



PRINCESS HOLY AURA

THE ETHICAL MAGICAL GIRL, VOLUME 1

RYK E. SPOOR

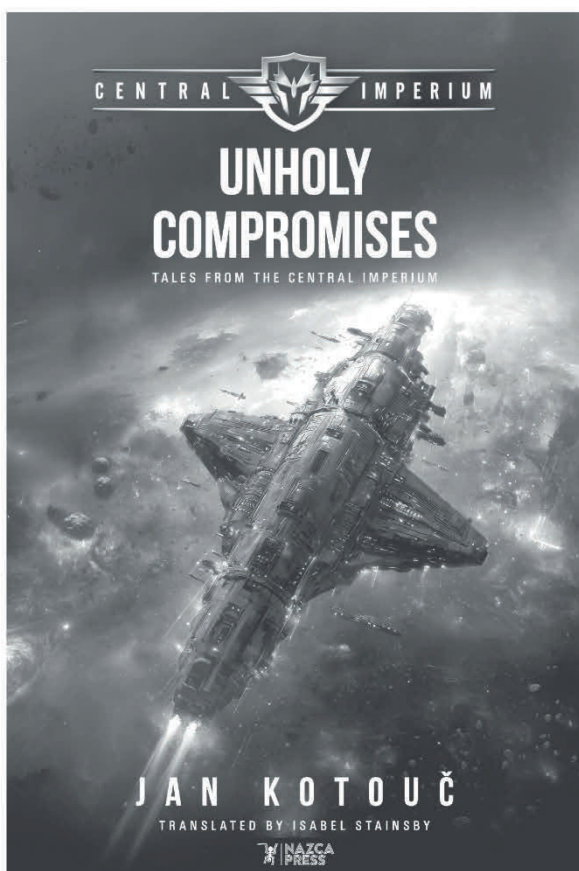
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BOOK ONE

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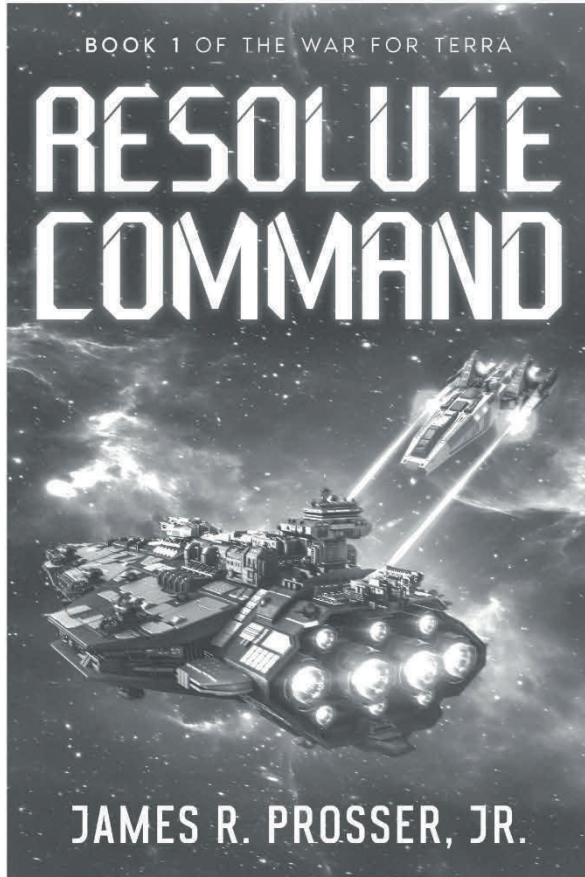




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Can Lee lead a band of civilians and misfits against impossible odds, or will the *Terran Princess* become another casualty in the war for Terra?

PRINCESS HOLY AURA

THE ETHICAL MAGICAL GIRL BOOK ONE

RYK E. SPOOR

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DEDICATION

This novel is dedicated to the memory of Stephen J. Reed, one of my oldest friends who passed far too early. I wish he could have been here to read this, because I think he'd have loved it.

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Firstly, thanks to Toni Weiskopf and Tony Daniel,
for taking a chance on this crazy idea.

And to Jay Hartman and Walt Boyes, for bringing Holy Aura back.

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imagine Holy Aura and her allies.

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PART I

THE PRINCESS AND THE RAT

CHAPTER 1

The screaming came from the alley to Steve's right; it was high-pitched, the voice of a child in terror and pain. Steve found himself sprinting down the alley before he'd even consciously realized what he was going to do. *This sure wasn't what I expected after leaving work.* Most days he walked home from Barron's Bagels after cleaning up and making sure the shop was set up for the morning crew, and either prepared for an evening of gaming, or just watched whatever happened to appeal to him.

It seemed that tonight wasn't going to be quite so quiet.

There were a *lot* of shapes moving at the end of the evening-shadowed alley, he realized as he shoved his way past a dumpster. He skidded to a halt, frozen for an instant by the macabre nature of the scene.

A little boy—Emmanuel, a boy who lived in the apartment a few doors down from his—was backed into the far corner of the dead-end alley, eyes wide with fear, face bleeding, beating at dozens of feral cats that had surrounded the kid. A large white rat—a pet?—was clinging precariously to Emmanuel's shoulder, balancing as far away from the hissing creatures as possible.

