

# The Waterdancer's World

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*For Joshua B. Lukin,  
Treasured Friend, Intrepid Thinker, Outspoken Comrade*



I'm interested in a poethics that recognizes the degree to which the chaos of world history, of all complex systems, makes it imperative that we move away from models of cultural and political agency lodged in isolated heroic acts and simplistic notions of cause and effect. Similarly, the monolithic worldview that leads to assessments of success or failure in the arts based on short-term counts of numbers persuaded—for example, the size of the audience—is particularly misguided. Although news media operate on the premise of a single worldwide field of events, from which the most important are daily chosen for review, human culture has always consisted of myriad communities with very different interests, values, and objectives. There are disparate “audiences” to define the character of culturally significant events and no way to know which will have the greatest effect on our multiple futures.

—Joan Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*



## *Preface*

Humans have been living on Frogmore for nearly a millennium (in standard years). Since the history of the planet's human habitation is inextricable from the human inhabitants' struggle for independence from the Combine's Council for Developmental Strategy, accounts of Frogmore's history written by off-planet historians who have never set foot on Frogmore usually adopt a simplistic framework casting it as the story of failed civilization and descent into barbarous parochialism. My account, which relates only a portion of that history, refuses that framework and insists on seeing our planet's history as a hard-won achievement of autonomy that must often have seemed at best unlikely, at worst impossible, to those waging the struggle.

In constructing the account that follows, I've selected certain documents for inclusion as well as narrativizations of well-documented events and supplemented these with excerpts from published texts of the day in order to provide context about life on Frogmore five centuries ago. This is, of course, a standard methodology used by professional historians everywhere, most of whom just happen to live on Pleth, where all but two universities in the galaxy are located. Most historians agree that the events I choose to focus on constitute the turning point in Frogmore's history, but they will likely consider my narrativizations and selection of extracts biased and presumptuous, simply because my focus supports a radically different understanding of the planet itself as well as of the nature of the conflict. Unlike Pleth's most eminent historians, Frogmorianians need more sophisticated accounts of

their history, accounts that ring true for them and celebrate the achievement that one Combine-centered history calls “a sad day for galactic civilization, a defeat for everyone involved.”<sup>1</sup>

I’ve chosen to relate this history primarily through the perspectives of five individuals, none of whom appear in the standard histories discussing Frogmore: Claire Gaspel, Ariel Dolma, Nathalie Stillness, Madeleine Tao, and Inez Gauthier. In addition to these, I begin my account with a brief narrative from a fifth point of view intended to provide additional context. Claire Gaspel’s journals have been preserved because she was a “First Daughter” of the inhabitants descended from a group of reproductive surrogates who were among the planet’s first human settlers; I’ve included extensive verbatim extracts from Gaspel’s journals and Ariel Dolma’s personal correspondence. I’ve also included extracts from anthropologist Nathalie Stillness’s Frogmore journal, composed when she was on-planet doing fieldwork here. Decades after the events described herein, Jurist Madeleine Tao wrote a memoir of her professional life, a memoir rich in mature reflections on juridical process. And finally, the fifth perspective, the best-documented of the five, is that of Inez Gauthier, a financier and the daughter of General Paul Gauthier, who oversaw the Combine’s occupation of the planet. I’ve chosen to make the Gauthiers the dominant focus of the narrative not only because the source material documenting their activities and influence on the planet is so plentiful, but also, and more importantly, because they played such a critical role in the eventful years leading up to Frogmore’s break from the Combine.

The supplemental material I’ve included comes from the following sources (publication dates, Frogmore dating, given in parentheses):

- 1 This is the phrase used by Hortense Park in her magisterial *Backworld Issues: The Combine’s Long Struggle for Civilization on Five Underdeveloped Worlds*.



*Frogmore's Destiny: A Manifesto for Independence* (5.III.501; written 8 years after the events in the book).

*Frogmore: The CDS Fact Book* (475).

*A Traveler's Handbook to the Galaxy*, 49<sup>th</sup> Edition (492).

Enoch Fulmer, *A Star-Hopper's View of the Galaxy* (490).

Madam X, *Frogmore's First Circle: Life in Amanda Kundjan's Circle* (495).

Imogen Alençon, *The Trouble with Frogmore* (497).

Alexandra Jador of Pleth, *The Art of Holodrama* (489).

Daniel Sayles, Confidential Memo to the Standing Working Committee for Frogmore [to which no one who appears in this book had access] (492).

I'd like to thank the Frogmore Historical Society for the grant that funded my travel to Jannisset, which made this account possible, and the Narrative Sciences Department of Frogmore Central University for providing a sabbatical as well as leave-time for writing this account. Thanks go, too, to Gervais Tao, who generously shared family holos and other documentation with me; to the Daughters of Paula Boren for permission to publish selections from Claire Gaspel's journals; to the Frogmore Historical Society (again!) for allowing me access to its archive of epistolary documents and to quote from Ariel Dolma's letters to Livvy Kracauer; to numerous colleagues in my department who helped me work through the epistemological issues entailed by my departure from the standard narratives of galactic history; and, finally, to my partner, Gisela Kimura, who spent many hours reading drafts of this narrative and commenting on them freely and at length.

Exact citations and sources for my account are, as always, available on request.

