay slowly subsided.

Den began, “I’m very proud of you and our ship. This is a great moment for the history of our family and our families. It is the beginning of an entirely new Family Trader Vessel and family. In the Regia Anglorum, we will continue the great tradition of the Family Traders. We will continue our charge and our function in communication, trade, and balance within the Confederation of Human Space. Our first run is Nior for a shakeout and initial trading. We have cargo for trade from Lojime and will pick up more at Nior. Our first official negotiated schedule puts us at Centri and then El Rashad. These planets have been out of Family Trader schedules for more than ten years and should prove particularly lucrative for our new ship. Members of the Regia Anglorum assume your assigned watches and stations. We deorbit from Lojime on time and on schedule.”

The crew cheered wildly again, and Den stepped forward. The council made way for him and Natana followed right in his wake. They headed to the bridge to assume command and prepare to take the Regia Anglorum out of orbit around Lojime and into Faster Than Light, FTL, shutter drive to the planet Nior.

Nikita roamed the quiet morning streets. She was hungry and had been hungry almost every day of her short life. The road was a mixture of mud and human waste. The smell of it rose with the slight morning breeze. Nikita kept to the driest side near the shops, within the shadows. Right now, it was early enough that she didn't have to worry about the creeps and catchers. They were all still asleep. The street was narrow and the shops drab. Their bright fluorescent lights had been turned off less than an hour ago and the steam rose from their still hot fixtures. A thin stream of mist caught at the surface of the street and lifted with the increasing heat and sunshine.

Nikita cut across Feast Street and into a dim alleyway. She caught herself at the edge of the opening and listened. Then she made a seeking—a mental probe. She didn't detect any human presence, although she felt animals and smiled. They were already at their feast. The garbage cans were overflowing, and the rats and stercats were already there. Nikita knew better than to disturb any of them. She moved quietly and slowly toward a fragrant barrel that was too tall for either the rats or the stercats to reach and began to shuffle through the trash. Here there was food. She found many tasty things with only a trace of spoilage. The sun would soon turn it all rancid, so she must eat her fill and take what she could. It was enough to assuage her hunger for

a little. Never enough to fill her tight belly completely, but enough to make the hunger go away for a while.

If she were stronger, she might fight the rats and stercats for their morsels, but she knew the danger in that. She had seen too many of her acquaintances in the streets maimed by the animals, and the rats carried disease. The stercats were not as dangerous as the rats for that reason, but they were still armed with long claws and fine sharp teeth. The rats were originally from Terra; she read that somewhere. They carried human disease. The stercats were indigenous to El Rashad, and couldn't transmit human pathogens directly. They were as nasty as the rats and sometimes more feral. You couldn't eat them either, but the rats were very tasty if you were lucky enough to catch and kill one. They were tasty enough that many of the smaller kiosks on Feast Street served them.

Nikita watched the animals carefully. They probably thought the same about her. Nikita was skinnier than the sleek animals feasting behind these restaurants, and probably dirtier. They didn't molest her because the garbage was tastier and easier to get than Nikita. Nikita knew how to fight. She had fought all her life. The rats and stercats understood not to bother her, but just to remind them, she sent out a mental signal telling them how nasty she could be. She knew she communicated when in response, she heard a hiss and a squeak, and an unseen rat and a stercat who was a little too close backed away.

Nikita wrapped the remains of some food in a piece of paper and stuffed it into the cloth pouch at her waist. She carefully picked up the papers and trash that had fallen out of the waste can. She didn't want the shop owners to start putting out poison or attach locking lids to the cans. Then she would really go hungry.

Her hunger almost sated for now, Nikita made her way back to Feast Street and walked away from the main Carnival District toward the big fence. She turned onto Church Street. It was named that because a church was there. It was the only church in the Carnival District and maybe on the planet El Rashad. It was, at least, the only church near the great egalitarian city of Fatima. Nikita knew that because she once heard the priest say the only reason this church was allowed was because it was placed with all the other illegal pursuits in the Carnival District.

