

Orphan of Nippur
by Tony Cox

I don't know how old I am. Not exactly. I'm small for my age, but Sister Anne thinks I'm about twelve. I do know it's been nearly two years since I met Mister Tvorsky and he rescued me from the Black Widow and the slave merchant on the planet Nippur. Mister Tvorsky is a space freighter, and I'm glad he was there when I so badly needed help. Anyway, he rescued me and brought me here, to Astar, zillions of light-years away from that terrible planet and my old life.

Here is a Catholic convent on the bank of the river Megra. Megra begins in the distant mountains and flows mostly through deep canyons. But *here* the canyon walls leave the river and allow a nice little valley.

The convent hides from the hot sun in a grove of huge shade trees. Surrounding the trees are neat orchards and irrigated fields. These are planted in long straight rows that stretch to the canyon walls. Beyond the canyon walls for as far as I can see are hot sand dunes. And beyond them, I know, but can't see, are the snow capped mountains where my river Megra begins. I've only seen the mountains once. Mister Tvorsky and I flew over them on our way to the convent.

I love the convent. The nuns are like a family of old women with me as their favorite grandniece. I have my own room and more food than I could ever want. I help the nuns in the kitchen and gardens. I enjoy the work. It's not hard and I still have plenty of time for fun and for learning.

I have bad nightmares. Sister Anne says although I live here now, I still spend nights on that bad world. She says talking about it will help. I hope she's right; she usually is.

Sister Anne is my best friend and my teacher. My assignment for today is to record a story about my life on Nippur and about my rescue. Here it is.

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My name is Katrina. I like Katrina; it's a super name. Mister Tvorsky said it was a good name for someone like me with red hair and green eyes. He gave me that name after I told him I didn't know anything about a name, only what my friends on Nippur called me, which was Cat. That was because in a scramble I always managed to stay on my feet like an Old Earth cat. There were a few of those running wild in Pangara, the city where I lived on Nippur. The cats eat the rats, which I've heard, also come from Old Earth.

I'm an orphan. At least, I think I am. My earliest memory is running in the streets of Pangara with the Pack. The Pack was a group of kids like me, without home or family, sleeping in the alleys and living by our wits. I had good friends in the Pack; we helped one another when we could. Sure, some of the older boys and girls bullied us younger kids, but we could live with that, partly because we had no choice, and partly because the older kids helped protect us from the adults on Nippur.

But suddenly, the Pack was gone, rounded up by the Bulls, the Pangara police, or at least the crooks that go by the name of police in that terrible place. I'll bet that after the Bulls captured my friends, they were collared, forced into slavery, and sold to the highest bidder. If any are still alive, they're scattered across the galaxy by now.

I escaped because I was small enough to slide through a half-open window. That half-open, crank-out window was why the Pack was captured. My best-friend Jana spotted it while the two of us were searching from alley to alley checking the contents of dumpsters. We were always on the lookout for opportunities. The Pack couldn't survive just by raiding dumpsters. Most of the people in Pangara were so poor they rarely threw away food or anything of value. The Pack must regularly score something large to convert to cash. That usually meant stealing.

When Jana told Ziggy, our pack leader, about the open window, she sent scouts to check on it. The scouts were Jimboy and Ted, two of the oldest and biggest boys, and they reported it was a good prospect, the warehouse for the largest store in town. That window was so high off the ground, it would take the whole Pack to get someone through it.

Early the next morning, before daylight, we gathered in the alley. Ziggy sent Char and Jordie, the youngest two Pack members, to the ends of the alley for lookouts. They would give us a whistle if they saw anyone. It took the rest of the Pack to make a living ladder. I was

last, because I was lightest and small enough to slip through the window. I scrambled up the backs of my friends. My job was to go through the opening and search the building for a door or a lower window to open for the Pack.

I'd barely reached the window when the Bulls came, loud and fast. It was a trap. They blocked both ends of the alley and bottled us up like rats in a pipe. The human ladder broke up, leaving me hanging by my fingers from the window frame. With a quick motion, I pulled myself up, swung through the window, and dropped to the floor. Crouching in the darkness, I listened. I heard the shouts of the police and the cries of my friends as the stun sticks hit them.

It would be just a few minutes before they searched inside the building. In the dim light, I could see several rows of stacked boxes. To my left was a large pile of empty boxes, and across the room was a door.

I ran between the rows of boxes to the door. It opened into a long hallway and at the far end of the hall, an exit sign glowed red. Hurrying down the hall toward the exit, I felt for and tried every doorknob along the way. They were all locked. A loud bell started ringing as soon as I pushed the bar to open the exit door; they would be expecting me in the alley outside.

I returned to the storage room, chose a group of boxes, and re-stacked one side to leave a hole I could wiggle down into. Once I was in place, I pulled the top boxes over me and waited.

Shortly after that, a couple of guys entered the room and turned on the lights.

"I tell ya, we're wastin' our time here," said one. "You heard the alarm. That lil' bugger skipped out the back."

The other one said, "You're probably right, John, but they told us to search here, so we'll do it."

I heard them moving about the room. They tossed the pile of empty boxes, then turned to the stacks.

"Hey, check this out! Macadamian nuts from Old Earth!"

I could hear the box above my head ripping open. Then came the snap and whoosh of a can opening.

"Yeah, they're expensive. It's been some time since I've had any. And look at these little smoked sausages."

Now I heard a plastic package being torn open.

"You know, John, I believe that lil' bugger ripped off some stuff

before she escaped.”

“I think you're right.” John laughed, talking with his mouth full. “We need to report this terrible robbery.”

They left soon after that. The jerks! Actually, I have another word for them, but Sister Anne tells me I must stop using *that* word.

I stood quietly, squeezed into the tight space, trying to move as little as possible.

Later, another couple of guys, one the owner, came in. The owner slapped the boxes above my head and said, “All this stuff is imported and it ain't cheap. If I'd known I'd be ripped off, I wouldn't have let you use my warehouse. I expect payment for my loss over and above my share from the hunt.”

“Okay, Okay. Just give me your costs--we're not paying you retail,” growled the other man. I knew the voice; it was Top Bull, the police chief.

Listening to the owner tote up his losses, it amazed me that I could carry all that stuff and still be able to escape. Another major jerk!

Top Bull accepted the numbers without question, but I could tell he wasn't happy. “I can't believe that little witch got away. I'll put the word out. We'll have her collared in a week.”

“Say, isn't she the one--” said the owner, laughing.

