

LONGING FOR LANGALANA

By Mercurio D. Rivera



I wince at the intensity of the Earth Emissary's beauty, and take a step backward. Despite my decades of exposure to his people, the mere sight of this uniformed young man, this stranger, still causes powerful feelings to bubble to the surface reflexively. As he strides into the room, his emerald-green eyes glitter. The resemblance to Phinny is uncanny. He nods a greeting and sits down at the conference room table. His pink, smooth-skinned brilliance makes me squint, and I have to turn my back to him to combat the giddiness. Facing the thick-plated window, I observe the dull, grey moonscape, the dead dust dunes stretching off into the horizon, softly lit by the indigo glow of Langalana overhead.

I struggle against the urge to stare at his hazy reflection in the glass.

"An Emissary, eh?" I say, leaning heavily on my red-furred cane. "Your father would be proud." Peeking over my shoulder, I point to the wicker bowl on the glass table, my finger trembling ever so slightly. "Please, help yourself to some *chapra*. But chew the leaf slowly. Its nectar is very, very sweet. Your father used to love it when he was a boy, you know."

I slowly rub the scales on my chin and gesture toward the massive, reddish planet that fills half the black sky. "Magnificent, eh?" Mauve clouds encircle its equator and dark purplish seas stand out starkly between three large landmasses.

"To think, our peoples traveled so far, endured so much. But in the end, Langalana spurned us," I say. "And so, we've been left to pine from afar, to dream about what could have been."

I turn around and dare to look directly at him again.

The young man sucks gingerly on the tip of the red-leafed *chapra*. Like his father, a majestic swath of thick, yellow fibers sheathes his closed cranium and falls to his shoulders. A profound love causes me to ache and shudder; I shake my head and avert my gaze again.

"I know why you're here," I say.



From my sleeping quarters I spied the silver landbuzzer--a glinting pinprick in the distance--speeding toward us. As if riding choppy waves, it skimmed atop the undulating, scarlet-furred grasslands that stretched in every direction. The buzzer clattered up to the reed

fence that surrounded our hearth and two humans--an older female and a young boy not much taller than me--clambered out of its sidecars.

I froze, open-mouthed, for I had never seen an actual alien before. In the weeks since landfall--when our Wergen brethren left us and continued onward to the Northern Continent--these were the first pilgrims we had encountered. I'd been told that they came in magnificent shades of pink and brown and yellow, like the Visian demigods of our mythology, but to actually see them with my own eyes... Rather than a single breathing canal, they bore two tiny holes in the center of their faces beneath a protruding skin-covered bone. Tossed, colored fibers covered the tops of their rounded heads. But most striking of all, a rainbow-colored aura that I can only describe as a coating of pure, unadulterated beauty shimmered about them. I bent down and peeped at them over the windowsill as they approached our front yard. The old female conversed casually with Father and Elkah, both of whom worked the fields with the bots. Although I longed to see the aliens up close, I felt paralyzed by a sudden overwhelming shyness.

"Shimera!" Father called out. His voice, though loud, sounded shaky.

I hesitated for just an instant before bolting through the central fireroom to the hearth's front archway. Father and Elkah stood side by side, both clutching their bunched-up tether--for when they stood so close together there was a chance that one of them might stumble over it or become entangled.

"Shimera, these are our new neighbors, Dr. Zooey Crest and her nephew, Phineas." As he spoke to me, Father kept his eyes fixed on the humans.

When I tried to return the aliens' greeting, I found myself breathless. I could only nod.

"I was hoping, young lady," Dr. Crest said, "that you might be able to tutor my nephew in the Wergen tongue." She said this in perfect, unaccented Wergenese. "I'm inundated with lab work, and Phinny could really benefit from some personal instruction. He knows just a few words and phrases."

As Dr. Crest spoke, the boy, Phinny, stood behind her, gawking at the tether that connected Father and Elkah's craniums.

"Say hello to our neighbors, Phinny," Dr. Crest instructed the boy, switching to Earthen. "In Wergenese."

The boy stayed hidden behind his aunt's pleated, white skirt and shouted out a badly accented "hello." While the adults continued speaking, he shifted his gaze to me and stuck out his dark pink tongue. I smiled, marveling at this strange and wonderful human greeting.

"Shimera would be honored to tutor the boy," Elkah said.

When Phinny looked at me again, I bashfully stuck out my own colorless tongue, which couldn't extend nearly as far as the human's.

The boy laughed delightedly and Dr. Crest glanced at me, raising an eyebrow. "Yes, well... Phinny will come by around midday tomorrow."

"You really must visit for dinner," Father said.

“Yes, please, we insist,” Elkah added.

Dr. Crest shot us a strange look, one I had difficulty reading, and shook her head slowly. “That’s very kind of you, but I’m afraid we’re going to have to pass. Some urgent engineering experiments require my attention.”

“Can we come by and help clear your fields?” Father asked.

“Perhaps assist you with your lab work?” Elkah said. “Really, there must be some way we can help.”

Several lines appeared across Dr. Crest’s forehead. “That’s quite all right. The Wergen bots are managing the fieldwork just fine, thank you. And I work best alone.”

“Are you sure—?”

Her glare cut Father off in mid-sentence. “Good day.” She grabbed the boy’s hand, turned, and marched off.

Father and Elkah bowed their heads, embarrassed that they’d been too forward.

And as the landbuzzer receded into the distance Phinny looked over his shoulder, and I thought I saw his long, pink tongue stick out once again, greeting me in his special way.



“We were planetary pioneers, the ‘heroic trailblazers’ of Langalana,” I say, my voice tinged with bitterness. “My father and Elkah performed the traditional Wergen function: maintenance of the fieldbots used by the pilgrims to clear large patches of the grasslands in preparation for the settlement’s expansion. And Dr. Crest studied soil samples and, months later, headed up a team of human engineers responsible for crop production. This was years before the construction of the Science Institute, Emissary, years before the devastation had begun, before the landfall of hundreds of human exobiologists, anthropologists, entomologists.”

I pace slowly, shifting my weight to my cane, and rub the scales on my chin.