Nikita was always cautious, even about the priest. He had never threatened her, and she never detected any threat in his mind, but Nikita was always cautious. She was cautious with everyone and everything. She slipped behind the church and stole directly to its garbage cans. There wasn't much edible waste there, but she wasn't looking for food. On the top of the can lay the newspapers from the previous day. The priest always left them for her. In the past many people, mostly men had left things out for her, but they were usually creeps and catchers. Everyone knew about creeps and catchers in Carnival. The creeps were generally men and just wanted to rape her. She hadn't been caught yet, but she knew all about rape. She knew of it nearly daily from the minds around her. The pain and evil of it filled her young mind with horror. It was a typical condition in the Houses of Carnival as well as its dark backstreets. The catchers were generally women. They wanted to take Nikita for the sex houses or to sell her as a house slave. Nikita knew all their minds, and she could detect every one of them. She always kept her distance, that's why Nikita was still free and most of those she had known in the streets were either enslaved or dead.

The priest left yesterday's papers right on the top of the can. He sometimes put food and things for her just under them. Other than the newspapers, there wasn't anything today. The

priest didn't have much either. The people of El Rashad and Fatima didn't own much of anything themselves, and what little money they could get, they spent in the Carnival District.

Nikita took a very cautious look around. When she was certain no one was nearby or watching, she climbed the stones at the back of the church and pulled herself up on a ledge just before a garret window. On the ledge, she was hidden from the ground. The window led into a small attic. The garret contained a false window that had once been nailed shut. Nikita long ago worried the nails loose. It took days and much concentration, but she had pulled them out of the casement from the front side of the window. Now, just like every time before, she made a careful search before she eased open the window and slipped in. She left a small prop in the window frame to hold it open. That let in a slight airflow and ensured she had an escape path. Nikita always left herself an option—she always had to have an option to escape, some escape path.

Inside the attic, Nikita first pulled a vaguely human looking stuffed piece of cloth from the cloth pouch at her waist. It was dirty and made of rags. It had a stuffed head with two different beads for eyes and a rough stitched mouth. Its body was a darker brown rag shaped somewhat like a dress with stray feathers and bobbles attached to it. Its arms and legs were stuffed and attached to the body. Nikita kissed her little rag doll and spoke to it, "Good morning, Alice." She had already greeted Alice the moment she woke, but the return to their attic was an occasion that required such formality. Alice didn't require food, but Nikita did, and Nikita took all the comfort she could from her doll. With Alice propped against the wall, Nikita laid the papers out on the floor and began to read them. She taught herself to read a long time ago, and she still had problems with some words. The numbers were the easiest for her to understand. She liked numbers, and she liked anything technological. She read everything she could find in Carnival.

She tried to get on the public computers whenever she could. If she came at the right time, she could eke out a half hour on the system before the manager kicked her out. After Nikita read the first paper through, she stood and stretched. The day was still new and the streets were still nearly empty. She must get everything done in her day before the Carnival District began to come alive again. Nikita tucked Alice back into her shirt and knelt at the base of her window. She sent out a scan, and sure no one was watching, Nikita rushed through the window and back onto the ledge. She was in the alley behind the church in an instant and began her careful trek toward the big fence and the spaceport.

The spaceport attached directly to the Carnival District and the city of Fatima. It sat on the tip of a peninsula that stretched from the city of Fatima out into the great Sea of Adin. Wide brown rivers flowed on either side of it. To the west, on the far side of the river, was the great sea and the river port of Fatima. At the east, on the far side of the river, was a large commercial fishing and harvesting center. To the north, the city of Fatima extended into the far distance. It was a huge blot on the continent that reached upwards and outwards into the long flat plains of the planet El Rashad.

A tall fence, the big fence, ringed the space port even along the shore. It was made of heavy plasteel and about six meters high. The top was made of multiple lines of alarmed shiggawire, a single molecular filament that would slice through anything including metal.

