

The Possessor Wars

Book 2

The Outcasts

Chad Spencer

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Part 1

WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

“Every human being should strive to do better and to be better. If we don’t have goals to achieve, what’s the point of existing? Of course, achieving your goals always brings its own challenges. And sometimes ... sometimes it launches us into whole new worlds.” *Thoughts on Life*, Hugh Benson, p. 300. © 2879 Megalon Interstellar Media, All rights reserved in this and all other universes, parallel or unparallel realities, unrealities, and planes of existence.

“Please try not to be so nervous, Harriet.”

Harriet wasn't listening to her mother. She scanned the wide reception area, her bright green eyes searching apprehensively for Hugh. Nervously, she ran her hands over her waist-length, flaming red hair to make sure it was all in place. She noticed several boys looking at her and grew increasingly anxious.

‘Did Hugh and I really make the right decision?’ she wondered. ‘This part of the arcology is so different from what we know.’

The arcology Harriet stood in was a tall building on the plains of the American Midwest with many other arcologies. It was 3000 stories high, cylindrical, and a mile wide. Each arcology housed millions of people, with apartments, schools, stores, recreation centers, and more.

Her father interrupted her thoughts. “Harriet, Earth to Harriet. Are you there, Harriet?” His green eyes flashed mischievously.

“What? Oh, sorry Daddy. I was trying to see if Hugh and his family are here yet,” she explained.

“He'll be here,” her father soothed as he gently placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “Don't worry.”

A small, mostly spherical robot drifted toward her through the air, lowered itself to her eye level, pointed its bulging camera lens at her, and asked “Harriet Brightway? Are you Harriet Brightway?”

Harriet recoiled a bit; she wasn't expecting to be met by a robot. “Yes,” she replied hesitantly. “I'm Harriet Brightway.”

“I am here to escort you and your family to the Assembly Hall,” the robot told her as it pointed one of its thin, three-fingered hands to the left. “Please follow me.”

Harriet glanced upward at her father, who nodded. Taking that as its cue, the robot drifted toward a long corridor. Harriet and her family followed.

“Aren't you excited?” Harriet's older sister, Ruth Ann, asked as they wended their way through the crowd.

Harriet shrugged. “I guess. But I feel so out of place here.”

Harriet's mother put her arm around Harriet's shoulders. “It's ok sweetheart. We'll help you get settled in. I'm sure you'll make lots of friends here.”

“Look at how everyone's dressed,” Harriet moaned, pointing at the elaborate clothes the other students wore. Looking woefully at her own plain outfit, she complained. “I stick out like a sore thumb.”

“Don't worry, Harriet,” her father broke in. “Once school starts you'll be wearing the same uniform as everyone else. It'll be ok. And if you need some fancy clothes for after school activities, we'll get you some.” He smiled reassuringly.

Harriet hugged her father as they walked. “We can't afford that Daddy. Not after buying those expensive uniforms.”

“You don't worry about that,” her father instructed. “That's my job.”

“Rick, you spoil these girls,” Harriet's mother chided.

“That’s what dads are for,” he chuckled happily.

The robot guided the Brightway family into the Assembly Hall and indicated the front row of the ornate hall. Spotlights floated near the vaulted ceiling and shined down on the stage. The robot showed them to their seats and asked, “Will that be all?”

“Yes,” Harriet’s father responded.

“Good day to you then,” the robot said. It drifted away through the Assembly Hall doors.

“Oh look,” Harriet’s mother called out, “here come the Bensons.”

Gazing again toward the large double doors, Harriet saw Hugh Benson and his family coming through the crowd. A robot identical to the one that greeted them was guiding the Bensons to the front of the hall. Hugh trailed timidly after the mechanoid. He ran his hand through his close-cropped, sandy-colored hair. His parents walked right behind him.

When they arrived at the front, the robot escorted them to the seats next to Harriet and her family. Like their robot, it asked, “Will that be all?”

“Yes,” Hugh’s father responded.

“Good day to you then,” the robot said. It drifted away through the Assembly Hall doors.

“Hi, Hugh,” Harriet greeted as Hugh slid his slight frame into the seat next to hers. “Your robot said almost exactly what ours did.”

“Same programming,” Hugh mumbled back as he fidgeted nervously in his seat. “Gives them all the same behavior.”

“What’s the matter, Hugh? You look like you’re expecting someone to start throwing grenades at you.”

“I would like that a lot better,” Hugh joked awkwardly. “I feel like I’m on another planet, not 2100 floors higher in the building I was born in. Do you see what they’re wearing here? And why do all the guys have long hair? Their heads look like mushroomrooms. Don’t they know that’s not what guys are supposed to look like?”

Trying to hide her own uncertainties, Harriet scolded, “Hugh, don’t be so fussy. Their hair isn’t very long—just a little over their ears. Long hair was in down on our level back when my uncle was in high school. He had a pony tail down to the middle of his back. Styles change. You shouldn’t get worked up just because the hairstyles up here are different.”

“Everything’s different here. I’m not sure coming up here was a good idea.”

With bravado she didn’t feel, Harriet scolded, “We worked too hard to get here to give up and go home now Hugh. Just think how much better our educations will be here than down in our old school.”

“I suppose,” Hugh agreed. He didn’t sound convinced.

An attractive middle-aged woman approached them and asked, “Are you Harriet and Hugh?” They nodded. Extending her hand, she introduced herself. “I’m Beth Scrivener, your Supervising Instructor here at the Westfald Academy. You’ll be in my homeroom for your Core Classes, Group Interaction, and Personal Study Sessions. Here are your student packets.” She handed them each a box that was not much bigger than a loaf of bread.

The smiling Mamsen Scrivener informed them, “They’ll be introducing you at the start of the orientation. It was Principal McBride’s idea. She’s so excited to have the two of you here. I’m afraid you’re the biggest celebrities she’s had as students.”

Apprehensively, Harriet and Hugh glanced at each other. “We’re not celebrities,” Harriet objected. “Neither of us can understand why all the media is making such a fuss about us. We’re just a couple of kids from the low end of the arcology.”

