

Beautiful Dreamer by Edward McKeown



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Taluma Dekhara drew herself up to her full height of forty centimeters and stared at her rival, Sagawa of the Progressives. Sagawa glared back, her jeweled eye-shields glittering in the morning sun. Around the two antagonists stood a dozen Nateelians, some in the traditional robes and sashes and a few, Sagawa's people, dressed in miniature versions of the clothes the aliens, called humans, wore. The two groups had unexpectedly come on each other at the scenic overlook that faced the capitol. A bitter debate broke out immediately.

"It is change or die," Sagawa insisted. "We either master these new ways or we become a sideshow for tourists, irrelevant to the universe at large." The small intense Nateelian paced back and forth while arguing, causing the silver scales of her skin to coruscate. "Your childhood among priests and traditionalists has left you unfit to lead," Sagawa charged.

"Whereas," Taluma returned, "your rejection of our past, our traditions, values and beliefs makes you fit?"

"Yes. Because I understand what you Dekharas fail to face. The roof has been blown off the world. Everything is changed and the past cannot help us."

"This debate is pointless," Aveelo, Taluma's young cousin interjected. "The matter will be decided at the Tol-kir-Kira. We will see who can offer the Concordiat a better dream."

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Sagawa snorted in irritation. "Come," she waved to her followers. "There is no point to talking to these relics." Her coterie of the fashionable dutifully followed in her train.

"Rude fool," Aveelo fumed

"Pay her no mind, dear cousin," Taluma said, projecting a serenity she did not feel. "Return with the others to the castle. I would like to meditate in this spot."

"As you wish," Aveelo made a gesture of respect and gathered the others, leaving Taluma alone with her thoughts.

With all witnesses gone, Taluma gave into the doubts that plagued her of late. Her thin-boned shoulders sagged. She walked up to the edge of the overlook to survey the jeweled and glittering city that lay before her, Donamore, capitol of the nation state of Truas, and most influential of the nation states of the Concordiat.

Once, she thought mournfully, that meant the universe. Now there is a new scale against which Donamore and even the Concordiat are the equivalent of Poochberries. She looked up, her gem-like eyes blinking independent of each other. Above was the sky, roof of the world, with its remote stars. Roof no more, as Sagawa had pointed out. The sky was endless and the lights were suns like her own, circled by many worlds.

The giants call my home, Wehardi IV, just a commonplace rock at the bottom of a gravity well. It's an uncouth name for something so important as my world.

Her eyes drifted to a sky-spearing pinnacle. A trading ship, one of the smaller interstellar vessels, sat on its fins at Skyport. Her courtiers had told Taluma it was named the *Cosmic*. The small trader still dwarfed her family castle or the largest ocean vessel the Nateelians had built.

The newcomers seem to threaten no harm in themselves, she thought, but they bring new ideas, new perceptions and a linear way of thinking so foreign that it frightens my people, to whom dreams are almost as real and sometimes more meaningful than the real world.

To me they have brought something worse, doubt that dreams are worth anything at all. I'd been proud before the aliens came, she thought. Now I can only wonder, proud of what? I cannot afford these doubts if I am to win the Tol-kir-Kira, the test of the beautiful dream. My father is old, and doubts his ability to hold power much longer. Everything depends on my ability to project a vision of beauty before the Concordiat. The winner will be sovereign in this city, which leads the world.

Before the arrival of the aliens, four years ago, I'd been favored to win. Even my rivals wept at the beauty of my visions, mystical animals, shining cities, wealth and joy. But that was before Sagawa's Reform Movement, before alien thoughts and ways disrupted the stability of the thousand-year-old Concordiat. Dreams come rarely to me now, and they are confused pitiful things wrung out of my doubts.

Despair assailed Taluma. She had trained for a lifetime for this one test. Her clan and immediate family had invested so much in her. How could she fail them?

Standing here, she thought, is answering nothing. I must see these aliens with my own eyes, speak to them. Learn why it is that they block my dreams, or another must be chosen to lead.

Decision made, she felt curiously lightened. Taluma quickly returned to the Dekhara castle, the formidable ancient pile of gray stone atop the mountain above her.