The young man stares at me silently, impassively.

“But what did Phinny and I care about the logistics of settlement? We were just children, children exploring a vast new playground.” I can’t help it; my voice becomes wistful now. “Every morning Phinny came to my hearth for his lesson in Wergenese. Our conversations in those first few days--in Earthen, of course--were formal and very brief for, you see, I was still painfully shy around him.

“And as the days passed we became more comfortable in our surroundings, more comfortable around each other. Oh, the afternoons Phinny and I spent in those breathtaking grasslands! How many games we played! How many secrets we shared! One day, he told me he’d discovered a natural trail through the grasslands, a trail that twisted out towards the Purple Sea.”



Elkah oversaw the skittering bots that cleared the growing grass in front of our hearth

while Father prepared the meals inside. At that time, their cranial cord extended for almost a full ten meters and still sported the great elasticity so typical of the recently-tethered.

When we strolled past Elkah, her head jerked upward and her white eyes zoomed in on Phinny. “Where are you going, Phineas?” she asked.

“To the overlook,” he replied in slightly accented Wergene. “For my lesson.”

“*Very* well spoken,” Elkah gushed. She patted his head and her fingers lingered in his yellow tresses. “You’re an excellent student.” At that very instant Father must have moved toward the rear of the hearth because Elkah’s tether pulled slightly, causing her to take two steps backwards. “Olbodo!” she shouted over her shoulder. “What is *wrong* with you?”

Phinny grabbed my hand--which pulsed with pleasure at his touch--and pulled me along to the recently discovered path that snaked in a southwesterly direction. Because the blue sun hovered directly over us, we cast no shadows as we wandered through the trail. The grasslands resembled nothing on Werg--or Earth apparently, judging from Phinny’s wide-eyed reaction every time we moved through them. A deep crimson fur lined each blade of grass, and the fields literally swayed--not from the warm wind, but of their own volition--left, then right, in perfect rhythm.

From the twisting dirt path, the fields fell away and we emerged onto a jutting, rocky overlook. Shielding our eyes, we stood at the lip and marveled at the glorious, placid Purple Sea, kilometers below, lapping against the crystalline cliff side. A steady breeze blew, warm and silky and impossibly salty.

We set down our blankets and I began Phinny’s lesson, instructing him on the nasal twangs that punctuate Wergene verbs. I found that Phinny had an impressive facility for languages, so much so that his skills approached Wergen levels. He always picked up the nuances quickly, biting his lip and concentrating intensely. Before long, however, a dam seemed to burst in his head--he’d hurl stones into the sea, or recite the Wergene alphabet while standing on his head, or break off a reed and challenge me to a duel, or lay on his stomach and spew a dewy substance from his mouth over the edge of the overlook--signaling the end of the lesson.

As we began our long hike back I could sense he had something on his mind he wanted to ask me. His reluctance to do so surprised me, for Phinny had questions and opinions about everything and in the weeks that I’d been tutoring him never once hesitated to voice them:

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?” he had asked.

“I had two sisters who died at birth,” I replied.

“Why do fieldbots look like giant spiders? The Wergens should make them look, I don’t know...friendlier,” he said.

“The bots are modeled after Scythians--our pets on Werg.”

His barrage had continued: “I wish I had those white Wergen scales. You shouldn’t say you’re ‘colorless’--you’re white, like chalk;” “The math and science holoprograms are boring, don’t you think?” “I’m glad Aunt Zooney got assigned to Argenta rather than

Inlandia;” “We’re the luckiest kids ever, to be the first pilgrims on this continent;” “They say you can fit a hundred Earths into Langalana, but I don’t believe it!” And so on.

I always answered in Wergnese and we spent hours on that overlook, the afternoons vanishing into the sun’s blue blaze as we chatted and played.

As was our practice, I walked him back to his habitation. Sometimes I would wander inside to catch a glimpse of Dr. Crest in her spacious laboratory, the rectangular gene-splicers lying on long tables and humming in the background. But today she stood at the entranceway in her white lab coat and waved for us to enter when she saw us approach.

Phinny and I entered the lab where Dr. Crest stood in front of a table with a microscope, a blue syringe and odd-shaped metallic devices that scurried about the table on their own. “Did you have a good lesson, Phineas?”

“Yes, Aunt Zooey,” Phinny said in Wergnese. “Learned a lot.”

“The watermelon is ready, if you’d like to try some.”

Phinny jumped up and down and let out a whoop. Dr. Crest had been trying for some time to engineer Earthen fruits and vegetables to grow in the garden behind their habitation.

“Can we have some right now?” Phinny said.

She hesitated. “Come here, Shimera.”

Despite her wrinkled dermis, she radiated waves of beauty--like all humans--that made me feel tingly and happy to be alive. She gently grabbed my hand--an electric tickle buzzed through me--and placed it on the table, palm up. Her five fingers, so pink and dainty and dexterous, brushed my three digits with a sandpapery substance. “Let me do a quick run of your cell samples to make sure it’s safe for you to eat these fruits,” she said. “Phinny, why don’t you run outside and cut up a melon.”

Phinny scrambled out the door.

“Shimera, I’ve received Elkah and Olbodoh’s daily dinner invitations, their notes and e-messages.” Dr. Crest removed a bundle of red slips of paper from her lab coat jacket and dangled them in front of me. “Tell them to stop it.” She crumpled the invitations in her five-fingered, white-knuckled fist and tossed them into the waste bin. “You Wergens can be so goddamned overbearing.”

The scanner beeped and Dr. Crest stared into a monitor and made a peculiar gesture, raising her opposable digit in the air. “All clear. Enjoy the watermelon.”



I face the Emissary, but make a conscious effort not to look him in the eye. He has finished the *chapra* and fingers the edges of the empty wicker bowl.

“From that brief exchange with Dr. Crest, I learned at a very early age how important it was to suppress our feelings around humans, how our emotions make them uncomfortable, and can potentially drive them away. I promised myself at that moment that I would never make Phinny feel awkward around me. I would bottle up my feelings for him deep inside

me rather than ever risk losing him,” I say, my voice trembling.