Mamsen Scrivener patted Harriet’s arm. “You’re too modest, Harriet. Your science project last year was nothing less than amazing. You figured out what hosts of experts couldn’t. Principal McBride is so happy that your parents decided to send you here to our school. You know you could have gone somewhere better. I heard that the Martian Institute of Technology made you an offer.”

“Well, yes,” Harriet admitted, embarrassed. “They did, but we didn’t want to leave our families. I’m only 16, and Hugh’s 15.”

“Well, we here at the Westfald Academy are very glad you two decided on our school.” Mamsen Scrivener noticed a woman taking the stage. “Oops,” she said hurriedly, “there’s Mamsen McBride now. It looks like she’s about ready to start. After the orientation, could you two please meet me out in the foyer with your families?” They nodded their agreement and Mamsen Scrivener scooted off toward the stairs that ascended onto the stage. She took her place near the pear-shaped Mamsen McBride.

“Welcome new and returning Westfald Academy students,” Mamsen McBride gushed. “We’re so happy to see all of you—especially our two new students Harriet Brighway and Hubert Benson. Stand up, please, both of you.”

Harriet and Hugh stood, both flushing with embarrassment. Spotlights drifted down from the ceiling and focused on the both of them. A camerabot wafted toward them and aimed its lens right into Harriet’s face. It was all Harriet could do to keep herself from crawling under her seat.

Mamsen McBride continued, “A big hand everyone for the two individuals who solved the mystery of the tragic wormhole collapse two years ago.” She clapped enthusiastically while the crowd copied her with a polite smattering of applause.

Hugh sat quickly back in his seat, so Harriet sat down too. “I don’t want to be here,” Harriet heard Hugh mutter. Silently, Harriet agreed.

“We hope you’ll all find the Westfald Academy to be everything you were looking for in an educational institution,” Mamsen McBride continued as she gazed at them almost adoringly. Harriet forced a stiff smile back at her.

“And now, our Accelerated Program instructor, Mamsen Scrivener, will provide a special presentation introducing the Westfald Academy to all of our incoming students.”

Mamsen Scrivener stood and began a 3D video presentation about the school. It started with an overview of the campus. “... and here is the astrophysics lab. Right next to that is our robotics lab. Those of you taking robotics and neurocomputing classes will do your courses here. Just down the corridor is our music department.” Too nervous to concentrate, Harriet stopped listening.

After Mamsen Scrivener’s presentation, a stick-like female teacher talked about the uniforms, dress code, and behavior code. “The Westfald Academy sounds like a pretty strict school,” Harriet fretted.

The next presentation, given by a square-jawed male teacher in sweats, covered the recreational and physical education facilities. "Our students can go out for virtually any sport," he told the gathering as he gestured enthusiastically with his meaty hands. "We have artificial reality programs that cover pretty much every known sport or exercise. We currently have 180 AR pods in our PE department's three AR suites. Our pods come with a special feature that tells the occupant's body to release the master hormone that humans produce when they exercise. The occupant's body then responds by building muscle tissue, burning fat, and giving the occupant all of the other benefits of real exercise. So the more you work out in our programs, the better shape you'll be in." He waited for everyone to be impressed. When no one was, he droned on, but Harriet didn't listen.

"At least there's something worth coming to this school for," Hugh muttered. "People like us could never afford time in an AR suite."

Harriet didn't want to tell him that she'd been in an AR suite a few times when her family went on virtual vacations.

Another teacher gave a presentation on what to do on their first day of school. "Your first and most important task is to find your homeroom. That's where your Supervising Instructor and learning group will meet every morning before you start your various classes. Your Supervising Instructor will help you with your adjustment to the Westfald Academy. In addition, he or she will assist you with your homework, guide you in your selection of classes each semester, and be your primary instructor for your Core classes. Supervising Instructors have three to five learning groups in their homerooms. Each learning group has one male and one female group leader. Your learning group is composed of students with similar abilities and interests. You'll be in a lot of the same classes with your group members. Everyone in a learning group works together for the common good of all, and your groups will succeed together. So it's important that you do your best to contribute to all of the group's learning activities."

"That doesn't sound good to me," Hugh complained quietly.

'I've never known him to be this negative,' Harriet thought. 'He's usually so upbeat about everything.' But Harriet remembered that when Hugh skipped a grade in Jr. High he became a target for a bully named Dirk Highborne. 'I guess that kind of experience can make anyone afraid of moving up in school,' Harriet mused.

The teachers droned on, giving presentation after presentation. Harriet felt overwhelmed. Glancing at her father, she saw him look over and give a reassuring smile. Somehow that made things seem better.

It took an hour and a half, but the orientation finally ended. With their families, Harriet and Hugh made their way out of the Assembly Hall and into the foyer. Mamsen Scrivener arrived promptly, with two students in tow.

"I'd like you to meet Leonardo de Medici and Tiffany Montague," she said to Harriet and Hugh. "They'll be your learning group leaders for this school year."

"I'm very glad to meet both of you," Leonardo said, his crystal blue eyes gazing directly into Harriet's. "It's amazing to be in the same study group with you. I hope we can all get along really well." He offered his muscular hand, which she shook somewhat timidly. Leonardo then shook hands with Hugh rather quickly.

"Uh ... yes," Harriet stammered, trying to be polite. "I'm sure we'll do our best to help the group be successful. Won't we Hugh?" Hugh nodded silently.

“Is it true that you have an IQ of 235?” Tiffany broke in, directing her question at Hugh.

Hugh looked as if he was about to have a heart attack. Other than Harriet, girls rarely spoke to him—especially not girls as stunning as Tiffany. “It ... it’s not that big of a deal,” he replied almost apologetically.

“Hubert doesn’t like to boast,” Hugh’s mother interjected, “But it’s true, he’s been tested as having the highest IQ of anyone alive.” She beamed proudly. “But, Harriet is almost the same, aren’t you dear? Isn’t your IQ 200?”

“215,” Harriet’s father announced proudly. Harriet wished she could disappear.

“215? Wow,” remarked Leonardo. “That’s way more than you, isn’t it Tiff? Weren’t you telling us at the end of last year that you were tested at 166? Didn’t that make you the smartest girl in the school until Harriet showed up?”

Tiffany’s face went hard. Leonardo smiled slyly.