Louise Ducange  
Frogmore Central University



## *Zero*

SADORA LUMNI

Sadora stood at the room's singular, small window, gazing down into the marsh below at the iridescent purple shells of the creepers foraging in the slow-bubbling sludge; though ponderous, their movements were oddly graceful. They might have an ugly name, but they were her favorite amphibious species. The day's mistflowers' lavender cast especially flattered the beauty of their shells.

Behind her, Solstice said, "The grant's been renewed."

Sadora turned. Solstice's eyes were shining. She held out the screen she'd been using, and Sadora went to her, took the screen, and sat down with her at the table. "So you'll be able to keep waterdancing?" Sadora said. Not a real question. But Solstice had been worried that this might be the year she'd be cut off and have to go to teaching full time. That, or take a job in the Capitol District at Frogmore Central University. Solstice always said it was a mystery how she got any funding at all, given how few public appearances she made, and those rarely attended by people with full connections. But Solstice had always refused to see how extraordinary her resume must look to the outsiders handing out the grants—and how smug they probably felt when telling their friends they were funding "an art form native to Frogmore."

"The renewal comes with an invitation," Solstice said. Her rough, throaty voice grew husky. "Or should I say a 'command performance'?" Though the traces of triumph glazed Solstice's eyes, her tone sounded wry to Sadora's ear.

“From the Executive Regional Manager?” Sadora wondered aloud. That would certainly account for the wryness. “Or a member of parliament?”

A grin spread over Solstice’s face. “The Governor herself, Sadie. I’m to give an evening performance at the Governor’s Installation and teach three workshops at Frogmore Central.”

“Wow. Congratulations, sweetie.” Sadora looked down at the screen, but the officialese of the text made it attention-repellant. “Sounds like a lot of work—and expense. All told, three breakdowns, set-ups, and moves of the tank. Are they paying for that?” If they weren’t, the expense would seriously eat into the grant. Of course any amount of hardship would probably be worth it, but since Solstice had to teach part-time in the dome to supplement the grant, it wouldn’t be easy. And of course that wasn’t even taking into account the need to rent a room in the Capitol District for at least six days, maybe even as many as ten.

Solstice laughed. “Yes, silly. Do you think anyone would perform for them if they didn’t? The letter specifies expenses plus an honorarium of 500 credits.”

Sadora stared at her. The grant paid 1000 credits—to cover an entire year. Five hundred for a few days’ work seemed extravagant beyond measure.

“We’ll need to get time off from our jobs, of course. But since we both work for the dome, that shouldn’t be a problem. And if we have to, we can always trade shifts with co-workers rather than get them to substitute for us.”

“We?” Sadora said. “*Us?* The invitation is to you, Solstice.”

Solstice looked inquiringly at her. “This is a joint project, isn’t it? There’d be no waterdance without the tank and fluid. Remember that pathetic tank I was using when we first met? And you also collaborate with me on thematic conceptualization and design the special effects. How can it not be to *us?*”

Sadora set the screen down on the table. That all might be true, but as far as the people funding the grant were con-

cerned, she provided technical assistance, not creative input. The thought flattened her. “Yeah,” she said, somehow all that she could manage. What was the matter with her? Making Solstice the face (and name) for their work had been her own idea, after all. (As had been applying for the grant in the first place.) When the outsiders looked at Solstice (at least when she was wearing a cap concealing her head hair), what they saw was someone who looked like themselves. Someone who was eligible to vote and was thus a full citizen. Someone they could believe capable of being an artist—which they would never believe about anyone retaining the skin and exoskeleton all natives of the planet were born with.

Solstice took her hand. “What is it, Sadie? Do you have reservations about this? It seems to me that this might be our big break.” She lifted her hand to stroke Sadie’s cheek. “But you are so much more perceptive than I am, I know I’m probably missing something.”

Conscious that Solstice would likely take any sign of withdrawal the wrong way, Sadora restrained herself from drawing back. Solstice’s lack of sensitivity had been something they’d had to work through—and something Sadora considered a result of Solstice’s years on Pleth, not a basic trait of her character (as Solstice had decided to believe). “Well,” she said slowly, trying to think her way through the vague thoughts she felt needed formulation, “I think that right from the start you’re going to have to be clear about what you want to achieve and how much you’ll be willing to compromise to get there.”

Solstice drew her hand away and sat back in her chair. “You mean, whether I’m hoping to achieve important things with my work, rather than mere professional success and public recognition?”

“Something like that.” Sadora brushed her fingers over the grainy surface of the cheap printed table. “The reason you need to think about it is because if you do something

that makes Them really uncomfortable, they'll likely drop you back into oblivion." Or worse. Though "worse" was an unlikely consequence for someone of no consequence anywhere, not among the Families, not even in their own dome.

"I don't want anyone to just think this is a pretty display of a body acceptable to the outsiders," Solstice said. Sadora noted that the expression settling on Solstice's face was bringing out the squareness of her jaw and couldn't stop herself from smiling. "If we can finish working out the logistics of the time-tripper piece," Solstice added, "I'd like to perform that one."

"How much time do we have?"

"Almost three months."

Sadora realized that she had just said *we*. We'll be all right, she thought. Just as long as Solstice doesn't start thinking of herself as one of Them...



