

FORESEEN

TERRI-LYNNE SMILES

Free Sample

PLOTFORGE, LTD.

Cover design by Daniel Brewer
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Published by PlotForge, Ltd.
1650 Lake Shore Drive Suite 225
Columbus, OH 43204
www.plotforge.com

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Foreseen
ISBN: 978-1-937979-05-8
LC Control Number: 2012909996

Printed in the United States of America

Kinzie

Rex waited at the bottom of the steps that led out of the private jet. I stopped halfway down, sweeping my eyes across the secluded airstrip. A muffled whoosh from the ocean in the distance pounded the air. I had seen the waves bashing against the ragged, Maine coast as we landed – my first glimpse of the Atlantic. Beyond the runway, the boulders were worn smooth and spotted with lichen. Short, craggy brush and sparse grass filled in between.

Sasha crowded onto the stairs behind me. She glanced down the length of the sleek aircraft with a giggle. We'd had a good time on the way out, exploring Rothston's plane, which Sasha had never seen before either. It was impressive. A "G-Five," Rex had told us when we boarded. That didn't mean anything to me, until I found the specs on board. The craft had a range of over six and a half thousand miles – a quarter of the globe! And all the creature comforts to fly that far, with leather seats as big as my dad's recliner at home, and tables, and a huge TV.

When we reached the ground, Sasha bounded over to the black limousine waiting at the edge of the runway. A sun-weathered old man held open the rear door. Charlie Johnson, the driver for Rothston. This place had a guy whose job it was just to drive people around? The trip was becoming more surreal by the moment.

The limo pulled onto a narrow two-lane road. The foreign scenery slid past the car window, and I caught occasional glimpses

down the steep slopes to the angry gray water. The trees in Maine were more twisted than they were in Indiana, and the leaves had already fallen. The wide-open farms that I was used to were missing. I shivered at the chill in the air. Or maybe it was from the strangeness of it all.

The views of the ocean vanished when we turned inland, and after some twists and turns, we drove onto a narrow lane lined with scraggly brush and naked, dark tree trunks. The gateway to The Rothston Institute, Charlie informed me over the seat. I peered forward, expecting to see something grand, but it was just an overgrown gravel drive with a rather creepy feel. I settled back, watching the bushes go by. After a moment, the scrub thinned and gave way to a manicured lawn and formal gardens skirting a huge stone edifice. The building – a castle it looked like – was perched on a cliff, high over the sea. Immense blocks of tan stone formed towering walls with pale gray granite framing the corners. Lead-mullioned windows dotted the façade. The entire scene was imposing in the way that only something old and enduring could be.

The moment Charlie opened the door at the crest of the circular drive, Rex strode off toward the building without so much as acknowledging any of us. Maybe I'd been too harsh with him, but I was probably getting an F on my lab for doing what he'd said. I'd tried to do it over, but even with Sasha building the maze, it still wouldn't work. I turned in a new lab report, with the actual data – the impossible runs of rats going directly from the start to the finish. I was sure Uncle Mark wasn't going to accept that for a grade, especially after saying I needed to learn to control myself. But I had no idea how. Rex had just laughed at that, telling me I should have fudged the data again, and influenced Dr. Collier to accept it. I didn't know how to do that, either, and wasn't about to compound the problem even if I could.

Charlie offered me his hand to help me from the back of the limo. "Welcome to Rothston, Ms. Nicolosi," he said, as I climbed out of the car.

I was speechless, staring up at the wide stone steps that led to colossal arched doors of milled wooden timbers. A woven knot design was imbedded deep into wood at the center of each door, as if it had grown there on its own.

"I will get your bags, Ms. Nicolosi," Charlie said to me.

"Thank you!" I said pleasantly. "And call me Kinzie, please."

The old guy just smiled and nodded. "Yes, Ms. Nicolosi."

"C'mon, Kinzie," Sasha said, beckoning me up the steps in Rex's wake.

"*This* is where you grew up?" I asked in awe. Ancient orders of knights and princes belonged here, not a bunch of kids.

"Just for middle and high school," she laughed.

I looked back toward the limo, and Charlie gave me a friendly wink. He'd said very little during the drive here, but something about him was comforting, though I wished he'd stop calling me 'Ms. Nicolosi,' it made me sound like some pretentious rich girl.

The pretentious rich girl I was with called to me again, so I slung my backpack over my shoulder, climbed the steps, and braced myself for the weight of the door. But when I gave it a firm tug, I nearly fell backwards. The door was perfectly balanced to open with the touch of a finger. Sasha giggled again and pulled me through the entrance, grinning wider when my mouth dropped on the other side. Stairs lined each side of a large slate-floored vestibule that was bigger than my whole house!

"You'll love this," Sasha tittered, pulling me across the floor to one of the doors on the other side. I stepped into a cavernous room that resembled the main chamber of a gothic cathedral. Tall, carved shelves filled with books lined the walls and imposing oak tables stood in rows on the stone floor. All of it was magnificent, but the end of the room took my breath away. A three-story stained-glass window depicted a white-draped goddess holding three small men in one hand and a sextant in the other. The same knot-like symbol that I'd seen on the doors framed her head like a halo, and golden glass beams of light radiated from her like rays of the sun.

I stared up at the goddess-like image as Sasha giggled beside me. "I knew you'd like the library. We must have every book ever written." I was sure that wasn't true, but I didn't have time to correct her, as footsteps echoed sharply behind us. I turned and a middle-aged woman with short, dark hair greeted me.