Nikita knew all the good places to watch as the spacecraft and aircraft flew in. The best was a high retaining wall near the seacoast. She could sit there and see through and across the fence, but she could not be seen. There were other places, but they had less visibility and some of them could be traps. She was once almost caught by creeps who blocked both ends of one alleyway facing the fence. She and Alice together fooled them. She might have even hurt one—bad.

Nikita made her way to the retaining wall. It was a long walk, but the end result was worth it. She sat near the top of the wall and perched Alice beside her. Nikita could see the shuttles coast in from orbit. They started as a thin red gold streak high above the horizon. That's when she heard the first sonic boom. She always hugged herself and shivered when she heard it. Nikita explained to Alice what she knew was happening in the shuttles. She didn't need to imagine what the pilot was doing, she simply gazed into his mind. She did have to guess what the computers were calculating. To do that, she imagined she could see in her thoughts their computations and the ship's fight path. She tried to compute them in her mind and predict where the shuttles would show on the horizon. Most of the time, she was right. The shuttles always crossed the field at ten thousand meters and made a turn toward the final approach. She read about it in the papers, but she calculated it herself every day from the sun angles and the shuttle positions.

At the turn was when the shuttle made its second sonic boom. It was always really strong, and she could feel it through her entire body. Then the pilot lined up on the long shuttle runway and landed. She graded the landings. She knew just what to look for. She had listened once to a long conversation about it, and she read in directly from every pilot's mind that landed at the spaceport. Plus, she always eavesdropped on spacers when they came into the Carnival District.

Nikita knew all the shuttles and all the ships that came through the port at Fatima. She read their schedules in the paper everyday. She memorized them almost as quickly as she read them. That's why the next inbound shuttle had caught her special attention. It was not from a usual spacecraft to visit El Rashad. It from a ship called the Regia Anglorum. The shuttle, when Nikita finally saw it, was a heavy lifting type the Trader Families used; she had read about that too. She knew the Regia Anglorum was a Family Trader ship.

Nikita's mother died when she was very young. Her mother had been a singer and entertainer at Carnival. They had called her La Llama, the flame. She was a flame: beautiful and fine featured. Her voice was perfect and everyone listened; they could not help listen. La Llama was the toast of the Carnival District, until she died. La Llama told Nikita that her father was a Family Trader, but Nikita knew that couldn't be true. A Family Trader ship had not come to El Rashad in years—not as long as Nikita could read. Nikita didn't really know what a Family Trader ship was.

La Llama had told Nikita that her father was special, but he left Nikita and he left her mother—what kind of special was that. When La Llama fell into the last throes of the wasting disease, she mumbled to Nikita many stories about Carnival and about Nikita's father. Her mother's words were nearly incoherent. Nikita didn't learn anything new. When her mother finally died, Farid, the landlord, wanted to make Nikita a servant in his house. Nikita knew his mind, and she knew where that led. She saw the women and girls abused daily there. It was the way of Carnival, and without Nikita's mother there to protect her... Nikita left before her mother's body was cold. She didn't shed any tears, but she spent a long time hungry before she discovered how to live in the streets.

At first, the creeps and the catchers ignored her. She was too young for most of the creeps and too small for any of the catchers. At the beginning, she could pose as a child from Carnival. Her dress was more fine than the children of the city of Fatima. That gave her a lot of leeway with the merchants and hucksters. Some recognized her as the child of La Llama and fed her as a matter of course.

As her clothing slowly degraded to rags, and she outgrew them all, she could no longer hide in plain view. Everyone recognized her as a beggar and orphan. Then she became a true outcast.

No one offered her anything anymore. Then, she had to keep out of the sight of creeps, catchers, Carnival police, such as they were, and the officials from the city.

