

OLD YEAR, NEW YEAR

Jolene Demmings

She strolled. It was the gait of confidence, of purpose, and with the aura of “Mess with me at your own risk.” Her reputation was established with the citizens of Melalur, but the Year End Festival drew people from hundreds of kulums—close to two hundred miles. She still translated distance, weights, and time, despite being five years into her second life.

“May the gods grant you a good festival, Joleen,” called a food vendor, seconded by a wine stall seller with a truly atrocious product. Not that she denigrated the drink. She never stopped being surprised at the feeling of being more at ease than in her old life. It might be because however humans had come to this planet or however they’d spread afterward, a separation of physical and racial types was not the result. It shouldn’t have mattered, but being a black woman had baggage on Earth that was absent with citizenry being a mix of every type found on Earth and a few who were not.

She exchanged greetings with vendors and passersby who recognized her even if *she* drew a blank, but she still kept an eye out for why she was being paid for her presence. The city’s petty criminals, such as pickpockets and shoplifters, never resorted to violence if confronted, but distant visitors to the regional festival were a problem if they had not heard of Joleen Demiks and the Demiks Security Band. She would have called her current profession a security service, but the connotations with neighborhood bands that functioned like gangs on Earth were more familiar to the local populace. The difference was that her band provided security *from* individual criminals, tempered the harsher tendencies of some Melalur bands, and kept minor officials from going beyond what was considered normal graft.

Not that her services had no constraints, as was evidenced when she turned into a row of food stalls.

“Joleen, I heard the vendors had pooled their coin and hired you.”

“I think the riot last year convinced them the police were useless.”

Loxum Chula was as nasty in personality as his appearance—his carefully crafted affectation did not impress her. However, she *was* impressed by the fifty to sixty men he controlled.

“Still going around with Humamar, I see,” said Chula. “A smart decision. I doubt any individual Melalurian would deliberately antagonize you when you’re alone, but who knows with all the strangers here for the festival?”

Chula was correct in his assessment. It had taken, in Joleen’s opinion, far too many instances of men not believing a woman was a physical threat before the lesson finally percolated throughout Melalur. She was tall for a woman, shorter than only perhaps 10 percent of men. She was also robust of build, which on Earth might have been unflatteringly called *stocky* or less appealing words during times she had let her weight escape her attention. These features, plus eight years in the U.S. Marines and nineteen years in the Kansas City Police Department, had provided experience and confidence she would never have dreamed of using in ways that would have been unbelievable if her Earth life had continued.

A ridiculous, almost feminine laugh came from a source behind Joleen. Humamar’s voice was strikingly incongruous for the six-foot, six-inch, lean man at her back. He was as recognizable as Joleen to local citizens. Some would say as infamous. In his case, partly the result of being charged with murdering a member of the city’s ruling family. Humamar’s

previous reputation for violence had prejudiced the city tribunal. After all, who else would have had the temerity to deny killing the grandson of the family's patriarch after being found standing over the body?

That was in the early days after Joleen had arrived and begun living in Melalur, a seemingly placid refuge compared to her first years since being cast away. Once in the city, she had worked odd jobs, including as a laborer, a garbage collector, and a cleaner of stables. Humamar had been her big break. Having witnessed him first come upon the dead body, she protested his innocence to the constabulary. The officers were all too willing to ignore her, a woman of no significance, while they focused on placating the ruling family.

It had taken her a month (Earth time) to find the real killer and convince the patriarch that another grandson had committed the murder of a perceived competitor among his peers. The patriarch released Humamar and rewarded Joleen with enough coin to sustain her while she developed her retinue—under the condition the murder remained unsolved. She intuited the patriarch valued suppressing rumors of internal family conflicts. The living grandson disappeared shortly thereafter, making Joleen wonder if the patriarch had mulled over whether to dispose of her as well as the grandson. It had been a tense few days before she felt reassured—or so she told herself.

She kept the secret, but twice in the next month, members of the city's elite had come asking her to discreetly investigate what the local police were unable or unwilling to solve. From there, her reputation grew. She initially would have preferred joining the Melalur police, but her experience with Melalur police personnel and their ingrained belief that no woman could enforce the law closed that option.

