

Art and Story by Tristan Thompson

DUSKRIDER

A new social phenomenon is revolutionizing human life on Zarmina. People now have the opportunity to transfer their consciousness to a new body: a synthetic host. The synthetic host doesn't age. It doesn't need food, get sick or develop cancer. Transferring essentially means immortality. The process, however, is irreversible.

Recently, a colony ship from Earth has docked in Zarmina's interstellar port city of Vogt. The colony transport, the Duskrider, has brought 300,000 immigrants from Earth in hopes for economic growth. Among this group is Lena. On her life aboard the Duskrider, Lena was a well-known magnacycle racer.

Zarminian magnacycle riders have begun insuring their legacies by transferring their consciousness to synthetic hosts. Lena is facing pressure from her team and their investors to protect hers as well. She now finds herself at a diverging path of her convictions or continuing her passion.



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Preface

In late 2016, I created a piece that I named 'Midnight Rider'. After publishing it, I started to consider expanding on the character's world and her story. I just felt like one piece wasn't enough to tell the atmosphere that was there.

During this period of thought, I was also riding what is known as the New Retro Wave-- a genre of music that reminisces the days of Don Johnson and pearlescent Lamborghinis. This musical movement helped formulate themes of this young woman's world, and what qualities (and problems) a futuristic setting might have. It should also be noted that I had not seen Blade Runner up to this point. The exposure to this genre was an experience unlike any other.

After doing a bit of research, I found a potential setting that would be a perfect setting for a science fiction narrative. Twenty lightyears from Earth, among the Libra constellation, is an 11 billion-year-old red dwarf star, Gliese 581. This star is twice as old as our own sun, and is also destined to burn twice as long. Due to Gliese 581's smaller size in comparison to our own sun, planets that orbit it are much closer to its surface. Therefore, a complete orbit might take only a couple months or even weeks.

In 2010, a planet was discovered by European scientists orbiting this star. It is thought to have elements needed to sustain life as it is on Earth. Since this planet resides so close to the parent star, it is tidally locked. Just like our own

moon, this tidal locking means that one side of the planet is always facing the body that it orbits. In other words, the two hemispheres of the planet offer vastly different climates. The very subsolar point that is closest to the star would be a hellish desert. I imagine a blazing red sun held in eternal high-noon. The supersolar point, however, would theoretically be a frigid and silent blackness that has never seen the face of its own star.

Now, although these two extremes exist on this planet, there could also exist a third environment. Along a circumventing meridian, sandwiched between the two hemispheres, would be a temperate zone. A zone kept in stasis by sometimes turbulent winds. With

two vastly different pressure systems, there would be violent storms which could perhaps nurture a habitable zone. With advances in terraforming technology, we can conclude that by the year the story begins, humans have substantially developed it (enough to write a story about, anyways).

With these ingredients, I believe I have something to cook up. Two parts speculation mixed with one part physics, set on medium heat, I've hopefully made something digestible. I want to bring the fullest life I can to this fabricated world and its inhabitants. They and I both thank you for it.

-Tristan Thompson



In the year 2487,

mankind has established its first interstellar civilization. Twenty light-years from Earth, in the Libra constellation, exists a planetary system known as Gliese-581. Within this system, Zarmina, the sixth planet, rotates in a tidally-locked orbit around Gliese. It is a red dwarf star twice as old as our own Sun, and destined to burn twice as long.

For over one hundred years, Earth has been sending colony ships of volunteers to terraform and inhabit Zarmina. The voyage between Earth and Zarmina takes more than twenty years at light speed. A shipbuilding company has constructed a new type of colony ship, the Duskrider, that supports a fully-functioning society for this lengthy journey.