The shuttle from the Regia Anglorum made the turn. Nikita exulted in the sonic boom. The spaceship lined up on the approach path, and the pilot guided it to a perfect touchdown. Nikita raised her hands to the sky and let out a shout. It was always something to see a shuttle touch down with such precision—the pilot must be very good. She reached out her mind to seek him, to see how precise he might be. She did that often with spacers. Their minds were so different than the people of El Rashad and the Carnival District. Their minds were generally linear and straight thinking. They were uncluttered and wonderful. She wished she could always be around minds like that.

What Nikita touched made the hair on her head stand up. It made her heart beat a frenzy. It wasn't the pilot, it must be a passenger, but still she thought the shuttle swerved just a little on its rollout. It must have been her imagination. She pulled back her probe immediately. She had touched the most powerful and wonderful mind she had ever experienced. She had only felt the edge of it, but she knew its strength. It was clear and perfect. It was like listening to one of her mother's songs. It was like a clear fountain of water.

Nikita jumped down from her perch and ran down along the length of the fence. She cast out ahead to make sure no one was near. It was still early—before noon. She ran to the meager entrance from the space port into the Carnival District. With a mind as powerful as the one she felt, she should surely find him again when he entered the Carnival District.

The entrance from the space port to Carnival was just a gate in the fence with a guard shack on either side. In reality, only the guard shack on the spaceport side was ever manned. The

people in the Carnival District didn't care who entered or left. Only the spaceport wanted to prevent the dwellers of Carnival from entering.

Nikita waited a long time. No one with a mind like the one she felt came through the gate. Not many people came through the gate at all—it was still too early. When Carnival finally began to wake, disappointed, Nikita left her hiding place by the spaceport gate and made her way back toward the church.

The church was close to the entrance from the Carnival District into the city of Fatima, and this was a very well secured gate. It had body scanners and real armed guards. Its purpose was to keep the denizens of Carnival from entering Fatima and to keep restricted and illegal items out of the city.

Nikita didn't understand everything about that very well. She knew the city of Fatima was a place where people lived a nearly effortless existence. She knew the people worked very little, and they weren't too hungry. She knew they wore nice clothing. Not as nice as most of the clothes in the Carnival District, but much nicer than the rags she wore. Their health was good. They still succumbed to the wasting disease and other ailments, but they didn't have to pay for their care.

La Llama paid for her medical treatment and little good it did her—she was dead. For some reason not fully understood by Nikita, the people of Fatima came to Carnival as often as they could. Every stray centicredit they had went into the Carnival District. They swilled here like pigs, and they received very little for their precious money. Nikita knew that money was precious. The people of the city had so little of it. Their minds told her of the difficulty and deprivation they made to come by their small funds. At Carnival, money flowed like water, most if it from the people of Fatima into the coffers of the hucksters and sellers.

Nikita had heard about the food the people ate in Fatima. It was bland and came in only a few varieties. She didn't know what it was called. Maybe their lives in Fatima were so bland, like their food, that they came to Carnival to experience real life. At Carnival were games of chance and illicit activities. The way people talked, the people of Fatima could have sex with anyone whenever they wished, yet they came to the sex houses at the Carnival for every thing imaginable and some not so imaginable. They paid good credits for the opportunity. Women and men from Fatima paid to become the sexual providers in the sex houses. They paid to be degraded. They paid to experience excitement in ways that were considered illegal and immoral in Fatima. In the suicide houses, they paid to die in various ways and they paid to watch the suicides lose their lives. They paid for a piece of seaweed roasted on a stick, for small pickled fish, and the rats cooked in tiny kiosks in the street.

The people of Fatima ate at the restaurants in Carnival. Meat was so precious to them and the experience so exhilarating to them, some of the restaurants served the very suicides from the adjoining tents. Nikita knew which restaurants those were—she stayed well away from them.

