

Second Sister: Pink Tamale

Pink Tamale

The young woman's head took a lot longer to form than Sean expected. He'd forgotten what the translation from synthetic to organic would be like. *“That’s right, he reminded himself, “They’re na in a hurry here. They’ve been gin all the time in the world. All the Sisters care about is quality.*

But he didn't have that kind of time, and it frustrated him to watch the rest of her body slowly emerge into his simulation. First the heart-shaped face, then the violet almond eyes, finally the honey-blond hair. She wore a long cloak of some sort of iridescent silk that Sean had never seen before. It moved with her in shades of cyan and mauve and the deepest violet. The colors had a life of their own.

Tall--much taller than Andrea Radford, his partner, and with shoulders she could only have dreamt of having--the apparition took weight and form. Knee-high boots of antelope hide, trimmed with rattlesnake scales completed her outfit.

The last item of clothing to form was a depiction on her bosom of a woman, arms spread wide, with the Earth emerging from her womb: the EcoFem logo, still recognizable four hundred years later. *Aye, Andrea would be so proud.*

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Finally her expression took form. Her right eyebrow was raised, and her eyes were squinty with anger. She looked like her many-times-great grandmother.

*Crivvens, she's like both of them.*

The slowness lulled him into a false sense of security. Sean almost didn't see the knuckle punch to the throat coming. He barely had time to turn off the physics algorithm before she connected. He heard her grunt of displeasure when her fist passed through blue-grey smoke.

"Help ma boab!" Sean exclaimed, his Scottish ancestry asserting itself even more insistently.

"Let me go," she insisted. "You're endangering someone's life!"

"And you're interferin' in things you dinna understand, lassie."

Sean shot back.

Her focus never left his throat. She stepped back, planting her left foot firmly on the floor and cocked her right arm for another blow.

"Prove it!" she growled.

Sean adjusted the simulation parameters to ghost mode, just enough physics to convince her of the reality of her situation. Good thing, because she wasn't finished. Her next strike, a right-left delivered to his solar plexus, found only swirls and eddies as its target.

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"Mighty me, have ye no' finished that yet?" Sean said in exasperation.

He let out a breath. "I ken that you're na supposed to dinna be here. I'm a safety engineer, so to speak. I'm to make sure there's na tamperin' with the Work. You're apparently attemptin' to deliver a premature baby to a woman who's had two miscarriages, nearly dyin' from the second one. My information says this pregnancy should kill her. And you're na allowed to change that."

"That's not an answer I accept. Who are you?" she shot back.

"I'm Sean Landsten, lead neural interface engineer for EcoFem," he replied. *Where had he heard that tone of voice before? It was exactly like her.*

"That's not likely," the young woman replied, striding quickly towards him, her form becoming more real with every powerful steps. Her boots make audible clicks on the terrazo floor he ordered up.

"Which one of the Sisters sent you?" she asked, now looking him straight in the eye. An unmistakeable smell of sage-and-cinnamon floated from her hair and face; the smell of the Cactus Mother organic technology he had laboured so long to build.

*In another incarnation.* "Nye of them. All of them, I suppose, is the better answer, likely. I've been called in to diagnose a problem they hanna seen before." Sean looked at his manifest. "It seems you've been very busy, and more than a little naughty."

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She stepped back, placed her feet firmly on the ground, shoulder-width apart, and crossed her arms over her chest, the image of feminine wrath. “Don't speak to me like that. No more evasions. I'm very busy.”

Sean smiled. Andrea would be so proud of this one, the culmination of their hopes and dreams. But she was young and wrong to boot. He did have to make a point.

“No. You're na goin' anywhere until I've said what I have to say, and shown you all that I have to show you. Your problem can wait.”

She stamped her right foot, hard. “No, it can't. Someone needs my help very much, right now.”

Sean looked over his manifest, flipping to the next page. “I've got your patient and your assistants in a holdin' pattern. There are some problems, but I'll release you in time.”

“And how can you know the right time?”

“You're presently operatin' at ten times normal human neural speed. With your body, you can push that to fifty for short sprints. And that's what I'm ginna to do in this simulation.”

