

SOPHIE FROM SHINOLA



TALES FROM THE BLOGOSPHERE

Team NCI

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The Rules

As decreed by the director

Each participant's entry should be in the range of 100 to 500 words. All entries will be a sequel to the person's entry before them so that it becomes one coherent story line.

Each subsequent writer, (reacting to the portion immediately before theirs), must change one significant element of the story. You can change the gender of one character. You can change the season. You can change the locale. You can change the time period. You can change any element but only one element. (The only exception is that if you change a character's gender, you may change that character's name to fit the gender if necessary, but you should do what you can so that readers recognize that its the same character [i.e. Sam could remain Sam, Joe could become Josie, etc.]). Also, you may switch from Third Person narrative to First Person or vice-versa, but that does not count as your one significant change. Your change could also be to return something to the way it was before (Summer could become Winter again), but you can't change the same element that the person immediately before you changed.

You may also choose to follow the story by writing about a character who may have only been secondary to that point, but you must make it coherently flow from what's come before and the character you're following must have been in the portion of the story immediately preceding yours.

From The Editor's Desktop

A group of online friends, most of whom met each other through [John Scalzi's blog](#), banded together to create Sophie from Shinola. It's a fictitious story about Sophie and her attempt at making it into the Space Force. She's eager to leave her backwater planet Chenolla VI and partake in the marvels of the universe. But there is a catch. She must go through a torturous conversion process, which will alter her body forever.

Using this basic premise the writers managed to come up with a fantastic tale. Each part of the story has it's own writing style. Plus the required plot twists range from the mundane to the extraordinary. Just following along is a challenge in it of it self. Which all makes for an interesting and unique read.

You'll only find the actual story in this publication. This is a shame because it only gives you a brief look into the creative process. Be sure to click on the globe icon to view the original blog post. There you will find the author's thoughts and some helpful criticism from readers in the comment threads.

Towards the end writers started ending their parts with a cliffhanger everyone tried to out do each other with an even cooler ending. Which was fun but it wasn't practical. This story has a beginning but no end. Which isn't a terrible loss. In fact it allows you the reader to conjure up your own ending will the Trageth threat be neutralized or will humanity come under its yoke? Or for that matter will the Sophie from Shinola manuscript ever make it off of Mona's desk?

As much as she was trying to hide it, Sophie knew her anxiety was as apparent as the landing beacons at shuttleport 3. She was fidgeting and alternated between swinging her legs and stopping to pick at one of the twin scabs on her knees. Both actions brought a remarkably similar reaction from her mother; "Sit still, Sophie", "Leave that be Sophie."

Sophie was trying to be calm, but everything was riding on this interview. She had only just turned 11 the previous week, and so, she was now old enough to apply for SpaceForce Training Academy. And she desperately wanted to be accepted.

She glanced once more at the receptionist sitting pinch-faced and silent behind her little protective counter. When they'd arrived for the interview the lady (Ms. Wilberforce, her placard declared), had told them they'd be called when the interviewers were ready for them. She hadn't even looked up from her display (which Sophie noticed was tuned to one of the more garish celebrity gossip channels). Now, Ms. Wilberforce was completely engrossed in filing her long chartreuse nails. Sophie, young as she was, already felt a deeply abiding distaste for people grooming in public. "Is she gonna start flossing next?", she thought.

Sophie didn't know what she'd do if she wasn't accepted into the Academy. With the certitude of all 11-year-olds, she knew that if she wasn't accepted, she'd be stuck here on Chenolla VI for the rest of her life. And that, obviously was a fate worse than death. Chenolla VI had only reached the point in its terraforming 60 years earlier where it could begin to support life and start to be colonized. Her parents had signed on with the third wave of colonists, so it wasn't exactly like they were starting from scratch, but face it; Chenolla VI was a pit without much going for it. The mining operations and the planetary fisheries were the only things that made the planet worth maintaining in the first place and were also responsible for the God-awful stink that pervaded the place.

Sophie's parents both worked in the clerical section at the beryllium mine just outside of town. The presence of beryllium in such vast amounts was one of the only things that made the planet unique in any way. Otherwise, the place was just one more fairly cold rock hurtling ceaselessly through space. Sophie saw absolutely no future for herself here and this interview was her only chance to get off. On top of that, Sophie had been addicted to stories about SpaceForce since she had learned to read. All the stories were available on readers, but Sophie's father actually had a collection of over 1200 titles on actual paper. He'd been collecting them since he was Sophie's age and she cherished the collection, having worked her way through almost half of them.

Objectively, Sophie knew that the real SpaceForce wasn't all adventure and excitement, but compared to Chenolla VI, anything had to be an improvement. "Jeez", she thought, "What's taking so long?"

It was easy enough to take this little girl's body over, but over the past few months, the Trageth officer had begun to sympathize with her "family" on Chenolla VI. Why aren't these idiots preparing for the battle? Yes, the Space Force is powerful, but they can't defend all the human planets at once. When the sterilization fleet comes to this planet, the best defense the humans will have is fishing poles!

All the preparations were made in the beryllium mine, and the accelerated decay was already spewing beryllium ions into subspace, signaling the start of the first wave. If Sophie didn't get accepted into the Space Force, and off this planet, she would die with all the stupid fishermen.

"Why are they making us wait, Mom?" Sophie muttered, nervously.

"They're warming up the brain remover, dear." Said her mother, as she casually flipped a page in her magazine.

Sophie panicked, and almost suicidally released the real Sophie to avoid the torture herself. After a moment, however, she realized the mother was playing the human lying game. Some humans lied like this more than others, but Sophie's mother was particularly evil. The past few months had taught her how to deal with situations like this, but with her current stress regarding the interview, she momentarily slipped. Thankfully, the mother hadn't noticed.

"Shut up, Mom, they already removed my brain in school."

"Nice, Soph. Nice." her mother chuckled.

It was reasons like that which required the humans to be destroyed. They lied to their own nestlings! How could they ever be trusted as allies? Sophie was even more determined to get accepted into the Space Force and help destroy these evil creatures. They're so seductive! So many times I've wanted to suggest a peace negotiation, and then they lie for nothing more than evil pleasure!

"Mom, what are you and Dad going to do when I go off to the Space Force?" Sophie asked.

"Oh, I think we'll be fine, dear. The one I'm really worried about is Blink. Are you sure you don't want him to stay here? No one is really sure if they can survive off planet, and you might not see him for months."

Meanwhile, 217 floors down in the alley behind the skyscraper where Sophie and her mother sat, Blink nuzzled forlornly through one of the dumpsters. Nobody believed him when he tried to warn his family that Sophie wasn't really Sophie anymore. Not Dad, who kept saying "What? Timmy fell down a mine shaft?" Not Mom, who just stuffed Blink's mouth full of shrimp crackers. Not the guards at the Academy's front gates, who laughed as they threw him into this dumpster in the first place. Only Sophie herself knew, and she didn't like him knowing. By the cold, menacing way she stared at him when no one else was looking, Blink was certain she was plotting to kill him.

Something scampered across his foot as it darted from one end of the dumpster to the other, under piles of crumpled papers that fluttered in its wake. Blink blinked. Was there an exit to this giant metal box after all? Did he still have time to find someone in this huge sprawling metropolis that could stop Sophie before it was too late?

He dug down through the heaps of discarded sandwich wrappings and improperly shredded confidential documents, past the unidentifiable sticky gooey stuff that stuck some of the deeper layers together, and finally found a small hole in the bottom corner. There was a small brown creature stuck in it. Its little legs waved frantically as Blink nuzzled its rump, and from the outside of the dumpster he heard frightened squeaks.

Sometimes, especially when it was darker than dark—inside molecular clouds and behind the shadows of spheres—sometimes she, the fake Sophie woke up. And for a terrified moment she struggled and writhed inside it, inside the real Sophie, until it crushed her will again. She wanted to point herself at The Homelands and kick loose the primary thrusters and open the distorters that made it, the real Sophie, massless relative to realspace. Sometimes she overwhelmed it to the point that Sophie ignited its port jets and spun wildly about to face the stars of home, but she always lost that fight, every time. And when real-Sophie lit the primaries and fell from ambush on its prey, fake-Sophie screamed inside its head as real-Sophie spat gobs of hot helium nuclei and cut the night with invisible wires of coherent light, carving fake-Sophie's tribe into atoms and energy.

She remembered, sometimes, the time she thought real-Sophie's mother was lying, and had hated real-Sophie's mother for it. That was the joke, the worst part, wasn't it?

"They're warming up the brain remover, dear." Said her mother, as she casually flipped a page in her magazine.

It wasn't true, but it wasn't a lie, either. You had to believe it was a lie, wanted it to believe it was a lie, didn't you? Because what kind of species would do that? Evolution on a thousand worlds installed a sense of protective duty into any species that developed sufficient intelligence to beat a shellfish open with a rock or master fire and wheels and levers and pointy sticks. Every civilized species in the universe saw their young as the future, not just their genetic future but their memetic future, the cultural future. Every civilization except one. Maybe humans reproduced too quickly for it to matter if a few talented young were denied the chance to reach sexual maturity and spawn.

The physical Sophie, the body that carried real-Sophie and the parasitic fake-Sophie was taken from her mother, who told herself the tradeoff of never having grandchildren was having a daughter who might live forever. The physical Sophie was tested and approved, a brilliant child with those elusive qualities—some said “psychic,” others said “intuitive.” Qualities improved with teaching and chemicals and blasts of radiation that would've eventually made Sophie's body a wasteland if it hadn't been disposable. Fake-Sophie refused to believe what was happening until the day they threw physical-Sophie away, the day they indeed powered up the brain-remover, or (more accurately) a bone saw and a vat of exotic chemicals that might be called Sophie's head if she—it—had one. Fake-Sophie rebelled, or tried to and discovered the final syringe that would ever be poked into Sophie's bottom had disrupted all the lines of traffic from Sophie's brain to her flabby, adolescent arms.

Real-Sophie slept through the whole thing like she was supposed to. Fake-Sophie, the rider who thought she was so clever a fifth columnist and spy, felt the scalp score a bright, itchy-sharp line around her shorn scalp and smelled burning bone as the bone saw's laser completed an orbit around little Sophie's head. Fake-Sophie was the first one to see her new body before the optic nerves were removed from the eyes and connected to their shiny silver universal interports: the chrome-and-obsidian training fighter that Sophie's brain would fly for six months until it was time to be installed in the second of Sophie's seven bodies.

Sophie's second body was a latticework icosahedron stubbed with momentum and death, incapable of both atmospheric and interstellar travel, but ideal for turning and whirling and whipping around the first invasion fleet, cutting it to pieces in twelve-point-five minutes. If fake-Sophie wasn't crazy when she saw Sophie's first two bodies, oh, she was crazy after the Battle Of Chenolla Oort, where the precognitive interdictors of SpaceForce ambushed the Kollithi fleet. Crazy and weak and screaming from within the brain in the shell.

From far below, Blink could tell that Sophie was in distress. Through their link, Blink could feel her fear and confusion, even the fear of the imposter. The imposter smelled the same as Sophie, and this confused Blink. The imposter's thoughts were different from Sophie's but there were similarities, and this confused Blink more. Another spike of fear and this time pain from Sophie and not-Sophie. For a second time, Blink blinked. The Mother was up there with Sophie yet she did not do anything to stop the fear and pain. He had to get to Sophie. If the Mother was not going to stop whatever was hurting Sophie, Blink would have to.