Nikita couldn't figure what was missing in the lives of those from Fatima that drove them to Carnival and to everything there. She knew of many from the city of Fatima who left to become denizens of Carnival, but no one who left Carnival for Fatima. She thought that plenty of food and little work might be pleasant, but something terrible must lurk in Fatima that she couldn't fully understand. She did know the minds of those from Fatima were much different than those from Carnival. She could pick them out of a crowd without difficulty. Those minds from Fatima were simple, but confused. Their minds were like children who never held any responsibility. They were not straight. They were not linear. They were weak and convoluted. Those from Carnival were complex and sometimes harsh, but they glowed with maturity.

Perhaps that is why the people from Fatima lost the simple games with such regularity, and why they thought degradation was entertaining.

It was almost impossible for a person from Carnival to enter the city of Fatima. Nikita heard rumors all the time about resource shortfalls in the city—it was almost never in the newspapers. That's when Carnival really became crowded. She didn't think the people of Fatima went hungry, but when their food and entertainment was reduced in the city, they traveled in droves to Carnival. Maybe the city food was then more bland then, or it could not satisfy. When Nikita observed what the city people would eat and enjoy, she wondered about their sanity. But their minds weren't like crazy people—she had touched the minds of the insane. No, their minds were like babies testing the world, but not certain about what was good for them to eat, or drink, or do.

Even if the people of Carnival desired to enter Fatima and live like the city people, that would be nearly impossible. Fatima only rarely accepted those from outside. She heard that some offworld tourists paid good credits to visit the cities of El Rashad. They were paying guests. At one time, she understood, El Rashad accepted any and all of a like mind, but now, the resource shortfalls were so great they couldn't accept anyone except those who would pay.

El Rashad manufactured nothing, so it was not unusual that Family Traders seldom landed there. Nikita had come to learn, from her newspapers, that El Rashad imported a large portion of its protein, carbohydrates, and fats to convert to the main foodstuffs of the cities. She also knew they exported large amounts of raw human substances like blood, plasma, hormones, tissue, and other human matter. From what she understood, the people of the cities were required to spend one day a month providing fluids, tissue, and hormones that could then be exported. Nikita guessed these were valuable commodities, but wasn't sure just how they were valuable or why.

At the great gate into the city of Fatima, Nikita delayed a few incautious moments and watched the crowds enter Carnival. The people of Fatima were dressed in loose pastel similarity. Some made little attempts at individuality. Their refinements were weak, and among the many similarly dressed people, nearly insignificant. The denizens of Carnival were flamboyant and debonair in their heady costumes and fine dress. The provocateurs were dazzling and already culling out those with money and those who wished to end their lives and those who wished other more peculiar experiences. The prostitutes, male and female were singling out their prey and dissecting their desires to pass them to the correct house or place or environment. The time was past noon and the games were beginning to open. The whole of Carnival was about to begin.

Nikita knew enough to stay out of the way during Carnival. This was the most and least dangerous time for her. The most because she would stand out in her dirty rags; the least, because, right now, no one would care anything about a hungry child. They were too absorbed in themselves. Even the creeps and the catchers would be too busy at their regular trades to care about Nikita. Still Nikita took pains to keep out of everyone's way during Carnival.

She watched carefully and sought with her mind all around her before she snuck back up the wall of the church and into her attic space. There, while the noise of Carnival gradually increased, she could read the rest of the newspapers and eat the remainder of her salvage from the morning.

Although she tried to concentrate on the words in her papers, Nikita could not get out of her thoughts the mind she felt on the Family Trader shuttle. She wanted to meet a person like that. She wanted to touch that mind again—but she was scared to death to attempt it again. Just a

little bit, she thought. She vainly progressed through the paper—her mind half on her reading and half on the mental experience that was so unique in her existence.