She turned, and spoke with her back away from him. “And I can't stop you can I?” Her hands fell to her side, a partial gesture of compliance. “Mother's behind this, isn't she?”

“That's true after a fashion. Both of your mothers are,” Sean answered. “Come, walk with me. It's time for you to know what you're

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really gettin' yourself into. The best way to show you that is to show you where you came from.”

She turned back to him, and came forward one hesitant step.

“What's this about two mothers? No one can have two mothers.”

“I'm not sure that's true about you. Are you interested now?”

“Yes.”

“Then let me show you what my world was like four hundred years ago, before your world began. You can see and touch the simulation, but you won't be able to interact with it. There isn't time to waste.”

“We agree on that.”

“Let's go back to that fateful day then, shall we?”

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A large, bearded, unkempt young man rushed in through the open door to Sean's office, his belly bouncing off the top of his jeans.

“Boss! I've found her!” he exclaimed.

Sean clapped his data-gloves together, and the simulation algorithms froze in mid-flow. “Jings! What ye really mean is: I've found her maybe, on the third try.”

“No, this time I've done it and I can prove it. Turn on CNN-Web, right now.”

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“All right, if it makes ye happy.” Sean snapped the right middle finger of his data-gloves, opening his right palm away from his body to make the window wall-size.

Trumpets blew in fanfare across the office, announcing the latest revelation from CNN-Web. “This just in,” a smiling blonde head burred. “That amazing, fantabulous, miracle cure of Lance Stirdly, the only person ever to cleansed of dreaded HIV-7.” She smiled, all the way back to her pearlescent molars. “Our story tells of the miraculous cure of Lance Stirdly, hot meat-wrap star, who after having illegally performed in his last production “Snuff Lite and the Seven Warthogs”. He plays a policeman who saves the equally sizzling meat-wrap star Pink Tamale from certain death at the hands of Iraqi slave traders. His reward is her trademark double-dick.”

“Crivvens, I'll never get used to American webTV,” Sean exclaimed. “Is there nothin' ye canna say in front of the wee ones anymore?”

“Shush,” a female voice replied. Andrea Radford stuck her honey-blond head in the door. “I'm interested, too”.

The news-woman continued. “Lance lied about his HIV-7 condition to keep his job, and was planning to pick up his career by moving to Somalia, where U.S. laws don't apply. But just before he did, he used an AutoDoctor to give him a physical, and found out that he was cured of HIV-7. The first person ever on the planet! We've got

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an intimate in-depth interview with Lance himself, but first a word from our sponsors.”

The scene on the wall parted like the waters of the Red Sea at Moses' command, segueing into a suburban backyard where a small boy gazed at the heavens on a warm summer evening. “Mom, how come I can't see all the stars like I used to?” he asked.

“There's too much junk in the sky,” she replied. “Someone really needs to go there and clean it up.”

“That's why I'm gonna do,” the boy said fervently.

The scene expanded from his earnest face to a vantage point orbiting the Earth. The mother's soothing voice continued. “That's what Carl Sagan said many years ago, and that's what SaganCorp is doing today. Working with all the major governments we're not only cleaning up the skies, but we're creating the PowerLink system. Solar-powered energy beams to deliver an unlimited and endless supply of inexpensive power to everyone on Earth. And then to the stars!” More voices, a choir of hundreds began to swell behind her own. “Free...free to wander...free to wander the skies...” they chanted.

A male head, extremely close-shaven, peeked around the door jamb. “Kinda tugs your heart strings, doesn't it? Makes me wonder why I quit SaganCorp.” Doug Hastings, chief of security, smirked.

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“Aye, Doug, but SaganCorp prefers your heartstrings at the end of a long pair of their pliers. Just the same way they'd like mine.” Sean answered.

A quick clockwise swirl on the wall and the blonde reappeared. “We're back with Lance himself,” she said. A man's head, all tan and feathered blonde hair, poked into the camera. “So Lance, what are you doing these days?”

