

Make Mad the Guilty

By Nick Vollmer

The comedian saw the red glow in the audience. His eyes went wide, his expression changed from a smile to a look of terror, and he ran. But it was too late. A transparent tube thudded down, sealing off the edges of the stage and muffling his horrified screams as he was trapped inside. Bianca closed her eyes and covered her ears with her hands, but even that wasn't enough. The man's screams tore at her, shredding her emotional defenses and causing her heart rate to skyrocket. Despite her closed eyes, she could see him, clawing and pounding at his prison, his eyes filling with hopelessness as his final seconds ticked away.

The screams cut off. The stage dropped out from under the man and he was sucked into the frigid expanse of space. The cruise ship *Opulentia* drifted along as his corpse bounced down its hull.

The audience cheered, and the curtain fell.

Bianca was left nervous, cold, and naked in the wings of the stage, but she was well-trained and as accustomed to the horrors of her art as anyone could be. She didn't scream. She didn't cry. As icy air poured down on her from a vent above and sharp pains tore through her head with every rapid heartbeat, she forced herself to take deep breaths. She closed her eyes and tried to focus through her fear, her shivering, her anger, and her migraine, but no matter how she tried, she couldn't stop any of them. She was next to perform, and the performer before her had just been mercilessly executed right in front of her.

Get control or die, Madam Kate's teachings were always in her mind. Bianca forced another deep breath. Then one more.

The clear tube rose into the ceiling. Out on the black holostage, there was no sign of what had just happened. If Bianca could convince herself the murder hadn't occurred, there would be nothing to remind her. Another deep breath. She let it out, nice and slow.

It's just you and the moment, nothing else matters. She let the lesson repeat a few times in her head.

Curtains hid the audience now, but Bianca knew they were out there, comfortable in their plush red chairs. She could hear them, talking, laughing, grumbling, calling to friends and bellowing for the next show to begin. She had been taught to expect no remorse and no sympathy. Monsters. She clenched her fists to keep her hands from shaking with both fear and anger.

Don't get mad, just focus and stay calm. Emotion prevents you from adapting.

"It's a shame," one of the stage technicians said from somewhere behind her. "I used to enjoy lookin' at the girls they sent. Before the holostages, they used to send babes." Bianca didn't look back. She didn't want them to see her face. She still didn't have control, and she only had minutes before she had to perform.

"She just looks sick," another male voice replied, "give her some food and sleep and I bet she'd be one helluva ride." She could feel their eyes drifting openly over her naked flesh.

"Well don't invite her home yet," the first man joked, "I've seen ones that look like that before. You mark my words, she's as good as dead."

"You'd think the owners would take better care of their slaves," the second man said as they walked away.

Their lingering eyes didn't bother her in the least, she was used to that, but their words did. Was she healthy enough to engage all two hundred members of the audience with her show? Madam Kate took better care of her slaves than any other owner, but Bianca had to admit she wasn't feeling

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well. Could she thrill them enough to stay alive after they'd already had a taste for murder? What a waste her life would be if she died tonight.

You are better than all of them. Never forget that.

Bianca's stomach still churned from being pulled out of cryosleep, combining with her fear and the headache to make her feel truly ill. But there was nothing for it. Fear or no fear, illness or health, she had to perform. She was a slave, hired from Madam Kate to entertain. If she refused to perform, they would kill her for her disobedience. If she vomited on stage, they would eject her into space. But death was only death. It was dying without purpose that horrified her. Dying like the man clawing at the glass.

Bianca took another deep breath and opened her eyes, forcing her fear down inside of her. This was her purpose.

The auditorium was designed to jettison performers if the majority of the audience didn't like an act. If that happened, the owners of the *Opulentia* would pay off Madam Kate and that would be the last anyone heard of Bianca. It had been done before—out here where the law was unenforceable, the wealthy could do as they pleased.

"Make mad the guilty and appall the free," she whispered to herself, "Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed the very faculties of eyes and ears."

The words empowered her, and an icy confidence washed through her veins. The fear was still there, boiling inside like poison, but she could make it a tool now. She had learned to use it to give herself a mental boost instead of shutting down. There was still the headache, and the feelings of illness and cold, but the fear... that, she would use.

Forcing a smile, she walked to the center of the stage. Its surface was smooth and cold as glass against her bare feet. She stood shivering as she faced the curtain.

CostumeBeggardWeakNow, she thought-commanded a nanochip implanted in her brain. It took a moment for the stage to whirl to life, and in that moment she allowed herself to worry that maybe the chip had malfunctioned and was causing her headache. But the stage did fire up, and she pushed that possibility from her thoughts. It was just a headache. A bad one, but nothing to truly worry about. Focus on the goal. Do something these people won't be able to deny.

In an instant, she was no longer a thin, naked, bald girl. A projection locked into place around her and made her appearance that of a young man with messy, black hair and skin almost as white as hers. He wore no shirt, and his pants looked to be well-worn cotton of an ugly orange color. He was dirty and his ribs were painfully visible. It was one of her least appealing costumes, but Bianca loved to use him to begin her show. She had a sick obsession with accusing the people who were most dangerous to her, and this starving young man was the very antithesis of her audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" an announcer's voice echoed through the auditorium beyond the curtain. "Eminence Cruise Lines and the crew of the *Opulentia* proudly present... Bianca Lucentio!"

Bianca steeled herself.

The curtains slid open. There was no applause. Her audience just sat in their wide, velvet chairs, talking to one another, laughing, and paying little attention to the stage before them. They were the ones who could condemn her to death, and yet they wouldn't even give her a chance unless she reached out and demanded it of them. They would just glance up eventually, push their red buttons, and she would die.

But seeing them there dissipated some of her fear. It was just an audience. They weren't any different from the audiences she had performed for dozens of times in the past.

MusicBeggarsSong, she thought-commanded as she stared out at them. *SoftNow*.

The meandering murmur of a gently played clarinet drifted through the audience. It was music Bianca had composed, but she knew it would be talked over and its subtleties lost. When the music began, a few people finally glanced at the stage. She stood defying everything they expected from a

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show. In place of someone beautiful, horrifying, or powerful was this weak boy, emaciated and standing hunched with his eyes peering nervously over the crowd, daring them to execute him. Bianca offered the few who glanced at her a weak smile. Then she pitifully held out her hand as if asking them for something.

“We got another one for the tube, boys!” a man yelled. Bianca’s heart skipped a beat, then calmed when no one paid the man any more attention than they were paying her.

She held out her hand to the man calling for her execution specifically. She put the best pleading look she could muster into the eyes of her young man costume. The lights on the stage were still bright. There were no theatrics. There was nothing special or interesting about the scene at all other than the murmur of music. It was perfectly boring and, for now, exactly as Bianca wanted it.

“This is ridiculous,” the man said, and pushed the button on the armrest of his seat. It lit up, glowing red beside him like a burning warning of worse things to come. If ever more than half of the buttons were lit, the stage itself would open up and Bianca would be sucked into the endless nothing of space. As she planned though, too many members of the audience had yet to notice that the show had even begun. They were too accustomed to things grabbing their attention. She was playing their pasts against them to create a performance that had meaning at least for herself. The bang would come soon enough.