"Kinzie, it's so good to meet you," she said, stepping forward with her hand extended. She took mine and shook it firmly. "I'm Brenda Thompson. Please call me Brenda. I am to take you to your luncheon with Ms. Whitacre."

"Let me take her. Please?" Sasha begged.

The woman's eyes flashed as if she didn't appreciate a disruption in her plans, or probably just as likely, at Sasha's irritating tone. "No, Sasha. Your grandfather sends word to come see him immediately."

Sasha nodded. "I'll see you later, Kinzie," she said cheerfully and skipped away. Sasha had never been unhappy at school, but here, she seemed downright giddy. More like a carefree child than the worldly college student I knew.

"Her grandfather's here?" I asked the dark-haired woman, as she directed me swiftly into the right-hand hallway. Her skirt swished back and forth over a bottom that was out of proportion with her top half.

"Yes. He's a member of The Seven," Brenda said with reverence.

"What's that?" I asked.

Brenda's eyebrows raised in surprise to be quickly replaced by bemusement. "The Seven are Rothston's leaders," she explained as I followed her down the stone and slate hall.

"And Sasha's grandfather's one of them?" I was caught off guard that Sasha hadn't told me. But then again, she kept assuming I knew things that I didn't. Brenda nodded, as she bustled along the stone floor.

"I assume there are seven of them. How do they get picked?" I asked as weak sunlight filtered through the wavy glass of the windows. I tried to peer out to get my bearings. I couldn't see anything clearly, but from the position of the sun and shadows, I'd say we might be on the north side of the building, heading west.

"Yes, there are seven. The existing members choose their successors, selecting the most powerful adepts who can see clearly into the future to guide us. It's our highest honor."

"Then what? How long do they stay on?" Every third window, I noted, bore a small stained glass image in the center, like they were telling a story.

"Until they choose to retire," Brenda said as if it was obvious. "You must have so many questions," she marveled. My head was still trying to grasp the details of the hallways. They were grand – as wide as the utilitarian ones in my high school, but twice as tall. All slate and stone, with graceful cornices at the top of the walls, with caps at the corners with that same design again. An endless knot, looping through itself.

"It is hard for me to imagine walking in here at your age, knowing nothing of how we operate," Brenda continued. "Two generations of adepts have been raised here. You have a lot to catch up on."

Brenda's shoes tapped out her steps as we passed through arched double doors and into a large room with a high ceiling and rows of oblong tables. A smattering of people – mostly preteens and a few adults – were eating from plates on plastic trays like we had in the Hutchins cafeteria. Several turned as I walked by, some smiling, some simply staring. Not many visitors around here, I guessed, but the attention was making me uncomfortable.

"How many people live here?" I asked, aware of the muffled thud of my sneakers on the floor.

"On a permanent basis? Sixty-seven adepts. And a dozen commons. Of course, while school is in session, like now, we have all the adept children from ages twelve until they graduate from high school."

"Rex said there were thousands of adepts. Where are the rest of them?"

"Adepts live all over the country. Mark Collier and his wife in Newberry, for example. Sasha and her family live in Connecticut."

A dull pain emerged in my head as we reached the end of the room. The last thing I needed here was another one of these stupid headaches. I rubbed my forehead, as Brenda opened a wooden door set into the wood paneling. Inside was a small dining room where a solitary old woman sat. Her silver-gray hair contrasted with her even coffee-colored skin. She rose gracefully, and Brenda dipped her head before introducing the woman as, "The Honorable Melvina Whitacre, member of The Seven."

"Thank you," the older woman said and Brenda scurried from the room. "Kinzie. It's a pleasure to meet you again after all these years," she said.

I sat down, taking in the brocade table runner and rich wood paneling of the room. "Thank you, Ms. Whitacre."

"Please, dear, call me Mel." Her voice was strong, creating the impression of a very competent grandmother. I unfolded the white cloth napkin and draped it across my lap as she offered me the bread basket. When I opened the cloth, the scent of rich cinnamon and butter wafted up. I took a bite of a sticky bun, noting that the headache was already receding, although certainly not gone. Maybe I just needed some food.

"You've grown into a beautiful young woman, Kinzie," Mel continued. "And from what I hear, you are as precocious as when you left here."

"Precocious? But I thought I was only two when I was here."

Her eyes lit with a kind smile. "Nearly three. But you were an impressive toddler. You had a very solid vocabulary and refused to be coddled. The first time I met you, I spoke to you as I would one of my own grandchildren, but you would have none of it. You put your hands on your hips, looked me in the eye and said, 'I am not a baby.' From then on, no one dared to talk down to you." I laughed, thinking that definitely sounded like something I'd say. "You were very direct, and highly intelligent," Mel continued as a waiter appeared with beautifully arranged plates of fruits, greens, and chicken. "And you are going to need it. You have a lot to learn."

"Ms. Thompson said that too. Um...can I ask you something?"

"Of course, Kinzie. You may always ask me anything."

"Why didn't anyone figure out I was adept until now or why didn't I ..."

Melvina held up her hand. "Given that adeptness tends to run in families, we know who might be adept. Their families know what to watch for. Most children by the time they are four, and certainly before they are six, display their ability to perceive the turbula in some unmistakable fashion. We are not certain why you did not. Perhaps it is simply that you were raised away from Rothston, knowing nothing about adepts."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

The woman took a bite, chewing thoughtfully before she answered. "If you did not know that our attributes were possible, you may have never explored them in your own consciousness, and thus, done nothing to reveal you were adept. In other words, a person can't do what they believe to be impossible."

