

Clash Champions

by David Turover

Episode 1

Hello Jill

Table of Contents

Prequel: Westglen.....	1
Prequel: Midnight.....	12
Prequel: Strange People.....	17
Part 1: Encounter.....	22
Part 2: Let's Try That Again.....	29
Part 3: The Bounty Hunter.....	35
Part 4: Shopping Trip.....	42
Part 5: Evening Interlude.....	65
Part 6: Explain Everything.....	74
Appendix.....	83

Prequel: Westglen

The small town of Westglen was two rows of wooden buildings in the middle of a vast prairie.

Andy Olson rode into town on his white horse wearing a boyish smile on his face, a pistol at his side, a rifle on his back, and a wide-brimmed white hat to cover himself from the sun. There was no dirt on his white vest or his unscuffed boots which looked like they might have been purchased at a department store a half hour earlier, and the light blue shirt under his vest looked like it had been pressed.

"Good morning, Andy!" A bespectacled shopkeeper waved at him.

"Good morning, Gunther!" Andy waved back.

"Morning, Andy!" The rider received another greeting from a black-bearded man with a sheriff's star on his vest.

"Howdy, Sheriff!" Andy returned the greeting.

The sheriff had some news for Andy. "The out-of-towners invited us to a friendly game of poker at Rosewater's saloon if you want to join in."

Andy grinned. "That sounds like fun!"

Scene: The Rosewater Saloon

Inside the Rosewater Saloon, a rough but handsome man sat at the bar. He had not shaved that day. He pulled back his shot of whiskey, swallowed it down, and set the small glass down on the bar with the four others.

The lady who ran the saloon returned behind the counter to deal with him. "Are you done there, Dick? Would you care for another?" She raised a bottle of whiskey.

The man quietly shook his head and held a hand over the empty

shotglasses.

The woman returned the bottle behind the bar. "That'll be fifty cents, Mister Wood, whenever you're ready."

"Thank you, miss." The man sat still for a few seconds, then reached into his pants pocket.

In the corner of the bar sat a group of three men playing cards.

"I fold," said the sheriff, laying his cards on the table. A ten high gave him little choice.

Andy Olson smiled as he showed his hand. "I have four of a kind. Lucky sevens. Hah."

A third player wore a vest over a long-sleeved black shirt and a red neckerchief around his neck. He sweated nervously. "Uh, let me take a close look at my hand..." He brought his cards below the table, shook his arms, shuffled his cards between his hands, shook his arms again, and and smiled. "All right. I got five of a kind." He laid five cards on the table, each an Ace of Hearts.

"Well, I'll be!" exclaimed Andy. "I ain't never seen such luck as that!"

The sheriff interrupted him. "Now wait a darn minute. I ain't never seen no deck of cards that had a five of a kind."

The cheater nervously chuckled. "Heh heh... I guess you found us out, Sheriff. The truth is..." He put on his black hat, stood up, drew his pistol, and brought his neckerchief up over his nose to cover his face. Several similarly-dressed men in the room did likewise. "We're bandits and we're robbin' this whole town. The poker game was only to distract you."

Andy politely protested. "But you said it would be a *friendly* game of poker."

The sheriff said, "He might have been lyin'."

The bandit leader yelled out to the room. "Hand over all your monies and your valuables and your valuable money, and don't get any other ideas."

One of the bandits pointed a gun at the lady barkeeper, who had picked up a chair. She said defensively, "I am only moving this chair."

Her voice distracted a second bandit. Dick tapped this bandit on the shoulder, then punched him in the face when he turned to look. This distracted the bandit who had drawn on the barkeeper, who brought the chair down on his head.

The saloon's honest patrons followed their lead and began fighting with the other bandits. As the bandit leader turned to look over his shoulder at the chaos, Andy and the sheriff stood up to join in the fight.

Two bandits ran in through the swinging saloon doors with pistols in their hands. Dick kicked one in the chest, who stumbled back into the other. He then swung his fist and punched the first bandit in the head, knocking his head back into the head of the second bandit. Both fell unconscious.

The bandit leader turned back to the cardplayers and immediately took a clean right hook to the face from Andy Olson. The bandit leader stumbled and fired his pistol as he fell, hitting the sheriff in the thigh.

"I'm hit!" The sheriff fell backwards, missing his chair and landing on the floor.

Dick quickly turned to the barkeeper. "We need bandages and a clean handkerchief." She took a glance at the room to see that the locals had the bandits handled, then nodded and ran for the supplies.

Andy knelt by the sheriff. "Sheriff! You'll be all right! We'll get you to Doc, and he'll fix you right up!"

The sheriff looked up at his friend. "It hurts, Andy!"

Standing a short distance away, Dick spoke with little emotion. "Good. That means you're alive."

The sheriff continued talking to the white-vested man. "I'm bleedin' so much. Tell me I'm not gonna die, Andy."

Andy, the white-vested man, said some comforting words. "You're not gonna die, Sheriff."

Dick added his own apathetic opinion. "It's not too bad. It missed your artery. I've seen worse."

The barkeeper returned with the bandages and handkerchief. She handed them to Andy, who placed the handkerchief on the sheriff's wound and began wrapping the bandages around his leg.

The sheriff looked up at Andy with despair in his eyes. "Andy... tell my wife..." He had second thoughts. "Wait. I'm not married. Well, I durn well better live through this so I can find myself a wife!"

The barkeeper could make an offer. "There are several ladies upstairs who are looking for a husband."

The sheriff was not too fond of that idea. "I meant a decent wife, Emma. I have standards."

Andy finished tying the bandage and gave the sheriff a pat on the shoulder. "That's tied up, now let's get you up and over to Doc's place."

Andy and Dick leaned in so the sheriff could put an arm over each of their shoulders. After they had lifted the sheriff to his feet, Andy turned to Dick and said, "Thanks for the help, Dick."

Dick smiled. "Not a problem, Andy."

Scene: The sheriff's office

The hobbled sheriff, using a cane to support himself, winced with pain

as he sat down in the guest's chair because it would be too much trouble to get to the chair behind his desk.

A panicked cowboy opened the door and burst into the room. "Sheriff! Someone's been rustlin' mah cattle!"

The sheriff sighed and tapped his cane on the ground. "I can't walk and Andy's out of town... Why don't you see if Dick Wood can help you."

Scene: Prairie

Dick Wood stepped through the open prairie, carrying a shotgun and wearing two crossed bandoliers of shotgun shells over his shirt.

A steer turned its head and mooed at him.

The steer was floating a foot off of the ground, slowly rising upward in a wide beam of blue light.

Dick looked up. The beam of light led to a flying saucer hovering about 20 yards up with a ring of lights on its underside flashing in a circular pattern. He raised his shotgun and fired. One of the lights went out and shards of glass fell to the ground. The saucer shuddered as something exploded inside of it.

With smoke pouring out of the damaged section of the ship, the saucer dropped the steer and attempted to hover away before veering out of control and crashing to the ground.

Scene: The sheriff's office

A panicked cowboy burst into the room. "Sheriff! The railroad company men are coming into town, and they look like trouble!"

Scene: Westglen, outskirts

A steam-belching locomotive slowly chugged toward town carrying three cars behind it. Robotic arms drew railroad ties and rails from dispensers on the side of the second car and laid them on the ground in front of the locomotive, and another pair of mechanical arms hammered the rails down with spikes.

The sheriff and the cowboy met the railroad company man and several of his armed guards at the edge of town. The company man was a tall thin man with a thin curled mustache who wore a business suit and a two-foot-tall stovepipe hat with a chinstrap to prevent it from blowing away at the slightest wind. He held up a piece of parchment and made his case. "The Governor has granted the Railroad Company the authority to run a route through Westglen, and anything within three yards of the new railroad in either direction will become Railroad Company property. I have decided to run the railroad *through* Westglen, and anything we find along the rail line, such as whatever we find where the bank used to be, will become, legally, Railroad Company property! Ha ha ha ha ha!"

The sheriff and the cowboy turned and headed back into town. Once they were out of the Railroad Company man's earshot, the sheriff quietly spoke to the cowboy. "Get me Andy Olson." The cowboy nodded. The sheriff continued. "And get me Emma Rosewater."

The cowboy was surprised to hear that name. "You mean the crooked barkeep what waters her drinks?"

"That's the one," the sheriff said. He had one more name. "And get me Dick Wood."

Several minutes later, the Railroad Company's engine approached a hastily abandoned stable on the edge of town. Armed company men stood inside and on top of the train's cars, every one wearing a black cowboy hat. The Railroad Company's man stood by the road leading out of town to watch his engine do its work.

Emma Rosewater hurried down the road, wearing a revealing dress

that accentuated her cleavage. She walked up to the Railroad Company man and called out to catch his attention. "Excuse me! Excuse me sir. Might I beg of you to reroute your train? The good people of Westglen might have something to offer you in exchange for your kindness and decency in this matter." She batted her eyelashes at him.

The Railroad Company's man scratched his chin. "It would need to be a magnificent offer to change my mind."

Emma held up her purse and reached into it. "I do have something in my purse that might enhance your disposition." A crack rang out and the company man fell as she shot him in the face with her hidden pistol. The man's two bodyguards were too shocked to react before she shot one of them. The other guard drew his gun on her but was felled by a rifle shot.

From behind a barrel, Andy Olson ejected a spent shell and reloaded his rifle.

The sheriff yelled out to the railroad car. "Your man's down! Stop your monstrosity."

One of the railway men on the roof of the locomotive fired a rifle at the sheriff and missed. The sheriff stuck his cane in the ground and stumbled for cover with the help of the cowboy. Andy Olson aimed his rifle at the reloading attacker, then adjusted his aim and shot down a different company man who had just raised his rifle at them.

The locomotive crashed into the side of the abandoned barn. As the roof began to collapse, Dick Wood leaped from the roof and fired his shotgun before he landed on the top of the train. The man he had hit bent over and fell off the side of the train while Dick Wood helped a few others off with his gun butt and a hard kick.

Inside one of the passenger cars, the Railroad Company men saw their companions being thrown from the roof one after another. There was a pause for several seconds before Dick Wood kicked the door in and aimed his shotgun at them. The men lay down their guns and raised their arms.

Scene: The sheriff's office

The same panicked cowboy burst into the room. "Sheriff! We're being attacked by Indians!"

Outside of town, a small army of whooping Plains Indians rode toward Westglen, armed with bows and arrows. Some of them were wearing Cleveland Indians hats and jerseys.

The cowboy added, "... and Mexicans!"

Outside of town, a small army of sombrero-wearing Mexicans rode toward Westglen led by a wide-bodied man with a rainbow-colored poncho. Some of them were carrying mariachi band instruments instead of guns. Their leader yelled "Atacad!"

The cowboy added, "... and the Ku Klux Klan!"

Outside of town, a small army of hooded Ku Klux Klan members rode toward Westglen carrying Tiki torches and Confederate flags. Their leader shouted "yee-haw!"

The cowboy finished. "... all at the same time!"

The sheriff sat straight, raised an arm, and waved his hand in a circle above his head. "Get me everybody."

Scene: The Rosewater Saloon

The cowboy burst through the swinging doors and shouted "EVERYBODY!"

He had the attention of everybody: Andy Olson; Dick Wood; Emma Rosewater behind the bar; two stranded space aliens, one with an arm in a sling; the other customers; and several defeated bandits that had stayed in town.

Scene: Westglen main road

An army of rifle-bearing cowboys, clerks, and shopkeepers collected themselves and marched along the dirt road. Emma Rosewater led a squad of scantily clad women of ill repute with rifles in hand.

The hobbling sheriff waved them forward. "Go on! I'll catch up."

Scene: Outside Westglen

Seen from above, the three attacking armies conveniently converged towards the one point in the small town where the people were making their defense. The townspeople took aim from behind a hastily constructed barrier of overturned wagons. A few arrows flew in as the Indians began attacking. The townsmen returned fire with a wave of rifle and shotgun fire and a laser beam from the pistol of the one healthy alien.

Andy Olson aimed carefully and fired. An Indian fell off his horse. "I got one!" he reported proudly.

Dick Wood aimed his shotgun in a different direction and fired. The booming blast knocked the leader of the Mexican army off his horse as if he had been tied to a rope and reached its limit while his horse kept going.

Dick Wood took a second shotgun from a young girl of the town and handed his spent shotgun down to her. As the young girl began reloading his first gun, and as incoming gunshots splintered the wood of the barrier, Dick Wood aimed and fired and knocked the leader of the Ku Klux Klan off his horse.

The townspeople continued exchanging fire with the three armies until one of the Klansmen stopped his horse and shouted, "Hey! Wait a minute! Don't we all hate each other?"

The other armies stopped and looked at him.

A Mexican said, "Si."

An Indian said, "Yup."

All three armies turned their weapons on each other. After a single salvo, all of them lay dead.

The confused townspeople stood and watched. The sheriff said, "I guess that's it."

Scene: The sheriff's office

The same familiar cowboy burst into the room. "Sheriff! Come on out. You'll want to have a look at this!"

The sheriff rose to his feet and followed the cowboy out of the building.

Scene: Westglen main road

The sheriff stepped out into the street and looked up to where the cowboy was pointing. Several other townsfolk were looking in the same direction. Far above them, an egg-shaped flying ship zoomed around in a broad circle as it spiraled down toward the town.

The sheriff gave his best educated guess as to what it might be. "That there must be one of them French dirigibles that I've heard tell of."

Scene: Outside Westglen

The egg-shaped ship slowly settled into the grass outside the town. A transparent elevator lowered from the rear of the ship and let off a rather ordinary-looking middle-aged woman who was overweight and carried a large pistol strapped to her hip. She began walking toward the edge of town, where most of the residents had gathered to watch the ship land.

The sheriff turned to Andy. "Andy, do you know what they say about French women?"

Andy shrugged. "Nope."

The sheriff said, "Neither do I. And that has me worried."

The unknown woman walked up to the crowd of spectators and looked at Dick Wood. "Mister Wood?"

He acknowledged her. "You can call me Dick." He showed no sign of his surprise that she knew who he was.

The woman held out her hand and introduced herself. "My name is Irene Harkness, and I have a business proposal for you. It would involve travel far away and a long term commitment."

Dick shook her hand. "I'm willin' to hear it. How far are we talking?"

Prequel: Midnight

The dull red moon hung large in the starry sky, a dim glow around its edges. Only the vaguest outline of the dark landscape could be seen. The eye of a nightbird could have seen the movement of people going about their business in the darkness, but the human eye would have had difficulty discerning any shape.

Suddenly the stars nearest the moon began to fade out as the moon's left edge glowed ever more brightly. The moon's redness turned to white as if an infection were abandoning it. The sun's light soon returned to the earth, illuminating a fortress of black stone defending a city of black men.

