

April AD 2574

The cargo robot was right on his heels. Royd Kar scrambled up a stack of crates, hoping the 'bot couldn't follow. The slick duraplast surface of the crates didn't offer much purchase, and the 'bot didn't look like a climber.

He was right — the robot stopped, whirring and clicking, at the foot of the stack. One long, jointed manipulator arm reached upward, touching Royd's right foot; he kicked it away and pulled himself to the top crate.

There, five meters up, Royd thumbed his nose at the 'bot. Then, curious, he stretched out on his stomach and watched the machine. What would it do?

After a few minutes the 'bot seemed to lose interest. It rolled away, feelers waving in the air before it. Perhaps, Royd reflected, it had thought he was loose cargo and only wanted to secure him. After he'd stopped moving, the dimwitted thing concluded that he was safely stowed.

Great, he thought. Am I supposed to stay here for three days without moving?

Stowing away aboard the *Terran Queen* had seemed such a good idea when Royd had first thought of it, a week ago and safe home on Taarla. Now, after thirty hours with only catnaps and with hunger gnawing at his stomach, he began to wonder if he'd made a mistake.

Maybe, Royd thought as he huddled down on his perch, maybe he should turn himself in. After all, what would the authorities do to the 14-year-old runaway? Even though he'd passed his preliminary adulthood tests, and was considered a full citizen on Taarla, surely Earth cops wouldn't be too harsh on a kid?

But would they let him stay on Earth? Or even get off the ship there? Hardly likely. They'd bundle him up and ship him back to his parents. Back to the leaky, one-room shack they called home. Back to the government dole that paid three people only enough for one, back to the mines that were the

only work opportunity on the whole burnt-out cinder of a planet.

Royd's family hadn't always been poor. He had dim memories of new clothes and a spacious home with a beautiful garden, of household robots and tri-di and enough to eat every day. His father had been an ironball champ, famous throughout the sector; his mother had parlayed Papa's earnings into a winning portfolio that got her a powerful position at a major investment firm.

But then Papa was injured, and the Crash turned all Mama's stocks and bonds into meaningless bits in worthless computers. Royd hadn't known at the time that the Depression affected everyone in the world; for years he'd thought it was his fault that the family had left their wonderful home and moved into a succession of shacks, each worse than the one before.

Papa, injured, couldn't work in the mines — and Mama, a native Earthwoman, wasn't qualified. So the family went on the dole, and Royd sat with his Papa in the town square as the old man shook a begging bowl at passing strangers.

Royd blinked back hot tears and wiped his nose with the back of his hand. No, he couldn't turn himself in; going back home would be more than defeat, more than humiliation. It would be the end of all his dreams. Six days in the mines had convinced him that he wouldn't last a year without turning into the same kind of dull-witted, prematurely-aged drone who staffed the work crews around him.

No, Royd's only hope — his *family's* only hope — was for him to get off-planet, find some place where honest work was available and he could make enough to send some home. Royd's dream was to go to Earth and get a good job, work hard, and eventually bring Papa and Mama to live with him. For a moment he was lost in the vision of their faces suffused with delight when the one-way ticket to Earth arrived.

Royd sniffed and shook his head. Unless he got to Earth, he could kiss the rest of his dream goodbye. Stowing away

had been the only way to get offplanet, and he'd jumped at his chance when the *Terran Queen* set down. But he hadn't planned for a three-day journey through hyperspace. The vast cargo hold, fortunately, had a rest room facility — but there was no food, and now with the cargo 'bot after him he didn't dare go in search of any. For that matter, he didn't dare use the bathroom, either.

Royd felt movement behind him and turned sharply. Another robot, a meter-high spiderlike affair, was creeping toward him across piled boxes, its eight legs moving gingerly from perch to perch. Sensors waved before it like antennae, and a pair of strong waldoes opened and closed with the repeated click of metal against metal.

"Damn it," he shouted, "What do I have to do around here? Can't you give me a fair chance?" The larger 'bot had obviously not lost interest in Royd; it had simply gone off to call this climber.

