

CHRYSALIS

Flight into danger.

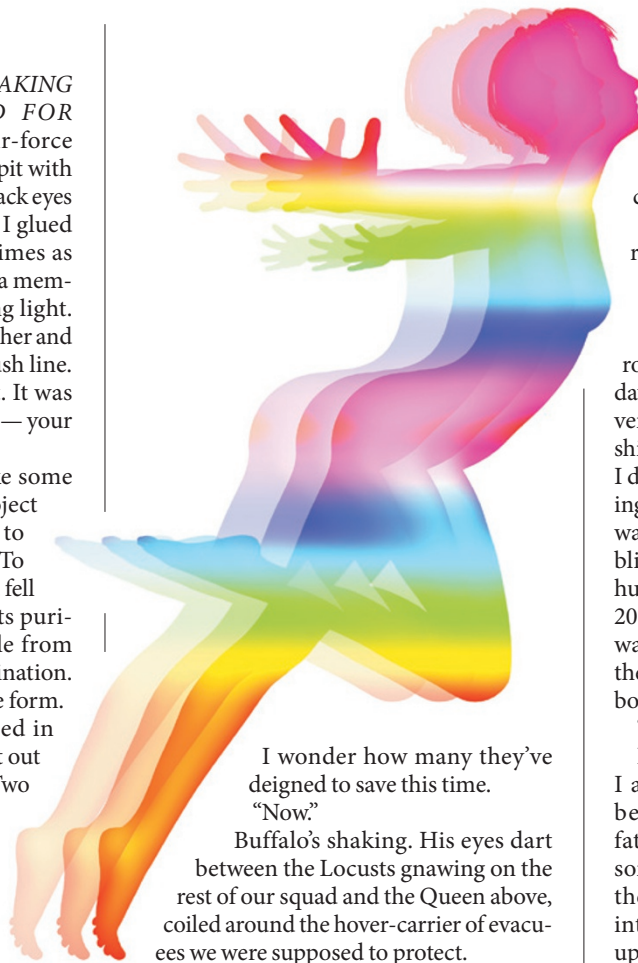
BY ANDREA KRIZ

I remember the broadcasts. *BREAKING NEWS: EXPLOSIVE END FOR PROJECT CHRYSALIS*. An air-force pilot lowering herself into the cockpit with a thumbs-up and a smile. Nursing black eyes and bruises in the Earth Archives, I glued myself to the screen a thousand times as she unravelled, as glass melted into a membrane that engulfed her in blinding light. And I recall the curses behind my father and me in the Afernsi refugee ship's mush line. "We never should've toyed with it. It was never meant for us. Charlie Bickoid — your curiosity killed us all."

My father always spoke of it like some kind of fairy tale with a moral. Project Chrysalis, humankind's attempt to catch up in the galactic arms race. To reverse-engineer an alien 'ship' that fell from the heavens. The biochemists purified a protein-like macromolecule from its circuits. Dismissed it as contamination. An enzyme, soon discovered. A life form. When the Sopholid pupa exploded in the US Air Force Test Center, it sent out some kind of signal. *THIS JUST IN*. Two wings unfurling out of the inferno.

I look up at the dogfight and wonder if he's up there. If that's his plane supernovaing in the violet skies, torn in two by the swarm. My father. He's decades too old to be crunched up in a turret ball. He's a neuroscientist. It should be me. But I've no sense of duty, I tried to run from the draft and they dragged me to this, humanity's last refuge of a colony, kicking and screaming.

Like the Sopholid that Buffalo zapped, writhing beside me. A Mantis. Blood still streams off its scythes. The remains of its core drip into the bone-white rock at my feet. I wonder if it used to be human. These gleaming orbs — their Queen's heart throbs overhead — reason enough, apparently, to hound us to the far edge of the Galaxy, to plague our colonies until each and every one of us drools lobotomized and domesticized on one of their farms. "Condensed organic material," was all Commander Xexe would tell us in our briefings. The Sopholids have strengthened a hundredfold since developing human-powered cores, the Afernsi added grimly. It was good of the Afernsi to rescue a couple of hundred thousand of us from Earth if that's the case, I suppose. As the last troopship fades into the atmosphere,



I wonder how many they've designed to save this time.

"Now."

Buffalo's shaking. His eyes dart between the Locusts gnawing on the rest of our squad and the Queen above, coiled around the hover-carrier of evacuees we were supposed to protect.

"I'll fly up there and tear her a new one,"

I whisper, crouching by the Mantis's head. "And if the Queen shuts down, the rest of the swarm should retreat, right?"

"I'll shoot you if you touch that thing," Buffalo mumbles.

He wants me to remember what happened the last time a human wired herself into a Sopholid's brain. Biomechanical equations that've been worked out in excruciating detail since. The raw energy of metres of DNA uncoiling from each and every one of the trillions of cells in the human body simultaneously. Amplified by the circuits of the Sopholid in a way we still don't fully understand — such was the topic of my PhD research that I hope to, no, that I *will* return to after the war — it was akin to a nuclear bomb.

"Are you saying you want me to just stand here and die?"

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He says nothing. But I know. His Afernsi ray gun only fizzes when he presses

the fire button. All we've got left are our good ol' Earth rifles, whose bullets bounce off Sopholid exoskeletons like staples.

A sound like a beetle popping underfoot rings out. Buffalo crumples, clutching his side.

"Turbo Eater," he finally manages. "You really believe humans can fly?"

"I don't know," I admit. "We can pilot ships and things."

Not just to this miserable, terraformed rock that the nearest star hasn't risen on for days. But Satellite 10388. The Galactic University. My home. And the Afernsi refugee ship that brought me there. From Earth, but I don't remember any of it. I remember biting into a hydroponic tomato I stole when I was eight, the skin bursting, the juice dribbling down my lips. The constant ache of hunger. The stench. My dad and I lived in 20 square feet of space behind a radioactive waste container. And to conserve oxygen, they'd only let us open the hatch to roll out bodies twice a week.

"That's how we got here, right?"

I crawl forward. With that movement I affirm that I am, with all my heart, a believer in the Pilot Hypothesis. My father's, Charlie Bickoid's, fatal idea that someone built them. The Sopholids. That they can be controlled. I pry my fingers into the Mantis's skull — cockpit — curl up in the wetness, let the translucent plates close behind me. Brain mass glows to life around me. Spidery characters flash before my eyes. But I swipe all the warnings aside. Tendrils feel me out. I shudder as they burrow into my spine.

The film of the canopy was cracked and bloody, but suddenly I can see through it, somehow. I clench my fist and the scythe of the Mantis moves with me. And the Queen turns to look down at me at last. We thought their eyes were blank, compound, insectoid. But suddenly I can see all the colours of another rainbow in there. A rainbow I couldn't even have begun to comprehend before. They're calling me. She's calling me to join her.

"Turbo Eater." The wind whistles in Buffalo's mouth because I'd pulled the trigger first, I'd shot him hours and hours ago. "Fly." ■

Andrea Kriz is a PhD student in biological and biomedical sciences at Harvard University. She is the winner of the 2015 Ilona Karmel Prize for Writing Science Fiction.

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