



r.l.wicke
the *sea of stars*

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The Sea of Stars

“Gentle Thrush over Bristle Branches and noonday sun swimming through a sea of stars. On St. John’s day I will take my chances, and spread my wings en voyage to Mars.”

El swept his hands in a wide, circular motion against the brilliant sky. The brilliant flood of daylight was indeed tempered by the gentle twinkle of a million stars in every rainbow hue. Humanity had been unprepared for the dazzlement. Four years later, humans still clustered in every open field, day after day, their clumsy fingers clutching colored coal and paper, trying to trap a glimpse of the glory in the modest mew of the open page.

El was unimpressed by the splendor. It still touched him, but he had seen brighter, bolder, bigger, and he’d see more of such glories again very soon.

“It’s not very good poetry,” the man in the brown tunic said.

“No,” El agreed. “But it serves the purpose. Is everyone fully charged?”

“Yes, commander. We are all prepared to take wing at first light. The humans, will they stay at peace without us?”

“They will for now. With the Shekinah firmly installed, they will have the millenium of peace the Almighty planned for. After that, we may be recalled. It’s hard to say.”

“Why Mars, by the way? Have we been told?”

“There’s beginning life there. Rudimentary. We’re being called to watch over it. Give it a little nudge here and there. Nothing fancy. Once language is developed, we’re being called to a different galaxy. Apparently there’s a war brewing in Phizcorulant.”

“Phiz-what?”

“How long have you been on Earth, son?”

“Seventy-five years, sir.”

“They tell me you took a wife. That was a foolish thing to do.”

“Yes, sir. Not the first time I’ve been told so.”

“You leaving any children behind?”

“Two sons, sir.”

“Well, you’d better hope you don’t get called back to Earth to deal with that. We’ve seen wars start amongst the incomplete races over smaller differences than a bit of elder blood in a human line.”

“I thought they were promised a millenium.”

“One. No more was promised and no less will be given. Could be you that causes the end of it.”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“Never mind, Jo-el. I’m giving you a hard time. The action in Phizcorulant is big stuff. Real war and blood and guts and all. You’re going to want to be there.”

“Yes, sir. I do want to.”

“What does your wife say?”

“I’m sorry, sir?”

“Does she know you don’t have to go?”

“I would never dream of resisting the call, commander.”

“That’s not what I asked. Does your wife know you could stay?”

“Yes, commander. She understands. She wants me to go. Doesn’t want me to feel trapped here on Earth.”

“And your sons? How old are they?”

“Elijah’s eleven, sir. Lazarus is only three. He probably won’t remember me. I’ve left some vids for him.”

“What does Elijah say?”

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Jo-el looked away and did not answer.

“It’s a shame for a boy not to have a father, isn’t it?”

“I take full responsibility, sir. I knew what I was getting into when I married her. I warned her, too.”

“An easy dodge, Jo-el. A human can’t understand what will happen a dozen years later. It’s outside of their perception.”

“Yes, commander.”

“The boy ask you to stay?”

“More than once, sir. And worse.”

“How so?”

“He asked to come along.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I explained to him how we’re different.”

“What did you say?”

“That tomorrow we’ll be winged and we’ll slip through the Earth’s atmosphere like a soap bubble.”

“Like a soap bubble, eh?”

“Yes, sir.” Jo-el squirmed and stopped stacking crates for a moment. He looked over toward the shekinah and the warm light of the glory reflected the hard angles of the man’s face. “Lisa made bubbles for us and we discussed surface tension and quantifying properties of matter.”

“That’s sweet.” The corners of El’s eyes were crinkled and his mouthed was pursed.

Again, Jo-el said nothing.

“These sons, they are both your blood?”

“Yes, commander.”

“Are you sure? Have you used the chimera?”

“No, sir. I don’t interrogate my wife.”

“Why not? She would be unable to detect the process.”

“Yes, commander. My reasons are difficult to explain.”

“Try.”

“It’s not meant to be, commander, the union between a human and one of the elder, but to make it be, we must live on their terms. With my wife, I speak terms of endearment and touch her to communicate in a way that is more efficient to their sensory systems than spartan words.”

“Such communication is not mutually exclusive to using the chimera on her, Jo-el.”

“I put my trust in her, sir.”

“You put your trust in a being which, by definition, is untrustworthy?”

“It’s what the almighty requires them to do for each other, so I choose to do it for her.”

“But they have to do it for a reason. It’s a way of growing wings for them. You already have wings, Jo-el.”