Chapter 1

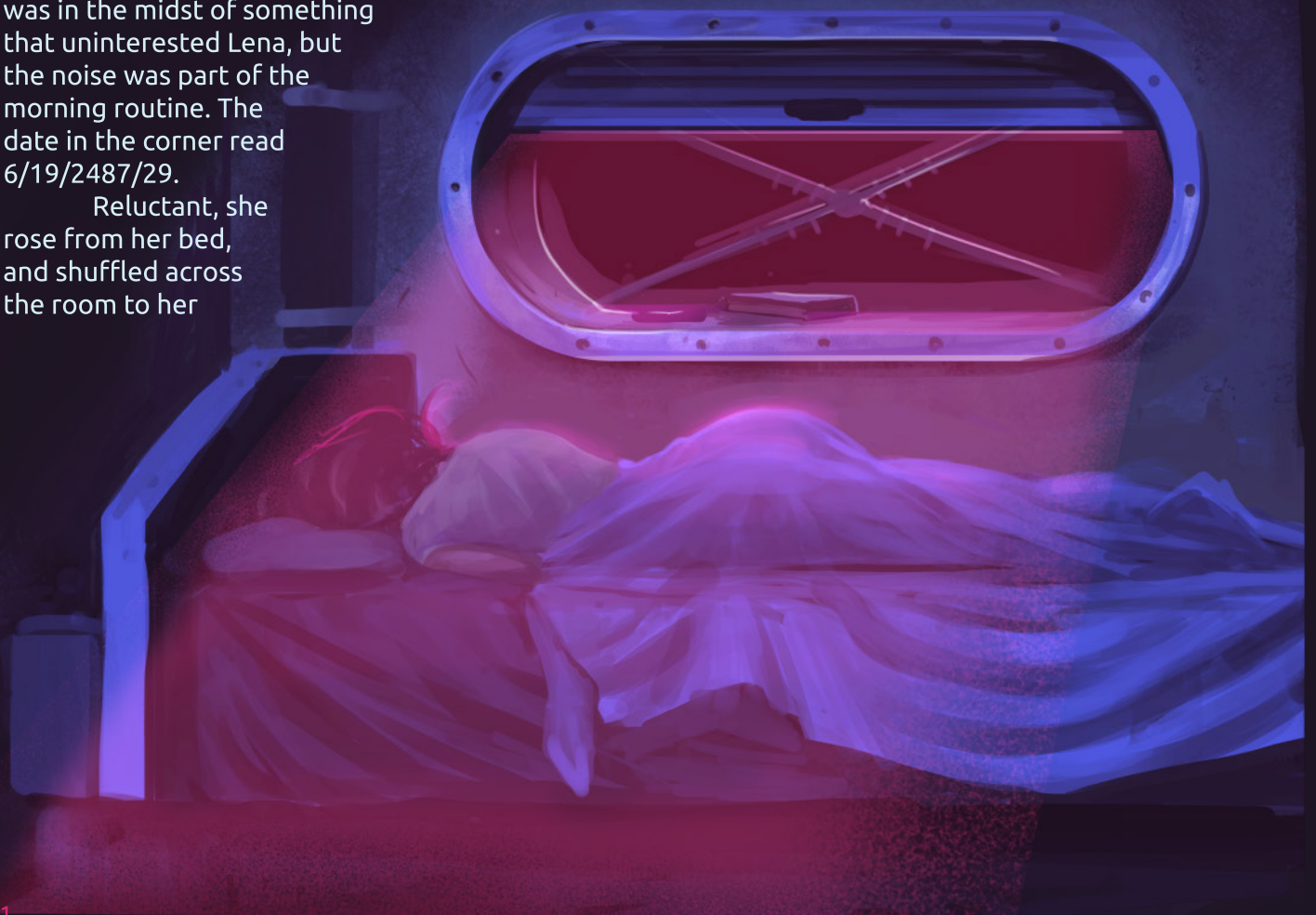
June 19, 2487
Gliese planetary system

A cylinder of crimson light glowed through comforting darkness. The light crept from an ovular window in a single-room cabin. Tangled in her bedsheets, Lena woke from sleep and fumbled for her celltab resting on the windowsill next to her bed. With one eye open, she held it in front of her face and carefully slid her finger along the dark surface. The screen gradually increased in brightness in sync with the room's. She stretched her arms above her head, then pressed her fingers into the inside corners of her eyes, letting out a sigh. The subtle scent of brewing coffee was among the air in her cabin. She sat up and with her celltab in hand, and swiped her index finger vertically along the screen. Across the room, directly above the kitchen island, appeared a depthless, holographic screen. A newscast was in the midst of something that uninterested Lena, but the noise was part of the morning routine. The date in the corner read 6/19/2487/29.