Jesus, that looks like a Halloween diorama. Steve knew that feral cats could be dangerous in packs, but he'd never seen such a mob around here; one or two, yeah, but nothing like this. Still, it was one thing to attack a little kid, another to deal with a full-grown man. Steve didn't *like* fighting, but he'd found that being six foot three and slightly over three hundred pounds with a good deal of muscle could convince most things to not even try.

"HEY!" he bellowed. "SCAT! Get out of here!" He grabbed up a two-

by-four from the ground and whacked one of the animals aside. “Go on, *get!*”

All of the cats turned their heads to look at him, an eerily synchronized action that sent gooseflesh rising in chilling waves across his body. Their eyes glinted a uniform green that seemed, impossibly, to be *brighter* than the light in the alley, almost as though they really were *glowing*. As one, the entire pack hissed venomously at him and then turned back to their prey.

What the hell? Steve was taken momentarily aback. Even the one he’d struck was returning to the attack, leaping up a set of crates for a better position. He’d expected the animals to scatter, at least, and really he’d pretty much expected them to run; now that he had a better look, there were only about a dozen of the animals, which meant that he still outweighed all of them put together by more than three to one, maybe four to one. But as Emmanuel threw a panic-stricken gaze toward him, Steve adjusted his grip on the board and struck *hard*. “I said *SCAT!*”

He connected well and truly this time, sending the animal flipping end over end across the alley, caught another on the backswing, and bored in to start flinging the creatures aside and get to the boy.

The hisses suddenly took on a furious screeching note, and then they *deepened*.

Steve fell back, horrified, as the furry little animals swelled to twice their prior size, eyes shrinking to nothing but faint ridges on a black, flat head with a mouth filled with ebony needle-teeth, body distorting to something semi-bipedal, wrinkled batlike wings extending from the shoulders. Blind the things might have been, but they still all faced Steve now, and he had no doubt they could *sense* him.

His stomach churned with fear, his knees shook, and he wanted to run. But there was a little boy in there, in among those monsters, and a tiny furry creature desperately trying to find shelter, and he was *not* going to leave them.

On the positive side...the monsters were now all focused on *him*.

One of them lunged, catching the board and ripping it out of his hands with terrifying strength; two more grabbed the board and broke it apart. *Holy crap, they’re strong as hell! I need something tougher!*

He saw it almost instantly: a lovely thick steel pipe, probably torn out of some nearby house, leaning against the wall just past one of the things. *Got to try.*

As the creatures started to slowly encircle him, he jumped

forward—with a speed that had surprised a lot of people, thinking that his bulk was mostly fat and not merely an overlay of fat on heavy muscle. He raised his iron-toed workboot and *stomped* as hard as he could on the one in front of him; something crunched and he heard a pained shriek, a quick scuttling to get *away* that gratified him. *Whatever they are, they can feel pain.* He hadn't been sure until now.

Something leapt onto him from behind, sinking what felt like a hundred burning needles into his shoulder and back, narrowly missing his spine. He cried out but finished the charge, caught up the pipe, and then spun around without slowing; his attacker absorbed the impact of his entire weight against the brick wall.

Two more flew at him—literally, flapping those leathery wings swiftly and powerfully to propel themselves through the air. Steve swung the pipe around like a baseball bat and a double impact shuddered down the steel shaft; the two monsters were sent smashing into the far wall.

But now the others, clearly realizing that Steve was a far more formidable opponent than they had taken him for, attacked in earnest. Teeth and claws slashed at his legs, two of them lunged for his arms and gripped, pulling, trying to disarm him, take him down to the ground where he would be dead in a moment.

Steve heard his own scream of pain and fear and it galvanized him; he shoved himself up against the tearing, wriggling mass and forced his body into another charge, ramming into the steel dumpster a little ways up the alley, bouncing back and forth between the walls, using his mass and strength and the hard city itself as a weapon to stun or crush his opponents. He spun the steel pipe around, brought it down in a piledriver blow that impaled one of the night-black monsters completely through, tore another from his arm and hurled it into the wall, hammered his fist into another yawning needle-filled mouth—feeling skin tear and rip—and then spun about like a top, hurling the stunned and disoriented things away.

The steel shaft felt *right* somehow, balanced in a good way like a fine quarterstaff, and its extra weight was comforting, helping firm his resolve and courage against these living nightmares. A lot of them were down now, but there were still more, six of them, and they were stalking, coordinating—*remember they can fly*—two of them gone, flanking him in the air, the other four trying to hem him in!

The four in the clear space ahead gave him an idea; instead of

retreating, he *dove* at them, dropping his weight on two of them, a falling anvil, then rolling to his feet before the others quite caught him. The steel pipe whipped around as he rose, and he nailed one of the flying ones, the heavy strike sending it sailing thirty feet almost straight up before plummeting back down to land, limply, on the filthy ground. Steve ignored the aching agony in his arms and back and set the steel staff to whirling up, down, right, left, smashing at anything and everything that moved, the slightest sign of beetle-black motion drawing his wrath and the hard, cold vengeance of steel.

Suddenly it was still in the alley; nothing moved but Steve and his shaking, bleeding arms. He looked around, wary, fearful, but no attack came. Everywhere he looked, there were twisted, monstrous bodies...but there was not a hint of motion from any of them.

Emmanuel had fallen to the ground, and for a moment Steve had the horrific thought that one of the monsters had killed the boy while Steve was fighting them. But after checking his pulse, Steve decided Emmanuel had just passed out from shock and fear. *No wonder; wouldn't be surprised if I did, myself.*

But the thought of being unconscious in an alley with those monsters—some of whom might not be quite dead—kept him quite focused on staying alert.