“I'm a member of the Sun Dance Pentecostal Church now. I've seen the error of my ways, and I'm on the road proclaiming the message of salvation.”

The blonde woman winked at the camera. “And just to show our viewers the truth of all this, let's have a big wet kiss. Okay, Lance?”

“Why, sure. Anything for the message.” The two heads locked lips for a full ten seconds before they disconnected with a loud smack. “Nothing like salvation!” she said breathlessly.

“Losh! Enough of this,” Sean exclaimed. He waved the screen off, although the green record light kept blinking on the wall.

“His story's gone national, maybe planetary by now,” Doug observed dryly. “I suggest you watch the end of it.”

Sean snapped it on, fast-forwarding to the last minute. The final shot was of a SaganCorp epidemiology specialist declaring Lance Stirdly cured of HIV-7, the first person on Earth ever to be so.



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“If SaganCorp already knows about this Lance Stirdly, and this Pink Tamale, then there's ginna be plenna trouble, I'll tell ye that.” Sean said. “They sound like a coupla wee nyaffs to me.”

Sean furrowed his brows. “Doug, can you create a hot link to Lance Stirdly's communications account?” he said over his shoulder.

“Sure. Will that be legal or illegal?”

“I'm in a bit of a hurry,” Sean replied.

Doug strode into the room, stopping beside the taller and much more massive Sean. “May I?” he asked.

“Be my guest. We'll all be gettin' clarty on this one.” Sean answered.

Doug pulled a thin black dataglove out of the back pocket of his trousers, and slipped it on his left hand. “Time for the left-hand path, then.” he said calmly.

His hand went into series of esoteric finger expressions. The screen became pitch black, then covered with swarming green ants. “Standard consumer-level encryption. One moment please.” He gestured to the left wall, and a screen opened up. “You're on, Sean,” he said.

The vidphone had been left beside the bed. A touseled but recognizable blonde head of hair came into center view. A bleary-eyed man in his thirties looked up and into Sean's face. “What? Who's calling me on this line?” he mumbled. One eye opened wider and his

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face lit up. "Say, I know who you are. You used to be famous. You're that scientist who says he discovered the gene for psychic powers."

"Says? Well, that's ancient history now. Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Sean Landsten, lead neural interface engineer for EcoFem. We'd like to find the whereabouts of Pink Tamale."

The face came nearer the camera, lined in suspicion. "Oh, you would, would you? You're not the first call about her. You're just the first on my private line. Tell me why I should help you?" A large hand reached for the phone as he got out of bed and stood up. Sean, Alatheia, Bob, and Doug caught a glimpse of another man's naked buttocks before Lance brought his own face back into view. "Jeffrey, get up and make us some coffee, will you?" Lance asked.

"Sorry to take up your time, but is it true about Pink Tamale?" Sean asked.

"Yeah, it's true. But that admission will cost you."

"Consider it done." Sean opened a small task window on the bottom of the screen facing him, and a series of numbers scrolled by. "How much?"

"Oh, since you used to be famous, just like me, ten thousand dollars USA." Lance answered.

"How about ten thousand Red Dragons instead?" Sean asked.

"Chinese! Well, I'm honored. Anything else you need to know? Can I charge by the word or the sentence?"

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“Where is she now? How can we reach her?”

Lance looked down on his phone. “Let's see you're calling from Abiquiu. She's just over in Old Albuquerque, at a joint called the Greasy Fingers. Massage place, with enhancements.”

“Good. We'll be there in a moment or two, I ken.”

Lance stared into the phone. “She's kind of wild, but she's a friend. Okay? She can't get work in the industry anymore. After today's news, I'm not sure if she'll be able to get work at all.”

Sean smiled. “Not to worry, my lad. We're going to hire her as a consultant. Anything else I ought to know before I meet her.”

“Yes, watch out for her boyfriend Rick. He's an asshole of the highest water.”

“Understood. Thanks, Lance. Stay on that road of salvation, now, you hear?”

“Hey, wait, what am I doing? What's that information worth to you? How about twenty-five thousand USA?”

“How about twenty-four thousand Red Dragons? Not a bad haul before morning coffee.”