“Keeping that promise proved more difficult than I could ever imagine. Your father’s kindnesses, his generosity, his humor, all touched me deeply. I tried my best to contain myself around him, mind you, just not always with success.”

I limp over to the window and press both my hands against it.



Following Phinny’s lessons, he and I would sit in Dr. Crest’s garden in what he called the “watermelon patch.” He’d split the melons with a long blade and we’d lifted out the pink centers eating them heartily, juice dribbling down our chins. We also occasionally sampled the succulent *chapra* that grew on the reeds of grass, a much sweeter food than the melons. As I’ve said, I preferred the taste and texture of the watermelons while Phinny loved the *chapra*.

One day, intoxicated with sugary *chapra*, Phinny finally blurted out the questions that I sensed had been weighing on his mind.

“Shim, why do Wergens love humans?”

His directness frazzled me and I found it difficult to respond.

“What makes *us* so special?” he asked.

“Well...I mean, you’re all so...beautiful.” I blushed.

“You think so? Aunt Zooey thinks that it might be biological. Maybe the way we smell or something.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“Your father? And Elkah? Why are they, you know, tied together that way?” he asked. And from the look in his eyes I could sense that this subject, the tethering of Father and Elkah, was what interested him most of all. But I was painfully shy about the subject.

“They’re tethered,” I said, embarrassed.

After a few seconds, when he realized I would volunteer no more information, he asked, “Are your scales soft?”

I shrugged.

Phinny shyly reached out to me. “Is it okay if I...?”

I nodded, and he gently brushed his hand along my cheekbone.

I know it’s silly, but, sometimes, all of these decades later, I can still feel the warmth of his fingers tracing the crevices between my scales.

“They feel...rubbery, nice,” he said. “On Earth only reptiles have scales.” His gaze shifted to the *coronatis*, the leafy headdress that covered my cranium. “And what about your head...”

“That’s personal,” I said quickly, and he withdrew his hand sheepishly.

“Why do Wergens wear those things? Those leaf-hats?”

“To cover our...areas.” I looked away from him again. “That’s where our cords emerge. When it’s time.”

He digested this information. “Shim, do you think a Wergen could ever tether with a human?”

My hearts skipped. I shrugged.

“Do all of you get tethered?” he asked.

“After the tests are done, yes, for the most part.”

“Tests?”

“Our medics always test our genes to make sure we’re...compatible. Some persons have diseases that don’t let them tether. And some people just choose not to,” I said, looking downward. “That’s not a good thing.”

“Oh.” And just like that, Phinny jumped to his feet and sprinted in the direction of my hearth. “Race you!”

I leapt to my feet and chased after him, laughing. “Wait! Wait!”



Perhaps it was because I stood slightly taller than Phinny, or because he constantly took instruction from me on Wergenese, but he resented whenever I told him what to do outside of our lessons. Looking back, I suppose I did sometimes take a superior tone with him, but you have to understand, this sprung from my desire to protect him from the dangers that existed alongside Langalana’s natural wonders.

All of that changed on one cool day, a day just like any other with magenta clouds looming overhead in the pink-tinted sky and the smell of snow in the air, the day that Dr. Crest sent Phinny to my hearth to obtain an extension blade--one of the fieldbots had damaged a claw and she needed to replace it--and I decided to accompany him on his walk back home. The truth is, I not only wanted to be with Phinny, I also wanted to experience soaring over the grasslands in his landbuzzer, which his aunt had let him borrow.

As we accelerated away, Elkah and Father waved goodbye to Phinny from a window. “Goodbye, Father!” I shouted, smiling broadly, one hand on the handgrip and the other holding my headdress in place. “Goodbye, Elkah!”

“Why don’t you call Elkah ‘mother?’” Phinny asked.

“Elkah isn’t my mother, silly,” I said, tittering at the absurdity of his comment.

“Elkah is Father’s second mate.”

“So your parents are divorced?”

“Divorced?”

“Yeah, divorced. Like mine. They separated when they realized that they couldn’t get along any more.”

“Separated mates?” I shuddered. I had never heard anything more horrible, more... alien.

“Mom decided that it would be best for me to stay with Dad,” he said. “She’s a really important person on the Outer Council and doesn’t have time for kids. But then Dad enrolled in the Delta Expedition. So he left me with Aunt Zooey.” Phinny had a sad,

faraway look in his eye I had never seen before.

I didn't know what to say, so I simply stared ahead.

We said nothing for a while. The buzzer skimmed the apex of the red blades, and we both held on to the handlegrips as we surfed the waves of grass.

"So. Where is your mom?" he said. "On the Northern Continent?"

"Hah! She's here, just incorporated, Phinny!"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you know what incorporation is, silly?"

Phinny straightened up. "Well, I've heard of it..."

"Oh, look! A manticola!" I shrieked. "Stop for a second."

I jumped off the sidecar and pushed my way through the tall, feathery grass to the bright yellow-and-white petals of the budding manticola stem. When I stooped down to take in its scent, I heard Phinny scream.

He shoved me hard from behind, sending me sprawling to the ground.

As I tumbled, I saw it, there on a patch of grassless sand, emerging from a shadowy burrow. With a clicking sound, the thing twitched and unfolded its carapace segment by segment until it stood at eye level with Phinny. It was as thick as my leg, with a lightning-bolt shaped torso. Thorns covered its muscular chitinous sections, and it bore the same deep-red color as the surrounding grasslands. As I tried to figure out whether it was plant or insect, the creature screeched. It seemed poised to sink its sharp teeth into Phinny when he pulled the extension-blade from his pocket and lunged. He drove it right between the thing's four black, bulbous eyes, pounding the creature again and again, even after it had slumped to the ground.

I watched from ground level as Phinny flattened the creature's head with his blows until it lay in a red pool of viscous fluid. Only then did he stop.

I walked behind him and placed my hand on his back. "Did it bite you?" I asked. In response, Phinny made a bizarre choking sound and disgorged chunks of semi-digested food onto the ground.

"Are you ill?"

He wiped his mouth. "Why did you run into the grass blades?" he shouted. "There's no path here! You *know* it's dangerous." He stomped off toward the landbuzzer.