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Once there, she summoned her maid, and after borrowing the maid's less conspicuous cape and swearing her to secrecy, Taluma set out to leave the castle unobserved.

Brittony Janov tried to still the sobs that wracked her twelve-year old body. She knew she shouldn't have run away, but disappointment had so seared her that she fled, deaf to her father's frantic cries. He and the crew of *Cosmic* were probably turning Skyport upside down looking for her. Eventually they would find her by the shore road. It was a spot she came to overlook the sea, sheltered by the small copse of trees and not far from the outer trade gate. Another sob wracked her, and tears ran down her nose. It had all gone so wrong.

Cosmic was on her fourth landing on Wehardi IV, ferrying in scientists and trade supplies for the Wehardians, or Nateelians as they called themselves. *Cosmic* had made the initial discovery of the new aliens, first to be found since the Voit-Veru. It made the family-run combine and its two trading vessels solvent and promised more wealth beyond. But for Brittony it meant something special, the Wehardians were projective telepaths, able, with difficulty, to read consciously intended thoughts, even to project an image in the mind of another. She and her father had not been on *Cosmic* when it landed on Wehardi but lived aboard the *Yukikaze*. When Brittony learned of the Wehardian's skills she'd begged her father to take her on the *Cosmic* to Wehardi.

Brittony had a special reason. Unconsciously, she raised a hand to her head, feeling the slight scars beneath her dark brown hair. Skull fracture, the doctors said, with a small degree of permanent brain damage. A miracle really. The flutter crash that killed her mother should have killed her too, except that she was thrown free, landing in some bushes as the defective flutter cartwheeled. Somehow the nine-year old Brittony had survived but when she awoke it was if she had been reborn. There were huge gaps in her memory and into one of those gaps had fallen her mother. She could not remember her face, her voice, or her touch. Pictures and images could have been those of any stranger. The doctors told her father that her memory might return. It had not in three years.

"Are you ill?" said a small high voice in Tradespeak.

Brittony started and looked around. Next to her stood one of the little, lizard-like natives. Her eyes were faceted like Daddy's wedding ring gem. Her arms looked liked polished silver and ended in small claw-like hands. A cloak of dark green felt draped over the tiny native's shoulders.

"I miss my mother," Brittony whispered through teary eyes.

Taluma stared in surprise; the giant was a child! Somehow, she had never thought of them as having children. This ugly tower of bone and flesh was still more than twice as tall as herself and many times her mass. Atop its head was an untidy mass of fur—no, hair. It did have pleasing, bright blue-gray eyes, though these seemed reddened around the edges.

"Where is your mother?" she asked.

“Dead,” said the child, distress obvious in her voice and manner, “a long time ago.”

“I sorrow with you,” Taluma said, “but why do you cry now?”

“Because,” she said, “I had such hopes of seeing her.”

“I don’t understand,” Taluma said.

“I thought,” the child sniffled, “your people could read minds. My brain was hurt in the crash and I can’t remember my mother. One of your people in the trade port, Gawanis Defora, said that for a thousand credits he could reach my memory. I could almost see something....almost, then it was gone.” Another shudder wracked the child.

White-hot rage lit in Taluma. The power to mindspeak lay in most of her race, the ability to project, to dream, was far rarer. To delve into the mind was a daunting task for even an adept, far more so with an alien mind. But to raise the hopes of a child and then dash them was unforgivable.

Taluma reached out with her gift, projecting a wave of soothing comfort to the child. It seemed to still the child’s shaking. As her mind touched the child’s, she felt a shock of recognition. The child was young, female, probably only ten cycles or so in existence.

Taluma’s empathic nature reached out to the child finding her ‘feel’ to be surprisingly like that of her own young cousin, Aveelo. How could this giant seem so like a normal person?

“What is your name, child?” Taluma asked, though with a slight effort she could have delved the child’s mind for such surface information. Such an invasion, unasked for was unspeakably rude, even criminal. An adult could, with only a little training, block out most lesser talents. An adept like herself was another story.

“I’m Brittony Janov off the *S.S. Cosmic*, from the Janov Trading Family, out of New Eire,” she said, with a hint of a defiant pride.

“Do you have a father?” Taluma asked.

