The Tree Farm

Scriptor Paul Hathcoat

Chapter 4 ~ Back to the Family

After enjoying a delicious dinner, Sara and I relax in the sunken conversation pit. Quietly conversing about life, dreams, and our plans for tomorrow, I suggest, "After we say goodbye to Father, let's go swimming. It'll be too hot to do anything else. Have you been to the Queen's Bath yet?"

Sara Shrugs. "I've been in quarantine."

"Do you know how to swim?" I ask.

"Yes. Do you?" Sara asks.

"I'm half Atlantian, half Sybarinian."

"What does that mean? Do you sink or float?" Sara asks.

"I am land, sea, and sky. You are Atlantian half Alterian."

"If you can't swim, I can teach you," Sara generously offers. "I'm a certified instructor."

"I swim. So, what do you say? Do you want to go?"

"Youp," Sara says.

"Invite Motta," I say.

"Youp."

"Don't just say youp. I want to meet Motta before you girls move in. I can't have any more crazies running around here. One is enough."

"You think I'm moving in?" Sara scoffs.

"Both of you. It is written."

"Maybe so." Sara settles into a pile of black-spider silk sofa cushions. "You'll love Motta. She's an Ebonian hybrid. She looks like Eleni."

"I've always loved her, and you," I softly cradle her cheek.

Sara takes my hand and kisses my palm. "Did you invite Eleni to swimming?"

"Eleni will do whatever I say and be happy."

"Robert, that's mean. She loves you."

"I know." I sit up and take note. There is a distinct change in the room's harmonic resonance. I look at Father. "Hold that thought. Did you hear that?" I whisper to Sara. "His spirit has returned from the Void."

Sara nods. "I felt it. It gave me goosebumps," she whispers back. "Turn down your music."

"You don't like it?"

"It's beautiful."

"I knew you'd like the album," I say, closing my Skypod™ connection. "Atlantians are capable of interdimensional travel in our spirit bodies, you know."

"Youp," Sara smiles and hugs her pillows.

"So are Sybarinians," I add.

"Youp," Sara submerges in silk.

Asleep in his sleek, black Sybarinian sunray leather recliner, Father opens his eyes, blinks, smacks his lips, and stretches.

"Watch him. He's referencing and resetting the Roluxx Spacemariner™ strapped to his wrist."

"Youp," Sara yawns.

"It's a beautiful timepiece. Handsome, durable, and precise, it features a blast-resistant, solid gold-titanate case that's watertight to one-thousand atmospheres. Spacemariners are guaranteed to give picosecond accuracy for a lifetime. The icosahedral quasicrystal movement is dimensionally synchronized

with the quantum sidereal clock at the Sybaris Station Naval Observatory."

"Robert. Robert, please. You sound like an obnoxious television advertisement," Sara cuts me off.

"And it's self-winding," I add.

"Okay, it sounds nice, I suppose," Sara surrenders.

"I want one. When Father dies, I'll inherit his timepiece, the Overlook, and all its contents. In addition, I'll inherit his spacecraft, watercraft, T-pods, farms, factories, interplanetary holdings, art, antiques, and treasure. I stand to gain a great deal upon his demise."

"That's mean. Don't you love your Father?" asks Sara.

"I pray that day never comes, but Father departs for Caesuria in a few short hours. The fastest route from Sybaris to Caesuria is through the Black Stygian Nebula Complex, a convoluted course littered with time voids, rock, ice, dust, and Nyt demons. If and when he gets through alive, he'll attack the bloodthirsty Zumans infesting Caesuria."

"Magnus mentioned Caesuria," Sara says.

"When?" I ask.

"When Magnus and Eleni visited Motta and me last week," Sara explains. "Eleni is worried."

"She should be. Caesuria is primarily a swamp and primordial coal jungle. Zumans are well adapted to these primitive conditions. They are armed with modern weapons and

carry viral contagions. A Zuman attack is expected and outnumbered. He risks being shot, eaten by bugs or Zumans, or contracting some horrific flesh-rot disease.

"The odds are not in his favor, but Father is unconcerned. He is an Apex Atlantian warrior commanding three Sig squadrons attached to a Hydra class heavy gunship named the Bonefish. He named her that for a reason," I say.

"Twenty-three-hundred, time to roll." Father leaps to his feet. "Robert, where's Eleni and Magnus?"

"The library."

"What are they doing?" Father asks.

"I don't know. Want me to get them?"

"Yes, tell Magnus it's time to roll, but give them a few more minutes. I need to speak to you and Sara alone."

"Talk to me and Sara?"

"Don't worry, it's nothing bad," Father reassures.

"Yes, Sir," I hold up.

"What were you and Sara doing?" Father asks.

"We were talking about life, dreams, and stuff we'll do tomorrow. Thinking swim."

"Where's Sara run off to?" Father surveys the dimly lit conversation pit in search of the scrawny little orphan girl. "I want to talk to her."

"Ky-yi!" shouts Sara. "I'm here." Planted deep in a pile of decadent, black spider silk pillows, Sara springs to the surface and sunflower salutes, palm raised to the light. "We didn't want to wake you. I'm sorry if we did."