They managed to get some of the shifts during their projected absence covered, but had to do some trading—and work some of the traded shifts before they left rather than after their return. The extra work was harder on Solstice than on herself; nurturing and stimulating small children was tiring in a way that maintenance work was not. But most of the remaining work preparing the new waterdance was Sadora's, so that was all right.

Most of the worry and all of the uneasiness was Sadora's too, though. Following Solstice's advice, she compelled herself to learn the habit of keeping her hair trimmed close to her scalp. Even people from the Families living in the Capitol District did that, Solstice warned her. Anyone without head hair was liable to freak out seeing one of the "unaltered" (the politest words of the plethora used to name people like Sadora) wearing their hair long (or wearing non-opaque cling-ons that made their exoskeletons clearly visible). Basi-

cally, the hardest part of their preparations involved anticipating such “nonsense.”

Sadora threw a small party a few days before she and Solstice left for the Capitol District. Sadora wanted the people closest to them to know why they would be spending time away. And maybe, if she was honest, she hoped that outside validation might make people take their waterdancing collaboration more seriously, though she knew that outsiders' tastes and preferences tended to be a source of derision in Family culture. The party had been solely her idea, of course. Solstice always claimed she was antisocial and had no social skills. But Sadora suspected that was a story Solstice told herself to shield herself from the power of her family's ostracism of her and repeated experiences of rejection that had followed her return from Pleth.

“I understand her wanting to adapt her body for dance,” Sadora's sister Lee said shortly after Sadora had introduced them to one another. “But why couldn't she at least leave some spalls in her skin? It's as if she's rejecting who she is—trying to be one of *Them*.”

“She still has her head hair,” Sadora had pointed out. “And she hasn't acquired neural hardware. *They* don't see her as like themselves, and they never will, unless she takes that last step. Which I don't see her doing.”

Both her mother and Lee, though a little repulsed by Solstice at first, had gradually warmed to her. And their pity for her ostracism had eventually morphed into indignation. Like the few friends Solstice had made in the dome, they'd even come to take pride that *their* dome had welcomed her in and trusted her with their children. The Daughters of Violet Cho prided themselves on their humaneness, and they had a history of seeing things differently from Solstice's family, the Daughters of Bessy Darracott, who had a reputation for being ornery.

Sadora's mother brought a platter of cheese to the party, Lee brought fruit, her cousins brought pastries and breads, and Solstice's and Sadora's respective workmates brought beer and a selection of sparkling water. Sadora's workmates also brought their drums and tambourines, and though only the fittest could dance, everyone sang themselves breathless.

Later, after they'd collapsed into hammocks and shifted from sparkling water to beer, they reminisced about other times, told amusing anecdotes, gossiped, and finally spoke of the projected trip to the Capitol District and acquaintances in common known to be living there. When they were all well lubricated, Ari asked, "You're going to do the dance about the time-tripper, right?" He had been among those who'd been the audience for their final trial run.

Solstice said yes, she and Sadie were pretty happy with the shape it was in.

"What do you s'pose They'll make of it?" he wondered. "Will They even recognize it when they see it? Do any of them even know about time-trippers?"

Solstice and Sadora looked at one another. That was a question they'd never thought to ask. Solstice said, slowly, "I think some of them know about it—as a kind of myth or legend. I mean, I found mention of it in a travel book when I was on Pleth."

"They know about mistflowers," Sadora said. "They can't help but know mistflowers exist."

"But probably not about the relationship between mistflowers and time-trippers," Solstice said softly.

"That dance, I think, is really for *us*," Ari said.

"Though They'll probably think it's about Them," Lee said.

Sadora grinned. "Isn't everything?"

Everyone laughed, and the moment passed, and they talked about the birds nesting in Shona's Grove dive-bombing a juvenile green raptor who'd foolishly taken them for prey.



When the first probes the Council for Developmental Strategy sent to the Bellarius System yielded the intelligence that one of its planets was loaded with riches just begging to be mined, most of the sitting councilors paid scant attention to aspects of the planet likely to pose obstacles to development. Toxic atmosphere? Nothing domes and environmental suits couldn't cope with. Punishing gravity? Magnetic slabs beneath the domes and exoskeletal prosthetics or genetic modifications everywhere else would solve *that* problem.

The councilors knew that they themselves would never have to set foot on the planet. What mattered was the potential wealth, just waiting to be exploited. And in fact, since the atmosphere was already toxic and only workers would actually be living on the surface, they'd have no pressing concern to worry about ecological impacts the way they had to do with most of the worlds they administered. For capital investors, it never got better than this.

The Council named the world Frogmore, in deference to the Frogmore Investment Group, one of the primary sources of venture capital for the first wave of development projects. Candide Gael constructed the first dome on the site of the area that soon came to be known as the Center, which over the centuries has grown into a thriving metropolis with a population of twelve million. By the second century, the Center had grown too large to be accommodated by a dome of any size. Smaller domes were constructed in other areas to service the planet's many mining projects. Because the impenetrability of the atmosphere makes above-ground lower-atmosphere navigation risky, most transport is via either high-speed train on the surface or high-atmosphere rocket.

—*Frogmore's Destiny: A Manifesto for Independence*

## One

INEZ GAUTHIER

Hovering in the air above her dressing table, the holo-images of the four designs exhibited their features as Inez Gauthier subvocalized, in sequence, “charming smile,” “sardonic smile,” “sneer,” and “frost.” The images floated in the air like heads detached from their bodies, but the designs they wore flowed with such controlled precision that no one would have taken them for anything but models. The design-dresser stood by, silent and attentive, listening to his employer’s comments, waiting to be cued for his opinion.