“Yeah, she's the one. Let's get out of here and take care of business.”

That business was my poor friends!

Top Bull and I hadn't gotten along for years. For three years to be exact, since he was a street cop and he'd rounded up half a dozen of my friends and had them in the backseat of his patrol cruiser. While he was chasing down the seventh boy, I sneaked up to the car and tried the back door handle. It opened easily. My friends and I were out of sight by the time Top Bull returned, huffing, puffing, and empty-handed because the seventh boy had outrun him. The patrol car was parked in front of Bennie's Bar and there were plenty of citizens around cheerfully telling Top Bull about the little girl who opened the door. I believe they've been cheerfully telling him about it ever since.

Finally, the building was quiet. I waited a while longer, then climbed out of the boxes and stretched my muscles. My need to pee was so bad I was hurting. I picked a corner and relieved myself, laughing as I did, wondering what the owner would report about that.

I found a case of Pepsi cans. Opening one, I quenched my thirst,

then moved back to the open box of nuts. Curious, I opened a can and ate a few. I'd never tasted them before; they were salty and good. I hadn't eaten all day, so I sat there stuffing myself with nuts and sausages and washing them down with warm cola. A full belly, that was awesome.

Afterward, I carried and stacked enough boxes against the outside wall until I could reach the window. I was careful not to make a sound when I opened it and looked out. The alley was dark, empty, and quiet.

I'd already filled my sack with goodies from the storeroom. Using a cord, I lowered the sack to the ground. As I did, I remembered Ziggy, the leader of our Pack, with a twinge of sadness. She'd always insisted we carry a tote sack and twine. Just in case, she said. More than once, I'd gotten in trouble for forgetting my sack. I was glad I had it with me, because I needed to take some supplies so I could keep out of sight for a day or two.

I followed the sack out the window and took off through the shadows. At the end of the alley, I waited until the street was clear, then crossed to the next alley. I continued, going from alley to alley across the city to the old empty warehouse our Pack used as a safe house. When I got there, I hesitated. They'd captured my friends, so by now the Bulls probably knew about our safe house.

Reluctantly turning away, I chose instead a rusty old dumpster in the next block. The dumpster had seen better days, and a caved-in side made it useless. It was resting under a broad-leaved Tuka tree that would keep it cool during the day. I climbed the tree, dropped on top of the old relic, and pulled open the battered lid. It was dry inside and mostly free from little varmints. The smell wasn't the best, but I'd smelled worse, and it would have to do. Lowering my food sack to the floor, I dropped down beside it.

I dumped the food and cola, stretched the sack out, and dropped on it. The day had been a hard one. I worried about where my friends were tonight and how they were. I also worried about whether I could survive without them. Then I was asleep.

Sleep didn't last long. A horrific bellyache and hurting cramps in my gut woke me. My glorious meal of nuts and sausages revolted on me. I tossed and turned, but couldn't get comfortable or go back to sleep. Finally, I could stand it no longer; it hurt so much. Rising up, I pushed the lid of the dumpster open enough to look out. It was still

dark and quiet outside. I stood on tiptoe, my chin hanging over the rim of the dumpster, as wave after wave of heaves swept through my body. I barfed my heels up.

Finally, I was empty and was able to drop down again on the sack. Still hurting and feeling sick, I was so miserable I didn't care whether I lived or died.

Toward morning, the pain eased and I drifted off to sleep. It was late evening when I woke up. The day had passed without me being aware of it. Opening a bottle of cola, I rinsed the bad taste from my mouth and downed the rest of the liquid.

I felt better. My stomach muscles were tender and sore, but I was starving. A sick wave swept over me when I looked at the scattered cans of nuts and packages of sausages that I'd brought from the storeroom. I turned my head away. Nuts and sausages were definitely not on my current list of favorite foods. Still, I needed to eat, so I decided to risk a food hunt.

The dumpster lid screeched as I slowly raised it a few inches and peeked out. Outside was darkness, no light except for a far away street light. No movement among the shadows, so I opened the lid wide enough to slip through and stuck a can of nuts next to the hinge to keep it open. I jumped and threw a leg over the rim, rolled out, and dropped to the ground, twisting to avoid stepping into last night's barf.

I retraced my route through the alleys toward the main part of town heading for the *Avalon*, a popular bar and grill that offered the best garbage in town. The place was having a busy evening, and the cans were full. With no competition from the big guys in the Pack, I had plenty of choices.

While I was checking the menu and making my selection, Sad Sallie showed up with her cart. Sad Sallie was an old homeless woman who tried to help us kids when she could, especially the little ones.

"Hey Sal," I called, "I found you some sea prawns." The Nippurian shellfish were her favorite food. "Have you seen any of my friends today?" I hoped I wasn't the only one to escape the Bulls.

Sallie squinted and peered toward the sound of my voice. She was nearsighted and nearly blind without glasses, which she refused to wear. Sallie had to rely on her hearing unless you were close to her. "Cat, child, is that you?"

I responded and she hurried over to me.

“Quick! Under my skirt.”

I followed her command without question, although I nearly gagged on the smell. Sad Sallie kept a radio hidden in her cart, and with an earphone she listened to the police bands. She'd saved the Pack from disaster many times. There was plenty of room in the folds of her well-worn long dress. Now wrinkled and scrawny, Sallie must have been a large woman before she fell onto hard times.

It wasn't long before I heard a heavy car, probably a police cruiser, roll by. Afterward, Sallie whispered, “Cat—what are you doing her--don't you know you're a wanted criminal now?”

I was silent.

“That warehouse you robbed belonged to the daddy-in-law of Top Bull. Didn't you know that? Is that why you set the fire?”

Fire? I didn't know anything about a fire. I asked Sal, “What fire?”

“Why Cat, don't you know that place burned last night? Everyone says you did it. A hover-eye took pictures of you.”

“I was there with my friends, Sal, and I left late last night, but I didn't set any fire.”

“Well, Top Bull thinks you did. He's really angry--has an SOS out on you.”

I gulped, SOS, Shoot On Sight. In Pangara, with the Bulls in cruisers and the hover-eyes scattered around the city, SOS meant a death sentence, no parole.

“There's posters and fliers all over, a nice big reward. Everyone's looking for you.”

Life just got a lot harder. I squatted on my heels under Sad Sallie's ragged and dirty old dress, barely able to breathe, but mentally beating my head against a wall. What could I do?

“Best thing, is to get you out of town.”