I nodded. "Then, why did it show up now?"

Her forehead pinched together. "We don't know. We will be researching it, though." Her words brought up images of sterile rooms and wires connected to my head, and Mel must have caught the look on my face. "No child," she assured me, patting my hand. "We're not going to be prodding or probing – at least not much. Just asking questions. Beginning today, Rothston is your refuge from the world. You are one of us, Kinzie. You aren't different here, and you are always welcome to stay as long as you like."

A refuge from the world. A place where I wouldn't be different. It struck me that I'd never had anything like that. I'd always felt different. Even at home. Maybe this was why. I was adept, and this was where I was supposed to be, around people like me.

Mel set down her fork and handed me a syllabus outlining the coursework adept children cover during their years here. She suggested that I come back for winter break to cover as much of the material as I could get through. I hesitated, knowing I needed to work to have enough money for my second semester books. But then my eyes ran down the page to the more advanced topics, ranging from history to ethics to organizational dynamics to game theory. This place would be fun – and challenging. I'd figure out a way. Maybe I could get a job staffing the snack bar at school.

"We will pay you for your time here, of course," Melvina added, as if she could read my mind. Then it occurred to me that she probably could!

"Paid? To come learn all this?"

"Yes," she smiled. "With few exceptions, Rothston's investments have performed quite well over the past hundred years. As I'm sure you can imagine, having brokers and investment advisors who can perceive the short-term future is rather handy in the financial markets. Therefore, when Rothston began its training program of adept teens over fifty years ago, we did not want them to feel penalized by their inability to hold part-time or summer employment. Hence, we pay everyone over the age of sixteen for any days they spend here at our request."

This place was getting better and better, I thought as Mel began her lecture – an overview of the topics we would cover this winter. She began by reminding me of the two adept attributes – reading the possible near futures and influencing the decisions that lead to them.

"So, how does Rothston decide when someone should be manipulated?" I asked during a pause.

Melvina held up her hand to stop me. "We do not manipulate people," she answered seriously. "We merely influence their decisions."

I thought for a moment. "Manipulation versus influence. That's just semantics."

Mel's brow furrowed at my question. "No, Kinzie. There is a significant difference between the two. Manipulation implies that we can force a decision to happen. That is not the case. We merely increase the attractiveness of a choice that a person was already considering. You've observed the turbula, correct?" I nodded and she continued. "The tunnels branch, sometimes in multiple directions, each heading to a different possible future. When you begin to read actors – animals or people who make decisions that affect their environments – you will be able to focus on those decision points, the divergence in the paths, and perceive the choices leading in each direction. We can influence the decision by subtly broadening one branch over another, making it more likely that is the decision which will be made. But those divergent paths only exist if the choices exist. In other words, we cannot make a person choose something he would not consider. Even our strongest adepts cannot do that."

Mel stopped and studied me for a moment. "I think I understand," I told her. "But I am not certain how that plays out."

She paused for a moment, then set down her fork. "It comes down to what our limits are, Kinzie. We cannot cause someone to select an option they are strongly opposed to or would have never considered. And if the individual is emotionally invested in their choice, then it becomes nearly impossible for us to influence them to pursue other options. Take the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda

in the early nineties. Are you familiar with that tragedy?" she asked. I shook my head, and she hesitated for a moment before continuing. "Hmm. Perhaps over your winter break, we will spend some time on that episode. It is informative as to how, when, and why we work, as well as what can go wrong. In that case, Rothston, along with one of our sister organizations overseas, attempted to avert an atrocity in which thousands of innocent people died. But due to the determination of the participants and the emotional frenzy that developed shortly before the massacre, we failed. On the other hand, if strong emotions are in play, we can easily influence decisions in ways that are consistent with the individual's emotional state."

My head swam with the idea that Rothston influenced global affairs – affected massacres! What role had they played in wars? Or in peace for that matter. It sounded like Rex was wrong about them not doing anything. Or at least, they tried. "So, how do you decide when that should be done – influencing an outcome?"

"That is *the* question, dear," Mel answered with a nod. "One that is vital for all adepts to understand. The adepts of Rothston and around the world adhere to a Minimal Intervention Policy which prohibits us from intervening in the affairs of the commons except when necessary to avoid a significantly dangerous or adverse outcome."

I picked up the glass of iced tea in front of me, but before I drank, I asked again, "How do you know when that is?"

"Consider the Cuban Missile Crisis. A much better outcome than Rwanda. It is an example of both our Minimal Intervention Policy at work, as well as what we can accomplish. With the U.S. and Soviet Union on the brink of nuclear war, our adepts were positioned to influence both the White House and the Kremlin. But we did not act immediately. We waited until the results would be disastrous if we did not. At that point, it was important enough for us to influence the decisions being made."

"But what if you had been wrong? What if you waited too long?"

She gave me a kindly smile. "Then you and I would not be sitting here sharing this delightful meal. We can discuss this in more depth at another time, Kinzie. For now, we must move on."

Mel scooted her plate away and placed her coffee cup in front of her. A moment later, the server reappeared and filled the cup, then silently left again. Once the door was closed, Mel continued on to her overview of the history and policy subjects she hoped to cover over winter break, but my mind lingered on the discussion we'd just left. If adepts could have stopped the

brinksmanship that nearly destroyed the world, why hadn't they? Delaying seemed reckless at best.