For the barest instant, Royd considered letting the 'bot grab him, no matter what the Earth police would do. Then he clenched his fists and set his jaw. "You're not going to get me without a fight," he said to the approaching monstrosity.

Royd closed his eyes and raised his hands, spreading his fingers. The robot's skin was made of duraplast, but there were steel parts within — Royd could feel the metal skeleton, the battery, the tangle of wires inside the robot....

Taarla was an unstable world whose magnetic field was in constant flux, a world where even the smallest predators could generate electrical charges that put Earth's electric eel to shame. The early colonists had been genetically engineered for sensitivity to magnetic fields; some few even gained a rudimentary psi ability to manipulate the lines of magnetic flux.

Over the centuries, these magnetic talents served Taarla's people well. Following invisible patterns, the people located the purest veins of precious metals and rare earths; the vast fortunes lost in the Crash had all grown from the early mines.

Royd had a Taarlan's sense of magnetic fields, but he had something else, inherited from his father: when it suited him, Royd could gather those intangible magnetic lines and play them as a puppeteer plays his strings. In childhood, he had played with balls and rods and sheets of steel the way other children played with balloons and sticks and paper. Before the Crash ruined everything, Royd had hoped to become an ironball player like Papa, perhaps even greater.

Hungry, angry, and afraid, Royd reached out to the approaching 'bot...and pulled.

The 'bot hung for an instant, its splayed legs frantically twitching. Then, helpless, it rocketed past Royd and shot across the cargo hold. The poor thing was still gaining speed when it hit the far wall with a sickening screech, then plummeted to become an ungainly, quivering lump on the deck below.

Now he'd done it. The broken robot would surely bring one of the crew to investigate. And if they came, they would find Royd.

He shrugged. So now there was nothing to lose.

Grinning, Royd scrambled down the stack of boxes and dropped to the deck. He strode confidently to the nearest hatchway. Beyond it were the passenger levels — and somewhere in them, there was food, and showers, and soft beds with fresh white sheets.

The hatch was sealed with a simple magnetic lock. Royd gestured, the hatch opened, and he stepped through.



It didn't take Royd long to find food.

The *Terran Queen* kept Earth Standard Time, so it was the middle of the evening when Royd stepped out of the cargo hold. He walked down the spotless white corridor, glancing back over his shoulder every few seconds, until he came to a computer display, bright lines in the corridor wall.

Royd paused before the display, trying to locate the switch that would activate it.

"Breep. May I help you?"

Royd stepped back in surprise. The only talking 'puters he'd heard for years were the ones at the dole office. Those machines were hardly so well-mannered, and they would never offer to help.

"Do you require assistance?" the 'puter asked again.

"Yes. I'm starved. Where can I get something to eat?"

"There are sixty-three food service points currently in operation. Would you care to state more specific requirements?"

"Whatever's closest," Royd answered over a distinct growling from his stomach.

"Buffet supper is being served in Refectory C-3, open to all passengers. The menu includes — "

"Sounds cosmic. How do I get there?"

A blinking green light appeared on the wall, then moved to Royd's left. *"Follow the directional light."*

"Oh. Okay. Thanks."

Refectory C-3 was a good-sized dining room that reminded Royd of the cafeteria in elementary school. Two dozen passengers filled perhaps half the tables. At the front of the room, a hologram of a popular Earth band performed their latest music; but Royd made a beeline for the generously-stacked tables of food in the back.

He resisted the temptation to start cramming food into his mouth, and instead calmly snagged a plate and stepped into line. If the other passengers noticed his disheveled clothes or the rather stale scent that accompanied them, none mentioned it. The robot attendants at the buffet were equally silent.

When his plate was completely full, a tower of assorted hot and cold delicacies that swayed alarmingly with his every step, Royd found an isolated table and took a seat. The meal was the best he'd ever tasted, and he didn't stop until his plate was totally clear.