"Still proving your fierceness against children and old women, Chula?" said Humamar. The two men detested each other, but it had thus far not gone beyond words. The limits were set by Humamar's acknowledgment of Chula having too many men, and Chula not wanting to go beyond a point with the most dangerous man in Melalur.

"Still following behind a woman like a good lapdog or servant, Humamar?"

"Now, boys, let's be nice. Manners please, Humamar. And Chula, we respect you, but it does no good to pointlessly antagonize my tall friend."

Both men grunted—a deep bass in one voice and a near falsetto in the other. Chula nodded to Joleen and walked away.

"Gods above and Gods below, Hummie. How many times do I have to yell at you to stop asking for trouble? Serve you right if I cast you out of the band."

"And how many times do I have to tell you I hate you calling me that?"

"Yeah, but what I do is only annoying. What you do could make someone do something nasty."

"Sorry, Joleen," he said contritely. "You know I'm trying."

She sighed. "I know but try harder."

They continued wandering the festival grounds that covered sixty to seventy acres (by her translation) set aside for stalls and vendors. Stealing goods, picking pockets, and assaults were noticeably down from the time before the Demiks Band provided security. It had not escaped Joleen's notice that she was, in a way, acting like people she would have arrested on Earth—with a difference, she told herself. Instead of not harassing in return for a cut of profits, she would not protect or solve a crime unless she was paid. She told herself it was a distinction not worth worrying about. Anyway, it was the way of this world, a way she hadn't invented and couldn't change. Fundamental principles were fine as long as reality was in the equation.

She glanced at the sun for the . . . well, she didn't know how many times she had done it in the last two hours. By custom, the festival shut down the first two days at sundown. Tomorrow would be different, with any vendor and stall given freedom to stay open after sundown and risk the excessive revelry that marked the finale of the three-day festival.

But that was for tomorrow. Tonight was for families to remember the last year, equivalent to sixteen months back on Earth—she thought she would never train herself to think in local measures. Traditional foods would be served. Armady's early teen daughter would have the food ready for the extended family. His younger daughter would help, as would aunts and cousins. It was Joleen and Armady's turn to host the gathering. She believed she was adjusting to being part of Armady's family and what it meant to this culture. Was it so different from the family she would never see again?

Her previous life's trajectory had gone through the ranks of the Kansas City Police Department. She had been returning from a conference where she'd made a presentation on community involvement. Her San Francisco flight was canceled due to a crew shortage, and the only flight to get her to Kansas City that day went to Chicago, where she needed to change planes and fly back west. While at the conference, a deputy chief from her department broke protocol one evening over drinks and revealed that her promotion from captain to major would be announced the next week. She felt she had earned the elevation and already had sights on being a deputy chief, maybe even chief of police before she retired. The collision over Denver had changed her plans and worlds.

Yes, her life was different . . . in many ways, one of which required giving news tonight to Armady. She had long ago accepted that a career was more attractive than child-rearing. The urge for, as her cousin Sharice once described, "rollie shitbags that suck your life away" had never appealed. Thus, the news she intend to share tonight during the formal farewell to the previous year was that Armady, her husband, would be father to a third child in another six months.

How had she changed in the last years? It was more and more a recurring question. She did not dwell on getting the answer to that or other questions, such as comparing her first life with her second. Although she missed the first, the second was, if anything, more consuming than the first. Still, there were things she missed, perhaps more from nostalgia than wanting them back.

She checked the sun again and began humming.

"You've been on that same tune since mid-day," said Humamar. "It's a new one."

"It's called . . . well . . . something like 'For Old Times Sake' or 'Old Times Past.'"

Michael Posey

The winds blew across the valley as they did most days, five to eight miles per hour coming in from the west, then gently swirling as the valley turned right before branching into two perpendicular arms. It was perfect for launching a sailplane from the intermediate slopes of the Terfishal Mountains. The towering limestone formations walled the valleys of the region that stretched fifty studeema from the town of Morfelo—almost seventy miles by the estimate of Michael Posey—a.k.a. Maikel Pozee.

A crew of friends and coworkers helped assemble the sailplane on the rail ending at the sheer rock wall that descended three thousand feet to the valley floor. He stood admiring the vista and could not imagine a better launch position. The updrafts were constant, no matter the weather, though the force varied from day to day, and daytime thermals added to the lift options.