Mel glanced at the clock on the wall. Over two hours had passed since I entered this room. "I'm afraid that is all we have time for today, Kinzie." She dabbed her mouth with her napkin before setting it on the table. "I have a meeting I must attend. I will have Brenda come for you."

Out of respect, I rose as the older woman did and remained standing until she glided out of the room. When I sat back down, I grabbed another sticky, thinking over what I'd just learned. Rothston's power was impressive. Adepts had saved the world from nuclear annihilation. But they'd failed in Rwanda. Had they simply waited too long before stepping in? And what about the other man-made tragedies throughout history. The Holocaust? And Darfur? Or Waco? Had they tried to intervene? Had something gone wrong? And maybe there were other catastrophes that never happened – that I had no reason to know might have happened – that they had prevented. And could they do other things – like force funding for the research into life-saving drugs, even if there wasn't a profit in it? This place could do so much good, and the possibilities seemed endless. And if they could do things like that, I wanted to be part of it.



I squinted at the map on the desk. The Rothston Institute was made up of three secondary buildings connected underground to the main one, which had several wings itself. It was going to take me some time to learn my way around, but I loved exploring on my own so that was good. Even if every adept in the country were here, the maze of identical stone and slate corridors would never be crowded. And now, with only the middle school and high school kids here, as well as a few dozen adults, the place felt empty. I liked that. No crowds here.

A knock rapped on the door of the room Brenda had given me. An older student's room, she had called it when she'd unlocked the door and handed me the key, but it certainly wasn't anything like any dorm room I'd ever seen. Sasha's muffled voice sounded through the door. "Kinzie? Are you ready?"

"Hang on," I called back, rising from my study of the map. I opened the backpack I'd thrown on the four-poster bed, searching for something warm to wear down to a bonfire on the beach, and pulled out the first thing my hand landed on – Greg's orange fleece. What was it doing here? I laid it on the bed, and dug further for my ratty gray sweatshirt, but it wasn't there. I dumped the backpack

spread out its contents across the bed; my sweatshirt was nowhere to be found. I must have picked up the wrong one at school without noticing, but how could I have mistaken the large orange fleece for my much smaller gray sweatshirt?

A fist thumped on the door again. "Aren't you ready yet? C'mon," Sasha whined.

"Just a sec." I pulled the hoodie over my head, stopping for a moment to breathe in the relaxing autumn scent that hadn't quite faded away. My head poked the rest of the way through, and I rolled up the sleeves until I could find my hands. The orange material swam around me and I probably looked like Dopey from Snow White, but it would have to do.

Sasha took one look when I opened the door and swallowed a laugh – not quite successfully. And Molley Rhinehart, a preppy-looking strawberry blonde who had pointedly spelled her first name for me at dinner, looked more than ready to join in.

"It's not you, Kinzie," Sasha giggled at the oversized garment as the door closed behind me. "Why'd you bring that?"

"As if you don't know," I answered with an edge of accusation to my voice. I couldn't have packed this. Sasha must have switched it to tease me again about showing up wearing it on Monday, and then forgetting to return it to Greg.

"What's that mean?" asked a male voice, as Curtis Mechenbaum, a shortish, high school senior fidgeted out from behind Molley. I'd met him at dinner as well – Molley's younger cousin, they told me. Seemed nice enough, but jumpy. His eyes constantly darted around behind silver-rimmed glasses, as if waiting for something ominous to happen. It made me nervous just watching him, so I'd spent most of my time talking to Sasha and Molley.

Sasha swung her straight brown hair over her shoulder. "Sounds like Kinzie is finally admitting she has a thing for my ex," she cooed.

"This wasn't what I packed, Sasha."

She gave a short laugh. "But obviously, you did."

From her expression, Sasha wasn't going to admit that she'd switched sweatshirts to tease me – and honestly, I wasn't sure when she would have had the chance – so I shrugged it off, and followed them to the main doors and out into the cold night air. The three of them chattering about Rothston and people I didn't know and things I didn't yet understand. I simply listened, gleaning what information I could as we passed through one of the formal gardens to a torch-lit path that ran along the top of the cliff. Rounded, lichen encrusted boulders edged the path here and there, half overgrown with

bramble. Sasha would jump up on these from time-to-time, as if she was surveying her kingdom.

The path crisscrossed down to a broad beach where I could see a fire burning in the distance. It was dark now, but I could hear the breakers and taste the tangy air. My companions wanted to know my impressions of Rothston, since none of them remembered seeing it for the first time, but I wasn't sure what to say. It was magnificent, thrilling, beautiful, but the best part to me was just simply being part of their work. As one of Rothston's adepts, maybe I'd have the chance to make a difference in the world – as hokey as that sounded.

"The way things are now, you'll never change anything," Molley drawled in response. "None of us will. So, enjoy your turbula exercises. That's the biggest thing you'll ever do. We'll just sit on our hands, so don't think this is going to have some big effect on your life. It won't."

"That's okay," Curtis offered. His voice quavered slightly, as if he was afraid to contradict her. "You gotta be really careful with what you do as an adept, Kinzie. You never know what could happen."

Sasha burst into a laugh at that. "Yeah, and if you listen to Curtis, you can be sure nothing ever will happen." Curtis smiled sheepishly, but didn't disagree with the assessment.