The sight of the dessert cart, two full meters of cakes and pies and puddings and ices, convinced him to leave the table. When he returned, someone else was waiting for him.

She was a tall, gangly girl about his own age, with bright red hair and a homely face just losing its freckles. Her dark green jumpsuit was clean but rumpled, her hair cut in a short, casual style.

She thrust out her hand. "I'm Gael Rimma."

Putting down his desserts, Royd shook her hand. "Royd Kar," he said. Then, sitting, he gestured to his food. "Uh, do you mind if I...?"

"Go right ahead." Gael leaned back and waited until Royd had a bite in his mouth, then said, "I haven't seen you on the ship before."

Royd swallowed. "I...er...got on at Taarla."

Gael's eyes narrowed. "You weren't at the new passengers reception. I would have noticed." She put her elbows on the table and propped her chin up on her hands. "There are three other teenagers aboard, plus two toddlers and one baby. I pay attention to things like that."

"Yeah, well, I kinda stay to myself a lot," Royd answered, hoping she would take the broad hint and leave him alone.

Gael tossed her head. "The other three teeners are here with parents. I'm alone."

"Oh?" It was difficult to stay polite while wolfing down cherry pie, but Royd did his best.

"Yes. I come from Wargal. I'm going to Earth to try and find my older brother."

"Your brother's on Earth?" What next, the chocolate cake or the pudding? Both, Royd decided, spooning pudding atop his cake.

"No. I don't know where he is." She dipped a finger in Royd's pudding and brought it to her mouth. "Dwin left home a year ago, without telling anyone where he was going. However, we decided Earth would be a good place to start the search. The Earth Police have resources and connections

throughout the Myriad Worlds and beyond.”

“So your family sent you out alone to find this brother?” Royd couldn’t hide his skepticism.

“Of course not. My Pater is a very practical man; he would never have come up with such an idea on his own. My twin brother Alywin and I made the decision; after that, it was merely a matter of convincing the Pater to go along with us.” She lowered her eyes. “We are very good at convincing the Pater.”

“Wow, you must be rich.” Royd left out the rest of his thought — the part about “spoiled rotten.”

Gael laughed. “Rich? Hardly! But we have a little money.” She frowned. “Haven’t you heard of The Electrical Twins?”

“What are they, a singing group?”

Gael shook her head. “Child, where have they been keeping you? Watch.” She held her hand up, thumb and forefinger just a centimeter apart.

Without warning, a bright spark leapt across the gap, accompanied by a loud crack. Royd, startled, pulled back.

Half the people in the room turned to look; Gael gave an exaggerated shrug and they all went back to their meals. “Don’t worry,” she said, “I have it completely under control.”

“How did you do that?”

“It’s a psi power. Like I said: Alywin and me, we’re The Electrical Twins. Masters of the mysterious forces of static- and bio-electricity. The Wonders of Wargal. Just two credits a ticket. We performed everywhere.”

“Not on Taarla, I guess.” Royd leaned closer. “You know, that’s pretty cosmic. Have you always been able to do that?”

“That’s what the doctors say. They say the power is probably latent in our whole family. But our abilities didn’t manifest themselves until two years ago.” She stared into Royd’s eyes. “The story’s been on all the channels. Are you sure you haven’t heard it?”

Forgotten ice cream was puddling into soup on Royd’s plate. “Just go ahead and tell it, okay?”

"All right. The three of us — Dwin, Alywin, and I — were on a camping trip with our sitter. At least, we were supposed to go camping. Anyway, our boat went down on Roblak — that's Wargal's largest moon." Now that she was actually into her tale, Gael seemed reluctant to continue. "Nitrogen/Carbon dioxide atmosphere, lots of electrical storms. Anyway, after we sat for a while, Dwin had this wonderful idea that we could run up a spike and use lightning to recharge our batteries and send a message for help."

"Did it work?"