“Okay it's a deal. One last warning: whatever you think you're getting with Pink Tamale, it'll turn into something else altogether. The girl's got a knack for that.”

“Fair warning. Goodbye, Lance.”

“Goodbye, Sean.”

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Doug touched Sean's shoulder. "We've got an incoming call for you on a secure line. It's from Dave Bertrand of SaganCorp."

"Well, what a friggerty coincidence that is!"

"It's no coincidence at all."

"Of course it isn't. Put him on. But first everyone come in the room and stand beside me. Let's make this a family moment."

Andrea came in, and put her right arm through Sean's. Doug stood to his left. Lastly, Bob waddled in, standing to the left and just behind Dave."

The front screen in Sean's office opened to a bigger-than life image of a red-haired, heavy-set man behind a massive mahogany desk. Dave Bertrand, the richest man of the most powerful corporation on the planet, faced Sean and the rest.

"Dave! Long time no vid." Sean quipped.

"Yes, it's been too long." Dave took in the assemblage. "Hi, Doug. How's the new job working out?"

"They treat me fine here." Doug said stonily.

"And Andrea! I hear good things about the Cactus Mother project. They say theres nothing you can't grow in the desert if you've got them. Too bad we weren't able to find a place for you in SaganCorp."

"Thanks, Dave. We've just keep chugging along here."

"The other fellow I don't know. I'm Dave Bertrand."

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“I'm Bob Cuthbert. I handle synthetics and nano around here.”

“Well, if you're ever looking for another job, don't hesitate to call. If you're good enough for Sean, you must be something.”

Sean cut in. “So, Dave, what's the problem?”

“Well that our team of lawyers has caught wind of your latest work. They believe there is a potential copyright violation in the use of the RIN-1 code..”

“Which you own, though you never implemented it,” Sean concluded.

“Let's not dig up old bones, please. I'm here because I told the Board of Directors that we can clear all this up without lawyers. Friend to friend.”

“You mean the way you explained my last research finding to them? I've still got their bootprints on my trousers.”

“Sean, please. I believe in what you do, always have. Your timing stank. I had to follow directives like anyone else.”

“Okay, we put all that behind us. So?”

“I went out on a limb just this morning for you. I told them not to litigate because I believe you've solved the synthetic-organic interface problem.”

*Ah, the bait. But whose trap?* “It's true, Dave. RIN-1 is already ancient history, because RIN-2 uses a different base algorithm, and a prototype already exists.”

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“You're already at prototype? You mean you've solved the infection problem?”

“Yes. Better than that. Fully human prototype. So, friend-to-friend, do you want in? All you have to do is call off your legal dogs. And maybe send a little poker money my way. For incidental expenses.”

“Sean, I don't need a human prototype. I need an interplanetary pilot. You've probably heard that the AI's just aren't flexible enough. We need...”

“Synthetic speed and organic creativity. The Holy Grail. Here's what I'm offering you. Come over in a week, check out the prototype. If we've already got a human-AI interface, how hard can custom wiring an octopus be?”

Dave pushed his chair away from the desk. “Is it okay if you ask the rest of your team to go for coffee while we discuss this more? Friend-to-friend?”

Sean look around. Everyone nodded approvingly. Doug was the first out the door, followed by Alatheia, then Bob.

“Okay, it's just us.”

“Sean, I'm sure you need some quick cash. I've got to use unorthodox methods to get it to you quickly. I'm sending over a Suntrino on autopilot with an attache case. A million Red Dragons enough?”

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“That's a big attache case,” Sean observed. “Yes, that'll do”

“It will be coming out of Santa Fe office. Expect it in twenty minutes. So you next week, Sean.”

“Looking forward to it, Dave.” The screen collapsed, reappearing as the desert landscape of Abiquiu.

“All of you can come back in now,” Sean shouted over his shoulder.

Doug entered first, a stern and focussed look on his face. “We're in real trouble now, Sean.”

“Yes, we are.”

Andrea stepped in angrily, stomping her delicate feet on Sean's carpet. “Did you tell him you've already got a prototype? Sean, how could you!”

