Far-Star Island

A Novel

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Chapter 1

Khiora’s Crossing

Khiora Liatos swiveled, her senses spinning, and suddenly found herself sailing through the azure Mediterranean air. Only much later would she know what had struck her and sent her flying off. Now she only knew that she in turn struck the coruscating surface of the water—struck it a smashing, sidelong blow. Then her body sheared under and was only a drifting weight, while her stunned and bedazzled mind wandered through a weird but beautiful turquoise world.

Then she was drowning. As the shock of the blow began to wear away, dispersed by the swirling blue-green suspension around her, she realized this in a calm and unaffected way.

*Yes, I’m drowning*, she thought (though of course the words were in her native Greek.) *How very silly—I can swim like a fish, and here I am drowning.*

Part of drowning, of course, was floating ever downward. And that was what Khiora did, until the hope of fighting to return to the surface for air was no more substantial than the strands of seaweed sway-dancing around her.

Dreamily, she realized now that the water surrounding her was no longer turquoise. It had blushed a light plum shade, as if an exotic octopus had released its colorful ink to cover an escape.

Then her left foot bumped something solid. Slowly she looked down, even as her vision was beginning to dim, and saw something that sent a tiny spark of fear through her.

Shark!? No. Sharks weren’t known for their legs. The rangy creature that skimmed beneath her had four cat-fashion legs, each of them stroking like oars as strange feather-like fins along its side helped in forward movement. Its long, tufted tail moved like the keel on a boat to steady the animal’s course.

At the collision of her foot with its back, the creature halted, twisting at the shoulders to peer up even as Khiora was peering down. She gazed into a pair of cinnamon-colored eyes and thought mistily that they were possibly the kindest ones she’d encountered. But her senses were almost gone now. Another half minute, perhaps, and her last *syrtos* would have been danced, her last *baklava* savored, her life’s hopes all scurried away like frightened fish among the shimmying seaweed curtain.

But, though Khiora didn’t see it, the strange dweller of the plum-tinted waters doubled back and then shot up at triple speed. The tail snaked up, the strands of its tufted end separating into glass-like filaments. The filaments reached to the girl’s open mouth and entered, until half a dozen at least were inside, taking up their saving work.

As the water gently but surely evacuated the lifeless girl’s lungs, it washed through the tail-filaments, first a pale to deepening plum in color, then, towards the end, with a hint of turquoise hue . . .

Then while the last of the water-extraction was taking place, a great scalloped shape began rising around the unconscious Khiora, and a hard, iridescent canopy was arching over her head. The structure parted into two fluted “wings,” and these descended upon and closed around her.

Faintly gasping as consciousness came back, Khiora Liatos ascended as if from a great depth. For a moment she concentrated on the miracle of breathing. Then she became aware of the light around her. It was soft and pearly, almost like dawn-glow. But she knew instantly that she was completely enclosed in a place without windows, so the radiance couldn’t be coming from the sun.

And she was completely dry, she found. It seemed that only moments ago she’d been completely immersed in the deep Aegean waters, and now she was dry. It was probably a dream, then. But if so, where on earth was she now? For a moment, she didn’t want to know. She preferred to lie peacefully, her eyes closed, not thinking so hard that it hurt her aching head.

Memories flickered in the theater of her mind. Her little island lay before her like a table mantled with blue-green velvet. The cream-colored triangles of its sail-ships moved like a windborne feathered headdress across that mantle, She saw herself standing among the glory of it, drawing the sun-laced air into her pores.

At last, very carefully, Khiora opened her eyes and sat up. She was in a passage whose sides arced around and over her. Immediately she felt the gaze upon her. She looked to her right, and found a pair of cinnamon eyes fixed on her. The dragon-lion thing was resting only about two meters away, one of its paws curled around the other in cat fashion. *What* dragon-lion thing, her mind asked next? And then came the answer straightaway: *Why, the one that you saw just before consciousness faded out, of course. Is it . . . can it possibly be a gryphon of some kind? But no—gryphons are from ancient mythology. They can’t possibly exist.*

It was about the size of a cheetah, she thought, thinking back on her trips to the *zoologio*. But not quite so elongated and comically slender as that fastest of cats. No, this creature was lean but had well-developed muscles--from all its swimming, no doubt.