"About as well as any of Dwin's other ideas. The lightning strikes blasted our boat and killed the sitter right off. Alywin was burned and Dwin got knocked senseless. But apparently our latent psi powers came out and protected us."

"That's horrible."

"Yeah, I guess so. Turns out that a science satellite caught all the activity and notified the cops. They rescued us before our air ran out. Then we went on the road, and then Dwin ran away, and here I am." She spread her hands. "So you're a stowaway, eh?"

Royd felt like she'd just zapped him with her electrical powers. "Wh-what makes you say something like that?"

"I told you, I pay attention to things." She ticked off points on her fingers. "You're not exactly dressed like a passenger, you know. If you'd bought a ticket, you wouldn't talk about how rich I must be to afford one of my own. The ship's newsletter yesterday did a whole writeup on The Electrical Twins, but you hadn't heard of us. And you eat like you haven't seen food in three weeks."

Royd looked down at the remains of his desserts, then back at Gael. "It's only been two days, actually," he admitted.

"Why don't you tell me about it?"

Almost in spite of himself, Royd told her his sad story — the mines, his determination to find work on Earth, the cargo 'bots that had chased him, everything. When he finished, he

rested his chin in his hands and sighed deeply. "So now I guess you'll turn me in, right?"

"Wrong. Now I'm going to take you back to my cabin and put you to bed. Then while you're sleeping I'll get on the hyperwave to home. By the time you wake up, you'll have a ticket, fair and square."

"I can't let you do that."

She stood up. She was almost as tall as Royd, and looked twice as tough. "You stupid boy, how do you think you're going to stop me?" Her glare softened. "The Pater has a lot of friends, and he loves doing things for me. So don't worry about it. Besides, you're a psionic like me. Us freaks have to stick together, nyet?"

Royd gave a weak smile. "All right. Thank you. I'll pay you back, really I will."

"Fine." She took his hand and pulled him to his feet. "Now let's get you settled. If I'm going to sweet-talk the Pater, I have to practice being nice."



A good night's sleep and a tasty breakfast improved Royd's outlook on life. Of course, the trip ticket Gael handed him also lifted his spirits considerably.

Royd moved into the cabin next to Gael. The ship's steward, a handsome man in his thirties (who didn't seem the least bit surprised to have picked up a new passenger thirty lightyears from the nearest inhabited planet), found Royd some new clothes: a pale grey pair of slacks, a few pastel tunics, and a dark blue jumpsuit with the *Terran Queen* logo on the left sleeve and his name stitched on the front.

For the next two days, Royd spent every waking moment with Gael. There were a thousand things to do on the *Terran Queen*, and the crewmembers were only too happy to answer questions and give tours. Sometimes the other teeners joined them on these expeditions, but mostly it was just Gael, Royd,

and the ever-present, ever-helpful ship's computer.

Royd was almost sorry to see the Terra System draw close. When he went to sleep for the last time on shipboard, he actually had to blink back a few self-pitying tears.

At three in the morning, six hours out from Earth, Royd sat suddenly upright in the dark, listening to the steady hum of the air recyclers. Something had changed. Something in the ship's air, or artificial gravity, or in the odd mixture of background noises, or....

Yes, that was it! *Terran Queen's* magnetic field, which had been rock-steady since leaving Taarla, had...shifted.

Just as the creak of a loose floorboard at home would instantly alert him that someone was up and about; just as the rush of water over his skin would tell him that someone had dived into the swimming hole with him — so this pulsing change in the lines of magnetic flux told him that somewhere on board, something was out of place.

Like a spider, following quivering strands to a thrashing fly trapped in her web, Royd held still, finding the direction of this magnetic anomaly.

Aft. Toward the cargo holds...and the engines!

He pulled on his jumpsuit, padded out into the hall, and tapped on Gael's door. She opened it at once.

"You felt it too?" Gael clutched a yellow bathrobe around her shoulders. Her feet were bare.

Royd nodded. "I can still feel it. It's off that way." He pointed. "Wait a minute, you're not sensitive to magnetic fields."