“*Aurora* is too subtle,” she said, dismissing it from the display. She subvocalized “mild surprise,” “astonishment,” and “shit-eating grin.” “Scratch *The Diva*,” she said. She needed something to complement the pelt, not upstage it. So which should she choose? *The Gala*, or *The Deliberate*? For several minutes she strode about the room, clad only in cling-ons, caught up in furious thought. It was a question, she repeated several times to herself, of the total effect she wished to achieve. It must be dramatic, but not overbearing. Just as her choice of powder—

The general chose that moment to barge in. “Inez!” His peppy tone wobbled perilously close to querulous. “Where are my star sapphire earrings?”

The design-dresser lowered his eyes and assumed the demeanor of a piece of noninteractive furniture. The general’s daughter drew breath and stared at the image in the holomirror, at her nipples peeping through her nearly sheer cling-ons. Though the silver sparkles in the lavender pow-

der served the total effect, she decided she should have stuck with the usual gold sparkles, since the silver made her skin an ugly gray.

“Inez! Did you hear me? I can’t find my star sapphire earrings!”

The general often barged into his daughter’s dressing room, and even into her bath. When, fresh from University, she had first settled into his household, she found this mortifying. But consciousness of her own embarrassment had taught her to accept these intrusions as a simple fact of life, without significance. Only the unsophisticated suffered the agony of embarrassment. One who had grown up at the hub of the universe, one who had been educated in the finest institution on Pleth, must never be so gauche as to experience even the slightest twinge of it. To fuss about her father seeing her naked ~ on more than one occasion he had even had the bad taste to walk in on her while she was engaged with a sexual partner ~ would be to expose herself to the general’s contempt. After all, the general himself was almost never alone. He boasted to one and all that he issued orders and received briefings at every hour of the day and night, while eating, jogging, playing eye-hand coordination games. And while to his intimates he copped to being something of a hedonist, he took a curious pride in his ability to, when occasion demanded it, take care of business while executing a dump.

Requests that she retrieve some item or other for him annoyed her considerably more. Evergood, his personal attendant, carried in his supplemental memory the codes identifying every personal item the general owned. The first time he had said “Inez, where is the mate to this Arcturian camel-hair wristband?” she had dished him a haughty stare and wondered aloud why he hadn’t asked his personal attendant that very question. She had repeated this treatment every succeeding time he had asked her where he had put a personal possession, until finally he all but desisted from doing so.

While she would never claim to be the brightest star in the galaxy, when it came to her father's moods, she had no difficulty doing the math. He took care, naturally, not to let his irritation get out of hand with her, just as he always took care not to punch out his closest aides or his second-in-command. He might yield to an urge to assault the governor (though only in private, of course) but never someone he depended on for attending to details of which he himself had little grasp. That first year she had joined him on Frogmore—shocked at the remoteness, crudity, and naked barbarism of the planet—she had been forced to lay down a few ground rules. And so dramatic had been her methods of dealing with him that though the general often danced close to the line of transgression, he nevertheless refrained from testing (much less crossing) it.

Taken by itself, her father's testiness could have pointed to any number of developments and been explained in terms of several causal factors. But given the other symptoms he'd been recently displaying, her diagnosis was weariness with one- and three-night stands. A never-ending stream of partners satisfied his sexual needs and stroked his ego. But whenever he was forced to rely solely on his daughter for emotional security, a huge chasm of anxiety opened below the complacent emotional surface he usually displayed. Lately the general had taken to indulging in self-pitying drunks, extreme interest in his appearance, reminiscences about past liaisons, yearning speeches about escaping "this dunghill of a backworld," and long sessions in the therapy-cube, as well as settling into a prolonged period of sexual abstinence. His daughter, therefore, considered it only a matter of time before he'd be thrusting a new lover on the household.

The prospect of his forming a new sexual liaison left her ambivalent. At the beginning of his liaisons, the general would be interested in pleasing his new lover and revel in a certain freedom from the small tyrannies his daughter had

gradually (out of the irritation of weeks of enforced attention to him) taken to exercising over him. And Inez would finally have some peace. If the new lover proved to be grasping or even simply obnoxious, though, the arrangement would create a major headache for everyone in the household. In any case, Inez would always and ever be there, a permanent fixture in the household and ultimately the only person the general believed understood him, and so after he had become satiated with partnership, the new lover would leave, and the whole cycle would begin again.

The general's daughter flicked a look at her father, subvocalized *boredom*, and pointedly studied the remaining designs. Suppressing the retort that sprang to her lips ~ let us by all means get this over with, it doesn't matter who she is, only that she'll be willing to spend half her waking hours keeping track of your star sapphire earrings, your Borragian onyx death's head ring, and the myriad other items you are determined to thrust upon your other's consciousness ~ and said in a voice as smooth and cool as the design base covering the skin on her face, "Have you asked Evergood, General?"

The general glared at her; his design's eye-globes magnified the effect so splendidly that if anyone but her had been on the receiving end of it, they would have been quaking in their boots. "The fool is powdering my cape with Aurelian Dust, something he should have done earlier."