Bianca cowered away from the man the moment the button lit up, crouching low on the stage and wrapping her arms around her. Two more buttons lit up, and the rest of the audience began to take notice as they glowed. She didn’t want to risk many more. At least, not yet. Too many too fast had a tendency to cause a chain reaction. Her first point had been established. It was time to get to it.

ForeheadFlameReady, she thought-commanded through her headache. She had to force the confident playfulness that usually came so naturally. It was hard not to think about the throbbing in her skull. She turned her back to the audience and sat center stage with her legs crossed. Putting her head in her hands, she made the young man look like he was clutching at his hair in despair.

“There’s got to be a way...” she murmured, and the holostage projected the same words in a male voice over the auditorium’s speakers. She let her voice quaver and break, emphasizing the hopelessness of her character. She had spent months carefully crafting this entire first act of her show. She loved to show the audience what she really thought of them. First though, she had to show what they were stealing from the universe.

Now, she thought, and a flame appeared in the center of her forehead, swaying and dancing like a plant in the sea. Still seated, Bianca rotated to the audience with a look of intense thought on her face and thus on the face of the young man costume she wore. She stood slowly and reached up to touch the flame on her forehead with one hand. With another thought-command, she triggered a spotlight that shone down upon her from above as the rest of the house suddenly went dark. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then let loose a well-practiced smile that was full of a child’s wonder and excitement.

Her eyes snapped open. *MusicFlameDanceNow*, she thought. Drums began to pound, pulsating and all encompassing, cutting short conversations, vibrating hearts and stealing breaths. Her head felt as though it would explode, but for the first time, the audience turned to face her, upset at being so abruptly cut off.

CostumeTheInspiredStrongTransformSlowNow. Her mind raced through the commands, and the audience watched as the emaciated boy on the stage grew into a muscular male in the prime of his youth. His eyes met theirs and dared them to speak again. He had a gorgeous tan and the muscle tone of a world class athlete. His hair was as black and wild as the darkest pits of hell, but his face was that of the most alluring incubus. He was topless, and a tribal tattoo cascaded across his chest, as powerful and flowing as an ocean whose depths rippled with his muscle. His pants were silk, held to his waist with an elastic band, and they were the color of autumn. When he moved, the silk dazzled the eyes, reflecting

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light like the falling of a thousand dying leaves in a breeze. Bianca's smile changed, and the meltingly perfect smile of the confident young man hid her own broken and decaying teeth.

The music shifted, the lighting changed with her thoughts, and she began moving, dancing viscerally around the stage in a whirlwind of drums. The flute fluttered and thrilled through the audience. Flame streamed from Bianca's hands and feet as she flew, her mind issuing commands at intense speeds. She was lithe and graceful as a cat; her costume leapt and spun between hands and feet, performing acrobatic maneuvers that were physically impossible—her body only had to know where to be for the holostage to follow her commands and create the illusion of something more than human. She moved like a god in flight and shifted her costume back and forth between the man and a gorgeous woman. Through years of experiments, the woman now danced in the minds of men and lingered there long after she vanished from their sight. Like the man, she was a thing of perfection that even the women looked at with jealous desire.

All through the dance, Bianca's forehead blazed, and whenever she touched the ground a pillar of flame bubbled up from the spot until she was dancing in a forest of fire that licked at the ceiling and curtains. The music grew with the flame until the audience felt as enveloped in the artificial heat and primal movements as Bianca herself.

The show was loud and vibrant, alive and explosive, yet many audience members still managed to talk, leaning close to hear one another. Bianca didn't mind. They didn't care enough to give her their full attention, but their eyes were hers now. Embedded in indifferent expressions perhaps, but watching. They were giving her a chance.

And so she brought the spectacle thundering to a halt. Bianca collapsed in the center of the stage as if she were exhausted. Her costume intentionally faded out of vivid color. With her head pressed to the cool smoothness of the stage, Bianca thought-commanded:

World's Imps From the Wings and Stage. Music The Looters. Lighting Fire Pillars Only.

Now.

She took a deep breath, allowing herself a moment of rest as her programming of the stage continued the show. Her headache was worse than ever, and the room seemed to swim around her. She forced down the urge to vomit and thanked God she had programmed a break for herself into the show. For the first time, she accepted that something might truly be wrong with her, but it didn't matter. As Madam Kate had always told her, *the show must go on*. She continued thought-commanding and as she lay with her head on the stage, the show continued.

For the audience, demonic little men and women were creeping onto the stage and an appropriately mischievous theme song filled the auditorium. The imps peeked out from behind the open curtains and clawed their way out of the floor as if it were a black pool of ooze. They had beady eyes and long, hanging noses like beaks. Their fingers were twisted and their stubby legs made them waddle as they walked. They were dressed in the tatters of expensive suits and gowns, and the details in how Bianca had designed them gave the audience the impression that they smelled terribly. When their beady eyes caught the pillars of fire that still blazed, they gazed at them with sick fascination on their deformed little faces, then rushed over and greedily scooped out armfuls of flames, utterly unaffected by the heat. The pillars were rapidly depleted, and soon all that was left were the twenty imps with armfuls of liquid fire that they patted, squeezed, and formed into identical spheres.

Looking into the flames, their eyes glowed with lust, desire, and need, but it was only a trick, and it was clear to the audience that their eyes merely glowed with the reflection of the fire in their arms. The imps looked at one another, and then they each tried to plant the spheres they had stolen, digging holes into the blackness of the stage and tucking their fireballs inside. Beckoning comically, they tried to get them to grow from the stage into pillars, but their efforts were in vain, and the fires dwindled. As the flames died, the music died with them until there was nothing but silence and harshly lit imps in the dark.

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With disgusted looks and disgruntled motions, the imps left the stage, climbing out into the audience and seeming to vanish into the chests of individual audience members. The entire auditorium was built with thousands of holoprojectors, and the illusion was just as convincing off the stage as it was around Bianca.

Bianca was left alone on the stage, laying at its center, a once beautiful goddess now exhausted. She let the silence linger for a moment, then thought-commanded, *CostumeBaseFormNow*.

And with that, she was herself again; though an elegant, red dress covered her and her bald head had been hidden beneath shining locks of blonde hair. She was slightly tanner, her chest was far more voluptuous, and her teeth looked straight, but the features were hers. The eyes were hers. This was the way she liked to think of herself.

She stood up and bowed to her audience, invisibly struggling to hold her balance as her vision blacked out for a moment. An effect of the headache? *No time to worry about it*, she thought, *focus on the audience*.

She was surprised that three of the nearly two hundred actually clapped. She doubted they had understood any of the symbolism, but at least they appreciated the art. Most of the rest shrugged and quickly continued their whispered conversations. Bianca took the whispers as a complement—they weren't talking in their normal voices. Something in her intro had awed them into deeming quiet necessary, and there were no new glowing red buttons. A hope began to grow in her that maybe this audience would be the first to take more than entertainment from her show.

"Not bad," a man in the second row said with a sneer. He held a beer bottle in one hand and looked to be straining his already large seat with his bulk. She could hear a drunken slur in his voice. "But you were billed as an interactive entertainer. If this don't get interactive soon I'll cast my vote to kill you." He fingered the red button on his chair and smirked at her. There was a mumble of agreement from the rest of the crowd. Most of them were just as overweight as he was.