Finally Bob came in, clinging to the wall. “Boss, I still haven't got the earlid problem solved. Even if Pink Tamale is the one, how can we do it all in a week?”

Sean spoke to Andrea first. “Lassie, I love you more than life itself, but I had to say what I did.” He turned to Doug. “Tell her how it is.”

Doug let out a long breath. “If Dave phoned you directly at this time, it means he believes you've got everything it takes to make RIN-2 work. It also means he's already on the stock exchange, creating a hostile takeover of EcoFem.”

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“What!” Alatheia shrieked. “We're too small, our work is too unimportant.”

“Not any more, lassie. Dave wants those ships to fly. He needs version two of the Recursive Instructional Nexus. Fully networked, fully organic. No harder to reproduce than laying an egg. That's the only true way off-planet.”

Sean put his hand on Andrea's shoulder. “You haven't heard all of it, yet. Tell her Doug. Tell her what you used to do for a living.”

“SaganCorp will successfully execute a hostile takeover. In the process, they'll prove that Sean misappropriated a million Red Dragons, and had the Suntrino stolen. Records will be changed. The money will be traced to a Mexican drug ring; the Suntrino will be nabbed by USA agents in Guatemala. Sean will be charged, and the charges will stick. “

“That's not all,” Sean said. “Tell her everything, Doug. She's a strong woman.”

“If SaganCorp finds the prototype useful, they'll keep the EcoFem facilities open. We'll all be out on the street, off course.”

“And if they don't?” Andrea queried.

“They will declare the place infected with a hostile artificial organism. EcoFem will be fusion-torched into slag.” Doug said.

“But my Cactus Mothers! They're just about to flower!” Andrea cried.



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“That's why I quit working for Dave, and started working for Sean.” He looked kindly at Andrea. “And you. I believe in the Cactus Mothers to.”

Andrea pushed Sean away, and moved toward a corner of the room. She placed her hands behind her back, staring at the floor. “So we've got find Pink Tamale, clone her immune system, create a prototype human loaded with it, and use RIN-2 to link to the Cactus Mothers. In a week.”

“Well, it does work in simulation,” Bob observed helpfully.

“Yes, but it never does in the lab. The RIN-2 cabling goes haywire, and doesn't connect to the right place in the cortex.”

“I had something more radical in mind,” Sean said quietly.

“What? You're going to steal a spaceship, and fly us all away before Dave gets here?” Andrea queried.

“No. I was thinking of convincing this Pink Tamale to be the pilot. I wonder what that would take?” Sean answered.

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“I don't understand this...octopus...thing.” Rintiala said, her face reflecting the moving characters of the simulation.

“Well, that part's easy enough.” Sean answered. “You see, humans weren't made for space. Their bodies can't handle the radiation. It's only a matter of time before something leaks through and bounces around inside the ship, killing everyone.”

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“So why did Dave want what you had so much?”

“Because a deep-water octopus, in high pressure seawater, can handle space just fine. Weightlessness is no problem, and the sea water protects against radiation. Cheap like bannock, too, if you can make the octopus smart enough.”

“But he couldn't?”

“No, I came up with that. You make a molecular supercomputer into a sort of cable, and attach one end to artificial intelligence, the other to the octopus. The AI knows what the octopus knows; the octopus just has to be smart enough to handle a few commands.”

“And still he couldn't do it? SaganCorp couldn't do it?”

“No, because there's deep problems in connecting synthetics to organics. Stuff you can't predict ahead of time. And that's where the Cactus Mothers come in. They're a fully organic computer. You ought to know that.”

Rintiala squinted at him. “Better than you do. You're stuck in an old-fashioned Birthing Mother simulation. Compared to the Cactus Mothers, that's like camping out in a tent compared to living in the Temple.”

“Ouch, you're definitely sounding like your sixteen-times great grandmother now.” Sean observed. “The point is, we were far ahead of anyone else. And time was growing short. The twenty-second century

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wasn't a happy place to be. So, are you ready to meet Pink Tamale now?"

"Yes."