"Consider: You've already put your face on while I haven't even chosen my design yet," she said. "I thought you didn't like waiting for me?"

"What you need is a schedule and the discipline for keeping to it. I never cease to be amazed at the results of a civilian education. You're slack, woman!"

She aimed her right index finger at the holo-image of *The Deliberate* and raised her eyebrows at the design-dresser. "If Evermore's busy, you might try looking in your jewel boxes," she said.

The design-dresser inquired whether he should begin. Inez turned her long, bony back to her father and seated herself at the dressing table, gave the design-dresser the go-ahead, and messaged her attendant to let her know that she'd need to replace the silver powder with gold.

The general stomped off, unsatisfied. Had he really expected her to run over to his quarters and rummage through his jewel boxes for him?



Ninety standard minutes later, Inez shared a vial of one of the milder Barejo inhalants with her father. All five star sapphire earrings dangled from his ear. "I'm not *feeling* it," the general complained after they'd emptied the vial. "You should have chosen something stronger. You know I hate going to these affairs without getting up a decent level of intensity."

Inez stared past her father's head at the shifting tapestry glittering in the air behind him. "It's obvious, Daddy." She enunciated *Daddy* with special clarity to produce the aura of mockery she needed to evoke whenever using this form of address to him. "You've been living on this planet too long. Your senses have dulled, have become like theirs. It's their inability to respond to any but the most dramatic—no, *melodramatic*—cues fed them. They've a coarse taste for extremes. Which is all the more obvious for their persistently mis-taking the word *subtlety* to signify *preciosity*."

She gazed at the tapestry: her perceptions had been heightened by the inhalant, even if his hadn't, for the ordinarily indiscernible shifting of patterns and colors in the tapestry now tantalized her, whetting her appetite for more solidly corporeal pleasure. She glanced sidelong at him. "Consider, Daddy, their absurd fashion for dueling." She had introduced the fashion when she'd first arrived, to test the natives' gullibility as to how the societies of the more advanced worlds in the galaxy behaved. Though the elites had eventually discov-

ered the prank, their dueling had grown ever more elaborate, theatrical, and challenging, even penetrating the culture of Frogmore's professional class. Inez chuckled at the thought of her design-dresser dueling with, say, Amanda Kundjan's design-dresser: an absurdity she was tempted to share with her father. Intricate, she judged the elites' dueling, but never *subtle*. The last she had heard, more than two hundred books had been written on the subject.

"I wonder," the general said, his eyes glinting behind his amber-tinted eye globes, "that you still find their dueling a matter for amusement. That joke lost its savor years ago." The general's design spurted into an attractive pattern of pulsating oscillations that after a few seconds subsided into gentle swirls of the design's paler colors. Inez studied the pattern as she tried to guess what particular facial response had triggered it. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of a new facial design lay in the need it forced on interlocutors to decipher a fresh set of patterns, shapes, and colors. For social occasions the challenge of deciphering as yet unlearned designs could be exhilarating, stimulating, and provocative (thus holding their interlocutors' boredom at bay). For business situations transpiring in evening hours, however, such designs could prove frustrating, even disastrous. Low-level staff, of course, tended to conform to a limited number of designs, and sometimes workplace rules dictated which—if any—would be permitted. Needless to say, everyone they encountered that evening would be devoting their utmost attention and powers of memory to grasping the essence of the general's new design.

The general continued dissing her. "I'll be astonished if anyone consents to sit beside you at dinner. You know how the natives feel about time-trippers. It's been bred into them like an instinct. Surely you must have noticed how they use the time-tripper to symbolize death, anxiety, and impotence?"

Inez laughed.

The deepest, thickest shade of chartreuse spread over his design—including the eyepieces, which she had previously thought to be stable tints. “If you weren’t my daughter, the minute you showed yourself in public wearing that thing you’d be thrown straight into detention—unless you were first torn limb from limb. As I recall, they have laws against transporting any part of time-trippers—even those safely dead—outside the coastal zones.”

“My pelt has been neutralized,” Inez said. Careful not to look at them, she stroked the scales she had been assured had been treated with a chemical to seal in the poison and dull the scales’ deadly sharp edges. But a strange frisson of anxiety and revulsion rippled over her, and she removed her hand—with feigned indifference—from the scales. At once the sensations that had been revolting her ceased. She tried not to think about the manifest correlation between the touching and the feelings the touching had apparently evoked and concentrated instead on the beauty of the scales. Some had been silvered, others had been left in their natural phosphorescent state. The whole pelt shimmered, deadly and sharp, coldly beautiful against the rich russet tones of her skin. Besides the effect of the whole, the individual scales, taken singly, offered their own subtle patterns and colors and textures that drew the eye and had the tendency to fascinate the beholder to the point of mesmerism.

She smiled at the general, aware that that movement of muscles in her face would set warm earth-toned streams rippling and flowing through her design. “Besides,” she said, “those laws are mainly for the protection of natives who might be foolish enough to attempt to capture time-trippers—or to sell them.”

“I only hope,” the general said, “that the ill-feelings you stir up tonight won’t get in the way of this new Brainnard mining project.”