"Tell me then, sir," Bianca walked to the edge of the stage in front of him and crouched to be closer to eye level, then she leaned forward until her hands touched the stage. She made sure the man had a perfect view of her ample cleavage and cast him her most radiant smile, cranking up its glamour with a few thought-commands. Her red dress shimmered in the stage lights. "What would you like to see?"

A red light went on to her right, catching her off-guard. Her heart rate shot up sharply and her gaze flew to the man who had pushed the button. Normally she had things under control by now. What had she done that an audience member didn't like? Was this leftover bloodlust from the man they had killed?

The culprit was a well groomed man in a suit sitting in the front row, and the moment she saw him, Bianca wondered why she hadn't noticed him sooner. He stood out from the crowd the way an Olympic athlete would in a room of slobs. He was in perfect shape, but it was his eyes that froze Bianca in place. They were deep and black, and they emanated an intense intelligence that she had never seen amongst any of her audiences before. His slender lips were turned up in just a hint of a smile, and he didn't hesitate to look directly at her, into her eyes, through her costume and down into her depths. Something about that gaze made her shiver... but it simultaneously filled her with desire. This was a man of pride, and despite having never seen him before, Bianca found him to be hauntingly familiar.

As she stood and walked towards him, a large man sitting next to him gave her suited man a contemptuous look. "Why'd you do that?" he asked, "We're finally about to see some titties."

Before the man in the suit could respond, a woman that Bianca assumed was the large man's wife hit her husband with one gloved hand. "For heaven's sake, Arnie, is that all you think about?"

"I'm a successful man on a cruise," Arnie argued, "you can't blame me for wanting to see some that aren't yours once in awhile." Around him, the audience snickered.

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The suited man with the dark eyes smiled at Bianca when she stopped on the stage just above him, and despite her desire to press on with the show, she found herself waiting for his words.

"I pushed the button because Miss Bianca was making fun of us," he said to Arnie, though his eyes never left Bianca's. His voice was smooth and deep as velvet. Then his tone darkened, "But she's making an unfair assumption that we're all the same."

"Hell," Arnie said, "you're thinking too much. It's a freaking show, man."

Already frozen by his gaze, Bianca now found herself dumbfounded by the suited man as well. He had understood the imps. He knew they represented the audience. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came. *Make mad the guilty and appall the free*, her mantra came to her like a whisper. To truly make a difference, she had to make mad the guilty and appall the free. But always, *always* there had been nothing left in the universe but the ignorant and her master, Madam Kate.

Mad or appalled? She thought, looking at the man with morbid fascination, *Guilty or free?*

His face gave away nothing but a dark, satisfied enjoyment made all the blacker by the low light of the auditorium. He was impressively handsome sitting there amongst the slovenly, and she felt an unfounded urge to please him. With that came an intense fear she hadn't felt in a long time, and a chill ran down her spine. *Never truly care*, Madam Kate had instructed her, and the Madam was never wrong. But something about the man made her care.

Confound the ignorant and amaze indeed the very faculties of eyes and ears, Bianca finished the quote to gather the pieces of her shattered confidence, ignoring her shaking hands.

"I need suggestions!" she called out, backpedalling to center stage, "Yes, ladies and gentlemen, this show is indeed interactive! Tell me what you wish to see and I will perform it right in front of your eyes!" She hated the impersonal quality of her inflection and the carnival style showmanship, but it was the best she could muster. She hoped her poise would return as she proceeded with the show. Somehow this man had stolen it from her, and the knives stabbing through her brain certainly weren't helping. *Maybe it's the chip*, she thought again, horrified, *maybe it's still working but something's wrong*. If the nanochip in her brain malfunctioned, she would be unable to control the stage.

Once more, she pushed the thoughts from her mind. She had to maintain focus on the show or it would all be over anyway.

"Are there any suggestions?" she asked again, "Come on folks, tell me what you want to see!"

"What did you mean she was making fun of us?" Arnie's wife asked the man in the suit, but her voice was mercifully lost amongst the yelling of the crowd.

"Show us a mystery!" one woman yelled.

"Naked acrobatics!" yelled a man.

"Rock concert!"

Bianca was pleased that so many of them spoke up with suggestions. If nothing else, the suited man's accusations had bought her the attention of the crowd. She felt the ball of fear that had so rapidly consumed her begin to shrink back to its more common, usable level. It was time to do what she always did. She had to take their suggestions, tease them with their ideas, and make the show her own. Within her act she would lace the accusations. If the man became angry, it meant it was working, didn't it?

Before she could begin, the man in the suit called out a suggestion of his own:

"You're a slave," he said, and though he hadn't yelled it, his voice carried powerfully through the auditorium. "Show me why you think you're so much better than me that you can stand there and accuse." He leaned forward in his chair and looked like he was genuinely interested.

She should have ignored him. For God's sake, his button was already pressed, redeeming herself for him meant nothing. And yet...

"I wasn't accusing," Bianca forced a smile and spoke with strength though his piercing gaze was stealing away her nerves the way her imps had taken fire from the pillars.

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Four more red lights came on and the conversations in the audience grew louder. She was taking too long. She felt a bead of sweat drip down the side of her face, and she was grateful that the holostage provided a costume to hide it. Madam Kate's voice screamed in her mind: *Forget him! Control the show! Dazzle them or die you fool girl!*

Get control, Bianca, she told herself, you've had worse interruptions than this. He doesn't matter any more than the rest of these people. Run the show like you always do.

"Why don't you show us the day you became a slave," the man said, his voice strangely softer now and just for her, "Maybe it will remind you of the kind of people you're speaking to." There was something hidden in the way he said those words, some secret challenge. The words themselves made Bianca mad though, so she didn't pause to think about it.

The sudden anger that flared inside her got her moving again, and her thoughts whirled through a day that had changed her life forever. She tried to decide how to take all of that raw emotion and turn it into a show. She wanted to use it, not to remind herself of her place, but to show him why she was free despite her captivity. She put on shows that accused her audience of being less than they claimed to be; now she had to show why she had the right. The challenge inherent in it excited her and terrified her at the same time: this would be all new material, created moment by moment on a grand scale for a live audience that held her life in its hands. She didn't have any pre-made set pieces for this, and pure creation was difficult. She wouldn't be able to make entirely new scenes, but if she combined a few new things with pieces she already had...

"Dude," Arnie leaned close to the suited man, "I'm here for an erotic show. Not some lame history lesson." His wife sunk lower into her seat and rubbed at her forehead with one hand.

Amaze indeed the very faculties of eyes and ears, Bianca thought. Yes. In a way, this was the challenge she had been waiting for since the day her father died. It was time to prove to someone other than herself that she was far more than just a slave. She wished it had come on a day that she felt less ill, but there was nothing for it, so she closed her eyes and willed her headache away.

CostumeTheGreatandPowerfulBiancaReady, she thought-commanded, LightingSpotlightReady. MusicIntensityNow.

She disappeared into sudden darkness, replaced by a giant green face floating in mid-air. Smoke billowed up around it, and plumes of fire erupted from the stage as she spoke. The music conveyed power, focus, and the need to behold the greatness that was before you. She fell easily into the role, overacting her facial expressions in the dark so they were prominent on the giant face.