I silently agreed with that, but how to do it was the problem.

Sallie started muttering to herself as she often did when she was thinking. Suddenly she whispered, “Are you good under there? Can you move with me when I walk?”

Without waiting for an answer, Sad Sallie started walking down the alley pushing her cart. Squatting under the long dress, between her and the cart, I was goose-waddling and struggling to keep my balance as we moved along. I choked back a giggle. If a hover-eye spotted us, it would calculate Sallie was way pregnant.

We walked up the alleys for several streets, then Sallie stopped

suddenly. I bumped into the cart, but managed to regain my balance and stay in place.

Sallie whispered, "They're loading a truck up ahead. I'll find where they're going. If it's to some other city, you hide under the truck, then get in the back while I keep the men busy. I'll give you a pat when it's time to make your move."

We shuffled on until I could hear the men. Sallie stopped again, and I squirmed around until I could do a one-eyed peep through a ragged hole in her dress.

Sallie was next to a truck that was backed against a loading dock. Two men carried boxes from a forklift pallet into the truck. I'd never seen them before, but Joe, Sallie's friend and drinking buddy, ran the forklift.

"Hi, boys," Sallie called up to them with a friendly voice, "Careful, now, or you'll work up a real sweat."

"Hey, Sal." said Joe. "We're about done here. I got a bottle of Wild Red." He grinned and motioned with his head toward the inside. "Come on up."

His two helpers chuckled loudly.

"A little Red sounds good." Sallie laughed as she pushed her cart into the corner made by the dock and the truck. "Where's this load going?"

"Port City, soon as we can get it there."

I didn't wait for her to pat my head. I scooted from under her dress to beneath the truck. I sat there sucking in air. Even the greasy, smoky, exhaust-laden air under the truck was better than where I'd been.

Port City was a good destination; it was quite a bit larger than Pangara. The place consisted of hotels, bars, duty-free shops, warehouses, and housing for the workers of the spaceport. I wouldn't have to worry about Top Bull bothering me in Port City.

"Pull me up boys." I heard Sallie call. She was next to the dock with her arms in the air. The men lifted her up. After that, I heard a couple of guffaws and a distant laugh from Sallie as they went inside the warehouse. Then all was quiet on the dock.

Wary of hover-eyes, I crawled from under the truck, went to the back, and looked inside. It was half full of wood crates and cardboard boxes. There were plenty of places to hide, but the roll-down steel door at the back made me nervous. The closed door would trap me

inside for the entire trip. Would I be able to sneak out while they unloaded the truck? I shook my head; I doubted it. Reluctantly, I eyed the top of the truck. I shook my head again--no way. I'd roll off that at the first sudden stop. Also, there was too great a chance a hover-eye would spot me before we left town. Disgusted, I crawled back underneath the truck to think.

A large toolbox hung from the truck frame behind the cab. I crawled over to it, but a big padlock kept me from opening its door.

Looking back, I noticed the crank for the spare tire along one side. Some trucks carry a spare tire in a rack behind the back wheels. The crank lowered the rack so the tire could be removed. Spare tires were fair game for thieves, so usually a lock prevented the crank from turning. Someone had carelessly left this crank unlocked.

The tire rack had possibilities. I couldn't remove the tire; it was too big and heavy. However, if I cranked the rack a bit lower, there might be room for me to slip into the hollow of the wheel rim. I checked the crank, it moved freely, and I lowered the rack as much as I dared. There was just barely enough room for me to squeeze across the rubber tire into the rim. It was a tight, grungy, uncomfortable fit, but I could do it. What choice did I have? Staying in Pangara was too dangerous and Top Bull's reward posters meant I couldn't leave in a bus or taxi, even if I had the money. Which I didn't.

Wedged into the cramped space, unable to move, I must have dozed off and slept while the men finished loading the truck. We were rolling when I woke up, and I didn't like it. The lowered rack was loose enough to shake violently back and forth. I worried that I had loosened the tire rack too much, and it would drop down at the first hard bump. However, the rack held, and the truck continued the start and stop driving that took us away from town. Once on the main highway to Port City, the truck traveled faster and the jiggle of the rack was more intense. The tires began a high-pitched whine and fierce gusts of hot, dirty wind blasted through the rack. The wind tugged at me and threatened to blow me from my nest. With the wind came bits of road grit that pricked my skin like thousands of little needles. The force and filth of the wind and the sound of the vibration was nearly more than I could bear. I was scared spit-less, but I desperately hung on for what seemed like hours.

Finally, it was over. The truck slowed, signaling our arrival in Port City. We returned to the calmer start and stop motion again, and at

one of the stops, I rolled off the spare tire and dropped to the street. Fortunately, no one was behind the truck.

A single overhead street lamp dimly lit the intersection, and I scurried away from the light, moving into the shadows. I was in a residential area surrounded by houses, nice houses with fenced yards. In the distance, I could hear an animal barking. Daylight would soon arrive and I had to find a place to hole up. I started jogging up the road, following the taillights of the truck. I assumed it would be going to the main part of Port City and that's the direction I wanted to go, too.

In a few minutes, I'd left the crowded neighborhood and had traveled up a hill where the houses became bigger and set farther back from the road. These houses had fields around them instead of yards. The nicest houses were at the top of the hill and overlooked Port City, nestled in the valley below. The sight of the city from the top of the hill astounded me.

The valley was full of sparkling jewels—bright streetlights, lighted billboards, and glowing high-rise buildings. The light-sparkles were faint and sparse where they climbed like fingers into the dark outer reaches of the valley, but toward the center, they were brighter and brighter still. The brightest cluster of lights was the spaceport, a large white ring-shaped building. From the center of the ring, the space tether sprouted upward like a giant ribbon, stretching out of sight into the early morning sky.

At times, when the light was right, the space tether was visible from Pangara, a shiny thread rising above the distant horizon. I'd never seen it this close. An older kid in the Pack once described it to me, but his word-pictures were inadequate--as mine will be, too.

A burnished gold cylinder, rising from the center of the large round building, brighter than the twilight dark, and ringed at intervals with garlands of winking red lights. As it climbed, the cylinder gradually dwindled in thickness and the garlands of lights became smaller and closer together. Although thinning to the eye with height, the tether shined brighter and brighter until it entered the clear dawn-lit upper atmosphere. There it burned a fiery golden-red. I squatted on my heels and reverently watched the fiery-red burn travel down the column as the sun, still out of sight over the horizon, rose to banish the darkness.