"You didn't wake me, sweetheart. I set my alarm." Father checks his time strap and sits by Sara.

"What do you want to talk about?" Sara confidently enquires.

"Well, young lady, I'd like to talk about your future, starting with where you'll live."

"I live at the Visiting Students Quarters," Sara says. "Multipass," She flashes her ID.

"You can't stay at the VOQ indefinitely."

"Why was I put there?"

"You have some very high connections," explains Father.

"Who?"

"Me. I will see you and all the Ebo-Six orphans find a good home."

"I don't mind living in your high-security military garrison under 24-7 armed guard. It makes a girl feel safe."

"That is so sweet of you to say," Father smiles. "You know everyone has taken a great liking to you."

"I like everyone, too," Sara hugs her pillow.

"That's the spirit," Father exclaims. "Ah-umm," he clears his throat, "I'll get to the point then. You're invited to live here at the Overlook with my family."

"You want me?" Sara says.

"I would be honored." Father covers his heart.

"Would the arrangement be temporary?" asks Sara.

"Permanent. My home is yours. Take a private cabin on the Terrace deck. It has gardens and a breathtaking view of the eastern basin and beyond. Decorate your cabin, paint the walls, hang art, and print new textiles and furniture."

"I like pink," Sara says.

"No problem. You're free to run around the Overlook. Main galley, larder, library, gym, gardens, and pool," Father points at almost everything in sight. He hastens to add, "My cabin is off-limits. I don't want you kids poking around in my stuff," he grumbles and ponders a moment. "Add my private study to the list, secret stuff, you know, captain stuff. The garage and workshop are semi-off-limits without adult supervision. Stay out of the energy exchange locker while we're on the dangerous subject. Hyper-voltage nodes can vaporize little girls like you. My home is your home with a lifetime allowance."

"What's the catch?" Sara asks.

"All I ask is that you help with chores, stay out of trouble, attend the Naval Academy, study hard, keep up your grades, and if the Academy is not to your liking, I want you to

learn a craft or trade. I won't have you sitting around all day buried in a pile of pillows. I'm not running a resort here."

"I would love to go to school!" Sara's excitement spills over.

"Good, I know you're brilliant. I'd hate to see that brilliance wasted in a delta sub-minus section slot without a good education."

"Can I be an astrobiologist?"

"You can be anything you like if you qualify. The Academy offers technical and master degrees in quantum, terrestrial, and extraterrestrial sciences."

"I want to go to school!" Sara says.

"Excellent, it's settled then. Along with school, I want you to exercise. Take a swim class this fall. I want you to eat more, too. You're under-nourished." Father notes the dark rings under her eyes and her frail constitution. He is deeply concerned. So am I.

"You say I'm skinny?" Sara jumps to her feet. "Do you have any idea what it's like to starve? It does this to a girl." She hikes her hands on her thin waist.

"Yes," Father chuckles, "as a matter of fact, I know what it's like to starve. I say you eat more. You're emaciated, you little troublemaker. So there you have it. Kick off your shoes and make yourself at home. Enjoy the summer. The Academy starts this fall." Father graciously offers his home's warmth, comfort,

and educational guidance. "Would you like to select a cabin now?"

"I need to think about it," sleepy-eyed Sara replants herself in pillows and yawns.

"Do I make you uncomfortable?" Father questions. "I don't mean to. Your safety and comfort are my first concerns."

"No, you remind me of my father," Sara smiles through a yawn. "You talk like him."

"I'll take that as a compliment. Loz was a great man, one of the finest, bravest humans I've ever had the honor to call my friend and brother."

"You knew my father?" Sara asks.

"Yes."

"He never mentioned you," Sara says.

"I met Pam at the Naval Academy on Port Dawn. The fall of thirty-one. She was beautiful."

"You knew my mother?" Sara interrupts.

"Yes, Pam and I go way back. I remember the spring of thirty-three. She was sitting in the shade by Zothan's pond. The water lilies were in bloom. We were to be married there, you know." Father fondly reminisces.

"No, I don't know," Sara smolders.

"We were lovers before she met Loz. There were problems with our relationship. Pam needed stability. Loz won her heart."

"Odd, my mother and I talked about everything. She never told me about you."

"Pam and Loz knew everything about me," Father says.

"My parents were xeniologists." Sara's temper flares to life. "They never mentioned you, Captain Wog," Sara fumes, cools to a slow simmer, and settles back onto her sofa.

"Sara, don't be mad. They couldn't," Father explains.

"Why not? What's the big deal?"

"It's classified."

"Then don't tell me," Sara pouts.

"Sara, your parents were heroes in the service of humanity. You're a part of that, so I'm upgrading your security clearance and declassifying a few files for your ears only."

"If they were heroes, why keep it secret? Did you know, Robert?" asks Sara.

"This is all new to me. I didn't know," I say.

"Now you know, it was classified. Long story short, it all began in the summer of thirty-four and ended with Loz, and I shipwrecked on Saturacon."