"Silence!" she bellowed the words, and her voice was amplified to thunder out at her audience. "The great and powerful Bianca knows why you have come!" The walls quivered beneath the onslaught. Several more red lights came on—audiences never liked to be yelled at, but they were indeed silenced. The man in the suit smiled ominously and Bianca had to fight the urge to keep an eye on him, the way a teacher would keep an eye on a student known to do devious and mischievous things.

Bianca thought-commanded quickly and the face vanished. A beautiful and scantily clad female jester stood in the spotlight on stage, and Bianca moved towards the audience, gesturing dramatically as she spoke. Her words came fast, but with power, and she rapped them to a beat that started from the core of the dark, "For excitement came you here, for nudity and for fear. For a story hard to tell, for darkness and the pits of hell. For lessons hard learned but never lost, for a father who paid the ultimate cost. For tricks and doom, joys and gloom, a fight for life, violence and strife. A story that brought me here, before you all and full of..." her costume vanished on command, leaving her sweating, bald, and naked center stage with only her arms to cover her thin, white frame. "...fear," she whispered quietly, then the stage went black.

A voice chanted in the blackness and a heavy fog filled the stage as dramatic music began to play. "Fair is foul and foul is fair," the voice was like a diseased child in winter, crawling over the

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audience with cold and clammy hands, “hover through the fog and filthy air... On one fateful summer’s day, the slavers came to Qudaren to play...”

Bianca had no pre-made version of her father nor the time to create a full person, so she grabbed a character quickly that would work and thought-commanded it onto her. Then she hurried forward through the fog.

“Bianca!” he yelled in the mist. “Bianca, where are you?” In her mind’s eye, she saw the crumbling city her father had brought her to as part of their quest to find her mother. She saw the dilapidated houses and abandoned hovercars. There were beggars in the streets and men in rags proclaiming how unfair it was that they were being forced to live in a place without fresh air. Bianca had nothing like that in her preprogrammed repertoire, and she couldn’t spare the time to create something new, so fog and darkness would just have to do.

Using thought-commands and a skill similar to ventriloquism, she made a voice echo through the auditorium as though it were being broadcast across a city as it was in her mind: “Colony 8 has been attacked. Please return to your homes and lock your doors. The Qudaren military has been notified and will be here shortly.” In retrospect, she was sure her father had known the military would never show up. Qudaren wasn’t a place where people cared. As a little girl though, she had thought for a time that maybe soldiers would save her.

“Bianca!” she made her father call again. Then, she quickly thought programmed him to “search” and stepped out of the costume backwards into the fog and darkness of the stage. The costume was silent now, but it moved in preprogrammed motions, peering into the fog as though searching for something. Behind it, Bianca crouched in the shadows and prepared a hologram of a little girl, setting it to mimic her motions so she could act in the background while the hologram was what the audience saw in the foreground. In a moment, she would do the same thing with the costume representing her father, effectively turning her act into a puppet show.

The little girl ran towards her father from the right side of the stage. “Daddy, I’m here!” Rapidly switching between her two characters, Bianca acted for both of them in conjunction with preprogrammed actions, causing them to run together and embrace. She remembered the relief on her father’s face as she ran up to him.

“Hurry,” her father said, “we have to hide.” He had been nervous and his eyes darted up and down the dirty streets around them. He took his daughter’s hand and they ran towards the left of the stage. In her mind, they were running towards the secret basement that had been their home base to avoid the police and illegal immigration accusations. The galaxy was not an easy place to travel for a con-man and his seven year old daughter.

Their run was cut short. A mercenary working for Madam Kate stepped out of the fog to stand in their way. He was strong and armed with a rifle.

He pointed his gun right at her father. “Put your hands in the air!” he snarled.

Bianca’s father put his hands up, but he was a con man and liked to think of himself as one of the galaxy’s best. His posture shifted in the blink of an eye, and suddenly he had a swagger similar to the mercenary’s.

“Whoa man, easy there!” he called, “I’m part of the team. Madam Kate asked me to find her some little girls here in town.” Kate had announced her presence and her purpose to the whole city the moment she had taken over. Years later, Bianca had realized it was all a part of Kate’s act, a planned image that she created for the galaxy.

The mercenary looked at them skeptically, “I don’t remember seeing you on the ship.”

“I wasn’t on it,” Bianca’s father replied, “I was already here and hired over the telecom.” He was an expert at lies based on truth—several people must have already been inside the city for a raid to work, otherwise the bubble that protected it from Qudaren’s harsh atmosphere would have kept the raiders out.

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The mercenary took a moment to think, then focused on Bianca. “She’s not exactly pretty,” he said skeptically.

“What are you, new?” Bianca’s father asked with the perfect amount of accusation in his voice, “Pretty doesn’t matter now. We have holostages.”

Even as she played it out on stage, Bianca still felt the hurt of his remark. Her father had called her his beautiful little girl every day of her life, and some part of her wanted him to defend her beauty. She had dismissed it at the time as being part of his act. It wasn’t until she became one of Kate’s girls that she knew the truth.

“Well you’re going the wrong way,” the mercenary said. He raised one hand and pointed into the darkness at the back of the stage where Bianca lurked, acting for all three characters. “The Madam’s claimed the missionary’s office.”

“You really think I’m going to head back there with only one girl?” Bianca’s father asked. “I won’t dare face Kate until I’ve got at least five.” Bianca did her best with her onstage holopuppet, but in her memory she still respected her father’s ability as an actor. Despite the danger and the importance of their escape, he had mimicked the vocal patterns and posture of the mercenary almost perfectly. It was too tricky to uphold with the puppet, so she was using its preprogrammed posture and gestures. It was an affront to her father’s memory.

A red light went on in the audience, rapidly followed by a short chain-reaction of several more. A father-daughter drama with little context wasn’t enough for them. Feeling a sudden surge of adrenaline, Bianca made a decision.

Sound effect, gunshot, now, she thought-commanded. A gunshot rang out, and her father’s head exploded out towards the audience. Bianca adjusted the effect to happen in slow motion, emphasizing all the gory details even as her own head exploded in pain from the sharp sound. Her father crumpled to the stage. It wasn’t exactly how it had happened, but it was close enough, and many of the audience members jolted in their seats. Bianca winced even though she knew it was coming, and she quickly focused on the next part of the show to avoid dealing with all the emotions that could so easily break free inside her.

CostumeMadamKateScandalousNow. PropPistolRightHandNow. Bianca thought commanded the costume onto herself, then walked out of the fog towards her characters which she set to watch her.

The men in the audience cheered. Madam Kate was beautiful. She had a river of black hair flowing down past her waist. Her face was sharp but somehow soft at the same time. Her eyes were a vibrant jungle of green, and her breasts held the perfect balance between voluptuous and graceful. She was slender, but strong, sexy, but controlled. The version of her that Bianca was displaying was younger than the real Kate was now, but everyone knew her. Madam Kate was infamous all over the galaxy and loved and hated in almost equal measure. She was mysterious and outside the law, a villain and yet a successful entertainer. This version wore a sleek gown of silver silk with a slit down the center that revealed almost all of her breasts, an ample portion of finely tuned abs, and just a hint of what lay below her belly-button. The pistol was in her right hand, its barrel smoking for effect.