Finally, I tore my eyes away from the mesmerizing beauty. Dawn was nearly here, and I needed a place to crash, a place to spend the

day. I would wait to explore my new town in the darkness of night. Looking around, I noticed a house nearby with a large grove of trees behind it. In the grove, beneath the trees, grew a fair amount of underbrush that would provide the cover I needed.

I walked toward it. Once I was in the grove of trees and moving through the underbrush, I could see it wasn't as thick as it appeared from the road. It wouldn't do; there was no place to hide.

Immediately behind the house was an empty swimming pool and beyond the pool was a small building. I thought about that. If they didn't use the pool, perhaps they didn't use the shed either. I decided to check it out.

Circling through the woods to a point where I could keep the building between the house and me, I crept closer. Dark had vanished by the time I was ready to sneak into the shed. Fortunately, an overgrown bush half-hid the door, so no one would see me from the house. The unlocked door opened easily.

Inside, I could see an electric pump, a tank, and some garden tools. It was the pump-house for the pool. I closed the door and wedged a shovel against it. The roof of the shed was translucent plastic, so I had plenty of light. Beside the tank, I saw a water faucet. I twisted the handle and hoped it wasn't dry. The valve squeaked and I soon received a wet reward, murky at first, then a thin stream of clear water. It tasted all right, so I drank deeply then washed the grit from my face and hands. The water felt cold, but good. I stripped and washed all over. My shirt and overalls were next, I didn't stop until I'd cleaned my clothes and draped them over the pump and tank to dry. Still wet, I stood shivering in the cold early morning air, but I didn't regret the bath. Life was good; I felt good. Hungry, but good. Food would have to wait.

I dusted off a place behind the plumbing and stretched out for a snooze. I stayed there the rest of the day relaxing, dozing, and sometimes sleeping. With the sun shining through the translucent roof, the air in the shed became toasty warm by noon. My clothes had dried, and I had them back on by mid afternoon. By sundown, I was back on the road walking toward the center of Port City.

I wasn't sure what I'd do when I got there, but I was sure I had to do something. My best bet was to join a gang like the one I'd lost; every city on Nippur had at least one. But for now, hunger was gnawing at me pretty fierce; I wanted something to eat. I kept walking, keeping to

shadows and on the lookout for police cruisers and hover-eyes.

I'd nearly reached the space tether building when I spotted it. A primo dumpster full of barely touched, recently dumped food: fruits, vegetables and meat scraps. I was drooling when I got to it, but I forced myself to take the usual precautions. A quick look around convinced me it was safe to dig in. And I did.

I'd barely started eating. Suddenly, my muscles turned to soup, and I lost control of my body. I dropped face down into a sticky puddle of juice that had formed in the hollow of an overripe melon. It didn't matter; I was no longer breathing. Lights out.

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My body twitched violently. Painful tingles came from every nerve in my body. I slowly came back to life, gradually becoming aware of the tight weight around my neck. A collar. I knew then what had happened. I'd screwed up. Bigtime. The food offering was bait for a trap, and dosed with a drug that short-circuited my nervous system. Every muscle in my body shut down, including those I used to suck air and pump blood. I'd died, and I would have stayed dead, if the antidote hadn't been quickly given to me. Quickly that is, after I'd been collared.

I fought to gain control of my body and scanned with my eyes, slowly swiveling my head. Abruptly, I got a jolt, an electric shock started at my neck and sent waves of nausea through me. Someone was playing with the controls of the collar. I heard a cackle. Then I saw her. An old woman dressed in black with a red scarf around her neck. Bitter, heavy bile surged up from my stomach. I choked it back. It was worse than hopeless; I knew about this old woman. I was a prisoner of the Black Widow.

The Black Widow was a mean old witch who went from city to city preying on homeless children like me, capturing them, and selling them in the illegal, but thriving, at least on Nippur, slave market.

She jolted me again and hissed in a hard, mean voice, "That's to let you know who's in charge. Try something and I'll give you a double dose. Now get up! Let's go!"

I eyed her silently and struggled to my knees. I had a hard time making my wobbly legs do what I wanted them to do, but I was finally standing on my feet. All the while, the old woman in black

stood beside me impatiently tapping a long fingernail against the buttons on the collar control box.

I considered jumping her. She was bigger than I was, but I was tough for my age and she looked a bit frail for hers. With my eyes, I measured her closeness and mentally calculated my odds. She must have read my mind, because fingers dropped hard on the keys. Before I could even flinch, I dropped in agony to my knees. That jolt turned my leg muscles back to jelly.

“Didn't I just warn you about that?” She said severely.

Several minutes passed before I could gather enough control to stand again. The Widow pointed to a door in a nearby building. I shuffled toward it. I was submissive now, and would continue that way until I'd recovered some strength and had found the right opportunity. Inside the building, she directed me to a corner of a large room. She snapped on a light that lit the spot where I stood.

“Now you just wait right here.” The Black Widow said, ”I'll be back as soon as I clean up the mess you made of my snare.”

“What about the mess it made of me?” I thought as I silently stood in the corner under the cone of light. I was gross, having fallen on my face into a bunch of garbage.

I looked around the building. Through the gloom, I could see another door on the opposite wall. I walked toward it. That was a mistake, because as soon as I tried to leave the lighted area, the collar hit me with a jolt. I moved back to the center, then tried another direction. It was the same; the cone of light was my prison cell. If I left it, the collar would zap me senseless. I squatted, closed my eyes, and tried to control my emotions. I'd lost so much and had struggled too hard over the past few days to have this happen to me.

The Black Widow returned in a few minutes, wiping her hands on a rag. She pulled a hose from the wall and started spraying me with water, washing the garbage from my clothes and my body at the same time. The water had a smell and stung my eyes; I guess it sanitized me, too. I just stood there, my arms at my side, unable to do anything else, while the water dripped off me and ran into a floor drain at my feet.

“Strip.” She said finally.

“What?” I looked at her.

She shut off the water, dropped the hose, and pulled the collar control from a pocket.

“Get rid of those nasty rags, now!” She commanded, holding her hand so I could plainly see the control.

My choices were to take off my clothes or get the crap shocked out of me, and then take off my clothes. I took the first choice.

It embarrassed me, and it surprised her.

“You're a girl!”

I thought, “Duh.” But I could understand her confusion. I kept my hair short and I dressed like a boy. It made life easier and safer in the Pack and on the street.

“You'll bring top-pa-dolla!” She laughed, triumphantly.