“What nonsense. That deal’s in the bag. Anyway, I doubt anyone in the governor’s circle is so fuckwitted as to let an unrelated cultural hang-up interfere with their getting their hands on such a windfall.” She knew well that the general’s entire staff considered that the major difficulty lay in the bitter infighting being waged by the governor’s circle, the local managers of the Brannard Region, and the unofficial coalition composed of local managers from all over the planet, who never stopped trying to disempower the governor. No one but the governor’s circle, the Brannard managers, and the Combine seriously mattered in the affair.

“While we’re on the subject,” the general said, his voice suddenly grating, “I think it would be wise to avoid even mentioning the Brannard project tonight. We can’t afford slip-ups with this one.”

Inez gritted her teeth. So she had once fucked up a deal with a careless slip. *Once!* Eight local years should have been long enough to have proven herself reliable. But no. The general *never* forgot that old error—and never let her forget it. “You’ve such confidence in me,” she said, “that I wonder you tell me anything.” In fact he couldn’t keep from babbling to her about every matter, large and small, that claimed his attention. She, after all, understood him. And that wouldn’t change, even when the general had finally immersed himself in a new personal liaison. No matter how well the new lover “understood” him, he couldn’t afford to risk gabbing indiscreetly to just anybody.

“Yes, Captain?” the general called out, staring past her.

Inez looked over her shoulder and saw Handler and Glance standing just inside the threshold.

“Are you ready for the scores, sir?” asked Handler.

“Yes, yes, Captain, let’s have them.”

For the next fifteen standard minutes, the general and his daughter pored over the scores of the blood chemistry, reflexes, and coordination tests (as of the last standard hour)

of available craft operators and the staff security detail, and discussed who should be assigned to crew the general's craft and constitute his security detail for the evening. Most of the outcomes were obvious—some so obvious that they all knew (without speaking of it) that Glance would be docking and suspending two of the officers in the pool for failing to meet the minimal chemical standards applying at all times to officers.

As usual, though, the choice of pilot entailed considerable discussion. The general and Handler, his chief ADC, predictably favored the cleanest blood chemistry over the best reflexes and coordination score (which for unknown reasons seldom seemed to coincide). Lieutenant Glance, the officer charged with overseeing the evaluation and assessment of all craft and security operatives, however, as usual insisted that superb coordination and reflexes rendered a slightly muddied blood chemistry irrelevant on the grounds that the impurities in the top scorer's blood manifestly had not diminished their abilities and concentration to any appreciable effect. Inez agreed with Glance, but the general and his chief ADC together outranked her and the second, rather lowly ADC. Since Inez knew how to play on her father's most deep-seated fears about above-ground navigation on such a fog-shrouded world, she and the lieutenant prevailed. The general's attitude could be characterized as terror—wild, unreasoning terror that had been planted in him on his very first day on the world, when two craft in his escort had collided at high speeds with an errant civilian craft, resulting in the permanent deaths of five individuals in his escort and injuries for many more. His first official act on the planet had accordingly been to tighten its licensing laws. The rate of deaths and injuries in above-ground traffic had declined dramatically, allowing the general to instruct his critics that that achievement alone sufficed to justify the extent of his role in the planet's affairs.

After Handler and Glance left the room, Inez broke out another inhalant. The general complained that he wanted something stronger, but she ignored him. She felt certain that tonight was the night, and she didn't want him making a mess of a decision that would affect their lives for the next several months.



Half a standard hour later, the general and his daughter entered the antechamber on the roof. She was so bored with the general's boredom that she was close to stamping her feet and screaming. She needed to get off the planet, needed a break from the general, needed above all the refreshment of a civilized world.

The thought of getting away to one of the better sort of worlds, though, only exacerbated her mood. In the past she had tried doing that a few months at a time, since the general would not allow her more time than that away from him. But during such trips she always re-discovered the horrifying fact that Frogmore had left an indelible mark on her. The beautiful soul that had once illumined her existence had been scuffed and tarnished, making it invisible to the other beautiful souls she knew to be her equals. Only the constantly re-evoked memory of life before her arrival on Frogmore—years spent growing up on cultured, sophisticated worlds—made it possible for her to live with the humiliations and pique that trips off Frogmore now brought her.

Zagorin, that pillar of sour and stuffy stiffness, awaited her in the departure lounge. She held Inez's tissue-thin cape and the set of eating utensils they had decided would work with *The Deliberate*. She hesitated, patently wishing to avoid contact with the pelt she had earlier refused to handle when dressing the general's daughter. "Don't be an idiot," the latter said to her attendant. Naked face scrunched with distress, Zagorin took back the cape and, arms fully extended

to protect her body from accidental contact with the pelt, draped it around her employer's proud shoulders.

Handler opened the hatch, said that visibility was currently seven meters, and announced that all preparations for departure had been completed. His Aurelian-dusted raw silk cape swirling, the general stalked out into the hot, muggy fog, and his daughter followed. Neither bothered to activate their respirators since the walk to the craft would expose them to at most four breaths of the mist-heavy air.

Colonel Farquhar (recently returned from the Brainnard Region) stood at attention before the hatch of the craft he would be riding in, and the general addressed some pleasantries to him as he and his daughter passed him. Though second-in-command and of a first-rank family based on Janiset, he, like all the general's other officers, had to attend social functions in uniform. Inez took note of his formal, unsmiling bearing and admired his sleek, full-shouldered figure, which the tight, black, ruby-accented uniforms that all the general's officers wore rendered a pleasure to her eyes. His stern, bare face, seemingly impervious to the wisps of fog drifting about him, admirably symbolized the peacekeepers' brave and stalwart mission. But how, she wondered, did he endure having to show a bare face to the world for as long as he was posted to this hellhole?