I ran after him. "I can't wait to tell everyone, Phinny. You saved me. What *was* that thing? Weren't you even a little afraid? The way you struck it down, why, I've never seen such courage!"

He ignored me.

But as we rode back and I chattered on and on about his bravery Phinny's mood seemed to brighten. He stood straighter, with his chest puffed.

Following the incident, we were both so excited and flustered we got turned around without even realizing it and wound up back at my hearth. As we approached, I saw Elkah tending the fields and I leapt off the landbuzzer as it slowed--this time carefully staying on

the sandy walking path--and shouted out what had happened as I ran toward her.

“That sounds like a grubber! There’ve only been a few of them spotted on the Northern Continent--uncommon, but dangerous creatures--but I didn’t know we had them here. How’d you know its weak spot, boy? Right between the eyes! I certainly wouldn’t want to be fighting off one of those things with nothing but a blade.” She patted Phinny on the back and shoulders. “Shimera, you have to be more careful. The boy could have been hurt.”

From that day, the dynamic changed between us. It’s hard to explain, but I no longer felt the same need to protect Phinny. I knew that he could take care of himself. Not only that, I knew that he could protect me too.



I slowly circle the table. The young Emissary looks at me curiously, as if staring at an experiment gone awry.

“Despite the large number of incoming human pilgrims over the years, Argenta’s population grew only slightly. Most arrivals settled in Inlandia or in provinces in the Northern and Western Continents.

“As for my people, you have to understand, Emissary, the Joint Venture Agreement provides that only five percent of the population can be Wergen. Given Langalana’s sheer size, we were spread thin, to put it mildly. No Wergens lived in Inlandia. Our arriving pilgrims lived solely on the large continent in the north--an inconceivable distance from Argenta. As a result, I went almost a decade without seeing another of my kind--except for Father and Elkah, of course. A decade! Nevertheless, surrounded by beautiful humans--most importantly, in the company of Phinny--I consider these days on Langalana, these halcyon days of my childhood, the happiest moments of my life.”

The Earth Emissary opens his mouth as if to say something.



I saw Phinny less frequently when he began to spend much of his time assisting other pilgrims with the construction of the farmhouses and plantations. Most often I would visit him at the work site where he helped Aunt Zooney’s team with the irrigation system. We would eat together at midday and discuss the latest developments on Langalana.

He stopped by my hearth one morning to share the news that another starship jammed with over ten thousand humans was expected to arrive early next year. The plans to expand Inlandia to accommodate them needed to be expedited.

“I’m going to be working twelve-hour days, Shim: programming the bots to process grassland reeds, working with the engineers to diagram the city layout.”

“Phineas!” Father shouted, lumbering closely ahead of Elkah. With the cord fully extended, they could now walk only several feet apart. “My, but you’ve sprouted. What broad shoulders! You’ve been working the crop fields, eh?”

And, indeed, Phinny's transformation had been dramatic. He'd grown much taller and his yellow fibers seemed paled by the sun to an almost golden white. His skin had browned and his body had become lean and taut.

After I guided him away--his beauty mesmerized Elkah and Father and prompted them to earwig him far beyond the point of rudeness--he turned to me and whispered confidentially. "I never noticed before, but their tether... It seems to have shrunk."

I blushed. Of course their tether had constricted. Father and Elkah had been mated for quite some time now. "I-I..."

"It's okay, Shim. I know you don't feel comfortable talking about it." He turned to me. "It's going to happen. I'm moving to Inlandia."

"Really?"

"Aunt Zooey's getting older. She needs to continue her research in a less challenging environment. With the grubber swarms and the constant evacuations, it's getting to be too much for her."

I heard the words, but had trouble registering their meaning. "I think it's admirable that you're so loyal to Dr. Crest."

"It's the least I can do after everything she's done for me."

My spirit sank as the reality set in. Although he'd been talking about this for some time, I never thought that the day would actually come. "When?"

"Next week. The bots need major reprogramming to assist with the construction of the highways and office buildings and sewage systems. And we need to clear several more miles of Inlandia's grasslands."

As we walked our familiar path to the overlook, the field's color seemed to shift from red to purple.

"What about you, Shim? There's plenty of opportunity in Inlandia, you know. The grubber infestation here has only gotten worse. And with your language skills--"

"I can't leave my hearth, Phinny. Not yet. Not until my Passage."

"Your 'Passage'?" He raised an eyebrow. "Isn't it time you finally told me what this is all about?"

I hesitated, for our rituals are sacred, personal. But then again, this was Phinny. "When a Wergen reaches the age of maturity, there's a Passage ceremony," I explained. "A male stands with the female through the rites. But in my case...the nearest Wergen is on the other side of the planet. What am I to do, Phinny, swim across the ocean?"

"Well, it's just a matter of time before we have the parts for the bots to construct spaceplanes--"

"It doesn't matter. I couldn't perform the rites with a stranger."

"I'll stand with you," Phinny said, just like that, his green eyes aglitter.

I felt like flut-fluts flew circles in my stomachs. "You *would*?"

"Hey, I'd do anything for you, Shim. You know that." He reached out and caressed my cheek with the back of his hand, tracing the lines of my scales.

My hearts were so full that they seemed to expand into my throat and choke off my voice.

When we reached the overlook, he bent down to pick up a stone, which he shucked sidearm into the coruscating waters below. How many times had he done this over the years? Something about the familiarity of this act made my hearts swell even more.

And so on a chilly day, with the rising sun peeking from behind an amethyst cloudbank, we stood atop Piner's Peak, the highest point nearest Argenta, and performed the rites. For as far as I could see, the grasslands shone like a vast coverlet of scarlet, shimmering in the indigo sunlight. On Werg, my closest friends would have attended the Passage Ceremony; here, just Phinny, Dr. Crest, Elkah and Father stood by me. On Werg, my companion would have been a potential tethering mate; here, my sweet Phinny accompanied me, wearing the *coronatis* and ivy-laced ceremonial garb traditionally worn by Wergen males.