Observing the eclipse by its reflection off a hallway was the castle's ruler, a young woman of 17 years wearing a gown befitting nobility and an expression of some sorrow. A courtier came to her with a message. "Lady Midnight, your decision is needed on the dispute with the barons regarding the taxation of manufactured goods from across the northern sea." After one last forlorn look outside, she exhaled sadly and drew herself away. Her people did need her again, but this was boring.

It was now midday. The sun shone brightly over Castle Midnight and the city's inhabitants. The moon still hung in the sky, its great size dwarfing that of the shining sun.

Inside the castle, Lady Midnight shared drinks with a few trusted confidantes. She set down her drink. "I feel in a quandary."

"What about, Rona?" asked the oldest aide, a gray-haired woman holding her mug of warm cider with both hands.

"Shall we need to call a council?" asked the youngest aide, a man in his late 20s who sliced pieces off an apple with a knife while he casually leaned back in his chair.

"No..." Rona, the Lady Midnight, hesitated. It was not something she wished to admit, but she felt that she could trust these two. "I do not feel happy ruling, and I am not altogether certain that I am doing it

correctly."

The younger adviser offered a simple answer. "Get good advice from good people. Make sure they're not in it for themselves. Make sure the army is behind you. Beyond that, a kingdom runs itself."

The older aide touched Lady Midnight's wrist and offered more specific advice. "Have you considered taking a husband?"

That suggestion missed the mark widely. "Eh, no. There is no one that I fancy who I would also trust with the kingdom."

The younger adviser cut another chunk off his apple and cut to the heart of the matter by asking the unasked question. "So what would you rather be doing?"

Lady Midnight looked down before answering. "Honestly... I miss taking vengeance on my enemies."

Her advisers chuckled. The elder confidante said with a smile, "We are at peace with our neighbors now and it would be best to keep it that way."

The younger aide offered an alternative. "You know, your grandfathers used to have hunting parties." Lady Midnight closed her eyes and looked downward, saddened by another reminder of her murdered family. But the past was past. She had to get over it. The younger aide continued. "The deer would come out during the small night. Sometimes they wouldn't."

Lady Midnight continued the discussion with her two confidantes as they walked into the main court. "I feel like there is no excitement in my life anymore. Nothing interests me."

A courtier yelled out as he and a guard ran up to them. "Lady Midnight!" She turned, accepting the interruption. The courtier soon arrived and could speak in a normal voice. "There is a strange man at the gates who wishes to speak with you. He calls himself Lexington."

Lady Midnight spoke while the courtier paused to take a breath. "I

know no one by that name."

The guard floridly described the stranger. "His skin shines as brightly as the sun!"

The courtier continued. "No one has heard of him, but he speaks like a nobleman."

Lady Midnight thought this was interesting.

Lady Midnight sat in her grandfather's throne to receive the strange visitor. His skin was almost as bright as they said, an oddity that drew nearly every resident of the castle to have a look. Wispy curls of white hair covered his head. His wrinkled face suggested he might be in his mid-60s, but still healthy.

As he introduced himself, the strange man spoke in an unusual accent that a visitor from Earth might have identified as British. "Good day, Lady Midnight. My name is Rickard Lexington, and I am a recruiter for a fighting tournament that is called the Crash Championship. We seek out the most talented fighters from wherever we can find them. We have heard great stories about your accomplishments, and I was wondering if you might be willing to consider an offer to observe our tournament, and, perhaps participate if it would interest you."

This offer did interest Lady Midnight.

The strange visitor Rickard Lexington left the castle accompanied by two royal guards and a fourth figure whose body was concealed by a well-worn hooded dark blue cloak, whose face was hidden by a kerchief, and who wore a set of metal claws bound to the right arm, two daggers at the side, a shortbow and quiver of arrows on the back, and small pouches on the belt. Soft shoes minimized the noise of her footsteps.

The townspeople gathered to see her leave, and the rumors began. Lady Midnight's services were needed again somewhere very far away.

Back at the castle, Lady Midnight's closest confidantes considered the consequences of her absence. The younger of them was already considering countermeasures. "We'll need to tighten security, maybe hire an actress to play her part for special appearances."

The elder had not thought that far ahead. "Do you think people would take advantage of us?"

"I guarantee it." The younger aide kicked the black stone floor.

A few days later, the two royal guards returned. The elder of the two aides was there to receive them.

The first guard explained why they had returned without Lady Midnight. "She said that she felt safe, and that our services were no longer needed." He handed over a bound scroll. "And we were starting to miss our families."

The aide slipped the ribbon off the scroll and opened it. "This is Rona's handwriting."

The second guard exclaimed in an awestruck voice. "There were so many amazing things! We will be telling stories for months, and no one will believe any of them!"

On another day, soon after, the guards escorted a woman into the castle. Her outfit was similar to Lady Midnight's combat outfit but more garish and stylish. Her shoes were not made of padded leather but had the appearance of velvet. Her bow was a composite type and was not fashioned from wood but from a lighter and easier-bending material that had a glossy black appearance. Her shining gem-studded cape was certainly not something that a sneak in the night would have worn on the job. None of her belongings had much sign of wear on them.

Lady Midnight's two closest confidantes happily received the woman. The youngest was first to speak. "I see that rumors have gotten out that we were considering hiring an actress. You came prepared."

The visitor stood confused. "I am Rona."

Lady Midnight's aides looked at each other and laughed. The younger one smiled. "She's good. Sounds like her too."

The visitor looked toward the elder aide who stepped forward with a gentle smile, seeing through the act. "Madam, Lady Midnight is about five or ten years younger than you are."

The visitor stood still. "Seven years." A tear rolled down her cheek. "It has been seven wondrous years."

Prequel: Strange People

Scene: Cumberland Raceway, entrance

A banner hung on the wall of the entrance of the Cumberland Raceway to promote Race a Cop day with the smiling face of Sergeant Arthur Hawk, the popular public relations officer of the Portland police department.

Standing outside of the entrance, the middle-aged businessman Howard Gutman passed the time by playing a holographic video game projected by a headband with an attached transparent eyepiece that overlaid statistics onto his view. He steered a holographic racecar right or left by raising his fingers up and down in small motions at the edges of his field of vision.

A woman wearing white elbow-length gloves tugged at the arm of his shirt. "Howie, he is here!" Seemingly and actually out of place and time, Princess Strawberry Fragar was dressed in a red gown with pink speckles on the skirt and she wore a golden crown on top of her head.

Howie held up his left hand, steering his fictional car into a fictional railing. "Just a minute. I'm almost done with this level."

"Howie! He is here now!" Strawberry impatiently implored Howie to move, but he was focused on his video game. Strawberry turned away from him and looked to the side.

Sergeant Hawk held his helmet at his hip as he walked along with a group of teenagers and adults. He gave a friendly lesson to a teenager. "You did the right thing by slowing down. Your life is more important than the race, and I will see you again next month. Right?" The teenager smiled and nodded.

Strawberry left Howie's side to do the job herself. She daintily lifted off the ground with one long step and then stumbled forward clumsily as she landed poorly after rediscovering that she could not float in a dimension without magic. When she finally regained her balance, she found herself standing in front of a surprised Sergeant Hawk and his

guests.

Strawberry began her sales pitch before she was fully upright. "Hello, Sergeant Hawk! May I interest you in some outside work?"

Hawk had no idea who this silly woman was or what she might have wanted. "Uh... How far outside? Is there a costume party or something?"

Strawberry smiled as she adjusted the crown on her head. "It is an 'or something.'"

Scene: Unpaved Forest Road

The short-statured black-haired traveler walked alone along a wide and well-trodden dirt road that cut through a forest. Weighed down by a heavy backpack with enough gear for a long trip, the traveler wore a black cloak and black-painted steel pauldrons -- shoulder guards -- that had been decorated with a network of thin gold plating to focus and reroute magical energies. Underneath all of that equipment was a thin young woman named Catherine Black. People called her Cat.

Cat carried a sword at her side and wore a protective vest of leather straps covering a layer of chain mail. These roads were dangerous, and the danger could come from any direction. Monsters existed and would attack a lone traveler. Most trouble would come from other people, and supernatural encounters were not uncommon.

The encounter up ahead did not seem supernatural, but something about these people was far from normal. As the three old men walked toward her, Cat dropped her pack and reached for her sword. All three of them were smiling and staring at Cat like they intended to kidnap her. However, none of them looked like a threat. They were too old to fight. She could sense no magic from them. Moreover, they all looked really weird.

The old man on her left had a drinker's belly and a face that showed a history of fighting. In one hand he carried a simple club that had been milled to a smooth and long shape. He wore a white shirt and pants

decorated with very thin blue vertical stripes and the word "Bandits" sewn into the shirt in large letters.

Contrasting with the lumbering lumber-wielding Bandit, the taller old man in the middle maintained a straight posture. His facial features were thin and sharp, with a short salt-and-pepper mustache and a growing touch of gray at the sides of his short black hair. He wore smooth black armor that was made of a hard material that was not metal, and he carried an instrument strapped to his back that was probably a weapon, but was not any kind of item that Cat recognized.

The old man on the right wore mottled clothing of chaotically mixed grays and greens, a unique design that would hide him well in the forest. He wore a headband around his silver hair and a wide grin on his face. An unrecognizable L-shaped device sat in an external pocket at his hip where a weapon should be. The many pockets and pouches on his belt and vest suggested that he might be the only one of the three who was prepared for travel, although whatever provisions he could carry in them might last only a day or two.

The old man with the club chuckled and gave away their intentions. "There's a sweet-looking little girl walking alone. Is that the one you want?"

Cat pulled a few inches of her sword out of her scabbard as a warning, but she wanted to hear some answers before she killed them. "Alright, what's going on here? I have never seen a bandit who was dumb enough to write the word 'bandit' on his clothes, and --"

The Bandit proudly grinned. "Hey, don't knock the Bandits. We won eleven World Series." His smile was missing a couple of teeth.

Cat had no idea what that meant, so she finished what she had been saying. "-- and anyone that dumb would not live to be as old as you guys are, so what's really going on here?"

The man on the right asked a question of the man in the middle. "Is that Cat Black?"

"Of course that's Cat Black," said the man in the middle.

Cat drew her sword while glancing behind her to make sure that she was not being surrounded. There was no one else around. "You know who I am. What do you want with me?"

The man on the left began to open his mouth, but the man in the middle stopped him with a warning. "Hold your tongue if you intend to keep it."

"I was just gonna..." the Bandit started.

The man in the middle would have no patience for it. "You were planning to antagonize her with a lewd comment."

The Bandit shrugged guiltily. "Well... yeah." He raised his club to his shoulder and rested it there.

The man on the right quickly rerouted the conversation. "Miss Black, to get to the point, we want to hire you."

"Hire me for what?"

The man on the right answered vaguely. "To fight some people."

Cat resheathed her sword to talk business. "If that's the case, I need to know who it is you want me fight and what their powers are – if they didn't have powers you wouldn't be talking to me – and I charge a negotiation fee."

The man in the middle reached into a pouch on his belt. "This always works." His black-gloved hand held out a small pile of gold wafers.

Cat eagerly took a close look. "Is that real gold? You're not fooling me with that?" Her magic sense could tell that it was indeed real gold.

The man smiled at how easy this was. "I believe that this will cover your negotiation fee--"

"It does, that!" Cat eagerly took the gold.

--and we have more where that came from." The man let Cat pick the wafers from his hand.

Cat smiled happily. "You weirdos have hired yourself a sorceress!" She lifted her pack and joined the old men. "Now where are we going?"

Clash Champions
Season 1 - Episode 1 - Part 1
Encounter

Scene: Earth?

The sky above Los Angeles glowed a dull red as the dust in the upper atmosphere blotted out the sun. A few thin black clouds hung in the air above the ruined city. The buildings still stood tall, but the missing windows and the silence gave no sign of life.

Scene: Office building

Inside what had once been a typical office building, the skeleton of a monster lay on the ground in front of an open doorway where it had been killed. The bladed boots on its feet and the armor covering its chest were those of a soldier. The long jaw of sharp teeth showed it was not human.

A haggard young woman roughly stepped over the skeleton. Her black hair was an unwashed mess. She carried something large, heavy, and black in her hands.

She walked past the battle-scarred office furniture to the snack vending machine. After propping the heavy object she was carrying against the wall, she threw the vending machine to the floor and turned it over on its back with little apparent effort. She dropped to her knees and punched her fist through the plexiglass to grab the last item: a Fruity Oaty Bar. It was never her favorite, but it was food.

She thought she heard something. A tapping noise, soft and steady. Water? Footsteps? She raised her head to listen and pulled her unwashed hair away from an ear. Definitely footsteps. Not an animal. Not heavy enough to be a Lizard. A person? Impossible. She must be imagining things. She shook her head and returned her attention to the granola bar, biting off the end of its wrapper and spitting it away as the steady noise grew louder.

"There she is!" The man's playful voice was impossible to ignore. Shocked, she dropped her dinner and held still.

"Hi, Jill!" The voice again. She quickly raised her head to see a balding man in his late forties, fatter and in better spirits than anyone deserved to be after an apocalypse. He wore what looked like a plain navy blue t-shirt, pleated beige cargo shorts, a fanny pack and tool belt with a several unidentifiable items attached, and a tinted eyepiece attached by a thin arm to a plastic ring around his left ear. He waved at her. "My name is Miguel Legato and I'm a recruiter for the Crash Championship. You can call me Mick."

"Mick." Her mouth made the word. It had been a while since she had spoken to anybody.

"Yeah!" Mick grinned enthusiastically. "We'll get along great!"

Jill blinked, still unsure how to react.

Mick switched to his sing-song voice. "I've got something for you." He reached down his front, unzipped the pouch at his waist, and produced a round orange object. "It's an orange!" He smiled and tossed it at her. It bounced off her shoulder and began to roll away. She pounced on it, brought it to her mouth, and chomped into it, eating the rind and all. Sweet juice poured down her chin.

"It's a Valencia." Mick said this last word with extra flair. "You like it? I bet you like it."

Jill felt that something was not right. This was too good to be true. She cautiously examined what was left of the orange. "What is this?"

Mick answered the unexpected question. "It's... an orange?"

"No..." Jill's hands shook. "It's not real. This can't be real. What am I eating. What am I eating." Her voice rose to a scream as she threw the orange aside. "WHAT AM I EATING???"

"That *was* an orange," Mick said with some concern in his voice. His concern quickly dissipated. "I can get you another. I can get you all of

the oranges you will ever want, better food than that granola bar you were noshing on, clean clothes, and a shower, because you could use one." He unconsciously put a hand to his nose. "You just have to come with me and I'll get you all these things."

