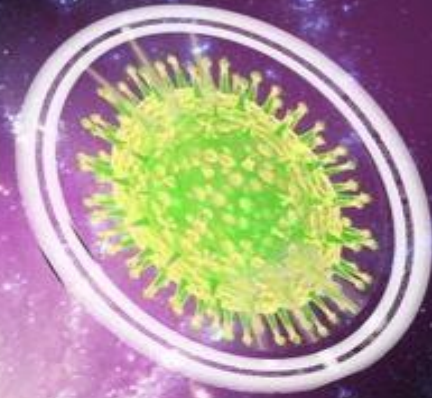


*Life City
In the*



Rose Lightning

Life In The City

By Rose Lightning

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Frank awoke to the sound of his wife's screams. He did not ask her what had happened. He knew. Gently, firmly, he pulled her into his arms.

I'm here, I'm here. It's OK now.

Holding her, he waited for her screams of terror to subside into sobs which shook her body and finally into a whimper as she clung to him.

He knew the routine: hold her with maximum body contact, reassure her, get her to notice things about the room, get her to think about something she enjoys, give her reason to live, get her to the clinic. He went through the routine with practiced skill, pulling her attention from the terror which had consumed her. In twenty minutes he had her up out of bed and talking calmly as she dressed. In forty minutes they were boarding a conveyor.

Settling back in the seat, Frank dialed the address of the clinic: Ring 14, D deck, Starboard-Aft 357.

The ride would take fifteen minutes. Fifty-five minutes from onset of the episode to the clinic. It could have been worse. Last time they had been on vacation at a spa in Ring 3, A deck, Port-forward. The low gravity near the hub had made it almost impossible to hold onto her and the ride to the clinic had taken nearly an hour. They had almost been too late.

Sandy knew the routine too. She let her husband guide her in spite of everything. She wanted to run screaming and tear her face off. Instead she watched through the window of the conveyor and noticed the city around her as it sped by. Nervously, she tried to comment on the things that she saw. Ring 12, B deck had a new hydroponics plant with the gardens spreading among the mountains which housed the recycling plants. The mountains made good climbing in the summer and good skiing when they turned on the winter. The university in Ring 13, C deck still had the same bulky stone buildings with ivy growing up the sides. She wondered at the tradition which required this.

Between rings she gazed at a million stars through the transparent wall of the conveyor tube. Like a giant sea swirling around her, she liked the stars best of all. Sight of them helped to calm her.

Look around, be interested, always keep physical contact. Her hand held his, white knuckled and shaking.

"Hello, Major Brandon. Come right in, Doctor's waiting." Reassuring attendants reached to assist her from the conveyor and in through the doors of the combioioncs clinic. They knew the routine too. They all knew by just how slim a thread Major Sandra Brandon clung to her sanity. The sign over the door read "Combioioncs – Life Living Together."

Frank got Sandy checked in at the Admissions desk and gave his full report. Then, turning to pace the waiting room, he tried to pray. As a child he had been taught to pray. God watched over all of mankind and the animals. He watched over the myriad of beings who populated the galaxies. Looking at the

door through which she had disappeared, Frank wondered if the God of his childhood watched over Sandy.

Escorted into the exam room, Sandy was settled by nurses into the big scanning chair. They immediately started taking her vital statistics and various other readings, marking everything on the screen of the chart data base. All the while they kept up the conversation, keeping her occupied and calm.

Dr. Tzahi Assam, senior specialist in combiovionics maintenance for this sector, entered the room and greeted her as the old friend that he was. From the first day, he had been with her. He had been there when she awoke, had held her when she cried in frustration or screamed in fear. He had taught her to use her body and its perceptions, helped her to understand her world. Back home he knew people who suffered from culture shock if they moved to a new town or village. But to change every part of your existence so completely had to be overwhelming. He understood what she faced. Or at least he thought he did.

“Hi, Sandy. I hear you have a big bonus coming for that last operation you did. I saw the tapes, quite something.” Tzahi chatted away while he examined Sandy and her charts. “You know, Eve got a new dress for the dinner party next week. She can’t wait to show it off to you and Frank.”

Sandy did her best to respond.

One of the nurses pointed to an entry on the chart and offered the doctor a hypodermic. Shaking his head he whispered to the nurse, “Nothing until the scanning is done. The host needs it, but we need to have the full data on the Resident first.”

Gripping the arms of the chair, Sandy started to shake again. She knew what came now. Holding back a scream she let out a muffled wine instead as straps were put into place to hold her securely. The scanning cap was fixed over her head. One tear leaked cheek, then another, soon followed by and unchecked flood.

The sound of her heart racing and the blood rushing in her head muffled her awareness of her own screams. Just before she lost consciousness her eyes met those of her long-time friend and doctor. For just a moment she felt pity for him. He could never know.