“Where am I?” Khiora finally asked. It was the inescapable question, of course—what else was more important at that moment? It seemed bizarre to think that the gryphon-thing in front of her could understand or even reply, but as far as she could tell there was no one—nor any *thing*—else to ask. .

The creature’s soft, red-brown eyes had been fixed on some unknown point in space. Now they traveled back to Khiora’s face. “Wrxyyxhyvnmnnoor,” said the gryphon that couldn’t possibly exist. Or at least its mouth came open with the sound, which was like an underwater wind-chime in quality, so Khiora had to assume it was speaking.

“I can’t understand,” Khiora said, again speaking her native tongue.

In the absence of a comprehensible answer from the gryphon, the young castaway repeated her question. To her amazement, this time what seemed to be random sparks spun out on the air, coming from the neighborhood of her own mouth. These “sparks” were a lovely turquoise in color—somewhat like her Mediterranean waterways—but when she lifted a hand she found they had no heat or substance at all.

A voice entered her, then. *You are in a place without place.*

Khiora reeled a little. It was disconcerting not to hear but to *feel* the words. She’d heard of mental telepathy, of course, because just like most teenagers she had watched some fantasy films. But when it was telepathy, weren’t you supposed to hear the words in your mind? Khiora had seemed to “hear” the gryphon’s answer in the little grotto of her chest, its words fluttering like wisps of smoke around the fireplace of her heart.

Finally recovering a little from the shock, Khiora asked, *What does that mean?*

More words arrived inside her. *It means that you are in a place that is Not.*

*Not what?*  Khiora demanded. And then she realized she hadn’t really spoken, either.

*What is your place?*  the gryphon countered.ó

*An island in the country of Greece called Kefallonia. On Earth.*

*Then this is Not-Greece, Not-Kefallonia. Un-Earth, if you like.*

*That isn’t very helpful,* said Khiora crisply.

The gryphon’s long face didn’t change, but somehow Khiora simply knew it had smiled.

*The name would mean nothing to you now. And I am Not-gryphon, incidentally.*

*Then what are you?* She was getting used to this business of “non-talk.”

*I am lovely. Would you not agree?*

Khiora laughed in spite of herself. *Yes, I suppose so. But only because I fancy blue-green skin, lion manes and webbed paws.*

A wind-chime stirring and clinking “sounded” within the girl’s chest. Her laugh, she knew, had been answered by another.

*Well-said, young one. Very well, then. In the Librarian’s scrolls I am mentioned as a dragólyon. Kothkharza by name. My mother: Kulkharza. Her mother: Kyskharza. And her mother . . .*

Kothkharza. Khiora sounded it out syllable by syllable. And as she did so, everything returned to her—her descent almost to watery death, the appearance of Kothkharza, and just how fortunate she’d been to wake in this cave-haven.

*Are you a man or a lady?* she asked slowly.

*Female*, came the scientific response.

Khiora drew a long, whispery breath*. Lady Kothkharza, then. I owe you my life, don’t I?*

*Most likely. But who is it who owes me her life?*

Khiora felt a little ashamed of the tone she’d previously taken. Her mother was always scolding her as an ingrate, and now it seemed she was just as ungrateful in her dreams. Because, of course, this couldn’t be reality—could it? But even in a dream, she couldn’t shrug off the saving of her life. Khiora went down to one knee. *Khiora Lyria Liatos of Kefallonia,* she said. *This is who owes you her life.*

*Welcome, then, Khiora Lyria Liatos, to where you are.*

*And what am I doing where I am?* Khiora had risen, and her question sounded cross in her own . . . heart. Patience, her mother assured, was the least of her virtues.

*I don’t know. Would you like to be taken to someone who may illuminate the matter?*

*Please,* voiced Khiora. Illumination would be the very thing.