“Of course,” Brittony said. “Poor Dad. I ran off cause I was so upset. Oh, he’s probably looking for me all over. He might even have called the Captain. I had better get back before I cause more trouble.” The girl turned to look at Taluma. “You were awfully nice to listen to my problems.”

“I intend to do more than listen,” Taluma said. “This Defora, who tried to read you had no right to do what he did. You have been harmed by one of my people, amends must be made.

“I am Taluma Dekhara. I live there,” she turned and gestured toward the castle overlooking the hill. She felt the girl’s surprised reaction, tinged with alarm.

“Are...are you a princess?” stammered the girl, with wide eyes.

“Yes. Come to the castle tomorrow, with your father, at first bell and ask for me. Present this token at the gate.” She handed the child her signet ring. “I am the strongest telepath of my realm. If it can be done, then I promise you it will be done. You shall see your mother.”

“I’ll be there,” the girl cried.

Waves of joy and gratitude flowed out of the girl, almost battering Taluma.

So like my little cousin, she thought.

“Till then.” Taluma turned and started back for the counsel at a quick pace. There was much to do. The proctors must be summoned. Defora would be brought

before her before sunset. He would bitterly regret his swindling when she was through with him.

“Brittony!”

She turned at the sound of her father’s shout. He came pounding out the trade gate at a flat run. He raced up to her and grabbed her in a hug. “Darling, are you alright? Are you OK?” He stepped back still holding her to check that she had all her limbs still attached.

“I’m sorry Dad,” she began, “I shouldn’t have run off.”

“Damn right,” he said, satisfied his daughter was not in immediate need of medical attention. “God, anything could have happened. I was worried.”

“I’m sorry Dad,” she said again. “I was so upset.”

“My fault,” he said. “I should never have taken you to that being. I should take that little lizard and wring his neck.”

“It’s OK, Dad. That man was a fake. I met the princess, she told me.”

“Who?”

“Princess Taluma, Dad,” Brittony turned and pointed at the retreating figure of well-dressed Wehardian. As if sensing his regard, the being turned and looked back steadily. It raised a hand in salute then turned and walked into the city gate.

“She’s my friend,” Brittony said. “She’s going to show me Mom tomorrow at first bell.”

Manfred Janov looked at his daughter and Captain Brantz, torn between hope and worry. Brittony was excited, animated even, a rare thing for his daughter since her mother’s death. Yet he feared to see another tearful agonizing disappointment.

I could have crushed that little lizard for what he did to my daughter, he thought. Murder had filled his mind and it was fortunate for the alien fortuneteller that Brittony had run off at that moment and he’d had to chase her.

There was another concern. The discovery of a native race on Wehardi IV had helped reestablish the Janov trading family but it had been more of a trickle than a flood. One reason was the restrictions placed on traders by the Confederacy, but it was more the official hostility of the ruling Wehardian oligarchy, led by the Dekahara family. Now Brittony was involved in ship matters way over her head and perhaps his as well. A Janov he might be, but only a very lesser cousin and counted not at all against Captain Brantz’ authority.

Brantz had listened quietly as Brittony’s tale had almost burst out of her. Her cool blue eyes studied the child and would suddenly shift to him. Brantz’s chair creaked as she shifted back, running her hands through the silver-gray of her hair.

“Well,” she said finally. “You had quite an adventure, Brittony.”

“Yes, Ma’am. I hope I didn’t cause much trouble.”

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“Trouble?” Brantz said. “Running off in an alien town beyond Confederate law. Arranging for meetings with a leading politician of a party opposed to the presence of traders?”

Manfred gulped and Brittony looked at the floor.

His daughter’s head came up and the desperation in her face stabbed Manfred. “Can I see her? She promised me she could show me my mother.”

Brantz looked at Manfred as if measuring some problem. “I don’t believe that it would be prudent to break an appointment with the Dekharas. You and your father will go.”

Brittony clapped her hands together in joy, then remembering decorum, quickly put them in her lap.

Manfred wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or terrified. He caught the look on the Captain’s face. “Bree, wait for me in our cabin, then we’ll go have dinner.”

Brittony nodded and skipped out the hatchway.