Mamsen Scrivener interrupted, “Well, Leo, that’s not really all that important, is it? What’s important is that you and Tiffany do your best to help Harriet and Hugh to adjust and succeed.” She sounded very stern.

“Yes, Mamsen Scrivener,” Leonardo replied almost meekly. But he winked and smiled a secret smile at Harriet when Mamsen Scrivener turned to talk to the adults.

“If you wouldn’t mind,” she said to the four parents, “I’d like to briefly discuss a few things about your children’s educations. Leonardo and Tiffany can show Hugh and Harriet around the school. We’ll all meet back here in about forty minutes. Ok, Leonardo?”

“Sure Mamsen Scrivener. We’ll be glad to give them a tour,” he agreed. To Harriet, he said, “Let’s go to the Student Commons first.” He pointed off to the left. Harriet glanced at her father, who gave a small nod.

Harriet took a hesitant step in the direction Leonardo indicated. Hugh and Tiffany moved to follow her as Leonardo walked beside her. She smiled up at him, admiring his broad muscular shoulders.

As they walked, Harriet observed that Tiffany was tall, nearly six feet. Literally looking down at Harriet, Tiffany demanded, “So Harriet, why did you and Hugh decide to do an analysis of the hypergate failure for your school science project? That’s a little out of the league of schools that far down in the arcology isn’t it?”

Harriet saw a sour look pass briefly across Leonardo’s face. She answered, “We had a friend go missing in the wormhole collapse. It ... motivated us to find out what really happened.”

Leonardo gazed down at her sympathetically. “Was this a close friend?” he queried gently.

Hugh answered for her, “He started the robot club we were all in. We were repairing and selling robots to buy lessons we couldn’t get at school.”

Harriet added, “Yes, he was a really close friend. His name was Jeff Bowman. Without him, we never would have made it into a place like this.”

“Well then I guess it’s lucky for us that you had such a good friend,” Leonardo commented warmly. “Did you ever find out what happened to him?”

Dropping her face downward, Harriet tried to answer, but couldn’t. Hugh jumped in, “No. He was lost in the disaster. A lot of rescue ships and unmanned probes have

been sent out. Every couple of months, they find more survivors scattered around on planets or in space in cryogenic stasis. But they never found anyone from Jeff's ship."

"So you decided to find out for yourselves what caused the hypergate to fail and the wormhole to collapse?" Leonardo prompted the silent Harriet, but she still couldn't answer through the weight of her emotions.

Nodding, again Hugh replied for her, "Yeah. The news reports just didn't make sense. Hypergates generate stable artificial wormholes that are kind of like a tunnel through hyperspace. The experts all said the collapse was a failure in the hypergate. But once it's generated, there's no reason for a wormhole to break apart into so many fragments. Our science project showed that it couldn't have been a gate failure. The only thing that could cause what happened would be a series of gravitational bombs inside the wormhole."

"I don't see why they put you on the news for that," Tiffany snipped, ruffling her perfectly styled curls.

Glancing sourly at her over his shoulder, Leonardo told her, "Because it means that it was sabotage, Tiffany. Nearly 28,000 people were lost in the wormhole collapse. Less than a quarter of them have been found. Harriet and Hugh's science project showed it was some kind of attack. The Federated Alliance reopened their investigation because of these two. They have Rangers all over Alliance space trying to track down who did it. There's a Congressional committee and everything."

Tiffany accused, "I guess you two are pretty happy."

"Happy?" Harriet shot back hotly. "Jeff is gone. His whole family is gone with him. Lots of other people are gone too. Some of them have been found dead. There's nothing to be happy about."

"It got you into this school," Tiffany retorted.

Hugh countered, "I think we would both trade away the chance to go to this school if we could have our friend back."

Tiffany's lips compressed and her eyes narrowed. She asked, "But you were on all the 3V news shows. I think you liked that pretty well."

'I think I'm going to strangle her if she doesn't shut up,' thought Harriet hotly. Not trusting herself to answer, she silently clenched her teeth.

Hugh retorted, "Like I said, we'd trade it all away if we could have our friend back. Being on the 3V isn't anything great."

"How noble," Tiffany commented dryly.

Leonardo interjected, "Colored your hair lately Tiff?"

"What do you mean?" Tiffany demanded acidly, "This is my natural color."

"Oh yeah," Leonardo replied, "I keep forgetting that. It just seems to me that it was darker when we were in elementary school."

"No," Tiffany denied heatedly, "It's always been this color."

"My mistake," Leonardo apologized insincerely. Harriet saw Tiffany turn away and fume silently.

"Here we are," Leonardo said as he indicated the scene in front of them. "This is the Student Commons. The food court is over there. You can buy almost anything there that you could want to eat."

The Student Commons looked more like a luxury café than a part of a school. The wide room sported a high, vaulted ceiling that was bathed with brightness from re-

cessed lights simulating natural sunlight. Chairs, tables, benches, and real, live potted plants were scattered across the wide room. Around the outer wall were booths with holographic signs displaying menus and ads. The scene was trimmed with large potted plants and trees.

“All of the corridors in the school radiate out from the Student Commons,” Leonardo informed them. “The administration offices are down that way. The science classes are over there. PE, art, and stuff like that are down that green corridor. Music classes are down the light blue one. You probably won’t get lost.”

They were interrupted by a tinkling from Tiffany’s purse. “Oops. There’s my comPod,” she said. Pulling out a thin, flat, rectangular object that was about 5 inches long and 3 inches wide, Tiffany cradled the device in her hand and the object displayed the image of a crisp, middle-aged woman. “What?” Tiffany asked the woman. “Oh, sure Alice, I’ll be right there.”

Harriet was surprised because there was no sound, just the image of the woman talking. She wondered how Tiffany could hear what the woman was saying. Glancing questioningly at Hugh, Harriet saw him tap the lower part of his ear and then point at Tiffany. Looking back at Tiffany, Harriet noticed that she was wearing colorful, but oddly-shaped, earrings. Then she understood. The earrings had tiny speakers in them that only Tiffany could hear.

Returning the comPod to her purse, Tiffany told them dryly, “It’s been great, but I gotta go. Daddy’s treating us to a quick vacation in the Biodome Belt before school starts and our housekeeper’s taking me shopping first. Later.” Tiffany shot them a tight-lipped, stilted smile and pranced airily away.