"What were you doing there?" Sara asks.

"Reconnaissance. I flew my kestrel class ketch with your father acting as science officer straight through the Black Stygian to get to Saturacon undetected." Cringing, Father bites his knuckle as he relives a moment of terror. "I had to. The

information was vital to quadrant defense. The shortcut shaved a year off a round trip through hostile Saturaconian space. We made it through the Black Stygian in one piece. Still, the ship suffered irreparable deflector damage, eventually bringing us down to the frozen southern polar region of Saturacon." Father takes a long moment to reflect on the hardship.

"How exciting," Sara exclaims.

"That's not even the exciting part," Father emphasizes the even. "Two Silver Lumarians found us, healed our broken bodies. They rebuilt my ketch faster and sexier with a redesigned airframe, twin-core deflectors, and a sweet rear-mounted rotor. I named my ketch The Black Widow. If I had more time, I'd show her to you." Father takes a deep breath and carefully calibrates his Roluxx. "That's all, end of story."

"Wait, what happened next? How'd you get back?" Sara wants more.

"Sorry, that part's still classified, but you should know this: I loved your mother and father and held them in my highest regard. When they volunteered for the assignment on Ebo-Six, I promised if anything ever happened to Sara, she would be loved and cared for. I intend to keep that promise." Father looks up to heaven. "So that's why you're here," Father clarifies.

"Thank you, Captain," Sara yawns. "It was a comforting story."

"It's late; you look exhausted. Why don't you stay the night?" Father tries to convince her. "Sleep here in the pit. You look pretty comfy. Blankets are in the console. Eleni and

Robert can escort you back to the VSQ after you eat a hearty breakfast tomorrow morning and pick up your belongings. Everything will be clear to you by then."

"I can't sleep here," says Sara.

"Does Robert make you uncomfortable? He does that to some people. Even me sometimes. I'll talk with him again."

"I trust Robert with my life. I have another reason for waiting," Sara says.

"You've been through a lot. I know the VSQ is safe and secure, but let me assure you, the Overlook is one of the safest spots on Sybaris," Father insists.

"I'm not worried. Robert pledged his life to defend me."

"He can do that," Father states with confidence and pride, "He's a match for any man."

"Thank you for dinner. It helped me forget for a little while," Sara confides.

"I understand. I've lost loved ones, too. The Zumans," Father hangs his head in sorrow and chokes on the word, "murdered them," Father lingers on the thought.

Sara lays a loving hand upon Father's wrist, "Robert told me what happened. I'm so sorry." Touched by his terrible grief and reliving her own, tears run down her cheeks.

Father lifts her chin, "I thank Goddess you were spared," he smears away the tears, setting free a smile. "And I thank Goddess, Captain Tommy, Tom-Tom, Tom-Cat Walker got to you in

time. I know he wishes he could have got there sooner." Father checks his timepiece. "I'm bugging out in a few hours. The creatures that attacked Ebo-Six came from Caesuria. I know it's a small consolation, but what happened on Ebo-6 will never happen again anywhere in the galaxy, so help me, Goddess," Father swears a holy oath.

"Please be careful, Captain," Sara cautions. "There were hundreds of them."

"There are millions, maybe billions, infesting Caesuria, but don't worry, little one, I've got some big, strong friends coming with me."

"Ajax and Maktu?" Sara puzzles. "They're big and strong."

"They are, but I have even bigger and stronger friends coming with me."

"You do?" asks Sara.

"I do. My special friends make Ajax and Maktu look like little dinknoids." The captain peeks through pinched fingers and smiles. "Dink," he squeaks.

Sara laughs at Father's silliness. "Do they like cookies?"

"They don't eat. They're interdimensional sprites inhabiting robotic shells," the captain explains.

"Sigs?"

"You guessed it," Father says.

"Robert said they're angels sent by Goddess."

"They're Hyperborean's," clarifies Father.

"Robert said he's their king," Sara adds.

"He told you that? Do you say that, Robert?"

"I did. I tell Sara everything," I said.

"The flower lady showed him the future. Do you know the Flower Lady?" Sara says.

The captain groans and shakes his head. "Titan King is one possible future on one possible timeline. It's not the future I want for him or you." he references his timepiece. "We'd better get rolling and get you back at the VSQ. Please think about my invitation."

"Captain, I want to say yes. May I talk to my friend, Motta, first? She's like a sister to me," Sara hesitates.

"Of course, talk to Motta. Can you tell me more about her?"

"She looks exactly like Elini," Sara says.

"She is? I'd like to see her genetic records."

"Do you want to see mine?" asks Sara.

"No, I know who your father is. I want to make sure of Motta's lineage. I promise we can make room for her, but whatever you decide, always know I care." Father checks his time strap. "Robert, find Magnus and Elini. It's time to roll."

"Yes, Sir." I spring into action.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Sara asks but blissfully sinks deeper into her comfy pile of pillows.

"Nah, relax. Our Father should speak privately to you about Motta," I reassure and withdraw. I smile. I'm happy. I've found my lost sisters. They are here! I welcome them with all my heart.