"Don't trust him, Jill."

Jill looked to her side to see who was speaking. This third voice came from a young girl of about eight years old who looked like a younger version of Jill. Jill turned her head back to Mick, and the younger girl was gone as suddenly as she had appeared.

"What are you?" Jill asked Mick.

The question surprised Mick. "Oh, me? I'm Mick... I'm a businessman. That's what this symbol means." He put his finger and thumb on the clip-on symbol at the top of his shirt. "I'm licensed for dimensional splitting and transport of people and materials. My ship is parked outside..."

As Mick talked, Jill stood up and walked to the side wall and retrieved a gigantic black gun of impossible bulk, over three feet long with a stock that was almost as tall as her torso and about half as wide. Jill hefted it with a little difficulty. She was used to carrying it around.

Mick cautiously took a step back. Jill interrogated him further. "Your ship?"

"Yeah, I have a ship!" Mick beamed with pride. "We can just walk out and get going and I'll get you off this planet and we'll go someplace better."

Jill did not believe him. "The Lizards will come. They will hunt you down."

Mick smiled. "We won't have to worry about lizards where we're going. There are only people. And some bird people and insect people and there are some lizards too but they are friendly lizards."

Jill shook her head. "That's not possible."

Mick happily disagreed. "Sure it is! Let me show you."

Jill considered her world's technology before the war. "We don't have any spaceships. We don't have space colonies." She thought for a moment before reaching her conclusion. "You're not real."

Mick patted himself. "Sure I'm real. I'm pretty sure I'm real."

Jill looked to her side for a few seconds. She turned back to Mick and smiled. "Anna says you're not real."

"Anna?" Mick asked with confusion as this conversation went in a direction he was not expecting. "Who is Anna?"

Jill continued smiling. "Anna is my sister." She liked her sister. They always got along well.

Mick was not happy to have to inform her. "Jill, I don't think your sister made it."

"What do you mean?" Jill nodded to her side. "She's right here."

Mick touched his eyepiece as he scanned the area. There was no one else there. "Uh, Jill?" He decided to roll with it. "She can come along with us! It'll be great! We can all go exploring--"

A touch of cruelty entered Jill's smile as she shook her head. "You're not real. It's not possible for you to be real. You're just another hallucination." She raised her gun at Mick.

Mick tried to talk her down. "Jill, put the gun down. No, bring it along because you'll need it --"

Jill grinned as her gun's barrel glowed white with energy. "... so I won't really be hurting anything."

Mick screamed "SHIELDS!" as he jumped to the side and ran out the nearest doorway, dodging a thin white laser beam that punched through the wall behind him and the wall behind that one.

Jill smiled happily. "I haven't hunted anything in weeks. This'll be fun."

Scene: Office building, hallway

As Mick ran down the hallway, something on his belt beeped and a mechanical voice spoke. "Voice command not recognized."

Mick yelled at it. "Raise personal shields!"

This resulted in the same beep and response. "Voice command not recognized."

Mick opened the door to a stairwell and entered as Jill fired a blue burst of energy at him from the end of the hallway.

Scene: Office building, stairwell

The pressure wave from an explosion in the hallway knocked the door off its hinges and into Mick, throwing him down the stairs. As he lay still on the landing, Mick spoke the command once more. "Raise personal shields." A shimmer briefly covered him. He sighed. "Thank you." He put his hands to the floor and began to stand up.

As Mick got to his feet, Jill appeared in the doorway. "There you are." She smiled maliciously while a red light glowed within her gun's barrel.

Mick jumped down to the next level of stairs as Jill fired a red burst of energy into the wall behind him. Chunks of the wall flew out, as did smaller bursts of red energy that exploded and threw bits of red shrapnel in all directions, further scarring the already battle-damaged walls. The energy and debris from the explosions bounced off of Mick's personal shield, but there was a limit to how much it could deflect.

The dismantled door covered the stairs in front of Jill. She kicked it

down the stairs and fired a shattering blast of red shrapnel into it.

Mick glanced back up at the sound and decided that he needed to get away from Jill quickly. He looked down and saw that the railing was missing from the lower level. He drew a cylinder with a handgrip from his toolbelt and pushed a button with his thumb. The cylinder produced a short blue lightsaber about eight inches long. Mick swiftly sliced out the railing to his side of the stairwell and jumped across the center of the stairwell to the lower stairs. His momentum carried him forward and he ran face-first into the far wall. His personal shield prevented any damage to his face, but his lightsaber punched a hole into the wall before it automatically turned off as he dropped it.

Mick bent down to pick up his lightsaber and hurried down the stairs to the next door. It would not open. Looking through a window in the door, he saw that the doorway was blocked by a barricade of office furniture. He hurried downward again and was stopped by a grim sight: beside the next door, the way down was blocked by the corpses of 7-foot-tall space lizards with large holes in their power armor. He paused and heard their killer slowly stepping down the stairs towards him. He looked back and saw the gouge that his lightsaber had made in the wall when he ran into it. He looked ahead and saw that a large chunk of the nearby wall had been blasted out.

Mick turned his lightsaber on again and began carving a large circle into the damaged wall. "Wherever this goes... I guess I'm gonna find out." He kicked the circle, pushing it back an inch. He rushed forward and pushed it through and fell through the hole as Jill aimed her gun down the stairs at him.

Scene: Outside

Mick screamed "it figures!" as he fell three stories into the mud outside of the building. He groaned as he rolled over. "Yep, it figures." His scanner had fallen off his ear. He picked it up out of the mud, shook it, and glanced around.

The muddy area used to be a garden for long-dead flowers that would have grown next to the building. On the other side of a concrete

walkway, the former lawn was bare mud and dirt. A sign identified the building as once belonging to a company named Applied Nanotechnology. His egg-shaped ship, the size of a 2-story house, was still parked in the middle of the street behind it. Mick stood up, wiped his muddy shirt, and wiped his muddy hands on his pants.

Jill leaped down and landed on the concrete walkway in front of him, shattering it under her feet. Her heavy gun slipped out of her hands. She reached down to pick it up.

Mick tried to talk her down as he walked around her and toward his ship. "Uh, hey, Jill, could we talk about this? Less shooting? More talking?"

Jill lifted up her gun. "No. More shooting." She aimed at Mick and then saw a more appealing target. She turned her head to look. "What is that in the road? Is that your ship?"

Mick smiled. "Yes! Come on! Let's get you out of here."

Jill eagerly asked another question. "What would it look like if I shoot it?" She raised her gun and grinned as the barrel glowed blue. "Let's find out."

Mick yelled. "Emergency transport pattern alpha!" A shimmering beam of light surrounded Jill and she disappeared.

Mick sighed. "Well, that was a waste. Maybe I should try again. Another time." He turned and walked towards his ship.

Clash Champions
Season 1 - Episode 1 - Part 2
Let's Try That Again

Scene: Low-tech village

It was midafternoon on a calm preharvest day when the child's cry was heard throughout the campground.

"SPACESHIP!"

The children rushed from their cabins and tents to see the rare sight, with the adults soon following them. The glint of reflected light slowly became a gleaming silver pigeon that swooped rings around the settlement in a slow descent before landing somewhere beyond the cornfields, beyond the hills.

The children's awe was not reflected in the faces of the adults. One man spoke his mind for all of them.

"Oh, God, no."

An optimist placed the situation in a better light. "At least there is only one... so far. It might even be ours, although we... we never had anything like that." She could only hope.

Scene: Cabin

Inside one of the larger cabins, a bearded young man led a small group in weaving reeds. The products of previous sessions, a few baskets and a skirt, lay around a room that also contained woodworking tools, an anvil, and a fireplace. The craftsman himself wore a woven object of his own making, a square reed mat that hung from his neck by a leather strap and was decorated by columns of feathers and knotted strings of seashells.

A twelve-year-old boy was not really into it. "Why don't we just go into town again? The old clothes keep us warmer than anything we've

made."

The lead craftsman explained that there was a greater purpose to this activity. "The old clothes will eventually run out and wear out. It won't be in your time, but maybe in your grandchildren's time. By then, everyone will have forgotten how things are made if we do not make the effort to remember."

The man and woman who had seen the spaceship opened the cabin door and entered. The male witness spoke directly to the leader of the weaving session. "We are having a meeting. Immediately."

Scene: Dining Hall

Two other adults joined these three around a table in the campground dining hall. The male witness repeated the group's decision. "So. We are going to send... her."

"We *have* to," accepted the female witness.

Scene: Teepee

Set on a field away from the main campground was an amateurly constructed cone of long sticks that formed a simple shelter.

A two-seat hovercraft slowed down and settled to the ground outside. It was driven by the craftsman, and the female witness was his passenger. They looked like children inside the craft, which had been built for users that were a few feet taller than the average human adult.

The two stepped out of the craft and walked towards the shelter's entrance. "Jill?" the woman spoke. "Are you in there?"

Jill was curled up in the floor inside the shelter, wearing a full dress of woven reeds. A pair of sandals lay beside her. Behind her head, something large and rectangular was covered by a blanket and a pillow was propped against it.

The woman spoke again. "It's Sandra and Chris. Could you come out?"

Scene: Landing point

The oval ship's two tails had descended to a horizontal alignment when the speedy hovercraft drew near. A man was standing on a ramp at what might have been the rear of the ship.

The hovercraft's pilot, Jill, reported in on her radio. "I'm at the ship. There's one person here, a human. At least, he looks human." The passenger in the seat beside her was her large gun.

The response was quick. "What does he want?"

"I'll find out." Jill drove onward toward the ship. As she got closer, she could see that the visitor was a middle-aged man wearing casual prestrike clothing. Most clothes that old were worn to rags by now, but this visitor's clothes were in excellent condition. Jill's own dress was woven from grasses and reeds during one of Chris's crafting sessions.

At the ramp, Mick spoke to someone still inside the ship. "She's supposed to be in a village around here. It shouldn't be too hard to find. We'll just head up to the top of a hill and look around. Someone has to have a fire going."

Mick's companion walked down the ramp in hard leather boots. She wore the armor of a medieval soldier, with iron leggings and an iron chestplate covered by a sleeveless waist-length cloth drape with a green-and-white diamond pattern, and a well-worn cape that had originally been a creamy white color. Strands of blonde hair escaped from her gold-trimmed, open-faced helmet. She carried a sword in a scabbard at her side. Her equipment was very worn and had clearly been in many battles. She was a head's height shorter than Mick was, which became clearer to see as she stepped down the ramp towards him.

The armored woman spoke to Mick in a concerned voice. "I have no power here either. I maybe not be able to protect you."

They were interrupted by Jill's voice calling them from the hovercraft. "Hello there!"

The startled Mick turned around to see his guest. He looked at her through his scanner, then pulled the apparatus away to reveal his full face. His smile grew wider. "Jill! It's you! I've found you already and you aren't shooting at us! This is great!"

Jill hefted her heavy gun as she stepped down out of the hovercraft. She held the bulky weapon in both hands, pointing it away to the side while she addressed the strangers. "Who are you and how do you know my name?"

Mick smiled again. "Ah, that's a long story. You can call me Mick. Seeing as how that's my name, it wouldn't make sense to call me anything else unless you didn't like me." He chuckled.

Jill was not sure how to react. She glanced at Mick's companion, who met her eyes and raised a hand to salute her. "Good day, Miss Ross."

Jill reflexively answered. "Hi. um..." She stammered in her confusion and then shouted in a demanding voice. "How do you people know my name?"

"Oh," Mick explained, "I'll get to it. The short version is that I travel from world to world and we heard about your story. We'd like to make a deal with you and your village." He introduced the armored woman next to him. "This here is Tia. You might consider her another 'anomaly', not quite like yourself but she's had similar things done to her. Tia, go ahead and introduce yourself."

'Tia' stepped to the side of the ramp and spoke confidently. "My name is Celestia van Rijndael. It is a pleasure to meet you."

Jill fumbled her response. "I'm... Jill Ross but you already know that."

Celestia nodded understandingly and smiled. "Formalities are worth

maintaining for their own sake."

"Thank you." Jill was not quite sure what Celestia had said but she appreciated the accepting tone of voice.

Mick clasped his hands. "So, I'm here on business. Let's make a deal."

Scene: Dining hall

Jill attempted to explain the offer to the leaders of the survivor camp. "He wants me to fight this... bounty hunter in outer space, someone very powerful who he says is as strong as I am."

One of the leaders responded. "And he offers us food?"

Jill lifted a large sack and tossed it onto the table. The table shifted a bit as it landed. "He says this is seed grain. He says that the crops grown with it will produce viable seed and not die off. I was not aware that that was something we needed to be concerned about, but he said that there are other dealers that are not as reputable. There are more sacks on the hovercraft outside."

Another leader nodded approvingly. "Our next harvest could feed everyone for five years."

Chris, the craftsman, was not so convinced that was a good thing. "If people know we have this to fall back on, they will not put the effort into farming. And when it runs out..."

Jill continued. "He has some books on math, simple mechanics, nuclear power. He can provide us tools and equipment so we don't have to scavenge for them. We can start civilization over again."

Scene: Landing point

A small crowd of about twenty villagers had gathered. Jill drove the hovercraft to the ship, turned off the engine, and stepped out, carrying her large gun.

Mick stood at the bottom of the ramp to greet Jill. "Hey! Glad you're on board. Come on up and I'll show you around the ship." He patted her on the back as she walked up to the ship. A tear rolled down her cheek as she understood that she might not be coming back.

Celestia noticed that Jill was crying. "May I assist you with anything?"

Jill hesitated to say anything. "Please tell me that this will turn out all right."

Mick answered enthusiastically. "Oh, it's going to be fine! Everything is gonna go great!"

Celestia was cautious but confident. "I cannot make promises, but I will do what I can to see that all goes well."

Jill felt better at hearing that. "Thank you."

The ship's ramp rose up. Mick's voice boomed over a loudspeaker to the assembled villagers. "Could you all stand back a bit further? Further. Keep going. Alright, stay there."

They heard Jill's voice next. "I love you all, and I hope to be back soon."

A slightly annoyed Mick complained. "Hey, I thought I told you not to touch anything."

Some said the ship simply vanished, while others swore they saw it rise into the sky at an unimaginable rate of speed.

Clash Champions
Season 1 - Episode 1 - Part 3
The Bounty Hunter

Scene: Mick's ship, bridge

The bridge of Mick's ship was a little cramped. A U-shaped console provided both floating holographic and inset displays to Mick in the forward pilot seat and whoever would sit at seats on each side. There was some standing room between the ends of the console and the rear wall of the room, where there was a single entry door in the center. A small medicine cabinet was affixed to the wall at the rear port side. The rear wall on that side held a spray canister that looked like a small brown fire extinguisher. It was for repairing leaks.