From behind Emmanuel crawled what Steve could now definitely see was a large white rat, fur gleaming slivery in the dim glow from distant streetlamps and the skyglow overhead. Oddly, it was wearing a tiny crown of some sort. *Kids do put all sorts of strange things on their pets, that's for sure.*

The animal sniffed at Emmanuel, then stood up on its hind legs, surveying the area, sniffing at Steve and the air around. Steve, who had had a pet rat himself some years back, gave an exhausted grin. “Sokay, fella. I think I got them all.”

“That you did,” the rat said, with a dignified almost English accent. “Well done, Mr...?”

Steve blinked, then shook his head. “What the...*did you just talk?*”

“I did. Perhaps it would be better if I introduced myself first, and then you can provide me with your name. I am Silvertail Heartseeker. And you are...?”

Am I nuts now? Did I just snap from boredom or whatever and imagine I was fighting monsters instead of cats? Talking rats? What the hell, Steve? You write better RPG scenarios than this!

He decided, after a split second, that if he wasn't going to assume

insanity, then *dream* was the more likely explanation, and therefore, being rude to the talking rat—Silvertail Heartseeker—was pointless. “Um, I’m Stephen. Stephen Russ.”

He tried to stand, found that it was *really* hard; screaming pain from uncountable lacerations echoed through him. *I’ve never hurt like that in a dream. Tiny pains, referred pain from something that happened during the day, but nothing like that. It’s clear pain. Not muffled, not dreamed...*

“...is this *real*?”

Silvertail Heartseeker nodded in a satisfied way. “The natural question, of course. Yes, Stephen Russ, I am afraid this is all too real. You answered calls of the innocent and helpless and risked your life to protect young Emmanuel from things far worse than you imagined existed. For that, I must first thank you. Many there are in the world who would have ignored those cries, and far more who would have fled when mundanity turned monstrous before their eyes.”

Silvertail bounced up and laid a pink paw on Steve’s hand.

Instantly a white shimmer of light flowed out from the tiny hand-shaped paw, light that was cool and soothing and that surged outward through Steve’s body. He saw the narrow rodent face wrinkle in concentration, the whiskers quiver, as the light erased pain, eased tension. Silvertail sagged down, looking as though he had just spent an hour running on an exercise wheel.

Steve flexed his muscles experimentally. There was still pain, but it felt superficial—more like the cat scratches he’d initially expected, not the deep, possibly dangerous wounds the monsters had left. “Wow. Um, thanks.”

“On the contrary, as I said, I thank you. I could not cure all of your injuries, but you will suffer no lasting ill effects from this battle.” He glanced at the boy. “Emmanuel will also recover, though he should receive appropriate mundane care shortly.”

He drew himself to his full height—which, standing, was probably all of eight or nine inches—and bowed. “I must formally greet you, who have passed a test that few in your world would have passed—a test of empathy, a test of attention, a test of reaction, a test of courage, a test of endurance, all compressed into this single battle. You are the one, the Heart I have been Seeking.”

Steve felt a chill of awe and anticipation, sensing that the tiny figure before him was far, far more than it appeared, and that it was

speaking a ritual, a destiny, not merely ordinary words.

From apparently nowhere, Silvertail Heartseeker produced a glittering brooch, three inches across, of gold and silvery metal, covered with an elaborate pattern in gems. Even to Steve's untutored eye, it was exquisitely made, the main body in the shape of a strangely broken-pointed star with a jeweled galaxy across it. Silvertail lifted the brooch in both tiny hands and said solemnly,

“Stephen Russ, you are the Heart that was Sought, the Courage that is needed, the Will that is eternal. It is for you, and you alone, to take up this burden and defend the world against the darkness that now rises to swallow the light. Take you up the Star Nebula Brooch, and become that which is your destiny. Take it, and become your true self—Mystic Galaxy Defender, Princess Holy Aura!”

CHAPTER 2

Steve goggled down at the slightly oversized rat with its overly-shiny white fur, tiny golden crown, sitting on his hind legs and regarding Steve with a far too knowing look. “Become *what?*”

“Mystic Galaxy Defender, Princess Holy Aura,” Silvertail repeated calmly.

The repetition of the ridiculous phrase left Steve speechless. He would have laughed, but the situation was not, in fact, funny; instead, he stood there, rubbing his broad face and feeling the never-quite-eradicated five o’clock shadow rasping on his palm, looking around at the monstrous, eyeless corpses scattering the alleyway around him, trying to grasp everything that had happened.

As the ebony bodies began to evaporate like dry ice in the slanting sunlight breaking through the clouds, the ludicrous words finally bounced back into his consciousness. “*ARE YOU COMPLETELY BLIND?*”

“While ordinary white rats do often have vision problems,” Silvertail replied primly, “*I* can see far better than you—into the soul, in fact, as well as more mundane spectra.”

“Then perhaps you can see why the word ‘Princess’ isn’t exactly appropriate,” Steve said sarcastically. “Let alone the rest of that hackneyed Magical Girl word salad you spewed.”

“You need to have a little more *respect* for an ancient tradition, Stephen Russ, especially as it is now your destiny to take the Star Nebula Brooch and the name of Holy Aura.”