“I’m sorry, Captain,” he said. “I didn’t intend for this to happen.”

“I’m sure,” Brantz said. “It may be trouble, but it might be something more. We’ve been here for years with only a trickle of trade. This may be a chance to break the stalemate. The wedge we’ve been looking for. So you go. You’re training for cargomaster so fortunately this is more or less up your alley. I’d rather have Master Speice handle this contact but you are too involved. So it falls to you to make this work.”

“Captain,” he said, looking straight into her eyes.

“Yes?”

“I won’t take a risk with my daughter’s safety or health. Not even for the sake of trade.”

The cool eyes measured him for a second, then seemed to soften. “If I thought otherwise, I’d kick your butt out an airlock. Spend some time on the books tonight, Manfred, you have a big day ahead of you tomorrow.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he stood, sensing the dismissal, and headed out.

“Manfred,”

He paused at the doorway.

“It’s good to see a smile on that child’s face. It’s been too long and I’ve been worried. Understand that we are here for trade but Brittony is *crew*. I want to see that child whole again. And if I don’t hear from you by sunset, I’m gathering every man and gun and coming after you. Count on it.”

He smiled. “Good night, Captain.”

The following morning Brittony and her father stood under the fins of the *Cosmic* as she towered, blue-black and highlighted in yellow, into the sky. They both wore fresh dress uniforms of the same color, covered with half capes. Manfred rubbed his eyes. Cargo Master Speice had kept him up half the night, relentlessly grilling him on procedure and protocol. The captain had handed him and Brittony small com units. Manfred turned down even a stunner, trusting more to his wits than weapons.

Brantz wished him luck “Remember, I hear from you before sundown, or we are coming.”

To his surprise, she knelt next to Brittony and kissed her cheek. “Hope for the best, Bree,” she said. “But know that it may not work and be ready to deal with that. Look after your father.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Brittony whispered, sober and contained.

One of Speice’s trade crew drove them in a small ‘mule’ to the spaceport’s edge and dropped them off. From there they walked through the fairy-like city of the natives. It looked as if it had been carved from quartz and marble. Some buildings were trimmed in ornately-carved, dark woods. The small, brightly-colored aliens paused to watch them, or scurried out of their path, seeming frightened by creatures four times their height, even after all this time.

The street of Donamore had gradually been widened, at least on the main roads. There were many areas where a human could hardly fit in the older sections of town. Manfred found himself looking in second-story windows of many buildings, to the evident discomfort of the residents.

Manfred huffed a little as they started up the hill toward the castle, glad for the traveler’s cape that kept the morning chill and sea breeze at bay. Brittony, who skipped ahead impatiently, did not notice the climb.

They approached the castle’s outer walls. It seemed made of gray stone with walls that stood meters over their head. Manfred ducked as they stepped through the gate. In the courtyard beyond, natives milled about a large blue tent. He recognized it from Master Spiece’s description as the Trade Tent created to protect natives and spacers from the weather. Brittony might squeeze through some of the castle passages on her knees but a grown human never could. So meetings were held in the courtyard tent.

Manfred looked at the soldiers standing around the tent. They held wicked-looking spears, about a meter long, and swords. He also noted small but serviceable slug throwers on the belts of some of them. One, obviously an officer, stood directly in their path. His golden crested helmet contrasted with the silvery scales of his skin and the red of his uniform.

“Give him the token, Bree.”

His daughter walked up slowly to the officer, who eyed her warily. He might be tall for his species but he barely came up to his daughter’s chest.

“Hi,” Bree said in Tradespeak, then more formally. “We are here at the invitation of Princess Taluma.”

“You are expected and welcomed,” he replied, without a trace of accent. He took the token and nodded to the guards. They pulled back the flaps of the tent. The humans walked in.

Taluma looked up as the giants entered the tent. She had to catch her breath at the sight of the child’s father. *He’s as tall as a building*, she thought. *Well, not quite, but he’s huge.*

She switched her attention to the less threatening visage of the child.

“Greetings,” she said, “Brittony of the Janovs.”

“Greetings, your majesty,” Brittony said. “This is my father, Manfred Janov.”

“Just princess, child.”