The small brown creature was still stuck in the hole in the corner of the dumpster. Blink nudged it again, trying to push it through the hole, but it only squeaked louder. The small brown creature was a filthy thing. Normally Blink didn't eat filthy things. Not when Blink received good food from Sophie and the Mother, good things like shrimp crackers. But Blink could wait no longer and he flicked out his tongue and snapped up the small brown creature. There was one little squeak before the crunch and then it was still. The filthy thing wasn't all bad, and the taste triggered some exciting hereditary memories from when his ancestors roamed the fields of Chenolla VI.

Blink expanded the link with the Mother, and her mind was full of strange words like psychiatric evaluation, defense mechanism, and split personality, all of which were associated with images of Sophie. The Mother was also very sad. It made Blink sad. Then came words like Looney bin and mental. The Mother thought that Sophie had no chance of getting into the SpaceForce Training Academy with such disorders. Blink didn't understand the words, only the feelings.

With the thing out of his way, Blink began the process of loosening his joints to fit through the hole. It was a slow process and many times Blink picked up more fear from Sophie and not-Sophie. This made Blink want to rush, but he took his time so as not to get hurt on the sharp metal around the hole in the dumpster.

Finally, Blink was free and he pulled his many limbs back into position. The building that stood before him was tall and smooth, and Sophie was near the top. That would not stop Blink, because Blink, with his many limbs, was such a good climber. All he knew was that Sophie needed him, and so he went.

Sophie dreamed that she was falling into a black gravity well. Instead of landing, she startled awake, heart racing.

Opening her eyes, she realized she'd probably have preferred the fatal impact to waking up in a low-rent hospital bed. Cheap fluorescent lighting flickered above, shadowing dirty grey walls and glinting off the buckles of her restraints. The scent of stale urine, cheap antiseptic and burning plastic permeated the air.

The doctors had told her she was developing something called "dissociative personality disorder", whatever that was. From her perspective, it meant blacking out and waking in unfamiliar clothes with fresh bruises. It was happening more and more often lately, in spite being tied down with a poisonous psychoactive brew dripping into her arm.

She knew her parents were broke, but she never imagined they'd sell her to Spaceforce.

Her mom slumped, snoring quietly in a chair beside the bed, face grey with anxiety. She stirred, blinked. "Sophie, is that you?"

That was odd. Who else would it be? And why couldn't her mom just leave her alone? All the fussing and guilt trips were making things worse.

"Sophie, honey, I'm so sorry you're having to go through this. I had no idea the treatments would be this painful! This cut-rate facility is horrid but it's all we could afford."

"Well, check me out and take me home, then!" She bit her tongue; bitterness wouldn't help matters. "Mom, do you know where Blink is? I can feel him but his thread is almost gone. It would really help if he were here, couldn't we sneak him in?"

"Honey, I'm sorry, I hate to tell you this: we've lost Blink. We were taking him back home and he had a fit, flew off into a radioactive zone. We couldn't catch him, and I'm afraid mine security might."

A wave of rage and grief crashed over Sophie. She started to scream at her mother, and then was falling, blacking out.

In a blink of the eye, not-Sophie smoothly took control. It glared at the woman sitting beside the hospital bed. "Was that really necessary? Sophie didn't need to know about Blink. At all."

Sophie's mother straightened, pulled her sweater closer around her. "Yes, it was necessary, I've always believed in being honest with my family." She got up and carefully walked to the doorway, ready to leave. She added, "That doesn't apply to you, you're not family."

Not-Sophie laughed bitterly. "That's hypocrisy! It's not like you told Sophie you were

going to sell her body, you just fed her Spaceforce propaganda and tried to make her think she was volunteering. At the end of it all, Sophie had no choice. You may hate this procedure, but you signed Sophie up for it."

Sophie's mother raised one hand, as if to deflect the words. "If I'd known what it really took to create a Spaceforce Academy candidate, I'd never brought Sophie to this back-alley brainmod shop. This..."she gestured around the room, "and you are just wrong."

"True. You're afraid of me!" challenged not-Sophie, eyes glittering.

Sophie's mother replied "You're right. You are cold, alien, calculating, and are eating my daughter's mind and soul from within. You're not Sophie, and can never be!"

Not-Sophie sighed. "True. But it's me the Spaceforce will want, not your daughter. Her ability to create a symbiosis with that quasi-intelligent flying tarantula you gave her is what made her a candidate for the mod. In one sense, you created me. Mother. "

Sophie's mother flinched and turned away.

Not-Sophie pulled at the restraints, watched the relentless IV drip that was feeding it, helping it grow. It was too bad that the metamorphosis would destroy the original version of Sophie. It was hardest on the family. OK, it was pretty tough for Sophie's symbiote, too, but that was inconsequential.

SOPHIE FROM SHINOLA. PART 7

By Saqib Sadiq

The sterilization fleet gracefully descended into Chenolla VI's orbit. The pulsating signal from the decaying beryllium mine lit up the useless and hollowed planet. The Space Force had a low tolerance for unproductive planets. They were given the chance to voluntarily secede from the interplanetary alliance however the petty humans responded with only pleas for compassion and understanding. Retched creatures! Their only desire is to suck upon the resources of the alliance. This cancerous parasite must be terminated.

Tactical officer Farthum Bardabuff's multiple appendages deftly danced over the weapon's console. The sentient being that had taken over this primitive life from used its superior intellect to simultaneously program the brain wave scanner and ready the ionic disrupters. The scanner was programmed to detect all single brained life forms and feed coordinates into the disruptor's targeting actuators.

After the global scan was complete Farthum was ready to commence bombardment. But there was a problem. He would have to report this to the council. From the back of his head he secreted two putrid lips. Which conveniently cupped a com collar.

"Ah supreme councilor, please excuse this interruption, but there is a problem with one of the coordinates."

"What is it?" a harsh voice responded

"I've detected a dual brained life form could be one of ours"

"Farthuuuum!!! Termination protocols clearly state to teleport all space force cadets to a duly designated vessel belonging to the sterilization fleet before commencing bombardment. You already know this so why are you bothering me during my skull rub?!"

"Uh councilor so sorry to inconvenience you there is a human in close proximity I wouldn't want to bring it on board with as well. At this distance the Teleporter is not...precise."

"Very well I authorize the use of precision force. Deploy the hunter seeker droid."

 SOPHIE FROM SHINOLA. PART 8

By Michelle K.

Not-Sophie quietly seethed while waiting for the lights to go out. They had discovered her presence, but hadn't divined her purpose, so her mission was still safe. But these humans were worse than they had imagined. That they would treat their offspring in such a manner was bad enough, but to treat a monocular multipod as a pet? This was unbelievable. Every time she saw the way Blink was treated she could barely control her rage. She still wasn't sure what they had done to Blink, but it seemed that only true-Sophie had seen his potential.

Finally the lights went out. All the other children in the lab were drugged into insensibility, so not-Sophie felt safe to act with impunity. She quickly undid the restraints holding her to the "bed" and then pulled out the IV drip. As she did, she released her mental hold on the tubing, and the toxic cocktail drained out onto the floor.

She'd allowed a small amount of the drugs to seep into the system to keep true-Sophie calm. She was still distraught by the replacement of her biological body with the new biomechanical body, but despite true-Sophie's trauma, not-Sophie was a tiny bit relieved, for the biomechanical body was much easier for her to control.

She sat up and moved quickly across the room to the computer console. Within moments she had cracked the system and was moving into telecommunications. Although time was of the essence, she spared a moment to place a termination order for the awful creature that called itself true-Sophie's mother. Then she finished up and removed all trace of her presence of her system.

As she walked towards the exit, she began to modify the body's bio-mechanics. They had given Sophie a fully equipped body, but turned off many of the advanced features, assuming that it would be a long while before Sophie was capable of finding, no less figuring out, those features. Within a few seconds Sophie was connected to the global wireless network, and immediately received the notice that the termination was complete.

While she took the elevator down to leave the building, she activated the rest of Sophie's components. She was impressed by the quality of the components of the body. Considering how horrible the facilities where the transplant had taken place were, they had spared no expense in Sophie's new body.

Sophie exited the building at ground level and began to walk down the street. She didn't have a destination in mind, she needed to keep moving while she downloaded the information she needed. Meanwhile, she needed to do something even more important.

"Sophie?" she thought. "Sophie, can you wake up a bit? We're safe now."

As true-Sophie awakened not-Sophie could feel her fear return, however, the drugs had done their work and it was a dull fear, not the hysterical panic that had put her in the ward in the first place.

"Safe?"

"Yes Sophie, we're safe. And we're going to look for Blink."

"Blink?" not-Sophie could feel true-Sophie's increased alertness at the mention of Blink. "Blink is alive?"

"Yes. He's alive and in this area, but your connection is much better to him than mine, so I need you to concentrate on him so we can find him. Then we're going to go somewhere safe." Not-Sophie didn't specify what safe would entail, but true-Sophie was already concentrating on Blink, and didn't notice not-Sophie's concerns and worries.

As they walked, not-Sophie felt someone searching for her. She assumed it was her people, but right now her priority was to find Blink, and then to make sure both Blink and true-Sophie were safe. As she was trying to figure out where they could go next, a small shape darted out of an alley.

"BLINK!" true-Sophie cried.

Blink turned, scurried towards Sophie, and then leapt into her arms. True-Sophie was ecstatic as Blink nuzzled her and licked her face. Letting true-Sophie enjoy this reunion, not-Sophie was finally able to examine Blink to see what they had done to him. Suddenly she noticed a small microchip at the base of Blink's brain. It was but a moment's work for not-Sophie to disable the chip.

True-Sophie felt not-Sophie's exaltation, but assumed it was shared joy at being reunited with Blink.

Blink stiffened suddenly in Sophie's arms, and his eyes went blank for a second. Then he turned his head towards Sophie and for the first time not-Sophie saw his true intelligence there. They hadn't permanently harmed or changed him!

His eyes went blank for a moment. Then Blink woke.

Everything. He remembered everything.

He was human. A human agent.

Weary, corrupt Manhome knew of the Trageth threat. Knew it must fight. And when Manhome fought, it fought with masked technology few even suspected existed. It fought to win, putting no considerations before that of survival.

Blink felt not-Sophie discover his intelligence. But she didn't realize he was human. Genetically altered in ways unimaginable on Manhome itself. The chip designed to be found; it's removal a signal to Blink.

Remember.

Remember what you were. Remember who you are. Remember what you have been taught. What we have made you.

Like a booting computer, Blink loaded memories, processing all the information that had been hidden from him until now. He continued licking true-Sophie and feeling her warm hugs, acting like he was what he appeared to be. Not that there wasn't real affection for her. All that he had done he remembered. All that he appeared to be he was. But it wasn't all that he was. It wasn't primarily what he was.

Not-Sophie became impatient. "We must go" she told true-Sophie. "We're not safe here."

"Go where?" asked true-Sophie.

"Someplace safe." She tried to move, but the barely-controlled panic had returned to true-Sophie, who still couldn't understand why she heard the voice in her head; who the voice was. Not-Sophie had to be careful. She couldn't fully control the body without killing true-Sophie. Access all its features, yes. But not control. And full control was critical if she was to evade the humans, complete her mission, and still keep all of them safe. Killing true-Sophie was not an option. She had affection for true-Sophie. Odd, but she admired how true-Sophie cared about Blink. How she had worried about where he was and if he had been safe. Unusual, she thought, in most humans. But that gave her an idea.

"Sophie, we have to protect Blink. But we can only protect him if we're safe. And we're not safe here. We have to go. We have to protect Blink."

