

A TAPESTRY CAPRICORN STORY

# REPTILLA

SUDDENLY IT ALL BECOMES  
DEADLY SERIOUS



ELIZABETH AUDREY  
MILLS

# **Reptilla**

A Tapestry Capricorn adventure

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Published by Elizabeth Audrey Mills

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Cover design by BetiBup33 design studio [betibup33@gmail.com](mailto:betibup33@gmail.com)  
<http://thebookcoverdesigner.com/designers/betibup33/>

Email: [elizabeth@itsliz.net](mailto:elizabeth@itsliz.net)  
Website: [www.itsliz.net](http://www.itsliz.net)

**Reptilla**  
**A Tapestry Capricorn adventure**

by

**Elizabeth Audrey Mills**

## - One -

### Lightning Response

The sun was high on a late summer's day, and Tapestry Capricorn was patrolling her patch. The local cats watched her with a certain amount of idle curiosity as she passed, but did not bother her. She looked like one of them, a common short-haired tabby, with white tummy and paws, but they sensed that she was different. They felt a mild unease, without understanding the cause, so they did what cats do when things get complicated - they ignored it. They scratched an ear, gave a few bits of fur a token lick, and waited for an Earth mouse to pass within easy striking distance.

But there was one (there is always one) ... on this occasion it was an overweight black-and-white tom that lived at the back of the Chinese Restaurant ... who, urged on, no doubt, by his over-active hormones, decided to meander over (casually, like) to try his luck.

She saw him lumber to his feet and stretch, then watched him detach himself from the shadows under the dustbins and begin to saunter towards her. When he was close enough, she speared him with a glare from her piercing green-yellow eyes, and he suddenly decided that he wasn't really interested after all, and sauntered off, nonchalantly.

Grinning as only cats can, she continued her meandering path through the town centre, checking out any visitors she met as she passed, spotting them easily. She couldn't understand why Earth people didn't notice the shimmering aura around people from other dimensions, caused by slight differences in the resonance of their atoms. Perhaps they saw only what they expected to see.

In the churchyard she came upon a party of starlings, just in on a day trip from Sturnidae, their glossy black feathers glistening in rainbow colours as they noisily explored the gravestones, chattering and squabbling. She sat and watched them with amusement for a little while. Then, when they flew up to investigate the belfry, like a grey ghost escaping from a tomb, she moved on to the market place.

It was Wednesday, and she found it busy, in the usual town-centre, market day sort of way, but there was nothing to trouble her, nothing to occupy her mind. In fact, life had been rather boring for several weeks, and she found herself again hoping for a little excitement. However, there is a rule of the universe that says: *Be careful what you wish for, because you may just get it.*

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Later, as she left the shops behind and made her way out into Latchfield, on the residential side of town, a laconic voice entered her head through the radio receiver implanted behind her left ear. It was a broadcast from her Controller, Lightning Response (his choice of name, the pretentious idiot). "We're getting some strange anomalies on the broad-spectrum scanners," he announced in a flat tone that carried a hint of an unidentifiable accent. "Someone's bringing a lot of stuff over. Can't tell any more than that at the moment. Nothing local, but keep your eyes open."

Tapestry sent back her personal code as acknowledgement that she had heard the message, then jumped up on a low, red-brick, garden wall to think about the implications. It was rare for large numbers of objects to be brought through from one of the other dimensions. Most traffic was the steady flow of travellers ... sightseers, workers, trainees, agents, messengers ... representing the diversity of life in the Metaverse. A sudden surge of activity could be something innocuous, like a bus-load of tourists, but Lightning would not have troubled to announce it if it seemed innocent. She felt a stir of anticipation at the thought that something new could be starting.

She looked around. From where she was sitting, she could see the roof of the shopping mall and the tall car-parks and office-blocks of Hemingway town centre on her left, and the clustered buildings and sprawling playing fields of the Latchfield Schools to the right. On the horizon beyond the town, the hills sat in a ring, like friendly trolls around a camp fire. It was quieter here, in this part of town, away from the shopping centre; the kids were in school, and most adults were

busy at work, out shopping or at home. Of the few people that passed as she sat there, some would stop and speak a word or two to her, extend a hand to stroke her head, then pass on ... she didn't mind, she liked to socialise, and rubbed their hands with her cheeks, purring ... but many walked by without even seeing her, so engrossed were they in their thoughts or their mobile phones.

The estate was her favourite place, but it was changing by the day. Just over the rooftops nearby, dust and smoke rose from where the demolition crews were already flattening the old council houses in Travis Road, where the rats had tried to set up their invasion earlier in the year. She smiled to herself when she remembered how her team had thwarted them ... Adrian and Noah, Tommy and Cabbage. Tommy had finally relented to the council's pressure to move out of his house and into the block of flats that was visible above the rooftops beyond. He had stayed as long as he could, but said that the garden was proving too much for him, and at eighty-two he needed a smaller home. Tapestry suspected that the real reason was that he was lonely after all his neighbours had moved. His had been the last house remaining occupied, and with his departure, Hemingway council had quickly sent in the bulldozers.

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"Ok, everybody, listen up," came Lightning Response's voice in her head again. "Cleo has called an urgent meeting - all British agents are to report at once."

This would be a virtual meeting, of course, telepathic. With several hundred cat agents in the British Isles alone, and thousands beyond, dotted all around the world, it would be impossible for all, or even any great number, of them to assemble in one place in reality.

All I.T.M.A. agents are trained in telepathy, but it was still one of Tapestry's weaknesses. Oh, she could manage basic communication with anyone who was sensitive ... like other Felidae cats, or Tommy (who was unusually receptive for an Earthling) ... but she could not break through the babble of most minds. Earth humans, in particular, sprayed their thoughts around like air-freshener, forming a screen round them, blocking off anything from outside their heads. Still, with her training, joining a meeting with other Felidaeans would not be a problem, even for her.

She needed a safe place where she could leave her body while her mind was at the meeting, and knew of a spot not far away that she had used before, a little patch of flattened grass and weeds, conveniently hidden from view under some bushes at the corner of a neglected garden. She ran along the top of the wall, dropped into the garden, and pushed through an overgrown flower bed to the hollow.

There she paused to pad it down with her paws, whilst checking all around to make sure she was not being watched. Satisfied that all was clear, she laid down, curled up and closed her eyes, relaxing herself into the trance-like state that allowed her mind to travel freely. To any casual observer, it would appear that she was asleep, when in fact she was very busy indeed.

Almost at once, she was part of a crowd. She felt other cats joining, their voices forming into a telepathic babble. Her mind joined with the others in rationalising the situation, creating an image of a large room, with cats of every variety arriving from all parts of the country and taking their places.

The cat called Cleo sat on a raised stage at one end of the room, looking around at the arriving agents dispassionately. Her full name was Cleopatra of the Snow, but in her role as head of the Felidae branch of I.T.M.A. (the Inter-dimensional Travel Monitoring Agency) she was known variously, if not affectionately, as Queen Cleo, The Queen, or usually just Cleo. Despite her age, or perhaps because of it (nobody knew how old she actually was, and no-one dared ask) she had an impressive, commanding presence. A large, white cat of Persian appearance, her fur beautifully fluffed up, she sat passively watching the room as it filled. Beside her, occasionally chatting with her, was the younger, Siamese shape of Lightning Response, the Controller. He was the technical expert, and it was part of his job to keep the team informed and organised. It was a job he took very seriously.

Soon the last cat had arrived, the imaginary doors were metaphorically closed, and Lightning

Response moved to the front of the stage, where a lectern with a completely unnecessary virtual microphone awaited him - Tapestry could not remember if it had been there when she arrived. He jumped up onto a stool behind the lectern.

"This matter is escalating by the minute," he began without preamble, his telepathized voice reaching the agents' heads with a slight echo, as though amplified, and complete with an occasional whistle of feedback. "Our monitoring stations started picking up transmissions yesterday, aimed towards the stratosphere. The signals have identical signatures, which suggests a common origin, but the world from which they are coming is Serpentes, a desert world; the last time anyone went there, it had no life except some primitive snakes. In the course of the last twenty-four hours, fifteen satellites have appeared in close Earth orbit, all located over major centres of habitation around the globe, and there is intense inter-dimensional activity into and between them. Over a thousand objects of some kind of have arrived since we first detected the emissions."

He turned to Cleo, who stood and walked slowly to the front of the platform, where she stopped and studied the crowded room. "I have checked with all our friendly worlds, and no-one claims any knowledge of this surge," she said, gravely. "It means that an unknown entity is flooding the space around Earth with something, and we think it may be the first step in an invasion."

Someone in the audience turned to whisper something to a neighbour, and Cleo stopped speaking to stab him with a glare ... the unfortunate cat practically shrivelled under the heat of it. "We have to act quickly," she continued with a sigh, when she had decided that he had wriggled enough. "There is no way of knowing how far advanced their plans are. With the agreement of our allies, we plan to send an agent to Serpentes to find out what is going on. While we deal with that aspect, you must all return to your patches and be extra observant; report anything odd that you may notice. Lightning Response will inform you of any developments as they occur. That is all for now."

With a mumble of voices, the audience began to dissipate. Tapestry turned away from the stage and began to follow the other cats who were leaving. She replayed in her mind everything she could remember that had happened on her patch, trying to think of anything that could be significant, finding nothing.

"Agent Capricorn," Lightning Response's voice came disturbingly close, as though speaking into her ear. "Report in person to headquarters, as soon as possible, please."

Tapestry turned back to face the stage, glaring at the Controller. But she knew that he was only relaying Cleo's words; she had been summoned, and that could mean only one thing.

"Location 'Wow' in one hour," he added.

'Wow' was a wood-yard on the industrial estate; they would arrange for a portable teleport unit to be waiting for her there to take her to Cleo's secret headquarters, somewhere in England. She acknowledged him with a nod, observing the strange looks she was receiving from some of the other agents as they passed; they had noticed that she was not leaving, and, though they could not hear the private message from Lightning, realised that she had been chosen for the dangerous mission.

Without warning, the hall blinked out of existence, and she opened her eyes again to the material world, back in the garden in Latchfield Estate. A moment's disorientation followed, as she took in the tall shrubs and weeds around her, and adjusted to the switch from illusion to reality again, as though waking from a dream.

But she had a task to perform, and The Queen would not be happy to be kept waiting. With a sigh, she stood and stretched and yawned. *'Time for action, agent Capricorn,'* she said to herself. She picked her way through the flower bed and across the lawn, then jumped onto the wall and headed towards the school.

## - Two -

### Cleo

The infant school was a cluster of old buildings, a short way from the modern secondary school that Adrian and Noah attended. It was not on a direct path to the wood-yard, but the open space gave her a chance to make sure that she was not being followed, and all her senses were on full alert. The whereabouts of the teleport station must never be compromised - Earth had not yet discovered the technology for inter-dimensional travel, and if it fell into the wrong hands it could cause havoc.

As she skirted the deserted playground she could hear the sounds of the children in their classes a short distance away – singing, a piano, and the chanting of multiplication tables. She paused at the corner of the Victorian building and looked back across the playground. There was no visible movement, and no-one was in sight, but a skilled tail would know how to remain hidden. So, when she pushed through the hole in the fence that led onto the sports field of the secondary school, she took one extra precaution: she scooted along a tunnel she had made through the thick undergrowth beside the fence, and, when she emerged from the other end, quickly climbed a nearby tree. From her perch on a low branch, she could see the field, the fence, the infant school, and both ends of her tunnel. She waited.

After five minutes, confident that nobody was with her, she jumped down, squeezed through the iron railings of the school boundary onto the main road, and began to make her way through streets and gardens towards her destination. At about halfway, she used her favourite trick of circling back through gardens and over fences and walls, sniffing her trail, making sure there were no other fresh smells. She also crossed her path, thus creating a confusion of four trails to throw off anyone who might try following her scent.