“Idiot. Get back to your patrol,” Kate commanded the mercenary. Her face was calm and controlled without the least bit of remorse for the man she had just murdered. She walked over to stand above Bianca. The little girl looked back up at her, shaking from the shock of her father’s death but too stunned yet to cry.

Even then, Bianca had been awed by her. This was a woman who truly had power over those around her the way Bianca’s father had only pretended to.

“What’s your name?” Madam Kate asked.

“Bianca,” the child whispered.

“Do you feel like crying, Bianca?”

“Yes.”

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“Well don’t. Crying is weakness made physical. If you’re going to survive with me, you must be strong.”

Bianca nodded.

“Good,” Madam Kate said, “Come along.” And together they made their way back to the stolen home of the missionary.

On stage, the two characters disappeared into the fog, but Bianca’s memory of the scene was crystal clear, and she recalled the awe she felt at the size of Madam Kate’s space ship. It was hovering behind the missionary’s house, just beyond the bubble that protected the city from Qudaren’s dust storms. A door-sized hole had been cut into the bubble to allow Kate and her mercenaries inside, and it had been re-sealed with a simple sheet of plastic.

Letting the scene fade from her mind and the stage, Bianca walked back out of the darkness. Not fancy Bianca. Not beautiful Bianca. Just Bianca. She was naked. She was white. She was thin. There were bruises on her arms and legs. When she spoke, there were teeth missing from her mouth.

A multitude of red lights came on in the audience and for a moment Bianca feared that the chain-reaction might carry on until she died. Luckily, the chain dwindled out at about twenty new lights. Perhaps they were women offended by her nudity. Perhaps they were men offended by her ugliness. To Bianca, it no longer mattered. All that mattered was the man in the front row, and the sorrowful expression that had appeared on his face.

“The life Madam Kate gave me was difficult,” she said softly. “I was forced to do things that no child should ever have to endure.”

Techno music tore through the room, pulsating with an exotic dream of a melody that whispered of something erotic, intense, and instinctual. The stage began to drip with red, and the red itself flowed and streamed and drizzled down from the ceiling to run in rivulets out towards the audience as though someone had poured a thousand gallons of paint out onto everything. Only the red was lit, and everything else was a blackness as deep as terror. The flow increased until the red was a flood, and then the thickest areas of it began to pull apart as though the black were pushing through. As it broke free, the blackness took form.

The silhouettes of pole dancers emerged on either side of the stage, two on the right and two on the left. The shadows of clearly beautiful women flowed in an eerie mix of a dance and the running of paint, pulling themselves up and around their poles and dripping away. The men in the audience cheered. The women sat enraptured by the artistry of the scene. Then a final pole emerged in the center. This one had the silhouette of a little girl dancing on it, no more or less erotic than the women that surrounded her.

Bianca walked purposefully out amongst the rivers of red, once again disguised in her Madam Kate costume. She stopped in front of the center pole and watched the child dance.

“You’ll have to use the holostage better than that,” she said. “If you do it right, no one needs to know that you aren’t a grown woman.”

The child stopped and took form out of the blackness of the silhouette, a little white girl covering her private places with her arms. “But the man,” she said, “the man you sent me to... he... he wanted me like this.”

Madam Kate showed no emotion. She crossed her arms on her chest and was as cold and hard as a statue.

“Did you let him touch you?” she asked.

The little girl looked hurt, and she turned her eyes to the floor. “I tried to tell him no, but...”

“Punish her,” Madam Kate interrupted, then stalked away as the little girl fell to her knees on the floor, bawling.

The stage seemed to descend into an impenetrable blackness. Whispers swam through the air, each in Madam Kate’s voice.

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"You must be versatile."

"You must be smart."

"You must be strong."

"You must be creative."

"You must always do what they ask."

"You must never do exactly what they ask."

"You must know the psychology of men."

"You must know the psychology of women."

"Punish her."

"Punish her."

"Punish her."

A sphere of warm light appeared at center stage. The little girl, now bald, bruised, and a few years older, sat on the floor, looking up at Madam Kate. The Madam was dressed in a silken nightgown that blew against her in a gentle, night-time breeze. It left little to the imagination.

"To be the best, you must learn everything you can," Madam Kate said. For the first time, her tone was gentle, and in any other context, it may even have come across as loving. From behind her back, she pulled a book and held it towards the little girl. "You can read, right?" she asked. The little girl nodded. "From now on, you will read for three hours a day." She tossed the book into the little girl's lap, then turned and walked away into the darkness.

The darkness closed in on the little girl, bringing its cold to replace the small warmth of the sphere of light. The girl held the book in front of her like a shield, and then she opened to its first page.

The sound of a flute playing a melody like the end of winter fluttered into the audience. It was shy and quiet and it moved with a skittish hesitance, yet it carried all the beauty of a child's heart in its outstretched hands. The little girl turned the page and leaned closer to the book. From the stage beside her, a vine began to grow, timidly at first but with increasing surety as the girl read. It was vividly green and alive, and it glowed a beautiful, ephemeral blue. The flute grew less afraid and began to caress the ears of the audience as it moved. The girl turned the page again, and a flower appeared on the vine and hummed with joy. The flute couldn't help but skip blissfully to the sound, gaining strength as the vine continued to grow. Soon the melody would be full of spring, and winter would be forgotten.

The girl turned the page again and shifted to lay down on her stomach, intent on the words before her. More vines sprouted out of the ground, and each one grew quickly, lighting the stage in their beautiful blue light as a woman with the voice of an angel began to sing in a language no one knew but that everyone longed to know.

More pages were turned, and more flowers appeared. The flute was joined by a piano, and then a harp, and then a violin, until exaltation and redemption were washing over the crowd. More pages were turned, and animals found their ways under the curtains and out from beneath the chairs of the audience. Birds flew through the jungle of glowing vines, adding the high notes of a piccolo to the song, and squirrels scurried along the ground bringing light snare drums. Soon there were animals of all types around her, and her garden had become Eden itself, accompanied by a symphony of a summer day spent playing tag and climbing trees.

The real Bianca, still naked, white, and bald, walked out from amidst the vines. She looked out at the suited man with real tears running down her cheeks. The words of Madam Kate screamed in her mind: *Never show them vulnerability. Crying is weakness made physical.* But Bianca's soul argued. *No, she thought, it's hiding that shows true weakness.*

"I found the world," Bianca whispered to the suited man in the front row, fully understanding how forced it sounded, but meaning it all the same, "And when I was finally sent out into it to see it for myself, I realized how many eyes were still closed."

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The garden faded away behind her, and she looked into the man's eyes. His challenge had faded away, and the secret that had lurked just behind it was there under the stunned expression on his face. *He believes in me*, Bianca realized suddenly, and the shock of it was almost as powerful as the shock of her first interaction with him. *He agrees and wanted to see if I really knew what I was doing...*

And just like that, she knew what she had been doing wrong for so many countless performances. She could see it clearly in her mind. She couldn't hope for an audience to change their lives based on accusations. She had to do for them what the books had done for her.