The path disappeared into a broad beach of water-smoothed stones. The fire I'd seen from the top was a roaring blaze with tongues of flame licking high into the sky and turning the foam along the wave crests a ghostly rouge. A few dozen people gathered around the bonfire with their talk and laughter filling the air. Preteens skittered through the small crowd, pelting each other with marshmallows, and a game of horseshoes on a sandy patch on the other side of the fire added its metallic clang to the night air.

We skirted the small crowd to an open spot on the far side of the fire where we huddled, toasting marshmallows while Sasha told me the story of Numb Chuck. According to the tale, which supposedly happened around fifty years ago, Charles was an adept ago who fell on some hard times, after gambling his money away.

"Why do all ghost stories start with the person living fifty years ago?" I asked, only to have Curtis shush me, like I was going to offend the spirit world with my question.

Rothston had refused to help Charles get back on his feet, Sasha continued. Homeless and alone, he began to influence commons into giving him money in order to survive. But when his finances improved, he didn't stop, and went on influencing commons to give him whatever he wanted, often leaving them destitute while he lived the high life. The Seven warned him to stop,

but he didn't so they confined him to the dungeons beneath Rothston, until he promised to obey.

"There are dungeons under Rothston?" I asked. This story was getting more farfetched.

Curtis nodded ominously, but Molley just laughed. "It's supposed to be where they put rogue adepts. Deep underground. Rats. Bugs. Like something out of a movie. They take us down there in middle school for Halloween," she informed me. Curtis shivered.

"So what happened to Charles?" I asked, realizing the dungeons were probably just the basement of the old building.

"They kept him there for a month!" Sasha said, her eyes wide and voice overly dramatized. "Until he promised to obey The Seven. But once he was released, he returned to his swindling ways." Sasha paused at this point in the story. Molley popped another marshmallow into her mouth, while Curtis sat beside me, his eyes staring as if the story were true.

"And?" I prodded.

"He didn't stop. He kept stealing from people. Sometimes even from other adepts. He wouldn't stop. Not until one winter morning, when he was found on the Rothston grounds, frozen to death!"

I stared at her, wondering why the anticlimactic ending had been told with such flair. I opened my mouth to tease her, when I realized what it must mean to them. "You mean, someone influenced him to stay outside and die?" I asked.

"Yes. The Seven. And now, Numb Chuck haunts the halls of Rothston at night to warn others of his fate."

"Or to keep the little kids in their rooms," Molley added with a giggle.

Sasha threw a marshmallow at her, but Curtis was staring at the fire, jumping at each crack from the flaming logs as if the ghost would rise up in front of him at any moment. I grabbed one of the marshmallow sticks and used it as a light saber to charge the flames and slay the imaginary wraith. The others quickly joined in, and one of the gooey tips caught in my hair. Sasha tried to pull it out, but she was laughing so hard it kept getting worse. Molley finally grabbed the scissors next to the marshmallow bag and, before I could stop her, the bottom six inches on one side of my face was gone, along with the sticky white mess.

The group around the fire was thinning, and I noticed Rex had joined one of the clusters on the other side, but something was different about him. I studied him for a moment before I figured it out – his demeanor. I watched him nod to the middle-aged man next

to him, looking almost deferential. Weird for Rex. Out of character. I nudged Sasha. "Who is Rex talking to?"

Her eyes scanned the crowd, before coming to rest on the four figures. "Oh, that's Brad Jamison," she informed me. I studied him to try to stick the name with the appearance – on the lean side with hair that was slightly thinning on the top. "You'll get to know him," Sasha added. "Pretty cool for an older guy." She nodded toward the squat, dark-haired woman in her forties and a plump, non-descript man next to her. Marci Lee and Bart Pasternak, she told me. I shrugged, finding the names meaningless. "They're members of The Seven," she said as if it were obvious. I squinted, trying to make them out better. With the grandeur of the building, I guess I'd expected Rothston's leaders to look wise like Mel, or maybe like superheroes. These three looked like soccer parents, or maybe Mr. Jamison could be a middle-school basketball coach. But at least now I knew why Rex was being respectful.

"You want to meet them?" Sasha asked, as she began pulling me along.

I resisted. I had already met a million people today and the names were getting tough. "Not yet. Let me get a little more of Rothston in my head first. I don't want to look like an idiot."

"Suit yourself," she chimed, and let it drop.

"Who's up for horseshoes?" Molley asked, licking the last marshmallow goo from her fingers. As we headed over to the horseshoe pit, Sasha picked up the closest two red metal U's. I bent over to pick up the silver ones and felt a twinge of a headache at the base of my skull. I wish these things would stay away. Maybe I needed glasses.

"We need someone else. Kinzie can't play," Sasha called to Molley and Curtis, who'd continued down to the far stake.

"What? I can play," I objected, retrieving the horseshoes and noticing the headache was already gone.

Molley responded from the other end. "Not the way we play."

"It's okay," Curtis offered. "She'll just be off limits to the rest of us. But that means we can't play as teams."

"Off limits?" I gave Sasha a confused look, and she laughed, preparing to pitch the first shoe. It went wide and short, landing a good five feet in front of the pit. Curtis and Molley were just as bad. It took several turns before I figured out what was going on. For each toss the three of them made, one or both of the others would take on an unfocused stare, and the throw would go wild. Once, Sasha mis-stepped, falling to the ground as she released the metal shoe, which landed behind her. They were influencing each other. The object of the game was the same – who could get closest

to the stake, but I was the only one who got within two feet of it consistently. Curtis, on the other hand, was getting more and more frustrated because Sasha and Molley would gang up on him, both influencing him to throw the same way, which apparently magnified the effect. His aggravation boiled over when they began taunting him for being beaten by girls.