Jill was awed by the starfield in the forward viewscreen. "We're in space already."

Mick leaned back in the pilot's seat. "Yep, I thought I'd take us straight to the rendezvous point. Tia, would you like to do the honor of scanning?"

Celestia had been distracted by her thoughts. She opened her eyes and looked up, focusing her attention on the present. "Yes, m'lord."

Mick casually make a joke of Celestia's formality. "Aw, don't m'lord me. Sir is enough."

"Yes, sir." Celestia turned her attention to her console.

Jill noticed that Celestia had seemed far less comfortable than Mick. She decided to ask about it. "Umm, Tia, is it?"

"Celestia," Celestia corrected her, then sighed as she realized she would not win this as long as Mick kept using her nickname. "You may call me Tia."

"Was something on your mind?" Jill asked.

Celestia turned her head to Jill and smiled. "Oh, I just... I wish I could have had that kind of send-off when I left my world." She turned back to the console to finish her assigned task.

"I... take it was not on good terms?" Jill asked. Celestia closed her eyes and nodded. Jill tried to comfort her. "I'm sorry."

Mick grinned. "Don't worry. You don't have to worry about those jerks anymore. I made sure of that. How's the scan coming along?"

"Scan..." Celestia waved a finger across the display, looking for the correct point to select.

Jill offered to do the job. "I can help with computers. My nanites can establish a direct interface--"

Mick waved her off. "Nah, this is training. She needs to learn."

Celestia tapped a point on the control panel and the the entire interface changed. "Is this the correct presentation?"

Mick gave her some help. "You're getting there. One more. It's on your left. Green button, physiometrics menu for the short range ship scan. Long range is under astrometrics, purple button. If it sounds confusing, it is. Whoever designed this menu system was an idiot."

Pressing the button gave Celestia new questions. "Do you want me to run a passive scan or an active scan? It says passive takes longer and does not work as well."

"Do 'em both. It's good practice." Mick then had another thought. "Definitely do an active scan. It'll wake her up if she's not expecting us back so early, although she should hardly have seen us leave, unless... oh, I don't think we established temporal lock when we came back, did we. I don't think we did it when we left, either. In either case we should be offset in realtime so it won't have been more than a few hours from her perspective."

The scanner results began appearing in tables of data on Celestia's console screen, updating constantly. Looking over her shoulder, Jill

was impressed. "Wow, that's really upper-division science stuff."

Celestia admitted ignorance. "I do not know what most of these numbers mean, but I suppose it is my duty to learn."

Jill recognized some of the heading names and pointed them out. "That's astronomy. Those have something to do with chemistry."

"There is more," Celestia said. "Pardon me while I move these records." Using finger motions, Celestia moved the holographic data table aside and showed Jill another part of the results that expanded in size as she made room on the console for it, while the data table shrank. "Over here, it distinguishes ships and planets by their size and speed and the pattern of energy that they radiate."

Mick interrupted them. "And we are being hailed." He made a few motions on his console. "And here we go."

The starfield disappeared from the main viewscreen and was replaced by the view of the pilot's chamber of a small starship. The pilot wore a suit of primarily red power armor that looked like it was put together from scrap metal, with several dings and scrapes attesting to its regular use in battle. The right arm of the pilot's suit ended in a tapering cylinder that extended an extra hand's length beyond where a normal person's arm would end. A small amount of light brightened the v-shaped viewport of the pilot's helmet. The dim lighting on the other ship added to the figure's mystique.

Mick started talking. "Ah, hello there, Alex. We have returned, and we were successful." He gestured towards Jill with an open hand.

"It took you long enough." The masked, modified, and amplified voice carried the full sense of impatience with which it was intended to be delivered.

"How long were we gone for?" Mick asked.

Alex answered with extra stress on each word. "Five days."

Mick didn't believe that. "Noooo, that's not right. You're putting me

on."

The power-armored pilot crossed its arms. "I have had to turn down several offers."

The embarrassed Mick apologized. "Sorry. It's a good thing I paid up front, yeah? I'll have to get the time synchronizer looked at. That's a serious problem."

"I've had longer waits before." Alex relaxed. "So that's the new candidate? She looks... normal."

"She's not." Mick said confidently. "Come over and have a look at her. Then we can head back to base."

Jill was surprised that Mick would make this offer. "You're inviting them over?" This Alex did not seem like a friendly person.

Mick nodded as if nothing were out of the ordinary. "Oh yeah, you two can start to get to know each other."

Jill saw the gaze of Alex's helmet looking at her through the viewscreen and decided to introduce herself. "Hi, my name is Jill, and I'm still not clear on exactly what this is about."

"Ha!" Alex laughed. "Mick, you do the best job of failing to explain things."

Mick chuckled. "Hey, I usually get around to it eventually. Tia, do you want to beam her over?"

"MICK." Alex said his name loudly enough to disrupt everyone's train of thought.

Mick blushed slightly in embarrassment. "Oh, yeah. Tia, Jill, the Alex in this universe is still concerned about her secret identity, so don't--"

"MICK..." Alex warned him again.

Mick cleared his throat and tried again. "Alex here has a secret

identity and is really serious about keeping Alex's identity a secret, so try to avoid referencing anything that might identify Alex such as age, appearance, contacts, or especially gender since there's a lot of prejudice in this universe against thinking women can be bounty hunters. Pretend she's a guy."

Alex crossed her arms, then uncrossed them. "I'm coming over just so I can punch you the next time you do that."

Mick took it lightly. "Alright. Tia, ready the transporter. You remember how to do that, right?"

Alex spoke first. "No, I'll use the hatch. Hold your position." The viewscreen flipped back to the stars as the communications channel closed.

"Well, that went well." Mick laughed. "You'd think I have stopped doing that by now, since she put it in our contract that it's costing me five thousand creds every time she sees me do that--"

Celestia corrected him. "Every time Alex sees you do that."

"That's what I said, right?" Mick asked. Celestia and Jill shook their heads. Mick threw up his hands. "Majority wins. Anyways, she made it part of her contract shortly after I hired her. I just doubled her pay for the day if she holds me to it."

"You're still doing it," Jill noted. Celestia closed her eyes and tried to avoid laughing out loud.

Mick shrugged. "Am I? Hm."

They waited for a few more minutes as Alex's ship moved into position. A pair of clanks were heard as the dorsal airlock opened and closed, followed by lighter clanks as Alex descended a ladder and walked towards the bridge. The door to the bridge opened to reveal a figure who was no less imposing in the ship's brighter light, the power armor giving Alex a wider frame and several inches of height over everyone else.

Up close, the lighting revealed that Alex's armor was scarred by a multitude of scratches and scorch marks. A few off-color parts had been replaced relatively recently and were comparatively undamaged.

The details of the bounty hunter's gun-arm could also be seen more clearly. The weapon was encircled near its base by a metallic ring with six equally spaced attachment points. Further down it seemed to be segmented by thin gaps around its armored outer surface that served to dissipate air pressure and heat. One of these segments was also divided between top and bottom, with the bottom part being a removable module that was colored orange.

Alex walked toward Jill and looked down at her in both senses of the phrase. "You like lowtech, Mick. First you send me some soldier from the dark ages, and now you're having me fight a cavegirl."

Celestia was trained better than to react to taunts. Jill protested. "I'm not a cavegirl! And I'm not low tech! Well, maybe I am compared to you, but we had technology. We put people on the moon."

Mick pointed to Jill's gun that was propped against a wall in the back corner of the room. "Hey Alex. You see that gun over there? That's hers."

Alex looked at it and looked back to Jill. "Nice. I look forward to seeing what you will surprise me with, since there seems to be more to you than I can see right now."

Jill had a concern about who Alex was and why they were meeting. "Wait. Mick, is Alex the bounty hunter you wanted me to fight?"

Mick casually affirmed this. "Oh, yeah, we're friends."

Alex corrected him. "We are business partners."

Jill wondered what was really going on. "Why would you have me fight one of your... business partners?"

Celestia made a suggestion to Mick. "Perhaps you should explain everything to Jill."

Mick looked quizzically at her. "I thought I already did."

Celestia responded diplomatically. "You may have Jill confused with another recruit."

Mick had a flash of understanding. "Oh. Oh. Ohhh. Okay. Long story short, you'll be fighting a few bouts with Alex to see if you're any good or not. If it works out, there will be more fights in the future. More business. You'll be spending a week or two in our training facility, and you don't have any extra clothes, do you? I didn't see you bring anything along."

Jill did not. "No."

Mick had a solution to that. "Alright, there's a space station nearby that Alex and I like to go to because the mall has a full armory. We can go there, get Jill some clothes, pick up Tia's new armor at the same time, and while we're there let's get Jill a softsuit for extra protection." Mick rubbed his eyes. "We could do it tomorrow, maybe. I'm getting tired and I need to get put my head down for a bit. I think I've been up for twenty hours. Or if we want to get it taken care of right away..." he turned to the bounty hunter. "Alex, this is your neighborhood. How would you like to take Jill shopping?"

Clash Champions
Season 1 - Episode 1 - Part 4
Shopping Trip

Scene: Commerce Station hangar deck

Jill and Celestia walked across the metal hangar until it ended in a carpeted hallway that would lead them to the station's commercial promenade. Jill had many questions. "Um, Tia, is it?"

Only mildly offended, Celestia calmly responded with her given name. "Celestia."

Jill began to unload her questions. "Celestia. I'm not at all clear what's going on. Why is this space station here? Who built it and why haven't the Lizards attacked it yet?"

"It is--" Celestia quietly started, but Jill interrupted her with more questions.

"Why are there people here?" Jill continued, demanding answers but providing no time for them. "How are there people here? This, this all makes no sense! Sorry for interrupting you."

Celestia patiently waited for a time to intercede. "It may take some time to understand. We have traveled to a different order of worlds. The word that Mick uses is 'dimension'."

Jill blinked and thought about it. "We're in a different dimension? That would explain it."

"You are familiar with the concept?" Celestia was a little surprised that Jill accepted this answer, but few things surprised her greatly anymore.

Jill was indeed familiar with the concept. "They had it on TV shows all the time. Bad sci-fi. The kind of stuff I never watched."

Celestia was not familiar with the words 'TV' or 'sci-fi' but understood

the concepts of shows and watching them. "Do these words TV and sci-fi refer to a sort of play?"

Jill was a bit surprised at Celestia's question. "Yes. You don't know what TV is?" She remembered that her companion was wearing a medieval suit of armor, so she explained the term. "It's like a play that they record so you can watch it again any time you want."

Celestia was intrigued. "Perhaps some day you might show me the theater of your world?"

Jill was sadly reminded of the destruction that was brought to her Earth. "Sorry. There has not been any working TV in years, and there's not gonna be."

Scene: Space Station security checkpoint

An alarm blared as Jill and Celestia approached a security checkpoint. A blue-armored figure stepped forward and motioned for them to stop.

"Miss... Miss." He was talking to Celestia. "You'll need to power down your armor to twenty gamps or below before you can go any farther. Station regulations."

Celestia was baffled. "My armour is not powered."

"Maybe you forgot to turn it down, unless our sensors are picking up the flower power from your friend here." The guard chuckled at Jill. "We don't get too many antitechs in space for the obvious reasons. I hope you enjoy your stay here."

"I am very sure that there is no power in my armour." Celestia argued. "Can you check again?"

Jill stepped several paces away while the guard drew a black baton and waved it in front of Celestia. The guard put the baton away. "You're off. I don't even see the power source. What kind of armor is that, anyway? I've never seen anything like it."

"It is custom." Celestia said. "I am sorry if there was a problem."

"No, no problem at all!" The guard assured her. "I'm sorry that our systems flaked on you. Have a nice visit."

"Thank you." Celestia thanked him and continued onward.

Jill rejoined her and trust a fist into the air. "Flower power!" The two women shared a laugh.

Celestia asked Jill if she was serious. "Do you truly think it was reacting to you?"

Jill nodded. "Yeah, it probably saw my nanofield."

Celestia could not understand what Jill was talking about, but she now knew there was a name for whatever hidden power she already suspected Jill must have had for Mick to consider her valuable.

Scene: Space Station promenade

"Oh, wow." Jill was the first to react when they reached the commercial promenade. It was a long, wide walkway with a series of small shops stuck together on each side, like the malls that Jill suddenly remembered from before the invasion. What struck both women with awe was the novelty of the equal scene on the roof seven meters above. It was not a mirror, but the roof was a second floor with shops and people walking, all upside-down from their perspective. After every few shops, a artificial gravity arch on each side wall connected the two floors.

Jill thought about the scene. "How come the artificial gravity on the roof doesn't cancel out the artificial gravity on the ground?"

Celestia shrugged, the question being above her head, but then she saw a possibility. "There might be a regulator between the roofs here and the roofs above."

"Probably." Neither of them understood the technology involved, but that answer was enough to satisfy Jill's curiosity. She walked forward into the mall. "Hey, that looks like a clothing store." Jill turned and hurried toward it.

Scene: The wrong clothing store

Jill went to the nearest rack and examined a yellow sweater with sleeves that were wider than usual and far longer than the body. "What kind of style is this?" she wondered.

The insect behind the counter answered. "The human clothing store is five spots down and around."

"Thank you, sir." Celestia said as the two women exited in embarrassment.

Scene: Pedestrian arch

Jill and Celestia stopped as they reached one of the arch walkways that connected the two opposite floors of the space station's mall. A thin vertical sheet of transparent plastic walled off either side to keep teenagers from jumping off the middle. A handrail was attached to these walls.

Jill bent backwards to look up to the upper floor. Seeing no one there, she smiled and took a deep breath. "I think I can do this."

"Do what?" Celestia asked.

Jill answered by bending her knees and leaping up into the air with just enough momentum to pass through the zero-gravity layer, spinning as she reached the midpoint and falling onto the upper floor. Having spun too far to land on her feet, she cushioned the fall with her arms and let out a small shriek when she hit. She picked herself up, recovered a sandal that had been knocked off in the fall, then sat down in a cross-legged position and looked back up at Celestia on the opposite floor.

Celestia looked up to see Jill sitting and waving at her. The small crowd that had gathered to stare at Jill began to disperse after seeing her do nothing more than sit on the floor. Celestia looked down for a few moments, quietly attempting and failing to summon some of her own power.

"Tia?" Jill called her. "Come on up here!"

Accepting failure, Celestia turned toward the arch and began to walk, her boots clomping on the archway. She soon disappeared behind the advertisements lining the plastic walls. As she neared the halfway point, she looked through a gap in the paint and saw lines of red lights embedded into the walls between the roofs of the shops. Did these regulate the gravity somehow? She quietly continued walking until she completed the arch.