Bianca ignored the man, intent on her newfound purpose. The audience was waking up from the spell she had cast on them. They looked at one another, deciding whether or not to be upset at the sudden pause. Whispered discussions crept amongst them like long forgotten ghosts. Bianca let the pause linger... and then a red light came on. Followed by another. Then a whole string of them. They had made their decision and Bianca was being found lacking.

Her heart sank. Her performance had enraptured them, but it hadn't thrilled them, and now she would pay for it with her life before she ever got the chance to display her realization. People like these didn't like to be reminded of the flaws in their world, and once again, the show hadn't been truly interactive. To them it had been just one more accusation, powerful enough perhaps to snap them from their self-imposed ignorance, but now she had truly made mad the guilty.

Bianca stood looking at the man in the first row as the red lights continued to come on, building towards the hundred that would kill her, and she felt oddly calm in the knowledge that at least one person had finally understood. After years of shows, years of passionately throwing herself into her performances, she had made a difference to at least this one man. He knew what the world had lost. Maybe he had already known, but the change in his face reflected the change in her heart, and in that moment she felt more connected to him than she had ever felt to anyone in her life. She had shown him that he wasn't alone. She only wished she could have the opportunity to show him the realization she had made.

But the audience gradually began to glow red. It was like watching a countdown, counted in faces appearing out of the dark. But it was far slower than Bianca had expected; far slower than it had been for other performers that had been killed. There was a nervousness in the room that Bianca had never witnessed before, and murmured conversations in the dark that she prayed were the conversations of people who didn't like her accusations, but that had been inspired by the artistry with which she made them. Because that was the secret to making a difference. She had to inspire instead of accuse.

She took a deep breath and waited for the stage to drop her into space, focusing all of her attention on the man. In stark contrast to Bianca, he seemed genuinely afraid of the red lights and he turned sharply in his chair to get a better look at the rows of audience members behind him. As the lights went on, his face contorted with panic and he jumped up from his seat to stand in front of the stage.

"Hurry!" he called to her, holding out a hand, "I'll get you out of here."

His words woke her from her reverie and she blinked the tears from her eyes.

"What?" she asked.

"Come with me!" he said again, "Climb down before they kill you!"

"I can't," Bianca told him honestly, her eyes turning again to the growing red, "If I disobey, the chip in my head explodes." As she thought about it, her head seared with pain, nearly bad enough this time to make her stumble. Her ability to pretend away the headache was gone.

The color drained from the man's face, and he spun on the audience behind him. "STOP!" he screamed.

The audience went silent and looked at him, their beady eyes glowing red with reflected light. Two more lights came on as if in rebellion against the suited man's request, but the chain was broken

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and those two were the last of it. Bianca didn't know how close to dying she was, but she couldn't imagine it taking more than one or two additional red lights.

"You can't kill her," the man begged, "For God's sake, you have to understand..."

His voice faded as he looked out at the hostile stares. Something in him changed, and it was as if he realized something that he should have known all along. He let out a sad, little laugh. Then he turned to face Bianca again.

"You're truly amazing," he said, "you impressed me into talking to them like they're more than animals."

He spun back on the audience. His jaw set and his eyes went hard with indifference.

He pulled a small, metal box out of his pocket and held it high above his head. In its center was a red button. When he spoke, a roaring anger filled his voice and attacked everyone that sat before him. "I have a bomb hidden on this ship. If one more light comes on, I blow the hell out of all of us."

A fearful whisper swept through the audience.

A bomb, Bianca thought, stunned, *he has a bomb*. The word kept repeating in her head, freezing her feet to the stage.

The man pointed to a terrified woman in the front row. "Go find someone who can disable the chip in Bianca's brain," he commanded her. "And don't bring any guards back with you or I swear I'll kill us all." The woman hesitated, too scared to act until the man bellowed, "NOW!" and forced her to climb heavily to her feet. She ran, half-waddling, from the auditorium.

"She won't be able to find anyone," Bianca told the man. "Only Madam Kate has the control."

"Then I'll keep this whole ship hostage until she frees you," the man whispered.

For a second, Bianca was speechless. No one had ever cared about her before, and now, suddenly, here was this man, ready to fight the entire galaxy for her. A part of her wished there was a way he could win, but she was smart enough to know there wasn't. "Kate will just kill us all," Bianca replied, "It would help her image."

A pained expression crossed the man's face and he let out an agonized moan. "Damn it. I never should have even boarded." He turned for a moment and met her eyes, "I'm sorry," he said genuinely, "I was sent to kill everyone here. There are a lot of bad people. But I... I didn't have the heart to do it without proving to myself that they all deserved it. I was going to take an escape pod. I never thought that someone like you would..." he looked up at the ceiling truly distraught, then yelled, "Damn it!" again.

"Put down the detonator," a voice commanded over the ship's intercom system. "A reasonable solution can be reached without resorting to violence."

Bianca watched the man's knuckles turn white as he clutched it harder. "The galaxy needs this!" he said, yelling the words at the invisible voice. "There's no other way."

He glared out at the audience. "This slave is the only one that's proven she has the mind to deserve to live, and your sick system has made it so I can't save her!" he raged at them.

The anger left him and he stood there, shaking with emotion. He turned back to look at Bianca and in a broken voice that was just above a whisper murmured, "I'm sorry I couldn't save you. At least I know you understand. We can't let ignorance and idiocy rule any longer."

Bianca was dumbfounded. This is how her life would end? As a sacrifice to an ideal she herself upheld?

The man held the button high.

No! Bianca's mind screamed as he reached his free hand towards it. She looked out at the horrified faces of the audience and saw life in their eyes. Her show had begun to change some of them, but this... this had woken them up. For the first time in her life she stood in front of an audience that was fully aware, fully awake, fully *there*. Their eyes and minds were open, and this man, this desperate, fear-filled man with a mission was about to steal it all away.

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“God have mercy on me,” the man breathed, and his thumb moved onto the button.

“Wait,” Bianca whispered.

The man jerked as if he had been hit, then looked at her, confused.

Bianca gazed back at him, letting her eyes linger on his before she looked up at the audience once more. She took a deep breath to calm herself.

“I can prove they’re more than what you think,” she said, doing her best to sound confident.

“It’s too late,” the man replied. “They had their chance to save themselves. They chose to kill you.”

Several members at the back of the audience tried to use the opportunity to stand and shuffle for the exits, but the man spun on them and yelled, “Move and I push this button right now!” They froze.

“Please,” Bianca begged, crouching closer to him, “let me show you. Give them one more chance.”

“They’re mindless fools,” the man said. “Nothing you can do can change that.”

“Give me a chance to prove you wrong,” Bianca replied, “if you’re going to sacrifice me, you at least owe me that.” She knew that somewhere the cruise ship’s security officers were watching, but she also knew that there was nothing they could do. The suited man had become a suicide bomber. If he even caught a glimpse of security, he would push the button and it would all be over. She wondered if even now the officers were escorting anyone that wasn’t part of the show’s audience to escape pods and splitting their force to search for the bomb. Whether she could convince the man to give up his mission or not, just delaying him might save lives.

“They enslaved you,” the man said, “They put a bomb in your brain. They abused you when you were a child. Why would you want to save them?”

“Because I believe they can change,” Bianca said. “What difference does it make if you let me try?” She prayed that he was too worked up to think about the other people that might be getting away. Or maybe his primary targets were amongst the audience and he didn’t care about anyone else.