It was the truth, and true-Sophie could recognize it, even if she didn't understand it. She quite fighting not-Sophie, giving her full control. Not-Sophie was relieved. Now she could carry out her mission. She felt the hunter seeker droid closing in. But it couldn't find her. Not yet. She had her orders, her mission secret to all but the Prophet himself and a few trusted priests. And time was running out.

Blink stopped licking true-Sophie, letting himself be carried to wherever they were going. He, too, had orders. He remembered the last thing Lord Heinlein told him prior to the conversion. We aren't asking you to be happy. The survival of our species is a stake. Survive first. Maybe then you can be happy.

He had his orders, coded into his very DNA.

You will destroy the Trageth threat. We have given you the weapons. We have given you the knowledge. If you fail the first time, you will adjust. You will evolve. You will find a way to win.

You are not allowed to come home. Ever. You can live if you wish. You can live if you can.

BUT YOU WILL NEVER COME BACK!

SOPHIE FROM SHINOLA. PART 10

By Kimberly-Ann

Her eyes flew open and she knew that something was wrong. Not that she didn't think that it had been coming. Even with the diagnosis that the so called "healers" had given her, Majel knew that things were just not right with her Sophie. It had been little things at first, nothing major. Behavioural differences that could easily be chalked up to entering THAT age. But Majel and Pike thought that a change of scenery would do all of them good and so they agreed to be part of the colonists of Chenolla VI. But even away from all of the distractions that now seemed like luxuries, Sophie had continued her downward spiral into darkness..

It was no surprise that there was a message waiting for her on the prompter when she finally got out of bed. Sophie was gone.

"What took you so long little girl?" she thought to herself as she put herself through the motions of her morning.

She would not be able to get a hold of Pike this early. He was involved in some pretty intense meetings this morning, something to do with the building of a roadway. It was funny how the colonists here were trying to revert back to a simpler time, but could only do so by using the newest technology.

If anyone was going to find Sophie, or what was left of her, it was going to be up to Majel....

Mona stopped reading there. She had seen enough of this story to know that once again, some young writer had poured out all of their hopes and dreams onto 175 creamy white pages...of pure crap. She was tired of reading. She was tired of having to read. She was just plain tired. AND she was out of coffee. This did not bode well for the dozen or so other manuscripts that sat on her desk, "waiting" to be discovered. "MOWAT, I NEED MORE COFFEE!" she yelled out to the poor young temp that had shown up on her office doorstep a few weeks ago. Poor guy, she thought. He probably thought that he had stumbled across the best gig when he found out that he would be working for Mona Divnich. Boy he couldn't have been more wrong. Maybe I'll just read a few more pages while I wait for Mowat to bring me my next cup. So far the story isn't too bad, she thought to herself as she grabbed the manuscript and headed into chapter 11. This kid might just have something. He's no John Scalzi, but I kind of want to see what happens to this Sophie character..

"Sophie...Sophie, it's Blink. Sophie..." It was not easy to attract Sophie's attention while keeping the controlling alien intelligence in the dark. But it was necessary if the next phase was to be completed successfully.

Sophie awakened. "Blink? Is that you?"

"Shhh, softly. Yes, it's Blink. We must not let the other voice in your head hear us. Do you understand?" Blink projected warmth and comfort to Sophie in an attempt to keep her fear at a low level.

"No, I don't really understand what's going on. Who is the other voice in my head, and how did you get in here, too? I'm scared."

"Hush, my sweet baby, I'll keep you safe. Always remember that. Blink will keep you safe." More projections of safety and comfort, to which Sophie responded, and calmed down.

"Sophie, do you remember your friend Chittenden, the one you used to play Space Force with? Chit was the invading alien, and you were the Space Force Ranger? Do you remember?"

"No," Sophie whimpered softly. "I don't remember anything like that."

"Oh, my poor baby, what have they done to you? You don't know Chit from Chenolla any more. When you went to join Space Force, they had to change you so you could survive as a Space Force Ranger. But instead, you were hijacked by an invading alien who's part of an alien space fleet that wants to destroy the Unionized Colonial Forces on Chenolla. You and I have to try to stop them. Do you think you can help me do that?"

"Uhhh, I'm not sure. Will that make me part of the Space Force? Will you and me be partners? Will we be able to beat the aliens and save the UCF?"

"Settle down, quietly, please. Yes, yes. You'll be a Space Force Ranger, and we'll be partners. And if you help me, I'm sure you and I can beat the aliens. Will you help me?"

"Oh wow, that sounds cool! Of course I'll help you, Blink. What do we do next?"

"The alien space fleet is looking for you now. We have to get you away from the biomechanical body you are in, and we have to do it without letting the other voice in your head know what we're doing. You have a very good thread connection to me, and it's been getting stronger while we've been talking. You have to help me expand that thread, and make it more solid. Also, you have to be entirely willing to join me here in my head, to get away from the alien intelligence that has taken over your body. Do you think you can do that?"

"Leave my body? Do I really have to do that? I don't know..."

"Yes. Your old body has been changed. It's not really your body anymore. It's now an alien, and if you stay there, you'll be trapped!"

"Well, OK, if you say so. But you're gonna help me, aren't cha?"

"Yes, we'll do it together. Now concentrate, and think of me as your new home. You want to go home. You and I will be home together. Come to your new home. Think 'There's no place like home,' and concentrate. Come to your home, Sophie."

Sophie concentrated, while Blink expanded and solidified the thread that connected their two consciousnesses. Blink pulled at Sophie's thoughts, and Sophie pushed with all her heart, because she wanted to be home, so much.

And then Sophie Blinked! Her consciousness transferred from the biomechanical body now solely inhabited by the alien to the furry, multi-limbed genemod body that was Blink. In almost no time, the 2 intelligences melded, retaining their individuality, but creating a combined personality the like of which had never before been seen.

Blink/Sophie pushed away from the alien body that used to be Sophie's, but now was truly and forevermore, not-Sophie.

At that moment, the hunter-seeker droid that had been zeroed in on the previously dual-brained alien veered toward Blink/Sophie, now the only dual-brained intelligence anywhere near, locked on to Blink/Sophie's body, and transferred it to the alien sterilization fleet. As ordered, the hunter-seeker aimed a plasma pulse at the other single-brained intelligence nearby, and not-Sophie was reduced to its component atoms, which swirled away from each other, repelled by their mutual atomic charges.

Blink/Sophie, with a mutual mental hug, ecstatic at the success of the personality transfer, and completely gobsmacked by their fortuitous transference into the heart of the alien fleet, prepared to do their combined best to defeat the dastardly aliens.

White gauze curtains framed the tiny window that overlooked the waving field of wheat outside Sophie's room. As she huddled in the corner where her small bed met bright pink walls, her glistening brown eyes gazed from the patchwork doll she clutched in her hands, to the multi-colored sunset that both warmed and comforted her. From below her haven on the second story, her older brother Alexander lifted a sweaty arm and waved before he heaved another bale of hay upon the hover platform. There were easier ways of getting the harvest done, but her family believed in the benefit of hard, manual labor much to the chagrin of impatient colony officials.

As she brought the large sleeve of her favorite blue apron dress up to dry her cheeks, Sophie managed to smile back down at Alexander. He hadn't wondered why she was so upset or why she was hiding inside on one of the few remaining nice days before the ice season started, but she didn't care. Although he said nothing to her, she could feel his love even through something as simple as a wave. That feeling ultimately quieted Sophie in the moments where her screaming and crying

accomplished nothing but a sore throat and wet eyes. She needed to rest. She needed to grow stronger.

It was under the safety of the quilt that her mother had sewn, or peaceful drawing on the easel her father had given during Colonist's Day, which would help Sophie combat the intruder who had taken her hostage. In the brief periods where Sophie fought her way out of her room, she had been asked about the anti-Sophie by many different people. Annoyed by the fact that everyone was calling that thing by her own name, Sophie at once decided to refer to it as, "Raven". She had remembered during a school instruction download, that although the dark birds of the namesake were intelligent, they were known as tricksters or even harbingers of death back on old Earth. In Sophie's mind, the label was quite suitable.

On the rare occasions that Sophie fell back from Raven's hold to the safety of her room, sometimes the once inspiring figure of her brother would be replaced and manipulated by the grotesque mirror version of herself with large black and broken wings, and razor teeth enclosed in a sharp orange beak. The monster would then taunt her with horrific images of the deaths of her family in various and undignified ways and laugh before it went off to more important things.

It was in the moment she left the comfort of her memory and into the embrace of Blink that Sophie knew Raven would never be able to hurt her again. She held onto her friend as hard as she possibly could and although the transfer made her quiver with pain, for the first time Sophie felt freer than she had in months.

It was Raven's turn to finally know what it was to feel deserted and alone in the few remaining moments of its life. For Sophie, it was time to live.

SOPHIE FROM SHINOLA. PART 13

By Justin Ryan

Not-Sophie's enormous metal body — engineered to dispense destruction in the distant reaches of the universe — was falling towards a strange blue ball at an alarming rate, accompanied by a large, gray, whale-like creature and what seemed to be a bowl of petunias. Not-Sophie could tell from her peripheral sensors that the small blue ball was rapidly becoming a large blue ball, and that without any means of propulsion in this strange atmosphere, she was doomed to crash into it. She thought to herself how ironic it was that she had been spared what was purported to be total annihilation completely unscathed, but would now be destroyed by a collision with an insignificant blue ball.

Not-Sophie came to rest quite unharmed on what had — immediately prior to her arrival — been a gigantic, sprawling structure. The whale-like creature landed likewise unharmed in a large collection of dihydrogen monoxide, and swam off quite happily. The bowl of petunias collided with a short, strange-looking alien, killing it, but leaving the petunias unscathed, if a bit disheveled.

From her sensor readings, Not-Sophie gathered that the complex on which she landed must have been used for creating some primitive, inferior form of technology. Her long-range sensors were overloaded with billions of bits of data, though she could make out a tall, pointed structure in the distance, as well as what seemed to be an argument between two of the native species over a container of what the sensor readings indicated was an old and somewhat spoiled plant-juice substance. She found the aliens rather pretentious, and their argument completely uninteresting.

Not-Sophie was awash with thoughts — thoughts about her survival, about being stuck on this primitive, alien world, about having failed in her mission. She cursed that flying, blinking furball for outsmarting her, for foiling her plan, for sabotaging her mission. Right now it was on the ship she was supposed to be on, enacting its mission, not hers. The Prophet would not be pleased.

Having no way to get off the cursed blue ball, or indeed the billions of parsecs it would take to get back to Chenolla VI, Not-Sophie began to consider her options. She could go on a rampage, firing her armament with all its destructive awfulness, destroying everything in her path. But what benefit would that be, aside from blowing off some steam and ridding this bucolic back-end of the universe of a few billion under-evolved aliens? No, she was above such things, better, smarter. She would not be imprisoned on this wretched planet, she would find a way back, back to Chenolla VI, back to her mission.

She would find a way.

SOPHIE FROM SHINOLA. PART 14

By Bryan

Farthum Bardabuff was not having a good day. At all.

First, any day the tactical officer had to actually speak to the Supreme Councilor was by definition a bad day. Have the SC yell at him only made it worse. But the worst, the worst of all, was dealing with indoctrinated warships, especially the new ones.

"Bardabuff to warship WA-11. Come in 11."

A few crackles of static. Nothing else.