Father and Elkah-thrilled at Phinny's participation-presided over the ceremony. They moved awkwardly, their tether now not more than six inches long and so taut that Elkah's head leaned slightly to the left and Father's tilted slightly to the right. By this time, Father had attained dominance so Elkah rarely spoke. As Father sang the Old Words, I removed my headdress, exposing my cranial cavity, and sang the song of adulthood.

I caught Phinny peeking for a second before averting his eyes.

My cheeks flushed and I felt my cranium moisten.

Father raised his arms and said the final words. And then chaos erupted.

Father drew his sidearm and a laser pulse fired. Phinny yanked on my arm as he stumbled, pulling me away from the sudden movement behind us. When I turned, a grubber's carcass lay on the ground, steaming. Another one sprung at us and Father fired again. At the same time, a purple-thorned grubber loomed over Dr. Crest, who held her hand over her face. Everything was happening in a heartbeat, and the shock rendered Dr. Crest--indeed, all of us--silent. Unable to move quickly, Father and Elkah stumbled over each other and fell to the ground, the sidearm dropping out of Father's hand. Without thinking, I hurled myself at the creature before it could strike at Dr. Crest. As I collided with it, the grubber turned, a blurry streak, and clamped onto my upper leg with its mandibles. While I rolled on the ground, the creature on top of me, a shot rang out and I found myself staring at the grubber's headless carapace.

"Are you all right?" Phinny asked, clutching Father's smoking firearm. But I could barely hear him over the scream--my own scream, I came to realize--as I spotted the thorns embedded in my thigh and the clear blood streaming from my shredded leg.



I lift my cane in the air and waggle it, shifting all my weight to my healthy leg trunk. "A memento."

The Emissary scratches his chin.

“Phinny and Dr. Crest delayed their relocation to Inlandia for several weeks during my slow and painful recovery while Father and Elkah programmed the medibots to tend to me. But the venom proved beyond the bots’ ability to treat. In fact, Father initially feared that the bots might find it necessary to amputate my leg, but Dr. Crest intervened and worked to develop what we then thought would be an all-purpose anti-venom. You have to realize, Emissary, this was before we understood the true nature of the grubbers.”

He stares blankly at me.

“Eventually the infection waned and my fever subsided,” I explain. “Although my body ached during this period, my spirit soared for every night your father sat with me and held my hand and read to me. In truth, I dreaded my recovery, for I knew that once my condition had improved, Phinny would be leaving me.”



I fell into a deep depression after Phinny’s relocation to Inlandia. I couldn’t bring myself to get out of bed to attend the scheduled tutorial sessions in Wergenes--or even to help Father and Elkah with the clearing of the grasslands. Phinny must have sensed the impact his departure had on me, because he made an effort to call and visit regularly. Over time though, the bi-weekly visits became monthly trips, then just random stop-bys on business outings several times a year. But we would still speak just about everyday. During our holo-chats he would confide in me about his problems, about his adjustment to life Inland: how the grasslands had been cleared away and glass towers erected, how he’d obtained a position as an intern on the recently formed Settlement Council. He told me in great detail about debates with his new friends and co-workers, which ranged from political discourse about settlement policy to petty squabbles about who got the offices with the best views. Some of the councilmen had strongly supported the Growth for Humanity Bill pending on Earth, which pushed for more profitable alliances with other alien species at the expense of current Human-Wergen joint ventures. Phinny told me that even though it wasn’t his place to do so, he’d passionately defended the Wergen alliance, invoking loyalty, the deep friendship that had developed between our species, the vast amount of knowledge and philosophy that humanity still had to learn from the Wergens.

During these years that Phinny lived in Inlandia, I lived my days waiting for his projection to appear on my holo-monitor. I longed to hear his gentle voice, to laugh at his self-deprecating humor. These chats became more difficult to schedule, however, as the grubber infestations increased. It seemed that every few days the evacuation sirens blared and full-blown laserfire blasted on the outskirts of Argenta.

At the time, a personal matter also concerned me. My body ached to tether, but being isolated from my own kind made this impossible. By then--although I had not discussed it with Father or Elkah--I had already made my decision. I would not tether. More than anything, I wanted to commit myself to the person I cared for more than anyone else in the universe. I wanted to spend my life--in the way that humans share their lives--

with Phinny.

Phinny knew about my dilemma; I had confided in him about my need to tether, but not about the decision I had made. During one of his unexpected visits, we took our familiar walk together. A bioelectrical field--quite effective at the time--kept the trail and the overlook clear of grubbers. During this walk, I confessed my intentions.

"I don't plan to tether," I said to him.

"You're just saying that because of your circumstances. I'm sure that if there were others of your kind among us you'd feel differently."

"Maybe I'll just get 'married,'" I said playfully. "I've practically lived my life like a human anyway. After reading up on it, I must say, Phinny, there's something quite intriguing about the marriage ritual."

"When do I get to read the book on Wergen mating customs?"

"Phinny, you *know* we wouldn't write about such things..." But when I saw his warm smile I realized he'd just been teasing.

"I know, I know," he said, holding his hands up as if surrendering. "Shim, I have something in mind." And it was at that moment--I don't know what gave it away, really -- that it finally dawned on me: Phinny had been planning to "propose" to me. I tried then--as I had on so many prior occasions--to imagine our lives together once we formally committed to each other. Human marriage was such a pale shadow of tethering. But if it was with Phinny, with my sweet Phinny, it would suffice.

"Why Phineas Crest, I can't imagine what it might be," I said, mimicking his teasing tone. Then I spoke seriously. "Thank you, Phinny. Thank you for always being there for me." I kissed him on the cheek.

He hugged me, and I felt a buzz surge through my body.

"Phinny!" a familiar voice shouted. Father and Elkah lumbered toward us. Phinny took a step backward, a look of horror etched across his face. In hindsight, I suppose I should have realized that he would react this way, never having seen this stage of incorporation before.

Father plodded on four legs, his and Elkah's. Elkah's left arm protruded from Father's midsection. Their two torsos were pressed so tightly together that Elkah's left side melded into Father's right side. Another sign that Father had established dominance was that Elkah's head had disappeared within his, save for her right ear, which still remained visible. In several months, all traces of her body would vanish.