Reluctant, she rose from her bed, and shuffled across the room to her

coffeemaker and picked up the warm mug of black coffee. Setting herself down on a barstool at the small kitchen island, she skimmed a few public postings of the day as she sipped the bitter coffee. She mulled over a few stories of Zarminian local affairs: Sector 7 was unable to fund repair of their transways, and it was causing commuting issues, notably for neighboring sectors 6 and 8. Another story about some colonies of the inner sectors were rioting near the outer, more established parts of the world. For what, she did not know, or care. Lena was forcing herself to pay more attention to these current events, but from a world she had never visited, she found the politics dolesome.

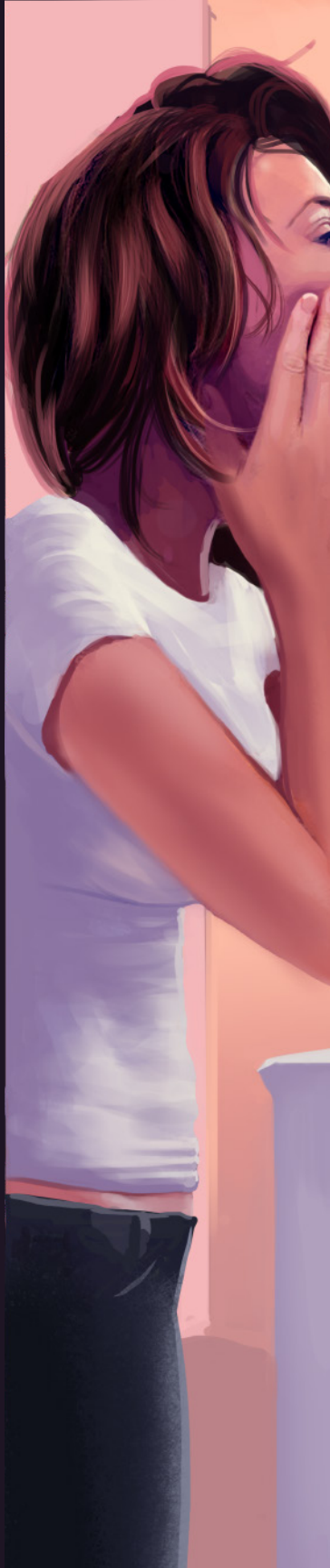
In about a month's time, the Duskrider would enter Zarmina's atmo-



sphere and dock at the interstellar port located in the city of Vogt, Sector 3. Upon arriving at the terminal, Lena, along with all 300,000 plus on board, would be filed for Zarminian citizenship. Upon clearance, each person and family aboard would most likely relocate to some Sector where they would start work. Most had positions waiting for them. Hiring recruits from the Duskrider had certain perks for Zarminian employers. The political affairs uninterested her, yet the tension was palpable.

Lena took a deep swig of her warm coffee. It warmed her throat and chest from the inside. She set the mug down and rose from the barstool. At the foot of her bed lay a nest constructed of crumpled clothes that she had worn the previous days. Some were passable for clean to a careless eye. She rummaged through and chose a dingy grey shirt with a few small stains, and her black working jeans. They were stained as well, but black at least concealed the evidence. She slipped off the white tee she had slept in and tossed it onto her unmade bed, planning to use it again tonight when she got home.

She clipped a fresh bra behind her back, slipped the grey shirt on over her head, then tugged the jeans up over her waist and buttoned them. Dressed, she stepped into her bathroom to apply a light facial moisturizer. She used it as a precaution to protect her



face from the dirt, grime, and heat exposed to her from working as a mechanic. The absence of common air impurities or harsh sun exposure found on Earth or Zarmi-na left most of the Duskrider's residents' complexions unnaturally smooth. Although Lena had the occasional pimple or blemish, her face was absent of age, yet expressed a sternness beyond her years.

She snagged a Vitabar from a red and white, half-empty box on her kitchen counter. Unwrapping it and extracting a small bite, she walked over to her now lukewarm coffee and downed the rest, chasing the dry, doughy lump in her throat. She upended the mug in her sink, next to a dirty plate and some soiled utensils. With the Vitabar clutched between her teeth, she grabbed the pair of well worn, black boots and tied them around her feet. Last, she made sure to pocket her celltab from the island, then exited through the door into the hall.

The M floor of the Duskrider contained eight parallel rows of efficiency cabins. The top residential floors A through G contained cabins with two or more bedrooms, H through K for couples, while the lower floors L, M, and N offered studios. Today, Lena's particular hall was empty. It was a weekday, and most people had already begun their day by this time.