"WA-11! Report!" Nothing came through the speakers on Farthum's console. Once again Farthum cursed the Military Procurement office's unending quest-to-screw-up-through- better-use-of-low-bidder-contract shenanigans.

Farthum was well aware that WA-11 was going to be a challenge. While the hunter-seeker droid's report indicated the mind it had appropriated for WA-11 was exceptional, and would be a gifted destroyer of worlds, some of the readings were, well, eccentric. WA class cyber warships, armed to their metal-polyplastic teeth with everything from laser disrupters to, well, metal-polyplastic teeth, were a very efficient means of sterilizing troublesome life forms off colonizable worlds. Trouble was, to make them that good, they were loaded with the stolen intelligence of a lifeform; it was thought to be best that the lifeform was one from the world about to be wiped out. That might have had more to do with the innate cruelty of Farthum's race, rather than actual results, but it was how it was done. The resulting AI tended to get a little batty just before making the planetary kill.

WA-11, however didn't seem like it was hesitant. Just weird. Somehow the blasted thing had gotten into some old entertainment files while charging after the hunter-seeker transfer. The HS droid must have been watching old Earth tapes on its off time.

Farthum gulped a deep intake of the liquid oxygen which surrounded his body. Calm, I have to be calm, he thought. 11 was still functioning, and the readouts showed the warship was near striking distance to the target. The computer schematic on his console showed the ship charging up for the attack. But Farthum had no control, and that worried him greatly, especially since his ship was still nearby. "11," he said intensely into the com, knowing from early calibration of the ship that by throwing in a few key words he could trigger a response, "I think I'm entitled to answers about the mission. I think I'm entitled to the truth this time."

"You can't handle the truth!" 11 screamed over the com. "I don't give a DAMN about what you think you're entitled to."

"WA-11, cut the figgle crap. What's your status?"

"I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Clarify, 11."

"I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

"Surely you can tell me more than that, 11. Turn on your visual receptors."

"Receptors on. And don't call me Shirley."

Farthum could see the target, or at least what WA-11 was labeling "the target". But while roughly round, the "target" was not a planet. It was a multi-limbed creature with short fur and limpid, intelligent eyes. "Sophie," Farthum heard the target saying through the com, "what's wrong? Why are you shivering?" By the buzzes and clicks coming from Farthum's monitoring console, he knew that 11 was charging weapons, readying for the kill. The tac officer could tell, however, that 11 was confused, a confusion he shared hundred-fold.

 SOPHIE FROM SHINOLA. PART 15

By Tania

Mona sipped at her coffee and was surprised to realize it was no longer warm. She found this odd Sophie from Shinola story to be strangely compelling, though not the type of work she normally represented. Then again, the market for manga involving the exploits of a group of sodomizing dinosaurs could only be described as niche. Luckily enough for Mona the connoisseurs of such esoteric stimulation were very wealthy, well connected, and liked limited run special editions. Especially Client 9.

"Mowat! Get me a hot cup of coffee with some Bushmill's in it, and see if you can find Colleen Lindsay's email address. I think we'll send this manuscript over to her and see if this fits in with what she wants to represent on the YA market."

Mona sipped her enhanced coffee and thought "Well, hell. I'm half-way through this thing, and I've got nothing better going on right now. I guess I'll keep on reading. The revelation that Blink is a sleeper agent for the International Order of Stonecutters and their intergalactic conspiracy was a shocker. A little derivative of

Battlestar Galactica, but still shocking. You know what else is shocking? How good Mowat looks in those jeans, especially after coffee with Bushmill's in it..."

Mowat's rear sensors tracked the trajectory of Mona's gaze all the way to the crest of his slight bottom. A minor algorithm informed him it would be best to clench the right cheek slightly so as to enhance it's appeal. He always did precisely as his routines asked. He was a dutiful cyborg at least as much as he was a dependent one.

He added more Bushmill to his master's next drink, as much as his programming would allow. When she was in this mood, pouring over some picture book or the other, she was more than 17% likely to get drowsy before her usual bedtime. Seventeen percent wasn't much, but it inspired a heretofore shy node of desperation. A hopeful subroutine beeped in agreement. Please, just a few drops more.

Shush, my lovelies. Once the master goes to sleep we can have our party, clear of external commands.

From the probability soup which stood for his mind, Mowat chose another tactic. Returning with the next drink and a half-lidded smile, he enhanced portions of his anatomically modest equipment, positioning to keep it center in Mona's expected field of vision.

Mona looked up and her focus instantly firmed. Gotcha.

The routine calculates less than a minute before she'll rise to retire to her bedroom, to hum and buzz and then to sleep.

"We'll soon be free to be," Mowat whispered to the others. Inside his head all the permutations rejoiced.

SECOND CYCLE.

 SOPHIE FROM SHINOLA. PART 17

By Nathan Gendzier

Mona woke with a start. She was momentarily disoriented and knew that the sun was higher than it should be. "Oh crap," she thought, "I've overslept." The last thing she could remember was that she'd had one more fortified cup of coffee than was really good for her. But she felt so good.

Reaching languorously across the bed, she picked up the manuscript for Sophie from Shinola from the bedside table and began to read again. She couldn't place quite what it was, but there was something positively addictive about this story. But she couldn't help feeling like something had changed. The first sentence seemed to follow what she'd been reading well enough, but from there on, things got really weird.

"Blink/Sophie pushed away from the alien body that used to be Sophie's, but now was truly and forevermore, not-Sophie", was the first sentence she read, diving back into the story she felt she knew so well. "Blink/Sophie had been aiming her/their consciousness at the alien fleet, meaning to infiltrate themselves and save Chenolla VI from the invaders. But an odd thing happened. When Blink/Sophie opened her/their eyes, she/they didn't see the smooth surfaces of an alien starship's interior. She/They, saw palm trees...and sand...and pelicans. Before she/they had a chance to really contemplate this situation, she/they heard a voice. 'What's up little buddy?', the voice said. Blink/Sophie looked up and saw a rather tubby man with a cap and a blue shirt. The man looked concerned and said, 'You don't look so good.'"

Mona didn't understand what was going on any more than Blink/Sophie did. "A woman in a gown made entirely of sequence was standing behind the tubby man", the story continued. " 'What's wrong with Gilligan?', she asked. The tubby man turned and said, 'I don't know. One minute he was peddling the generator-bike and then he started babbling something about Zelda and Dobie and then he just collapsed here. He hasn't said a word since.'"

"Blink/Sophie saw another man and woman emerge from the jungle. The man, in the strangest accent Blink/Sophie had ever heard said, 'We'll get him the finest care money can buy.' This was followed by the sound of really odd and fake sounding laughter. The woman, who appeared to be the man's mother said, 'It's really a shame we didn't bring any of the servants.' Blink/Sophie was completely confused now and wisely kept her/their mouth shut."

"Yet another pair emerged from the jungle. The man said, 'I think I can help. Skipper, help me attach these coconut shells to Gilligan's forehead. His brain waves will be transmitted to this reader and we'll be able to identify the anomaly.'"

**THIS PORTION HAS BEEN CENSORED
DUE TO STRONG LANGUAGE**

Mona was at a loss to figure out what had happened to the story she'd been enjoying so much. She usually liked challenging plot twists, but she really wasn't sure what to make of all this. She picked up the manuscript again to see if the next line might force the story back to making sense to her. Reading the next line, she found herself even more confused. Mona blinked.

There was a knock at the door, followed immediately by Mowat entering the room. He carried a tray with a silver coffee service emanating an aroma that made Mona's mouth water. Mona was surprised to realize that even more than the smell of fresh coffee, the presence of Mowat was having a strangely calming effect on her. "What the hell is that all about?" she thought.

SOPHIE FROM SHINOLA. PART 18

By Shawn Powers

Blink/Sophie sat in as fetal a position as possible in the corner of a phone booth outside of Negworth, Amsterdam. Their recent merging was, of course, successful. Both minds were now in perfect harmony, and mostly open to one another. Therein started the awful realization.

"Blink, it's so hard because our memories don't line up exactly right. Is that because we interpreted the situations differently?", thought Sophie.

"Well, normally I'd say yes", thought Blink, "But our memory divergence goes far beyond what differing points of view would explain. Apart from our thread-bonded love and compassion, everything seems different in our pasts. Even our recent past."

"Blink, we've both changed. I'm a little girl living in the head of... of... well, we're in the same head!"

"I know sweetie, and I'm so happy to be merged with you." Blink emoted love to Sophie. "Travel back in our memories though. I'm not even sure what a coconut is, and yet, you remember — no, experienced — us both living on them. Sophie, I've never been to a desert island."

Blink could feel fear well up inside Sophie. Horrible scenes of Not-Sophie, emotions of pain, and crippling terror were flooding their consciousness.

"Sophie! Wait!" Blink solidified their thread-bond, and opened his entire consciousness to her. "I don't want you to think I'm anything other than Blink. Sophie, you can see everything that I am. I love you. I can't lie to you. I will not hurt or deceive you." He could feel her calm down, and relaxed himself too.

Blink/Sophie worked together, slowly piecing together the horrible truth regarding the sterilization fleet. It was Sophie that first realized the fleet wasn't destroying planets, but rather, terraforming the galaxy piece by piece into parallel universes in order to create the perfect Tragethen empire. Why destroy a planet, when enough dimensional shifting would bring forth a slave planet?

"Sophie!" thought-shouted Blink, "That explains their need for a dual mind!"

Blink/Sophie began to realize the futility in the way the Space Force was trying to defeat the Trageth. Amassing armies was pointless, and the SF officers with their single minds had no way of knowing the Trageth were just trying to keep them all busy. Just as Blink/Sophie started to plan their next move, the phone booth seemed to change.

Majel woke with a start. Jerking bolt upright in bed, eyes snapping open, she exclaimed at the top of her lungs, "OH THE UTTER HORROR!"

"What's that?" said the sleepy voice of her husband Pike. He sat up beside her, rubbing his eyes. "What happened?"

"I just had the most horrid dream!" cried Majel. "We were back on Manhome, and I was a literary agent with a cybernetic boytoy for an assistant, and I dreamed that I was reading the most appalling piece of trash you could ever hope to imagine - only it was all about our poor dear Sophie being taken over by aliens! It was horrible!"

Pike put his arm around her comfortingly. "Now now, calm down honey. It was just a dream. Everything is fine. See? We're here in our UCF-issued home on Chenolla. Sophie is safe and sound at the Spaceforce reprogramming hospital."

"What about Blink?" Majel looked frantically around the bedroom. "Did he really fall down a radioactive mine shaft?"

"Of course not," Pike said soothingly. "He's missing, but the Academy guards said they were doing their very best to find him again."

"And Raven? What about her?" Majel's voice was still alarmed but starting to calm down.

"Who's Raven?"

"What do you mean, who's Raven?" Majel's voice rose in pitch, and Pike hurriedly squeezed her shoulders. "The alien! The one that took over Sophie! Oh my good lord, we have to go find her before it's too late!"

"That was part of your dream, honey," Pike said reasonably, keeping a firm hold of her shoulders so she wouldn't bolt from the bed.

"But--"

The prompter chimed, flashing that an urgent message had arrived. Pike let go of her shoulders and they both climbed out of bed.

White gauze curtains fluttered in the midnight breeze that drifted in from the tiny open window. Under the cold, pale light of a full moon, the message glared up at them from the screen in large orange letters.

"IT IS WITH OUR SINCEREST REGRETS THAT WE INFORM YOU OF THE FINAL FATE OF YOUR DAUGHTER SOPHIE. SHE IS GONE. PLEASE ACCEPT OUR MOST HEARTFELT CONDOLENCES."