"But I *do* feel electrical potentials. And this one nearly took my head off. It was like a great big lightning bolt hitting next door." She closed her eyes and frowned. "It feels like there's another one building up now."

"Maybe it's something to do with approaching Earth," Royd suggested. "Or dropping out of hyperdrive."

Gael shook her head. "De' Purna said they wouldn't even touch the engines until an hour before approach. I think

something's wrong — and we ought to tell somebody."

"What do you mean? Call the Captain and say, excuse me, Ma'am, we think there's something wrong with your ship?"

Gael stood with her hands on her hips. "Well then, what do you suggest?"

Royd glanced aft down the corridor. "Let's take a look. It might be something simple, you know, magnetic lockdowns in the cargo bay or such. Then if we can't figure out where the distortion is coming from, we'll notify the crew. How does that sound?"

"Okay, I guess." She held up a finger. "Wait here while I put on some clothes."



The thrumming magnetic distortion led them to the threshold of the engine room door. That door was closed and sealed, but Royd's magnetic abilities made short work of opening it.

He half-expected someone to stop them, but the large room was empty except for the massive graviton and stardrive engines that drove the ship, the antimatter reactor that powered them, and the display consoles that controlled both. Narrow catwalks threaded between hulking machinery, the air around them live with the sensation of enormous power held in perfect control, tremendous forces balanced against one another.

"We shouldn't be here," Royd whispered.

"I know," Gael answered, "But it's too late to turn back now. We might as well find the distortion."

Forward...left...and there it was. The magnetic distortion was invisible, existing deep inside the engine, but Royd felt it clearly through the grey metal of the engine's containment housing. "Right there," he said, pointing.

The Chief Engineer had opened an inspection hatch to show them the interior of one of the mighty engines — Royd

remembered that the containment housing was ten centimeters of solid impervium, enough to stop an atomic blaster. Yet here the housing was cracked and visibly scorched.

Unconsciously Royd reached forward, following the pull of the hidden distortion. Gael knocked his hand aside.

"Watch it!" She pulled Royd back, stepping in front of him. "It's going to —"

With a loud crackle, eye-searing electrical bolts leapt from the damaged housing. Royd felt his hair stand on end and fell back — but Gael stood her ground. For an instant she was outlined in light, as electricity danced around her. Then the discharge ended, and she turned back to Royd with a smile. "Sorry."

"Hey, don't worry about it. You saved my life." The magnetic distortion lurched, then started getting larger, more powerful. "I don't think this is a harmless side effect," he said.

"No. We'd better go get someone right away."

Royd frowned. "Gael, it feels like it's spreading. I don't think leaving is such a good idea."

Her eyes were wide. "Can you do anything?"

"I'll try." Royd closed his eyes, concentrating on the insubstantial lines of magnetic flux. He felt his way around the distortion, trying to get a feel for its shape and properties.

The ship was embedded in a strong, solid magnetic bubble — and this distortion was like a ragged hole in the bubble. A hole that was expanding, growing less stable with each passing second.

What if the bubble popped? Would the resulting explosion destroy the ship — or just drop them out of hyperdrive and strand them a hundred billion kilometers away from the nearest planet?

He didn't want to find out.

Moving quickly and surely, Royd extended his own field, gathered the edges of that hole, and...tugged. There was

resistance, then he felt the hole stabilize. As long as he could hold on, it would get no larger.

"I...think...I have it," he grunted. "But I don't know...how long I can...hold it." Right now, stabilizing the distortion was about as strenuous as lifting his baby brother. But he could feel deeper and stronger forces stirring within the engine. Soon, he knew, he would tire....

"What the hell is going on here?" Chief Engineer Purna, a meter and a half of smoldering fury, bore down on the two kids, followed by half a dozen of the crew. Her expression made it clear that someone was about to get chewed out.

Royd started to explain. "There's a tear in the magnetic field — "

"What have you kids done to my engines? Get away from there before you make things worse." Purna moved toward Royd.