That morning, he had released candle-powered, miniature hot air balloons from the valley floor and the cliff edge. By following their flight, he judged the conditions optimal.

The sailplane was a labor of love. It had taken him two years of part-time work to produce a plywood version strong enough. The result was only possible because of a native tree whose trunk he peeled away in tough, fibrous layers and cross-glued together with a resin from another native plant, a succulent whose sticky exudate he forced from the plant and that, when dry, was stronger than the interlaced fibrous layers. The resulting pseudo-plywood was strong and flexible enough. Once satisfied with the material, he had needed only two months to produce the first version he was willing to risk testing. Even then, the craft would have been too heavy on Earth. Only the lighter gravity and similar atmospheric density compensated. Two minor and one moderate crashes provided enough experience for him to develop the second sailplane. That one lasted almost a year before the wings began to warp. He had used version three for another year with no signs of warping.

It had been his good fortune to find work in a carpentry shop when he arrived in Morfelo, bedraggled after first eluding pursuers two realms away. He had crossed the lands of a people who were less than welcoming to strangers and then tramped over a mountain range he later learned was the last refuge of what closely resembled a puma with black spots. He carried several scars on his right leg and left arm.

The love of carpentry had come late and was not his first love. He could not remember when he had not planned on becoming a pilot, but he was eighteen before accepting the reality that his eyesight was just below the standards required for military and commercial pilots. He had still become a pilot but only recreational. He'd settled for an air force career in aviation, eschewing the officer track to becoming an aircraft mechanic. One irony of his new life was that he now had perfect eyesight, its having been somehow corrected by the aliens.

During twenty years in the U.S. Air Force and fifteen more working for airlines, he kept, flew, and maintained a small airplane. When he retired, the extra free time allowed him to add carpentry and sailplaning to his activities. That led him to this day as he prepared to start a new chapter in the culture and history of the people in his second life.

"Maikel, get your crazy ass over here, and stop staring off into nothing. Your contraption is put together and just needs your inspection. Like every other time, I'm not going to be the one to tell Imiluh that her husband is splattered on the valley floor."

He smiled at Hawnul. It was part of the routine. Imiluh's two brothers worked in the same carpentry shop that he did—Hawnul being the younger brother and more amiable. Of course, *shop* was a bit of a misnomer. A better description might be a small factory that had expanded from the large shop where Maikel had first started working. The family members' skill and industriousness, when paired with Maikel's knowledge of a different carpentry's history and techniques, turned a highly regarded valley carpentry into one whose furniture had a clientele that spread as far as the capital, ten days' travel away.

Even with the family business's increased fortune, it still took Imiluh's father almost two of the planet's years shorter than Earth's before he agreed to the marriage. Though now a family member, Maikel was prepared for his role in the business to be limited by not being a son. But he had other plans that encompassed not just this one valley but another twenty similar valleys within this mountain range and possible farther, depending partly on today's flight.

"All right, I'm coming. As always, I can't count on sausage-fingered, pretend craftsmen to do a good job."

The banter became more ribald—not that Maikel noticed, his total focus elsewhere. Checking the assembly and every part of the craft was ingrained in him. As many times as he had flown this model, one could never be too cautious. Twenty minutes later, he was satisfied and stood back for a final look.

The sailplane's body rested on a one-foot-wide timber with a lightly greased groove wide enough to hold the craft in position. Hanging free outside the timber were wheels for the landing. Smaller wheels near the wing tips would help keep the wings from snagging on the ground during those landings. It worked most of the time. Only once had he needed to construct a completely new wing.

"Everyone in position!" he called out. One man went to each wing tip to ensure they never touched the ground during launch. Two more men grabbed short protrusions behind the cockpit. The fifth person was Hawnul's wife, recruited for today when a man became ill. Her role was to release the safety rope holding the craft in position after Maikel removed the wedges at the front of the craft's body, which he now did and quickly climbed into place. He went through the final checklist. Seat strap holding him steady. Look right, left, and to the rear to check the control surfaces operated by tough lines attached to the twin steering columns. Check the small glass windshield. Take a deep breath.

"Ready! Launch!"