When she reached the industrial estate, it throbbed with noises and smells so strong that they hurt the senses and smothered the more delicate sounds and aromas. She wrinkled her nose and tried not to breathe any more than was necessary. The wood-pile was located in the yard behind a factory unit that made cheap furniture; it was just a stack of off-cuts, piled against the corner of a fence, a place to store potentially useful bits of wood. After a quick, final look around, she entered a tight maze of tunnels through the lumber, following a scent trail left for her that led to the I.T.M.A. teleport station placed there specifically for this mission.

The cubicle, when she reached it, was compact, cat-sized, not much bigger than a shoe box. She entered, closed the door and activated the pre-set control console mounted inside. Within seconds, she arrived, in the teleport cubicle, on a rug in the middle of Cleo's cosy living room. She pushed open the door and emerged. Cushions were scattered around on the floor, two kittens were engaged in a scrap around a cardboard box, Cleo was curled up on a soft settee, and Lightning Response peered down from the top of a wardrobe.

"I take it I have volunteered," Tapestry said, caustically, to the room as she stepped out onto the rug. The kittens ran over to greet her, and she nuzzled each of them. Satisfied, they returned to their game.

"You are the best agent for the job," Cleo replied, levelly, not taking the bait.

Tapestry walked slowly across the room, stopping and sitting on the rug when she reached her boss. "You meean I'm expendable," she growled. She was not being disrespectful to her superior, the top agent in the country; cats are always direct and honest.

The older cat sighed. "On the contrary, Tapestry, I believe you are the only field agent under my jurisdiction who has any hope of returning alive. You can turn it down if you like, no-one will criticize you."

"Turn it down?" Tapestry responded with a twist of her head that was the equivalent of a grin in Cat. "I have never said 'no' to a mission since I joined, never turned down a single assignment; you

know that. I'm glad you picked mee. So, how do I get there?"

Cleo purred and stretched her claws, plucking at the cushion, and looked up to Lightning Response. The lean Siamese stirred from his place in the gods and made his way down to floor level via the back of the sofa. "Follow me," he said to Tapestry, leading the way out of the room through a door that had not been there a few seconds earlier.

"Good luck," the older cat called.

"Meeow," Tapestry replied, as she turned to follow the Siamese, kinking the top of her tail in a gesture that said 'Yeah, thanks,' with a hint of irony.

She followed Lightning Response through the door, and found herself in a small, brightly-lit chamber, with walls and floor made of some kind of black glass. In one corner stood a cylindrical glass tube, tall and wide enough to hold a human. This was the portal. In the centre of the room was a lectern control console, of the kind she had seen before when porting from Felidae to Earth.

"I'm sending you to the Galaxy Trader space station, which is close to Serpentes," Lightning told her as he headed for the console. "From there, they will teleport you to the planet's surface."

He paused to morph - becoming a handsome man of about twenty, with faintly oriental features - then he flicked the switch that powered up the equipment. A fluorescent light flickered on in the portal. "I advise you to travel in human form," he added, nodding his head towards the cabinet. "There are clothes and some supplies in there."

Morphing as she walked, Tapestry crossed the room towards the cabinet, observing a hatch slide open in its side to admit her. In human persona, she was a girl of about seventeen, tall and slim, with grey-and-black striped hair, cut short. Her face and body were covered with a dusting of fur that repeated the tabby pattern of her cat form. Her eyes were large, with yellow-green pupils, her nose small and catlike, and she retained her pointed ears and long tail.

Inside the cabinet, on the floor, she found a white, one-piece coverall, which she began to put on. Under it was a back-pack, and a belt with a small pistol in a holster.

"What about getting back?" she enquired, looking out at him through the clear glass of the cabinet, feeling that she was being forced to ask something he should have already told her. "How will I let you know when I'm done? Will I be carrying a homing beacon?"

"Ah," he said, with at least the decency to appear uncomfortable. "The only way of sending radio messages between dimensions is on a portal carrier wave, and we don't have access to the alien transmitter. You will have to do it yourself from that end."

She zipped up the overall and picked up the belt, glaring at him through the glass as she strapped it on.

"There is some food and drink in the pack," he continued. He tried to smile reassuringly, though he was distracted as he made adjustments at the control console, checking the settings against a chart. "That's about the best we can do, I'm afraid."

Tapestry swung the rucksack onto her back, and held him with her angry stare for a moment before replying. "You are sending mee into a situation of extreme personal danger, without any guarantee of returning?"

He shrugged his shoulders, as though to say 'What more can I do?' Tapestry got the message.

"But you will have an assistant," he added, brightly.

"Who?"

"We don't know yet," answered the Siamese, as he activated the that control that sent her on her way. "He is being sent from Canis."

"Wha...?" was all she had time to say before dematerialising. Then she had no mouth to form words, no air to make sounds; she had become, in fact, a wave particle, a duality, riding the curve of space between two points of matter.



## - Three -

### Serpentes

The objects that make up the solid part of the universe are much closer together than we think. There appears to be a lot of space between the worlds, but in reality all the stars we can see, and the ones we can't see, and all the planets that circle them, are jam-packed together, like balls in a ball-pool. But so they don't all rub up against each other - something we are all agreed would not be a good thing - each one lives in its own dimension. There are millions of dimensions, and each world has a different frequency from all its nearest neighbours, like radio wavelengths. They whiz about in all directions like Italian taxi drivers, sometimes passing right through each other without even noticing ... they do, they really do.

There is also another, rather clever, extra dimension - the famous 'space-time continuum' - that provides a kind of thick gel between the worlds, working like a lens that makes the universe look bigger, and slowing down any objects trying to move about.

One way to travel these apparently long distances in space is to build an enormously powerful rocket, to escape from your home world, and then float around in the gel barrier until you bump into another planet on the same wavelength. This is difficult, dangerous, slow, and terribly expensive, and by the time you get there, you will be very, very, old. Earth people are still doing that - they are stuck in the dark ages, and are still trying to smash their way through life's problems, instead of sitting down together and thinking up better ways of doing things.

The other way, the sensible way, is to retune yourself to the wavelength of the place you want to go to, and just, well, go there. Fortunately, cats, and some people in the other dimensions, have discovered this, and are happily flitting from world to world using Trans-dimensional Gateways (TGs, or Portals).

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For a moment, Tapestry experienced a sensation rather like being tossed in a blanket, a kind of weightlessness accompanied by a twisting motion; then she was on her feet again, gravity asserting itself in the right direction, in a similar cabinet in a similar room.

She was still reacting to Response's last statement. "A dog?" she groaned, her mind lagging behind events, like a shadow. "Oh come on! I would rather do the job on my own than have to carry a dog." But she was already on the Galaxy Trader, the portal door had opened, and she was addressing a puzzled-looking ape creature.

"Welcome, Agent Capricorn," the primate said, uncertainly. "My name is Claude."

Tapestry held up a hand in greeting and apology as she stepped off the platen of the portal. "Sorreey, Claude," she said sheepishly. "That wasn't meant for you, it was the end of a conversation I was having with my controller." She smiled and changed the subject. "You're heere to forward mee to Serpentes, I gather."

He nodded. "Yes, we are in the same planetary system, though not in orbit around Serpentes. It is quite a long teleport, but well within safety margins." He indicated another booth. "It is all set up for you, and ready to go."

Tapestry crossed the floor of the small cabin and stepped into the smaller box. Claude's voice became tinny as the hatch slid shut behind her, and their conversation continued over the speaker system. "I have tuned this rig to the same co-ordinates as the source of the alien portal transmission, offset a bit, so that you will materialise a short distance from where their device is located. They will probably not even detect your beam, as it will be so close to their own."

She waited, pensively, standing with her arms close to her sides in the approved manner. "Oh, thank you, Claude," she remembered to say, her voice trembling because her nerves were suddenly jangling so hard it was like an electric shock flowing through her body.

He nodded acknowledgement as he pressed a button on the control panel attached to the outside of the cabinet. The room shimmered out of sight, and Tapestry experienced a moment of nausea as her consciousness was thrust through darkness, with no sense of up or down.

The teleport system had been the first non-linear technology to be discovered. It was the 'short-range' device, suitable for intra- and inter- planetary travel rather than inter-galactic. It had the advantage of requiring only a sending station, which generated a fixed-length beam along which objects could be projected, like a blowpipe; when the object reached its target, the proximity of matter on the same wavelength caused it to materialise again spontaneously. It was how the pioneers first made contact with other worlds, and discovered that there was intelligent life throughout the universe. Its limitation was that it could only operate within a single, five-dimensional environment.

The journey, though shorter, was much more uncomfortable. Tapestry was moving, yet seemed to be in stasis; aware, but detached; alive, but, for those moments, nothing but a flow of energy. Then, with a sickening jolt, she arrived ... body and mind re-united ... at her destination.

Out of total blackness, she was thrust into searing sunlight. A blast of heat, like an explosive combustion, struck her like a blow. Overhead, a huge orange sun filled a quarter of the cloudless, red sky, while beneath her feet stretched a desert, the sand littered with boulders and industrial debris.

However, there was no time to take in more than an impression of her surroundings, because Claude's long-range co-ordinates were less than perfect, and she popped back into reality a metre above the ground. Unprepared, she fell, landing badly on some engineering junk. Thrown off-balance by the pack on her back, she stumbled and fell to the ground, the breath knocked from her.

However, her situation was to quickly get worse. As she struggled to rise to her feet, she heard a warning noise behind her, a rattle, like the sound of pills being shaken in a little plastic pot. She froze, and turned her head slowly to face the source. Only two metres away to her left, its head raised above the coils of its body, its tiny eyes scrutinising her, its forked tongue darting out and in, tasting the air, was a large rattlesnake. '*Great,*' she thought. '*What a wonderful start to the mission; I die of snake poison as soon as my feet hit the ground.*'

"Ssstay where you are," the rattler hissed, giving its tail another shake. "Thiss iss private property; you are under arressst!" It was a magnificent specimen, golden-brown scales glinting in the sun, the chocolate-coloured diamond patterns prominent along its back, and its golden-coloured, ridged tail-extension raised and quivering.

Tapestry cast her eyes around her and weighed up her options. Flat sand surrounded her, and the nearest rocks were at least ten metres in any direction; she could not hope to run from the snake, which could strike in a fraction of a second. The only object near to her was the tangle of abandoned machinery on which she had landed, and that offered no refuge.

Her legs were still bent at the knee in a crouching stance, her arms still stretched out and down, her hands on the sand, where she had balanced herself when she fell. She began to slide her right hand slowly up her leg, towards the holstered pistol on her belt, hoping that it would be concealed from the snake by her body.

No such luck. "Ssstop!" the creature spat, seeing the movement. She froze again, her hand halfway there.

"What's your problem?" she said, stalling for time. Her left hand was still in the sand, and against her palm she felt something hard and stick-shaped half buried under loose grains. She closed her fingers around it ... it felt like metal, an iron bar or a short piece of heavy cable. She knew that the snake could react faster than she could swing it, but it felt good to have some kind of weapon in her hand.

In reply, the creature gave another rattle of its tail, a sound that was repeated from away to her right. '*Oh dear,*' she thought. '*It's not alone.*'

In her peripheral vision, Tapestry saw a dozen more snakes, similar in appearance to the first, slithering in a zig-zag motion quickly towards her from where a low bluff, dotted with small caves, rose above the desert. She needed to act before they were close enough to unite with their

colleague, but she knew that, if she made a move, the one nearest would strike.

She tensed to leap to one side, action being better than passive acceptance of what would surely be her death, but then another sound caught her attention, a low growl, which emanated from behind a rock near to the rattler. The snake's head turned quickly in response, and she had the distraction she needed. She snatched up a handful of sand with her right hand, and grasping the iron bar with her left, she leapt forwards, hurling the sand at the snake's head.