Scene: Clothing store

The space station's humble little clothing shop carried a greater and more exciting variety of items than either of the women was used to seeing. They engaged in a few seconds of aimless browsing and exploration before a salesman came to help them. "Might I serve you young ladies?"

"Oh, yes!" Jill answered.

Celestia added some details. "We are looking for clothing made of a strong material that can stretch and is somewhat resistant to fire and tearing."

The salesman visibly suppressed a laugh. "Madam, all of the most common materials in production today should account for your needs. You will want to look for items made with Durafibre, Tenstrong, or Joove Microthread, which should be everything in all of these racks--" his wave covered nearly the entire store.

Jill smiled. "Oh. That's good, then. Anything would work."

The salesman drew their attention to the luxury rack in the women's section where the items did not meet the ladies' requirements but he would earn a greater commission. "-- and the items over here are made with different materials to provide you the best in style and comfort. For example, these scarves on display are made with an all natural material called cotton."

Jill began looking through the clothes in the women's section to begin selecting the clothes that she would be wearing for the foreseeable future. She preferred simple and comfortable styles and was glad to find them. Unfortunately, the clothing sizes were in an unfamiliar measuring system: centimeters. She turned to the shopkeeper with an implied request. "I guess I'll need my measurements taken."

The salesman smiled. "Over this way." He led Jill toward a low platform that looked like a scale. A square arm rose up from the back of the platform and ended at a pair of attachments, a green light and a small black box with a wide mouth at the bottom. Simple outlines of shoeprints were drawn on the platform, making it apparent what Jill was supposed to do. The salesman warned Jill. "You do not need to remove... whatever it is that you are wearing. Simply step on the platform." The green light flashed, and the black box printed out a paper slip of numbers that gave her weight and measurements with a computer-scannable graphic code at the bottom.

Jill took the paper slip, looked at it, and then placed a hand on the printer. The salesman did not see her nanites leak into it. Jill smiled. "Neat." She withdrew her hand and her nanites and returned to look for clothing.

A black dress with lacy white shoulders caught Jill's eye. She compared its size to the numbers on the slip. "It would fit."

"Do you like it?" Celestia asked.

Jill did like it but did not like to admit it. "It's not something I'll wear every day, but it's nice."

The salesman picked it up for her. "A good start to your collection."

Jill noticed that Celestia was not looking at clothing. "Do you want to pick up anything for yourself?"

Celestia refused. "It would be an abuse of trust."

Jill looked at the underwear display and then back to Celestia. "Do you think he would mind if I got fancy underwear, or would that be an abuse of trust?" she asked half-jokingly, as if to challenge Celestia's formality.

Celestia inhaled before choosing the less serious of the answers that came to mind. "Would he know?"

Jill laughed. "No! I'm just wondering, would he see it in the bill and get upset or what."

Celestia chose to give a serious answer this time. "Remember the reason you are here. Your clothing should be chosen for that purpose." She did not know if it was appropriate to mention combat in the presence of a third party. "Once you have enough for your needs, Mick should expect that you will pick up a few additional items. After all, what you choose here will supply your entire wardrobe."

Jill glanced around the store. She had a question for the salesman. "Where are the socks?"

"They are on the other side of this rack," the salesman answered swiftly.

"Sir." Celestia caught the salesman's attention. She had remembered something that Mick had said earlier. "We have another question. Might you have something called a soft suit?"

The salesman was surprised to be asked that. Doesn't everyone know that a boutique is not an armory? Apparently not these two, and from the looks of them they might have good excuses for not knowing. "Oh, for a softsuit you will want to go to the civilian armory on the opposite level."

Scene: Scarlet Arms Armory

The two women walked into the public armory carrying four bags of Jill's new clothes. Jill's red dress was also stuffed into the bottom of one of the bags, as she had changed into a new outfit.

The armory contained a number of armor suits mounted on a side wall and on a few displays around the shop, and a wide variety of guns mounted on the opposite wall. Other displays included rows of helmets and boots, racks of handheld scanners and other equipment, different types of batteries to put into the equipment, and a bucket at the end of one rack holding spear-like portable shield generators.

A sign gave notice that all of the weapons were powered down and tracer tagged. Most of the weapons were one-handers but several larger weapons were available as well.

Jill went to the largest gun, put her bags down, and lifted it to see how heavy it was. "Wow, this is heavier than my nanogun."

The armory's shopkeeper, a red-headed woman in her early thirties, interrupted Jill from across the store. "Miss, that weapon is for a heavysuit with bearing gloves."

Jill leaned over to put the weapon back. "Yeah, that's more than I would be wanting to carry around."

The saleswoman rushed over to her. "Are you alright? You could throw your back out trying to lift one of the heavies."

Jill stood up and smiled. "I'm fine. I'm stronger than I look." Behind her, Celestia attempted to test the weapon's weight for herself. It did not want to move. She wisely chose not to strain herself trying further.

The saleswoman was astonished. "No kidding. I'm surprised you could lift it at all." She got to business. "So, you two are in the market for a weapon?"

Jill shook her head. "No, I already have a gun. I was just looking."

Celestia explained their presence. "We would like to purchase a soft suit for Jill."

Jill added to that. "Yes, and Mick said there should also be a suit of armor for Tia here."

"Celestia," Celestia corrected her, "and the armour might be in the name of Miguel Legato."

The saleswoman checked her records on a holographic flip-display. "We are holding a suit of armor for a Mick Legato."

Celestia sighed at Mick's lack of decorum. He used his nickname on a contract? Regardless, it was his choice to make. "He often uses that name."

The saleswoman looked over the order. "It's a custom model... the numbers look do like it is made for someone your size and not a Mick or Miguel unless he is a really small one. It'll be... twenty million creds. We have multiple loan services that can help you out."

Celestia handed over Mick's chip card. "Would this cover it?"

The saleswoman took it. "You're still using a chip card? We can handle that." She scanned the card and was shocked at the astronomical balance. "Wwwow. So, will you be paying in full upfront?"

Celestia agreed. "Yes. The fewer obligations that bind us, the better."

An appealing question came to the saleswoman's mind. "This Mick Legato that you work for..." she leaned forward and spoke in a whisper. "Is he Counselor Mick?"

Jill could not answer that. "I just met him today."

Neither could Celestia. "I have not heard him use that title, but I have known him for only a few weeks."

The saleswoman grinned. "I think it's him! There have been rumors

that there is a businessman called Counselor Mick who is rich enough to control the Galactic Council like a puppetmaster. No one knows who he is, or where he got his money, or where he came from. And this armor, I think it's a confidential design. I've seen some unpublished designs and this suit has a new optical system and higher shielding than anything I've worked on, and the plating is an unusual multilayered design of different alloys and was shipped from three forges that are rumored to service both the Enforcers and criminal syndicates along the frontier." The saleswoman suddenly got a worried look on her face. "Hold on. I should close the store."

"For what cause?" Celestia asked, worried by the saleswoman's worry.

The saleswoman explained as she walked towards a button on the rear side wall. "If you work for Mick then someone might be after you or this armor. One of the ships that parked here a little over an hour ago belongs to a bounty hunter named Alex Smith who is notorious for taking down high profile targets."

That confused Jill. "Doesn't she work for Mick?"

Celestia quickly continued. "Alex should not be a problem. Are there any other bounty hunters who might be a concern?"

The saleswoman returned to the two customers. She leaned in to Jill, grinning. "She?"

"Umm.." Jill remembered that she was supposed to keep that a secret, and did not know how to respond. The saleswoman drew back smiling and giggling, having another rumor to spread through the backchannels that evening.

Celestia changed the subject. "I suppose I should test the armour to ensure that it fits."

"Oh, it'll fit," the saleswoman said confidently as she returned the laser rifle to the wall display. "It was built precisely to your measurements and the padding will adjust if you gain or lose a little weight, but I like your attitude. On the frontier the paranoid survive,

right?" She smiled.

Celestia hesitated. "If you guarantee that it will fit me, then I will accept your word."

The saleswoman smiled. "Oh, great! Then I'll call the porters over and we'll get that loaded onto your ship. Now if I remember rightly, we also wanted a softsuit for the young lady here?" She turned to Jill.

Jill, still uncertain of anything, said "I think that's what it was called."

"Oh, you're new to this! Let me explain." The saleslady was happy to explain, and she had plenty of experience helping novices. "A softsuit is armor made of soft materials that can be fitted to you the same day. They have enough shields to take a hit from lighter weapons, although heavy guns like the one you were looking at will go through them. If you add a hydropack it will keep you alive in most environments. They are favored as basic defenses by civilians and private security forces."

She brought the customers to a display that held up a white suit with blue highlights that had a thin and streamlined look. The suit was open in the lower thighs and the side of the abdomen, and did not cover the lower legs or forearms. "The Alco Arbalester is a good midrange suit with high mobility--"

Celestia immediately rejected it. "It is vulnerable to attacks to the midsection, legs, and extremities."

The saleswoman corrected her. "The shield output covers the whole body." She saw that Celestia was not convinced. "But if that's a concern, then you won't be interested in this one..." She passed by a pink suit that was in the shape of a woman's one-piece swimsuit but thicker, and showed them a navy blue full-body suit covered in solid plates and studded with small silver protrusions. "The Zetak suits are popular with professional security forces. This model gives you good protection for its weight class, and its mobility is good since it connects directly to light and midrange boots. If you're interested, we can take your measurements and get one fitted for you.

Twenty minutes later, Jill walked out of the dressing area wearing the Zetak ZC-70 suit. "It's warm."

The saleswoman explained. "That is a result of the reheating process. The resizing. We started calling it reheating and the name stuck. It should normalize to your body temperature in a few minutes."

Jill stretched her arms. "This is very comfortable. It probably doesn't look like it, but it is. Do you mind if I walk around to get a feel for it?"

"Go ahead." the saleswoman encouraged her. "Just stay in the store. There's a lock that disables the suit if you walk too far away."

While Jill wandered around the store and stretched to test out the suit, the saleswoman made conversation with Celestia. "By the way, that's some interesting armor you're wearing. The cloth cover is a unique touch. I've never seen that done before."

"This is the style where I am from." Celestia gave a terse answer to discourage further conversation. She felt somewhat embarrassed to be wearing her conventional armor in a place where people normally wore powered suits with technology well beyond what her world could imagine developing, but she would feel defenseless if she were not wearing it.

While Celestia had hoped her terseness would keep the conversation short, the saleswoman continued looking her over. "It looks like something really old fashioned, from ancient times. I mean pre-flight when there were people living in castles and fighting dragons with swords. I love those old stories."

Celestia surrendered a smile. "I believe that was the designer's intent."

Jill returned to speak to the saleswoman. "It's starting to feel a bit stiff. Is that normal?"

The saleswoman assumed nothing was wrong. "If you're not used to wearing armor, then the extra weight might be a surprise."

"Hold on." Jill stood still for a moment. She lifted an arm, and stopped. "It froze up."

The saleswoman came in close to look at her. "Oh, that's not good! Let's get you out of that."

"Wait," Jill pleaded. "I think I've got this figured out." The saleswoman stepped back as Jill lowered her arm and raised it again. A visible arc of electricity left her shoulder and was absorbed into the suit's shields. "Ah!"

The saleswoman pulled a control device out of her pocket. "I'm shutting it off."

"No, wait--" Jill pleaded. The armor's shield shimmered briefly as the suit's power turned off. It shimmered again as the power turned back on at Jill's silent command. "I might be able to fix this."

The saleswoman turned it off again. "No, I can't sell you this. I've never seen a suit misbehave like this. Is it staying off this time?"

Celestia offered a resolution. "Perhaps you could recommend a suit with superior mobility."

Twenty minutes later Jill was wearing a suit with fewer, smaller, and rounder navy-blue plates over its base. She looked down over herself, then turned to Celestia. "Does it look good on me?"

Celestia laughed at the unexpected question, and replied with a quip. "That is the last consideration for war and the first for court."

"So..." Jill took a moment to comprehend the advice, then repeated her unanswered question. "How do I look?"

Celestia gave her the answer she wanted. "You look good."

Jill smiled and turned to the saleswoman. "I'll take it."

The saleswoman smiled back. "Glad you like it! Can I interest you in a helmet to go with it?"

Jill had no idea what she needed. "I dunno. Do I need that?" She turned to Celestia for advice.

Celestia relayed this question to the saleswoman. "Jill's equipment should enhance her abilities and should not be a hindrance should it fail unexpectedly."

The saleswoman was happy to suggest something. "Then you will want a helmet with a viewplate rather than a virtual display. This is a good model. You'll see Enforcers using it."

Jill tried on the helmet, got a sudden burst of claustrophobia, and immediately took it off. "No. I don't think I'll be wearing a helmet."

The saleswoman introduced her to headband-style shield extenders. Some had an adjustable strap on the end. Some had an extender on the sides built into a chinstrap. "These shield extenders increase the rate of energy flow from your armor to the shields around your head. They won't give you anywhere near the protection of a helmet, so don't rely on them to stop anything from a high angle larger than a laser pistol."

Jill tried one on and didn't mind it. "This doesn't get in my way at all."

The saleswoman walked over to the display of armored footwear. "If you want high-jump boots, we should have several things in your style." Size would not be an issue.

Jill declined. "I don't think I'll need them."

The saleswoman turned to Celestia. "If that will be all, I'll take the credit chip again." She turned back to Jill as she began processing the payment. "Now, if you do have any ideas of getting into serious combat, you will want to buy heavy armor. Softsuits only give you the most basic protection."

Jill turned to Celestia. "So, Celestia, what am I getting into? I was supposed to fighting one person and it was supposed to be dangerous but then he says it's just a training match but I'll have to stay somewhere for a week or two and who knows what he'll be wanting

us to do next. Do you know?"

Celestia knew a little. "He wants us to join a fighting tournament."

The saleswoman was curious. "Oh, like the Show Trials?"

Not having any familiarity with this universe's tournaments, Celestia gave the non-answer "perhaps" and continued. "If that does not work out, he has suggested to me the possibility of mercenary work."

The saleswoman interrupted again. "If you pardon me for saying this, neither of you two look like the mercenary type. Are you sure that is something you want to do?"

Celestia calmly said "I believe I am capable."

Jill hesitated for a moment before speaking. "I think I could manage it."

The saleswoman smiled and shrugged. "If that lifts your rocket then have fun doing that, but real combat is very different from combat sports. I mean, people die. Have either of you killed anyone before?"

"Thousands." Celestia answered without hesitation or emotion.