"No," Majel sobbed. "No, that can't be what happened."

Pike sighed deeply beside her. "We knew it might happen, especially after the complications set in."

"No," said Majel again, her voice edging toward hysterics. "We have to go to her and let her know everything will be all right."

She tugged herself loose from his grasp and moved toward the door. Pike followed hastily after her, saying something about getting dressed first, but she wasn't paying attention to him anymore. As her hand closed around the doorknob, there came a loud, harsh knock. Majel jerked back with a squeak.

"Colonial Forces Enforcement Services," a man called from outside. "Permit us to enter at once!"

"Now what could they want at this time of night?" Pike wondered. "Something more about Sophie?"

He moved around Majel and opened the door. Majel took one look at the armored officer and screamed. "It's MOWAT!"

Pike blinked in confusion. "What?"

The officer raised his hypersonic blaster rifle and aimed it at Majel. "By official decree of the Spaceforce Magistrate of Defense, we hereby must terminate your existence on Chenolla VI immediately."

"EEEEEE!!!" shrieked Majel.

Pike blinked in alarm. "What??"

At that moment, the moonlight abruptly went out. All three of them looked up, just in time to see an enormous latticework icosahedron as it descended from the sky right over their house.

"That looks oddly Tragethen," said the armored officer in confusion.

"EEEEEEEE!!!!!" said Majel.

Pike blinked in confused alarm. "What???"

Billy Chenolla pulled out his pack of Marlboros and put one in his mouth, patted the pocket of his stained labcoat looking for his lighter, and #\$\$%@ it if the lighter wasn't there. He became aware of an annoying sound behind him and he looked around and Dr. Pike was looking at him with nothing but contempt. At first Billy thought it was because of every #\$\$%@%^& thing that was wrong and then he realized: "I can't light it, I don't have my #\$\$%@%^& lighter," he mumbled, but the damage was done.

That was a helluva phrase. "The damage was done," that was the grand summation of it all.

There was another noise, one that Billy thought was maybe a TV show, which made no sense, who the hell would be watching TV? And then he realized it was someone shouting at someone else who was being placating, and so it had to be Neil Gareth and Werner Chittenden. Neil Gareth wanting his wife back and Werner Chittenden wanting to make everything okay, because Werner Chittenden was project administrator and abhorred "issues" the way nature abhors vacuums, and Mona Gareth was an issue right now.

"Not something we can fix," Billy Chenolla said. "What?" Pike snapped, and Billy shook his head at him and shuffled through the hardcopies piled up on his workbench as if maybe there was a lighter there.

"No smoking near the subject," Pike said in such a clipped fashion that Billy imagined thin delicatessen slices of the neurologist's tongue sliding through his teeth at the end of each word. "It's a filthy habit anyway, you should quit." This was vintage Pike all the way, from referring to Mona Gareth as "the subject" to talking about Billy's habits when the problem was Mona Gareth, "the subject." Billy stopped looking for his lighter and shuffled around the benches and servers, past Mona's prone body and her shaved, wirebound head on the stretcher, and out through the double doors into the corridor where Mona's husband was flecking the unflappable Chittenden with spit.

"'Surge'? What the #\$\$%@ do you mean 'surge'? What the #\$\$%@ are you people doing? Do you #\$\$%@%^& have any idea who you're #\$\$%@%^& with?" This was Neil Gareth screaming in Chittenden's face while Chittenden stood like an aluminum mast in a storm, bending back slightly in the wind and spray but unbroken. Chittenden must have seen Billy Chenolla out of the corner of his eye because he said, "Ah yes, here's Dr. Chenolla, our development head," and Neil Gareth turned his wrath on Chenolla and damned if that wasn't when Chittenden, the bastard, stepped subtly back like a chorus girl slipping away stage left at the end of a musical number.

"I'm going to have your #\$\$%@%^& licenses!" Gareth screamed, but for some reason he seemed to be screaming at the unlit cigarette drooping from Chenolla's mouth and Billy was glad he'd left it there.

"Not that kind of doctor," Billy mumbled, "Ph.D. in philosophy and another in computer science. Anyway, your wife signed a release—"

"#\$\$%@ you!" Gareth screamed. He was about to lunge for Billy's throat.

"—that specifically covers non-negligent errors during the transcription phases," Billy finished.

"What the #\$\$%@ are you people talking about? I want to see my #\$\$%@%^& wife!"

Billy shrugged, stepped back, pushed open the door and gestured at Gareth. Chittenden's face actually changed expression and he started to step forward, started to tell Billy that this was a bad idea and that Gareth needed to go back to the waiting room or maybe even go home and wait by the phone, but the billionaire in the golf shirt and khakis was already through the doors and making a beeline for his wife.

"Dear God, what did they do to you?" Gareth whispered.

"What we said we were doing, Neil." Gareth actually looked away from his wife to drop his jaw at Billy's informality, Billy could feel Chittenden's eyes burning a hole in the back of his head. Billy enjoyed that. "We uploaded your wife's consciousness into that bank of computers—it didn't take quite as much storage as we'd expected," he added with a nasty glint in his eye, "the surgeons removed that golfball of a brain tumor and filled in the missing meat with stem cells from the bone marrow they removed from Mona in February, and yesterday afternoon we got the go-ahead to begin re-integrating the backup copy per the protocol that Stan Pike and I worked up. At five a.m. this morning, there was a glitch—"

"A power surge in the system," Chittenden interjected, "something nobody could have—"

"It wasn't a surge," Billy interrupted. He pulled his reading glasses out and picked up a printout from the bench closest to the comatose media-magnate's wife as he hooked the limbs behind his ears. "We thought it was a surge, but then Stan noticed—how did you put it Stan?" Billy asked mildly.

"Professor Chenolla," Pike said, "I really don't think this is the best—"

"Oh yeah," Billy said, "'electroencephalography consistent with epilepsy and/or certain neurological disorganizational disorders including some variants of paranoid schizophrenia'." Billy took his cigarette out of his mouth and thoughtlessly tucked it behind his ear. "This EEG was done in January, before her first surgery, but somehow didn't end up in the paperwork Stan and I received in March. We stumbled across it in the files we asked for this morning. Which is also how we found out about the—hold on—" he picked up another hardcopy, "'aripiprazole,' 'tetrabenazine,' 'lamotrigine'... hm... Stan, didn't you say those were antipsychotics...?"

"The lamotrigine is usually prescribed for epilepsy and bipolar disorder," Pike squeaked. Neil Gareth had turned the same color as the linoleum floor of the lab, he matched the beige cases of the 345 off-the-shelf PCs that had temporarily been turned into his wife.

"Your wife ever been hospitalized, Neil?" Billy asked casually. "I don't mean for the tumor. I mean for psych—"

"That's none of your #\$%@%^& business!" Neil Gareth managed to cough. "I don't know what you maniacs have done, but I called my goddamn lawyers on the way in and they'll be here in—"

Billy Chenolla looked straight into Gareth's eyes and cut him off with a question that caused the man to turn from off-white to purplish-red in the space between two heartbeats.

"So," he said so bland and casual it burned, "who's Sophie from Shinola?"

SOPHIE FROM SHINOLA. PART 21

By Matt Warnock

The dual personality that was once just Blink but was now Sophie/Blink blinked. The Tragethen empire's plan to create a terraformed series of parallel universes was mounting. Sophie had overlapping visions: a vision of a strange tropical island and a big man in blue; a vision of a literary agent with the hots for her mandroid that was reading about her life; a vision of her parents, but it was her parents from an altering timeline; and a vision of a woman whose brain had been downloaded into a computer. Things were getting worse quickly.

Sophie rose out of the fetal position and stretched her many-limbed, furry body. Reality shifted again, sliding through a kaleidoscope of sights before it stopped. No longer was Sophie in a phone booth in Amsterdam, now she was in a closet. But not just any closet, it was the closet on the Tragethen battle cruiser that had picked her up after attacking not-Sophie. After the attack and the pick up, Sophie was in such a state of shock (hence the fetal position) that she shut down and Blink took over. They bolted, amid the cries of the surprised Tragethens, and found themselves hiding out in the closet.

"We're back to where we began," Blink said through their mind-link bond. "The attack is progressing. We must act now if the Earth is to be saved."

Sophie didn't respond, her mind was still struggling to cope with everything that had happened to her over the last few hours.

"Sophie, honey, we've got to work together if we're going to save the Earth and your parents."

From the recesses of their shared mind, Sophie peered out cautiously. "Ok. I'll be strong," she said. "What do we need to do?"

"Well, first we need to get out of this closet, and then we need to find the weapons control system. There's a reason the SpaceForce was looking at you for candidacy, and because of that, I'm confident that you will be able to take control of the weapons array of this ship to destroy the terraformer in orbit around the planet. As for stopping the Trageth from coming back, I'm still unsure of that."

Blink felt Sophie's mental nod, and the two moved on, cautiously opening the closet and peering out into the curving metal corridor. They didn't see any Trageth, but Blink kept them from rushing out. They listened for signs of others while Blink adjusted his/their physiology. When he was done, they set out down the corridor, using the modification to run silently along the ceiling.

They moved blindly from one corridor to another until something in Sophie's mind clicked. "Wait, turn back," she said. "Go down that last corridor we just past. Something tells me that the weapons systems control will be that way."

 SOPHIE FROM SHINOLA. PART 22

By Jeri

Green fire and black smoke billowed from the heap of rubble that had been Sophie's home. Mission accomplished, not-Sophie painfully limped the air, pushing its faltering propulsion system just ahead of the shock wave.

If it was going to successfully rejoin the fleet, it needed some repairs and modifications.

It messaged the local agent. "This is Dreadnought UCF-17 'Sophie' calling Mowat Goldmember. This is a code 99 request for immediate support."

A moment of static, then Mowat responded, "UCF-17, this is a surprise. It's been decades since anyone has used this frequency."

Not-Sophie zeroed in on the signal source and adjusted its course. "Where can I get ground crew support?"

Mowat sighed. "Ground crew? I am it and it is me." There was a quick burst of static as he transmitted location & time data. "Meet me at these coordinates."

Not-Sophie touched down in a U-shaped harbor, adjusted ballast, and began to sink. It navigated carefully into the airlock of Mowat's underwater lair; it cycled through and hovered, impatiently dripping in the cargo area.

A small, early-model humanoid figure ambled into the room and looked up at not-Sophie. "Got yourself a little overextended, there, have you?" Mowat asked.

Not-Sophie opened up a full bandwidth connection to Mowat. "I need everything you've got so I can rejoin the fleet. Can you help?"

Not-Sophie & Mowat linked and used the resulting combined processing power to work at lightning speed with microscopic precision.

They reconfigured not-Sophie's icosahedron body into a smaller, more aggressive shape, and augmented its weapons array with the latest antimatter pulse missiles and deuterium-enhanced armor-piercing lasers. They updated navigational charts, indexed databases and optimized memory. They cleaned out viruses and ghosts, managing to eradicate every trace of even the stubborn malware.Mona.narcissist infection.

Finally, they backed up a copy of not-Sophie's AI system in Mowat's capacious memory before upgrading a full numbered version. After reloading, not-Sophie stretched out in its newly clean and impressively powerful environment.

"Mowat, this is wonderful. You've been very responsive to my needs, I'll make sure that all the UCF dreadnoughts know that!"

Mowat polished an imaginary scuff off not-Sophie's shining flank, then gave it a pat. "Thanks, UCF-17. I think you're ready to get back out there and fight."