The sea was yellow, as it should be. All around her life flourished and danced in beauty. Graceful trails, their wakes were interwoven by the dance. For a moment she was at peace. One with the beauty, her mind encompassed all that she could see as she experienced their joy – almost.

Remembering her plight, she withdrew and moved on.

The touch of thoughts reached her. She fought the instinct to reach back in response. Closing her mind, she pushed deeper into her mount and urged it into a spiraling updraft while watching the bubbles

bursting around her. As the pressure decreased she felt her body expand until she thought she would disintegrate.

Nearing the surface she could see them. Stars – moving slowly in their own dance – so tiny yet so huge. She loved them and hated them at once. They made the sea, her home, seem a small insignificant prison, locking her in. Yet, if she reached for them, the stars would take her away from the sea forever.

Forced by the lack of pressure to retreat into the depths, she desperately fought to keep the thoughts away. The waters were dangerous here, pink and blue formations like huge fat spider webs were the home of those who would consider her mount a prize dinner and would not mind consuming her as well. But she plunged on, fighting the thoughts and the touches of the people she loved.

She would not be forced to leave! She would not be sacrificed! She would not!

“Daughter! Daughter! Please answer, please.”

Feeling the pleas of her father, she knew his grief. She knew that he would do anything to save her if he could. He had no choice – neither did she. With even more desperation, she plunged on.

Her desperation gave way to panic which in turn gave way to grief and exhaustion. Finally, she could fight no more. The thoughts of the population reached for her, hammered at her, begged her to reply. The tiny nubs which would someday be her feeding tentacles rubbed against the mount making her want to eat. But she had no mouth yet and so had to return to City for nourishment. The mount lashed about reacting her emotion and her weakened control. She could not hold it.

In defeat, she opened her mind and turned the mount in the direction of home.

The soothing closeness of the people surrounded her. Many simply noted that she was returning to City and thought pleased as they went about their own tasks. Others took the time to inquire. Some scolded. None understood. They guided the mount for her, thoughts reaching into and through her to the hold she had on the mount. She let them take control without a struggle. You could only fight the entire population of City for so long.

After a time she could see the beautiful shimmer of the pale blue and purple tentacles stretching above and below the huge sparkling globe that was City. Like a million stars linked in a dance; like one huge star spreading out into the sea, City was filled with life’s celebration. There, within and around the membrane of City, lived millions of people working, playing and dancing together.

It seemed that she was two people. One who loved City and the people of City and the whole population of the sea. The other who wanted to flee, to be herself, away from all who would control and condemn her.

“Daughter, you come home! Oh, my child.” She felt her father’s thoughts but could not answer them. As she slowly drew nearer to the immense City his thoughts bathed her.

Releasing her hold on the mount, she withdrew her substance from its nerve center and then reached out to touch the membrane of City. The mount wriggled away, a mindless worm in the sea. She seeped through the pores of City's outer membrane. At last she was home.

"Father, I am here."

"You frightened me so, child. I know it is hard but..."

"What do you know, Father? What do you know? You spend your whole existence dancing within City. You have never even been alone. What do you know? Are you the one being asked to die?"

"I admit that I am only male and could not know about being alone. But, perhaps you won't die. You are such a strong child, surely you will survive. You have every trait desirable. No one in City rated higher. Even your... rebelliousness... is considered desirable. You have every chance..."

His substance reached hers now. The physicalness as their substances meshed was so comforting. She would miss it so much. Her grief exploded. All in City felt it. They all knew her shame and her fear. With no place to hide she spread her substance as thinly as she could. Perhaps she would dissolve and become nourishment for the others.

"Child. Child." The voice was not her father's. It repeated in her mind as well as her surroundings, touching gently until she responded. "Child." It was the voice of City herself. She felt shame that she had distracted City who must feed and house the whole population, keep them all from danger. She had never been directly addressed by City before.

"I did not mean to... I apologize. I was just..." She pulled her substance back in, compressing herself into the smallest possible space.

"Do not apologize, Child. You are correct to feel as you do."

"I am?"

"Of all my children, you have been my favorite."

"Why? I did not know... I mean, I never thought..." She darkened in her confusion. Of all the millions living in City how could she be the favorite? She never obeyed, ran away often and was rude to her elders. If she was the favorite, how could she be sacrificed? It made no sense. Thoughts and emotions spun around her.

"Child, when I was young I loved my City so. The people and the dance were so wonderful. I wished I could spend all my life there. But I was female and fertile as well. I felt the longings. Over and over again I left City, determined to be myself. Over and over again I returned, so glad to be home and so disappointed in myself for needing to do so. My father and my elders scolded me so often.

“Time passed and I grew. My membrane formed making it difficult to pass in and out of City. My nubs began to grow. I was so hungry. Then life quickened in me and I was expelled from City to fend for myself in the sea.