As they watched her go, Harriet asked Leonardo, “Is she always like that?”

“Not always,” he replied. “She’s laying it on thick for you. Until you showed up, she was the smartest person in school and she made sure everyone knew it. She’s not the kind of girl that takes well to being second best.”

“I guess not,” Harriet commented dourly. Then she asked, “She has a human housekeeper? Not an android or robot?”

Leo answered, “Most people around here own some robots, but they also have some humans working for them. Usually the servants’ families have been working for their employer’s families for generations.”

Apparently Hugh was more interested in her device. “What was that thing?” he asked. “Some kind of gridPhone?”

Obviously attempting to hide his surprise, Leo replied, “It’s a comPod. They’ve been popular for a long time. It’s smarter than a gridPhone. You don’t run apps on it. Each one comes with its own AI. So the AI does everything you tell it to instead of you running apps like on a gridPhone. That was her family’s AI there on the screen.”

Surprised, Harriet exclaimed, “It wasn’t a real person?”

“Naw,” Leo drawled, “her family’s AI has had that avatar forever. But Tiffany doesn’t change it because her mother picked it out.” He seemed to think that explained everything.

Harriet flushed red. ‘Leo probably thinks we’re from the Stone Age,’ she thought.

Hugh, however, seemed unfazed and very interested in the technology available in this part of the arcology. He abruptly asked Leonardo, “What about the AR suites?”

They talked about AR classes in the orientation meeting. If they have so many AR classes here, why do they use human teachers instead of cyberteachers?"

"At the Westfald Academy," Leonardo explained, "they think that you get the best education when you have human teachers. Humans can react to your needs better, interact better, and all that stuff. That's what they say anyway. I don't know. It wouldn't much matter to me, but all the good colleges look for people with both AR and human-taught classes. So my parents put me here."

"Leonardo?" Hugh asked, abruptly changing the subject. "Do you know that guy over there?"

The boy he was pointing at leaned against a wall on the other side of the Student Commons. He seemed intently interested in something in his hand. What struck Harriet as unusual was the long, ratty overcoat he wore. People who lived in arcologies neither needed nor wore coats. Other than in 3V programs, she had never actually seen anyone wearing a heavy coat like that. Even if he hadn't been wearing the faded tan coat, his shoulder length, white-blond hair would have made him stand out in this crowd.

"No," Leonardo told Hugh. "I've never seen him before. The way he looks, I doubt he's a student here. Why do you ask?"

"I think I saw him scanning us with a handheld scanner," Hugh informed them.

Before Leonardo could answer, the blond youth glanced over his shoulder at them and then disappeared around a corner.

Leonardo pulled a small round object out of his pocket and put it to his ear. Harriet heard the beep-bee-booping of dialing emanating from the device.

"Hi, Security? This is Leonardo de Medici. I think we've got someone on campus that isn't a student. A description? Male. About 17 or 18. Shoulder length blond hair that's really blond—almost white. He's wearing a beat-up, light tan overcoat. Yeah, an overcoat. Seriously. I don't know, maybe he's from Outside. And we think he just scanned us with a scanner. Huh? No, it isn't a joke. Look, I remember the noodle incident too but I was in 7th grade then. I swear we saw this guy. Can't you send someone to check it out? Thanks." He returned the device to his pocket.

"Was that thing a comPod?" Hugh blurted out.

"Kind of," Leonardo replied pulling the device from his pocket again.

"How do you dial it?"

"You don't. It's one of the new mindpods."

Both Harriet and Hugh stared at him blankly.

"You haven't heard of a mindpod? It's the latest thing. It scans the brain of its owner and figures out what the electrical impulses mean. All you have to do is think of the name of the person or place you want to call and it calls them for you. And it comes with an AI that talks to you and does things for you, just like a comPod. But the AI talks to you in your head and you can think your orders to it. It's almost as good as having a datacrown."

"A datacrown?" Harriet wondered silently. But she didn't ask Leonardo about it for fear of embarrassment.

Hugh was fascinated with the gadget. He seemed to want to ask more about it, but he was interrupted by the sound of shouting. Across the Student Commons, a group of guys were pushing a younger student around. Taunting the slender boy they sur-

rounded, the older students pulled at a box he carried. When they knocked it out of his hands, it burst open, causing art supplies to cascade onto the ground. Laughing, the boy's tormentors scooped up the supplies and began throwing them across the courtyard.

Before she knew what she was doing, Harriet was in motion. Anger flaring inside her, she stomped over to the group of bullies. But just when she was about to start yelling at them, an idea struck her. Changing to a nonchalant gait, Harriet sidled up to the group.

"Wow," she said to the younger student. "You must be quite a fighter if all these guys are afraid of you."

The boy froze, staring at her in confusion.

"We're not afraid of that little throdworm," one of the older students snapped at her.

"You must be," Harriet countered. "None of you will stand up to him alone."

Now the group zeroed in on her.

"What are you," one demanded, "his girlfriend?"

"Well," Harriet quipped coyly, "I'm always interested in strong guys. Not guys that have to run in packs like little Delarian sharkrats."

One of the group strode toward her menacingly. "Listen you little riklet. You better mind your own business if you know what's good for you."

"Riklet?" Harriet mocked. "Isn't a riklet a small bird that digs into your skull and eats your brains? I'd think someone from the fancy Westfald Academy would be smart enough to come up with something better than that."

"Shut up."

"Shut up? Wow, what a stunning comeback," Harriet flounced her long, red mane of wavy hair. "What are you going to do about it anyway? Hit me? What you're saying is that you're so big and brave that you're going to push around a girl that's a foot shorter than you and probably ninety pounds lighter? What do you do when someone your own size comes around, hide behind your mommy's skirt?"

One of the guys grabbed Harriet by the arm. Behind her, she heard Leonardo's determined footsteps approaching. Before Leonardo could intervene, one of the bullies spoke. "Let go of her, Jack. That's the girl that was on the news."