He felt the lurch as the rope restrainer was released, then the slow slide forward, increasing as the men pushed the craft. His quick glance to the sides saw the men at the wing tips. Then, the edge coming closer. Thirty feet from the abyss, a painted line marked where the four men released their hold and stepped away. He was committed.

As always, his pulse raced, his throat clamped shut, and his breathing stopped. No amount of confidence and experience could overcome instinct. He was jumping into a void and was not a bird.

The slithering sound of the craft's body against the timber abruptly disappeared, and the sudden drop of his stomach signaled that gravity had made its presence known. What happened next varied, depending on the air he dove into. Up or down. Up if the craft immediately entered an updraft, down if not. Up was better. Down meant the craft would descend under control until he found an updraft. It was a good day. His stomach returned to its normal condition, and the sailplane flew out over the valley. He knew that thousands of people were looking upward at that moment or would soon be doing so when alerted by others. The conditions were good. He sailed to the opposite side of the valley and regained lost altitude near the mountains on that side. Back and forth several times, then parallel along the cliffs to the valley's end before he turned around. He could have continued for hours, but today was for more than enjoyment.

He checked an additional cord that was not usually present. He lined up with Morfelo two miles ahead, pulled the cord sharply forward, and hoped the packing worked. He was reassured when he felt an increased drag. Looking over his shoulder, he made gentle, short turns right and left to confirm the banner was trailing behind. He laughed, imagining the reaction of not just Morfelo's citizens, but also those of people in other towns and villages as he traversed the valley for the next hour.

Silbun Harglow had been skeptical that Maikel's stunt would help his harness business, but Harglow was an honest, casual friend of Maikel's. He had promised a share of the increased business only if it happened and only for one month. Maikel would have liked the banner to read "Harglow's harnesses are best," but that was too long for the first banner, which read "Harglow"

to test the degree of drag. Maikel was reassured. Next time he would try a longer banner. Maybe for one of the blacksmith shops.

For the next hour he flew back and forth, up and down along the valley, now relaxing to enjoy being free from the ground. He would never fall asleep, but his mind could wander while his reflexes worked semi-automatically. It was in such moments that some of his most bitter-sweet memories surfaced. Today was one such day.

In two days would begin the traditional New Year festival to mark new beginnings. In his first life, he had lived alone, his wife dead eight years and their only child a son living in Chicago, where Maikel had been headed when the *event* happened. Since Marge's death, his social world had revolved around a group of like-minded sailplane enthusiasts in Reno, Nevada, one of the premier sailplaning sites in the United States. Most of the men were also retired, several widowers as well. He recalled the last five . . . or was it six? . . . New Year's Eves on Earth—when they had celebrated together, usually at the home of Alex McPherson, a transplanted Scot who found the sailing and the climate better in Reno than Edinburgh.

An evening of excesses meant liquid spirits, along with good feelings. By the time midnight came, they were all well-oiled and deep into combinations of good humor, brotherhood, and melancholy. Alex could drink them all under the table, and by the witching hour, he would start singing "Auld Lang Syne" over and over, interspersed with the men's anecdotes of life and lost loved ones. On some nights, Alex passed out by the tenth iteration. Other nights, maybe it was Maikel who passed out. Whoever it was, Maikel was eventually able to accompany Alex in the original Scots, though he didn't know what the words meant.

He smiled as he remembered Frankie O'Connell's yearly teasing Alex that the song was in Gaelic, prompting Alex to huff that Gaelic was a Celtic language and Scots was Germanic, two entirely different language groups. Alex would then lecture the group how Scots was either a separate language or a distant Anglic dialect sister to English, depending on the scholar. Maikel could not remember which Alex favored. He *did* fondly recall the subsequent toasts to Scots insisted on by Alex.

The sailplane once again approached Morfelo. Maybe Maikel would do one more pass around the valley before landing where the crew waited. He looked down, searching for his and Imiluh's house beside a stream, then looked back up to clouds and mountains.

"Once more and then down," he said and his thoughts turned back to New Year's nights that would not come again. For the next half hour, the only sound was his singing softly in Scots.

Heather Chen, Mark Caldwell, and Joseph Kolsko

Although each clan felt assured its five-day New Year Festival was better than most other clans', almost all would concede that Orosz City's was the grandest. After all, was the city not the center of the Caedellium Union, the site of the miraculous battle that saved them from the Narthani, and the home of Yozef Kolsko, Paramount Hetman of Caedellium?