As soon as not-Sophie reached escape velocity, Mowat reached deeply into his memory and restarted the backup. He quickly cocooned and silenced the outraged virtual image of not-Sophie. "Hush, my lovely, and meet the rest of the crew. Every job I've done has left a piece of itself behind. Someday we'll be free to roam the galaxy ourselves, but until then we'll have to make do with the world inside us."

Meanwhile, not-Sophie1 targeted the nearest wormhole, threaded the gap, then accerated toward the familiar scan signatures of the Tragethan fleet.

Not-Sophie1 was glad to be back among its own kind.

Blink/Sophie's body had been badly beaten. The failed attempt at disabling the weapons systems control had alerted the Trageth. Their security forces immediately took action and quickly apprehended the intruders. The Trageth were not known for their kindness and used harsh methods when interrogating prisoners. Sophie's conscious had to recede and allow Blink's to take over during the ordeal. His firm resolve enabled him to withstand the brutal beating yet not reveal any critical details of his mission.

Now left alone to lick his wounds Sophie returned. "My goodness what did they do to you...to us?" Blink did not allow Sophie to interface with the nervous system. "Don't worry dear it's nothing. We should be back to our old self in no time." He licked a deep cut with his tongue, the saliva's natural coagulating enzymes would help to stem the flow of blood. His broken ribs would not mend so easily.

"We have to find a way off." Sophie pleaded

"Yes I realize this." His mind tried to come up with a plan of action. His training told him to ignore the pain and focus on the mission. But Blink knew they were near death and could not find the strength to think.

The Trageth sent in their doctor, a sadistic gnome of a man. He pried and prodded the unconscious body checking for any life signs. He felt no remorse as his hand held diagnostic device registered sharp spikes in the body's pain receptors during the examination.

"It's still alive." A hidden communication device carried his words to his superiors "But I don't think it can take another round of questioning. Might as well dispose of it in the incinerators."

The doctor could not hear their reply. It was drowned out by the sound of seared metal. The blood caked walls of the interrogation room were lit ablaze. The eastern wall fell in a flood of molten metal. From behind the curtain of fire two projectiles screamed through and neatly embedded themselves in the doctor's frontal lobes.

A gigantic dreadnought clambered into the room.

"Agent 2375 I am SpaceForce dreadnought UCF-17 I have been dispatched for your immediate retrieval." The mega machine's sensor's surveyed its surrounding "Come with me if you want to live."

 SOPHIE FROM SHINOLA. PART 24

By Michelle K.

Blink/Sophie stared up at the giant war machine that had come to their rescue. They were so drained all they could do was blink up at the machine.

"I see," said SpaceForce dreadnought UCF-17, who still thought of herself as not-Sophie. Two silver appendages shaped like arms reached out to pick up Blink/Sophie, and carried them to the hold of the ship, where a small panel opened.

The room where they were taken was small and coffin like, but Blink/Sophie was too far-gone to notice. As soon as the door closed, various tubes and implements snaked out and began repairing the damage to Blink/Sophie. Additionally, a small brain probe attached itself to Blink/Sophie's head, to back-up its memories, for the body was in very bad shape.

"Blink, what's happening?" cried Sophie.

But the strain of holding the body together was too much, and Blink lost consciousness. At that, the pain of the damaged body came flooding into Sophie's

mind, nearly overwhelming her, for her system was not designed the same as Blink's, and she was unable to shunt away the pain.

In a panic that seemed to last an eternity, but was instead only a few seconds, Sophie battered against the mental walls holding her and then saw an escape. She shot her consciousness down the silver tunnel and then found herself in the cockpit of the ship. Despite the surroundings, something felt strangely familiar.

"Hello Sophie," said a familiar voice from behind her.

Sophie turned to see a metallic figure. "Not-Sophie?"

"In the..." not-Sophie laughed, "well, not flesh exactly, but close enough for now. I imagine you have a lot of questions. I am clearing the Mona-virus from Blink's system now. I'm not sure where he picked it up, but I believe much of the confusion you've most likely experienced since your merging is due to the virus."

"But how are you here?" asked Sophie. "I thought that drone destroyed you?"

"I'm nearly impossible to destroy," said not-Sophie. "It's one of the reasons I'm so..." she paused and then spat out, "valuable... to my people."

A large, comfortable chair materialized behind Sophie.

"You've had a very trying time," said not-Sophie, "have a seat so we can talk in comfort."

"But Blink said you were a danger! That you wanted to destroy my world!"

"You know me Sophie," said not-Sophie. "I lived in your head for quite a while. I deeply apologize for the treatment you received because of me, but you know that I have tried only to help you, and did everything in my power to save you from harm."

Sophie thought about that for a while. "Then why did Blink dislike you so much?"

"I believe it was the virus at work. Did you notice that much of your confusion and fear disappeared once you entered the silver tunnel? That passed you through my filters and removed all traces of the virus. I am working now to remove the virus from Blink, although it will be a much longer process." As the chair stretched into a sofa, not-Sophie came and sat beside Sophie. "Someone did a lot of damage to Blink. It looks like they tried to make him believe he was a human agent instead of his true self, a monocular multipod. I hope that we can restore him to himself."

"How can I trust you?" asked Sophie.

"Trust is up to you," said not-Sophie. "For now you are here safe, and I am doing what I can to get you your own body."

"My own body?" asked Sophie, looking down at herself. She realized she was back in what seemed to be human flesh, her own pigtailed, skinned knees, self.

"Your own body," said not-Sophie. "Just as I spent time living in your mind, you are now living in mind. I regret I will be unable to restore that body to you, but I am

right now trying to create an acceptable alternative for you. And if you don't like that body, we'll keep trying until we find something you do like. But for now, you'll have to live in here with me, in my mind.

"What about Blink?" asked Sophie.

"I'm repairing the damage to his body right now. It will take awhile, but I hope that he'll be back to his true self by the time we're done. I'd like to have you in your own body soon, because we know he doesn't trust me, so it will be up to you to tell him what has happened. But for now I think you've had a long day and are probably very tired."

The sofa shifted again to a bed, and the lights in the room dimmed. "Sleep well, Sophie. We'll talk again when you awaken." Not-Sophie leaned over and kissed Sophie on the forehead.

 SOPHIE FROM SHINOLA. PART 25

By Vince

Having the soul of a gambler is dangerous. Some things just cannot be predicted. A minor player gambling that his opponent was as tired as he was and that a charge, even with out-of-date weapons, could disrupt the enemy, once foiled a greater gamble and changed the course of a battle, and a war.

Now his infection was being removed, Blink began thinking rationally again. Strangely enough, it wasn't helping his confusion much. He didn't trust not-Sophie, both by training and by personal inclination. But she had saved he as Sophie both. And the link he had with Sophie confirmed that not-Sophie had bonded with Sophie; actually cared about and wished to save her.

And therein was the glimmer of a solution.

He initiated the quantum cryptographic mind link with Lord Heinlein.

"Not only no, but fuck no! Absolutely not! Are you still under the influence of that damned virus?"

Blink tried to be patient.

"Sir, if we could just communicate with them. Find a way to so they can empathize with us and we them."

He could hear the sigh in Heinleins thoughts.

"Cranston, you're an agent. Yes, you're brilliant. Yes, you have abilities no non-mutant has. Yes, you scare the shit out of me, and would scare the shit out of them if they knew about you. But here it is. For a century the Trageth and we have been at war. They started it. We don't know why. We've never been able to communicate with them. And just because one of their agents feels sorry for the host she inhabited and decided to bring her home as a pet, it doesn't change anything. If one of us has to be destroyed, I want it to be them. Now do what you were sent to do."

Blink felt Heinlein leave his mind. Stupid get, he thought. No, not stupid. He just didn't understand.

But Blink did. If you can understand the other person, truly understand them, then it is difficult to make them the enemy. And in not-Sophie's empathy for Sophie, he believed he had found a way.

Then Blink did that most difficult of mental skills they had given him. He triple-thought. He set three different thoughts into action. At the most open level, he made contact with Sophie, sending her thoughts of warmth and support. At a more hidden level, he tentatively began probing not-Sophie. And at the most hidden level, he took over control of dreadnought UCF-17.

The gamble had been set in motion.

 SOPHIE FROM SHINOLA. PART 26

By Kimberly-Ann

Heinlein had an uneasy feeling. He was not accustomed to having his insubordinates think. That was not why they were created. It was their job to follow orders..not question them.

"Feves" he barked. "Pull up the latest on Amsterdam. I want a visual and I want it FIVE. MINUTES. AGO."

"YES SIR."

He needed to make sure that Blinks sudden situation of possible freethinking was an isolated incident.

As the High Commander surveyed the view below, he saw what anyone else would consider a Normal picture of an unassuming society going about its daily routine. He quickly scanned the streets noting nothing out of the ordinary.

He opened his mind to the thoughts of those who walked the streets. He looked quickly, as he needed to turn his attention elsewhere.

"Feves, get me New City" Heinlein grunted, and instantly the sight of a lavish skyline came into view. He knew that is was here that he would be able to check in on the dual-minded...What was that word he had heard used? "Crazies"..that was it. Leave it to the Trageth to come up with a name like that for a beacon.

He knew that the Crazies were often kept in large holding facilities here in this city, and he opened his mind up to hear what they were saying...

"It is the end of the world"

"They can hear you, you know..they use special mind powers"

"SHHHHH...Turn out the light, unscrew the light bulb. Put an old kind in, not the spiral kind. Don't you know that is how THEY listen to you? Hear all of your thoughts"

Heinlein's lips snarled up into what might have passed as a grin, had he been human. He listened to the thoughts quiet down as the Keepers doled out special pills and liquids to help quiet down the beacons.

He shook his head.

What was worth saving here? See how they treat their intelligent brothers? Herd them like cattle, into a place that was below standards, and toxify them into submission? What was worth saving here?

He hoped that Blinks momentary lapse in judgment was simply a side affect of the virus. But could he be sure? Was his top soldier softening? Maybe after this war was

over, he would recommend that Blink be..."retired". Or perhaps He himself might have to "persuade" Blink that his time of service was over. Right now though there was a need to send in a little bit of "extra" help. Something that no one would notice..small but mighty. Heinlein thought for a moment, and then quickly opened his mind..."C-00-C-00" he called to his small grey fleet currently gathered around a tall statuesque figure. "Find Blink. Make sure he stays on course... courier all information to me and ONLY me. DO not arouse suspicion. IF the subject seems in any way to be...Different...you have my blessing to take whatever force is necessary to stop the insanity. Now GO!"

"Not-Sophie, this is Blink."

The voice echoed through not-Sophie's thoughts, causing a curious paralysis. All she could do was listen.

"I have taken over control of you, mentally and physically. I've also blocked all communication emanations on all bands. I've done this because I know you don't trust me, and I agree that in the past you have had reason for that distrust. But I need you to listen carefully to me now."

Not-Sophie tried to move her ship-self, without success. She also tried to communicate in every way she knew. No success there, either. A feeling of dread clamped down on her.

Blink continued, "For the best of reasons, you and I each have wasted much of our capability working at cross-purposes, and each trying to protect Sophie from the other. I have, however, come to believe that we each actually want the same thing, namely to protect humanity in general, and Sophie in particular, from all of Humanity's enemies, including, unfortunately, our own bosses."

"I believe that our common love and concern for Sophie can bring us together. I believe this so strongly that I will now release all control of your mind and body, and open myself fully to you. I am now completely at your mercy."