"Don't be afraid, Phinny," Father said, skittering towards us, a magnificent tumbleweed of extremities. "It's still us."

Phinny stood silently, his mouth agape, his eyes bulging.

Father chattered away for a long time while Phinny gawked. Finally, I grabbed Phinny's arm and gently led him away.

"So *that's* incorporation!" he said. "But...Elkah?"

"She'll be incorporated completely within Father. Like my mother. Oh, some of

Elkah's skills and random memories will survive. And when encorporation is complete, Father--the new Father--will be impregnated with a brood."

"That's how your people...?"

"Phinny, I can't believe you didn't know. You've been seeing this with your own eyes for years." I placed my hand on his shoulder. He flinched.

"I've never heard of anything more horrific. Wergen females die when they mate?"

"Not necessarily. The dominant partner--male or female--encorporates the weaker one and then propagates. Father's genetic dominance was determined long ago when he and Elkah first tethered. In the same way, my genotype is such that I would surely be dominant if I ever tethered."

"I see," he said. Wrinkled lines formed across his forehead. He folded his arms across his chest and walked a few strides ahead of me. "Poor Elkah."

"It's part of nature, Phinny. Part of who we are. Trust me, Elkah looked forward to the day when she could pass on her best qualities to Father, when she could provide the raw materials necessary for the birthing of a healthy brood."

He said nothing for a long while. During this interminable silence I cursed Father's unbelievably poor timing. His appearance had upset Phinny just at the moment when he was about to "propose" to me, I was sure of it.

"Phinny, what were you going to ask me?" I finally said, breaking the silence.

He shook his head slowly. "Encorporation. I'm surprised Aunt Zooey didn't tell me about it, or that it hasn't appeared in the xenobiology literature."

"You know it's something we don't talk about. It's very...personal to us. So much so that it's an express condition of the Joint Venture Agreement that humans not write about it or discuss it."

He smiled now, that wide angelic smile that could light up all of Langalana. "Nature is marvelous, wondrous, isn't it?"

I exhaled loudly and returned his smile. Phinny was so gentle, so broad-minded. Of course he understood. Of course he accepted our ways.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I want you to wait for me at our special place."

"Oh?" I felt weightless. "Whatever it is, can't you tell me now?"

"No, no." He shook his head and smiled bashfully.

"Please, Phinny?"

"Don't make me ruin it!"

He squeezed my hands and kissed them. "My dear loyal, Shim. I have so much I've wanted to tell you. *Tomorrow.*"

"Tomorrow, then," I said.

I arrived at the overlook almost an hour early, dressed in the shimmering golden robes that Phinny had purchased for me in Inlandia. I brought blankets and sat down in the same spot where I had first begun Phinny's lessons in Wergenese. In my mind's eye, a ghostly

version of that rambunctious boy from long ago sat on the blanket next to me, concentrating intensely then jumping to his feet to toss a rock into the ocean.

From the position of the sun, I could see that Phinny had scheduled this moment to coincide perfectly with the sunset.

Where would we live? Phinny had mentioned the spaciousness of his Inlandian apartment. But we had not spoken about children. Although biological procreation could never happen, Phinny had often mentioned the numerous orphaned children left behind by pilgrims killed by the grubber locusts.

I heard the rustling blades of grass and turned around. Phinny stood there. His face glowed with joy to see me; his long yellow fibers ruffled in the ocean breeze. I rose to my feet and he came to me, held my outstretched hands in his. My entire body tingled; I felt incandescent.

“This is my gift to you, Shim,” he said, his voice hoarse with emotion.

How many times had I dreamt of this moment?

And how many times in the hundred years since have I relived that moment, a moment forever preserved in my synaptic amber.

He released my hands and swept his arm backwards as if clearing a messy table, as if avoiding a charging grubber.

I followed the direction of his hand, which pointed to the grasslands behind him, to the squat silhouette of a male figure. A figure unmistakably Wergen. He stepped toward us, emerging into the light of dusk.

“Remember when we were children, when Aunt Zooey took your cell samples?” Phinny said. “I transmitted your samples to the Northern Continent. They ran the normal genetic tests and found a perfect match. When the last human starship arrived, I arranged... Well, it doesn’t matter. Shim, this is Korte. Korte, Shim.”

Confusion overwhelmed me. Phinny’s words initially registered as gibberish. But as their meaning sank in, a wave of vertigo caused me to stagger sideways and backwards.

The Wergen knelt and bowed his head. “A profound honor, Lady Shimera.”

I turned and bolted into the grasslands as quickly as my legs would carry me, dashing through the chest-high blades into denser brush that rose higher and higher over my head.

“Shim! What’s wrong?” Phinny called out behind me.

Running blindly through the fields I heard Phinny’s voice become fainter and fainter. “Shim! Shim!”

I lost all sense of time racing through the grasslands, the blades’ gentle fur brushing against my skin. Had seconds passed? Hours? I dropped to my knees and heaved suffocating sobs. My breathing canal begged for oxygen but my body shuddered with each spastic sob. I rolled to the ground and hugged my knees. What had happened? I couldn’t understand what had happened. Rocking myself, I wept uncontrollably.

When I finally opened my eyes, the twilight had faded and the stars had blinked on. Occasionally I heard a buzzer whiz over my head and voices calling out my name. But I

only wanted the grubbers to appear and end my agony, to seize me in their mandibles and mercifully rip me to shreds.

A knock on the door of my room woke me up the next morning. Sitting up, I looked around and found myself in my hearth. A dream. Yes, it had all been a horrific dream.

Phinny entered. And all at once I knew that yesterday had really happened. His disheveled appearance and the creased semi-circles under his eyes suggested that he had been part of the search party.

“Shim. What happened? Why did you run away like that?” He sat beside me on the edge of my bed. “Don’t you know that the grubbers are everywhere now? It’s a miracle we found you in one piece.”

I glared at him.

“I thought you’d be happy. Korte is a perfect genetic match; he’ll make an exceptional tethering mate.”

My eyes brimmed with angry tears.

“What is it?”