“At first I thought that I would die – starve to death before my mouth was properly formed or be eaten before my tentacles were strong enough to use for swimming. I was so afraid. But I had to survive. I carried life.

“As I grew, the other Cities took notice of me and he helped me. They protected me, taught me what to do. My first dance with the other Cities was the most beautiful thing that I have ever experienced.” City paused for a moment. Her lights and membrane pulsed at the thought of that dance long past. The whole population felt it with awe.

“I have grown many daughters and expelled them to live on their own. But of all of them, none were as strong as you or as independent. None loved life more.”

“Then why, City? Why do you sacrifice me? You send me to die because you love me?”

Shock and rebuke exploded from the population causing waves throughout City. A mere child speaking to City in this manner was unthinkable! It took City some time to calm the turmoil and set everyone back to their tasks reassuring them that all was under control and that the Child was not to be expelled.

“You will not die, Child. And your love of life will save us all.

“There are some thoughts, Child, which are shared only among the Cities and are not open to the people. I show one of these to you now so that you will understand what I ask of you. No one else will know it.”

A picture appeared in her mind – a sea far to the north of her own but just as full of life and beauty. In an instant it was boiled away by a blinding flash leaving dry lifeless rock unable to ever support life again.

She saw the hard ones – beings like she had never imagined. Thick outer coverings kept these creatures separated from each other. They could never mesh in either mind or body.

Some of these beings could envision life for their own kind only. They did not see that people were people, whatever their substance. They could destroy an entire sea without a thought. But some others wanted life for all those living. They longed for life so urgently that they gave their own lives to save others. Hard shelled, single creatures, they could never know the touch of a population or the experience of the dance. They lived, fought and died alone.

She withdrew in pain and shock. They were so alone, these creatures who protected the seas without ever knowing the dance. Someone had to help them! Suddenly, she understood.

“I will go and I will help them. Perhaps I will survive.”

“Thank you, Child.” City glowed now and hummed as she began her dance.

Thanks and well wishes swept through all the population. Many good byes were said. City moved toward a dark hollow shape floating in the sea. Other Cities came close, calling their blessings and joining in the dance.

She emerged from the membrane of City and moved slowly toward the dark hollow thing, like a floating cave. As she neared it she was afraid as she had never been before. Turning, she saw the whole of the sea of life watching and calling to her. She moved into the cave and found her place as City had instructed her. The love of the population flowed through her as something began to move across the opening of the cave.

“Good bye. I will love you always” was all she could say.

The opening of the cave closed and suddenly – for the first time in her existence and forever – she was --- Alone.

“The Host is in excellent condition, which helps. The episode appears to have been triggered by a minor allergic reaction which affected the pituitary, which in turn caused her reserves of B1 to be burned up leaving her susceptible to the shock content of the memories. Lots of B1 and L-tryptophane along with some other amino acids are prescribed. As usual, the Resident needs as much physical contact as possible.

Thanks, Tzahi. You’re sure she’s OK?”

“The one thing you can absolutely sure of is that Sandy Brandon wants to live. 50% of the combiovite Residents die with the initial placement. 50% of those who live go completely insane inside of few weeks. Of the remaining 25%, half are unable to ever bring their coordination level above average and nearly every Resident suffers from full or partial amnesia. Sandy has extremely high physical coordination and reaction skills in the Host while the Resident retains full awareness and purpose.”

“OK, I know all that. But right now, is she alright?”

Tzahi laid his hand on Frank’s shoulder, noticing the tautness around his eyes. “Yes, Frank. She’s fine. At this point it’s mainly exhaustion and she’s sleeping it off.”

Frank sank into a waiting room chair and began to cry softly with relief.

Tzahi sat beside his friend. “I know this is a rough assignment for you. She won’t last forever. The memories are hard on the Resident, but she’s fine right now. You know the Host was cloned from a Russian dancer back on Terra. She’s in great shape. I understand from the crew in Recruiting that the Resident was the strongest willed specimen that her planet had to offer. They’re a good match. “

“You don’t understand. This is not just an assignment for me. I don’t care so much about the match between the Host and the Resident as I do about her. She’s so beautiful, so good. She has such a love for people. She seems to know my every thought and to understand. I love her, Tzahi.”

Tzahi’s look was stern. “You’re both soldiers, Frank. She needs your body and we need her skills. Remember that, no matter what else you feel.”

“I know, Tzahi. I know.”

It was late afternoon in the aft sectors when Sandy was released, fit for duty. Frank took her to their favorite outdoor seaside restaurant situated on a pier which jutted out into a shallow sea.

While eating oysters, they watched otters playing, one swimming on its back and eating its own oysters held on its abdomen as if it were a dining table. Sandy laughed. She loved the sea.