Sensing her movement, it turned back to face the danger, only to receive a shower of grit in its eyes. With a hiss, it struck blindly at the spot where Tapestry had last been, but she had expected that, and had moved off to its right. She swung the bar at the creature's head, and felt it land with a satisfying thud, knocking the snake sideways.

Without stopping to assess the effect of her action, Tapestry threw down the weapon and continued her forward motion, past the stricken rattler, towards the rock from where the growl had emanated.

As she passed it, a small, fluffy, white dog emerged, grinning. She ran on past it, without slowing, pointing in the direction she was heading. "Run!" she shouted. The other snakes would be arriving at any second, and she wanted to be as far away as possible.

With a yelp of agreement, the dog followed, galloping easily beside her.

Snakes may be able to strike in the blink of an eye, but they are not so fast over land, and soon the rattlers were left far behind. When she was certain they had shaken off their pursuers, Tapestry stopped. "Wee can't waste our time wandering around in the desert like this," she panted, her hands on her knees; the loose sand made running as a human an exhausting activity. "Wee must find the focal point for the transmissions, so wee can get to work."

Her companion turned his head to point off to their left. "It's about two miles in that direction," he declared, confidently, his voice arriving directly into her head by telepathy.

"How can you be so sure?" she asked, still verbalising.

He grinned again, his tongue lolling from the side of his mouth. "It's one of the reasons I was chosen for the mission, I have a natural spatial ability."

"That's handy," she mumbled, grudgingly.

He wagged his tail. "And I'm very good with technical equipment. I can grow fingers," he said, holding up a paw, from which he extended four, human-like fingers and a thumb."

"Impressive," Tapestry said, clearly unimpressed. She shrugged off her back-pack and drew out her drinking bottle of water. As she uncapped it and took a sip through the built-in spout she noticed his little head turned up to watch her. "You didn't bring any supplies, I take it?" she said, conveniently forgetting the fact that it was her controller who had provided hers.

He shook his head, glumly.

"What's your name?" she asked, replacing the cap.

"Kong," he replied, still looking thirstily at her water bottle.

"Kong? What, like the giant gorilla?" she spluttered.

He nodded, grinning.

"But you're one of the smallest dogs I've ever met! White, with a fluffy tail! Who gave you that ridiculous name?"

He bristled, visibly. "It's not ridiculous! As a matter of fact, I chose it myself. Visible dimensions are not the only measure of size, you know. Actually, I wanted to be Rex, but we already had one of those in the family."

She laughed, but felt regret at insulting him. "Would you like a sip?" she asked, removing the cap again and holding out the bottle, spout towards him. "Just a little, mind; wee don't know how long this has to last."

He sucked a mouthful of water. "Thank you, mistress."

Tapestry wiped the spout before replacing the cap. "I'm not your mistress, Kong, wee are equals. My name is Tapestry Capricorn, but you can call mee Tapestry," she instructed. "Oh, and thanks for your help back there; your distraction saved my life."

Kong wagged his tail again and panted loudly.

Hitching the rucksack onto her back, she turned in the direction he had indicated. "Shall we proceed, then, Kong?" she said, with only a trace of ironic amusement.

Together, they set off, girl and dog, Tapestry feeling rather like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, walking along with her own little white Toto trotting beside her. '*Follow the yellow-brick road,*' she muttered to herself.

## - Four -

### Kong

After an hour's hard progress on the loose, windblown sand, in the scorching desert heat, over dunes that lay like sleeping ripples across their path, they stopped for another sip of water. There was still no sign of a building, or any kind of activity, and the big sun was nestling onto the dusty grey heat-haze of the horizon ahead. Tapestry glared at her companion. "So, where is it, then?" she demanded as she held out the water bottle to him.

Kong gratefully sucked a mouthful of water, then released the spout from his mouth for Tapestry to re-cap it.

"It's near, I know it is," he replied, turning his head left and right, seeking the reassurance of a structure of some sort appearing where none had been a moment before. Failing to find anything, he cocked his head. "Keep going," he said, rather less confidently, "It's not far away."

Treating him to her best withering look, Tapestry returned the bottle to her back-pack and resumed walking, with the little dog following, the fine sand slowing their progress up the side of another huge dune. Each step forward loosened the grains, which broke and slithered away in waves, like water, causing them to slip back almost as far as they had progressed.

But when they reached the top, their effort was finally rewarded. Beyond the ridge on which they stood, the desert sloped down into a huge, circular crater, and it was filled with a sprawling complex of buildings. Dropping to lay flat on the sand, to avoid being seen, she faced Kong apologetically.

"You are good," she said with a smile.

His tail thrashed the sand. "Thank you, Tapestry."

Together they studied the unusual arrangement below. All the buildings were round, dome-shaped, and sand-coloured, shimmering in the heat haze. In the middle of the crater was a large hemisphere, surrounded by a ring of smaller domes. Each outer station was connected to the central unit by a strut or tunnel, like the spokes of a wheel.

"Fifteen sub-stations," Kong commented. Tapestry nodded, catching the significance of the number.

There were no roads entering the complex from any direction, and no sign of living beings outside the buildings; it seemed that the whole operation was self-contained.

"Can you see any security posts around the perimeter?" Tapestry asked.

"No, I don't think they are expecting any visitors," said Kong.

"Well, they are going to get an unexpected visitor soon," came the reply.

"Two," said Kong.

"What?" Tapestry asked, turning her head again to face him, irritated at having her thoughts distracted.

"Two visitors," he expanded. "They are going to have two visitors, not one. You and me."

Tapestry sighed. "You can't come with me," she said, emphatically. "I have to go as a cat. I'll be looking for a way to sneak into the buildings, and that may well involve climbing." She glared at him. "Can you climb?" she asked.

He looked glum, his tail drooping. "Well, no, but ..."

"No, exactly!" she interrupted. "There's no way of telling from up here how to get access to the buildings, but you can be sure they won't have made it easy. Besides," she added quickly, seeing his dejected expression, "we cannot commit both of us to an unknown situation. I need you to keep a lookout and warn me, maybe create a distraction if anything looks like happening, and to take over if it all goes pear-shaped."

He seemed to be reassured, pleased to have a useful job to do. "Okay, I understand."

She nodded. "Good. Now, I don't fancy going down this slope; I would be in full view, and

probably careering out of control in a sand-slide. I think we should circle to that low point in the crater wall over there." She pointed. "That will give me a better chance of slipping in unnoticed."

They began to walk again, and, after half an hour or so, reached the place where the long dune that formed the crater wall dropped to ground level, providing a ready-made entrance. A peep around it gave them a view of the complex that revealed just how big it was; the nearest satellite dome was only a hundred metres or so away, and towered above their heads as high as a house.

Tapestry took a few steps back from the opening. "Time to prepare. Will you look away while I morph?" she asked her companion. Not that she was concerned about being naked in front of a dog, but she knew that it could be disconcerting watching a body change shape, even for those who had seen it before.

He nodded and turned towards the buildings while Tapestry quickly removed the one-piece coverall and shifted into her natural shape. When her conversion was done, she rejoined him. "Anything happening?" she asked, forming the words in her mind.

"No change," he reported.

"Right then, in I go." She turned to leave.

"Be careful," Kong said suddenly in her head as she moved off.

She paused, surprised, and looked back, thanking him with a twitch of her tail before slipping out of sight around the curve of the dune.

All her senses straining, she crept on her belly towards the nearest dome, placing each paw carefully in front of her before edging forward a few inches at a time. She could hear no sound from the buildings or surrounding area, and her nose didn't detect anything in the air; even the smooth sand beneath her was devoid of aroma.

Several nerve-stretched minutes later she was beside the wall of the dome. Its surface was as smooth as glass, yet opaque, orange-brown in colour, and crystalline in structure, like marble. Now that she was closer, she could feel the ground beneath her feet trembling slightly, suggesting that heavy machinery was throbbing inside the building, and she also felt an uncomfortable tugging at her mind, a feeling that reminded her of the sensation experienced on inter-dimensional journeys.

Carefully, she followed the wall of the building round, searching for some kind of opening, but finding none. Even when she reached the place where the tunnel entered the dome, it was sealed, smooth and airtight, and did not offer any means of entry. She looked upwards, hoping that there might be some kind of ventilation outlet in the wall, but was disappointed. Besides, the surface was so smooth that even she would be unable to climb it.

*'Not a great start,'* she said to herself. There was nothing for it, she would have to follow the tunnel to the main dome, and hope for better luck there.

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Amazingly, despite her nervous expectation, no alarms were going off as Tapestry crept deeper into the complex, and no heavily armed security guards were screeching up in camouflaged Jeeps, raising clouds of dust into the air, and running around, shouting and shooting. In fact, nobody seemed interested in her presence at all, and she began to wonder if the site had been abandoned. She began to relax a little.

The central dome reared above her, like a giant bubble rising to the surface, smooth and glistening like a ruby in the red light of the setting sun. The tunnel beside her blended into the skin of the dome, and the next one joined it a short way off. Again she examined the glassy surface, carefully searching for a crack, or anything that might offer a way in. But there was nothing; it was flawless and seamless.

Then, just when she had almost given up hope, she was rewarded with a breakthrough. As she walked along close to the wall, becoming less concerned about being seen, a semi-circular hole suddenly and soundlessly appeared beside her, like the opening of an eye. For a second, she froze, her fur standing on end, staring into the interior for threatening signs, expecting to be pounced on by the custodians of the building. But nothing more happened, and she realised that she herself

must have triggered the door opening through some kind of hidden sensor. With that established, she knew that she had to act quickly ... it could close again without warning ... so, throwing caution aside, she scampered through. Behind her, unseen, the eye blinked silently shut again.

The sight that awaited her inside was stunning. From her new viewpoint, the walls were invisible; it was as though she was still on the outside, except that now she could see some of the machinery that was hidden and protected by the dome, and the air was cooler. The vast cavernous space was filled with machinery. At its centre, a huge portal sat on a raised circular bed, and from it emanated a ring of conveyor belts, each disappearing into one of the tunnels that served the outer domes. Some of the belts had boxes on them, trundling away from the centre and into the mouth of a tunnel. There was a steady whining, rumbling sound of electric motors, and the air fizzed with ozone; but, puzzlingly, there was not a human (or animal, or any kind of living creature) in sight.

As she watched, a flickering light in the portal caught her eye, and she saw a box shimmer into existence at its heart. Watching it, she noticed that the bed of the portal was tilted, and the whole edifice was rotating slowly to bring it into line with each of the radial belts in turn. The box that had just materialised slid onto a conveyor and jiggled off towards one of the tunnels; she trotted over to the belt and jumped up to sit on its side-rail to watch the box's progress. The far end of the tunnel was hard to see (cats don't have great eyesight) but when the box reached it, she was in no doubt that it vanished, twinkled out of this dimension and into another. This whole operation was an automatic staging post! Whatever was in the boxes was arriving from some unknown source and being beamed, presumably, to the satellites in Earth orbit.



## - Five -

### Action Plan

Kong was watching the site, ready to spring into action to rescue Tapestry if anything went wrong. He had visions of chasing away a horde of armed security guards, dodging their bullets and dragging her limp body to safety. He saw her creep through the lengthening shadows to the big dome, and enter it. Then nothing happened for a while.

He watched the orange sun slowly sink into the horizon, until there was just a dull, red sliver left. But, oddly, instead of the sky darkening, it began to become lighter again ... but blue this time ... and when he looked behind him the reason was clear. Another sun was rising, a smaller, brighter, whiter one. This world had two suns!

He felt the heat of this new arrival on his back, already more powerful than the red giant that had just set, and he began to pant.

It had been a long, exciting day. He lay on the sand, thinking about the events of the day, and trying to anticipate what might happen next. Depending on what Tapestry found in the domes, they would have to find some way of reporting back to their home planets. He had recently completed a course in communications, and knew some of the ways to use a portal beam to carry radio messages. It wasn't so difficult; he and Bess had even built a complete transmitter from parts stripped out of other equipment, although most portals had a built-in messaging system. They had been assigned to work together, and got along really well. And it wasn't always work - they had spent several pleasant evenings together, too. He remembered ...