He stayed where he was. He had his own magnetic field braced against the ship's hull; if he moved, he might lose control. "De' Purna, you have to listen."

"Kid, you don't have any idea what you're — "

Gael held her hands before her, half a meter apart, and lightning danced between them. Purna came to a skidding halt.

"Thank you," Gael said. "You're right, Royd and I *don't* know what we're doing. But before we stop doing it, you'd better take a look at the engine's magnetic field."

One of the crew was already at a console. After a moment, he lifted a pale face to Purna. "There's a rupture in the field. Right now it's stabilized — I don't know how. But if it goes, it'll tear the whole engine apart."

Purna's face went from rage to fear, then settled into an expression of disbelief. "All right, kid, what are you doing?"

"I'm a magnetokinetic. I've got ahold of the rupture and I'm trying to hold it closed."

"Like the boy with his finger in the dike," the crewman said. "If he lets go...."

"I know," Purna answered. "Listen, uh...."

"Royd," he supplied.

"Thanks. Listen, Royd, how much longer can you hold that rupture?"

"I don't know. When I grabbed it, I wasn't thinking in terms of holding it for long. I just grabbed." He frowned. "I've never done anything like this before."

"All right. I have to report to the Captain. Can you keep this steady for, oh, five minutes?"

"Sure." The magnetic field lurched, struggling to tear itself free of his control. He steadied it...but the effort was greater than the first time. "I hope," he added.

"Do your best." Purna retreated, leaving her crew gaping at Royd and Gael.



Half an hour later, the Captain made an announcement to the whole ship. Royd, struggling to hold the magnetic rupture steady, listened with half an ear to the words booming through the engine room.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am sorry to inform you that there will be a sudden change in our schedule. We have developed some minor engine trouble that will make it necessary for the *Terran Queen* to lay over at the Himalia Shipyards around Jupiter."

Gael grunted. "'Minor engine trouble.' Ha!"

Royd's right leg was starting to cramp; he shifted his weight carefully. "The Captain just doesn't want anyone to panic." He knew that the situation was a bit more grave than the Captain let on. At that moment, a hyperspace tug was on its way to tow the *Terran Queen* to Himalia; as soon as it arrived, the Engineering crew would shut down the malfunctioning engine.

Until then, Royd was their only hope.

"Passengers for Earth will transfer to the regularly-

scheduled Ganymede shuttle; passengers to Runtalex and beyond will be routed to Deimos and will travel on our sister ship, the *Martian Queen*. All luggage and cargo will be automatically transferred. We apologize for any inconvenience."

"Well, that's mighty nice to hear," Gael said. She stepped into position next to Royd. "Hold on, it's going to discharge again. Jobo, stand back."

Jobo — the short, stocky crewman who had stuck by Royd and Gael since the ordeal started — moved out of the way.

The routine was growing familiar now. The magnetic distortion triggered an electrical discharge every three to five minutes. As soon as Gael sensed a discharge coming, she moved into position to absorb it, while Royd braced himself to hold the field steady. The stresses were worst then.

Following the discharge, they had another period of relative calm while another built up.

Blue-white electricity leapt from the damaged engine to Gael's waiting hands. When it subsided, she shivered. "The charges are getting stronger," she observed.

Jobo glanced at an instrument in his hand. "Yup. The tug is on her way, but she won't get here for another half hour at least. Can you two hold out that long?"

Royd gave a wry smile. "We'll have to, won't we?"

Jobo shrugged. "We can do an emergency core dump in five minutes. And risk a pretty big explosion when the field destabilizes. If you can stand it, Chief Engineer would rather wait until we transfer the passengers to the tug."

Gael chuckled. "We're passengers too, you know."

Jobo waved to another crewmember. "Lenka, toss me your cap!" Lenka threw her dark blue cap; Jobo snagged it and set it on Gael's head. Then he took off his own cap and plopped it backwards atop Royd's brown curls. "Not any more, you aren't."