“You have *got* to be kidding me, furball. Go find a nice klutzy junior-high or high-school girl—this Holy Aura is like fourteen, isn’t she?” Steve had watched more than enough magical girl or *mahou shoujo* anime to know the outline of any plot involving a magical girl and a cute furry animal.

“Well, yes, roughly fourteen in physical—”

“Exactly. Or if you want to avoid the stereotype, find the most awesomely competent schoolgirl you can and give *her* this...brooch.”

“So, you want me to send a fourteen-year-old child up against the beings who sent *those*?” Silvertail asked quietly.

That stopped him like a sledgehammer. The melting monsters were now night-crystal skeletons of claws and fangs and graveyard wings, and the memory of their savagery had not faded. “You just told me that’s how old, um, Magical Defender—”

“*Mystic Galaxy* Defender Princess Holy Aura,” corrected Silvertail.

“Fine, *Mystic Galaxy* Defender Princess Holy Aura,” he repeated, trying not to laugh at the ridiculous name. “That’s how old you said *she* was.”

“That is the necessity of the magical girl or *mahou shoujo* manifestation of the power, yes.”

“Look, I could, I guess, kinda take it if I was King Holy Weapon or something.”

“The matrix was determined thousands of years ago, Stephen Russ. It can no more be changed than you could shift the mountains in their courses, and even if it could, I have good reasons not to do so.”

“But why *me*?”

“Because,” Silvertail said, and suddenly he was not supercilious at all, but tired and grim, “I have a conscience, and because there are some very practical limitations of the power.”

“A conscience?” He remembered the earlier exchange. “Oh. You don’t *want* to send a little girl out against your enemies.”

“No. I have done so before, and each time it has gnawed at me, eaten at my resolve, no matter what the reasons or the stakes. And even if I felt no such remorse, the requirements are extreme. Can a girl of that age, in *this* civilization, truly *understand* what we are asking of her? What would *you* do to someone who recruited your fourteen-year-old daughter, if you had one, to become the main warrior in a battle against forces that could destroy your world?”

“I think I’d kill you.”

“Yes. And you would be right to do so. What would it *do* to such a girl to be placed in that situation? Even if she survived, what would she be like after fighting in a shadow war against such enemies—ones that make those you just defeated look like *gnats*?” Silvertail sighed. “I have tried many options through the eras, Stephen. I have seen so many die. I have seen so much that was *wrong*.”

“What are the practical limitations of the power you mentioned?”

Steve was starting to realize that, if this wasn't the most bizarre dream he'd ever had, he was on the verge of the most important decision...well, maybe in the world.

Silvertail opened his mouth, but there was a slight stirring nearby. Emmanuel was starting to come around.

Steve grimaced. *Dammit. I'd forgotten about the kid in this insanity.* "We'll pick up on this later, okay?"

Silvertail nodded. "I will pretend to be nothing but a pet until you say otherwise." He scrambled nimbly up Steve's pants and worn leather jacket and settled himself comfortably on Steve's shoulder.

"Hey, Emmanuel, you okay?" Steve asked.

Emmanuel sat up, shakily, looking around. Following his gaze, Steve could see that there was barely a trace of the monsters, and nothing that would draw the boy's attention. "The cats! They turned into monsters!"

Steve put his best "concerned adult" face on. "What? No, though they did puff themselves up and fight back. Scary as heck. But they're gone now."

Emmanuel was pale under his dark skin tone, and was wobbling on his feet. Steve caught him. "Hey, take it easy." Picking up the little boy, Steve could feel him shivering, and there were still many scratches and bites visible. "I've got you. It's just a little way to your house. Just relax."

Shaking, the little boy gripped Steve's arms tight as he headed out of the alley. *Good that he's a skinny little thing; wouldn't want to carry someone much bigger very far.*

In a few minutes he'd reached the door to the Ochoas' apartment and knocked. The door was quickly pulled open; Emmanuel's mother stepped back with her hand to her mouth, saying what Steve thought was "My God!" in Spanish. His father shoved his chair away from their dinner table and ran to join her, leaving two other boys and three girls staring with worried eyes.

"It's all right, um..."—he ransacked his memory, dredged the name up—"Luciana, I don't think he's been hurt too bad."

He let Luciana take the boy as Alex—short for Alejandro, if Steve remembered right—looked at both of them. "What happened, Mr. Russ?"

He'd already decided how to tell the story on the walk here. "Bunch of feral cats; never seen so many in my life. I heard him crying in the

alley, ran down, and chased 'em off. They didn't want to go right away, as I guess you can see."

"Jesus." Alex frowned. "Some of those cuts are..."

Steve knew exactly what the other man was thinking. Animals might be rabid, certainly might cause infections, he should take the boy to the hospital, but the cost...

Steve sighed, dug into his pants and pulled out his wallet. "Here. I know you've got basic insurance, but the co-pay's what, a hundred for the ER?"

"A hundred and fifty."

Ugh. Well, ramen isn't that bad, I can survive on that and what Barron's Bagels will let me skeeve off them. "Here's two hundred. That should also get any meds they give him—"

"What? No, no, Steve, I can't—"

"Take it. I want the kid taken care of right, and so do you. Maybe you'll be able to pay me back someday, or just do something for someone else, okay? No big deal."

The Ochoas both tried to argue, but he refused to take no for an answer, and they did, after all, really want to have the doctors look at their son. He got out finally, evading the too-effusive thanks with an excuse that he was late for an appointment.