"You were supposed to be keeping lookout!" a strident voice suddenly said, close beside him.

He jumped, his legs flailing the air as he tried to get back onto his feet, realising that he had somehow rolled onto his back.

"A fine watchdog you are," Tapestry scolded. "I'm doing all the work and risking my life, while you take a nap in the sun!" She had morphed back to human shape, and was putting on her one-piece coverall.

"I wasn't really asleep," he protested. "Just thinking with my eyes shut."

She glared at him until he had to look away. "Oh yes? So how is it that I was able to walk right up to you without you noticing, then?" she demanded.

He was embarrassed. It seemed that he probably had nodded off after all. "Sorry," he mumbled.

Tapestry shrugged, clipping the belt around her waist and removing the pistol from its holster. It was a lightweight blaster, the kind that used a compact energy source to convert silicate crystals, such as sand or glass, into an intense plasma beam. She had used one similar to this in basic training - at close range it was equally effective against animate and inanimate targets. She unscrewed and removed a circular cup from the handle of the weapon, emptied out a shower of dust, and crouched down to scoop some sand into it. Then she shook it level and inserted it back into the gun. Pointing it at the side of the dune, she fired a short burst to test it. A glaring white beam sizzled from the barrel, and a patch of sand the size of a hand immediately glowed red and was fused into glass. They felt the warmth from it even in the heat of the desert.

"Wee have to go into the complex together," she told Kong, as she holstered the gun. She took the water bottle from her rucksack and squirted some into her mouth, then held the container out to the dog. Kong thanked her and accepted a quick sip of the offered water.

"The place is unmanned," she continued as he drank. "It's a staging post. Boxes are arriving and being re-transmitted. We have to assume they are going to the satellites circling Earth. One of us has to use the portal to travel up to the source, to find out who is sending this stuff, and why."

"You seem to have decided that it should be you who goes," he observed.

Tapestry replaced the bottle in the rucksack and took out a lunch box. She knelt on the sand, dividing the meat from the box into two portions, placing some in the upturned lid of the box and

setting it in front of the dog. He thanked her and began tucking in.

"It has to be me that rides the beam to the source," she said between mouthfuls. "I am the one who can fully morph to human shape, and I have a weapon." She patted her holster. "Also, as a cat, I can climb, if necessary, and squeeze into small spaces. Besides, there is something important for you to do here, once I have gone."

"What's that?" he asked, licking the improvised plate clean.

"You have to send a message to your agency, telling them the situation. And then you must disable the equipment, to prevent any more supplies getting through." She took the lid and fitted it back onto the box, which she then replaced in the rucksack.

"I can do that," he said, nodding his head.

"Good. Let's get on with it, then."

They set off quickly towards the hub of the complex, not troubling to conceal themselves, and were soon inside. Kong stared in amazement, as Tapestry had, when they first stepped through the door.

More boxes were arriving in a steady flow as they wandered between the conveyors. Tapestry heaved at one, pulling it off the belt, to fall crashing to the floor. It burst open on impact, revealing rifles, hand grenades and other weapons. Another box contained pieces of machinery, packed around with straw. They ran from belt to belt, pulling off boxes and letting them smash on the floor. It was clear that war supplies were being transmitted to Earth in great numbers, and if they had been arriving at this rate over the two or three days since they were first detected by Lightning Response, they amounted to a considerable arsenal.

"The sooner we can stop this traffic, the better," Tapestry remarked.

As though to emphasise the urgency of their task, all activity around them suddenly ceased; conveyors stopped rumbling, and the portal no longer rotated. The interior of the dome echoed into silence. The two agents stared at each other in shock. "They've finished," whispered Kong. "Whatever they are planning, this part of the operation is complete."

Tapestry nodded. "They have stockpiled their weapons - the next thing will be to send their invasion force. We can expect soldiers to be flooding through here soon; we must act fast." She looked around for a moment, then led the way to the central portal. "Can you reverse the polarity of this thing, to transmit back to the source, instead of receiving?" she asked.

"That's easy," he responded. "I can do it in five minutes from the control console; he inclined his head towards the small bank of instruments on the side of the machine.

Tapestry grinned. "I hoped you would say that. Then, when I've gone, you will need to recalibrate it to Canis's frequency, and contact your bosses."

Kong gave a little yap of joy at having something worthwhile to do, and scampered over to the control deck. He jumped up onto the operator's seat and extended his fingers, then began to tap away at the keyboard.

"Can you determine the status of the source portal?" she asked. "Is it still set to 'Send'? I don't want to be bounced straight back here again. She smiled mirthlessly at the thought of being bopped backwards and forwards like a tennis ball between the two stations, both set to transmit.

He nodded, his tongue sticking out from the side of his mouth as he concentrated. "It has been set to neutral," he announced after a moment. "That means it's ready to be activated, either by an incoming signal, or by the operator at that end. "

"Can you see anything of the other end?" Tapestry asked. It was sometimes possible for an operator to catch a glimpse of the destination on his screen, as though looking through the thick, distorting glass of a Dickensian shop window.

If dogs could shrug, he would have shrugged. "Not much. There's a stack of boxes in one corner. I can't see any movement in the room."

"Ok, thanks. I'm thinking that it will be best if I port in cat form," she continued, almost to herself, as she stepped onto the bed of the portal and began to remove her coverall again. "There's no knowing what I will find when I arrive, and I may need to react quickly. Besides, they would probably shoot a human appearing in their midst, whereas a cat may seem less threatening." She

carefully folded the suit and placed it beside her feet, along with the gun, then changed shape.

Kong grunted, absorbed in his work, and continued to adjust the controls for another minute or two. "All set to launch," he announced suddenly.

"Ok, thanks. I'm ready," she answered, feeling a sudden tension in her stomach.

The door to the portal slid shut. Then, after a moment, the room vanished from her sight, and she was once again thrust into the vortex that accompanies instantaneous travel between dimensions.

- Six -  
**Arrival**

Travel between dimensions is possible because of the ability of some waves to carry particles of matter within them. Similar scientific principles are used as in the teleport system, but inter-dimensional travel requires the use of two gateways, one at each end; it takes place in three steps:

Firstly the object to be ported is reduced to its constituent particles by the transmitting gateway. The particles are then re-tuned to the dimensional frequency of the destination world - this is the process by which the technology advanced beyond intra-world limitations of teleporting, to allow inter-dimensional travel;

Secondly, the machine sets up a wave between the dimensions, and a signal is transmitted ahead to the receiving station, identifying the object being sent and activating the far station into 'receive' mode; when a responding message is received, the third part of the process can take place;

Thirdly, the particles then ride on the back of the wave to the destination. They pass through any other worlds that are in the way, because those worlds are oscillating at a different frequency --they do not exist in the same dimension.

According to the Blatt principle of matter, each particle knows its relationship with the rest of the object from which it came. Consequently, when it materialises in the magnetic field of the destination portal, it resumes its rightful position within the re-assembling object. As each atom arrives, it pushes aside an atom of air, which resists, briefly, then moves out of the way with a tiny flash of light and a 'ping'.

Tapestry twinkled into existence at the unknown destination with a kind of twinkling sound. If there had been anyone in the room, they would have seen a flickering glow from the portal cabinet, and heard a faint chime of bells. But the first stage of the invasion operation had finished, and no inbound traffic was expected, so everyone had gone off to dinner and the machinery had been left unattended.

Unsteady for a moment with the usual disorientation, Tapestry sniffed the air; it was clean, with just a hint of ozone, as she would have expected in the clinical environment of a TG installation. The portal was large, also expected, considering the size of the objects being moved, but there was nothing to indicate which planet she was on or the nature of the people using it.

Beside her feet on the platen lay her coverall and gun belt, where she had placed them back on Serpentes. When the nausea had passed, she folded over the edges of the fabric, enwrapping the belt with its holster, and picked up the parcel with her mouth. Looking around to make sure that the room was indeed empty, she trotted over to the pile of boxes Kong had seen in the corner, and pushed her bundle into a gap, hoping it would be inconspicuous. Then she edged towards the door, which obligingly opened automatically, with a faint hiss of pneumatics.

Pausing in the doorway, she surveyed the corridor beyond. It was brightly lit by sunlight streaming in through large windows along the whole of the far wall. Blue sky and white clouds were visible, suggesting that it was not an unpleasant world, perhaps Felidae-like. There was no one about, but boxes and assorted pieces of machinery were piled along the near side of the corridor. She was relieved on both counts – the absence of people meant that she was so far undetected, while the boxes offered concealment, in case anyone should turn up.

Her nose began twitching to waves of heavy cooking aromas, mostly meat, with a background of something she couldn't identify ... bodies, but not human. She concentrated on her hearing, and detected a buzz of voices above the steady hum of hidden machinery, away to her right, the same direction as the smells, so she set off to investigate.

Hardly had she started on her way, however, than doors swished open on the outer wall of the corridor just ahead, admitting a tantalising smell of fresh air, along with the body odours of the two creatures who marched through. Tapestry dived for cover behind the nearest stack of crates. Now

she knew why the smells were unusual; the quick glimpse she had of them showed that they were reptilian. Though broadly human in shape, with two arms and two legs (so common among all the advanced races that it was almost the norm), their faces were elongated, with wide mouths and flat noses, the fingers of their hands were long and pointed, and their skin was scaly, grey, and slightly shiny. They were tall and wide, muscular, dressed in camouflaged military uniforms.

"What was that?" one of them said.

"What?" grunted the other.

"I saw a movement; something darted behind those boxes," explained the first.

"Probably just a rat," said the second, dismissively. "You know we can't get rid of them all."

'Yes, *just a rat*' thought Tapestry, trying to plant the image into the first creature's mind, but aware of the limitations in her telepathic abilities. She heard the rustle of clothing and soft thudding footfalls as one of them crossed the corridor towards her, smelled him coming nearer. She pressed herself against the back of the wooden crate.

"It didn't look like a rat to me," his voice said, very close.

"Don't bother with it," she heard the second one say. "Come on, we'll miss the others."

The first lizard grunted, but she was relieved when their footsteps moved away in the direction of the food smells. When she was sure they had gone, she slipped out of concealment and followed them, scuttling from one stack of boxes to the next, trying to stay hidden. When she reached what appeared to be a food hall, she stopped behind a machine of some kind, observing the steady traffic as it flowed into and out of the hall.

Most were soldiers, similar to the two she had seen earlier, but there were some reptilian civilians, and she was surprised to also see some humans. They were all dressed similarly, men and women, in loose garments similar to those in pictures she had seen of ancient Roman and Greek slaves. They seemed to be accompanying lizards of higher standing, who wore ornate gowns and robes trimmed with crimson and gold.

## - Seven -

### Lizards

The smell from the canteen was almost overpowering, and Tapestry found herself unable to move on from behind the machine opposite the entrance until her head cleared. The doors hissed open and closed several times, as patrons arrived or left, releasing a cloud of aromas and a burst of noise that flooded her senses. And just when she felt ready to break cover and scamper to the next lot of crates, a short way off, the doors would open and her crucial sense of smell was swamped again. Time was wasting; she needed to find out more about this place.

A short quiet spell passed, and she tested the air. It seemed reasonably clear, as far as she could tell, and the corridor seemed quiet. Far from happy, but anxious to proceed, she peeped out to check that the way was clear. Instantly she saw her mistake. A shadow fell over her and a huge, heavy hand clamped down on her neck. "Got you!" growled a familiar voice. "I knew it wasn't a rat what I saw; I just knew it! We have a pussy cat in our midst."