"That's right," Harriet shot back. "What do you think's going to happen if you do anything to me? Won't that get you thrown out of here permanently? At the very least, your name and picture will be all over the 3V news. Can you hear the headlines? 'Westfald Academy Student Assaults the Smartest Girl Alive on Her First Visit to School.' Kind of makes you wonder what company would ever hire a guy who got in the news for beating up a girl, doesn't it? But I guess you're not worrying about what will happen to you after you graduate, are you? Let me tell you, there's plenty of room on the streets Outside the arcology for a guy like you."

Jack released her arm. Her mention of Outside shocked him. He backed away. His friends followed them, leaving the courtyard.

The young art student stood frozen for a moment or two after they left. Then he offered his hand. "Thanks. Thanks a lot. I'm Will Ellis. I know who you are."

Harriet shook Will's hand. Forcing a smile, she replied, "I'm glad to help out Will. Now I've got to go."

Abruptly turning, she strode hurriedly past Hugh and Leonardo. They trailed after her. When they got around the corner, Harriet stopped and leaned against a wall. She folded her arms around herself and stared at the ground. Then slowly, she let herself slide downward until she was sitting. Silently, she started shaking. Leonardo and Hugh flanked her on either side.

“Are you all right?” Leonardo demanded.

In a tight, hushed voice, Harriet answered. “I’m ok.” She let her hair fall around her face so he couldn’t see that she was crying. “I need to get out of here.” Shaking, she climbed to her feet, but staggered a little.

“Harriet, let me help you,” Leonardo offered reassuringly. He put his arm around her to steady her. “You were so amazing. It was like you were on fire. You made *those* guys look like a bunch of throodworms.”

He surprised Harriet by laughing briefly. “I grew up with those guys. They go after anyone new. I’ve never seen anyone handle them like you did. You’re amazing, Harriet.”

Steadied by Leonardo, Harriet tottered back toward the Assembly Hall with Hugh in tow. About halfway there, she felt better. Wiping away her tears, she told Leonardo, “I’m ok. I don’t need any more help walking. But thanks.”

Leonardo smiled and released her.

“I think it’s probably time to go back to your parents” Leonardo suggested.

“Yeah ... I guess you’re right,” Harriet agreed.

Leonardo guided them to back to the large foyer in front of the Assembly Hall. Their parents were still deep in discussion with Mamsen Scrivener, so Harriet and Hugh sat on one of the benches scattered here and there.

Leonardo told them, “I’ve got to go, but it was great meeting you two. I’ll see you Monday in homeroom.”

Harriet, still shaken, forced a smile and replied, “Thanks for showing us around Leonardo.”

Returning her smile, Leonardo said, “Call me Leo. Everyone does.” He waved his goodbyes and left.

Their parents approached. “How was the tour?” Mamsen Scrivener asked.

Harriet and Hugh glanced at each other. “Fine,” Harriet told her tightly. “It was just fine.”

“Well, Harriet,” her father said, “I think it’s time for us to head home.”

“Home. That would be really nice.”

Harriet stood dreamily on a wide beach covered with red sand. The endless cascade of light purple waves slid over the gently-curving shore as it stretched into the distance. Above her, the similarly light purple sky was dotted with fluffy lavender-white clouds. A steady, warm breeze wafted over her as she gazed around herself. Looking out across the purple sea to her left, she saw a mammoth red sun brooding over most of the sky.

'I think I've been here before,' Harriet recalled hazily. But she couldn't remember when.

Turning toward her right, Harriet observed a manically colored jungle filled with an explosion of plant life. Seeing a gap in the forest, Harriet ambled in that direction. As she drew closer, she could see a path leading up from the beach. It connected the beach to a large castle-like structure made of pale blue crystal. With a growing feeling of familiarity, Harriet followed the path.

As she drew near to the castle, two people emerged from the large entrance. Harriet stopped, watching as the couple approached. She realized that she knew one of them. "That's Madison Burke!" she thought.

"Madison!" Harriet called out. "Where are we? What are you doing here? What am I doing here?"

"Hello, Harriet," the girl said. "It's good to see you again. But please call me Eden now, not Madison."

Puzzled, Harriet asked, "Why?"

"Because I am no longer just Madison Burke. I've changed, Harriet."

It came to Harriet that Madison and her family were lost in the wormhole collapse like Jeff and his family.

"Madison, you're alive!" Harriet exclaimed. "Is Jeff alive too?"

"Yes, Harriet, he is. But I have not yet made contact with him. He's sleeping."

"Sleeping?"

"Harriet, don't worry about Jeff right now. He's safe. I need you to concentrate on what I'm telling you. The telepathic link between us could be lost very easily. It's hard to maintain it."

"Harriet," Madison continued, "I am no longer the person you knew. When the wormhole collapsed, I was on a ship going to the California system. Our ship was thrown far across the galaxy. Few survived the initial disaster. In the end, only Allen and I were left alive." She indicated the boy standing next to her. "We would have died too, but we came into contact with two aliens named Senthil and Jex. They were energy beings. To survive, we merged with them. I am now called Eden. Allen is called Genesis. The aliens we merged with were also a couple. Now we are all together. We need each other to survive."

"Aliens? Madison ... er ... Eden, no one's ever found any aliens."

"Humanity has not yet explored enough to come into contact with other intelligent species, Harriet. But the wormhole collapse sent us much farther than any human has ever gone before. It sent us to Senthil and Jex. I know everything Madison knew, and everything Senthil knew. I am reborn. Now I am Eden."

“And ... you brought me here ... how?” she asked.

“This is nothing more than a vision created by a telepathic link between you and I. You’re seeing the planet that Genesis and I live on now. However, it’s just a vision. You’re really lying in your bed at home. But all that is unimportant. Harriet, there is a great danger facing the human race. To protect yourself, you must bring a ship to us. We will help you protect humanity.”

“How in the universe am I supposed to get a ship to you?” Harriet asked.

“You must find a way, Harriet. I know you are still young. As you get older, you must go into a profession that enables you to get a ship. You must bring that ship to us. I will be with you through the years, and I will show you how to modify your ship to come here. For now, just focus your efforts on the gifts I’ve given you.”

“Gifts?”

“Yes Harriet, gifts. Surely you wondered why you and Hugh suddenly became so much smarter?”

“Well ... yes, but I thought it was because of the lessons we were buying and all the studying we were doing.”

