

## Cocktail Weenies

(an Untethered Tale)

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## Chapter 1: Incremental Marbles

The docking procedure seemed to last forever. The trip from Alpha Centauri took 3 days, but it felt like the ship was in orbit around Earth for just as long before they were allowed to disembark. Aurianna fidgeted impatiently in the large, plush seat. At 5 years of age, it never occurred to her that perhaps the time spent in orbit dragged on and on because she was forced to sit still for more than 3 and a half minutes, or that she was strapped in so tight. She had free run of the entire vessel during the voyage, but had to be securely fastened in for the last couple of hours. It was practically torture for an adventurous little girl.

Going back to Earth was always exciting. It was so lush and green, the air so wet and heavy in comparison to the colony where she and her daddy lived in the Alpha Centauri system. If only they didn't have to visit ugly old Aunt Hildegarde while they were there.

"The old witch has long hair! And wrinkles on her face! Imagine! And she smells like — something! And she'll make me wear a dress, like hers, and eat food that came out of the ground! Out of dirt! She grows it in her own yard! Imagine, eating something that was in the dirt! The only thing worse was eating something that had actually been —" But Aurianna couldn't even bear to think of that. She shuddered. Give her synfood any day!

Finally, after it seemed that she'd waited at least all day, there was a bump and the distant sound of docking latches. Aurianna didn't wait for anybody to tell her that she could unstrap. She was out of her seat with a bound, ricocheted off the ceiling, and was waiting at the door before the attendant even had his PA system turned on. Her impetuous behavior might have saved her life, at least for another few minutes. She'd been out of her seat for only about 30 seconds, when a small entry hole appeared right beside where she'd been sitting, followed a few milliseconds later by a slightly larger exit hole on the other side of the compartment. The sound was kind of like a gunshot on the 3V panel followed by a long blowing sound. There was a moment of stunned silence from the other passengers, then Aurianna's daddy bounded down the hallway, snatched her out of mid-air, and ran back down the corridor the way he had come. It was a game to her, they did this all the time, and she giggled at the unexpected excitement of the chase. The odd sound of Daddy's grav-boots clacking on the plating with each step, then clicking off again made her giggle even more. She hadn't expected him to initiate the "someone's chasing us" game here on the ship. But it was always so much fun; they would hide in strange places and tell each other silly stories until Daddy's pager went off. Then he would breath a sigh of relief and tell her it was safe to come out (he was so good at playing pretend.) Occasionally, they pretended that if anyone heard them, they'd get caught, so they had to whisper, and keep the lights out, and not let their boots tap on the floor. Sometimes, Daddy even pretended to be really scared that someone would find them. Then he would tell her spy stories. They were so fantastic, she thought they were really over the top, even for a five year old, but he told them so well...

If she'd had to wait with anyone else, she'd have been furious at having to be on the ship for even one minute longer. Her temper-tantrum would have shaken the ship apart. But time spent with him, she never complained; she loved her Daddy more than anything in all the worlds. This time they hid in a small metal compartment un-

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Color Code: Nancy and Sam

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der the deck-plating until all the other passengers had run screaming into the waiting transport. Aurianna thought they were, perhaps, just a little too excited about visiting Earth, but then again, it was a rare treat, and perhaps warranted a little screaming. Soon, a bulky, black military vehicle arrived to take them Earth-side. It docked directly onto the Interstellar craft, not at the portal, but on one of the starboard airlocks normally used in space when one vessel docked with another in orbit of a planet. Aurianna loved “secret compartments” and this one was one of the best she had ever seen. It had an access tunnel that led directly to the airlock! They didn’t even get to see the outside, the beautiful blue Earth-sky. Just the metal inside the ship replaced by the metal inside the military vehicle.

The pilot radioed base, “Base, this is Wheeler 1. We have the cargo and it is intact. Repeat; we have the cargo. We are en route, e.t.a. 6 minutes. Prepare to debrief the subjects.”

“Roger, Wheeler 1. See you in 6 minutes.” Back at base the radio tech turned to the C in C and asked in wonder, “Does anyone here know she’s a Princess?” The C in C shook his head at the youth. “Son, *she* doesn’t even know she’s a Princess!”

“Oh, don’t be a silly ol’ thing! Of course, I know I’m a princess! Daddy calls me ‘Princess’ all the time!”

“Wheeler 1 to Base, you’re still transmitting.”

“Well,” muttered the Gunnery Officer, “So much for an incognito visit.”

Hardy Lee Dunn, a.k.a. Lord Dunn of Atoll, a.k.a. Daddy, cleared his throat and said, “Enough talk, fellows, just get us to the ground!”

Just then, the BBMV lurched.

“What the fu—” the Flight Engineer began.

“Watch it!” interrupted the Gunnery Officer.

“I don’t even see it!” said the Flight Engineer.

“I mean your language!” the Gunnery Officer said, inclining his head toward Princess Aurianna, who was listening intently, hoping to enhance her vocabulary.

“Well, I mean whatever thumped us!” objected the Flight Engineer.

“Oh, THAT what the fu—” began the Gunnery Officer.