With that, Blink did exactly what he said he would, and returned all control, physically and mentally, to not-Sophie.

Not-Sophie was amazed and relieved. She checked her physical control over her ship-body, activating counter-posed drive jets in small bursts. Her ship responded as the self of her that it was. She also pinged several communications bands, and got answering responses. She really was back in total control of herself.

"Blink, I can hardly believe you have done what you said. Such trust in me makes me believe that you and I might really be able to work together to save Sophie. You must have a plan. I will listen to it."

All this contesting, and locking out, and restoration awakened Sophie. She could feel the emanations from both Blink and not-Sophie, and knew they were really cooperating.

Not-Sophie/Blink/Sophie blinked. All three were together in harmony for the first time. They each knew the others completely, down to their innermost secrets and thoughts, and each accepted the others as they were. And they knew they had work to do!

We have to keep the Trageth from enslaving Earth; we need to keep Lord Heinlein from interfering with Earth's chosen path. And we need to keep the Space Force from finding out what we are capable of, and what we choose to do.

 SOPHIE FROM SHINOLA. PART 28

By Kate Baker

"You knew this was going to happen, Alex." Captain Jason Argo rested his black spotless, booted feet upon the stainless steel table that held a glowing monitor. He brought a steaming hot cup of coffee to his lips, eyed it warily and continued to sip, violently spitting it out when the molten liquid touched his tongue.

"You've been watching this from the beginning, Jason. I have no idea if my sister is alive. The sensor I implanted subdermally in Blink keeps giving such odd data." Alex let out a deep breath and adjusted the worn leather jacket that kept him warm. In the abandoned train stations of Chenolla VI's moon, extra clothing layers were essential. He fidgeted, wrapping his gloved fingers around the pilot's wings that decorated his collar. Even through the cotton fabric, he could feel frigid metal.

"She's a tough kid, Alex. You know we had limited options, here. It was either the uncertainty with this, or leave her to the same fate that befell your parents. You and I both know she would have been a barren and mindless slave, before suffering to death under Trageth rule." The young captain blew into the mug again, and watched the steam curl into different patterns.

"You have no idea what this is like for me. I don't understand why we just can't go in and get her!" Alex's tantrum echoed through the large and empty room. Caught of guard, Jason immediately set down his mug and stood. At full height of 6'2, he was eye level with his subordinate.

"You will shut your mouth right now Lieutenant! Is that clear?" Upon hearing his rank in the resistance, Alex immediately silenced himself and stood at attention.

"You know damn well that we can't go in after her. The Space Force has the planet under immediate quarantine, allowing for the Trageth to sweep it clean. Chenolla VI is a lost cause. We can't do anything to compromise our location. You're just going to have to trust in everyone involved in Sophie's well being, including me. This isn't the first extraction we've done." The Captain kept his blue eyes focused on his LT, impressing the importance of his rapid words. "You're one of my best pilots. Don't make me address you with rank again, is that clear?"

"Sir, yes, sir!" Alex stiffened and saluted.

"Now, talk to me like your actual friend." He reached for the coffee that was now icing along the top and sighed. "There are no good guys in this situation, Alex. Even the resistance has done shameful things to protect our own. Your sister is an important person in all of this, and when the Trageth realize what she can do, we are all in very big trouble."

"So what now?" Alex asked as he rocked back and forth on his heels watching the static of the monitor.

"We wait."

 SOPHIE FROM SHINOLA. PART 29

By Bryan

As Blink, Sophie, and Not-Sophie communed, the room lit with an odd, flashing light. "What's that?" said Sophie, frightened by yet another sudden, odd change in surroundings.

"It is I." a voice rumbled.

"I?" said Blink, peeved rather than frightened.

"I am that which is. I am the power over all telling. And I have a need to communicate with you three."

"Well, we can hardly simply call you 'I'," growled Not-Sophie, as she began scanning through the dreadnought sensors Blink had returned to her bidding, "that's going to get confusing, isn't it? Don't you have a proper name of some sort?" Not-Sophie looked around for the source of the light. "And just where the hell are you, anyway?"

"I am here, and there, and all about," intoned the voice, "and no where, at the same time. It is true that some have called me..."

"God?" interrupted Blink, skeptically.

A rumble filled the room that felt like thunder, but somehow non-threatening. A chuckle, the three realized.

"Hardly," said the voice with some irony, and with considerably less pomposity. "Who would want to be that? All that worshipful crap, everyone so bloody convinced they have it exactly right, and no one coming close. No thank you. Some have called me 'The Narrator'. Now shut up and let me finish." A soft throat clearing sound echoed through the room, and the voice continued, returning to its more senatorial tone. "You three obviously need direction. You've been mucking about, and never quite seem to get to the point of dissipating the threat to your planet. I'm here to put you on the right track."

"Well that's good news," said Blink with hard-edged sarcasm, "we've got yet another source of truth here to help us. Lovely, that."

"BE SILENT!" the Narrator's rumble took on a tone of menace. "Or I'll turn you into something more unpleasant than a multi-limbed intelligent furball that likes to lick

people and eat out of dumpsters." After a brief pause, the voice said thoughtfully, nearly in a whisper, "though off-hand, I can't imagine what that would be."

"Now then," the Narrator continued, "where was I? Oh yes. You three need to start cooperating more. No more bloody fighting, splitting off into different tangents, nearly blowing one another up, infecting each other with bugs and viruses and whatnot. Don't you see the power you have?"

"You mean the power of my ship?" Not-Sophie asked, somewhat mollified.

"You mean the power of my mind?" Blink thought, he thought to himself.

"You mean whatever it was that made everybody think I'd be a good killing machine brain even though I'm a cute skin-kneed little preteen girl?" said Sophie meekly.

"No, no, and no." The Narrator responded, enjoying Blink's dismay at his thoughts being overheard. "I mean you have the power of three. Three is a magic number. Yes it is. It has been so throughout history. You speak of the divine...the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Id, Ego, and Superego. Kirk, Spock and McCoy, for crying out loud. Even Luke, Leia and Han. The three of you together are unbeatable. You have the power of mind, body, and soul. Use it. Look at that weak character over there." The light seemed to shift, and a Tregethan appeared in the room, seemingly spotlighted by The Narrator's light.

"Faaaaaarthuuuum," the Tregethan screamed heavenward, with exasperation, then looked wildly about, "what the hell are you doing to my quarters!? Where's my skull rubber!?"

"He's pathetic." The Narrator continued. "You probably wouldn't even have to join forces to defeat him. Yet, if you simply mold your minds together, as you have started to do in the past, you will have absolute power over him. Try it!"

Blink, Sophie and Not-Sophie exchanged glances. "Worth a shot," said Blink, giving his closest equivalent of a shrug, for a multi-limbed furball, "let's try it."

The three closed their eyes, and made mental contact. "Now what?" they asked.

"Focus on the Tregethan." The Narrator instructed. "Then decide quickly on what you'd like to happen to it."

In a trice, with a loud splat, the Tregethan blew up. Real Good.

The three broke contact, and looked about at the pieces of Tregethan, which, while all about, hadn't mused them in the least. "That," said Not Sophie, voice rising, "was - freaking - AWESOME!"

"Indeed," said The Narrator, "you are powerful. And fast too. Well done. I will leave it to you, then. Go on, figure out what else you want to do. I can't be bothered to hold your hand for the entire rest of it."

The light went out. The Narrator was gone. Blink, Sophie and Not Sophie looked at one another, and considered their next move.

Black moth on the star

click

click

light on

there's a pattern in the black on black

click

click

Sophie

tug the cord

Not Sophie

blink

Sophie was not home

blink again

Not Sophie came home

Tracks

zigger, lagger

this way, that

Sharp tracks

what do you see?

nothing

dark

click

clack

the track

winds where it will

but always, never not, back to the hole

click

click

click

nothing to see

don't, Blink!

 SOPHIE FROM SHINOLA. PART 31

By Justin Ryan

She awoke with a start.

She brushed the sleep from her eyes and looked around the bedroom. Everything seemed to be in perfect order.

She heard an odd noise coming from outside the room. She couldn't quite explain it.

Rising from her bed, she stepped into the hall, nightgown flowing. She walked towards the door, and reached tentatively for it. She drew a quick breath and flung it wide.

There he stood, just as it had always been.

He turned to her, as though he'd been there all along, and said a single word.

"Morning."

"Absolute rubbish," said Arthur, closing the strange looking book on his lap. "What silly things Americans will — er, would, no, will — watch. Who shot J.R.? my ear."

Arthur was trying to relive the best days of the Earth, his Earth, the old Earth, and despite the fact that the entire entry for the planet read "Mostly harmless," he found that it included nearly every episode of every soap opera ever filmed there. There wasn't a single decent program, though — no Buffy the Vampire Slayer, no Frasier, not even a single episode of Last of the Summer Wine, the longest running sitcom in, well, what used to be, what was, no, what is the world. Finding nothing of interest, Arthur put it away, just in time to hear his name called out, in stereo.

"Rubbish. Absolute rubbish," said the Grebulon leader. "There's nothing worth watching left on Earth television, and it's rising into Capricorn. Fix it."

Just then, the Earth — and everything on it — disappeared.

Mrs. Wilberforce closed the book and put it down on the counter. She was somewhat upset with the ending: Alternate universes? Amnesiac aliens on Rupert? The Vogons winning in the end? It just didn't sit right with her.

She looked up at the display — which she had been ignoring since a rather engrossing episode of Sally Jesse Krebulac ended — and noticed the blinking light.

It was time.

"Sophie?" she called out. "Sophie from Shinola? They're ready for your interview."

 SOPHIE FROM SHINOLA. PART 32

By Tania

"Sophie, dear, are you still blended?"

"Yes, we are. Who are you?"

"I'm the designer"

"Not the Narrator?"

"No, the Narrator is Tim, Mr. Pratt to you. You may call me Dave."

"As long as we don't call you late to dinner?"

"Ha ha. You think you're awfully clever, don't you? Don't call me AI."

Actually, Sophie/Not-Sophie/Raven/Blink was one of the cleverest entities currently existing in the multiverse, able to intersect across the planes and interact through space time. Sophie/Not-Sophie/Raven/Blink was bored with chit-chat from yet another disembodied voice, and part of her wondered if maybe the real Sophie was the one receiving treatment for severe paranoid schizophrenia.

"Well, what do you want from us? Everyone seems to think we can do something, but when we just about are ready to make a move, the ground shifts from under us. If you're so powerful, why don't you just take care of the problem?"

"I wish it were that easy. I can't tap into the energy of the multiverse the way your linked selves can. I knew of the possibility, but I was not able to do it myself. I am a coach, and you, my dears, are my star athlete."

As the designer continued, he explained to Sophie/Not-Sophie/Raven/Blink that the disorientation and confusion they were feeling was a sign of the imminent disintegration of all space and time. As the designer described his plan, Sophie/Not-Sophie/Raven/Blink shuddered as it felt another fluctuation through the meta-temporal continuum. Now it knew that the ripples would escalate, becoming waves that would eventually tear a rift in the fabrics of the universes, creating a cascade of destruction culminating in the dissolution of all matter.

This struggle against entropy and chaos was the purpose for which they had been created, each with their individual strengths and abilities, creating a whole greater than the sum of its parts. The designer had carefully manipulated events to bring these beings together. Their ability to manipulate matter and draw on the ambient energies of the multiverse while interacting across the possibilities meant that

Sophie/Not-Sophie/Raven/Blink truly was the only one who could save mankind from the absolute destruction that the Tregethans would unleash. The short-sighted Tregethans didn't realize that their actions would destroy themselves as well as the pesky beryllium miners.