“I’m sorry, commander. As I said, it is difficult to explain.”

“It’s enough, Jo-el. When you have finished the barricade, check in with each of the decurions and report to me. Then say goodbye to your sons and report to the rendezvous point by midnight.”

“Midnight, sir?”

“I’ll want your assistance finishing the atmos for the journey.”

“Yes, commander. I will report.”

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“A young warrior, yes. He is a widower now, and childless. He leaves only memories behind.”

The rendezvous point was a silent beach twenty miles from the shekinah. The gleam still blazoned against the sky, luminous against the velvet black of the night. Just as in the day, the million-billion points of many-hued light speckled the darkness. In the cool night, even the swirls of far away galaxies were visible.

“The gate is open,” El said. His voice was another light, a falling star cutting through the living dark. Jo-el stood next to him. “All decursions report that their men are answering the call, without exception.”

“You were the only unknown quantity, Jo-el. None of the others waver.”

“There was another who took a wife, commander, was there not? In the fifth turma, if I recall correctly.”

“A young warrior, yes. Hosea. He is a widower now, and childless. He leaves only memories behind.”

“I didn’t know.”

“You didn’t ask. The humans have bequeathed you a portion of their limited perspective.”

“I’m sorry, commander.”

“No need to apologize, Jo-el. I had another reason for summoning you early.”

“Commander?”

“I spoke to the Queen on your behalf.”

Jo-el dropped to his knees. “Sir, why? What have I done?”

“Nothing. Rise, warrior.”

“What did you say to her, El?”

“Elijah is a good strong name. The name of the prophet.”

Jo-el said nothing.

“Why call the little one Lazarus, though? You know it’s the Roman form of-”

“Of El-eazar, yes, sir, I know. I apologize if it’s impertinent. The little one was

stillborn. My wife carried him to the Shekinah and he was reborn. She named him in her joy. I had no heart to correct her.”

“Unnecessary, Jo-el. It’s a fine name. I’m sorry he won’t remember you.”

“Thank you, commander.” Jo-el still hadn’t risen.

“The Lady interceded for you with her son the King. He has granted you leave to take Elijah with you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Lazarus has more of his mother’s blood than yours. He will be a leader of men someday. He’ll be tough and he’ll know when men are lying to him. But he does not possess the Chimera. He is physiologically human. Elijah is not. He is winged and gifted. Take him to the Shekinah before we depart and his wings will emerge. He will be able fly with us; to transform with us.”

“To Mars, commander?”

“And beyond. He will join us in battle on Phizcorulant and perhaps help build up the population there. He will be the first of human blood to step foot in another system.”

“I don’t understand, commander.”

“Get up, warrior, there’s nothing to understand. The Queen has interceded for you and obtained a favor. Take your son with you en voyage to Mars. You took for yourself a portion of the creation and you’re being allowed to keep it.”

Jo-el stood then. He stared at El. “His mother will be devastated.”

“His mother will raise another son to manhood and see you both soon enough.”

“She won’t understand.”

“No, she won’t. But she will accept the honor. Make her understand the honor.”

“She’s a woman, commander. She desires love above honor.”

“Then tell her what benefit is being given to her son. And someday, when humankind steps forth into the stars, her kin will have already preceded them. Tell her that because of her sacrifice, men will be welcomed on Phizcorulant

“You took for yourself a portion of the creation and you’re being allowed to keep it.”

as family.”

“Not if there’s a war there, sir.”

“We’d better get there first and help clear that up, then, Jo-el”

“Yes, commander.”

“Go and fetch your son.”

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“Gentle Thrush over Bristle Branches and noonday sun swimming through a sea of stars. On St. John’s day I will take my chances, and spread my wings en voyage to Mars.”

The ten thurmas spoke the words in unison. Their wings opened and their faces changed. They took to the sky and did not return to Earth again until the end of days.

But on that first night, a boy stretched his new wings. They assigned him to the same turma as his father, and together they slipped through the atmosphere like two fingers passing through a luminous bubble. It was all the other warriors could do, bemused as they were, to keep him in formation on that first flight to the red planet. He looked down on the Earth in wonder. Days later, he transformed into a bacterium, for the first but certainly not the last time. He had many adventures there. And when he visited Phizcorulant, everything changed on that wild planet forever. Many more things happened to him, and many other lives were changed because of him. If all of his adventures were written down, neither Earth nor Phizcorulant, nor the universe itself could contain all the books that would be written. But this was how it all began.

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