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“I want to thank you for offering to help my daughter,” the father said. The deep rumble of his voice filled the tent.

“She was harmed by one of my people who broke our laws. The villain will make amends to our law with a year’s service. I will make amends for the harm to your daughter.

“Please be seated on the pillows,” she gestured, “it will ease my neck.”

Brittony and her father sat on the thick cushions. Taluma walked up to Brittony. “I will lay my hand on yours,” she said. “It helps on the initial stages. Do not grasp mine as I fear your strength and size.”

“I would never hurt you,” Brittony said.

“Of course,” Taluma said, patting the child’s warm soft skin, so different from the hard cool scales of her kind. *Perhaps you and your kind wouldn’t intentionally*, Taluma thought, *but merely by existing you have the potential to destroy us.*

“Now, relax. Let your mind wander.”

Taluma began to infiltrate the child’s mind. Again she was surprised by how similar Brittony was to her younger cousin. She felt her own mind shift as she merged with Brittony. Suddenly the alien was no longer an ugly tower of bone and flesh but an adorable, passionate, stubborn, kind, careless child. Taluma gained confidence, finding the mental architecture more familiar than she dared hope. She delved past the child’s love of her father, her ship, their friends to a well of pain and despair and pushed into the dark place...

She was in a flying craft, only something was horribly wrong. The sky pinwheeled over them, the ground came up hard. Taluma mentally braced herself for the impact though she could feel nothing. Darkness, then white, then blurry images, Brittony was outside the machine crawling back. There was fire and inside-

No! The child must not see this. Recklessly Taluma poured out her strength to ward off the terrible images. Unaware yet, Brittony’s mind sought to focus on the powerful scene. Taluma struggled.

If I keep this up, she thought, I will never have the power for the ceremony, but if this is the image I leave Brittony with, then I will be a far worse criminal than Defora.

She put forth her full power. It barely sufficed.

On, she thought, on to safer places, to warmth and love. Now that she was secure in mastering the flows of Brittony’s memory, she called the child’s conscious mind to her. Come, Brittony. Let’s go see your mother.

I’m here. I’m here! The urgent power of the child’s mind caught Taluma off balance and she had to refocus her strength

A woman stood in front of them, holding a much younger Brittony. The woman was tall and pale, her hair was long and red. She sang softly and the warm scent of her filled their minds.

Beautiful dreamer,
Wake unto me
Starlight and dewdrops
Are awaiting thee.

Sounds of the rude world
Heard in the day

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Led by the moonlight
Have all passed away.

Beautiful dreamer,
Queen of my song,
List' while I woo thee
With soft melody.

Gone are the cares of
Life's busy throng.
Beautiful dreamer
Awake unto me.
Beautiful dreamer,
Awake unto me.

"Mom," Brittony whispered in Taluma's mind.

Images tumbled around them: Brittony's mother laughing and teasing, playing with her, teaching her, holding hands with her father as Brittony napped in her lap.

On and on it went, coming out of the damaged part of Brittony's brain, out from behind the scars. Taluma wove the images into Brittony's mind where she could access them at will. There were other images as well, Brittony's mom scolding her or having to discipline her. These too were truth and needed to be recovered but today was not the day for these. She placed them where they would emerge slowly and much later.

Beside her, Brittony's emotions surged wildly between joy at what was recovered and raw pain over what was lost. Taluma sent a wave of comfort and concern muting the child's grief.

"See now," she said across the link, astonished at the clarity of the communication between them. "Do not grieve. Your mother will be with you always."

"Thank you, Taluma," Brittony said. "I will never forget what you have done for me. You're my best friend." A wave of love such as Taluma had never experienced before rolled over her. She felt her own heart leap in response and a surge of protective emotion filled her. *Is this what a mother feels?* Taluma wondered.

"I must stop soon," Taluma said, "my powers weaken."

Brittony looked up at the image of her mother by a window under some alien star.

"So soon?"

"Yes,"

"Then we must stop. I don't want you to hurt yourself."

Taluma severed the connection as slowly as she could, letting Brittony's Mom fade into whiteness, not into darkness.

They were back in the tent.

"Dad," Brittony cried. "I saw her. I saw Mom. It was like she was right here. I remember everything!"