When the sun began to set, the light became too dim in Nikita's attic for her to read. That was when the most important time of the Carnival day began. When the sun set, the lights all over Carnival sputtered on. They were bright and filled with promise. They promised excitement and the answer to every desire. Nikita had thought often that when she finally grew up, she could work in one of the houses of the fortunetellers. She would be able to tell everything about anyone, just a simple scan of their mind, and she would know them intimately. She sometimes went by Fortune Court off Carnival Street, and imagined the possibilities. Still, the fortunetellers were not treated pleasantly. She thought the house owners might treat her differently. Since, she could really read a person's mind, perhaps she could actually touch the wishes of another and draw out those desires so they became real.

Nikita knew she was only fooling herself. The house owners were interested in one thing and one thing alone; they wanted the money from the people of the city. A few citizens of Carnival, like La Llama, her mother, had inherent worth and importance, Nikita had none, and her skills, though perhaps powerful, were not important to anyone.

Nikita sighed. When the streets around the church were dark, she climbed silently and stealthily down to the ground and made her way toward the door of the church. The priest stood out at the street and tried to entice the visitors from Fatima and the citizens of Carnival to Mass. Many nights he was successful and almost filled the small building. This, after all was a new experience, and unlike most Carnival events, it was free to anyone who wished to attend. Nikita thought the old priest should charge something for the Mass; she was certain he might entice more to come.

As the priest stood at the bottom of the steps and called for the people to enter, Nikita waited her chance. She scanned with her mind and her senses. When no one was looking, Nikita ran silently behind the priest and through the door. When she was inside, Nikita touched the water at the font and crossed herself. Then she rushed to the front left side of the church, the place no one else ever sat. The building was very dark there and the pews were misshapen with age and decay; they were especially dirty and dingy in the place where she sat. Nikita knelt and prayed. She kept her mind open and watched carefully around her, but still she fervently prayed.

Nikita's prayers were simple. She knew God must be someone very smart and very powerful, but she was certain she could not be misunderstood or go wrong if she kept everything simple and direct, "God, it's me, Nikita again. I want to thank you for the food this morning. It wasn't too bad and lasted until this afternoon. It didn't make me sick. Thanks for the papers too and for keeping away the creep and catchers. I can stay out of their way alright, but if I have to run, sometimes the food isn't enough, and I get hungry.

"Oh, God, I felt a mind today like none I've ever felt before. It was from a Free Trader Ship shuttle. Maybe you might let me touch it again. I'd really like that. Thanks for the priest. I hope my momma is with you, and I hope you like her singing. She did like to sing." Nikita always added that part. She didn't know if her mother was with God or not, but she thought it couldn't hurt to ask. Nikita liked God, and she thought her mother would like God too.

Nikita had ignored the church for a long time. She ignored it until she found the hiding place in the garret. After that, she listened every night with her mind and ears to the goings on inside the building. At first, she thought the church was like one of the houses with some kind of experience inside to titillate or degrade the people of the city. She quickly learned it was nothing at all like that. The priest didn't charge any money to attend. He asked for donations, but the

services were all free. The events in the church were unusual too. The priest read from old books. He sang and asked the people who came to sing. He led them in a wonderful weaving of words, signs, and song, then he told a story. His stories were simple, but they were always about the great God and his Son Jesus and some spirit. Nikita knew all about the spirit. She was certain that was what she had. She knew the spirit was this thing in her mind that let her see the minds of others, and she knew God could do that too—the priest said so in his stories.

Nikita thought the stories were wonderful. She thought the old priest was wonderful that he knew so many and could weave them so artfully about God and Jesus and the spirit. Then came the most marvelous part. The priest would bless wine and bread in the name of God and he would call everyone who wanted to come to Communion. Nikita always snuck up silently to the dark left side of the rail and knelt. Most of the time, there were very few who came for Communion. No one noticed her. The newness of the experience kept most from observing the girl in rags who came so silently and so deliberately every night to commune.

The priest knew she was there in the darkness. The first time, he almost missed her, but he caught himself at the last moment. Nikita made a sending and touched his mind. He turned deliberately toward the bright dirty face of the child who knelt there. He hesitated only a moment. He thought perhaps she was there only for bread and wine, but Nikita's eager hands reached out and sought something else, and the priest somehow understood that.