The hand grasped the loose skin behind her head, and she was lifted into the air, dangling helplessly, cursing herself for her stupidity, finding her eyes level with a hideous reptilian face. He stared at her, and she returned his gaze, taking in the rough, grey skin, flat head and long, thick neck. Close up she could see the patterns on each scale, see his nostrils flare as he breathed, his eyes nictitating occasionally as he studied her, curiously. His teeth were as yellow as his eyes, and his breath was a rancid blast that made her wince.

"Meeow?" she said.

"What you got there, Rass?" enquired another voice, its owner appearing from behind him. The two creatures were dressed similarly in combat-style military uniforms ... brown, with blotches of green and black, wide belts around their waists festooned with pouches ... but their feet, long, dark grey, and pointed, like their hands, were bare.

"It's a cat, dumbhead," snapped the one holding her, poking her with one of his clawed fingers.

Tapestry stayed limp. If she struggled, she knew his grip would tighten, whereas, if she did nothing, perhaps he might relax a little, giving her a chance to wriggle free.

"A cat, hey? I ain't never seen one of them before," said the second.

"Well you won't have, unless you been to Earth, like I have," replied the one called Rass. "The question is, what's it doing here? I think I'll just take it down to the chief and see what he thinks."

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Rass's superior officer treated himself to a few prods at Tapestry's belly while he listened to his subordinate's account. Tapestry could see that this creature was slightly different. His scaly skin was a lighter colour ... flecks of brown and ivory gave an appearance almost of gold ... and his head was narrower and longer. He rummaged in a cupboard and produced a sturdy wire cage, into which the helpless cat was thrust. The door slammed closed.

Tapestry was still as angry at herself, for her impatience back there in the corridor, as with the brutes who were holding her captive. If she had waited for her senses to clear properly, she would have smelt the reptile lurking, and wouldn't now be in this predicament. It wasn't just that her life was in danger, she had also jeopardised the mission.

She looked around the small room where she was being held. It was a working office, with filing cabinets and a desk. A large fan in the ceiling turned slowly, and a window looked out over colourful gardens. The cage in which she was held was strong enough to prevent escape, and it would be dangerous to try to morph from inside it.

The officer spoke into a communication device of some kind on his desk. When he had finished, he dismissed Rass and picked up the cage. Tapestry was shaken about as the officer left his office

and marched purposefully along a corridor, clutching the cage close to his body.

His scaly hand gripped the cage, and his long fingers poked through between the bars right before her eyes. Suddenly angry at all that was happening, she lashed out at it, raking her claws through the flesh, seeing with satisfaction the green blood that sprang immediately from the four deep gouges in his palm. With a roar of pain, the officer's reflexes caused him to release the cage, and Tapestry felt herself falling. She tried to control her landing, as she would have done if she had been free, but of course it was not possible in the confined space.

When the cage struck the ground, her whole body was jarred and her head banged painfully against the wire. But the cage had also suffered, landing on one corner, and she saw that the door had sprung partly open. Shaking off her dizziness, she squeezed through the gap and scampered for cover.

The officer saw her bid for freedom, and aimed a kick, but she swerved to avoid the ugly, clawed foot, and dived for the protection of a pile of crates. When she reached it, she did not hesitate, but scurried along behind the boxes, breaking cover at full speed at the end to reach the next stack. She discovered that Rass and his friend had been right about rats when she disturbed a whole colony of them, along with some mice, which scattered from the boxes like a firework display, adding to the general mêlée and confusion.

One stack towered nearly to the ceiling of the corridor. She jumped, then climbed quickly up the back, from box to box, to the top, then peered over the edge to assess the situation. Curious soldiers were appearing from a dozen nearby doorways, responding to the officer's shouts.

"Find that damn cat!" the furious lizard bellowed, indicating the nearest pile of crates into which he had seen her escape, while still trying to stem the flow of green blood that dripped from his hand. From her position further along the corridor, Tapestry watched with amusement as the reptile-men began pulling some of the smaller boxes aside, routing more rodents, which the soldiers chased with glee until the officer roared at them to stop.

When they had moved all the boxes they could, leaving only the biggest and heaviest, the soldiers turned to the officer with gestures that showed that, not only had they found nothing, but they didn't really understand what they were looking for. "Bring a fork-lift!" he shouted, flapping his arms helplessly, flinging droplets of blood in all directions.

One of the men ran to a side room, emerging moments later dragging a pallet-truck, then hesitated, unsure. Boiling with frustration, the officer pointed to the crates; "Well, get on with it, start moving them!"

It wasn't long before the men had moved all the boxes and found nothing but several nests containing more rodents. They stood back, clearly thinking that their leader had lost all reason, but the irate officer, who by then was receiving first aid to his hand from a medical orderly, was not about to let them off. "I want you to move every damn box in this corridor until you find that damned cat," he roared.

Tapestry peered anxiously down at the heads of a group of soldiers as they moved towards her hiding place.



**- Eight -**  
**Sah-Seh-Sah**

The whine of electric motors heralded the arrival of a compact fork-lift truck, which soon set about shifting crates at twice the rate of the pallet-truck. Tapestry knew it had reached the stack on which she was hiding when she felt it rise a little, then sway into motion. She lay still in the centre, afraid to look over the edge again in case anyone spotted her. The movement stopped.

"Nothing here, Captain," said a voice.

"Right, put it back and move on," the officer instructed.

The stack swayed into motion again.

"Wait!" he suddenly shouted. "What was that?"

The driver hit the brake, and the fork-lift stopped again. Unfortunately, there are laws of inertia that over-ride the intentions of sapient creatures. One of these is "the tendency of objects to keep moving in a straight line at constant linear velocity." The bottom box of the stack stopped with the truck, but the top ones carried on moving, with Tapestry clinging on as unwilling passenger. The stack toppled, slowly at first, wobbling, then faster. The corridor appeared before her for a moment, and she leapt off just before the crate crashed to the floor, and landed right at the feet of the Captain.

"Here it is!" he bellowed, and the soldiers around him turned to see. The officer made a grab at her, but she darted to one side and avoided his reaching hand. A pair of legs blocked her way, and she swerved again. More legs, and grasping hands confronted her. Dodging, twisting, she scurried back and forth inside a closing circle, seeking a gap in the sea of limbs, avoiding the looming hands that sought to grab her, and the feet that kicked out. But there was no escape; blackness suddenly descended when a blanket dropped over her, and she was blind and helplessly pinned down.

She felt herself scooped up in the blanket like a bundle of laundry, then swung in an arc, crashing into something hard. Coarse voices laughed. She grunted with pain, the breath driven from her lungs by the violence of the impact. Again, it happened, and again. Each time she felt the motion, and tensed for the blow to fall. She was sure her bones were being broken, and tried to protect her head with her paws.

*'Is this how my life is to end?'* she thought.

She considered morphing while she still had the strength. It would certainly enable her to escape from the confinement of the smothering blanket, but it would almost certainly make her situation even worse. At the moment, she was just a cat, a minor nuisance, but a human would attract far too much attention; they might even shoot her.

Consciousness was slowly slipping from her when the punishment suddenly stopped, and instead she was being dragged along the ground, bouncing over obstacles, twisting and rolling uncontrollably. Muffled voices reached her, but she could not hear what was being said. Occasionally the movement stopped briefly, then resumed. Once, she felt the floor pressing against her, and surmised that she was in a lift. When she became weightless, a minute or so later, she knew the lift had stopped. More dragging and bouncing ensued.

Then all movement stopped, and the voices faded. There was peace, a respite. She took some deep breaths of dusty, stale air and tried her limbs; savage pain tore through her whole body with each movement.

But the relief was short, and she was again twisted and bumped as the blanket was picked up and swung onto someone's shoulder. This time, however, after only a few seconds, she was suddenly up-ended and tipped out of the confinement onto a carpeted floor.

Dazed and in pain, she lay still and looked around. Two creatures ... her captors, presumably ... were leaving the room. A pair of reptilian feet stood close to her head, their owner looming over her, looking down at her. She felt an odd prickling inside her brain, and realised that her thoughts

were being read. She tried to resist, to make her consciousness a blank, but the mind that was probing was strong and experienced. After a moment, the creature spoke: "Agent Capricorn, welcome to my humble home," he said in a powerful, rumbling voice that immediately instilled fear in her heart.

Tearing her eyes away from his hypnotic stare high above her, Tapestry struggled to her feet, suppressing a cry of pain with each movement. She stood unsteadily, her legs trembling with the effort, and breathed in some of the clean, perfumed air. Then she looked up again to face the beast. "Who are you?" she asked, even her sub-vocalised thoughts shaking; "Where am I?"

He chuckled as he turned away and pressed a button on his desk. A young woman, human, appeared at once, dressed in the same brown 'slave' uniform as the people Tapestry had seen earlier. "Water," he snapped. She bowed and hurried away, re-appearing moments later carrying an ornate pottery jug, which she placed on the table. As she scuttled away, the lizard picked up a cut-glass ashtray from a coffee table, and poured some of the water into it. This he placed on the floor in front of Tapestry.

"My name is King Sah-Seh-Sah the Second," he declared with what seemed to be the reptile equivalent of a smile of smug satisfaction; "Welcome to Reptilla. I am the ruler of this little world, and soon to be ruler of your adopted home, too."

Tapestry lapped at the cool water, grateful, despite the hint of tobacco that lingered in the glass. She formed the words of her reply in her mind, while trying to mask all other thoughts. "Earth may be harder to conquer than you think," she said.

He smiled again. "You are wasting your time by trying to hide your thoughts from me, Agent Capricorn. I can reach the deepest recesses of your mind."

There was a knock at the door, and a soldier entered ... Tapestry could not tell if it was one she had seen before. He strode to the King, saluted, and handed him something. Sah-Seh-Sah acknowledged with a slight tilt of his head, and the creature left.

"What have we here?" Sah-Seh-Sah asked rhetorically as the lift doors closed.

Tapestry looked at the object he was holding, and recognised her coverall. The reptile unfolded it, revealing her belt and pistol. He grinned. "Oh dear, a weapon," he chuckled. He unscrewed the clip from the handle and emptied the sand from it into the pot of a tall plant by the window, tapping it to ensure that every grain was removed, before replacing it in the gun and the gun in its holster.

He walked back to Tapestry and placed the garment, belt and gun included, beside her. "You may like to morph," he suggested. "I am sure you will feel more comfortable."

He was right, and it proved the depth of his mind-probe. The shifting of weight and balance from four legs to two would ease some of the pain in her upper body, and the morphing process could sometimes even help to speed the healing of wounds.

"I have no intention of shape-shifting into a naked woman for your pleasure, Sah-Seh-Sah," she said with as much venom as she could muster in her weakened state.

He laughed. "I am not turned on by the human body, but I will look away if you wish. Do not be foolish enough to try to attack me, though; I will know what you are planning even before you do."

He turned to look out of the window, and Tapestry began to morph. The pain was overpowering, every damaged tissue seemed to be on fire, and she could not help gasping as it swamped her senses.

The King laughed again, his back still turned. "I had forgotten how puny your mammalian bodies are, and how sensitive to pain," he said. "Our reptilian structures are much more resilient, and we do not feel pain in the same way as you."

Tapestry finished morphing, and struggled into her onesie, suffering acute agony with every twist of her body. As she zipped up the front, she vocalised, surprised at how weak her voice sounded: "Well, pain helps us to empathise with others. I am glad of it. I would not want to be an unfeeling lizard."

He turned away from the window and studied the pathetic specimen before him. She was small, not much more than half his height. Her face was bruised, one eye was black and puffy, almost closed, and her mouth was distorted, her bottom lip cracked; blood trickled from her nose, and she

angrily wiped it away with the back of her right hand. She was favouring her left leg, carrying her weight on her right, and her left arm hung limply at her side. At the same time as he despised her weakness, he admired her resilience. He would enjoy breaking her.

## A Gift From Serpentes

In an act of bravado, Tapestry limped across the office to the window. When she looked out over the cityscape, she was surprised to find how high they were, at least thirty stories above ground level. It could have been Earth; tall buildings rose from busy streets below her, white clouds floated in blue skies above, criss-crossed with the vapour trails of aircraft.