He looked at her for a long time before he answered.

“Alright,” he said.

Bianca nodded and her heart rate picked up even more. Now she had to follow through, but she had spent her whole life trying to change people and she had never seen any proof to say she had ever succeeded. Even if it worked, how could she possibly prove to the suited man that they had changed?

As if to emphasize the hopelessness of it all, her headache pounded harder.

The terrorist turned and looked up towards the ceiling, speaking to whoever was watching from beyond the auditorium. “You’ll have found by now that I’ve disabled all but one escape pod,” he said. “It was supposed to be for me. Get who you can out on it, but know that the organization I’m a part of will hunt them for the rest of their days.” He looked away from the ceiling and out over the audience. “I’ve decided to let Miss Bianca put on one more act. If I die somehow during the show, a microchip in my brain will trigger the bomb, so there’s no point in trying to sneak in a sniper. This is the last thing you’ll see in your lives, so let’s all enjoy the show.” Bianca doubted the truth of his words, but it wasn’t something anyone would be willing to test.

He walked to the front row and sat back down in his seat. The people to either side seemed to shrink away from him. With a nod, he signaled for Bianca to begin.

She closed her eyes. She thought about all the training Madam Kate had given her and found no inspiration there. She thought about all the books that had meant something to her and got a glimmer. She thought about her father, and the glimmer grew to a glow. She thought of the life she had always wanted for herself and found something more. Finally, she found an idea, buried in a prayer her mother used to say by her bedside before she disappeared.

Forcing herself to think through her headache, Bianca began.

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Firing off thought commands, she suddenly became a thousand different people from a thousand different places, each one displayed for only a moment before she became someone else. Music began, a soft, inspirational melody floating through the air. As the costumes flashed over her, Bianca walked slowly backwards, making her way to the center of the stage. As she approached, the costumes flashed by faster and faster until the faces became a blur.

Then her foot touched center stage and the costumes vanished. She was herself again, a naked, sickly slave girl gazing out over the men and women who stared at her. She smiled and proudly displayed her missing teeth for all to see. Slowly, she turned her gaze upwards. She raised her arms with her palms up, and suddenly a beam of light as bright as heaven itself shot upwards from her chest. It grew wider and wider until she was engulfed in its shine.

A trumpet trilled triumphantly. It started strong and rose in a crescendo of pride. At the music's most powerful point Bianca vanished, leaving only the light and the stage. Everything else went black. The trumpet stopped.

For a moment, there was silence. Then the trumpet started again, skipping rapidly from note to note. String instruments joined in, contrasting with the trumpet to add a touch of mystery and adventure. In the center of the beam of light, high above the stage, something glimmered and glinted, reflecting rays of brilliance out over the audience.

Bianca stood in the darkness away from center stage, rapidly thought-commanding every element of her show. Her mind swirled through the millions of words she had read. Through the worlds she had explored without ever setting foot on them. Through the victories of men and women of the past that lived on through their contributions to the world. In each she searched for ideas, for materials to bring to her show, for a way to grab the audience and carry them with her to safety. Her heart hammered and she was more nervous than she had ever been in her life. What she did in these next few moments could save a thousand lives or sentence them all to death. She could feel a part of her trying to freeze beneath the pressure, but she fought it and latched on to the best of the ideas flying through her brain.

With a series of thought commands, shadows emerged from the feet of each audience member, stretching out to become living entities of their own. The shadows pulled themselves free and began walking across the walls, past the audience and over the stage. They flickered over pillars decorating the sides of the auditorium and grew large where aisle lights glowed. They walked with purpose.

"Life's but a walking shadow," a male voice said. The music dimmed and the shadows stopped to listen. The voice was deep and clear as ice water, reverberating through the auditorium. "A poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more." The beam of light still blazed and the object at its center continued to glimmer, casting beams of light around the room. "It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Flutes and piccolos shrilled as the shadows on the walls threw up their hands and shook their heads, giving the effect that they were screaming and wailing against the man's words. One shadow grew larger on the curtain on the right side of the stage and it held out its hands to silence its fellows. The flutes and piccolos faded. The other shadows watched the one on the curtain intently.

It looked from shadow to shadow, then lifted its head proudly. A whisper of bass guitar accompanied it as it stepped forward out of the curtain, becoming a fully three-dimensional silhouette. Slowly, but with confidence and pride, the shadow walked towards the pillar of light. It looked at it for a long time, then turned back to face the audience in a contemplative mood. Sitting down on the edge of the stage, it put its chin on its fist and propped that arm up on its knee. With its other hand, it scratched its head.

Ponderous music played, rolling through bass and strings. And then... it happened. A sphere of light appeared above the silhouette's head, blinding in its brilliance. The silhouette sat up rapidly, then leapt to its feet in excitement. It ran from one side of the stage to the other, silently but enthusiastically

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telling the other shadows about its idea. The music picked up, now a full orchestra that dreamed of excitement, magic and majesty. Arriving at center stage again, the silhouette reached up and grabbed its glowing idea to hold it lovingly in its hands. Slowly, the idea grew larger and larger, until the silhouette held a bubble almost a meter in diameter. Inside the bubble was a stone tool.

After looking around thoughtfully, the silhouette released the idea and let it float up into the air. Just as it was almost out of reach, it reached out a finger and popped the bubble. The moment the silhouette's finger pierced the bubble's side, a line of light began running down its arm, turning it into a real person. The line worked its way down the arm, across the silhouette's chest, down its other arm, past its hips, down its legs, and to its toes. It flowed up over its head. When it was done, there was a flash of light and Bianca's perfect man stood there triumphantly, complete with the tribal tattoos on his chest and the pants that swirled with autumn leaves. The orchestra sang of discovery and life in a complex melody that Bianca had written but never imagined she would use.

The stone tool dropped to the stage with a thud. As the man watched it, it began to change and split, becoming a stone wheel, a flash of flame, a wooden home. Each of these in turn grew larger and changed, turning into carts, and crops, and bridges. They continued to split, representing every idea that came from that first spark of brilliance. Soon the stage was swarming with all the history of human creation, each idea illuminated in its own glow. They split. They spread. They changed. Cities rose and fell, and soon the stage was a wall of creation. Then the dam broke and a wave of inspiration crashed out and over the audience.

Everything faded back to black except the pillar at center stage which still glowed intensely. Behind it, Bianca took a deep breath and prepared for the next part of the act. Never before had she been forced to use thought-commands so rapidly and with such purpose, and her headache throbbed like it was actively fighting against her. But she was in it now, filled with the adrenaline of the show, and the ideas were coming faster. Some things she created fresh, not taking the time to program motions, others she used from what she had.

The music began again in the darkness around the pillar of light, filled with suspense and trepidation for what was to come. The light pulsed with the beat, throbbing lighter and dimmer like the heart of the world itself.

The melody grew, becoming something passionate and triumphant, and then the great inventors, artists, writers, and innovators from throughout history began to emerge from the pillar, walking proudly out with their greatest ideas floating in bubbles above their heads. They lined up shoulder to shoulder at the front of the stage, with a second line forming behind the first, and then another behind that and on back through the light and into the shadows of eternity. Each of their ideas glowed vibrantly like fireflies in the darkness around them.