"Fine," he spat with determination. "Stand back. I know how I can win." Sasha dragged me away from the stake – a dozen feet away, at least. I couldn't imagine he was going to miss this badly. I started to say something, but Sasha shushed me, telling me not to break his concentration. But Curtis just stood there, unmoving. His eyes staring blankly. His face a study in concentration. But he hadn't even picked up the horseshoe from the ground in front of him.

"What..." I started, when Molley clapped her hands together in delight – and the horseshoe in front of Curtis was gone. I stared at the ground where the iron shoe had just been. "Where did..."

"Yay!" Sasha called out approvingly as she moved back toward the pit at our end. I looked at the stake and a horseshoe was there – a ringer.

"How..." I stammered, but Sasha's laugh cut me off.

"You don't know?" she asked.

"Know what? Where did that come from?" I asked as I neared the pit.

"Translocation, Kinzie," she said with relish.

"Translo... what?"

Sasha laughed again. "Translocation. Pretty cool, huh? Curtis is one of the best."

"But..."

"Oh my gosh, look!" Molley squealed as she bounded over. "You can tell it was horseshoe shaped!" As I got closer, I could see that the band of metal around the post was twisted and bent, looking only vaguely like the horseshoe it had been at the other end.

"I don't understand. What happened?" I asked Sasha, ripping my eyes from the mangled mess.

"Translocation. Moving the object instantly from one location to another," Curtis stated proudly as he joined us. "Commons call it teleportation."

"Moved it?" I bent down to examine it. Warm to the touch, then it shattered – too fragile to be lifted. "I'm not sure I understand. Why is it..."

Sasha interrupted. "You didn't expect him to get it perfect did you? You'll see when you learn this stuff, Kinzie. Most adepts can't do this at all, and the fact that you can tell the original shape is

pretty awesome. Think about how accurate you've got to be to do that! Every atom. Any miss can cascade it into not forming at all, let alone coming out looking like anything." I blinked, trying to process everything she was saying, but I couldn't get my head around it. Adepts could teleport? Translocate.

"Transposition errors," Curtis informed me. "That's what the mistakes are called. Impossible to avoid. We're not allowed to translocate animals because of it. You can imagine the mess." My eyes scanned the shattered horseshoe again. Mess? *Horrific* was more like it.

"Eeewww," Sasha added, to complete the picture.

"There's only one person who does this without a bunch of errors," Molley said, and Curtis's eyes dropped.

"Really? Will I meet them this weekend?"

"You already have!" Molley tittered, as I pushed up the sleeves of the orange hoodie that had fallen down over my hands again. I stared at the fleece as a thought occurred to me.

"You didn't...?" I asked looking at Sasha.

"Didn't what?"

"This," I answered holding the material out from me. "I know this isn't what I packed. You didn't..."

"Translocate it into your backpack?" Sasha asked, her eyes growing wide. Then she and Molley both burst out laughing. Even Curtis suppressed a grin.

"Translocating it perfectly, not a stitch out of place, would be incredible," he said, explaining the apparent absurdity of my guess. "Translocating it perfectly into a backpack? Folded? Can't be done. Not even by ..." Curtis stopped mid-sentence and seemed to shrink into the shadows behind his cousin.

"Talking about me?" Rex challenged, as he rounded the fire.

"Kinzie hadn't seen anything translocated before," Sasha told him.

Rex looked down at Curtis's mangled ringer. "Destroying Rothston property again, Mechenbaum?" He nudged the twisted shards with his shoe, and Curtis retreated further away. Rex's eyes fell to me, and he smiled. "If you want to see it done right, all you have to do is ask."

Rex was the one they'd been talking about? I met his pale gray eyes and stared steadily back, knowing he'd take great satisfaction if I asked him for anything. My head twinged again, but I pushed the pain aside.

"Oh, I want to see! I want to see," Molley sang as she skipped over to Rex's side, gazing up at him like she was star-

struck. Sasha had told me there were girls who would fight over Rex's attention. Molley must be one of them. Truly pathetic.

Rex's eyes lingered on mine a moment longer before he broke away. "Fine. Let's see. What should I do?" he asked himself, hesitating for a moment to build the suspense. "Let's start simple," he said, directing my attention in front of him.

A burning log instantly appeared midair and fell to the ground. The flames burst out of it as it hit. I stared in disbelief. He'd translocated it on fire, and apparently without Curtis' errors. For a moment, I thought of Greg Langston and his dream of a transporter. Not only could it be done, it had already been.

Molley clapped vigorously to which Rex gave a shrug. "That was easy. Let's do something fun. Ever see a U.F.O., Kinzie?" He didn't wait for an answer, waving me back from the burning log instead. His eyes glazed over and it disappeared, and the bonfire behind us crashed and sparked with its return. Rex's brow creased with concentration and a new flame – a short log this time – suddenly hovered over my head. I jumped aside to avoid the falling embers. This time I couldn't conceal my amazement as it began to stutter, rotating its position with little jumps, like an animation, until it became a blur. A glowing disk in midair. And then it moved, first slowly, then faster, then zigzagging about around us.

Molley cheered, Sasha clapped, and even Curtis gave a quiet hurrah, although he still lurked in the shadows. Rex swelled at the praise like a blowfish, but maybe it was deserved. Compared to what Curtis had done – heck, compared to anything I'd ever conceived of – this was incredible.