No, thought Taluma, not everything, thank the gods. I will never regret the strength I expended to erase the last image of her mother. She will never see the fall or its terrible aftermath.

Dizziness assailed Taluma.

“Princess,” Brittony cried. Her hands caught Taluma.

Taluma steadied. “I am all right, dear Brittony. But let us have no more of this princess nonsense between us. For you, I shall always be Taluma.” She sat on a cushion.

“Are you all right, princess,” Manfred said. “Shall I summon your guards?”

When Taluma looked up at him she no longer saw a monstrous figure but Brittony’s Dad. A man aged before his years by the loss of his beloved, who would do anything for his child. She remembered him dancing with his wife...

No. No more strangeness for now. I have fallen too far into their minds.

“I am all right, only fatigued. It has been the first time I was able to use my full mental powers in a long time.”

“Because you are afraid of us,” Brittony said.

“Bree,” her father warned.

“It’s true,” Brittony said. “Not of you and me, Dad. But of all of us and what it means to her people’s future.”

“Yes,” said Taluma, surprised. She reached back to Brittony’s mind. *We are still in contact*, she thought. *How can this be? There is no effort, no strain.*

Is it wrong? Brittony mind-spoke to her.

“I do not know. I have never heard of two who could remain in touch like this.”

“I’m not afraid,” Brittony said aloud. “So, I can hear your thoughts, the ones you are pushing at me now. You can hear mine?”

“Yes,” Taluma said. “This is not like what I did in your mind. That takes effort and energy this is like speaking without words.”

“Can this be dangerous?” Manfred demanded.

“I feel no strain,” Taluma replied. “I sense in your daughter a more adult mindset, a greater strength. It did not occur to me that while I was working in her mind that she might gain something from my own.”

To Taluma’s surprise, Brittony smiled at her. “Maybe I got some of your being more of a grown-up than I am. Hopefully, you got some of my being a kid. You are awfully serious, Taluma.”

Taluma laughed until her ribs hurt and Brittony joined in.

Finally when she had run down, Taluma said. “I have had little choice but to be serious. I face a trial in two days that determines the course of my life.

“Yes, I saw it in your mind, the Tol-kir-Kira.”

Shock spread through Taluma, what else had Brittony learned?

“The what?” asked her father.

“The Tol-kir-Kira,” Taluma said slowly.

“It means the test of the beautiful dream,” Brittony interjected.

“Yes,” Taluma continued. “My people had fought bitter wars till the gift of telepathic projection arose in them. Since then, power has passed to the Dreamer, whose visions become the path for society. For there can be no deception in a dream. One’s inner nature is laid bare for all to see. Wars became rare after the People chose the Way of the Dream.”

The human child looked at her earnestly. “Taluma, you can’t let Sagawa win. You have to dream.” A determined look slid over Brittony’s face. “And I’m going to be right there rooting for you.”

I can't believe this, Manfred thought.

The two days since Brittony and Taluma had bonded turned both the *Cosmic* and Nateel Concordiat on their ears. Taluma, to the shock of her conservative clan, demanded that Brittony attend the Tol-kir-Kira. Her family, caught between disapproval and forfeiture, could only agree. Now, Manfred sat on the cushions along with Captain Brantz and the senior officers of the *Cosmic* facing an arena of white sand glittering in the moonlight. The stands around and above them were filled with thousands of Nateelians.

His daughter sat next to him, again dressed in her best ship clothes, but she had eyes only for Taluma, from whom she'd been separated only to sleep.

"She's got to win, Dad." Brittony whispered.

Does she? he thought. *She's from the party that disapproves of trade and wants to hold back the future.* He looked at his daughter, so passionate and happy again. *Trade and all be damned*, he thought. *Before Taluma my daughter was alive but not living.*

"We're rooting for her," he said.

Captain Brantz cocked an eyebrow at him. *Well, at least some of us are*, he thought.

"Sagawa's starting," Brittony said, grimness entering her tone.

On the sands before them a vapor stirred. It formed a globe over Sagawa's head. It whipped faster and faster and suddenly there were images hanging in the moonlight. Nateelians dressed as humans, riding in flitters and spaceships, walking through buildings of Confederate design. The images were fuzzy and collapsed quickly into new ones along the same theme. Sagawa's arms dropped to her side as if in exhaustion. She staggered back to the tent of her supporters and collapsed into a wooden chair.