Every evening, slowly, gingerly, the priest communed Nikita. His movements were always slow and careful as though he knew she might bolt at any moment. She was like a small wild animal. A human being that was like a wild animal, but she sought the solace of God, and the priest could understand that. After all, that was his purpose.

Nikita became his most regular and faithful attendee. She came to every service. She made no sound aloud. She never spoke to the priest. She just came and prayed and listened and communed. She knew the priest had no idea that Nikita lived in his church. He did know she coveted the newspapers and other reading materials. One day she let him see her taking the papers from his trash. She was looking for food, at first, but came across the papers in the course of her search. He understood. After that, He started to put the papers on the top of the garbage for her. She was happy he did. A paper too deep in the barrel became saturated with all kinds of nasty things and was hard to read. He also occasionally left food for her. He did it usually at the beginning of the month when he received the stipend from his religious order. Later, his money ran out, and he had to eat everything or starve himself. Nikita knew all about being hungry. She didn't begrudge the priest his food; she could find food. She wanted his cast off papers more than anything.

When Communion was over, Nikita slipped back to her dark place on the left and waited for the benediction. At the end, she crossed herself, prayed again, and made her way along the dark walls of the church to the back. She waited for everyone to leave, and when it was clear, she stole out of the door. The priest never saw her come, and he never saw her go. She was like a flitting ghost. A shadow but the only consistent member of his congregation, the only one who seemed to really understand about God.

The church here on El Rashad was an unusual place. There was a church in every Carnival outside every city on the planet. They were maintained by a Franciscan order. Their main purpose was to aid those who were intent on suicide from the cities and to provide a mission to the denizens of Carnival. Other churches in other Carnivals were more successful at attracting a

regular congregation than Father Benedict's outside the city of Fatima, but Father Benedict tried to reach out more to the people of the city of Fatima.

The major houses of Carnival, in spite of their business and abusive habits subscribed to a clan based worship that was akin to Christianity, but obviously far from modern Catholic practice. That was one of the reasons missions routinely failed on El Rashad. It was very difficult to proselytize people whose every need was taken care of by the benevolent state or who were held in the cycle of degradation of Carnival. Father Benedict knew there were analogues in the far past. He had read about them when he trained for this job. The Franciscans provided funding for the basic necessities and expected the individual churches to build a congregation for expansion, funding, and charity. Whether he was remiss or not, Father Benedict long ago decided to focus on those who came to Carnival from the city. He had to admit, he was not very successful. The city citizens had no needs, no needs except those Carnival could supply. His church liturgy was a far cry from the games and entertainments along Carnival Street. The only person his church appealed to was the small waif who had yet succeeded in evading the creeps and catchers and had apparently not succumbed to the enticement of trading her body for food.

At least, Father Benedict thought she was a girl. It was hard to tell. He rarely saw her with any clarity. Her face was filthy and she only had dirty rags for clothing. When he did see her face raised to his during communion, he noted under the filth a delicate visage. Perhaps it was only his imagination. Still, she needed to keep out of the hands of both creeps and catchers. She wasn't ugly enough to repel either of them.

Father Benedict knew she was hungry most of the time. He saw it in her eyes. She was perhaps one of the few who ever knew true hunger on this Godforsaken planet. Father Benedict

wished he had some funds for charity, but he didn't. The order sent him a prescribed allotment each terra month and that was all. It barely saw him through until the next deposit.

There were not a lot of children on the street like the girl. Most of the abandoned children couldn't remain out of the clutches of the houses. They were sold like slaves based on their beauty or strength. The numbers of workers at Carnival were always insufficient, so even the plain and simple minded found some niche. This child was one of the few who wouldn't bow, or who was wise enough to completely evade the lure of Carnival. Still Father Benedict wished there was something he could do for her. Nameless, she still found a place in his prayers every night and every day.