“You know, I was so scared for you, Sandy. I really do love you.”

Sandy looked at Frank curiously. There seemed to be a bit more distance between them even though neither of them had moved. “Are you sure?” She waited. He only looked at her. “I know the physical relationship can bring on strong emotions, Frank. But are you really sure that you can love a bowl of jelly injected into the grey matter of a clone?” She stared into his eyes holding his gaze for what seemed like a lifetime.

“My wife, he said finally, “is the most beautiful and most incredible bowl of jelly in the whole universe. And I love her.” His eyes never wavered from hers. She touched his hand to her cheek and smiled. Together they turned and continued watching the otters at play.

The alarm sounded. In an instant they were both at a dead run heading for the nearest fast chute. Diving head first into the chute, Sandy gave their destination into the mic. “Hangar bay number 3, A-1 priority.” As Frank dove in beside her the belt was already moving. They clung to handholds and pressed the Velcro covered elbows of their uniforms against the belt that sped them along the chute.

Minutes later they reached the hangar. In less than two minutes Sandy was suited and out on the floor. Helmet under the arm, she ran – bounding leaps in the low gravity – for the length of the hangar checking on each wing to see which pilots were arrived, barking orders, pulling her squadrons together. Reports were relayed to her, “Red Wing two ready,” “Green Wing one ready,” “Circle Wings one through four ready.” As she climbed into her own fighter reports on the enemy’s proximity were relayed. Scopes came to life to show her his location, but she did not need them; she knew the enemy, could feel him.

Frank manned his own station in the control room above the hangar bay.

At Sandy’s signal three hundred fighters lifted off, were expelled from the doors of hangar bay into the blackness of space and sped away from the mother ship.

Sandy reached into her ship and felt its power. It moved as she wished with almost no commands from the control panel. She went rapidly down her own checklist and then began calling in each of the wings for report. As the reports came in her awareness reached out to touch them, encompass them. She knew each pilot in each wing. She knew their flight skills and how they would react in battle. She could feel them move together. They dove toward the enemy at her command.

In perfect formation they danced. Spiraling, they drew the enemy into their ranks, fell behind him and fired. Diving, crisscrossing, moving out, closing in, with graceful deadly beauty she guided them, urging them on. Orders and reports were barked over the comm system. But that was just for appearances while she guided them in the dance.

Three of her ships went down, then a fourth, consumed instantly by the enemy's fire. One was hit and ejected a tiny survival pod that spun off into space. Two others were lame, unable to maneuver in the fight. She held them all, hearing their cries and loving them as she continued the dance.

The enemy lost thirty-eight ships in the same time. Another twenty-one were caught in the dance. Overwhelmed by the precision and beauty, they could not fire on the Alliance ships and withdrew to watch. Some even joined in, firing against their own as Sandy guided them.

It was over almost before it began. Frank watched on his screens as the remaining enemy ships were disabled and taken in tow as prisoners. Sandy never killed more than she had to. Lame ships were also taken in tow while the survival pod was retrieved. Space debris was collected for recycling or for memorial as applicable. The wings headed home.

"Damn, she's good. Best damn Flight Commander I've ever seen." The Deck Captain slapped Frank on the back. Girl acts like she was born in space. Like it's the most natural thing there is to control three hundred fighters in a dog fight. Who would ever think a jellyfish could fight like that? Well, I guess that's what we made them combiovitae for. Damn good job. She's mighty valuable. You take real good care of her Frank, you hear?"

Frank answered to the affirmative, taking the comment good naturedly. Many of the citizens of the Alliance had some trouble really seeing the combiovitae as people. Beings from different planets with different anatomical structures were people. But they were born, not made. Frank understood.

Once the wings were aboard and their ships put to bed, the pilots debriefed and started to move toward their homes. Sandy accounted for each one, checking the wounded personally and attending to formalities for the dead.

Prisoners wounds were tended to and their temporary accommodations were arranged. She no longer regarded them as the enemy. She saw to every detail, working long after most others had left.

"Hi, Babe." It was Frank with coffee.

"Hi." She smiled accepting the coffee and a caress. Sandy hadn't even notice that she was tired and hungry until she took a sip. "What time is it?"

“Why, it’s so late that it’s early. How about some breakfast before we get you to bed?” Frank reached out to her with a hug, pulling her head toward his shoulder.

“Sounds great,” she said, burrowing her head into his shoulder while trying not to spill the coffee.

Turning toward the nearest conveyors they could see out from the huge hangar bay view ports. From this vantage point near one end of the hub and above the plane of the mother ship, they could see across the six layers of fifteen concentric circles which made up the ship – lights blazing, a giant city turning slowly against a sea of stars. It was beautiful.

Snuggling deeper into Frank’s shoulder, Sandy sighed. It was so good to be home

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