"You are in above your head, little cat," said the voice of the King behind her. "You and your little friend have caused me a minor hold-up, temporarily shutting down the operation on Serpentes, but it is not significant. Even as we speak, a squad of my troops is on its way to 'take care' of him and re-establish the portal." She heard a subtle change in his voice, sensed that he was goading her into reacting. "He may even already be dead."

Poor Kong. She wished Canaris hadn't sent him, although he had been very helpful, and she had grown to like the little dog. Perhaps he had managed to port out before the soldiers reached him. She hoped so.

"What are you hoping to achieve by all this?" she asked, turning to face Sah; her eyes were level with his chest, and she had to tilt her head painfully to look up at him.

He was huge, easily the biggest reptile she had seen since she arrived on this planet. His head was wide and heavy, his skin green, blotched with orange and brown, his eyes large and yellow.

"Oh, it's all but complete," he shrugged, affecting nonchalance, failing to hide a smirk. "Another day or two and we will be ready to declare ourselves and make our demands."

"Which are what, exactly?"

He laughed. "Why, capitulation, of course! Surrender of the entire Earth to me."

"Or what?"

"Or I will take it by force. My armies are ready, and I have weapons aimed at every major city. If your governments are stubborn, many millions of your puny friends will die."

"And you expect the Earth governments to capitulate, just like that?" she spat. "You are in for a shock, Sah-Seh-Sah. They are much more stubborn than that."

"Oh no, agent Capricorn," he laughed again. "I expect them to fight - I hope they will. Then I can demonstrate my new weapon. In fact, if they give in too easily, I may just decide to use it anyway, for effect."

Tapestry's legs were trembling with the effort of keeping balance, the muscles cramping in spasms of fire. She sat on the window sill, aware that she was demonstrating her weakness to her captor but unable to remain standing. "I take it your weapon is something to do with the satellites orbiting Earth," she said, fighting back the nausea caused by the waves of pain from her body.

"Yes," he grinned, enjoying her obvious discomfort, and revelling in his position of power. "Oh, it is wonderful. It uses the energy of the sun, you see. Each satellite gathers the ions that stream from the sun, from which the puny humans are mostly shielded by their atmosphere. It can then be concentrated through any one of the satellites in an intense beam, focused on a chosen area of the planet. It can wipe out all life in a city in seconds."

A knock on the door interrupted him in full flow, and a soldier bustled in and saluted. Sah-Seh-Sah listened while the reptile-man whispered something to him, his face twisting into an expression of anger. When he had finished, the King was clearly furious. He glared briefly at Tapestry, then pointed to her. "Bring her," he instructed the soldier, as he marched towards the door.

In two huge strides, the man reached Tapestry, seized her by the arm and forced her to stand, then propelled her across the room to follow the swiftly moving Sah-Seh-Sah.

They stood in silence as the lift plunged to the ground floor. Tapestry was sandwiched between the two huge reptiles, barely able to stand because of the stabbing pains in the muscles of her legs. When the lift stopped, and they began marching briskly along corridors, her legs gave out

completely and she fell awkwardly. The King did not change his step, and the soldier, anxious to keep up with him, scooped Tapestry up with one hand and threw her across his shoulder.

They reached the TG room, where Tapestry had arrived a couple of hours earlier, and stopped. She could see nothing of it at first, didn't even know where she was, because she was facing backwards, the bulk of her captor hiding the room from her view. However, when he hefted her down and deposited her on her feet, she saw a strange sight.

The portal was active; lights flashed on the control desk, but the bed of the machine, the circular plate where people or objects to be transported would be placed, and where arrivals would materialise, was flickering like an old movie, with images of soldiers shimmering in and out of focus.

"It's been doing this since we tried to send them, sir," reported the reptile-man at the controls.

"What is causing it?" Sah-Seh-Sah snapped.

The creature looked sheepish. "We don't really know, sir. They just keep coming back, then vanishing again."

"Well, switch the damn thing off, then!" the King ordered.

"But they could be lost between worlds, sir, never to return."

"How many of them are there?"

"Five, sir," said the miserable operator.

"We can't hold up the operation for the sake of five men," Sah-Seh-Sah declared. "Switch it off."

Before the man could obey, Tapestry spoke up. "You could try reversing the polarity, switch it to receive. You might get them back that way."

Sah stared at her for a moment, and she felt him probing her mind, but he found no ulterior motive. "Do what she said," he snapped at the operator, who nodded and immediately began to reset the controls.

After a few moments, he activated the master control, and all eyes turned to the portal, where the five soldiers shimmered into view. A cheer rose from some of the men present, but was instantly silenced when the five transportees collapsed on the platen and their bodies began to melt into formless blobs of green goo that trickled out of their crumpled uniforms and spread in puddles on the glass bed. The bouncing back and forth between source and destination had destroyed the bond between their atoms.

More was to come however, when another object appeared in the air above the bodies and dropped with a loud metallic clatter onto the platen. When it had stopped spinning, they saw that it was a hand grenade, and that the pin had been removed.

Tapestry grinned. Toto was alive.



## - Ten -

### Standoff

There was a scramble for the doorway, soldiers knocking each other out of the way in their desperation to escape. The man carrying Tapestry had been the last to arrive, and as he tried to turn to run, he blocked the exit for all the others, who crashed into him. But Tapestry was able to dodge around him; she couldn't move fast, but her smaller frame allowed her to slip through the gap, out of the room, and round the corner into the corridor.

A second later, there was a deafening blast as the grenade exploded. The man nearest the door was thrown across the corridor and slammed into the far wall, sliding down and laying still, his neck at an odd angle. Smoke gushed from the opening, green jelly, debris and body parts followed, bouncing on the corridor floor, splattering on the far wall.

As soon as possible, she turned back and re-entered the room. The portal was smashed beyond recognition, a tangle of twisted metal and shattered glass. Bodies lay all around, there was a smell of smouldering plastic and burnt flesh. She heard a groan from the heap of dead lizards ... surely no-one could have survived that? But she saw that Sah was struggling to release himself from beneath the body of one of his men; the soldier had given his life to protect his king.

Before he could regain his feet, however, Tapestry whipped out her gun and stood beside him, the pistol pointed at his head. "Stay where you are," she shouted, hearing her voice coming out as a frightened squeak.

He looked at the weapon and laughed. "It's empty, little cat. I know, I emptied it myself."

As he spoke, she heard a movement nearby, and turned to see the bulk of a soldier, who stood in the doorway, a surprised expression on its face, its hands reaching for the rifle on a belt over its shoulder. Tapestry swung her pistol around to bear on the lizard and fired. A jagged, glowing beam spat from the muzzle, hitting the creature in the middle of its chest, the blast of heat knocking him backwards. There was no blood – the wound was cauterised by the same flame that punched a hole in his chest as big as a fist. Then she brought the weapon back to point at Sah's head. "Meeow," she said.

The King's expression was a picture as he froze in the process of pushing himself upright. "How did you manage to reload it?" he asked, incredulously.

"That's for mee to know," she hissed. "Now stay where you are."

He turned slightly to shift his weight from his knees, and sat on the body of his dead loyal citizen, glaring at Tapestry in helpless anger.

She forced herself to think about every occasion she had ever fired a blaster, forming images of explosions, memories of the practice range mixed with imaginary scenarios, a muddled cloud of thoughts. He must not read her mind, discover that she didn't have another shot. She had banked on the fact that there was just enough silicon left in the chamber after her test blast in the desert to fire it that once, and now she held a useless piece of metal in her hand as her only protection against an entire army.

"What are you going to do now, little cat?" Sah-Seh-Sah hissed. "You are surrounded. And when they release me, I will enjoy eating you myself, very slowly."

She shivered at the thought. What, exactly, was she going to do? She had no plan, only the instinct to survive.

She moved behind him, so that he could not see what she was doing, and she would be screened by his body against any attack from the doorway. There was already bustling in the corridor, people moving, just out of sight; she needed to do something quickly, before they assembled an attack.

Looking around the room, she saw that, although the TG portal was totally destroyed, a teleport booth in the corner looked to be undamaged. She backed over to it, keeping one eye on the entrance and the other on the King, swinging the useless gun from one to the other, as though its mere

existence was a threat. The lights on the teleport panel were glowing in greens and reds, the LCD screen was displaying data, the machine seemed to be working; the only trouble was, she didn't know how to operate it. Oh, she had been through similar transmitters before, and had seen which control activated it, but she had never been trained in setting the thing; there was no telling where she would materialise.

However, with the absence of an alternative, and on the basis that the machine must still have the co-ordinates of its last use, she opened the door, noticing from the corner of her eye as she did so that the King was getting to his feet. Reaching round the cabinet from the doorway, she stabbed at the activation button with her finger, and leapt into the booth. As she slammed the door shut, the King let out a roar, and two soldiers ran into the room from the corridor, their plasma rifles ready. They saw her and fired at her from the hip, running towards the booth. She watched in horror as the metal of the cabinet glowed hot, before it all vanished from sight and she was thrust into non-dimensional space.

As Tapestry disappeared, Sah-Seh-Sah shouted to the two soldiers. "Follow her and bring her back to me!" he demanded.

They ran to the booth, then stopped, embarrassed.

"Er..., sorry, sir," one of them said, hesitantly. "I'm afraid we just shot out the control panel.

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Tapestry arrived in a cavernous, echoing warehouse, filled with rows and rows of military vehicles, like a parade frozen in time. She was still stumbling along at a limping run when her feet touched the ground, and she continued until she found shelter behind the nearest tank, then she paused to look around. She could not tell at first if it was part of the building she had left or not. The distant walls had no windows, but then she saw that rays of sunlight were streaming in from clear panels in the roof, high above her, illuminating the camouflaged vehicles like spotlights. So it was not the same building then, that was a start. There was no-one in sight, but she could hear the rumble and whine of machinery and some distant distorted voices.

Expecting to be followed at any moment, unaware that the teleport station had been disabled, she made her way between two of the long lines of assorted vehicles, putting distance between herself and the co-ordinates at which she had landed. Eventually she reached an outer wall made of sheets of corrugated aluminium, set into which was a door. Checking left and right to make sure that no-one was near, she hobbled across the open space to the door and was about to open it when she spotted a fire bucket. She quickly scooped some sand into her pistol and slipped outside.

A red giant sun glared down at her from a purple sky. The landscape, however, was much like any heavily-populated part of Earth: trees and tall buildings castellated the horizon on all sides, including one which dwarfed them all, and was likely the one she had just left, the King's headquarters. It was triangular in shape, like a flattened pyramid, wide at the bottom, tapering nearly to a point at the top. She was puzzled to see bright flashes appearing at random over its surface, and many more clustered at its base.

Closer to where she stood, wide, low buildings sprawled to meet the city-line, and a highway cut a path not far away, carrying multiple lanes of high-speed vehicles. The air was heavy with the sounds and smells of industrialisation.

This would not do, would not do at all; she was safe, but too far away from Sah-Seh-Sah to do anything to thwart his evil plans. She needed to get back to his headquarters.

*'There must be a teleport inside the warehouse,'* she said to herself, turning back to the door and re-entering the building. *'But where?'*

Thinking that she could probably be less conspicuous in cat form, she hid the gun under the wheel of a jeep, and morphed. This time the process was less painful, and she found that her muscles were easier, thankfully. She followed the outer wall, trotting with a hint of a limp from the end of one column of vehicles to the next, looking for an office or control room where a teleport booth might be located.

Activity seemed to be increasing in the warehouse. She could hear voices all around her, and vehicles starting up, their engines revving, filling the air with exhaust gasses; something was going down - something big.