He looked somewhat forlornly at the McDonald's that he usually passed on the way from work. He'd been planning on treating himself to a cheap dinner, but that wasn't happening now. He muttered a small curse as he realized that he'd lost, and completely forgotten about, the small sack of bagels he'd been bringing home from work. Thinking back he now could remember the bag falling and breaking open. Total loss. "Ugh. Well, there *is* ramen. And maybe the gang will bring some snacks tonight."

Finally he got to his house—or rather, the house he rented an apartment from. It was a third-floor apartment, which from his point of view was pretty swanky; at least he didn't have to deal with people trampling over his head at random hours, other people had to deal with *him*.

Have to remember to pay Lydia the rent tomorrow. Which will leave me like thirty bucks. Ascending the stairs, he got to his apartment and shut the door behind him, locking it and putting the chain on. "All right, Silvertail," he said. "You can stop the act."

"Thank you, Stephen." Hearing the refined accent was actually something of a relief; the events of an hour past had been so bizarre

that they had started to acquire a dreamlike quality. “I must say, you conducted yourself in a fashion truly worthy of a—”

“Do not go there, not yet.”

“As you will.” Despite the straightforward reply, Steve got the impression that Silvertail would have been grinning broadly in vindication, if rats could have grinned at all.

“Emmanuel’s family never noticed you.”

“No. I thought it best that I was unremarked, and I have had long practice at that over the years.”

Steve busied himself with digging out some ramen; to his minor gratification, he found that there was still a bag of frozen vegetables in the freezer, so he broke that open and put some into the broth as it was cooking. “You hungry, Silvertail? And if so, what do you eat?”

“Famished, in fact; I used a considerable amount of power to heal you.”

Not without a wince at the small but now significant cost, he added a second ramen packet. “Okay, I’ll have food for us both in a minute.”

Time to focus on this...ludicrous situation. I’ve got guests coming soon. “Now...I was asking about the ‘practical limitations’ that you mentioned?”

“The power you call ‘magic,’ and that we might as well keep calling that, has the ability to...not *violate*, precisely, but to *trick* reality, to make the laws of reality in effect look the other way, to negate reality in specific ways. But that takes *energy*. A *great deal* of energy to negate the very foundations of reality. And one rule we *cannot* violate is that energy cannot be created from nothing. Thus the energy to perform all magic comes from the magical being itself.”

Steve untangled that after a moment. “You mean that this Princess Holy Aura burns her own mass to get the energy to do her stuff?”

“Exactly. Why do you think your depictions of magical girls tends to show many of them with astounding appetites? We’ve worked hard to disseminate the meme, so that it can be recognized, perhaps accepted, because support and belief are also powerful forces for magic to draw upon. But the energy itself can only be drawn from the actual body of the *mahou shoujo*.”

Steve looked down at himself and grinned wryly. “Well, it’s not like I don’t have a few pounds to spare, I’ll give you that. Why else?”

“Mindset. You came into that alley determined to protect others, and with the willingness to face pain and injury in combat if

necessary. How many fourteen-year-old girls, or boys for that matter, as opposed to adult men, have that mindset? Oh, they can *learn* it, of course, just as young people of all ages have been turned into soldiers, but an adult who has developed it *naturally* is more stable.”

“Plus, if this...Princess keeps even part of my knowledge, she’s got a lot different perspective on the world than someone who’s less than half my age.”

“Correct. Yet...you have a certain...idealism, Steve, a belief in the general rightness and justice that is, or should be, in the world, and that, also, fits my needs. Am I correct?”

A part of him wanted to deny it, because it was becoming more clear that the impossible talking animal was making *sense* in a certain twisted way. But...“Yeah. I guess. I want to believe that people are good, that the *world* is a good place.”

“And if you have a chance to *make* it a good place?”

“Damn you. Look, don’t you see this is all kinds of wrong? If I have to be this...Princess Holy Aura. Well, okay. Maybe. If I just have to be her when fighting. But...Jesus! It’s not like I have anything against girls, but this is just...”

“I understand your reservations, Stephen Russ. But you may have to wear that form and seek both allies and enemies, for our enemies also understand the same weapons as we.”

“Why in the *world* did you guys choose this...particular shape for your superweapon?” he demanded, even as he took dinner off the stove and served it into two bowls.

“Thank you,” Silvertail Heartseeker said as the bowl was placed before him. “To answer your question...psychological warfare,” Silvertail Heartseeker said. “Firstly, such a girl will be underestimated in nearly all cultures and times. They will not be seen as the formidable force they are, and even those who *should* know better will subconsciously underestimate her. Secondly, that age is often a representation of innocence and purity on the edge of adulthood. She stands at the border of light and dark, of child and adult, of weakness and strength. Princess Holy Aura stands between the innocence and purity of the world and those who would corrupt it.”

Steve thought about that. It made sense, again, in a strangely twisted fashion. If you accepted the existence of magic, the idea that symbolism was part of its power couldn’t be dismissed. “So...what *are* our enemies, then?” There had been something almost eerily familiar about those eyeless winged...*things*, a familiarity that gave him the

creeps.

Silvertail eyed him. “I think a part of you has already guessed. You recognized the nightgaunts, did you not?” At Steve’s unwilling nod, he went on. “Some of your authors knew or touched upon the truth—Robert Howard and H. P. Lovecraft, among others.”