Jill's lost all of her happiness at once as her bad experiences came back to her. She looked away and muttered angrily. "The Lizards don't count."

The saleswoman was surprised by these answers. "Well... good luck."

Scene: Mall, armory exit

Jill wore her new softsuit over her new clothes as they left the armory carrying their shopping bags, Celestia saw that Jill was still in a foul mood and chose to distract her with a question that was on her own mind. "Jill, regarding the armor that failed, would the problem have been caused by interference with your powers?"

Jill calmed down enough to answer. "Yes. Whatever it's made out of reacts to different types of energy. That's how they change the size of these things, and I think it is meant to solidify when it takes damage. It was reacting to my nanofield in strange ways, but I got it under control."

"I hope you have," Celestia said. "The last thing you want to deal with on the battlefield is a haunted suit of armour that decides it does not want you to wear it anymore."

Jill chuckled, and then wondered if Celestia was serious. "Haha, yeah. Is that a common thing where you are from?"

Celestia shook her head. "No. Cursed items are rather rare and are usually discarded or destroyed when they are found."

Jill took a few moments to accept that answer. "You weren't joking."

Scene: Food court

"Wait. Something smells weird." A smell in the air stole Jill's attention. She did not recognize precisely what it was, nor would she have been able to, but she did recognize it as a flavor. Past the next arch they came to a number of flimsy-looking chairs and tables set outside a series of booths. Jill smiled. "They have a food court! I'm hungry. Let's get something."

The two women walked toward the booths and looked at the signs, none of which they could read. Those that were in recognizable languages had unrecognizable words.

Jill turned to Celestia. "Do you have any idea what any of this stuff is?"

"No," Celestia answered simply.

Jill headed to one of the booths. "Well, something over here smells good and I'm probably hungry enough to eat it."

In short time they had each ordered some exotic food and sat down to

taste it. Jill's dish was a bowl of some kind of chewy grain in a thin bitter sauce, covered with a layer of sour and sugary orange-colored slime that was topped by a small square purple wafer that combined the texture of a cracker with a flavor resembling grapefruit. This was junk food here, but it was the best meal she had eaten since before the invasion.

Jill put down her spoon after a few bites. "Wow... this is not real. This is a dream."

Celestia smiled and snickered knowingly, being familiar with that feeling.

Jill continued. "The last time I went shopping was a ten day trip by hovercraft to trade a bag of beanseed to another survivor camp for a bag of cornseed. Then it was ten days back. This... this food, these clothes, the ship, this place, it's all too good to be true."

Celestia nodded and explained that she had a similar reaction. "For some time I imagined that this must be a dream or an illusion produced by my interrogators, but over time--"

Jill almost dropped her spoon in shock. "Interrogators?"

Celestia calmly deflected. "It is in the past. In any case, after a week of waking up to a new life that is far too detailed and novel to be a product of my mind or that of anyone on my world, I concluded that it must be real."

Jill nodded. "Yeah, this is way too much to be a normal hallucination." Celestia's eyes opened with surprise as she recognized the implications of Jill being so familiar with hallucinations as to describe one as normal, but she quickly regained her composure and returned to a calm smile. Jill continued. "So it'll take me about a week to get used to this, whatever this is."

Celestia smiled at her. "It seems that you are settling in already."

Jill was not ready to agree. "I dunno. I dunno if I can trust this Mick guy. Do you trust him?"

Celestia had no choice. "I owe him my life, and he has a plan for the future."

"And he's my ride home, but..." Jill sighed. "My real home is gone. It's not coming back. If we have all of this here, I don't know if I want to go back."

"Perhaps we are both in a better place than we were," Celestia calmly observed. She took a sip of her drink.

Jill was starting to become agitated. "If Mick is so rich, he could bring us all here and build us a new home. Get us off our dead world, and we won't have to worry about the Lizards coming back unless they figure out how to follow him. What he's offering us is cheap for him. It's nothing."

Celestia thought that Jill's idea might be possible. "Alex was able to change the nature of her contract. You may be able to renegotiate."

Jill imagined the ways that could go wrong. "I dunno if he'd like that. He might throw me back."

Celestia suggested that Jill increase her bargaining power. "You could first make yourself indispensable to him by winning a position in the tournament."

Jill sipped her drink and put it down. It would not be a nice thing to do, but it would be worth it. "I'll think about it."

They had by then finished their food. Celestia was getting tired, but she was not showing it. "Are you ready to return to the ship?"

Jill had a second thought. "First, let's head back to the clothing store."

Celestia looked down at their four bags. "Is there something you forgot to purchase?"

Jill leaned forward and smiled. She had a plan. "We are going to get something for you."

Celestia was not comfortable with that. "I was not given authorization to spend--"

Jill interrupted her. "C'mon, you can't wear that armor all the time." She knocked on Celestia's shoulder plate.

"Yes, I can." Celestia insisted.

Jill sat back and provided a reason. "Think of this. Mick is rich. He won't mind if you spend a little of his money on a nice dress for yourself. If he flips out about it, that'll tell us a lot about him, what kind of person he is."

Celestia finished Jill's thought. "... to know how to approach him to bargain with him." She began to admire the plan.

Jill pressed Celestia further. "C'mon. Get one nice thing and see how he reacts. Maybe he'll like it."

Celestia declined. "You would have me commit a breach of trust."

Jill didn't see it that way, or how it could be seen that way. "Didn't he send us here to get clothes? Two women with his credit card, infinite balance, 'buy what you want' was what he said? He would expect you to get something."

Celestia sat silently, looking downward.

Jill continued. "And what would it cost compared to that armor he had you get?"

"It would be insignificant," Celestia admitted.

Jill leaned forward again. "C'mon. Let's go."

Celestia considered things deeply. It would also be in her interests to see how Mick would react. It had been apparent to her that Mick had designs on her that had nothing to do with the tournament or mercenary work. He had spent extra time teaching her about the

operations of the household, the ship, and the society he came from. He was training her as a companion, a living partner, a wife. She had no other options to make a living for herself. If Mick were the type of person to be angered by small slights, it would be better to learn this while she still had the time to find and develop new options. She raised her head. "Very well."

Scene: Clothing store

Celestia quickly went to the shop's selection of luxury items and flipped through the dresses until she found a good-looking green dress in her size. She brought it to the salesman before Jill had finished navigating with her bags through the racks to catch up to her.

The salesman was taken aback by her efficiency. "Will this be all?" he asked with surprise in his voice.

"Yes." Celestia was quick and to the point as she handed over Mick's credit chip.

Jill encouraged her to wear it. "Are you going to try it on?"

Celestia calmly refused. "I know my measurements."

Jill was disappointed. "Oh, c'mon! Let's see how you look in it."

Celestia calmly repeated her refusal. "Not today."

Jill teased her. "Are you sure you're a girl?"

Celestia ignored the insult and walked away with the dress.

Scene: Space station, hangar bay

Aided by a moving walkway running down the center of the hangar bay, Celestia and Jill carried their shopping bags back to Mick's ship. Alex's ship and a variety of others were parked nearby in an orderly

fashion on the sides of the bay.

The rear ramp of Mick's ship was down. The porters that had loaded Celestia's new armor onto the ship had forgotten to raise it, or did not know how. The station's security should have been good enough that nothing would be missing from the ship.

Scene: Mick's ship, cargo bay

The cargo bay took up the rear half of the lower level of Mick's ship. The sides were lined with shelves, boxes, and refrigerable containers. At the far end, an airlock door blocked the way toward the ship's instrument room that lay underneath the bridge.

Looking out of place, a rectangular metal sarcophagus must have been the crate holding Celestia's new armor, left there by the station's porters. On the top of the shining flat metal was the yellow logo of an arms company, a shield with crossed swords. Celestia glanced at it with a bit of apprehension and carried on.

The circular stairway unflattened itself and descended from the upper level as the two women reached it. The bottom of the stairway attached itself to a small platform on the floor that was surrounded by a marked square with reflectors in the corners to discourage anyone from accidentally leaving anything in the way of the stairs.

The collapsible stairway could descend in full and then be used as an elevator, but there would not have been enough room on it for two people. It was best to keep it in the form of stairs. The two women began climbing.

Scene: Mick's ship, second floor

The two women climbed up to the second floor, pulling their bags up through the relatively small gap in the floor. The stairs led to a simple hallway with the door to the bridge at the end of the hall. Doors on either side led to sleeping quarters while a hatch on the roof was one side of the airlock before the dorsal hatch.

Celestia brought Jill to the crew's quarters on the right and began poking the nearby computer interface to unlock the door. "We will be sleeping in here."

Scene: Mick's ship, crew's quarters

"Here we are," Celestia said. "Choose a bunk."

The bunks were three padded beds hanging off the side of what was not the wall, but a tall flat structure that was large enough to cover the wall and extend out several feet from it. The bunks were arranged as three corners of a rectangle, with an upper and lower bunk on one side and a third bunk below a wide blank panel where a fourth bunk might have been.

Each bunk was held up by a support arm that extended out from the inside of structure through the space at the bottom of a partially open panel. It seemed that the beds were designed to retract into the structure when not in use. Footholds formed a simple ladder to the upper bunk. There was a computer display panel near each bunk, embedded into the structure.

Jill dropped her bags in the middle of the room and walked toward one of the bunks. Celestia placed the bags she was carrying next to the bags Jill had dropped. Jill briefly examined one of the bunks and turned back to Celestia. "I'm not tired."

Celestia excused herself from Jill's company. "Do what you need to make yourself comfortable. I will check on a few things around the ship."

"Okay." Jill did not consider the option of asking to come along until after Celestia had already left the room. Alone, she looked around. She touched the bunk's padding. It felt hard.

Jill removed her softsuit. She had sweated into the clothes that she had worn under it. She left the suit on the floor with her bags of clothing. She climbed into an open bunk and lay in it, testing it. She closed her

eyes, wondering if this was all a dream.

She opened her eyes and saw her younger sister Anna looking over her, her young face filled with pleasure and compassion. Jill looked up at Anna with surprise and confusion as the smiling girl stepped toward her bunk. For one thing, very few people had survived the Lizards, and she doubted that Anna was one of them. Moreover, Anna had not aged at all. Furthermore, Anna had never boarded the ship.

Finally, what Anna said was completely out of her character. "Now is your best chance. You can kill them both and take the ship. You can control everything." Anna smiled widely.

Jill cautiously raised a hand to touch Anna on the cheek. At the moment of contact, Anna disappeared.

Clash Champions
Season 1 - Episode 1 - Part 5
Evening Interlude

Scene: Mick's ship, crew's quarters.

Jill lay in a bunk in the crew's quarters. She could not sleep. She was not tired.

Jill got up and looked at the bunks. Three of them hung off the side of a beige structure that was large enough that it could be mistaken for a wall. A space for a fourth bunk was empty, covered by a flat panel.

She saw that there was a computer interface near each bunk. She put her hand on the edge of the interface. Her nanites spread out, forming a small, thin puddle of oily gray goop under her hand. The computer interface changed rapidly, showing different scenes for room temperature, mattress firmness, cryogenic suspension controls, and other options. Jill triggered some setting that caused a clear plastic canopy to extend over the bunk. She watched as the bunk receded into the nearby beige structure and disappeared behind a panel that slid into place in front of it. Jill turned her attention back to the control panel and issued a command to retrieve the bunk. The panel opened and the bunk slid back to its normal position, and the canopy retracted.

Jill walked to the side wall which had a row of four tall cabinets. She pulled a handle and opened one. The cabinet had two shelves on the bottom and two empty clothes hangers on a metal rod at the top. There was a box on each of the two shelves. One metal box was marked with a large red cross, the multiversal symbol of a first-aid kit. She opened it and saw that it was indeed a first-aid kit filled with gauze, bandages, creams, pills, several small clear cylinders of liquid labeled as various medications and antivenoms, a device designed to dispense doses of the liquid, and other small devices of unknown function.

The second box, of a slightly larger shape and size, had no markings on it. It was locked by a small padlock whose key sat on top of the

box. Curious, Jill opened the box and looked inside. Filling the left quarter of the box was a smaller wooden box, while the rest was filled with a variety of objects. Jill lifted up and examined a menacing-looking metal headband with a large gemstone in the center. Beneath it were several small scrolls of paper tied together with ribbons. These she left alone. Beneath them, barely visible under everything else, was a folded banner with the same colors as the drape on Celestia's armor. Jill lifted a cylindrical object from the front-right corner of the box and saw that it was a stamp or seal of some kind. She put it back and closed the box.

Jill opened the next closet. Inside were neatly folded plain beige shirts and some underwear, probably Celestia's. Jill closed that closet and opened the third one. Jill saw that it was empty. She carried her bags of new clothing over to this closet, picked out a few items, folded them, and put them in the closet. It was not nearly large enough to contain them all. She soon gave up and put the folded clothes back in the bag.

Having finished exploring the crew's quarters, Jill walked toward the exit and opened the door. She hesitated as she heard a steady clanking from the lower floor of the ship. What was it? Were they being boarded? Her gun was still on the bridge. Maybe she could run for it?

The stairs lowered with a swooping sound. Jill stepped away from the door. There were two more clanks, and then the circular platform that had been the stairs lifted Alex to the second floor. Alex stepped off into the hallway.

Alex stopped to look into the open door to the crew's quarters. Jill stood still beside the wall. Alex continued walking down the corridor and opened the door to the bridge. Jill waited a moment and followed, filled with curiosity.

The door to the bridge had no handle at this side. "You gonna open?" Jill asked casually.

A panel beside the door displayed the message "Access denied."

Feeling up to the challenge, Jill placed her hand on the panel and let

her nanites explore it.

Scene: Mick's ship, bridge

The door to the bridge opened, allowing Jill inside. Her gun was still propped against a side console. Celestia swiveled her chair to see her. Alex, standing behind Celestia, turned her head to look.

Jill smiled and playfully questioned them. "Are you two plotting something behind Mick's back?"

Celestia responded formally. "Alex will be accompanying us back to base when Mick awakens. We will want to have Alex on board before that time, and I also wished to consult with Alex on certain details of the ship's operation because Alex is familiar with the operations of space ships."

Jill eagerly joined the party. "Count me in. I'd like to learn how the ship works too." She stepped toward the nearest computer console.

Alex walked forward and stood in her way. "Do not touch anything."

Jill could not believe she was serious. "Or what? You're gonna shoot me?"

"Yes." Alex replied seriously.

Jill laughed and tried to step around Alex. Alex stepped in front of her again. "Very funny," Jill said with amusement, not taking this seriously until Alex stood in her way a third time. "Oh, come on." Jill put her hand on Alex's armor and sent her nanites in.