All those naked mouths, ever on display, made sexual voyeurs of everyone who looked on them. Inez felt certain that most of the officers must be uncomfortably aware of that fact. Did Colonel Farquhar resent the general for the latter's standing order that all officers on Frogmore (excepting the general himself) must always appear in public barefaced and in uniform? Did it gall the ADCs who attended far more functions than the general's daughter (who simply would not put up with an event or three every spacing local day) always to be obliged to wear the gold-braided emblems of their rank visibly upon their clothing and to put up with that

absurd “Peacekeepers of the Galaxy” holographic insignia declaring TO UPHOLD PEACE AT ANY PRICE always in the same place on their breast pockets, pulsing like a logo on corporate livery? She imagined it did, but she’d never gotten intimate enough with any of her father’s officers to ask.

One of *his* rules for *her* banned her from sexual partnering with any of his officers. “Surely with the native population of the entire planet to choose from you won’t be lacking partners,” he had put it to her. But the officers’ naked faces piqued her erotic interest as the naked faces of many of the natives never could; when the natives went barefaced, it was usually because they knew no better, while the officers, all from advanced worlds, did so as a point of discipline. She abided by her father’s rule, however—though only because he himself followed the same rule. If he hadn’t, she would have done as she pleased in the matter.

The general and his daughter entered his personal craft; the officers and crew had of course assembled themselves on each side of its hatch into the sort of tight, clean formation the general liked to see. “Stavros,” the general said, pausing to address the pilot. “You barely squeaked by, your blood chemistry was muddied again. This is not acceptable, Lieutenant. There’s a reason we set standards.”

Inez glanced at the other officers’ faces and fumed silently at her father’s insistence on making a point of the pilot’s blood chemistry. Stavros’s eye, memory, and experience far outweighed the trifling impurity of her blood. Thinking now of the towers that lay between the Commander’s Residence and Lake Kundjan, of the Lake itself (not to mention the traffic), and of the tendency of the mistflowers to confuse the system’s sensors, she broke out in gooseflesh. She could not remember ever having felt safe on Frogmore when flying with any other pilot. Whenever anyone else piloted her, she spent the entire trip with teeth clenched, toes curled,

and fingernails dug into her palms. With Stavros at the helm, though, she had at times actually forgotten the danger.

As the general continued to harangue the pilot, his daughter grew so irritated that she spread the palm of her hand flat against his back ~ yes, she did like the feel of the Aurelian dust so rich and gritty on the raw silk ~ and, barely restraining herself from shoving him, interjected when he paused to let Stavros answer, “Are we boarding or aren’t we? Or do you propose that we spend the night inhaling fog?”

Head reared back, he only snorted loudly in reply and said, “See to it, Stavros.” As he stepped through the hatch, his daughter smiled at Stavros—and realized that the pilot would have no idea of how to interpret the flow patterns of *The Deliberate*. She imagined saying to her, “Let’s space him when we get over the lake, shall we?”

Inez followed her father through the hatch, seated herself, and fastened her safety straps. Wanting to avoid seeing her father’s nervousness, she closed her eyes. But closing her eyes opened her to the image of her own seat ejecting out into the lake, settling onto its floater, and rocking erratically, just above the surface, as she breathed in microscopic particles of mist-flowers that would soon be doing terrible things to her central nervous system. By the time she opened her eyes, the quiet, high-pitched whine of liftoff had been succeeded by the low throb of cruise. The general—likely fearful that she might level the charge of cowardice at him—had left the shutters open, thus exposing both of them to the constant realization that one could see nothing out there, not the ground, not a light, not a tower, just *nothing*, though many tall, thrusting towers and bustling air traffic lay all around them.

They had Stavros at the helm, the general’s daughter reminded herself. She had heard people say—Handler among them—that Stavros had a sort of sixth sense when it came to spatial perception. Lightning-quick access to supplemental memory, attention to charts, the craft’s instruments, and

the constant readouts provided by the auto-navigation system constituted Stavros's tools, just as they did any other pilot's. But those who enjoyed the privilege of crewing in her cockpit told tales of Stavros's announcing this or that lying out there in advance of navigational readouts. Stavros, unlike every other pilot on her father's staff, never had near-misses.

The general's eyes were closed. Things had been dull, quiet, and predictable lately, so it was unlikely that he was in communication with headquarters. Smiling, his daughter relaxed her left hand and placed it over the general's right, which, gripping the end of his armrest, now resembled a claw. "Poor Daddy. Are you having a bad time?" she cooed at him.

Behind his globular eye-pieces, the general's eyes snapped open; his head whipped sideways, and he glared at her. "You're so obvious, Inez. Admit it: my lack of appreciative wonder and admiration for your time-tripper pelt galls you."

Inez sighed. "Your nerves are all shot to hell, aren't they." She patted his hand. "You should try relaxing. I know you don't like tranqs, but surely you must have one of those bio-feedback apps in your personal package. You could access it now and by the time we land would feel as good as if you'd just had an hour in the therapy-cube. Really, Daddy. I don't know how you've managed to live on this planet for nineteen local years without cracking. And considering that Stavros—"

The general snarled. "Shut up, Inez!" He threw off her hand, and his design shuddered with convulsions of purple, yellow, and puce.