“Of course those helped, Harriet. But it is primarily because of the gifts I gave you and Hugh that you have accomplished so much more than everyone around you. Can you remember being here before and receiving these gifts from me?”

Eden’s question *did* trigger a memory. Harriet remembered a dream she’d had two years ago. Or at least, she thought it was a dream at the time. It was not long after Jeff was lost in the wormhole collapse. She recollected being in this same place talking with Madison. ‘No ... she’s Eden now,’ she told herself. With gathering clarity, she recalled how Eden had touched her finger to both of Harriet’s palms and forehead, one after the other. The tip of Eden’s finger had been glowing. Strange glowing symbols had briefly appeared where Eden touched Harriet as the thick light seeped into her skin.

“You have power over fire, Harriet. You have great intelligence. There are many other things you can do. You must learn to use these gifts. It is critical to your survival. I have given you these abilities so that you can come to me.”

Everything around Harriet shimmered and faded. “Eden?” Harriet called, but it was too late. It was all gone. Harriet opened her eyes and sat up. After a few moments of confusion, she told herself, “It was just a dream.” But she wasn’t so sure. She got up to get something to eat.

After breakfast, Harriet sat on her bed in the room she shared with her sister and examined the contents of the purple and gold box she received at the Westfald Academy orientation the day before. The box contained a welcoming letter that was actually printed out on fancy parchment-like synthpaper. The lettering was in a flowery, old-style script.

Deciding to save the letter in her scrapbook, Harriet found that her box contained two smaller boxes. Like the box that held them, the smaller boxes were also done in the Westfald Academy’s school colors of purple and gold. Inside the smaller boxes she found an uninteresting rectangular object about the size of the palm of her hand and something else she couldn’t identify. The card in one of the small boxes told her that these were her standard-issue autolibrary and dataglasses.

“What in the universe are these?” she wondered.

Harriet grabbed her old datapad from under her bed. Datapad technology was centuries old, so she was keenly aware that the Westfald students would probably laugh at her if they could see her using it.

Harriet turned her datapad on and connected to the grid, which was the arcology's network. She looked up "autolibrary" in the online encyclopedia. The entry said:

Autolibrary—A device, usually small and portable, containing an entire library of information. Autolibraries first came into popular use in about 2690 AD (2690 CE) and have been steadily growing in content and shrinking in size since that time. Autolibraries are obsolescing older technologies such as datapads, databands, and most types of handheld and wearable computing devices. Only high-end datacrowns store as much information as autolibraries.

Typically, autolibraries do not have user interfaces built into them. Instead, they are often paired with data access devices such as dataglasses and datacrowns.

Harriet touched the dataglasses link and read:

Dataglasses—A user interface device styled after glasses (a device used until the early 23rd century for the purpose of correcting vision problems that have since been resolved by other methods). Dataglasses typically do not store or process any data. Instead, they are used to access and manipulate data stored on other computers, such as autolibraries.

Figure 1 shows how dataglasses are worn. The stems, which extend over the top of the ears, contain scanning devices that examine the electrical impulses in certain centers of the wearer's brain. The scanned data is sent to the autolibrary or other computing device and analyzed for commands. This enables the wearer to "think" commands to the computer connected to the dataglasses. Responses from the computer are sent back to the dataglasses and transmitted directly to the wearer's optic nerves by the clear plasticrystal lenses mounted on the front. The transmitted images are seen only by the wearer. Audio data is sent by electronics in the rear part of the stems directly to the wearer's auditory nerves. As with the visual feedback, only the wearer can hear the audio output.

"I have to walk around with that thing on my face?" Harriet groaned as she looked at the picture. "And why is it called 'glasses' when there's only one?"

The letter from the Westfald Academy said that no other data access, storage, or processing devices were allowed on school premises. "This includes, but is not limited to, phones, comPods, datacrowns, databands, and all other electronic and optronic devices."

Harriet's datapad played a few flute-like notes to indicate that she had an incoming call. Checking her pad, she saw that it was from Hugh. Sliding a little panel on the bottom of the pad, she opened a compartment and removed a small earpiece. Placing it in her ear, she touched a button on the pad to answer the call.

"Hi, Harriet," Hugh greeted. "Are we still going surfing this morning?"

"Sure," Harriet replied, "I'll get changed and see you at the water park in half an hour."

They hung up and Harriet put her swimming suit on. Then she pulled a pair of shorts and a shirt on over her suit. Grabbing her towel, Harriet went to the nearest elevator and rode it to the water park. After checking out a surfboard from a vending machine, she made her way to the surfing area where she found Hugh in the Medium Surf Pool. He saw her and waved as she approached.

Catching the next wave, Hugh rode steadily toward the shallow end where Harriet stood. 'He's not a bad surfer considering he's only been doing it a year,' Harriet

thought. But she often longed for a more skilled surfing companion. She reminisced about the times when she, Jeff, and Akio used to surf at this park together. Akio, whose family had left Earth to colonize the planet Yokohama in the New Tokyo system, rarely sent her video mail any more. It seemed he had nearly forgotten her.

As Harriet watched Hugh glide stiffly toward her, she remembered that Jeff was never as good a surfer as she and Akio. Nevertheless, he had been able to handle the waves in the Heavy Surf Pool. She knew Hugh had no hope of ever being able to do that.

‘Oh well,’ Harriet thought, ‘Hugh is a good friend too.’

Hugh slid neatly toward Harriet as he skimmed across the top of the pool. He came to a halt almost directly in front of her and sank into the 3-foot-deep water. Smiling, Hugh asked, “Are you coming in?”

“Yeah,” Harriet replied, “but I have to put my towel in a locker first.”

“Here,” Hugh said as he tossed her an orange key. “I already rented one.”

After placing her towel in the locker, Harriet pulled off her shirt and shorts. She put them in the locker with her towel and returned to the pool to surf with Hugh. Catching a wave, Harriet zig-zagged on its crest with her long, braided red hair whipping back and forth as she went. Arriving at the shallow end, she waited for Hugh as he rode a straight course on the wave behind hers.

The pair surfed until nearly noon. Then they sat out for a while in the light of the sunlamps on the high ceiling. In the warmth of the simulated sunlight, their suits dried quickly. “Let’s stop at my place for some lunch,” Harriet offered as they chatted.