“You’ve *got* to be kidding me.” He suspected that this might become a catchphrase if he kept hanging around with Silvertail. “Nightgaunts? Lovecraft? *Cthulhu*? Wait a minute, let me see that brooch again.” Silvertail proffered the jeweled item without comment. “Damn. That’s an Elder Sign, isn’t it?”

“The broken-pointed star, yes. Though ‘broken’ is not quite correct. It represents...but we are getting ahead of ourselves. Our adversaries are a...not race, but assemblage of beings, some of them unique individuals, others various species, who hail from a mystically separate reality that is, unfortunately, compatible with ours in a manner that is inimical to our survival.

“Periodically—‘when the stars are right,’ as your authors have put it—their agents here can begin the arrangements to open the gateway and let their ruler through; if she were to manifest completely, she would become...a catalyst and an anchor, transforming the Earth to something like their own world and providing an almost unbreakable beachhead for their people to enter our world with.

“They first attempted this when I was young; fortunately for our world, that was also when our ancient civilization was at its peak, and we were able to fight them off, restrain them, until at last we created our ultimate weapon.”

“This Princess Holy Aura.”

“And her four companions, yes.”

“You mean you’re going to have to find *four other guys* who will even *consider* this insanity?”

Instead of looking amused or defiant, Silvertail seemed to wilt. “If it were only so easy.”

“*Easy?!?*”

“Oh, not in the sense you mean. In that sense, yes, it would be hard enough to find men with the same basic decency and courage as yourself, let alone ones willing to risk their own personal identity in such a drastic fashion. But that is in fact an irrelevant question...if there is no Princess Holy Aura first. The other Apocalypse Maidens, as they are called, will not be *able* to be located and awakened unless

Holy Aura is already there and active, if I have not already fired the opening shot, so to speak, in this era's war against darkness.”

He rose on his hind legs again and proffered the brooch. “Take the Star Nebula Brooch, Stephen Russ, and become the shield of light, the vanguard of good against ancient evil. Become Mystic Galaxy Defender Princess Holy Aura, and learn the truth of your soul and the power of the innocence you have always sought.”

Steve looked down and took a deep breath. Then he heard footsteps climbing the stairs. “Damn. I have other questions, a *lot* of other questions. But...I'll think about it, okay?”

Silvertail gazed at him for a long moment, then gave an audible, tiny sigh. “I suppose I can expect no more. But,” he said, as a knock came at the apartment door, “the time for that decision is not unlimited. We have defeated the first scouts of the enemy; their troops will not be long in coming.”

CHAPTER 3

“Hey, he’s *kawaii*, Steve!”

Silvertail held himself still as Richard Dexter Armitage reached out a finger to gently stroke his white fur. *Kawaii? Japanese quoted in reference to anime, obviously. Not surprising that Mr. Russ’ friends have similar tastes.* He had already noted the multiple posters of science fiction and fantasy shows of all types, reinforcing his impression of Stephen Russ—along with a wall case filled with weapons ranging from the mundane to models of science-fiction devices. *But that is all to the good. At least Stephen understands the essential nature of the mission, and I need not waste time explaining the basic role of the Apocalypse Maidens, even if there are details he does not understand.*

“Gentle, Dex,” Steve said; Silvertail saw a quick sideways glance at him, obviously worried about how well the “rat” would handle being treated as a pet.

“Steve, I *know* how to handle white rats,” Dex said, rolling his eyes as he picked up Silvertail and brought him nose-to-nose, grinning and making sniffing noises; Silvertail recognized typical “play with cute pet” behavior and simply sniffed back. “My family’s had *lots* of them over the years. Where’s his cage?”

“Er...I ended up getting him today without warning. Long story. So I’m going to keep him in this box for tonight.”

Dexter—a contrast in opposites to his much older friend, with long golden-blond hair carelessly combed back, a delicate-featured face, and slender build—made a face. “If he decides he wants out, he’ll get out of that in about two seconds. You’d better get a cage real quick.”

“I know, I know. Now put Silvertail down. The others will be here soon, and I thought you had character work you wanted to get done.”

“Oh, yeah!” Dex returned Silvertail to his friend’s shoulder and sat down, dumping a large collection of books, papers, and a bag of dice of varying shapes onto the large, chipped folding banquet table that

occupied a large part of Steve's living room. "Look, I was going through this supplement, and since I'm playing a wizard I thought..."

Silvertail tuned out the details of the conversation; he was aware of how role-playing games worked—in fact, he remembered with a slight pang the similar games that had existed long before this civilization ever rose, games he had played before that had become impossible. He was much more interested in observing the people, and especially Stephen.

The other players who filtered in over the next hour were an interesting group; one young woman, probably ten years younger than Steve Russ, named Anne, clearly paired with another man of her own age named Mike; a rather hefty but energetic boy named Chad, with a scruffy almost-beard and a cheerful expression, who appeared about the same age as Dex; and one much older man named Eli, quiet but with the air of a military man about him.

What most impressed Silvertail was the way in which Stephen directed his game, even though he was clearly distracted by the events of the evening. It was obvious that Dexter was the *smartest* member of the group, although Anne was often more dynamic as a personality. That only applied in the real-life interactions, though; Dexter shed his nerdish uncertainty when playing his character, and his quick mind and surprisingly powerful voice often dominated play. Eli was quiet, contributing to the game with a considered and careful approach that made his comments and characters' actions stand out the few times they acted; Chad simply played his character with a cheer and verve that echoed his own personality, while Mike always seemed a bit intimidated by the louder members of the group like Dex, Anne, and Chad.