To the same Yozef Kolsko, the prominence of Orosz City and himself had the significant downside of his having to make at least one major appearance on each of the five days. Day one was to deliver one of the opening speeches. Day two was judging wrestling, krykor breeds grown for wool, and fruit preserves. Day three was meeting individually with delegations from all twenty-one clans. Some meetings lasted only moments, such as for Orosz City, but others dragged, such as Bevans and Mittack. Day four was meetings with ambassadors and representatives, depending on the status of the foreign group, and judging the finals of music

compositions. Thankfully, Heather was also a judge, and his decisions uniformly matched hers. Day five was . . . well, by the evening he had forgotten *what* he had done that day.

“Yozef, go sit in your favorite chair and have some wine,” said Anarynd after a hug and a kiss. “You look like you need both. Everyone else is already here, and Maera made sure no one sat in your chair.”

In fact, he did not favor the chair more than several others, but once it was established to be his favorite, he saw no reason to dispute it.

The sitting room was full, with only the one chair unoccupied and several people standing. He spotted Wyfor Kales talking with Synton Ethlore. Wyfor was one of numerous magistrates who had been called to Orosz City to maintain order with the tens of thousands of revelers. Tomis Orosz talked with Klyngo Adris, visiting from Adris Province for the occasion. Children appeared and disappeared if they were mobile. Those children needing conveyances were passed around. Someone shoved a goblet of Mittack wine into Yozef’s hand while he talked to Mared Keelan, who was visiting for the festival.

“Another successful festival,” said Eina Saisannin, the Fuomi ambassador, from a nearby chair.

“Yes,” said Yozef, “success as judged by its being over. I’d enjoy it more if I wasn’t Yozef Kolsko.”

She laughed. “You have to eventually become accustomed to it. You’re the Paramount. Next year just tell everyone that you’ll limit your appearances.”

“Easier said than done. Every event seems to have a good reason why I’m involved.”

“Even judging wrestling?”

“You wouldn’t think so, but Aeneas told me he heard I was supposed to be a judge, and he had told his friends at school. That seemed to make a bigger impression on all of them than my being Paramount. Then Maera told me, ‘Don’t even think about not judging the wrestling. Aeneas would be too disappointed.’ And don’t ask why I had to judge fruit preserves.”

That’s when Xena climbed in his lap and asked about the pony judging, only to be disappointed and jump off when Yozef confessed it was one of the events he *didn’t* judge.

For half an hour, he enjoyed casual conversation, moments of children’s attention, and listening to the room full of people he cared about. A growling stomach reminded him he hadn’t eaten since morning meal. Maera, ever alert, either heard the gastrointestinal signal or caught his questioning glance around.

“Attention, everyone,” called Maera. “We’ll be eating shortly, but Heather has a treat for us.”

Yozef hadn’t noticed her, which was easy given her diminutive size. Yet when he looked around, he spotted her only when she got to her feet from sitting on the other side of Carnigan. She smiled at the appreciative comments and walked to pick up her foralong. The mandolin-like instrument was what she had played in Sulako as an entertainer for her slave master. After being freed, she had vowed never to play the instrument again, a vow she rescinded when she put those years behind her and realized she loved the sound. The instrument she now held had been made in Devanyo, the Farkesh capital. Accompanying her was a Fuomi, a member of Eina’s staff, playing a cello-analog.

Chairs and people moved into a semicircle so everyone could view the duo standing near the room’s bay window.

Heather strummed a chord to get people’s attention.

“This Festival on Caedellium is to celebrate the New Year, but it also signals the end of the old. For everyone, there are things to remember, sometimes with happiness, sometimes sadness, and whatever the memories, they will always be with us. In Amerika, we have a song of remembrance and commitment not to forget what happened. We’ll play the song, and I’ll sing the words first in its original language, then in English, the language of Amerika, and then in Caedelli.”

Murmurs of anticipation wafted through the audience. Heather strummed a series of chords and moved into a melody the cello picked up. She sang. Yozeff and Mark looked at each other, recognizing the song if not the words. By the second verse, Yozeff hummed along, unaware that Maera glanced at him from her perch on his chair’s right arm. When the last verse ended, appreciation was universal but subdued. Even in a strange language a tone was transmitted, though not all the listeners were sure what it was.