Rex exhaled hard, releasing his effort. But the stick didn't fall. It didn't even exist. The blur became just a mass of smoldering dust-like particles. A silvery goo that had no real substance. It was like nothing I'd ever seen, sinking slowly, dispersing as it drifted down, no longer matter as I understood it at all. When it touched the ground it seemed to... ooze, and then it was gone. The stick had vanished.

"What was that stuff?" I whispered, but Rex was rubbing his temples. "It didn't seem... real."

"Transposition residue," came the voice of Curtis out of the darkness. "A low-energy quark-gluon plasma. The only other place it might exist is at the surface of a cold black hole, leaking into space through Hawking radiation."

I looked up at him in amazement and saw the reflection of the firelight shining on his glasses. Curtis might be cowed but he was no idiot. And Lord Rex wasn't quite as perfect as he liked to believe.

Greg

"Lang-ston! Lang-ston! Lang-ston!" The Alpha Deltas cheered from the sidelines as I approached the wooden two-by-four structure at the end of the practice field. Having designed the simple machine, I had the honor of releasing the weight on the contraption that read simply "AD-FAT" on the side. Murphy had painted the letters which I'd had to explain twice stood for our frat and the contraption – a floating-arm trebuchet.

The Pumpkin Toss was undoubtedly the stupidest event in the annual inter-fraternity competition. But it was also the most fun. The third Monday of each month at Hutchins brought one competition and at the end of the year, the frat with the most points received the Hellenic Crown. It meant nothing, but between the fraternities, it was everything.

Today's competition wasn't fierce. I glanced downrange at the orange blotches scattered across the sunlit grass. The closest was maybe forty yards. The TKE's, a bunch of business major idiots, had used a simple sling shot. Bad move, but predictable. Every other fraternity entered a standard trebuchet to heave the squash, with varying results depending on the size and weight of their siege engine. The spread was from sixty-eight yards to just shy of one hundred. None of them had a chance.

Boomer, standing beside me, eyed my unconventional machine with uncertainty. "You sure this is going to work?" he asked quietly.

I returned a confident grin. "Know it," I said and went to give the pumpkin its last rites.

I looked back at the assembled crowd as I knelt down. Pete was cheering with a group of our frat bothers while Jenna White waited impatiently beside him. She hadn't come down to the frat house with the idea of me being dragged off to a muddy field and she made her annoyance obvious. Too bad. She'd just have to wait.

I scanned down the field, but my eyes caught on Kinzie Nicolosi, standing just out from the sideline. Sasha was with her – no surprise. And Brolie was behind the two of them. He lifted his eyes and stared straight into mine, challenging me somehow. He grinned and placed his hand on Kinzie's shoulder. An ownership stance. Kinzie's entire body tensed, and she flinched it off, leaning further into the field, but it didn't faze the jerk. He dropped his hand and looked at both girls like possessions, then his eyes rose back to mine and his lips curled wider. God, I wanted to pound that fuck, just to wipe that look off his face.

I looked down at the pumpkin resting in the sling and pulled a Sharpie out of my pocket. Rather than writing "FAT Man" on it as I planned, I scrawled a crude face and grabbed two silver thumbtacks from the sign on the side and used them for the pupils – Brolie's steel gray eyes. I stepped back to survey my handiwork and smiled.

"Who the hell's that supposed to be?" Boomer asked.

"World's biggest dork," I muttered. Seizing the handle, I raised my other arm with more flourish than the situation warranted. When the Alpha Delts' cheers had reached a fevered pitch, I yelled, "Fire in the hole!" and yanked the lever, dropping the weights straight-down the track, and whipping the floating arm of the trebuchet in a tight loop. Brolie's bloated pumpkin head launched into the air. The roar from the Alpha Delts faded for an instant before erupting anew when the pumpkin disintegrated in an orange mist halfway up the goal post at the other end of the field, a hundred and twenty yards away leaving the entire goal post vibrating like some huge tuning fork.

My fraternity brothers rallied around and Jenna danced over and threw her arms around me. I guess this wasn't boring anymore. I lobbed my arm around her shoulders and turned into the tide of students flowing onto the field to congratulate us. Amidst the cheers and slaps on the back, I saw Kinzie, frozen in place as the revelers surged past her. Her terror-filled eyes locked onto mine for

a moment, as her mouth formed the word, "Help?" Even at this distance, I was sure no sound had come out.

"Hang on," I told Jenna, dropping my arm from her shoulder. I took a step forward, but she grabbed at me.

"You said you'd spend the afternoon with me," she whined.

"I will. Just give me a minute."

Jenna's eyes traveled over to where Kinzie remained immobilized, scanning her from the top to bottom. "You'd rather be with her?" Jenna asked with a sullen look. God, how much of me did this girl want? We'd spent the whole damn weekend together.

"What the hell," I bit back in exasperation. "I'm just doing a paper with her. Give me a break." But she obviously wasn't going to. "Look, go back to my room. Pete can let you in. I'll be there in a few minutes." I stormed away. Damn girls and their possessive games. If that didn't tell her who I wanted to be with this afternoon, I didn't know what would.

By the time I reached her, Kinzie's statue form had become unsteady, weaving slightly in the thinning crowd. Her chest heaved like she was gasping for air. "Are you okay?" I asked, grasping around her upper arm, pressing through the fabric of her sweatshirt, to steady her.

Her dark eyes locked onto me. "Just ... just talk to me. Please?"