Lena continued down

the hallway and turned the corner to the connecting corridor where an elevator was located on the left wall. Other resident hallways extended from her right. At the elevator door, she called it and within a few moments, a friendly ding sounded, and the door slid open to a small compartment. It was a dull, blue-grey interior with a single, round overhead light. She stepped inside the empty elevator and pressed the button to the G floor where the tram station was located. As the doors slid shut, she leaned back against the side wall. She took a reluctant bite of her meager breakfast. It was strawberry and oat flavored. She couldn't tell if she hated strawberries, or just loathed strawberry-flavored foods. She swallowed it out of necessity as she told herself for the hundredth time that she would begin prepping meals for the morning. Without stopping, the elevator shot to the top floor, dinged, and reopened its doors.

She exited to a more populated hallway where she noticed a few people walking about in different directions to their own destinations. Walking through the hall towards the tram stop, the ceiling opened to a vast expanse where the air stirred with overhead motion. The view of balconies on the A through G floors encircled a community plaza that the tram track bisected. Overhead, drones zipped back and forth carrying



boxes and small shipping containers to their own destinations. A few people sat at the tram stop patiently awaiting the arrival of the 10:15. Walking with a brisker pace to the stop, she took the final bite of her bland breakfast, crumpled the wrapper, and tossed it into a recycling chute posted next to one of the benches.

She sat on an empty bench while she waited. While seated, she arched her neck back and went over all the things in her head she would need to get done today in order to stay on schedule. By the end of the day, their magnacycle must be operational. That left time to test-drive it tomorrow. Then she would have the next two days as buffer to fine-tune any minor problems. It had to be race-ready for the weekend.

She had spent the last month in



Zedd's shop helping him rebuild a bike he had raced previously in last year's Lightyear Festival. This year, however, was the final Lightyear Festival, dubbed Arrival Festival. And this year, Zedd was putting forth everything he had to the last Magna 200 race. Two hundred laps around the mile-long intertwining track, sprawling among the topmost floor of the Duskrider. It was the race that kicked off the week-long festival to commemorate their arrival at Zarmina. This would be the last time that most of the inhabitants of the ship would see each other. All passengers had been toiling for weeks in their own professions to prepare for the last big event before they started their new lives.

As she made a mental list of the parts she would need to double-check, an overhead red light flashed on. Ahead of her, at the far wall of the plaza, the tram track disappeared into a tunnel underneath the G

floor. A gloss black, three-car shuttle appeared and it glided silently around the corner. It slid to a graceful stop directly in front of her. The double-doors of the middle car parted to an empty carriage. Standing up, she leisurely strode into the car. She sat down on a metal bench seat across from a couple that entered after her. They were both enthralled enough by their own celltabs to pay any attention to her or each other. After a moment, a light buzz was heard, and a red light pulsed overhead. The doors closed with another silent movement, and the tram began to slide. Its rail line led out of the residential zone. It then had three stops in the commercial zone, three in the shopping district, and finally its last and only stop before reversing its course at the industrial district.

Once at her stop, she was the last one left on the tram. Coming to yet another smooth halt, the doors opened and





she exited to a wide, bustling hall, free of any advertisements that usually permeated the commercial and shopping districts. This particular hall was flanked with many garage doors on either side, housing mechanic teams that were working on their own magancycles. Overhead, in a high dark ceiling, exposed ventilation ducts and piping snaked their way in and out of the various workshops on either side. As she continued through, she slid an elastic band from her wrist and twisted her hair into a tight bun, so to not interfere with her work for the day.

All incoming mechanical orders had been closed the previous week, and unless there was a direct order from ship operators, all shops participating in the race were working on their own projects. It was a festive, yet competitive atmosphere. Walking down the street to Zedd's shop, she could see that nearly all of the bays were open. Workers inside were seen carrying buckets, welding, or applying finishing decals to their rides. Small robots zipped about the shops carrying tools and parts to the different workers. The sound of torque wrenches, welding torches, and music played over speakers, drowned out

the words of requests shouted at one another from inside the garages. The whole street was alive with tension and diligence. However, the teams inside some garages weren't taking any chances. A wary eye may see exactly what was being constructed inside. These shop doors were covered with long, vinyl strip curtains. Riders and mechanics had been known to borrow ideas from others. Some of these shops weren't about to lose their innovation to another. Every edge a team could have could mean the difference between a tens of thousands of dollars.