“Yah, right, whatever that is.” I muttered, knowing it had to mean money. My worse fear was realized; I'd be illegally sold as a slave.

She turned the hose back on and made me to turn this way and that until I was completely clean and bug free. She shut off the water and returned the hose to its place on the wall.

The Widow left abruptly then returned moments later with a towel and a roll of clothing. She tossed me the towel, and after I'd dried off, she unrolled the white knit gown and told me to put it on.

I eyed my old clothes on the floor. The woman shook her head and tossed the gown to me. I caught it and held it, still hesitating to put it on. I looked at the knit garment with distaste. All right, I had the collar, but I was dead when I got that. The dress, I would put on voluntarily. With it, I'd cross the invisible line between freedom and bondage. Out of the corner of my eye, I peeked at the Black Widow. She was standing there, impatiently tapping her long-nailed index finger on the collar control. If I resisted, I'd suffer the disabling and long-lasting effects of the collar. I shook my head. I had to remain healthy and strong so I could take advantage of the first opportunity to escape. I shrugged and pulled the dress over my head. It was loose and fell nearly to my knees.

The woman smirked, nodded, and immediately left the room. I squatted on my heels in the middle of the cone of light. There was nothing to do but wait.

The Black Widow returned just before dawn. She turned off the light of my prison, then said, “Come along, dearie. We have some business to take care of.”

We went down a hallway and entered a room. She told me to sit on a chair in front of a light blue screen. The woman took my picture, did some typing on a keyboard, and punched a button. Moments later a

small id card dropped from the machine into a tray. She looked at it and chuckled.

“Your name is now Genna543, dearie. Your parents indentured you three years ago. I like the picture. It looks just like you.”

Those words caused a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. She warily approached and snapped the id to a ring in the collar around my neck.

“Come along, Genna543. You must now walk a couple of meters behind me. And remember.” she raised the collar control so I could plainly see it, “I demand obedience.”

The street was empty when we exited the building. I looked around in the dim early morning light, calculating my chances of running. Then it hit, a hard, fast shock from the collar. It was over in less than a second, but it made me stumble and fall to my knees in pain.

“I said *obedience*, dearie. Don’t even think about running.” The woman said in a low voice dripping with malice.

We walked on the street a short way, then went down some stairs to a city transit terminal. I looked warily around. This was all new to me. There were no subways in Pangara. A train came rattling in, and we boarded, finding seats in a nearly empty compartment where I sat across the aisle from the Black Widow. We silently stared at each other. She wore a long black dress with a row of black shiny buttons down the front. A bright red scarf at her neck completed her costume. She'd pulled her gray hair back and rolled it into a tight bun. Two hard eyes glittered among the wrinkles on her face. Her mouth was a thin dark line that sagged at both ends. I turned away from the dreadful sight, leaned back, closed my eyes, and tried to rest while the train hurtled through the dark tunnel.

A while later, we left a terminal in another part of Port City. The buildings here were tall and looked like warehouses. It was still early morning, and the streets were empty of cars and people. The old woman led me into an alley. A third of the way down the alley, we stopped in front of a door, and the Black Widow pushed a button. Through the door, I could hear the chimes of the bell playing a familiar tune. A few moments later, the door opened and a woman came out. She was old, another wrinkled old crone, and her thick glasses rode low on her long nose. She wore a loose gray dress pulled tight at the waist with a wide belt and fanny pack. I felt an evil presence and shivered.

The Black Widow must have felt the same way because she stepped back from the door to the middle of the alley. I backed up with her. We waited there for the woman.

“Hello Myrtle.” The crone cackled. “What do you have for me?”

Then she tilted her head back and peered through her glasses toward me. “What's this? A beauty! And so young!”

The Widow said, loud and nervous, “She's last night's catch. I'll be getting a top price for her or I'll take her to Pete.”

“Now Myrtle, you know I always pay top money for quality goods.”

The old woman shuffled over to me and pinched my arm just above the elbow. “How old are you, Sweetie?”

I grimaced and pulled away.

She cackled a loud laugh, “Now come here, Sweetie. Let me look at you.”

I backed up some more, then looked at the Black Widow. She was fingering the control. I frowned. I couldn't take a zapping. Not now. I had to be strong. I had to find a way to escape. Resigned, I stepped toward the mean old woman.

Behind me, I heard a noise, then a brusque voice.

“What's going on?”

We paused, frozen in time. I turned my head toward the voice. It came from a man, medium height, bearded, with a cane. He approached.

“I said, what's going on?”

“Mind your own business! Move on,” spat the crone.

“I'm making *this* my business. I've been listening--you're bartering for a kidnapped child--that's illegal, even on this planet. I won't allow it!”

The man spoke with a heavy accent. I could barely understand him.

The crone responded angrily, “Nothing's illegal. This is a legitimate business deal.”

The man continued up the alley toward us. He looked at me. “How about it, girl? Are you a legal indenture?”

Peeking first at the old crone, then at the Black Widow, I was desperate, but afraid, to tell the truth. Looking directly at the man, I silently pleaded with my eyes and gave my head a tiny negative shake.

“Okay, I won't allow this,” he repeated in a quiet firm voice. “You

two, turn the girl loose.”

He had the old crone’s full attention now. She turned, took a step toward him, and angrily punched the air with a fist, “You’re trespassing and messing in something that’s none of your business. Move on, I say.”

He stood firm, “No! Release the girl.”

“Well, maybe this will change your mind! Move on, or else--” Her words were dripping with anger.

I shifted so I could see both the man and the old crone at the same time. She’d pulled a pistol from the fanny pack at her waist.

“Listen lady, don’t do something you’ll regret later. You know what you’re doing here is wrong.”

The man stepped sideways toward the shelter of a building. Looking directly at the slave trader, he said in a commanding voice, “Turn the girl loose. She’s leaving with me.”

“No way!” The woman shouted and pointed her gun at the man.

He quickly dodged aside and dropped to one knee. As he moved, the old woman shot. On the building above the man’s head, a brick exploded into fragments. She lowered the gun to shoot again.

The man responded by raising his walking stick. There was a quick phut-sound from the cane. The gun and half the old crone’s hand vaporized. The woman fell to her knees, her other hand grasping at the cauterized finger stubs. She screamed, then passed out, crumpling to the ground.

The Black Widow was between the man and me. She took one look at the downed old crone, dropped to her knees, and raised both hands in the air. “Don’t shoot!” She pleaded, “I’ll do whatever you want.”