She started to cough. Her eyes were watering from the fumes, and her nose had become numb, she was about to try to find an exit, just to breathe clean air, when a clicking noise close behind startled her. She turned, and there was a reptile soldier with his rifle pointing down at her. Another stepped out from behind the row of tanks to her right. She looked around, seeking an avenue of escape, but men emerged from every direction - she was surrounded by armed lizards, each glaring at her along the barrel of a gun.

Tapestry sat down. "Meeow," she said, glumly.

## - Eleven -

### Ruth

With all four legs bound tightly together, Tapestry arrived back at the lizards' headquarters, helpless again, dangling upside-down from the barrel of a rifle that rested on the shoulder of one of the soldiers. They materialised from a short teleport near the lift doors. She noticed at once that the building was throbbing with activity, armed soldiers and civilians alike hurrying to be somewhere else, orders being shouted, tempers fraying.

There was a smell of cordite thick in the air, and the sounds of gunfire, large and small, near and far, were constant. The man carrying her had to push through the crowd to reach the elevator, with Tapestry swinging to and fro on his back. And there were tremors and nearby explosions. Once, as the lift ascended towards the penthouse, it shook violently, the lights went out and they stopped moving for a minute or two before continuing to the top.

They found the King in his office with some of his generals, studying maps laid out on his desk. Sah looked up as the lizard carrying Tapestry swung her off his shoulder and held her out to him like an offering.

The King grinned, humourlessly, and gestured to a coat-hook on the wall. "Hang her on that," he growled, "I'll deal with her when I'm done here." The soldier saluted and carried out the order, then departed.

The building was, by then, vibrating almost continuously, with deep thuds and occasional loud bangs shaking the walls; Tapestry felt them through the pain of her own weight pulling on injured muscles. Unable to move anything but her head and tail, she took in the situation as best as possible. From her position, looking across the oddly inverted room, Tapestry could see bright flashes from outside the windows, and realised that this was what she had seen from afar. Obviously, something big was happening; it appeared that the headquarters was under attack.

After some further debate, the generals departed, and the King turned to give Tapestry his malevolent attention. She felt him probing her brain, inserting thoughts and fears. A shiver tickled her back as he loomed over her. A scaly hand rose level with her helpless body, a long, pointed finger inches from her face. A vision of her flesh being split forced itself into her mind, her blood spurting from severed arteries.

"Well, now, little pussy cat," he hissed triumphantly, "perhaps I underestimated you and your little friend. You seem to have caused me all kinds of inconvenience. I think it's time I took the pleasure of ending your pathetic life." He extended one of his hooked claws and slowly dragged it through her fur from shoulder to thigh, scratching her skin, tormenting her, licking his lips. Then his mouth opened to reveal a row of small, pointed teeth and he leaned forward to engulf her head. She felt his hot breath on her face, heavy with the stink of decay, and she recoiled, trying to turn her head away.

He laughed, the gust of air so strong that it was almost like being struck by a hidden hand. "Don't think it is going to be that easy, pussy cat. I plan to have my fun with you first. Perhaps I will pull off your limbs, one by one. Yes? Or shall I peel off your skin, slowly, agonisingly?" He laughed again.

"Whatever you do to mee, Sah, I will still have the satisfaction of knowing that I helped to defeat your evil plans," she replied, sounding braver than she felt, and aware that he knew it.

"Oh, my plan will succeed, little one; of that there is no doubt. You have only delayed the inevitable," he grinned, his face again just inches from hers.

But at that moment another huge explosion suddenly ripped the air, very close, smashing the windows, ripping the blinds to tatters, filling the room instantly with smoke and debris. Tapestry was protected from the violence of the blast and the shower of shattered glass by the bulk of Sah's body, but he took the full force of it. He let out a bellowing cry of pain, and turned to see what had

happened. She saw large shards of glass embedded in his skin, the green blood already oozing and running down his back.

Leaving her hanging, he ran to the window and looked out. Tapestry could see yellow and red flames rising outside, and the thick smell of burning was sharp in her nose and throat. She felt heat radiating across the room.

Sah turned back to face her, his face contorted with pain and anger. "It seems that I shall not have the pleasure of killing you slowly after all. Instead I will just leave you here to cook in the fire created by your friends." His mouth opened in an insane parody of a laugh as he headed for a door at the far end of the room.

The temperature in the room rose quickly, the fumes thickened and the flames outside the window grew bigger, like waving ferns in some crazy jungle. It seemed that the whole building was ablaze, and she was trapped at the top, unable to break free from the cords that bound her. She knew she had only minutes to live, perhaps seconds, and hoped that the smoke would render her unconscious before the fire reached her. She could not morph while tied up, because her limbs would be torn apart, unable to expand beyond the confines of the bonds.

Above the roar and crashing of the fire, she heard a sound behind her, and managed to turn her head far enough to look. The door to the ante-room had opened and a head peered anxiously around; a human head, with blonde hair. Seeing that the King was gone, the owner of the head, one of the slaves, ran into the room, followed by a small white dog.

"Kong!" Tapestry cried in amazement.

The slave ran to her and quickly lifted her down from the wall. She laid her gently on the floor, then set about cutting the ropes with a knife she was carrying. "Tapestry, my name is Ruth," she panted. "I have brought you some clothes; Kong said you might be glad of them." She placed a garment similar to her own next to Tapestry, and stepped back. "The building is an inferno," she continued as the cat morphed into a young woman before her. "We cannot delay. We must get onto the roof and hope that help reaches us in time."

Tapestry, now fully transformed and quickly pulling on the robe, nodded. "Thank you for risking your life for mee, Ruth."

The girl smiled quickly, then turned and began to cross the room. "Follow me."

They ran together, Tapestry limping as fast as she could on legs that were both numb and painful, to the door by which Sah-Seh-Sah had departed. Beyond it was a flight of stairs which brought them out onto the roof.

All around them, flames leapt skywards from the four sides of the building with a roaring sound. It was hard to breathe - the air was being sucked away by the conflagration, and what remained was thick with smoke. Ruth took up a whistle that was hanging round her neck by a cord, and began to blow into it.

"I don't think anyone will hear that in all this din," Tapestry said, puzzled.

"It's not a whistle, silly," Ruth grinned. "It's a transmitter, powered by my breath." She looked up and, moments later, a helicopter appeared overhead, the downdraft from its blades clearing the smoke and providing some welcome cool, fresh air. "See?" she said. "The pilot was waiting for my signal."

The aircraft came lower, and settled onto the rooftop, a large hatch already open in its side, a crewman inside waving them to get in. Ruth scooped up Kong in her arms, and the two woman ran into the blast of wind from the rotors. Ruth passed the little dog up to the crewman, then she and Tapestry clambered up the step into the cavernous hold, and the great beast immediately rose again, like a monster from the fiery heart of a volcano.



## - Twelve -

### P'Tchek

The helicopter swept away from the blazing building, and the trio looked out of the hatch in amazement. It was hard to believe that they had survived it. The centre of the triangular tower from about halfway up was invisible behind a mass of smoke and flames. Aircraft were circling it, some engaged in dogfights, some firing shots into the building. Bright orange flashes appeared briefly, gunfire or explosions, it was impossible to tell.

"How did that happen?" she asked the crewman, nodding at the conflagration.

"One of our gunships was flying in towards the headquarters; the lizards hit the cockpit with a rocket," he answered grimly. "Everyone in it was killed, but the wreckage carried on, straight into the side of the building."

They all became quiet for a while, each deep in their own thoughts, until eventually the inferno faded from view behind them.

The crewman helped Tapestry to belt herself into a seat, and after thanking him, she took Kong from Ruth and hugged him close to her chest, kissing his face. "That was a great idea of yours," she said to him, "sending a grenade from Serpentes to deactivate the lizards' portal. You nearly got me too, but it was very effective."

"Well," the little dog said, "after you ported out, I contacted Canis Control to report what we had found. I gave them the co-ordinates, and told them that you had gone to investigate. They identified it as Calliopea, and said that it had been occupied by the lizards. I left the TG on transmit, to prevent any more consignments arriving, and saw the soldiers trying to port into the complex, and being sent straight back again, so I tossed in one of the hand grenades we found, to keep them company."

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After a short flight, the aircraft banked and turned, then descended to land in what appeared to have been a park, but was now a busy military base, with motor vehicles, aircraft, tanks and soldiers in a state of high activity.

Tapestry handed Kong back to Ruth, and they jumped out onto the grass, to be welcomed by a tall human in military uniform, who saluted. "Well done, Ruth," he said warmly, "and Agent Kong." Then he turned to Tapestry. "Agent Capricorn, I'm General P'Tchek - pleased to meet you." He held out a hand, which she accepted, mystified that he seemed to be aware of who everybody was. He gestured to a land-car waiting nearby: "Will you accompany me to our field office?"

As they climbed into the vehicle, Tapestry looked enquiringly at Ruth and Kong. "Hee knows you," she said, bluntly.

Ruth nodded. "We have been working together for some time." Seeing Tapestry's confusion, she continued, while they took their seats: "This is my world, Calliopea. We were a peaceful people, unprepared for attack, and when the lizards invaded about a year ago, they walked in unimpeded. They renamed it Reptilla and made us all slaves. Our resistance movement managed to make contact with the Security Council of this sector through a trading ship, and General P'Tchek has been building a task force to free us and arrest Sah-Seh-Sah ever since. Everything kicked off when Kong reported the lizards' plan to attack Earth."

"What about Sah?" Tapestry wanted to know. "Has he been caught?"

General P'Tchek shook his head. "Ruth told us that Sah was in the penthouse, and we saw a helicopter take off from the roof when the fire started. One of ours followed it, but saw it suddenly crash ... it just tumbled out of the air. My men landed and examined the wreckage, but found no sign of any occupants. The experts think it may have been carrying a mobile teleport, and everyone on board abandoned ship."

The car pulled up beside a large, camouflaged tent, and the driver leapt out and opened the door to let her passengers disembark. Ruth put Kong down on the grass, and he ran over to a tree to sniff and relieve himself. Ambulances were arriving and departing, and some men, sporting various bandages, were sitting around outside on canvas chairs.

"I would like my doctor to check you over, Agent Capricorn," the General ordered. "You have been through a lot, from what I have heard, and you look a mess."

She nodded, smiling wistfully at his frankness, as they entered the front flap of the tent, her mind flashing through her tortures of the last twenty-four hours. Inside was a full field hospital, with many beds already occupied by injured men and women. Some of the casualties were lizards, with grim expressions on their faces, flanked by armed guards.

The General led them to an inner room, which proved to be a small office, occupied by a tall, thin man wearing a white cotton coat. He looked up from the papers he was studying, peering over his glasses. "Ah, General, this is our special guest, Agent Capricorn, I presume?"

*'Special guest?'* thought Tapestry. *'How come everyone knows about mee?'*

"Yes indeed," the General beamed, indicating Tapestry with an open hand. "She has been badly beaten, and inhaled a lot of smoke; will you give her the once-over?"

"Of course." The doctor indicated an examination couch jutting from one wall. "Would you like to hop on there, please, Agent Capricorn?"

"I will take Ruth and Kong to my office," P'Tchek told the doctor. "Will you get an orderly to bring Tapestry to me when you're done?"

The doctor nodded, already looking into Tapestry's mouth.

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"How's the clean-up going?" Tapestry asked the General when she rejoined them fifteen minutes later.

"We're just about done," he replied. "Most of the lizard settlements were in occupied cities, each with a military base providing their power over the Calliopeans. When we take away their soldiers, they surrender without a fight. The people are already back in control of their planet." He smiled at Ruth, who beamed like the sun at noon.

"And Sah-Seh-Sah, what about him? Do you know where hee is, where hee came from?" Tapestry continued.

He shook his head. "No-one had heard of him before. We don't even know how he came into possession of inter-dimensional travel capability. Of course, we will be on the lookout for him from now on."

"So, what now for us?" she asked, looking at Kong.

"What would you like to do?" the General replied. "Kong is going home to Canis, and your leader has suggested that you take it easy for a while, give your body a chance to heal. I can port you anywhere you want to go."