Chapter Two

Mizuki’s Passage

It was the school field trip, and they were going to explore Fugaku Wind Cave. Mizuki Su had a weird feeling about it—she knew something was about to happen. Goose bumps started crawling up her skin just thinking of it. For one thing, she didn’t like caves, and for another she didn’t like the darkness. In spite of her worries, she dozed off to the hum of the motor and the rocking of the bus—the combination of the “motor-song” and the movement always calmed her.

Suddenly it was full night. She found herself standing on a craggy peak. She felt the mountain breeze ruffle her long ponytail. A full moon shone in the sky, but there were no stars visible. The mountaintop glowed in the moon’s radiance. Mizuki walked forward, every step sending stones crackling into the shadowy valley below. Then she saw that something was creeping through the shadows. It was hard to tell, but it looked like—

“Mizuki!” Himuri’s call jolted her awake. “We are here. It’s about time you woke up, sleepyhead.”

Mrs. Hitori was now taking them through a clearing in the trees, and after a hike of about twenty minutes they saw the entrance of the cave. It was the size of two elephants standing one on top of the other.

Now Mizuki heard a whisper, but couldn’t make out any words.

“Did you hear that?” she asked Himuri.

The other girl was at Mizuki’s side, looking excitedly at the cave. “Hear what?” she asked.

“That noise coming from inside the cave,” Mizuki said more pressingly. “It sounded like . . . someone whispering.”

Himuri turned around to face her. “I didn’t hear anything. I think you’re still daydreaming.”

Mrs. Hitori’s voice broke in. She told them to form two separate lines. Mizuki was at the head of the line Mrs. Hitori called to go in. Trembling, she obeyed.

It was horrible inside. The walls were covered with moss, and spiderwebs were hanging from the tops. They looked like every hair of Mizuki’s head tied together and hung from the ceiling. It was cold and damp. She couldn’t believe how calm her friends were. Couldn’t they hear the small whispering all around them?

As they went farther into the cave the laughter of her friends started fading. She turned to see them, and she suddenly realized that her friends were no longer behind her.

Fear struck her like a bee sting. Desperately, she searched for the rest of the group. It was hopeless—she was stuck in a dark cave, and she was alone. She felt her way over to a rock to sit down. She rested her head on her folded arms, thinking of her family and wondering if she would ever see them again. Tears started running down her cheeks.

As she lifted her head, a dim orange light appeared. She wondered if that was the way out. She felt her way through the cave, and the light became stronger, letting her see the path in front of her now. Now it was blinding, but still it made her more calm.

Mizuki stepped out of the cave.

Chapter Three

Illumination Quest

They were walking out across a stretch of sand that carried a sparkle like the glitter Khiora used to use in her little projects, oh so long ago when she was a child. In color, this sand was a silvery-gray, and it looked absolutely beautiful as the gentle violet ripples of the lagoon rippled across it, foaming into lavender at the edges. A mild breeze was stirring, and it traveled across her bare legs and midriff, reminding her she was still clad in her black-and-bronze bikini bathing-suit. She pondered whether a change of clothes might not be needed.

Beside her ambled the creature who was the only living being she had met thus far in this wild-and-strange land of dreams. Lady Kothkharza, Dracóleon, accent on the ‘o.’ For some reason, although they had only met two or three hours before, Khiora trusted this blue-green, four-footed, lion-maned stranger as if she had known her from birth. After all, if she was going to be suddenly thrust into a weird realm that in no way resembled her Kefallonia, she could at least be given a sympathetic soul to soften her landing—and it certainly seemed that she had been.

“Where are we going now?” she asked.

Within the little sounding-chamber of her chest she heard, *To the place of illumination.*

*Oh,* very *helpful*, thought Khiora, who had always been a bit sarcastic.

*I’m sure you mean that sincerely*, came the sweet-“voiced” reply.