What Steve did—without, as far as Silvertail could tell, making the others consciously aware of it—was to redirect the sometimes overbearing certainty of Dexter to reduce his spotlight-hogging tendencies, bring Mike more into the game by asking him exactly the sort of questions that his character would be most interested in, and direct events to allow, in general, all of the players to get their moment to shine.

After several hours, the game had to come to a temporary end; it was getting late and some of the others had to get up early. Silvertail noticed Steve trying to hide his interest in the leftovers—chips, pizza that Eli had brought, a vegetable plate from Anne. *This is not a luxurious apartment. Did Steve sacrifice more than I realized this evening?*

To his surprise, Dex—who Silvertail had tentatively tagged as a rather self-centered young man—intervened as the others were packing up. "Hey, let's just leave the extras here. Either Steve'll eat

them, or we can have them for the next game day after tomorrow.”

“Well...” said Anne, hesitating.

“Remember, always bribe the game master,” Dex said, glancing at the fridge with an expression that told Silvertail that the younger man was very aware of how empty it was.

At that, the others laughed and agreed. Dex was the last to leave, and as he did, Steve touched him on the shoulder. “Hey, Dex,” he said. “Thanks.”

“For what?” the younger boy asked; he looked distinctly uncomfortable.

“For making sure they left the food.”

“Well...yeah.” Dex flushed visibly. “Figured you could use it. Didn’t see your usual bag of bagels.”

Steve grinned. “You’re sharp. Anyway...thanks.”

“You’re welcome. I mean, it’s just smart game tactics—”

“Shut up and get out of here before you make yourself look like a dick.”

“Right. See you in a couple!”

The door closed and Stephen sat down with a *whoosh* of relief. Then he glanced at Silvertail. “You can still talk, right?”

“I certainly can,” Silvertail answered.

“Still going to take some getting used to,” Stephen said. “So, I still have questions.”

“I have no doubt of it, Stephen Russ. But it is quite late; I believe you have to work in the morning?”

“Yeah, but right now I’m not ready to sleep. Not without some more answers.”

“As you wish.” The questions were, after all, inevitable, and it wouldn’t matter if they came now or later. The real trick would be to answer them in a way that would be acceptable to Stephen Russ. Mostly, of course, Silvertail intended to be—and had to be, in fact—honest, but there were very delicate aspects of the situation that probably were best left to later.

Stephen sat down, looking at him somberly. “Not that it really makes much difference if the situation’s as bad as you say...but I’d like to know if I get anything out of this.”

“You mean, is there a reward, other than the self-satisfaction of fighting for humanity’s survival?”

He looked pained. “I guess, yeah. I mean, it’s worth it just for that,

don't get me wrong, but..."

"Say no more. A hero is still a person, and still needs to worry about their survival. Yes, Stephen Russ. The magic that binds you to the contract once made also binds the world to reward you once Azathoth of the Nine Arms is banished once more to the realms beyond this one."

"Azathoth? I thought that was the, what, 'blind idiot god' at the center of the universe."

He sighed. "Stephen Russ, you of all people should recognize that the common perception is not going to always be the truth. Lovecraft...sensed certain things, was exposed to elements of the truth in passing. But they were filtered through his mind, his beliefs, his prejudices and perceptions of the world. This is true of all others who have glimpsed portions of the truth.

"So no, Azathoth Nine-Armed is not a formless mass of chaos. She—for that pronoun fits better than any other—is an alien invader, ruler and director of the forces and beings beneath her. Her *precise* manifestation—and even more so that of her underlings, the scouts and shocktroops who will come to prepare the way—is affected by the human consciousness, the *gestalt* of human perception and the specifics of those that they encounter and of the civilization that they are seeking to conquer. So some manifestations of your adversaries—if you take up your destiny—will be of ancient lineage, while others may seem far more contemporary."

"So they're shaped by, what, our beliefs? Some Jungian collective unconscious?"

Silvertail twitched his whiskers. "To an extent, yes, that would be a reasonable way to view it. A more modern and cynical way might be to say that they are rather subject to meme infection."

Steve laughed, a short and nervous but still genuine sound of amusement. "That's funny. Hopefully that doesn't mean that they'll manifest spouting 'all your base are belong to us' or something stupid like that."

"No, the more *amusing* memes would not be their forte," he replied. *If only they were. But the memes they will likely manifest...you do not need to be reminded of now.* "In any event...yes, there is a reward, Stephen Russ. If you defeat these enemies, avert the apocalypse, then the world returns to what it was before this began. Even you will not recall it. But you will find that you are...well, *fortunate* would be the best term. The success that has eluded you thus far will seek you out; whatever 'happy ending' you might wish for in this world will be made possible. That will

be true of you and all the other Apocalypse Maidens.”

“So I’ll save the world, not know the world ever needed saving, but then have everything start coming up roses?”

“In essence, yes.”

“That kinda sucks. I mean, not the everything coming up roses part—I guess you can tell I’m not exactly doing great on my own, though I won’t complain, lots of other people are worse off. The having done something awesome and not knowing it, that sucks.”