"Now it's Taluma's turn," Brittony said. "Oh Dad, she's so afraid. I can feel it."

Manfred looked to see the tiny figure of the princess walking into the arena. She looked tired, hesitant.

In the arena, with ten thousand eyes on her, Taluma knew herself to be defeated even before she began. *Are the Progressives, right? Do we need to cast the past aside and race into the future? What is the correct choice?* She tried to shake it off. *I must at least try.* She reached out with her mind. The sand began to stir and vapors swirled up. Taluma fought to master them to force the inchoate images of her soul to take shape. *But what shape, what image?* she despaired.

Taluma's dream collapsed in her mind, the floating image over the arena dissipated before taking any recognizable shape. The bitter taste of defeat filled and her and she could feel Sagawa's glee at her failure.

I'm done, she thought. *I cannot envision my people's future. Power will pass to those who believe our traditions and culture have no value. I've failed all those who believed in me.*

"Not yet," a voice cried in her head. Warmth and energy flowed into her. She jerked upright as if touched with an electric wire. She turned to face the flow of power.

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Brittony stood, towering over the Nateelians and seated humans around her. She extended her arms toward Taluma. A murmur came from the assembled Nateelians, some clutched their heads, and she realized that Brittony's mental shout had reached them as well. The spacers around Brittony shifted uneasily, looking at the assembled multitude but remained seated.

Brittony, Taluma sent, you cannot help me.

I have to! The child's mind pulsed back with fierce energy. You gave me back my memory. You gave me back my mother. I can't stand by and let you fail.

I cannot see the path ahead. How can I lead when I cannot dream for them?

With your heart, Brittony sent. You have a great heart, big enough even for someone not like you. My father says that a good heart is all the strength one needs. Taluma, you and I are friends. That's the future.

It struck Taluma like a thunderclap. *Yes, she thought, that is the future. Things can never be as they were before the aliens came. But there is a future. The child knows the truth.*

But I am too tired, Taluma thought, I have used up my energy.

Then take from me, Brittony demanded.

Taluma reached mentally for her friend and was astonished at the wild power of the child's emotions. She gathered in strength.

Brittony swayed slightly, then steadied. Manfred put a hand on his daughter's arm, his eyes anxious.

Captain Brantz looked at Brittony's father. "Manfred, we don't have to risk this."

Manfred didn't take his eyes off his daughter. "She's standing with her friend," he whispered. "Her mother would be proud."

Taluma turned back to the arena. It was as if a dam had broken in her mind. There was no turning back. The roof was off the world and couldn't be replaced. Nor could the past be resurrected. There was only the future which contained the new and strange but it wasn't all bad. It also held people like Brittony.

The song Brittony's mother sang floated up in her mind.

Beautiful dreamer, Wake unto me

That's you, Taluma, you're the beautiful dreamer, Brittony cried.

The dream began to form in the air before her. The ghostly wisps generated by her thoughts began to take form.

Starlight and dewdrops are awaiting thee

A beautiful, gemmed and white city of towers and delicate bridges took shape. Nateelians and aliens wandered about it calling and greeting each other. Yet there could be no question it was a Nateel city, with her people's spiraling designs and delicate architecture yet scaled for both peoples. It was the future. The vision swelled to fill the arena.

Beautiful dreamer, Queen of my song

Beautiful Dreamer by Edward McKeown

List' while I woo thee With soft melody

Taluma could feel the people's approval grow. Hearts unlocked as they gazed into the future she would lead them to. Consensus built in the arena. Sagawa and her supporters pushed back mentally against that welling feeling, but the consensus held. Their opposition faded and was dispelled.

Beautiful dreamer, Awake unto me

Taluma turned to face the assembly, no longer a princess but a queen, one whose destiny was now clear. She looked up at her giant friend and knew that Brittony felt it too.

There is a future, Taluma sent.

Together, Brittony said, joy in every fiber of her being.

Yes, Taluma said, weary yet filled with hope, together.

The End