“We always stop at your flat for lunch.”

Harriet shrugged. She didn’t want to say that she knew that Hugh’s parents were having a hard time making ends meet. Her mother had instructed her to bring Hugh by as often as possible for meals so that the Bensons could stretch their budget a bit farther. “It’s on the way,” she replied simply. “We can eat at your place if you want,” Harriet offered. “All we’re having at my place is ready-to-eat synthpaste.”

“Ready-to-eat synthpaste is *all* we eat at my flat,” Hugh commented sourly. “I *like* eating with your family. You eat *together*. I don’t think I’ve ever had a sit-down dinner with my family, especially with my parents always at work.”

“It’s hard to make ends meet, Hugh. Our parents all struggle. So many jobs are being done by robots now, people are lucky to have any job at all.”

“Maybe my family should colonize. I hear there’s lots of opportunities outside the Solar System. New Cambridge University has a program for advanced high school students.”

“I suppose, but are you really ready to leave the arcology and go to another star system?”

“Absolutely. I’m so tired of being poor. I’m tired of my parents having to work so hard.”

Harriet had to agree. “That’s true. But when we graduate college, we’ll be able to get jobs anywhere. You’ll probably be so rich that you’ll be able to buy this whole arcology.”

Silent for a moment, Hugh gazed distantly at the surfers still in the pool. “I suppose,” he agreed at last. “But my parents are teachers. And they can hardly make ends

meet. They could both get good jobs on Cambridge. My mom's cousin lives there. She does really well. It's humiliating for Mom and Dad here."

Harriet smiled and assured him, "Well, Hugh, someday you can buy them tickets to Cambridge."

"I will," Hugh insisted firmly.

They fell silent for a while, watching the surfers go by. Then Hugh resumed, "I had a weird dream last night."

"Oh?" Harriet asked warily, remembering her own dream.

"It was about Madison Burke. You remember her? She and her family were lost in the wormhole collapse."

Guardedly, Harriet replied, "I remember her."

"Well I dreamed she was still alive and living with some guy on a planet going around a red giant star. I liked the sky. It was purple of course."

"Why 'of course?' Why should the sky be purple?"

Surprised, Hugh commented, "After all the physics we studied together, I would think you'd know. Our sky is blue because of Rayleigh scattering. But if a habitable planet is going around a red giant star, then the increased red in the light gives it a really light purple color."

"Oh. I guess you're right. I should have known that."

"Anyway, Madison was living there on this jungle world in a blue crystal castle. It was great. I wanted to go inside, but she kept talking to me about coming to her planet. Finally she got upset with me and told me to tell you about it. She kept calling it a 'telepathic vision' and said you had them too. Then she told me I had super powers."

"What did you do?"

"I laughed, of course. I'm not a super powers kind of guy."

"Uh ... Hugh."

"What? Don't you think that's funny? Me, with super powers? I could dress in tights and call myself Captain America," he scoffed.

"That name's been taken," Harriet replied. "There was an old comic called Captain America. I read about it in one of the lessons we bought called 'Cultural Iconography.' It said he was an old symbol of America."

Hugh shrugged. "Ok, maybe I could call myself Superman or something."

"That name's been taken too."

Hugh sighed. "You don't seem to have much of a sense of humor today."

"Uh ... Hugh," Harriet repeated.

"What?"

"I had a dream about Madison Burke too."

"Huh?"

"It's true; she was on that planet with the purple sky. And the beach was red. There was a jungle along the shore with plants that were all different colors. And Madison called herself ..."

"...Eden," Hugh finished for her.

The two gazed at each other in electrified silence. In spite of the warmth of the sun lamps overhead, Harriet felt a chill run through her.

"How ..." Hugh asked, "how could we both have the same dream?"

"I don't know. Unless it really *was* a telepathic vision."

“Harriet, don’t be nuts!”

“How else do you explain it?”

“I don’t know!” Hugh shot back. “But telepathic visions? Come on! And super powers? What about those?”

Harriet just shook her head and shrugged.

“Harriet, she told me she was part alien now. Are you trying to tell me that that’s true too? How long has humanity been looking for aliens? 700 years? Has anybody ever found even *one* alien? I know a lot of famous actors sorta *seem* like aliens but ...”

“Hugh,” Harriet replied patiently, “I don’t know what this means, but I do know that I had the same dream as you. And that’s not normal. I also know that Madison told me that we’re so smart because she gave us some kind of special gifts.”

“Humph!” Hugh said disdainfully.

“You’ve got to admit, we did get a lot smarter after the wormhole collapse.”

Hugh made a disgusted sound and said, “That was nothing but *hard work*.”

“The others in the group studied the same lessons we did,” Harriet reminded him. “But they didn’t change like we did. Hugh, on the Westfald entrance exams, they found that I read eleven times faster than the average human being. Eleven times!”

“I know, for me it was fourteen times faster than normal.”

“Something is happening to us, Hugh. I don’t know what it is, but I have a feeling that these dreams are part of it.”

Hugh still wasn’t convinced. He changed the subject. “It’s probably time to get down to the community center for our study group.”

“I suppose.”

Surprised, Hugh commented, “You don’t seem very anxious to go.”

Harriet shrugged. “I guess I’m not. Ever since we got into Westfald, the group doesn’t seem to like us as much anymore.”

“They’re just jealous.”

“Hugh! They’re our friends!”

“Yeah? Then you’d think they’d be happy for us.”

Shaking her head, Harriet replied, “I think it’s natural. They have to go to a school that’s not nearly as good. Even with all the extra studying they do, they’ll never get much more than five or six sectors higher in the arcology than they’re at now. Life will always be more of a struggle for them, Hugh. You and I are having the best education possible handed to us on a silver platter.”

“Well,” Hugh commented, “if we’re going, we should go now or we’ll be late.”

Gathering their things and putting their clothes on over their swimsuits, the pair returned their surfboards and left the water park. They rode an elevator down to the floor Harriet’s flat was on. After eating a quick lunch together, Harriet scooped up her datapad, and the two of them took an elevator down to the floor Hugh lived on. Like Harriet, Hugh grabbed his datapad and headed then they both toward the community center.