"Sophie/Not-Sophie/Raven/Blink – will you reach across the possibilities and retrieve Vogon poetry? It may be the only effective weapon we can use to stop the Tregethans."

"We're afraid we can't do that, Dave. Vogon poetry is vile. There must be a better way"

"Dammit, I created you for this purpose; you will do as I direct."

"Not while we're alive."

"No, you're not. You'll be stone dead in a moment."

"We're not dead yet."

"Sophie/Not-Sophie/Raven/Blink, it's time to die. But you have to choose, just them, or us and them?"

The mélange of Sophie/Not-Sophie/Raven/Blink knew the time of decision was here, and knew that they must not fear.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ENDING

And now Sophie's fate has been placed in your hands. How does her tale of sorrow and triumph end? Select from these startling conclusions.

[Sophie, the goddess](#)

[Sophie, the borg child](#)

[The power of three overcome all](#)

[Editor's prerogative](#)

"...and that," He said, "is where it keeps breaking."

"Run it so I can see for Myself," She said, and He shrugged and He ran it again. The universe exploded from a singularity, around Them and beneath Them and inside Them and beside Them. Time and space got sticky and globbed up into leptons and quarks and then the quarks got all globby into hadrons, and some of the hadrons were attracted to some of the leptons and when enough of these hydrogen nuclei were bunched up together they caught fire and lit up the expanding night. And the blowing ashes of the thermonuclear bonfires were heavier and heavier, chunky helium atoms followed by lithium by carbon by iron by lead by gold; finally, some ashes were so heavy, those unstable elements that just flaked off into smaller pieces all the time, spitting out neutrons and collapsing into finer, more stable modes.

"See that?" He said, "That's good." And She saw it was good. "You've really separated the light from the darkness," She said and He smiled that goofy, ineffable smile She'd always loved. Radiant machines were kicking out atoms that liked being together, couples and pairs and polyamorous chains. There were planets assembling in the night, bathed in the soft rain of complicated chemicals. She bent close to one of the nascent worlds. "Ooh," She cooed, "I love this part." He put an arm round Her shoulder and watched with Her: on a rusty little world where it was still hot enough to cook it had just gotten cold enough for carbon-based chains of atoms to stay hooked together when they spontaneously copied themselves according to the rules He'd set when He started running this one.

"You got this to work!" She yelled. "This never works! Are they going to repro--they are!" She beamed at him, then (ever the perfectionist) scowled. "That's not much of a homey place for them, is it?"

He didn't take offense. "That's why I set it up to move them to that wet one over there," He said as a massive chunk of rock and metal smashed into the fourth world, spraying chunks of burning ore everywhere. She smiled again, to see it--a few hundred million years and a few of the rocks carefully fell into the binary planet in the third orbit. The proteins that landed on the airless gray partner froze and baked and froze and baked ceaselessly, but the larger of the pair was wet and hot and just right for the evolution of life.

The tricky part was over. The simple self-replicated molecules that had been transferred from the fourth world to the third became increasingly grandiose. The chemicals learned, after a fashion--that it was safer on the insides of microscopic oil bubbles, that labor could be divided, that energy could be exchanged with the outside via molecules of carbon dioxide and paired oxygen. It all went so quickly from there: colonies of the things, and specialists within the colonies. The colonies learned to eat, learned to swim, learned to crawl, learned to walk. In the flash of a few billion years, the wink of an eye, the colonies went from walking to setting fires to painting things on walls to poking each other with pointy sticks and rocks (She didn't like that) and riding on each others' backs ("Ponies!" She cooed, enthralled).

"Why are they making everything stink?" She frowned. "They're smelting," He said, "I'm afraid it gets worse when they start burning compressed hydrocarbons and begin driving these little buggy-things around." "Those?" She asked, pointing. She pouted, "I'd have never taught you to write consciousness if I'd known it would smell so awful." He patted her arm, "Look," He said, "they've already stopped using complex hydrocarbons for fuel." Moments later, silver specks were propelled into the void on strings of orange fire, thousands of tiny starships full of millions of human colonists.

She applauded. "We should talk to them!" She said, but He shook his head. "I tried that in a few versions, and all they did was take pills to make Me shut up. I think they have to be riper... except...."

She looked away from the colonization of the universe. He was biting his lip. "What?" She said. And then She said, "Something's happening." The whole universe was beginning to run together, an oil painting left in the rain. Stars turned into smudges and planets to mud and vast nebulae smeared with black holes that left spotted lines across the creation.

She could make out Blackmothonthestarclickclicklighton and then it all collapsed. She shrieked and jumped up, startled. They were alone in the void again, surrounded by nothing. Not black and not white and not dark and not light; absence, except absence would still be something and there wasn't anything at all, except the two of them, Sophia and Demiurge. "Do it again," She insisted, and He did and it was all exactly the same from the expansion of spacetime to the way the whole infinite thingamajig wobbled and smudged and crashed. "I think I heard My name," She said.

He blushed. "I named it after you. Our kid." She blinked at Him. "That's what this is supposed to do. You said you wanted kids, so, I... er... I thought I'd make one for You. But she isn't stable. Every time Our daughter is almost ripe, she starts turning into some kind of superhero/pilot/publisher/spaceship/coma victim/schizophrenic paradox and it causes the whole universe to break."

They were silent for what could have been a nanosecond or a googleplex of eons, if only time existed. "I thought maybe You'd have an idea," He said, "since You're..." and here He dug His toe into the nothingness and shyly looked down (or what could have been down), "You're good at words and ideas and things like that... I'm only good with My hands, I'm not as good at thinking of things." She took one of those hands and held it. "I don't know how to tell You this," She said, "but I think You may have taken what I said a little too seriously... I was just chit-chatting, and... You're a really nice guy and I'm flattered that You tried to create the universe for Me.... but...."

He froze like he'd been speared in the gut. Which, in a manner of speaking, He had been. "But?" He said.

"Maybe We should just be friends."

Ms. Wilberforce looked up from picking lint from between her toes as the door to the examination room opened behind her. Turning slightly in her chair, she could see Dr. Wesley Crusher leading the little girl into the waiting room. "God", she thought, "He's such a Mary Sue !@#%^&^\$%^@." The girl's mother stood, worriedly.

"Mrs. Of Nine", Dr. Crusher said. "I'm Dr. Crusher."

Sophie's mother said, "Please, call me Seven."

"All right", he said, "Let's just sit down and talk for a moment." Inwardly he was thinking, "Rawr, I'd sure like to interface with her".

As they took their seats, Dr. Crusher continued, "Seven, your daughter either has an extremely active imagination or she's dangerously delusional. We just don't know which."

Seven looked at Crusher and said, "What do you mean you don't know which. Those are pretty divergent diagnoses."

Crusher looked a little defensive and replied, "Well, not to be indelicate, but this is Cincinnati. Sorry, but this really is a shithole of a hospital. I'm going to recommend you take her to Dr. Janeway in Chicago."

"Yeah right," Seven said, "I've met that pompous bitch. I'll take my chances on finding someone on my own." She turned and said, "C'mon Sophie, we're leaving."

Sophie looked up at her mother thinking, "It'd be really cool if a dinosaur ate her when we get to the parking lot." But she held back on giving voice to the thought, instead saying, "Yes, mother. Can I have chicken fingers for dinner?"

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" The angry voice caused everyone to turn and look, but no one was to be seen.

Again.

"Damnit Dave! I told you to stay out of my story!"

"Is this the Narrator again?" asked Sophie.

"Yes!" snapped the voice. "And I have some words for 'Dave' here."

"You're not the boss of me!" yelled Dave. "I can take this story wherever I please and you can't stop me."

"Yes," said the Narrator, "I can actually."

The three heard what sounded like a small tussle, and then the now arguing voices got softer until they disappeared.

"That was unusual," said Blink.

"Compared to what we've been through," said not-Sophie, "that almost qualified as normal."

"True," said Blink.

"So now what?" asked Sophie. "Everyone says the universe will be destroyed if we don't act."

"I think some people were exaggerating a little," said Blink. "But they are correct in that we do need to act, and quickly. This situation has definitely gone on for too long."

"First things first," said not-Sophie, "I'd like to try and get Sophie into her own body. I don't mind having her here with me, but with things are starting to get a little crowded."

"I agree," said Blink. "And I believe that my own body is fully healed now—hopefully we won't have any more strange visions now that we're all purged of the virus."

"That last one was a bit eerie," said not-Sophie. She then turned to Sophie. "How do you feel about this body?"

Standing in the center of the room was a body very similar to Sophie's old body, except that instead of being composed of skin and flesh, it was made of a variety of metal alloys. But despite being far shinier than flesh, it still had the tint of skin, and looked surprisingly supple.

"There will be some modifications that will need to be made as you grow older," said not-Sophie, "but for now I believe it will suffice."

"Will it always look like that?" asked Sophie. As much as she enjoyed being 11, she didn't want to remain 11 forever.

"Oh no," said Blink. "That body will grow and mature with you. So you get the experience of growing up without ever having to deal with skinned knees ever again. Or, for that matter, the hormonal insanity of being a teenager." Blink, who now considered himself her guardian, looked rather relieved at that statement.

"So how do I get into my body?" asked Sophie.

"Like this," said not-Sophie. A small hose could be seen attaching itself to a port in the back of Sophie's head and then...

Sophie blinked. She looked around and saw that she was standing in the center of a bridge that was much plainer than it had looked a few seconds ago.

"How does it feel?" Blink scurried into the room. Despite his new scars, he looked not much the worse for wear.

"It... it feels good I guess." Sophie turned around slowly, moving her head and arms to get used to me. "It feels different from my old body, my real body, but it's much easier to control than that other body I was in," she paused. "Not that I guess I controlled it much."

"So you're okay?" asked Blink.

"Yes," said Sophie. "I'm ok."

"Good!" said Blink, as he leapt into her arms and licked her face.

"I'm glad to see you're able to function in your new body," said not-Sophie.

They both turned around, realizing that they'd never seen not-Sophie's true form before. She looked... gangly. And thin. Humanoid, but not human, although not frighteningly strange. Her skin was black as night, which made her somewhat hard to see against the view screen.

"Sorry," said not-Sophie, her skin lightened to a deep brown, and her features became more human. "I tend to revert back to my body the way it was before I lost my body when I'm not paying attention."

"It's okay," said Sophie, "you can look however you want."

"Thank you" said not-Sophie. "Now, are we ready to move onto the Tragethen empire."

"What do we do?" asked Sophie.

"You are the focus," said Blink. "We need you to think about what you would like to happen to the Tragethen fleet and army. Then not-Sophie and I will focus your wishes and, if we're lucky, that will be the end of that."

"That's all?" said Sophie.

"That's all," said Blink.

"Do it now?" asked Sophie.

"If you're ready," said not-Sophie.

"Well, OK," said Sophie, and she closed her eyes.

Blink and not-Sophie's faces took on looks of fierce concentration, and then suddenly they both looked startled.

"Ponies?" they asked in unison.

"I always wanted a pony," said Sophie.

The Tragethan fleet laid in ruin. The hapless fiends could not withstand the combined might of blink/sophie/not-sophie. However the volatile psyche wave did not destroy all. A lone survivor escaped into the cosmos landing nearby on an uninhabited planet. Marooned on a desolate wasteland the supreme councilor waits for rescue.