"Uh, sure," I said, feeling at a loss for words. Asking her what was wrong seemed out of place – assuming she wanted me to distract her from whatever was bothering her rather than think about it more. And besides, that would be making her talk instead of me. "So... uh... have you seen any good movies?" I asked. "No, wait. That was a question. Let me think of something else to talk about. Uh..." My brain was failing me, but her eyes were still imploring. "Have I told you I'm from Boston?" I asked and she shook her head slightly. "Yeah. Well, Brookline. My dad and stepmom live there. I ... uh ... I don't have any brothers or sisters, do you?" I was talking way too fast, and every thought that came into my head seemed to end in a question. But the edges of Kinzie's mouth began to curl into a smile and her breathing slowed, so maybe that was okay.

"No, I'm an only child too," she answered, and I felt my body relax as she did. "Thanks for doing that," she added. "I ..."

She paused, glancing around at the remaining stragglers from the competition.

"Don't like crowds?"

"Terrified of them. I need to get over it," she said as we turned to head off the field. She was trying to sound brave, but her eyes dropped at the end. "They scare me. I just ... I can't think or do anything," she admitted, seeming embarrassed.

"So you really meant it at Gianni's when you said it easier to be lonely."

She shot me a quizzical look. "You remember that? Yeah. I'd take being alone over a bunch of people anytime. Kinda weird, isn't it."

"Meh. Don't worry about it. Everybody's afraid of something," I offered to smooth it over. "Nothing to be embarrassed about."

"What are you afraid of?" she asked bluntly.

"Me?" My heart hammered twice, and I had no answer, despite the twisting in my gut. "I ... I don't know. Nothing, I guess," I answered, conceding her point.

She smiled with satisfaction and brushed her hair from her face. "That's what I thought."

I picked up a lock that fell forward again, holding it up for her to see. "What happened?" The chunk of hair was shorter than the rest, and not in a way that bore any resemblance to an intentional style.

"I was attacked by a marshmallow encrusted light saber." She rewarded my laugh with a smile of her own as we began to climb the road up the hill. "So how far you've gotten on the materials?" she asked, but I knew her real question from the tone.

"You don't think I've been working on it."

She blushed slightly. "I didn't say that."

"You didn't deny it either. We should go over what both of us have done so far, and I expect you to have gotten through your share as well."

"That sounds like a challenge," she said with a gleam in her eyes. "But I was gone this weekend ... Um... out of town. I haven't gotten as far as I wanted. But I'll catch up," she added in her defense. I smiled to myself, knowing that she would – and probably read my sections as well to make sure I hadn't missed anything.

"God, I hate this hill," Boomer's voice came from behind us. "Will you build that transporter already, Langston?"

"I'm on it," I called back, slowing down to let him catch up.

"Right. This guy's nuts, Kinzie," Boomer said to the girl beside me. "He thinks those things are real."

Kinzie's cheeks reddened, so I stepped in. "Not *real*, Boomer. Possible. Like you developing some class."

Boomer frowned. "You're a real comedian, Langston."

"Transporters are possible," Kinzie informed him in my defense. "I know they are."

"The biggest problem with building one is resolution," I explained to her eager face. "You sample a subject, send the information across a data link, and reassemble it on the other side

with new raw materials. They're already doing it with 3D stereolithography, but the technology ..."

Kinzie jumped in. "And I've been wondering if there's a way..." She hesitated, and gave me that look that saw straight through me, but I would have never expected the next words from her mouth. "Can I work on this with you? Transloca – I mean, the transporter? I want to understand it better."

I nodded, knowing I was nowhere near ready to actually work on the project. I didn't even understand it myself. After grad school, perhaps. But no one had ever taken me seriously on it. Still, Kinzie wasn't exactly stupid, so I could bounce ideas around with her if nothing else. "Why don't you come back with us?" I asked and felt a quick jab from Boomer's elbow in my side.

"Ixnay on the oomray," he muttered loudly enough for Kinzie to hear.

Crap. Jenna. I'd forgotten about her. "Right, I guess..."

"Ats-thay ine-fay," Kinzie offered easily, letting me off the hook. The funny thing was, she said it with a smile – like she understood and was okay with it. She thanked me again, and Boomer and I turned down frat row.

"Kinzie? Of all the fucking girls at this school ... Kinzie?" Boomer questioned, shaking his head. "She's not your type, Langston."

I gave him a shove. "No shit. I don't like her. It's just the paper."

"That's right," Kinzie's voice called to Boomer from behind us. I turned to realize she'd heard us. "And I don't much care for him either."

I gave a light laugh, but her words stabbed me because I'd been lying. The truth was, over the past few days I'd grow to like Kinzie – genuinely liked her. Even if I'd sounded like a babbling fool today, it was okay with her. I didn't have to play the part of the cocky stud – a card I'd played so many times, I'd begun to think it was the only one I had – the ace of assholes. Kinzie let me dust off the rest of the deck. And I felt good when I was around her. But her opinion was right. I wasn't a likeable guy.

Boomer was watching me, no doubt wondering what was going through my head. "Man, I'm witnessing the fall of the great Greg Langston."

My glare shut him up. I was friends with Kinzie. Nothing more. And besides, Jenna was waiting.

About the Author:

Terri-Lynne Smiles has a Bachelor of Arts in philosophy from Denison University and a Juris Doctorate from the University of Michigan. She lives in Ohio with her husband and a sweet but stupid dog, and is working on *Choices*, the sequel to *Foreseen*. Her website is www.terrilynnesmiles.com.