The light in Alex's helmet went out as her power armor's systems started to go down. "Hey!" Alex shouted in her natural voice, unmodified by her helmet's voice distorter. Her left hip pocket opened, revealing a small armory holding three purple, blue, and green half-cylinders that matched the shape of the orange part on the underside of her arm cannon, and two columns of puttylike red and white blobs about three centimeters in diameter. She pulled out a blob

and handed it to Jill. "If you want to play with something, play with this."

"Not on the bridge!" Celestia yelled.

"What is it?" Jill asked, holding the blob in her hand. It gave slightly when pressed and was coated in some sticky material. She turned her hand over and it stuck to her hand.

"It's an explosive," Celestia warned. "I suggest that you carefully return it and then stand in the back of the room and do not touch anything."

Jill handed the bomb back to Alex, who put it away. She stepped back, then decided she didn't want to be a part of this if she was going to be treated like she wasn't welcome. She picked up her gun, drawing Alex's aim, and said "I'm taking this back." Then she huffed and left the bridge.

Celestia lowered her head and sighed, showing fatigue that she had not displayed before.

Alex walked over, put her hand on Celestia's chair, and offered a suggestion. "Jump back to base now. If she causes trouble, you will have your powers."

Celestia tried to think about it. She was tired, but she saw how a fight would end. "If we have a fight we will wreck the ship. If we are in space when that happens, we are all dead. If we first manage to land, and I don't feel comfortable flying at this time --"

"I'll fly it in," Alex offered.

Celestia did not think that was a good idea. "You have never flown this ship before."

"I'll learn quickly," Alex said confidently.

Celestia continued her previous line of thought. "If we have a fight on base, we might wreck the base and the ship, leaving us stranded with

no communications or resources, and that is assuming we do not crash the ship trying to land."

Alex looked down at Celestia. "So you're too chicken to fly out without Mick looking over your shoulder and telling you what to do."

Celestia rephrased that. "I am abundantly cautious. Space flight is dangerous. Dimensional travel is dangerous. Landing is dangerous, and I am too tired to be certain of bringing the needed precision to any of them. We have to consider the mission. We also have a chain of command to respect--"

--Which you have already broken," Alex pointed out.

Celestia disagreed. "With Mick incapacitated, I am the ranking officer here--"

Alex laughed. "Of course you are, General," she said sarcastically. "You are the second in command of two people."

Celestia put up with the disrespect and carried on. "Regardless of the details, I believe it is within my authority to hire you to secure the ship."

Alex was silent for a moment. "You are that afraid of her."

Celestia admitted it. "She is strong and impulsive which could combine poorly with the fragility of this ship's instruments."

"And she can interfere with electronics," Alex added. Celestia looked up at the bounty hunter. Alex explained. "She turned off my suit. I had to reset it. Also, I think you locked her out of the bridge. She got in anyway."

Celestia took in this new information. "That is another reason to keep her away from the bridge." She sighed and stood up. "I suppose I should turn in. I hope we did not anger her."

Alex said, only partly jokingly, "If she kills you in your sleep. I will drop her on a planet full of J Parasite."

Celestia smiled. "Thank you." She turned and walked away.

Alex continued. "If Mick complains, I'll throw him after her. Then I'll steal the ship."

Celestia laughed and looked back. "I hope that will not be necessary."

"It would be fun, though." Alex joked. As Celestia reached the entrance to the bridge, Alex interrupted her. "Hey, do you have any beer around here?"

Celestia turned back to reply. "We have a dispenser in the cargo bay -- You will not be drinking while on duty!"

Alex sat in a chair. "You will not be awake to care."

Celestia sighed and walked away, surrendering the issue with a mutter. "Guards are the same in every universe."

The door closed behind Celestia. Alex sat in a chair. Her voice distorter amplified a quiet chuckle.

Scene: Mick's ship, crew's quarters

Jill was lying in her bunk, doing nothing much other than thinking, when Celestia walked into the room. Celestia headed to the cabinets and began removing her boots.

Jill lay still in her bunk. "That was an awfully short discussion about starships," she remarked.

Celestia gave a brief reply. "It was. We made the decision to continue at a later time." She removed her helmet, revealing full blonde hair that would flow better if she had not had it under a helmet all day.

Jill raised herself partway up on an arm, and she turned toward Celestia. "So what was really going on with you and this Alex Smith?"

Celestia stopped removing her gear and turned toward Jill. She unconsciously ran a hand through her hair before beginning a crafted reply. "We were discussing mission-sensitive matters regarding--"

"Mission-sensitive?" Jill interrupted Celestia, her voice carrying a strong sense of disbelief. She leaned forward and put a hand on her chest for emphasis. "I am the mission, unless there's something you're not telling me. In either case, I have the right to know."

Celestia calmly deflected. "The mission is to win the tournament. We need capable fighters, financial resources, a base of operations, transportation, the proper equipment... hold on for a moment." Celestia continued removing her armor.

Jill understood what Celestia was not saying outright. "And you don't want me touching anything on the bridge. Especially with my nanites. You could have just said so."

Celestia finished removing her armor, revealing her small body covered by a plain beige shirt that she had been sweating in all day. While her arms were thin, she had muscle tone showing that she exercised regularly. She continued her conversation with Jill. "Would a mere word have inhibited your curiosity?"

Jill took a moment to consider the question, and admitted "probably not."

Celestia continued talking while she began removing her trousers. "There is indeed much that we have not yet told you. There is much that Mick has not yet told me. Every day, I learn new things that he has forgotten to mention. I am sure that you will be learning more tomorrow and the day after."

Jill had a philosophical question. "Does space have a tomorrow and a day after?"

Celestia had a utilitarian answer. "In space, 'tomorrow' is whenever we all decide to wake up. On land it is much more obvious as there is a sunrise and sunset, although the precise time of sunrise and sunset

and even the length of the day is different from one planet to another. Did you know that?"

"I knew that." That was part of the basic astronomy that Jill learned in second or third grade.

As Celestia walked towards the bunks in her underwear, Jill remarked on her slightness. "You look tiny without your armor. Is it heavy? How do you wear it?"

"Practice," Celestia said. "I have worn it every day of active duty since my first field expedition."

"Why?" It didn't make sense to Jill that someone would weight themselves down like that.

"It keeps me strong," Celestia explained as she climbed into her bunk. "If I did not wear it regularly, my muscles would deteriorate and I would not be able to wear it as effectively when I need it for battle."

"That makes sense," Jill lied politely, still unconvinced that it made sense. She wondered if her nanites' powers might have dulled after years without fighting.

Celestia planted herself face-down in her bunk. Jill hesitated a few moments and stated the obvious. "You look tired."

"I am." Celestia's voice was muffled by the padding that she spoke into without raising her head.

Jill wished her "good night," then had a thought. "Hey. Are you and Mick on the same sleep schedule?"

Celestia lifted her head. "We do not have shifts, if that is what you mean."

Jill did not intend to be that specific. "I just meant, in general. Do you go to bed and wake up at the same times?"

Unsure of the reason for the question, Celestia answered in detail.

"Early on I would awaken early and sleep shortly after sundown, while Mick would often stay up late and sleep in. After seeing the same sunrise for several weeks, we do tend to rise and sleep at similar times."

This confirmed what Jill was thinking. "I just noticed that Mick said he was really tired and went to bed, and then he sent you running around shopping with me, which was nice but, wouldn't you have been just as tired as he was? That was a jerk thing to do."

Celestia relaxed, appreciating Jill's consideration for her well-being and humored by the recruit's haste to form an opinion of Mick. "I doubt he meant anything by it. A task needed to be done and I was willing to serve."

Jill continued. "If you were falling asleep out there, I didn't even notice."

Celestia smiled. "In officer training you learn not to show it."

"I'll let you go to bed then."

"Thank you." Celestia leveled her head into the bunk's padding.

"Should I turn off the lights?" Jill offered. She looked toward the door. "I don't see a switch."

Celestia explained how the ship's lights worked. "The light will extinguish itself when it sees that there is no movement."

"Okay," Jill said. She lay back and waited for the lights to go off. She still was not tired.

Clash Champions
Season 1 - Episode 1 - Part 6
Explain Everything

Scene: Mick's ship, 2nd floor

Mick walked up the stairs from the cargo bay while gnawing on an apple, holding it in a small towel to catch the drippings. He walked down the corridor and stopped at the side doorways, his quarters on one side and the crew's quarters on the other side.

He looked up at the hatch to the dorsal airlock to see that it was closed.

He walked to the door of the crew's quarters, wiped his free hand on the towel, and poked a computer screen by the side of the door. The screen changed to show the women sleeping inside, with false color accounting for the lack of light. Mick poked the screen again and it returned to its previous state. He walked onward toward the bridge.

Scene: Mick's ship, bridge.

Mick walked into his bridge to see the armored Alex Smith sitting limply in a chair. A tall plastic cup sat on the console with a trace of golden liquid at the bottom. "I think that's my beer. You leave any for me?" Mick knocked on Alex's helmet. There was no response. "Sweet dreams if you have them." Mick raised the apple to his mouth.

Scene: Crew's quarters

Jill walked into the crew's quarters from the side washroom door. The bunks were empty. Having slept last, she had been the last to wake up.

She pulled some clean clothes from her bags and took a long look at two differently colored rolls of socks, imagining which would go better with her new outfit.

Scene: Mick's ship, bridge

Jill was the last person to walk onto the bridge. Mick was guiding Celestia on the use of the ship's navigation interface. Alex sat in a back seat, watching. They had been there for some time. Any sign of Mick's breakfast or Alex's drink had been cleared away. The starfield showed that they had left the station behind.

Mick greeted Jill. "Hey there sleepyhead! Glad you could join us. While you've been out we've been getting Tia some flight hours, bopping around the system, scanning rocks and saying hello to some of the freighters. These guys are bored and happy to talk to someone. Hey, you had breakfast yet? You don't know where we keep the food, do you." Jill shook her head, so Mick gave directions. "Downstairs and on your right. We have a cooler and a cupboard for dry foods. The shiny packets in the cupboard are for emergencies. I don't recommend eating them. I could show you around if you want."

"I'm not that hungry." Jill lied. She was more impatient than she was hungry.

"That's fine," Mick said. "Wait an hour or two and you can have a better meal at the base."

Jill wanted answers. "Where is this base and what is this base? Is it like an army base or something?"

Mick laughed. "Oh, no. It's just a little place I own. Why don't I show you." Jill was anxious, but did not protest. She understood that she would get answers without going forward, but she did not know what she was going forward into.

Mick turned to Celestia who was seated at the ship's main control console. "Tia, bring up the universe address catalog. You push that button there to back out, and then it's on the left there." She had done this a few times before and no longer needed such specific directions, but the guidance helped. A table appeared containing two columns of symbols, a long column labeled "key" and a shorter column labeled "split". The symbols included both uppercase and lowercase letters,

playing card symbols, and signs from at least two other languages, all in one of four colors. A third field provided a helpful readable description of the universe represented by the key and the variant defined by the split. The top entry was labeled "Alex Smith 9" and the second entry was labeled "Jill Ross 3."

Mick patted Celestia's armored shoulder. "Yeah, you got it." Then he turned to Jill, knowing of her ability to manipulate computers. "You see this list of numbers? Never ever change them. Those are the shorthand representations of the much, much larger numbers that are used by our hopper to identify dimensions. Those addresses are stored in the main computers, which you will not mess with. One flipped bit in the wrong place and we will never be able to get back to a place unless you had somehow memorized the trillions of trillions of digits that defined it, and I don't think you and your nanites can do that."

Jill understood enough of that to know that Mick did not want her touching the computers. She nodded and kept her hands close.

Mick turned back to Celestia. "Now bring up home base. Oh, you already did. Good." The new display was divided into sections for temporal targeting, diagnostics, and spatial navigation. "Go to the navigation screen. It looks a lot like the navigation screen for flying around. Now stick us in space in a low orbit, outside of the planet's path. If there's a glitch in the chronometer, I don't want to risk being a microsecond off."

That was something that Celestia had not done before. "How do I view the planet's path?"

Mick pointed to one of the many icons at the top of the display. "Crossreference with temporal data. One more to the left. There you go. Choose a timeslice of-" Mick shrugged, signaling the unimportance of this figure for their needs. "A day." Celestia entered the parameters. The navigation screen showed a colored area through the planet's orbit. A white diamond was to the planet's side, representing the point to jump into. "That'll work. Okay, lock it in and hit the big Jump button."

Celestia did that. The dimension-hopping engine hummed for a half

second, and then the stars outside were different. The edge of the planet glowed blue and white at the side of the main viewscreen. Mick gave his pilot-in-training simple directions. "Get an ear on the beacon, set up a flight path, glide us in." She began looking around the interface for the commands to do that. Mick turned to Alex, the power-armored bounty hunter who was well experienced in spaceflight. "Alex, keep an eye on the numbers and make sure they are stable. If anything goes wrong let me know and I'll flip on the antigrav, boost us out, or hop us out if we need to."

The planet moved toward the center of the viewscreen as Celestia tilted the view, but not the ship, toward the left. A flight path appeared on the viewscreen, leading toward a green circle that had been drawn on the planet.

Mick smiled proudly. "Beautiful, isn't it? I own it outright. It's not on loan or anything. And down there where that circle's lit up is where I have my base and training room."

Jill had more questions. Many more. "What kind of training are you talking about, and how many people are at this base?"

Mick opened his arms wide, gesturing toward the crew. "It's just us. I used to have a few others, but they retired or moved to other teams. I had to sell the rights to one of them to stay afloat, but that's over and done with. We're rebuilding!" He smiled confidently.

"And this training," Jill asked, "is it like army training?"

Mick chuckled. "Oh, no, it's..." Then he accepted that she was kind of right. "Sort of. You see, we do have combat training but it's mostly practice for the Crash Championship. It's all regulated so no one can get hurt as long as everything is working right. Isn't that right, Tia?" Mick teased Celestia, who blushed and lowered her head.

Jill wondered what Celestia had done, and: "Who got hurt?"

Alex answered. "Anyone who gets in our way."

Mick tried to calm them down. "Hey, let's not scare her any more than

she already is." He tried to explain. "Alright, here's what happened. Tia here... broke some stuff, so they wouldn't let her into the tournament. It's too bad. She would have been great. That's all that happened."

Jill knew that was not all that had happened. "Yesterday, Tia was talking about mercenary work. You had us buy armor for protection. And there's..." Jill pointed to Alex.

Mick thought she wanted to know about Alex Smith. "Oh, Alex is here to help you train. You see, there is another, a different Alex Smith fighting in the tournament."

"You mean a clone?" Jill asked. She had enough familiarity with science fiction to be aware of the concept.