The music changed once more as the greatest men and women in history threw their ideas up into the air. In their bubbles, they drifted out above the audience like a magnificent hot air balloon show, and the music became a whimsical tune designed to remind everyone of blowing bubbles from a wand as children. The light from all of the ideas was like a warm day at the beginning of summer, and if she could have found time between thought commands to notice it, Bianca would have seen the smiles on the faces of the audience as they stood to catch the bubbles cascading towards them.

A woman in the eighth row was the first to catch a bubble. She stood and raised her hands towards it. As her fingers touched, the bubble popped. Out poured the words of Shakespeare, saying, "It is not in the stars to hold our destiny, but in ourselves." And when the woman pulled her hands away, a line of light floated in the air from where her right index finger had been.

She held the hand up to look at it and discovered that the tip of her index finger was glowing white. As she moved it, a line formed in the air showing everywhere it had been. Her finger had become a pen, capable of drawing in the air itself. At first she wrote her name, then she turned slightly, cast a thoughtful look towards the ceiling, and began to draw.

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Around her, others were doing the same. Great words, pictures and inventions were pouring out of bubbles and on display for all to see before they faded away to leave space for the audience to draw. And that's exactly what each member of the audience did, standing to accept their bubbles then finding that their index fingers glowed and that they could draw in air.

Bianca stumbled to the front of the stage, dizzy with the thought-commands that overwhelmed her mind but that she forced herself to continue. Each time she recognized one of the drawings in the audience, she popped it into three dimensional reality, and soon there were holographic tigers running through the air with six legs, technical models floating around showing the exact workings of creative inventions, architectural wonders growing from the aisles, inspirational quotes read aloud, and beautiful works of art. It was everyone's plans and dreams pulled into reality and it was a true wonder to behold.

Another searing pain tore through Bianca's skull. Her mind whirled with the effort of simultaneously creating and upholding the show. She wouldn't be able to keep this up much longer.

A bubble drifted down to the suited man and he reached up to pop it. The moment his fingers touched, the bubble exploded. The music stopped and a great wave of fire swept out, destroying everything in its path with a roar that sent the audience cowering to their knees. Everything was wiped out in the flames including the pillar of light, and when at last the explosion was done, everything was utter blackness and silence.

In the dark, Bianca collapsed to her knees. Her mind was reeling and she felt weak. Intense pain shot through her head with every heartbeat. She fought the urge to vomit. Sweat covered her, but it was cold now and she shivered. When she wrapped her arms around herself, she discovered that she was shaking. Her breathing was heavy in her ears, and her heart thudded against her ribs.

Stand up, she commanded herself.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She tried to climb to her feet and fell back to the stage. *Stand up!* She commanded herself again. This time she managed it, choking down vomit. She set her face, and held herself with composure.

House lights, she thought. ...*Now*.

And the lights of the auditorium came up.

Everyone in the audience but the terrorist was standing, silently looking at Bianca and the suited man. She stood there before them, commanding her knees not to buckle, a thin, naked, white girl with broken teeth and bruises. Then the man stood up, holding the box with the red button in his hand. He looked Bianca in the eyes and she stared right back at him, displaying the pride of a woman who knew her mind was free. He was crying. He walked up to the front of the stage and set the detonator down at her feet.

The applause was deafening, and it continued right up until the moment Bianca collapsed.

In a room in the crew quarters of the *Opulentia*, Madam Kate stood above the prone forms of both Bianca and the suited man. They lay side-by-side on a king sized bed, both unconscious and breathing slowly. Kate had her arms crossed on her chest, and her mind ran through her options. The suited man, Everett Kale, had been apprehended after the show and taken to *Opulentia's* brig. From there, he had been tranquilized and brought to her, all exactly according to plan. Bianca, however, had passed out on her own. The collapse had been unprecedented, and Kate hated anything she couldn't plan for.

A neurologist sat in a chair beside the bed, carefully studying the display on a monitor that was connected to both Bianca and Everett by several wires. After a few minutes, he looked up at Kate.

"I don't see anything wrong," he said, "but that doesn't mean there isn't something there. You know as well as I do that no one has ever been memory-wiped as many times as these two. Technically

they've been wiped every day for nearly a month since we can't count the years they've spent in cryostasis."

"What do you recommend?" Kate asked. This girl was her crowning achievement. Bianca had succeeded at genuinely inspiring her audiences, and though Kate had to keep tight control over word of mouth, the cruise lines had begun paying a fortune for Bianca's show and even altering the layouts of their ships to make it work. Audiences came away saying it was "life changing" and were willing to hold their tongues so others could share the experience. It was an experience that Kate was charging more for every cruise. She knew it couldn't last forever, but she planned to milk it for as long as she could and information traveled slowly over the span of a galaxy. Unfortunately, the show had come as a result of very specific circumstances. Bianca had believed she could recreate that show without the memory wipe, but Kate wasn't willing to take any chances. Luckily, Bianca would never remember that they had disagreed.

"If it were up to me," the neurologist replied, "I wouldn't wipe them again."

Kate nodded slowly and one hand rose to her chin. Not memory-wiping them would mean the end of the best payroll she had ever experienced. She had paid a fortune to keep information about the show out of the press, and had paid even more to buy off the terrorist organization that Everett was a part of. The few who knew details about the show thought it was just an elaborate act. Only Kate and the neurologist knew that Bianca and Everett weren't repeating the shows by choice. Each audience believed Bianca was set free after the show and that she chose to go back like some sort of hero. It was information that Kate had paid dearly to have carefully distributed to hide the fact that Bianca was still hers. The show, of course, had earned more than enough to cover its expenses.

Thanks to an expensive memory-erasing procedure, for Bianca and Everett, every show was the first time. They had no sense of time. They didn't know that they had been doing the same thing on different cruise ships for years. Everett always thought he was there on his mission, and Bianca always thought it was just another show. With careful planning and set up, neither of them ever knew the difference.

Kate thought long and hard, trying to come to a solution. Things wouldn't go well if Bianca began collapsing before the end of the show, but it wasn't Kate's way to let her slaves go, and the performances were too profitable to stop. Twenty-eight almost identical shows. It was an impressive run, but Kate thought she could pull a solid forty out of it. And if Bianca didn't make it, what was the life of one little girl? Kate lost entertainers all the time.

"Do the wipe," she commanded, "then load them into their cryochambers. We'll keep a closer eye on Bianca this time."

"I really don't think—" the neurologist started, but Kate cut him off.

She turned the full power of her gaze onto him. "Let me remind you that I pay you large sums of money for your service and that your daughter is in my custody," she said icily. Then she turned towards the door and was about to push the button to open it when the neurologist's voice stopped her again.

"Have you ever seen her show?" he asked.

Kate's eyes seemed to take him in, evaluating him in her cold and calculating way. "Not live," she said finally. "I'm not willing to risk her seeing me."

"But you're great at disguises," the neurologist continued quickly, stopping her before she vanished out the door. Then he took his biggest risk of all: "I'll do the wipe, but only if you promise me you'll see it."

Kate hesitated and turned to look at him again, keeping all of the emotion off of her face despite the battle between curiosity and anger raging inside her. "Why?" she asked finally.

The neurologist looked right at her and replied, "Because I think it will change your mind."