Disgusted, Inez turned her head away and deliberately stared out at the fog. But her eyes kept straying to the reflection of the three dim cabin lights on the surface of the window, beacons tempting her with their tangible, visible reality. From time to time she wondered if they were above the lake yet, but not once did she consider asking their location of the crew. Neither she nor the general really wanted

to know. If they had, they'd be running the holo of their progress now playing in the cockpit. Instead, she labored to recapture her excitement over her pelt. She reminded herself that word would spread around the entire planet, that the notability of her audacity would not be contained within the governor's circle. From the natives she expected shocked condemnation and respectful admiration corresponding respectively to their backworld traditionalism and consciousness of and interest in the more advanced worlds. In a way, she mused, it would be a test, especially for the ambivalent types, for instance the governor herself. This insight so gratified her that she turned to her father to share it with him. But the little twitches flickering over his (still) purple, puce, and yellow visage made her queasy, and she returned her gaze to the window. Had there been a recent crash she hadn't heard about?

They might well be over the lake now.

To his daughter (but to no one else) the general often inveighed against the governor for insisting on maintaining her principal residence and military HQ on the artificial island in the middle of Lake Kundjan and threatened never to set foot again in the Governor's Installation. But since it could be approached only by air, the Installation lay physically out of the reach of the malcontents and insurgents that plagued the governor and local managers. Time-trippers and Frogmore's other comparably deadly creatures did not live in fresh water, which was fortunate, given how many accidents occurred over the lake.

At least they did not have to worry about sabotage. The fact that sabotage of government and military craft had never been a problem, as the general liked to point out, proved the insurgents had no way of getting hold of the weaponry the general imported in vast quantities from off-world. "If they had it, they'd use it," he said again and again to the few vocal persons in the governor's circle who argued for curtail-



ing arms imports on the grounds that they would eventually fall into the hands of the insurgents.

*Politics? You go into the military, and they make you a general, and what happens? In fact I'm nothing more than a policeman, here to ensure that the people of the planet abide by the laws their democratically chosen government promulgates. This isn't my idea of engaging in politics. The military apparatus provided by the Combine is neutral vis-à-vis this planet's politics... We're simply here to keep the peace, which a handful of malcontents seem determined to destroy.* The general had used those very words so many times that his daughter had come to realize he must keep them handy in an autovocalization block. Which suggested that they were some sort of formula or definition for him...though serving what purpose? Rote explanation had its uses but could also get in the way. One could so easily reach for it and then find, mid-flow, that that wasn't what one wanted after all, that one had somehow gotten pushed into a corner because of the very fluidity and ease rote explanation presented as it slipped casually off one's tongue—and be unable to stop the recitation or alter it in progress.

Consciousness of the low hum and rising whine of landing-mode jerked Inez out of her stream of thought. She glanced at the general and observed the tendons in his forearms visibly bulging under his cling-ons as his hands clawed and clutched at the armrests. Stavros, she repeated to herself. *Stavros, Stavros, Stavros.* As though in response to this invocation, the sound of the engine abruptly cut off, and Stavros messaged them. <<We've landed on the Governor's Installation and are prepared to disembark at any time, General and Madam Gauthier.>>

Her heart lifting, her excitement resurging, the general's daughter clasped her father's hand and smiled at him. "Stavros is good," she said. "You can always count on her, General."

They unstrapped and rose to their feet, but then had to wait for the general to regain the firmness of his knees. “Tonight something good will happen to you,” his daughter told him. “I can feel it in my bones.”

The general gave her a look she had not yet seen pass over his design and half-laughed. He hadn’t the faintest idea of what she referred to.

The most singular of Frogmore's many striking physical aspects is the ecology of its lower atmosphere, which is inhabited by numerous organisms collectively referred to as the "Scourge." Most of these organisms, of course, are microscopic; all are eukaryotic. The Scourge renders the air on the surface oxygen-thin to variable degrees and appears to the naked eye as a dense fog that impedes visibility, which ranges from 1.5 meters at its densest concentrations to 40 meters at its lightest. At times this fog is marked by the presence of phosphorescent particles that suggestible individuals take for signs of supernatural presence.

The five largest of these organisms are colloquially referred to as "mistflowers," which many people mistakenly assume to be identical with the Scourge rather than a subset of it. Mistflowers exude a pungent sometimes sweet scent that varies in fragrance and strength, depending on the concatenation of the cycles of each of the five species as well as on other factors such as stage of life-cycle, barometric pressure, velocity and direction of the wind, temperature, levels of oxygen and carbon dioxide, etc. Three species produce spores, and two species produce seeds that, when ingested through inhalation or dermal contact, impact the human central nervous system with effects ranging from euphoria in mild cases to violent hallucinations in moderate cases to, in the most extreme cases, temporary unconsciousness or death.

It is rumored that several local religious cults harvest mistflowers when the Scourge manifests in very light, glowing shades of lavender, and that they then ingest these during collective rituals. Our fact-checkers, however, have not been able to verify this.

—*A Traveler's Handbook to the Galaxy*, 49<sup>th</sup> edition