Oops. Khiora had forgotten that her thoughts were no longer entirely her own. And then those thoughts returned to the issue of how she was dressed. Or *wasn’t* dressed. Until just recently (or was it so recently?) she had been a finless modern mermaid, out on a fishing-boat in the Aegean Sea, at one with a beautiful balmy August day and wearing exactly what anyone would expect. Here in this otherworldly place, the weather was also fine, but what happened if a storm came up? Surely this strange land had storms and bouts of bad weather. Although Khiora had been told by a number of men, both young and old, that she had a nice figure (though the word choice of some wasn’t quite so polite), and though there seemed to be no human beings here at all, she had begun to feel a little vulnerable with so much skin exposed.

“I may need new clothes,” Khiora told her companion.

Kothkharza tilted her head in her direction. *May you? It’s true that some Distalaris wear articles of clothing, but most do not.*

Well, I do, she returned crossly. And what I’m wearing now is fine for the water, but on land it might as well be—well, underwear.

*Then it’s as well you’ve spoken up now, Khiora Lyria Liatos. Cast your eyes yonder.*

She looked to ahead and to her right. There stood a small, crooked shanty that appeared to be made all of driftwood, the various pieces lashed together with cords of seaweed.

“Who lives there?” Khiora asked.

*No one. It is deserted forevermore.*

“Is there anything of interest inside?”

*I believe* you *would say so.*

Khiora trudged somewhat doubtfully across the sand until she reached the strange little structure. She looked through a rough window and saw various items strewn around the shanty’s sandy floor. She saw something long and black crumpled near the door. Rounding the corner of the shanty, she pulled on the latch of a door made from what looked like a large nail, probably from a wrecked sea vessel. This crude door lurched open.

Khiora took a loose stick and gingerly prodded at the black heap she had seen from the window. Many Greeks were nearly phobic about snakes, and Khiora wasn’t about to run the risk of being surprised by this land’s version of the *ohia,* the poisonous adder of Greece’s islands. Fortunately, there was nothing underneath the cloth, as she learned by lifting it up on the tip of her stick.

Casting aside the stick, she held up her find for inspection. It was the rough equivalent of a Japanese kimono, but was fashioned from a light, soft ebony leather which was a delight to touch. Appliquéd atop this leather, up and down the robe’s length, were various random rhomboid and triangle shapes, all of a wine-colored cloth. Then atop *those* someone had embroidered a splash of symbols in thread of a gorgeous metallic scarlet. The embroidery continued so richly in the upright collar that it gleamed like a dark ruby.

Khiora’s eyes had widened, and her mouth had fallen open. In all her shopping extravaganzas in Athens, she had never seen anything so beautiful.

Kothkharza the dragólyon turned at the soft footfalls, watching her charge approach.

*I gather you are pleased, young one. I think you are showing nearly* all*your teeth.*

“I’m not so terribly young, you know,” returned Khiora—but it was not a cross reply. Her mood was clear from the scintillating smile she was suddenly carrying around.

*To me you are an embryo. But I gather you like what you found in the little viagonish house?*

Khiora tried to resist being enthusiastic, but failed. “It’s fabulous,” she admitted. “I’ve never seen anything like it. Do you think . . . could it possibly be mine to keep?

Kothkharza’s eyes seemed to grow a little misty. *Yes. There is no one else to claim it now.*

In sudden glee, Khiora shouted, “*Opa*!” and performed a whirling flurry of dance- steps, her arms outstretched like a scarecrow’s. “If I came home from my visit here with only this to show my mother, it would all have been worth my while.”

The dracóleon looked at her quizzically. *You love clothing so much?*

“I love clothes, yes. But sometimes I think there are two Khioras. One loves swimming, diving, running around in her—”

*Underwear?* suggested Kothkharza.

“Bathing-suit,” said the girl sternly. “The second Khiora loves gorgeous new clothes, and doesn’t get them often enough.”

*Well, then, glorious day, and please let’s be on our way.*

Khiora glanced sharply at her beastly companion. For the first time since their momentous meeting, she had caught a trace of sarcasm, even of anger, in her companion’s “tone.” She fell silent, not knowing what more to say for the moment.