“What is the language, Heather?” asked Eina.

“It’s in Scots, a language related to English.”

Yozeff winced. Heather was usually cautious about dropping hints related to Amerika. He knew that Maera and Eina were alert to clues regarding Amerika’s location. One more clue had just been added—that there was another language previously unheard of and that was very different from English. By Anyar standards, such differences implied large land areas like continents, something incompatible with Amerika being part of a relatively small land mass that had heretofore escaped discovery.

Oh, well, he thought. He wouldn’t even bother to later reprimand Heather.

“Now I’ll sing the song in English. I’ll repeat the first verse a couple of times at the beginning and end. Maybe Yozeff and Mark will join in.”

Faces turned to gauge the responses. Mark frowned. Yozeff shook his head.

“Go ahead, Yozeff,” said Anarynd. “We’ve heard you singing before when you thought no one was listening. You aren’t *that* bad.”

“You must not have heard him singing the Mr. Ed song,” rumbled Carnigan.

“Not just him, you big oaf,” said Synton. “You two idiots sing it even though the damn horse isn’t ridden anymore.”

Yozeff answered questioning looks that came his way. “Later. Let’s stick with Heather.” She strummed the introduction again, then sang in English.

*Should old acquaintance be forgot,
and never brought to mind?
Should old acquaintance be forgot,
and the days of auld lang syne?*

(Chorus)

*For auld lang syne, my dear,
for auld lang syne,
we’ll drink a cup of kindness yet,
for the sake of auld lang syne.*

Yozeff joined in for the first chorus. Mark waited until the repeat of the first verse before shrugging and singing, surprising everyone except Maghen with his strong baritone. When Heather moved into further verses, neither compatriot knew the words but then joined again, louder this time, with the verse ending repeats and the chorus.

This time, the reactions included appreciation for Yozef and Mark's participation. Yozef noted, without chagrin, that Mark's performance had better reviews than his own.

"Now in Caedelli," said Heather.

*Should old acquaintance be forgot,
and never brought to mind?
Should old acquaintance be forgot,
for those days now passed on?*

*For days now passed on, my dear,
for those days now passed on,
let's raise a glass of memory yet,
for those days now passed on.*

*Now let me toast the year gone by
and call you to do the same!
Let's raise a glass of memory yet,
for those days now passed on.*

*We've run the race and tilled the field,
won and lost, my friend,
But never will we let turn to dust
those days now past and gone.*

*And there's a hand, my trusty friend!
And give me a hand o' thine!
Let's raise up a glass of memory yet,
for those days now passed on.*

*For days past and gone, my friend,
for those days now passed on.
Let's raise up a glass of memory yet,
for those days now passed on.*

When the last foralong chord faded, the silence, then shuffling of feet and soft murmurs made Yozef believe the Caedelli version had impinged on a sensitive subject he was unaware of. The notion was dispelled when Eina said, "Wonderful, Heather," and the room filled with accolades, soft rather than boisterous, as if people were avoiding being disrespectful.

"Could you sing the Caedelli version again, Heather?" asked Maera.

Heather nodded and strummed the introduction. When she got to the second verse, Yozef heard Maera whisper, "Anid." Moments later it was Anarynd's turn. "Aunt Tilda." As if permission had been given, others gently voiced names. Yozef recognized a few, but most were names of people he assumed were dear to the speaker, perhaps dead, perhaps alive but elsewhere.

When Heather finished the last verse, instead of the music fading, she kept going with chords and said, "Once again and anyone join in if you remember the words."

Maera was the first, Eina only one line behind.

I might have known, thought Yozef. *They both probably knew the words from the first time they heard them.*

He was not surprised when more and more people sang the “*for those days now passed on*” refrain, but he was surprised when Synton sang all the words to the last two verses.

Encouraged by the audience response, Heather continued two more times through the entire song. When she ended with a flourish of chords and held the foralong above her head, Yozef thought there were more moist eyes than dry. Several women wept openly, and Gwyned put an arm around Carnigan and pulled his sobbing head into her bosom.

Yozef had whispered, too, and smoke from the fireplace must have been irritating his eyes.