“Oh, Phinny, you idiot. Don’t you realize that I’m in love with you?” I said, the words finally pouring out of me. “That I’ve been in love with you from the first day we met? That you mean everything to me, that I can’t imagine a life without you?” The tears stung my eyes. “I couldn’t care less about tethering.”

He seemed stunned. “Shim...I understand,” he said. “You’re Wergen. Of course you love me.”

“No, you don’t understand. You don’t understand at all. This goes beyond that. I don’t love you because you’re human. I love you...because you’re you!”

He shook his head. “How can you say that? You know that every Wergen feels that way about every human.” His face filled with unmistakable pity.

“I don’t feel this way about any other human!”

“That’s because you’ve spent more time with me than you have with anyone else. It’s only natural that you would have a stronger attraction toward me.”

“Your kindness, your humor, your generosity, those are the things that I love...not your beauty.”

“Shim...”

“How can I convince you?” I clutched his hands. “How can I make you understand that what I feel for you... It’s real. *I swear it.*”

“On a rational level, you have to know that this just isn’t true. You’re too intelligent not to realize that the biological impulse that drives your species to be attracted to mine... It’s affecting you.”

“Fine.” I let go of his hands and crossed my arms. “So you’ve known how I felt about you all these years? It must have provided you with such amusement.”

“Shim, I need you to understand,” he said. He gently ran his hand across my cheek.

I slapped his hand away. "Don't you dare touch me!"

"You're like a dear sister to me..." he said, his voice cracking.

"Leave!" I jumped out of bed and shoved him.

"Shim..." He hung his head and walked toward the door.

"Don't you care that the very sight of you tortures me? That your touch is agony to me? You're a monster!"

"You have to understand..." He turned and grabbed my shoulders.

"Get out! Get out!" I slapped him hard. He took a few steps back, his hand over his red cheek, and I slammed the door in his face. "Leave me alone! I don't ever want to see you again. Do you hear me? Let me live my life in peace." But even as I said the words, I longed for him to break down the door, to take me in his arms and beg my forgiveness, to kiss me and hold me tight, and tether with me in the fleeting, short-lived way of his people, were it possible. My back to the door, I slid to the floor and stifled the sobs with my hands. After several interminable seconds, I heard him retreat, his footsteps like daggers in my hearts.



"Don't look at me that way, Emissary," I say. The look of pity--even after all these years--still stings. "It wasn't easy, but I eventually got over your father."

The Emissary nods his head slowly.

"I redirected my energies towards...more productive endeavors. I taught classes in Wergnese to thousands of arriving humans. And years later, I turned my attention to politics. I traveled to Inlandia every month and sat on the Settlement Council as Argenta's elected representative. And eventually, with the development of spaceplanes and other forms of intercontinental travel, the World Council was established. Remarkably--even though I remained untethered--my people selected me to serve as Langalana's Wergen Ambassadrix.

"My feelings for your father have been dead and buried long, long ago. The way we'd left things, the truth is I never thought I'd see him again."



Against the advice of my military advisers, the remains of Father and my half-siblings, Lyrra, Olsinore, and Vergo were set ablaze on the summit of Piner's Peak. An entire platoon of armed soldiers surrounded the procession, on the lookout for grubbers. Blue-tinted snow fell around us in sheets, forming a covering that made the grasslands appear tired and aged. The pyre still smoked--the final words having been spoken--and, out of respect, the humans and Wergens congregated around me to sing a brooding threnody.

That's when I saw him, standing off in the distance, his face covered by a scarf, his yellow tresses blowing in the wind. Ten years later and I recognized him instantly. It seemed like only yesterday since we'd spoken for what I thought was the final time.

When Phinny realized that I'd spotted him, he approached, accompanied by an obese female human wearing a fur-lined hooded coat.

“Shimera,” he said, hugging me. “I’m so sorry about your family.”

“Phinny? It’s really you! I’d heard that you relocated to Earth.”

“Yes, I was near the system when I got word of Olbodoh’s passing.”

“The grubbers are everywhere, Phinny. *Everywhere*. The swarms now overwhelm our strongest bioelectric force fields. When I found Father and the children...it was too late...”

Phinny embraced me again and this time I fell into his arms. After a few seconds, he pulled away and gestured to the pot-bellied female. “Shimera, this is my wife, Lois.”

“Your wife?” I shook her hand in the way that humans greet one another, and my hand tingled. How I hated myself in that instant; how I hated that this woman’s touch brought me pleasure. “I’m honored,” I said.

After we exchanged pleasantries, Phinny whispered something into his wife’s ear and she nodded. A Wergen patrolman took Lois’s arm to help her with the slippery footing.

Phinny hooked his arm with mine, and I handed my cane to the patrolman. We walked several steps ahead of them, our footsteps crunching in the snow. “Wergen ambassadrix?” he said. “My, my, my. What happened to the farmgirl and teacher I knew?”

“Without distractions, she found she could expand her horizons.”

Phinny looked away from me uncomfortably.

This sounded bitterer than I intended so I changed the subject. “How’s Dr. Crest?”

“Aunt Zooey died about five years ago. She stayed in Inlandia, convinced to the very end that the solution to the grubber problem lay in gengineering. When the locust storm hit.”

“We lost so many good people that day. I didn’t realize she was one of them.”

“Shimera, isn’t it time for you to abandon this world? It isn’t safe here.”

“I can’t give up on Langalana, Phinny. I just can’t,” I said. “Remember how easy we all thought this was going to be? Simply power up my people’s fieldbots and welcome the arriving starships, right?” I shook my head and smiled. “Well, just because things have gotten difficult is no reason to quit. I have responsibilities here.”

The snow had intensified as we walked toward the settlement, but I could still make out the Wergen security forces in our perimeter, following with their weapons drawn.

“Shim, about the way we left things all those years ago...I’m sorry. It was wrong not to stay in touch.”

I stopped. “Does she love you, Phinny?” I whispered.

He nodded.

“Let me ask you something,” I said under my breath with a ferocity that surprised even me. “How do you know?”

“Excuse me?”