"It would be nice to spend some time back home on Felidae," she said, feeling suddenly homesick. "I have some leave due. Yes, I would like to go home for a while."



## - Thirteen -

### Felidae

As the view through the glass of the portal changed from General T'Pchek's field HQ to the public library in her home town, Tapestry felt a warm glow of nostalgia flow through her. It was a year ago that she had ported out to take up her assignment on Earth, and she hadn't seen her family or friends since. Both her litter-sisters and one of her litter-brothers had been there, then, to see her off, along with her mother and others from the family; she wondered if anyone would show up today to welcome her back.

"Welcome home, Tapestry," said the technician as she stepped off the platen. She thanked him with a slow blink of her eyes and a twitch of her tail, then crossed to the door. In the large hall beyond, the foyer of the library building, there was only one person waiting for her, but it was the one she had hoped for, her youngest sibling, Geraldine.

They ran to greet each other, purring loudly. "Oh my, you have grown!" Tapestry exclaimed, looking proudly at her sister.

"No longer the gawky kitten with big paws," Geraldine grinned.

"I'll say," returned Tapestry. "I bet you have all the toms after you."

"Well, they try, but Father keeps them at bay."

At the mention of her father, Tapestry's joy evaporated. "Hee's still hanging around, then?" she said, bitterly.

"He shows his face when he feels like it," Geraldine sighed. "Seems to turn up just in time to do the most harm."

They lapsed into silence, each with her own memories.

Most Felidaean tom cats do the right thing, they leave the females to get on with bringing up their kittens, but Tapestry's seemed to derive pleasure from returning to the family periodically to throw his considerable weight around. Every member of his family had experienced his brutality, and though her mother and the other adult females did their best to stand up to him, he was too strong and mean even for them ... he took sadistic pleasure in beating those smaller and weaker than himself. As soon as each new generation was weaned, he threw the boy kittens out to fend for themselves, and made the girl kitten's lives so unbearable that most of them left as soon as they could, just to get away from him. Then he went around his harem again, impregnating every viable female, to keep them constantly in childbirth.

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Outside the library, Geraldine had a car waiting to take Tapestry home, where she planned to stay for the first few days of her leave. When they were settled into the comfortable seats, Geraldine instructed the car's computer where to go, and it began to slide forwards, easing into the flow of traffic, then accelerating. These driverless vehicles were still the best means of transport around town, capable of travelling at high speeds, powered and controlled by technology that sprang from the developments in teleportation research.

Soon they were in the suburbs, and alighting onto the pavement outside the house where Tapestry grew up. It was a simple, single-storey building with a pretty garden, as were all the surrounding properties. The car whizzed off back to the rank, and the two girls walked up the path and into the family home.

As always, the place was filled with life. Kittens played, babies mewed, and mother cats helped each other to do whatever had to be done, while chatting constantly with each other.

When Tapestry entered, with Geraldine holding back behind, a whole swarm of cats, young and old, ran to greet her. She was the girl who had broken free, travelled, not only out of their town, but

across space to another world. Amidst all the purring and the quarrelling over who pushed whom, Tapestry saw her mother, standing outside the circle, letting everyone else go first; she never changed, it was her way. Tapestry gently pushed the little ones aside and broke from the crowd.

Mother and daughter, reunited at last, purred and kissed each other. "I heard you got into a bit of trouble," the older cat said in a tone that showed her concern, but which also hinted a little at censure.

Tapestry nodded, aware that her mother thought that this business with I.T.M.A. was not what a young female cat should be doing. "It was a tough assignment. I took a bit of a beating, and didn't feel that I had achieved much, but everyone is saying it was a big success."

"Well, we're pleased to see you, and relieved you weren't seriously injured. Are you coming home to settle down now?" There it was again. Her family, and especially her mother, couldn't understand why she had chosen to leave, to train for the dangerous life of an I.T.M.A. agent on another world.

"No, mother. It's my job, what I have chosen to do. It's important."

The old lady looked tired. She had reared six litters of kittens, and suffered the violence of the tom who had fathered them all. "If that's what you want to do, dear," she said, sadly, "I can't change your mind. But I worry about you constantly."

Tapestry kissed her again. "I'm sorry, mother. I don't want to make your life any harder than it is. I hope you are proud of mee."

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Before her mother could reply, the mood in the room suddenly changed, and a fearful silence fell; it was as though a shadow passed over all present, and every eye turned to the entrance. There, menacing as ever, stood the huge black tom that they all feared ... Satan (the name he had given himself), Tapestry's father.

All the kittens ran from the room but one, a tiny grey creature hardly more than six months old. It cowered on the floor at his feet, urinating with fear, too terrified to move. Satan glared down at the helpless infant with disgust. "Get this useless garbage out of my sight and bring me some food," he growled.

Tapestry's mother made to approach the kitten, but Tapestry spoke out. "No mother, let the kitten stay. The only garbage here is that useless lump of lard." She took a step closer to Satan and stared him in the eye. "You are not welcome in this house," she said. "Go away and leave us in peace."

The big tom's response was to bend down and pick up the kitten in his mouth and, with a flick of his head, throw it across the room. The little ball of fluff bounced twice on the carpet and came to rest at his mother's feet. He picked himself up and shook his head, then retreated behind her legs, peering out, anxiously.

Satan glared down at Tapestry. He was a full head and shoulders taller than her, and about three times her weight ... a giant. "Who do you think you are to tell me what to do," he spat.

"Don't you recognise mee, father?" she replied. "Tapestry Capricorn, five years old now, but still bearing the scars you gave mee."

"It seems you need some more scars. Perhaps then you will learn some respect," he growled. With that, he pounced.

Tapestry was not surprised ... she was familiar with his easy violence, and she saw his muscles tense before he sprang. When he landed where she had been, expecting to find her under his paws, she was not there.

"I'm over heere," she said, grimly, from her new position, off to one side. "You'll have to do better than that, old cat, if you want to teach mee respect."

His lips curled back, revealing long yellow teeth. She saw him shift his weight to strike at her with one front leg, and she tensed ready to move aside again. But as his paw swept towards her, and as she went to dodge away, her injured muscles ... nearly recovered from the beatings she suffered on Calliopea, but yet to be completely healed ... let her down; pain stabbed through her left

leg as she put weight on it, and she didn't move fast enough. His paw, with claws extended, slammed into her shoulder, knocking her flying, digging into her flesh and drawing blood.

As she scrambled to her feet, ignoring the fiery pain from the new wound, knowing from experience that he would immediately follow-up the move, he pounced, his mouth open, aiming for her neck. This time, though, she was able to sidestep, slashing out with her own claws as he careered past, and heard him grunt with pain and surprise. He spun around as quickly as his bulk allowed, and lunged again, and, as before, she avoided him and gouged his flank as it presented itself.

He skidded to a halt and turned to face her, an angry yowl rising from his throat. There was hatred in his eyes, but she noticed that he was hesitating, having to think about his next move. He hadn't expected any opposition, wasn't used to it. He feinted to the left, intending to jump instead to the right, and she began to respond, then saw through his plan and stood firm. Confused, he changed his mind. She could see that he wanted to leap again, but was now uncertain.

Her years of training with I.T.M.A. had given her the ability and confidence to face anything, even her childhood tormentor. She was not only stronger in mind, now, but also in body, lithe and lean, even allowing for her recent injuries. Exercises and combat training, in both cat and human form, had shown her how to respond, how to think, how to anticipate, and how to make her opponent do what she wanted him to do.

"You seee," she said, goading him, "I don't respect you, I never will. I despise you for the bully you are." Deliberately, she turned her back on him and started to walk away.

She knew he would respond at once, knew he would pounce. She even knew how many steps she could take before he landed on her. At exactly the right moment, she rolled onto her back, ready to attack his exposed belly as it descended towards her. He was totally unprepared for a frontal assault, and as his great bulk fell, out of control, just before his weight squashed her, she sank her teeth into his throat and at the same moment ripped at his abdomen with the claws of her back legs ... left, right! Just twice, and very carefully controlled. It was the classic move by which cats kill larger prey, but administered this time in such a way as to be less than fatal. Nevertheless, his tender belly flesh was slashed open and he yelled with pain. Although the breath was knocked from her when his enormous weight landed, she knew that she had struck the decisive blow.

He threw himself to one side to escape, and she released her mouth from his neck to allow him, rolling to her feet in the opposite direction, in case he retaliated, licking his blood from her lips. But he crouched flat on his shredded belly, glaring at her in amazement, his blood spreading on the carpet where he lay, panting with pain and exertion. The growl was still hissing through his lips, but he knew that he was beaten.

Tapestry felt no joy, but neither did she feel sympathy. She had seen the result of his anger too often, on herself, on her siblings and on her mother. She took the two steps that brought her to stand over him, glaring down into his eyes; he looked up at her in fear. She said nothing, just stared at him.

"I am badly injured," he whimpered.

"Then go find medical help," she replied without emotion.

"You are a heartless witch," he hissed bitterly.

"If I were heartless, I would have killed you just now," she hissed. "I could have, you know, easily; I am trained for it. As it is, you can leave. But you are never to return, and if I get word that you have been back here, or have bothered any member of my family again, I will come back and find you. Do you understand what I am saying?"

He did not answer, but dragged himself painfully to his feet and limped out of the room.

## - Fourteen -

### Earth

Two weeks later, with an unexpected sense of relief, Tapestry returned to duty. She arrived at the I.T.M.A. portal in central London, and took the train to Hemingway, wearing new clothes and carrying nothing but a small lunch pack. Sitting in the carriage, watching through the raindrops on the window as the green and brown fields slid past, she found herself looking forward to seeing her patch again.

Oddly, it now felt more like home than the place of her birth. Her leave on Felidae had been pleasant, and her family had pampered her, almost worshipped her after the showdown with her father, but ... but what? Why did this ordinary, semi-industrial town mean so much to her?

It couldn't be the weather, which was unpredictable (to say the least) and sometimes downright nasty; and, although the summer had been hot, it seemed to be over in the blink of an eye. She emerged from the station and looked up at the sky. The rain had stopped, and as she sniffed the autumn breeze it was cool and clean, hinting at the first chill of winter.

After she had changed back to cat and stowed her clothes, she sat on her favourite wall on the Latchfield Estate, still musing. A woman passing, pushing a small child in a buggy, spoke kindly to her, and she replied, purring, rubbing her head against the offered hand. Friendships? She had made friends here, it was true, but she also had many on Felidae, and she was as fond of them as any here on Earth.

No, it was not the friendships that made it special.

Really, it was only duty that had brought her here. Not quite random chance ... I.T.M.A. had a bigger presence on Earth than any other single planet in all the known dimensions, and had posted her to this Midlands town to fill a vacancy ... but Hemingway was not special in any way; she could just as easily have been sent to Paris or Buenos Aires, or even another planet entirely.

Perhaps it was because she was needed here? She smiled to herself; *'They do not even know why you are heere!'* she chided.

No, she was not needed, although her job was important.

And then it dawned on her: it was nothing external, at all ... it was inside her. Here on Earth she had realised her self-worth.

If she had stayed on Felidae, she would have been comfortable, would have raised a family, the same as her mother and generations before her. She would have lived, and given life, and it would have been rewarding and worthwhile and satisfying, and she would never have discovered her limits.

This latest assignment had come close to being her last, and she had been ready to die, but the cause was worth it. The wheels she had helped to set in motion would have completed the task, whether she was there to see it or not, and her life was nothing compared with the lives that were saved that day.

This town was a metaphor for her achievements, her role in the greater scheme of things. It was small, like her, but they had both grown through their involvement in building something worthwhile ... a future.

She was just one small link in a chain that was bringing together intelligent beings on millions of worlds across unmeasurable dimensions, but every link is vital and contributes to the strength of the whole, and grows stronger itself as a result.

She jumped down from the wall and headed towards town. There was a job to be done.



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