Upon arriving at her shop a few hundred feet down, she saw that Zedd had put his garage door down today. Zedd always preferred to hear the other nearby mechanics in their shops. He said it was the sound of motivation. Since they were nearing completion of Vela, a two-year old model V45, she figured he wanted to hide the final product for a race-day surprise. Good thing, because Lena and him had spent nearly every day of the past three weeks busting their asses on Vela. The Arrival Festival race was everything to Zedd, and Lena understood why. This would be Zedd's last race before he retired from professional racing.

Lena turned right down an alley separating their garage from the neighboring on their left. The side door to their garage was located about ten feet in from the alley entrance on the right. Next to the door, mounted on the wall was a small yellow keypad. She pressed in the six-digit entrance code. A mechanical *click* sounded within the wall. She slid the metal door sideways into its chamber.

The interior was dark. There were no windows, and no light source with the bay door closed. She fumbled on the inside wall for the light switch, and finally connected with it after several waving smacks of the wall. The room woke with a flash.

"Lena?" she heard from the other side of the shop, but seemed to come from nowhere.

"Morning," she grumbled. To her





immediate right, the bay door towered above her. On her left, two large work tables were stationed in each front corner of the room, with a central path to the back office between them. She continued into the shop, searching for the source of his voice. She immediately noticed that the bike was off the lift. No. *Fell* off the lift.

“What the hell happened!?” she yelled. No answer. She was trying to make sense of it, but she couldn’t decide what type of upset she should be.

She paced towards the center of the shop passing between the two large work tables on either side of her. Among their surfaces laid various engine components, chassis parts, and some haphazard wrenches. Then she saw it. Behind the lift in the back left corner of the room lay Vela, the beautiful behemoth of metal and speed. She was contorted and twisted on the ground, with visible scratches and dents. Lena flanked the lift to assess the full damage, but froze immediately at what else she saw.

About Me

I wrote the preface, story, did all the art, and promotion myself, so I may as well write my own biography, too.

A native of southern Indiana, I grew up in St. Wendel, a small town twenty minutes outside of Evansville. Once I graduated college in 2013, I moved to Indianapolis to begin my career as an artist. I had been working freelance for about two years at that point, so my portfolio was fairly developed for an undergrad.

That summer after graduation, I began work at MainGate, Inc., where my knowledge of designing t-shirt prints was put to use. While there, I gained professional know-how, and built my network. After about two years in, however, I began to stagnate. I felt like my technical proficiency would plateau if I stayed, so I got a job as a shoe salesman part-time while I focused on rebuilding my portfolio.

During my stint in footwear retail, I began to learn a lot about digital painting from my time spent in my studio (and a lot about shoes, for that matter). I began dabbling in Corel Painter, and in doing so, I learned even more about the mechanics of Photoshop. Even when I didn't have commission work coming in, I would self-assign projects that challenged me in different ways. I still see plenty of art that motivates me to learn and further develop.



The Campaign

Thanks again for purchasing this. This first chapter is hopefully not the end of Lena's story. By the time you have read this, I should have a Kickstarter campaign up and running in hopes of your support. Please consider checking out the campaign if you enjoyed this story and want to see it progress. If you want to support me, and not necessarily the Duskrider project, a patronage to my Patreon page is also very valuable. You can get rewards either way.

If my goal is met, I plan to make a full-length story surrounding Lena's adventure on Zarmina, and the choices she must make in the advent of AI advancements. I want to draw questions to readers' minds of how technology can not only be dangerous, but how it can be helpful as well.

The part about the story that I am most excited to create are the individual scenes. The way I had envisioned the final product is that the scenes will be cinemagraphs (like a .gif, but perfectly looped). I do not consider myself an author (as you can probably tell from the amateur writing). At heart, I am an illustrator. I wanted to create a reason to make all of these scenes of a different world. And I wanted to have a reason to learn how to take illustration to the next level. If you're a fan of learning, you'll understand my plight.

The struggle now is not only developing my skill, but marketing. Although it's probably not obvious from someone who writes his own biography in first-person, I don't like talking about myself. With this first chapter, I hope that it not only brings readers to the world of Zarmina, but introduces them to my endeavors as well. If you purchased this and read the entirety, it means the world to me.

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