“How do you know? How do you know she isn’t just physically attracted to you, that she isn’t just driven by a biological compulsion to propagate your species, to combine her DNA with yours?”

“Shim...”

“How do you know it’s true love?”

Flakes of blue snow hung on his hair, and he looked like he carried a great weight on his shoulders. “I suppose I don’t. But I know this much: she doesn’t *have* to love me.”

His words deflated me. We took a few more steps in silence before I answered. “I’ve read medical journals about your species’ state of ‘love’: the increased dopamine levels, the heightened neural activity in the ventral tegmental area of your mammalian brains. It’s all chemical, you know. All driven by the evolutionary urge to breed. You look down on us, but I don’t think your kind is *capable* of true love.”

“I don’t look down on you,” he said. But he gave me the look again. The look of unmistakable pity.

Lois and the patrolman had caught up to us so we started to walk again. I coughed and cleared my throat. “As I was saying, Phinny, we’re not giving up on the grasslands. We’ll figure out some way to drive back the grubbers. I have absolute faith in that. Tell me, can you and Lois stay a few days?”

Phinny looked back at his wife who gave a small, near-imperceptible shake of her head. “No, I’m afraid not. We’re on our way to visit Lois’s parents in the Scornian system. Plus, Lois is pregnant and it’s not really safe for us to stay here too long.”

“Oh?” I stared at her midsection and tried to recollect my lessons in human procreation.

We stopped in front of the row of hearths of my neighborhood.

“Well, things have certainly changed here,” he observed.

“Yes, a lot more Wergens, eh? Can you and Lois come in for a few minutes? Perhaps have a bowl of *chapra*? Or maybe some preserved watermelon? For old time’s sake.”

He looked at Lois again and this time she rolled her eyes and tilted her head back slightly. I could have sworn that this caused Phinny to take a step backward, as if an invisible tether pulled at him. “No, no, we really have to be going.” He placed his hands in mind. “I promise, I’ll keep in touch this time.”

“That’s good,” I said. But as I gauged Lois’s expression I thought I saw another near-undetected headshake. And I realized that this would be the last time I would ever see Phinny again.



I slowly circle the table again.

“Langalana rejected all of our efforts to tame her, Emissary. We had to evacuate the settlements three sun-cycles ago and relocate here. The grubbers kept multiplying exponentially. We’ve concluded that they’re a form of biospheric antibody, keyed in to our alien DNA. The grasslands became uninhabitable. Then Inlandia fell. The Northern and Western Continents fared no better. Eventually we tried relocating to the frigid peaks of Langalana’s highest mountains--but the grubbers followed, scaling the vertical walls unimaginable heights to pursue us. We even tried constructing new settlements on remote

islands, but in time the grubbers honed in on us, swam across the vast oceans to find us. For a few years we thought we'd found a solution when the gengineers developed chemicals signatures that camouflaged our alien DNA. The grubbers actually stopped attacking and multiplying, then disappeared altogether. One day, however, they suddenly saw past the chemical mask, and the swarming recommenced. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims have since been killed.

"We have no choice. It's time for us to move on, Emissary. For all of our dreams of settling Langanana--so many starships traveling such vast distances--we're not welcome here. So I've given the order," I say. "The Wergen contingency will be moving out of this system, joining humanity on some other new world. Glitteria, perhaps? That's why you're here, isn't it? To coordinate our relocation to the next human colony?"

The Emissary stands up and clears his throat. "Thank you for telling me about my father's childhood. The truth is, we had a falling out a long time ago and we were never as close as I would have liked.... Before he died, my father heard I had business on Langanana. He asked to see me and requested that I seek you out, to give you a message."

"A message?"

He reaches into the inside pocket of his blue uniform jacket and pulls out an envelope. I look at the extended hand and, shivering slightly, take it from him.

The Emissary pauses. "As for the business I have here..."

"Eh?"

"Yes, we'd heard about the decision to move your people." He rubs his hand over his mouth. "I realize that with your displacement to this satellite you may be unaware of recent developments." He hesitates. "I'm here to inform you that the Growth for Humanity Bill finally passed."

"Excuse me?"

"Earth's Council has decided that our most profitable joint ventures with the Wergens are behind us. We've learned a lot from your people, Ambassador, for which we're deeply, deeply grateful. But we're now able to produce high-quality bots on par with the best that the Wergens can produce... And the Evollians have offered us new technologies, new opportunities."

"I...I understand." I feel numb. "Well...at least there will be ongoing cultural exchanges between our peoples. We still have much to learn from one another."

"I'm afraid I haven't made myself clear. Our disassociation must be total. You have to understand, Ambassador. My people have difficulty coping with the Wergens'...deep, unconditional adoration. I'm afraid that it's brought out the worst in a certain segment of our population. There have been some...abuses...on other colonies. No, I'm afraid that it's not in anyone's interests for our worlds to interact any further." He stands at the window and stares at Langanana. "So many precious resources. What a shame." He turns. "In any event, I really must be going."

I clench my fists. "What about the contracts in place between our people? The Joint

Venture Agreements that have been signed?”

The Emissary walks to the door and pauses at the threshold. “I’m sorry. If you wish to file a grievance, I’m sure some financial settlement can be reached.”

After a long pause, I answer. “I’m sorry too, Emissary.”

“Yes, well.... Good luck to you,” he replies awkwardly, and nods goodbye.

As he turns the corner and his footsteps fade down the hall, I hold up the yellowed envelope in my hand. I don’t need to open it; I know what it says: Phinny loved me. He came to realize over the years that he’d made a terrible mistake not asking me to marry him, that the love that we shared was pure, genuine. But once he’d realized his terrible mistake, circumstances had conspired against him. By then he had responsibilities to Lois and to his son.

Ah, Phinny, I’ve been over you for so long now. It doesn’t matter any more.

I fold the envelope, unopened.

Leaning against the window, I focus intensely on the cold beauty of Langalana. The planet hangs there, so close, so close that I can almost snatch it out of the sky and cradle it in my bosom. I reach for it, but find the glass thick and impenetrable, and the proximity only an illusion.

I sigh and slowly run my hand along my cheek, tracing the crevices between my scales.

End