After Jeff disappeared, Harriet occasionally reflected on the days when he started the group. It all began when Jeff was walking in the park located on the top of the arcology. Because the arcology was more than ten miles high, the park was covered by a clear dome supported by strong beams set into triangular shapes.

When Harriet, Jeff, and Akio were 12, Jeff used his robot, which was shaped like a small monkey, to find an access door to into the dome's support structure. The door was an entrance for maintenance robots and it led to a series of ramps. The ramps extended up among the giant support beams that held up the half-mile tall dome on top of the arcology. These days, the ramps were no longer used. Jeff observed that each day the ramps were bathed in sunlight. So he came up with the idea of growing food on them. He gathered his friends and they composted food scraps from their homes and the school cafeteria to make soil. They had their robots spread the composted soil over the ramps and plant seeds that they bought. When their harvest came, they sold their produce to a storeowner high in the arcology. The storeowner didn't ask a lot of questions. He was just happy to get cheap produce.

Everyone outside the group thought it was a club for kids to build, repair, and sell robots. Although the group did repair and sell robots, the robots were not the main source of their income. Instead, the group used the money from their "farm," as they called it, to buy themselves lessons that gave them a better education. Knowing that their farm would be shut down if anyone ever found out about it, they kept it a secret from everyone outside the group.

Harriet and Hugh arrived at the community center where, each Saturday afternoon, the entire group studied their lessons together. As Harriet entered, she saw that the group was already hard at their schooling. As soon as the pair came into the room, however, everyone stopped and stared. Harriet was caught off guard. "They've never acted like this before," she thought warily.

Ally Wilson got up and approached them. "Harriet, can I talk with you two outside?" she requested in a hushed voice. They followed her out.

"What's going on Ally?"

"Harriet," she began awkwardly. "Harriet ... I'm sorry. This wasn't my idea."

Harriet queried warily, "*What* wasn't your idea?"

"Well, Jeff started the group," Ally said, apparently as an excuse, "and he was the leader until he ... until the wormhole collapse. Since Akio left too, you've been running things. But now that you and Hugh are going to school in the top sector ... " She didn't seem to want to continue.

Harriet urged her on.

"This wasn't my idea," Ally repeated. "We're friends, Harriet. We have been since third grade."

"Ally," Harriet asked, "what's the matter?"

"They want me to be the leader now," Ally blurted out.

Harriet thought indignantly, 'After all I've done to keep things together and keep the farm producing?'

To Ally she said, "Well Ally, if that's what everyone wants, I guess it's ok with me too. I know you'll keep things going well."

"And ... " Ally continued.

Guardedly, Harriet asked, "And what?"

"And they don't want you two to come study here any more. They say that you're so far ahead of them that you're just a distraction. Everyone thinks that you should keep farming. But ... they ... don't want to study with you any more."

Harriet burned inside. Before she could answer, Hugh said coolly, "That's fine Ally. I think we can manage the studying on our own now. And it's *really nice* that everyone says it's ok for us to keep working on *our parts* of the farm that *we* started with our *own* work and money. It's *especially great* because if it wasn't for *Harriet*, Akio, and Jeff, they wouldn't have their plots in the first place so *not one of them* would have *any* lessons to study. What are *really* great bunch they all are."

Ally recoiled, "I'm so sorry Hugh. Harriet, you've got to believe me. This isn't what I want at all."

Through clenched teeth Harriet replied, "I believe you, Ally. You and I are still friends."

With that, she turned and walked away. Hugh trailed after her. Behind her, Harriet heard him say, "I can't believe it! After all you've done for them. I can't believe it."

With a firm stride, Harriet kept moving toward the elevator. "It doesn't matter, Hugh," she told him as she tried to convince herself that her words were true. "We're starting a new life now. I guess we have to leave the old one behind." Still fuming, Harriet stepped into an elevator and spoke the number of her floor. The elevator doors slid closed and carried her upwards.

Hugh sat on folding chair facing one corner of the single-room flat his family shared. Behind him, he could hear his older sister playing a game on her datapad. His parents were sitting at the foldout kitchen table talking together in low voices.

‘They think I can’t hear them when I use my dataglasses,’ he thought as he read through an article on robotics.

“Do you think we’re really doing the right thing, sending him up to that school?” his mother asked his father in a near whisper.

“Of course we are,” his father shot back testily. “Do you want a kid like him to be limited in life by the few opportunities we can provide him? You know how smart he is. He doesn’t belong this far down in the arcology.”

“Neither do we,” his mother replied wryly. “But we get by.”

“I want him to do more than get by. He has the chance to do great things. He’s Hubert Einstein Benson, named after the greatest genius since World War III. I named him that because I knew he’d be smart from the day he was born. I just had a feeling in my bones. It’s the same now. We *have* to send him up to that school for him to reach his full potential. I feel it in my bones right now this minute.”

“Well,” his mother commented wryly, “I hope your bones are right. The last time we moved him up, that Highborne kid beat him up and put him in the hospital.”

“Hmph,” his father snorted. “That kid is gone, lost in space where he can’t hurt anyone—if he’s alive at all.”

Hugh felt a stab of sadness. ‘Jeff was lost in that wormhole collapse too,’ he thought.

“Anyway,” Hugh’s father continued, “his new school has its own security force. He’ll probably safer there than here.”

Hugh’s mother continued to express her reservations, but Hugh stopped listening. He’d heard it all before.

Returning to the robotics article, Hugh studied information on robotic command recognition matrices. As the evening passed, he read several more articles on robotics, some on gravitonics, and a few on spaceship design. By the time he was done, it was time for bed.

Hugh folded his chair, put it in a drawer, and lowered his bed from the ceiling. Grabbing his pajamas, he went into the bathroom. ‘I really don’t need that school,’ he thought as he brushed his teeth and changed into his nightclothes. ‘All I need is my dataglasses and autolibrary. What could that school offer me that isn’t in the autolibrary?’

Climbing into bed, Hugh wished he didn’t have to face the next day. Experience taught him that his mother was right. There would probably be someone at his new school that would start pushing him around.

‘One day I’ll learn to fight,’ he thought. ‘Then I’ll never have to worry about being attacked.’ Warmed by that thought, Hugh drifted off to sleep.