The man said, “I want you to unlock the girl’s collar. After that, throw the control to me.”

The Widow was angry. “You’re stealing my property!” Still, she complied, then tossed the controller about halfway toward the man. I felt a great relief as the collar loosened and fell away. I caught it in my hands and ran toward the man, stopping long enough to snap the collar around the neck of the Black Widow. She screamed in anger as I rushed on by and scooped up the controls. Her anger screams turned to those of extreme pain when I mashed the button.

Sister Anne, I have to admit those screams brought me some of the most pure joy I’ve ever felt in my life.

My one thought was to escape. I scooted on past the man. I was

grateful to him, but he could pull me into another mess as bad or worse than this one. I did stop long enough to wedge the collar control under a trashcan to keep the button pressed. Then I was out of the alley and around the corner. I paused.

I could hear sirens in the distance, the Bulls, no doubt. I looked back into the alley. The flesh-peddler was unconscious. The Widow was jerking nicely. The man was just standing there looking around.

“Crap!” I muttered. “He’s waiting for the police. He doesn't know they'll arrest him instead of the women. He helped an indentured servant escape, and that cane has to be seriously illegal.”

I ran back in and grabbed his hand, yelling, “Come on! Don't you hear the sirens? The Bulls will be on their side. We need to get out of here!”

I think he finally realized the danger, because he gave my hand a squeeze, turned, and started running. We left the alley together.

I was ahead when we were halfway down the street and called over my shoulder. “Follow me!” I turned into the transit terminal entrance, ran down the stairs, and ducked under the turnstile. A train had just stopped. I got aboard, and the man followed a few moments later. He'd stopped to pay.

We were the only people in the car and sat separated by several seats trying to catch our breath. Without looking directly at the man, I gave him my full attention. Light blue eyes in a face surrounded by neatly trimmed dark hair and beard stared back at me.

“Are you okay?” The man asked after a few moments.

I hesitated, then nodded. I was wary. I'd met so few adults who were nice without wanting something in return. My nod pleased him; he seemed as unsure of me as I was of him.

We rode silently for a long while before reaching the end of the line where we had to get off. The end of the line was the main city terminal and was located in a shopping mall under the space tether building. The man didn't seem too threatening so as we walked through the terminal, I hung with him, but not too close.

We walked past a restaurant; I sniffed hungrily at the aromas and looked longingly through the door.

“Are you hungry? Do you want something to eat?” He asked, probably noticing my drools.

I was starving and I could have hugged him for asking. I didn't want to appear too needy, so I just nodded and quietly said, “Yes,

please.” In fact, I was desperate for something to eat. It had been a while.

The restaurant was a cafeteria, and I piled my tray full of goodies. He smiled at my actions, but said nothing. After he paid for the food, we walked over to sit at a corner table. By then, my tummy was quivering, and I was shaking from anticipation. I forced myself to slow down. I didn't want a repeat of the nut and sausage experience. While I ate, he drank a cup of coffee. We talked.

His name was Nicholas Tvorsky. He was originally from Old Earth, from a place called Russia. Mister Tvorsky was the captain of a space freighter. He was the pilot and the crew too because he was the only one on board when in space. The walking stick was a gift from a friend in another part of the galaxy. I told him I hoped it put the old crone out of commission for a long time, perhaps forever. While I didn't know much about weapons, I was sure there was no technology on Nippur, or on many other worlds for that matter, that could shoehorn laser power like that in a slender cane. I thought, “This guy has some interesting friends.”

He said Nippur was well-known for its ruthless ways, and the Federation tolerated it only because of its strategic location. All freighters who travel to this arm of the galaxy must pass through the Nippur spaceport to refuel and to exchange cargo. There was little agriculture on the planet. Except for a few small mining efforts, the spaceport was the only industry on Nippur.

Before I knew it, I'd told him the short story of my life. It was neat talking to him because he showed no pity or surprise over my tale and respected me as a real person while he listened. I liked that.

He told me he was an orphan too, orphaned by time. His parents and his family had died long ago. Hundreds of years had passed on Old Earth while he traveled the galaxy. For him, wrapped in a temporal-stasis field while aboard his ship, time had almost stood still. I found the idea of t-s fields a little weird. I'd never met a space traveler before.

I reached the end of my meal before I finished everything on the tray. I hated to leave leftovers, but I knew if I didn't, I'd be sick. The knit dress had no pockets or I'd have filled them. I wrapped several cookies in a napkin for later.

Suddenly, there was a news bulletin on the large video screen in the cafeteria. We stopped talking to listen. A picture of me flashed on the

screen. It was from the indenture id card. The bulls must have found it when they pulled the collar off the Black Widow. They wanted me for questioning in an assault and robbery early this morning.

The two old women had obviously recovered from the morning's events. They claimed I was a servant, indentured to the old crone, and I was robbing the warehouse when they caught me. In the struggle, I'd cut off the poor old woman's fingers with the laser torch I'd used on her safe. After that deed, I'd run, taking a bunch of cash and jewels with me. The report didn't mention Mister Tvorsky.

I shielded my face with my hands while my eyes peered between fingers to scan the cafeteria. Fortunately, the place was nearly empty; no one was near us; no one was looking at me.

"Great." I thought, "Now I'm a big-time crook: arsonist and jewel thief wanted in two cities."

Nervously, out of the corner of my eye, I peeked at Mister Tvorsky. Surely, he wouldn't turn me in, not after helping me escape and buying me all this great food. The man was frowning at me.

I realized later that it wasn't a frown. He was just deep in thought.

Finally, he said, "If I can get you out of Port City, do you have somewhere you can go?"

I thought quickly and said, "You know I have no family, but I can get by on my own. Any city—as long as it's not Pangarra or here—would suit me fine." Then I hesitated, remembering the news bulletin, "No, it doesn't matter, I'm done in. They have a picture of me. No place is safe." I looked down and blinked the tears from my eyes. I couldn't help it. It was hopeless. "They said I was an escaped indenture--that means a reward and pictures on newscasts and wanted posters in every city."

Mister Tvorsky was frowning again. Then he looked at me. "Do you trust me?"

I thought. He seemed like an okay person, and he'd helped me a lot. I nodded.

"I have a safe place in mind. I think I can get you there, but it's not on this world."

I gulped. I considered him trustworthy, but perhaps desperation clouded my judgment. Still, what choice did I have? What was my future here?

I heard myself saying, "I'll go--"

He looked at me intently, as if to make sure I was serious.