“Watch it!” interrupted the Flight Engineer.

They shared blank expressions for a moment.

Meanwhile, the pilot was furiously pushing buttons, flipping switches, gritting his teeth, levering levers, tuning in Paul Harvey for The Rest of The Story, turning dials, counting parachutes, playing “Nearer My God To Thee” on the BBMV stereo, squinting his eyes, crossing himself, releasing countermeasures decoys, firing weapons in

random patterns, reciting “Hail Mary’s”, taking evasive action, heading for the hills, deploying communications buoys, baring the door, clenching his fists, holding his breath, ignoring enigmatic instrument indications, and shushing the Gunnery Officer and the Flight Engineer.

“Shush!” he said.

“What’s the matter? What’s the matter?” they asked in unison.

“Gosh,” said the pilot through his clenched teeth, “if I could sing bass, we’d have a trio.”

He began singing along with “Nearer My God To Thee”, in a quivering countertenor.

“I had to get the clown crew,” muttered Lord Dunn in disgust.

Just then, Lord Dunn noticed a very large, very bristling with weapons pods, very alien looking, very glowing vessel just outside the port view port. Hardy Lee Dunn, Lord Dunn of Atoll, known as Hard Lee Dunn Atoll to his friends, to his very close friends, realized at that point that the final approach to reentry wasn’t going well Atoll and, indeed, might be a final approach to more than just reentry.

For the sake of Princess Aurianna’s peace of mind, Hard Lee Dunn Atoll joined the game that, he suddenly realized, the crew was playing for her sake. While yelling, “Oh Aurianna, look at the stars out the starboard starview starport!”, through which was visible a stark and close-up view of the night side of Earth, he swooped Princess Aurianna up in his arms. Then, joining into the chorus of “Nearer My God To Thee” that the crew, having turned off the BBMV stereo, was adroitly performing in the rousing style and tempo of an old-fashioned Gospel quartet and which, prior to his entry, had been seriously in need of a good bass, he released the Velcro straps on his grav-boots and launched himself and Princess Aurianna toward the starboard side of the BBMV. Upon arrival there he stuffed them both into the Emergency Reentry Pod, a very un-aerodynamic craft that was certain to make its occupants live up to its acronym during reentry.

“Ooooooh, another game!” Aurianna crowed.

“Enough with the bird imitations,” Hard Lee Dunn Atoll admonished.

The BBMV lurched again, harder this time. The pilot missed a note, throwing everyone else out of tune.

Hard Lee Dunn Atoll, noting that the crew was Dunn singing and hoping that they weren’t totally Dunn, pushed the eject button. With a short “eeeerp” sound, the ERP erupted into space.

Princess Aurianna didn’t enjoy the game any more, after that.

## Chapter 2: The Grillig

Very few people in modern times even knew about the Grillig, much less understood it.

But history shows that people who do not remember history are doomed to learning about the Grillig the hard way.

Unfortunately for the people of Earth, not to mention our innocent princess, who would one day be forced by fate and her royal duty to deal with the Grillig, the Phober-nashig was in full swing, which as you and I both know from history, meant one thing. The Grillig was not far behind.

As the ERP fell, Lord Dunn thought about the Grillig. He didn't know if the very large, very bristling with weapons pods, very alien looking, very glowing vessel (VLVBWWPVALVGV) that he had seen just outside the port view port had anything to do with the Grillig. He wouldn't be able to contact any of his contacts until he and the Princess were safely on the ground and the Princess was safely installed in the very safe, very secret, highly disguised, high security, Royal Castle Complex (VSVSHDHSRCC), with "Aunt Hildegarde". In the meantime, he just had to endure the emetic qualities of the ride down in the ERP.

While Lord Dunn thought about the Grillig, the Princess, the VLVBWWPVALVGV, "Aunt Hildegarde", and the VSVSHDHSRCC, the ERP did its job. It entered the atmosphere at near orbital speed and, as it tumbled its ablative surface glowed brightly. After it had slowed sufficiently that what was left of the ablative surface had cooled, the temperature cycle of re-entry had induced what most people called the Popcorn phase. The biochemical process in the sub-ablative layer (SAL) of the ERP, triggered by the temperature cycle of re-entry, began. The outer layer of the ERP, the SAL, began to expand while the ERP itself, of course, retained its original dimensions. As the SAL expanded, the volume and surface area of the ERP increased, while its mass remained constant. The SAL slowly grew to many thousands of times its original volume. By the time the ERP had entered the lower atmosphere, it was drifting like a piece of thistle down. Lord Dunn didn't have any idea where the ERP was going to land but he hoped that it would be a remote location, far from the prying eyes of his enemies. The atmosphere in the vicinity of the somewhat random point of impact that chance had selected for the ERP was unusually calm, and the ERP slowly drifted in a final descent that was so near to perfectly vertical that fine instruments would have been needed to detect the deviation. The final descent took more than an hour and by the time the ERP finally came to rest, everybody within ten miles of Paris was out watching, and cheered riotously when the ERP impaled itself firmly on the uppermost tip of the Eiffel Tower, in full view of the 3V panels of the world.

(To be continued)