"Not quite." Mick explained. "The owner of the root license to Alex's dimension sublicenses splits. Let me explain that. What we can do is we can freeze the dimension at a point in time, split it, which gives us a copy of the dimension, and play around with the copies as long as we don't do anything to cause them to collapse into each other. These splits are not exact copies. There are slight differences from one to the other, but that makes them more interesting!"

Mick continued on. "I'm not allowed to bring this Alex into the core worlds but I can bring her--" Alex looked up and glared at Mick through her helmet. Mick corrected himself and continued. "I can bring Alex onto my base, which is far enough outside the Core Worlds that it is outside the jurisdiction of the Transdimensional Authority. Anybody who fights the Alex on my base will be ready to fight the other Alex when they get to the tournament."

Mick still had not answered Jill's question, so she repeated it. "So, what about the armor and the talk of mercenary work?"

Mick had hoped to leave that for later, but now was as good a time for explanations as any. "Oh, yeah. If you're really good, there are people who will hire you to do some fighting outside of the arenas. This is the dangerous stuff where you could get hurt. That's what the armor is for. I think you'd fit into that kind of work right away if the

tournament doesn't work out for you."

Jill was apprehensive. "That's not..." She hesitated for a moment before continuing. "Okay, that is actually exactly what I signed up for, but it's not what you have been talking about since I signed up."

Mick casually explained the difference between tournament fighting and mercenary work. "Ah, I see why you are confused. These are two different lines of work. They are similar, they both involve fighting, and I'll be managing both of them. The tournament is the priority. That's where you are going to get noticed, and you don't get the job offers unless you get noticed first." He smiled. "That's where you are going to make me some money."

Jill was even more apprehensive. "I'm not sure if I want to get noticed."

Mick doubted that. "What, you never wanted to be rich and famous and have everybody love you?" He asked teasingly.

Jill didn't know how to answer that. "Maybe when I was a teenager."

Mick chuckled. "Alright. Let me show you something." He turned to the console and poked the interface a few times until he found the video he was looking for. "This will show you what this is all about." He turned back around to face Jill. "This will explain everything."

Jill stepped forward to watch as a shimmering rectangle of golden particles appeared in front of the main viewscreen and within two seconds solidified into a barely transparent three-dimensional picture with full color and a few inches of perceptible depth. The picture was a chaotic amalgam of quick images in very rapid succession: a fast blue and white hovercraft zipping around a racetrack, some grunting figure in a yellow racing helmet -- the pilot? -- strapped to a seat, and the same person standing, posing, or in what appeared to be archival footage, punching different people in the face: an aging man in a pinstripe baseball uniform, a gray-haired man outfitted in camouflage and tactical gear, a woman in a regal red gown spotted with thin pink speckles, a steely-eyed young swordsman who wore the emblem of a ruby-eyed skull on his black armor, and a fifth combatant who fought

with a claw and whose identity was well hidden by a face mask, wrappings, and a navy blue cloak studded with white gems, but who might have been another woman. An announcer's clear voice broke through the chaos of the the zooming racecraft and the grunting pilot.

	Zoom!	
		"He drives fast!"
"Huh!"		
	Zoom!	
"Yeah!"		
		"But what drives him?"
"Hooah!"		
	Zoom!	
"Whoah!"		
		"Why does Sergeant Hawk drive so fast!"
	Zoom!	
"Hah!"		
	Zoom!	
"Yeah!"		
	Zoom!	
"Wha-ha!"		
	Zoom!	

There was a split second of the pilot, Sergeant Hawk, holding a beverage container in his hand before the video split away to the first of several scenes of his hovercraft zooming back and forth. Hawk's voice was overlaid over the sequence. "I have to get to Red Dog for my Hawkochino Supreme!" The final scene showed his hovercraft entering the parking lot of a coffee shop. This scene was just as quickly interrupted by a new scene of Hawk holding the drink aloft in a victorious pose, shouting "Hawkochinooo!" while the background flashed behind him for about a second and a half, the longest single take in the whole series of images.

The announcer continued speaking over multiple scenes of Sergeant Hawk sipping the drink, posing with it, and grunting his approval. "Get your own delicious Hawkochino Supreme for only four chains or more at your local participating Red Dog. Our lines are guaranteed to

be fewer than thirty vehicles long or we'll talk half a chain off the cost of your order."

Sergeant Hawk delivered the final lines. "It's delicious! Go to Red Dog!"

The holographic vision shimmered out to nonexistence in an instant. Jill's jaw had dropped open somewhere near the beginning and was still hanging open. All that she could manage to ask was "what... was that?"

Mick stood up and began pacing around the small area of the bridge as he explained the business. "That was an ad. Sergeant Hawk gets a chain for every five thousand Hawkochinos that Red Dog sells. His agent gets half of that. That ad... sold *billions* of Hawkochinos. It was even bigger than Lady Midnight's Dark Chocolate Mochatta, which I personally think is the better drink, but then I'm a sucker for dark chocolate. And they had to discontinue it when she retired, but there are places that make knockoffs. Anyway, this is where the real money in the tournament is made. Product endorsements. Advertising. You can make good money in Crash if you win all your fights, but you can make better money doing this and all you need to do is be popular."

Jill could not believe what she was hearing. "But... I'm not like that! I'm not popular. I'm not exciting. I'm just me."

Mick shrugged. "Not everything that people buy is exciting. You could sell tampons. It's a huge market. Half the mammalian multiverse uses them." Noting Jill's disgusted shock at the suggestion, Mick recovered. "That was only one idea. I can come up with some other ones, but first we have to get you some exposure. And before that, we have to get you in the tournament to begin with. And before that, I want to be sure you can fight to the level of the tournament. If you can't win, you won't get contracts. Unless you're... more exciting than you are. And you can learn to fake that."

The egglike ship fell through space, approaching the planet below.

They were now close enough to the planet that it filled the entire viewscreen. This sight was familiar to Mick but it still filled him with

awe every time. "Would you look at that." He turned to Jill. "You ever flown into a planet from space before?" Jill shook her head. "It's beautiful, isn't it. You're not afraid of heights, are you?" Jill shook her head again. "Good."

The egg shot like a bullet through the planet's atmosphere, its twin tails creating enough drag for it to safely make an unpowered landing when provided with a thick enough atmosphere.

Mick raised a screen on a nearby computer console. "Let's look at my to-do list..." A long list of items appeared, covering the display from top to bottom, where the bottom displayed "Page 1 / 3". Mick cast it aside. "Ugh. I'll get to it later." Celestia quietly dragged the list to her console and began reviewing the items.

"Clouds are breaking." Mick looked at the main viewscreen. The ship was much closer to the surface now. The land was filled with the dark green of forests, while there was a sea to the north and west. The viewscreen centered on a semicircular cove where the coastline traveled in an easterly direction and slightly north. A sharp eye could make out some blue and grey objects just south of the cove.

After few more minutes of descent, these objects could be distinguished. The ship floated toward a distant landing pad that sat beside a blue three-story building that itself sat beside a large rectangular building that looked like it was made of concrete.

Mick pointed out the features to Jill. "There's the base. There's the landing pad. And that," Mick said proudly, "is the Death Box."

Jill's face fell.

TO BE CONTINUED
in Episode 2: The Death Box

Appendix

Writer's Notes

This story began as the fanfic idea "What if Iji fought Samus?" That raised the question "Where would Iji fight Samus?" with the obvious answer being "Smash Brothers." That raised the next question "Who would bring Iji to Smash?" Then, "How would they get there?" and "What would they have to deal with along the way?" The story fell into place from there.

The story changed from a fanfic to a parody when I noticed that my characters were behaving differently from the originals, so I declared them all to be from alternate dimensions and changed their names. This allowed their personalities to develop into their own characters.

Episode 1 was the third-shortest of the planned episode. I wrote up some other recruitments separately and added them to the beginning to pad it out. The extended version is right in the middle of the various episode sizes.

Mick's "emergency transport pattern alpha" beams the threat into the upper atmosphere. Mick is a jerk that way. So, that Jill is dead. So how does Mick hire her? Remember what Mick said about being licensed for "dimensional splitting". He makes a copy of the dimension before trying to pull anyone out of it. Each copy is slightly different from the original. He will simply (and expensively) make another copy of the original dimension and enter it at a different point in time. So he will literally "try again another time."

Splitting a dimension is like adding an extra decimal point of precision to a number. If you have the number 1.23456, you could also call it 1.234560. 1.234561 would be a slightly different number, as would 1.234562, 1.234563, and so on.

Mick destroyed Celestia's antagonists in her home world by dropping a nuclear bomb on their base camp, wiping out the antagonists, their entire army including Celestia's former unit, and the city that they had under siege. Mick later guessed that she would not be happy to learn he had done this, so he hides this information from her and discourages her from wanting to go back.

Celestia is given a helmet because she is a soldier. It is an open-faced Barbute style so that one could see her expressions.

Alex's arm cannon takes one of four interchangeable modules.

1. Orange = regular shots, fires straight forward.
2. Purple = spiraling anti-shield weapon, less effective against physical targets
3. Blue = rapid fire beams, drains power directly from shields
4. Green = time freeze, slow firing and uses lots of power. Used very rarely because they are no longer made and cannot be replaced.

The bunks in the crew's quarters are cryogenic suspension chambers. Jill has not seen enough sci-fi to recognize them.

Different universes have different currencies to hint to the audience that these are different units of value. Alex's universe uses "credits". The Core Worlds use "chains". Celestia's world uses "guilders". Jill's world used to use "dollars" but the alien invasion made those useless.

There was a long road to get to "Red Dog" as the name of the doughnut shop.

The coffee chain and doughnut shop were originally written as two different places. When this was a straight Smash fanfic, before the names were changed and the characters were tweaked, Captain Falcon did a pitch for a fictional chain called Dead Dog Coffee, a play on the name of the defunct Petaluma coffee shop Deaf Dog. His pitch ended with the great line "Dead Dog, because you're addicted and we know it." In the rewrite I made their coffee non-addictive so I had to take the line out.

The separate doughnut shop was introduced in the rewrite as "Satan's Doughnuts", a play on the name of the chain Tan's Doughnuts. Both names had a problem: you need to be a Sonoma local to get the joke. Out of context the names are disturbing but not absurd enough to be funny. Both had to be renamed.

When writing parodies, it is important to create value outside of the

parody context. The bad movie parodies of the late 1990s and early 2000s would redo scenes from other movies without adding value to them. They were not funny if you did not know what they were making fun of. The great parodies like *Airplane*, *Spaceballs*, and *Hot Shots* were watchable stories that worked if you had not seen the movies that they were based on.

It makes sense that a doughnut shop would sell coffee and vice versa, so I merged the two businesses together to simplify the universe. Tossing my notes aside and working from a copy-and-paste of the first fic, I now had "Dead Dog Coffee and Doughnuts." What a clunker. Inspiration struck randomly, as it does, and the name "Red Dog" came to me in a flash. Should I emphasize the shop as a doughnut shop or a coffee shop? Should it be "Red Dog Doughnuts" or "Red Dog Coffee"? The answer is "no". Just "Red Dog". Especially in an ad.

Character References

- Jill parodies Iji by Daniel Remar.
- Celestia is based on Celes Chere from Squaresoft's Final Fantasy VI.
- Alex Smith is a knockoff of Nintendo's Samus Aran from Metroid crossed with the armor styles of Star Wars and the voice of Darth Vader. Her hip magazines are inspired by the hip holster of 1987's Robocop. Her refusal to be identified as a woman is a reference to the original game's marketing materials which kept this fact a secret to be discovered when the player beat the game.
- The insect shopkeeper resembles one of the Space Pirates species from Super Metroid.
- Sergeant Hawk is a recolored Captain Falcon from Smash Brothers. As for the people he was punching:
 - The baseball player is Casey Striker of the Big City Bandits, a reference to the mid-20th-century New York Yankees. He will be introduced in Episode 12.
 - The man in camouflage is Sneaky Weasel, a parody of Solid Snake from Konami's Metal Gear series, who will be introduced in Episode 8. He appears here in one of the prequels.
 - The regal woman in the red gown is Princess Strawberry, a parody of Nintendo's Princess Peach, who will be introduced in Episode 7.
 - The swordsman is Lord Conrad, who is a cruel and evil parody of the happy and smiling Fire Emblem characters in Smash Brothers. He will be introduced in Episode 7 and have a major role in Episode 12.
 - The clawed assassin is Lady Midnight who mixes elements of the Smash Brothers character Sheikh and the assassin from Assassin's Creed. She was also intended to reference Midna from Twilight Princess but carried over nothing but the name and the association with nightfall. She will have a brief appearance in Episode 7.

References in the prequels

- Dick Wood was originally based on Duke Nukem but became a generic tough guy.
 - Dick's universe is based on all of the popular Western television shows of the 1950s through the 1980s. The universe has its customs, its villains, and its own white-hat hero in Andy Olson. Dick was just a dependable side character who would help Andy from time to time. Harkness saw that Dick would make the better arena fighter.
- Howie's name is a reference to the Nintendo Power comic strip Howard and Nestor. All of Howie's fighters are based on Nintendo characters.
- Cat Black is based on Lina Inverse from Slayers.
- Casey's description of Cat as a "sweet-looking little girl" is a reference to the BBS game Legend of the Red Dragon, where that is one of the game's most powerful enemies.

Other References

- The Crash Championship is a reference to Nintendo's fighting game series Smash Brothers.
- The Fruity Oaty Bar is from Serenity, the Firefly movie.
- Mick's lightsaber is another Star Wars reference.
- Mick's spaceship design is based on Burt Rutan's SpaceShipOne.
- Celestia's last name van Rijndael is a reference to the Advanced Encryption Standard algorithm. Although she is mysterious, it has no meaning other than it having been on the author's mind when it was time to give her a name.
- The holographic displays on Mick's ship are inspired by the displays in the 2002 film Minority Report.
- Flower Power is a reference to the hippie movement of the 1960s and 1970s.
- The upside-down floor as a ceiling in the space station mall was not intended to be a reference to the movie Inception, as that sequence was written before the movie came out, but they are so similar and the movie does it so well that it deserves mention.

- The scanner in the clothing store is based on the typical sliding-bar scale one sees at a doctor's office, minus the sliding bar.
- The pink swimsuit-like softsuit in the armor store is supposed to be Samus's bodysuit from the original Metroid.
- The Hawkochino drink is a reference to Starbucks's Frappuccino.
- Red Dog is a breakfast chain like Dunkin Donuts.
- The Death Box is the name of a custom Smash Brothers arena designed by one of the students in the Sonoma State University Computer Science Club.
- The use of "chains" as the currency of the Core Worlds is a reference to blockchain technology.