“I cannot disagree,” Silvertail said. “But it is part and parcel of the nature of the enchantment and the war. The powers of magic that make the war possible are usually walled off from this world, ever since the first great conflict. So the battle is fought, the world witnesses the battle, but all of this is affected by—is a *part* of—the grand contest. Once the conflict is resolved, the world returns to what it was before the magic appeared.”

“That almost sounds as though magic’s real source is this Azathoth, or wherever she comes from.”

“Not truly. It is more a matter of the fact that the way in which she was sealed away was done *using* all the power of magic we could channel, so that her entry to the world would of necessity bring the magic back...and any attempt to bring magic back would, almost certainly, unleash her as well.”

Stephen looked at him. “So why do *you* remember?”

“I am...the key, you might say. Or the flaw in the prison, an inescapable one given that there were magic-workers on this side of the barrier. I am the one who watches for the cycle to resume, whenever the conditions are right, because I am the only one with the ability to find those who can close the door.”

“But *why*?”

He sighed, feeling his whiskers drooping, remembering in the distant, distant past when it would have been human shoulders slumping. “Because I was the one who *created* the Apocalypse Maidens, Stephen Russ. One of thirteen, the most powerful of Lemuria’s wizards, and the only one to survive the conjuration that transformed my daughter and her four closest and most courageous friends into the weapon the world needed. As you can see—” he gestured to himself—“it...cost me.”

Steve looked simultaneously sympathetic, outraged, and pained. “Do you have *any* idea how hard this is for me to deal with? I

mean...*Lemuria*? A wizard stuck as a white rat? And you did this to your own *daughter*?”

“I did not do this *to* her; she *volunteered*, and...” His voice, despite untold centuries of control, threatened to break. “And...I have *never* been more proud than I was that day.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Steve paused. “So...what about the other twelve of you?”

“They...were consumed by the ritual. We knew the risks, of course—the power we were unleashing was by far the greatest magic ever worked by mankind. I think I only lived because there was, as I said, a necessity that there be a key, a linchpin, a nexus of the enchantment that would remain throughout eternity.” Even after all the centuries, remembering the deaths of his friends still hurt.

“But your daughter and her friends...they did win, right?”

“They won, yes. And in doing so ripped the foundations of magic from this cosmos, shattered the stability we had enforced upon the world, and wiped out our entire civilization, nearly dooming humanity to extinction.”

“Holy *shit*. And this is the *good* outcome if I take this brooch-thing up and win?”

“No, no, Stephen. That was then, when the world was *filled* with magic, when so much *relied* upon magic that to withdraw it was like turning the foundations of a building to water. My daughter and her friends *did* survive, and so did enough of humanity—or we would not be here to speak of it. But in the other repetitions of the cycle...while there is great destruction sometimes wrought during the combat, the world is returned to its prior state afterward. Not entirely without cost—if people were specifically slain by the forces of our enemies, they will be found to have died, albeit by more mundane forces, after the victory. But the world will not be destroyed if you win. Only if you lose will it be plunged into a creeping shadow of its old self.”

Steve nodded slowly. “Jesus.” He looked down at the Star Nebula Brooch, lying on the table between them, and picked it up reluctantly. “And this really is the only way to fight these things?”

He shrugged. “The only one I know of.”

Stephen Russ sighed. “Tell you what. I’ll...carry it for a while. Think about it. But...this is all of *me* you want me to change.”

“Not *all* of you. I might even say the least *important* part of you. I do not wish to change the sort of person you are.”

He bit his lip. “Yeah. I guess. But dammit, my entire life and self-image aren’t just something to toss aside, either.”

“I did not say they were, and perhaps I should apologize; one’s self-image is not at all unimportant, and indeed for a man of your age, that self-image is the rock on which you have built your identity. So, yes, I was wrong, and I do apologize. I ask you to make a very significant sacrifice, of your self-image, of your position in a society that—you know well—values men more than women in many areas. I ask you to, at least temporarily, sacrifice even the respect that age and size have given you.

“But know that these sacrifices will make you, as Holy Aura, vastly stronger; the willingness of the Chosen to take up the battle at great personal cost, this is one of the greatest sources of power in any magic. Your willing acceptance of this price may give us the key to a swifter and more certain victory. And they will certainly make it more likely that one day you will wake up—the same Stephen Russ you are now—and your life will become brighter, and the world will be safe.”

Silvertail could see Stephen considering that. “So,” he said, “in a nutshell, the more I’m personally willing to sacrifice to the cause, the more powerful Holy Aura will be.”

“Correct. If you accept the burden, you are—while Holy Aura, in any event—sacrificing a major portion of your personal foundation and viewpoint; this will make you *immensely* stronger as Princess Holy Aura.”

“You say ‘while Holy Aura’; does that mean I can change back to Stephen Russ?”

“Yes. You will of course have no access to any of Holy Aura’s powers while in your original form, but yes, you will be able to change back. You will *not*, however, be able to change your mind once you have accepted the power; once done, the enchantment cannot be undone.”

Stephen surveyed the brooch again, eyes tracing the beauty of the curves absently. Finally he straightened. “Okay. I’ll think on it. And not too long. I promise I’ll have an answer for you in...um...a week. Is that okay?”

A week...She will have learned of the loss of her creatures soon. She will know that either I chose to act, or that the Princess has been found. Yet...I have no right, nor power, to force the issue. “If it must be, then it must be. One week, Stephen Russ. May that time be well spent, for our enemy is already moving.”