Wordlessly, I looked back at him.

He stirred, his eyes circling the room. He removed his watch, set it, and gave it to me. With a nod of his head, he pointed to a hallway behind me. "Go to the ladies restroom. Get in a stall and lock the door. You should be safe until I return." He hesitated, thinking. "I need to check out of my hotel room and take care of some business. Then I'll be back for you. Keep an eye on the timer. If I'm not back before it gets to zero, then something has happened; they've arrested me, or I've had some other serious problem." He pulled out his wallet, removed some money, and gave it to me. "In that case, I probably won't be back, and you're on your own."

I looked at the Federation bills he handed me; it was more money than I'd ever seen before. I could live a long time on it.

We both stood up. "When I return, I'll knock on the door, fast three times, pause, and then once more. I'll wait just outside the door. Be ready."

I nodded and without looking back, I walked quickly to the restroom. It was empty. I chose the farthest stall, locked the door behind me and sat down. It would be a long, nervous wait.

I was so tired from the stress and activity of the previous night that I dozed, napping in intervals, waking enough on several occasions just in time to catch myself falling off the seat.

Two women came in the restroom. I stood up and watched them through the gap between the door and the wall of the stall. After they left, I realized I still had the money Mister Tvorsky gave me in my hand. The dress had no pockets. Pockets are important; more than once that morning I'd wished for my overalls back. I counted the bills. It was enough to rent a room and buy food for the rest of the year. If I could change my appearance enough, maybe I could stay in Port City or even go back to Pangarra.

As if in answer to my thoughts, a woman shuffled into to the restroom. She was old. I could see her through the crack at the door of the stall. She slowly took off her coat and draped it over a chair near the doorway. Then she entered the first stall. I heard the lock sliding home.

I eyed her coat. Long enough to cover my white knit dress, it had a hood which would hide my face. Stealing the coat would be easy--slow as she moved. I could grab the coat on my way out of the restroom, leave the restaurant, and be gone from the terminal before

the old woman left her stall.

I hesitated. What would Mister Tvorsky think if I were gone when he returned? If he returns. What if he isn't as nice as he seems? What if he does me worse than the two old crones did? However, I thought, he did save me from them. He did seem very nice. I started pacing, circling the limited space in the stall. I kept weighing my risks and my choices and, in the end, I couldn't decide. Then the old woman took the decision out of my hands. She finished her business, washed her hands, and left with her coat.

Not long afterward, I heard the three fast knocks on the door, the pause, and the single one. I rushed out of the restroom. Mister Tvorsky was waiting outside the door with a large, open suitcase on wheels.

“Hurry, get in.” He said.

I was surprised and a little annoyed. “This is it?”

He nodded, “If you're going with me, I need to sneak you through port security, and up the tether to my ship.”

That startled me. The idea of going up the tether was bad enough, doing it in a suitcase didn't appeal to me at all.

The man shook the luggage handle impatiently, “It's the best I could think of. I didn't exactly have time to plan something special. Do you want to go or not?”

I did. I really did. I flashed a smile of apology to let him know I appreciated his efforts and curled myself into the suitcase. It was a tight fit, but I made it.

He gave me a can with a mask attached. “It's oxygen. You can take hits off it when you start running low on air. The trip will take several hours.” Then he closed the zipper.

“All right.” I said to myself. “Now is NOT the time for a panic attack.” Although it was dark inside the suitcase, I closed my eyes and started trying to relax. “I can do this. I can do this--”

Suddenly, the suitcase, my new world, tipped on its side and I felt the rhythmic bumps as it rolled across grout lines in the tile floor of the restaurant.

This was the fourth time in almost as many days that being small and skinny was good for me. First, I slipped through the window of the storeroom; second, I hid in the stack of boxes. Next, I rode on the truck's spare wheel, and finally I curled up in a suitcase to escape Nippur. Sister Anne says smarts trumps size every time. Smart and

big may be the best, but she says that being extra-smart and extra-small like me isn't all that bad, either.

I learned later that after Mister Tvorsky left me in the restaurant, he returned to the hotel to get his luggage and check out. As he hurried to the hotel, he thought and rejected several escape plans. Finally, he came up with the kid-in-the-suitcase plan. It was the only one with a chance of working, and the only way to get me past the space port security.

There was a constant fear that terrorists might damage the space tether. The security checkpoints were many and thorough. This resulted in long lines for the civilian departees. However, spaceship crews enjoyed special privileges, and they were able to bypass the lines and some of the delay at each checkpoint. Security rarely checked the single piece of luggage they pulled or carried. Those with the status of pilot and owner, like Mister Tvorsky, were mostly never checked. He was counting on that.

When he got to the hotel, he repacked his belongings and sent them to his freighter by a courier. With the empty suitcase, he returned to the restaurant, stopping along the way to buy a canister of oxygen. The oxygen cans were common, on racks in every store in the terminal--sucker candy for those who feared the trip up the tether.

At first, the ride in the tether shuttle was unsettling. I suddenly slammed hard against the side of my suitcase and it banged against something else. Then everything was vibrating. It startled me; I panicked, packed in so tight. Claustrophobia hit me hard. My muscles tensed. I wanted out. I was suffocating. No, I realized I was holding my breath. I forced myself to suck in oxygen from the canister. I fought for control, to quiet my fears. Slowly, I realized the pressure I felt was acceleration. The shuttle was underway. I was moving up the tether and escaping my life on Nippur.

The acceleration continued for some time. Cramped, jammed up, the pain I felt was almost unbearable. Then it gradually eased off. The vibrations stopped, and I was floating. Literally. That caused me to remember the big breakfast I had that morning.

“No way.” I thought determinedly. “No way, that's gonna come up. Not in here.”

After a while, I started enjoying weightlessness. I decided I liked it.

My head slammed against the suitcase again, except now it was the other side. We'd passed the break-over point and were slowing down.

This time the pressure wasn't as bad and finished sooner. Afterward, we were weightless again. We'd arrived at the terminal in space where Mister Tvorsky docked his space freighter.

I was moving again, weightless and bouncing around with the suitcase. I tried to imagine this. The picture in my mind's eye was a man holding a leash and at the other end of the leash, a suitcase that floated and fluttered like a balloon, occasionally and sometimes unexpectedly banging into walls and bulkheads. That's what it felt like, too.

Finally, we arrived at his ship. I heard a metal door clang shut and air locks being set. Then the suitcase unzipped. I squinted my eyes against the bright light and sucked in several deep breaths of fresh air. The air was cool, and I tasted a slight metallic flavor. My new friend completed unzipping the bag, and held on to my wrist as he pulled it away. I floated, suspended in the air in the shape of a suitcase until I un-kinked my legs and arms. It felt good to be able to move again.

I realized that moving weightless would be a problem when I started bouncing around. Fortunately, Mister Tvorsky continued to hold my hand as I flopped. He pulled me over to a handhold on the padded bulkhead. I hung there by one hand while I looked around. The room was small and cramped. It was cylindrical, like a can. Several rows of handholds decorated the well-padded curved wall. Gauges, dials, video screens and keyboards dominated one end. The other end was strange looking; two sets of three cylinders, in a couple of curved racks that made them look like two sets of bunk beds.

I smiled large at my rescuer, "Thanks very much, Mister Tvorsky." I said. "Now, where is the bathroom?"

He laughed and pointed to a door. "There is a small problem there." He said, "Are you aware that bathrooms work differently in a weightless environment?" He proceeded to explain the mechanics of waste removal in space.

I entered the facility and followed his instructions. It was my first time to pee into a vacuum cleaner.

He was busy at the controls when I returned, pulling myself along using the handholds. It was fun.

"I thought your ship would be bigger." I said.

"This module is only a small part of it." He pointed to a framed picture that hung on the bulkhead above the video screens.

What I saw in the picture looked like a large tank farm. Hundreds

of cylinders attached in a rectangular array.

He pointed to a small dot in the picture. “Here’s the control module, where we are.”

I looked closely at the picture; there was a tiny cylinder perched on top at one end of the array. He flipped a switch and pointed to a video screen. “This is what the rest of the ship looks like from here.”

I saw lighted rows of tanks that stretched forever into the darkness of space.

“And this is the view from the other end of the ship, looking back toward us.” He said, flipping the switch again. In this view, I could see the control module, just barely. Gradually, using one of the controls, he zoomed in on the structure, a sideways soup can perched on a platform that raised it a short distance above the horizon of the tank field.

I shook my head. “This isn't anywhere close to what I thought a space ship would look like.”

“You're only seeing the topside. The hyperdrive and energy source are below, out of sight.”

A radio started squawking. Mister Tvorsky did some more control things, responded to the voice on the radio, and flipped some switches. A video display brightened and text began scrolling down the screen. He peered at it and started tapping on the keyboard.

“The rest of the tour will have to wait. We're getting underway.”

He typed some more, flipped a few more switches, and stood up. “Okay, all done here, we'll be back there at the pods for the trip.” He gestured to the other end of the module.

I followed him from handhold to handhold along the bulkhead. We entered the passageway between the two racks of cylinders--the ones I thought looked like bunk beds—and he gestured to one. “This is where you'll be for the trip. Get in.”

I looked in the can. The padding on the inside reminded me of a coffin. “Listen.” I just got out of one box, and I don't want to crawl into another.”

“It's okay; this one's special. You won't realize you're in it. We'll be wrapped in a t-s field; the temporal-stasis field we talked about earlier.” He tapped the narrow cylinder, “It's also an escape pod. If there's a bad problem during the trip, this pod could save your life.”

A bell started a low repeating chime.

“Hurry now. The countdown has started, and don't worry, the

computers will take care of everything.”

I reluctantly swung up and floated in position inside the can.

He got in the pod on the other side. “Don't worry.” He repeated, then laughed and raised one finger; “I'll see you again in one minute.”

He pushed a button and the lids came down. Then it was dark.

#

With a whoosh, the lid of the pod sprang open. I blinked at the light. Mister Tvorsky was standing beside the pod looking down at me.

“What happened? Did something go wrong?” I asked with concern.

He laughed. “We're there. Or, rather, here. At Astar. It was a good fast trip. Only took three Old Earth years.”

I didn't feel three seconds older, much less three years.

“I went ahead and docked before unwrapping you. I hope you don't mind. There isn't much to see from inside this tin can except through video from the cameras outside. There are no windows. And I had to do many complicated maneuvers in a short amount of time.”

He looked at me. “I know this is all new to you, and you shouldn't have to miss anything. But I needed to concentrate on my job.”

He paused. Then he said, “I recorded it, so you can watch the video later, if you want. Oh, and I think I've worked out your immigration problems.”

I didn't know I had an immigration problem. “What?”

“You need permission to enter this world legally--and we want that.” He looked at me severely, “I don't want you doing anything illegal here, ever.”

Duh, as if I would, if I had a choice.

“I have a good friend here. Well-placed. He's going to arrange everything.”

Mister Tvorsky didn't mention his friend owned this world, but that's another story.

“We'll stay here at the space terminal until my friend gets the legal issues worked out.”

I looked around. “Stay here?”

“Not here on the ship. We'll stay at the In-transit Guesthouse; it's part of the space terminal.”

Our escort, a couple of Bulls, met us at the first checkpoint. Mister

Tvorsky said I should call them security guards now. Okay, I can try to do that.

The guesthouse was a terrific place with lots of great food, gardens, swimming pool, and artificial gravity. I couldn't leave until I was legal, but Mister Tvorsky did, and he brought back nice clothes and picture books from the planet below.

Finally, everything was complete, and it was okay for me to leave the guesthouse and the space terminal. We took the tether shuttle down to the planet. Mister Tvorsky's friend arranged a charter flight to take us to the convent. It was the first time I'd flown in an airplane and flying over the beautiful mountains was an adventure I'll never forget. The mountains are often in my mind and I hope to visit them again one day.

#

I finished recording this story for Sister Anne in my most favorite place at the convent. Sitting in the highest window of the stone belltower, I waited to watch the sun of Astar set behind those western mountains that I can't quite see from here. While I waited, I thought about the long ago days on Nippur. I thought about the Pack. I hope all my friends found their own Mister Tvorsky in their time of need. I thought about old Sallie, and I hope she is no longer sad. I thought about my mad scramble to stay alive and free, and I thought about the question Sister Anne is sure to ask tomorrow after she listens to my recording.

In my thoughts, I can hear her say, as always, “Katrina, what have you learned from this assignment?”

I'll respond, “It's good to be clever, to keep trying, and to never give up. But sometimes too, it helps to be small.”

I will pause, then continue, because I know she will expect more. “Being clever and small is sometimes not enough; good friends can help you in times of need. Making good friends and working to keep them are some of the most important things a person can do.”