After a few minutes of walking, she ventured, “Who lived there?” and pointed back to the driftwood shanty.

*A person.*

“Oh, helpful,” Khiora sniffed. “What *kind* of person?”

*A very good person—but also very melancholy.*

“Male or female?” she persisted.

*I’m not permitted to answer all of your questions, Khiora Lyria Liatos. Distalar is a land ridden with mysteries, steeped in secrets. Much of what you learn here will be by happy—or sometimes* ***not*** *so happy—accident.*

Khiora sighed, and walked on a while longer without speaking. Finally she said, “I’m in Distalar, then. So it does have a name. And the . . . the inahbitants are—Distalaris? And that other word, the one you used for the house. Viagonish?”

Kothkharza sighed in her turn*. All things located on the verge of the Viagoon are Viagonish. That is also the official language of Distalar.*

“Thank you, Kothkharza,” Khiora said quickly. “I love direct answers. I’m sorry if that annoys you.” She gestured to the water. “Then that is the Viagoon?”

The dracoleon simply nodded.

Then Khiora cast her eyes ahead and saw the sun strike flittering star-flashes off a bright ribbon that crossed their way. “Is that a river we’re coming to?”

*Yes. That is Urknon, one of the nine Riddled Rivers.*

“Is it deep?”

*In places, but there is also a good fording-point.*

“We could swim. As you know, I’m almost like a fish in the water.”

*You might not be so at ease with this particular body of water.*

Khiora looked closely at her companion’s kindly but draconine face. “Why? What lives in it?” She was having memory-flashes of octopus reefs and moray eels.

*Not what. It is a who. His name is Elzabarg.*

“And he’s not a *nice* who?” Khiora asked somewhat flippantly.

*He is one of my distant cousins, and I have had many contacts with him. Not a single one of them was pleasant.*

She thought about that for a long moment. “But they were at least civilized?”

The topaz-colored eyes centered on Khiora. *On the last of those occasions, he attempted to kill me.*

Chapter Four

Mirrors of the Night

As Mizuki’s sight adjusted to the sky’s dimming light, she could clearly see the tall trees rising from the ground but it looked like they were behind mirrors. Making the sun reflect on them and making it extremely hot. Almost like a burning over. *Mirrors! They were mirrors. But what would they be doing in the forest?* It was almost like a maze. Her reflection was everywhere.

Suddenly a flash of gold raced past her. Mizuki stopped still, listening. There was something hiding in a bush less than five feet away. Going in for a closer look, even though the skin on the back of her neck was prickling, Mizuki saw a furry thing emerge.

It appeared to be a cat. In size it was larger than most of the domestic felines Mizuki had seen, long and slender under its medium-long fur. Its coat was the color of an ancient bronze mirror she had once seen in a museum in Tokyo, except on the chest, the paws and under the jaw, where it was a beautiful cream tone. Except, once again, for the strange spectacle-like markings that made curlicued ovals arounds its eyes. These markings were a deep rust color, and the cat’s eyes were an eerie reddish-gold.

Those red-gold eyes had fixed on her. Mizuki stared into their depths until she started to feel almost like she was being hypnotized. She forced herself to look instead at the cat’s ears, which were very long and tufted and twitched every few seconds, and the tail, which followed right along with the ears. Finally she felt herself beginning to twitch, too, and she turned away quickly.

Now she was looking once more at her own multiple reflections in the faceted crystal mirrors standing all around her. As she looked, a small puff of vapors began to obscure part of the surface, as if someone had been standing behind her breathing on the “glass.” But the little cloud wasn’t white— it was a pale violet, just like the light that had guided her through the cave passage. And as Mizuki watched, it began to form letters. Finally those letters resolved, spelling a message: *Turn again.* The symbols used were Kanji, from the written Japanese language—just as if they were meant only for Mizuki.

So she turned around again—and faced the strange cat of the red-golden eyes.

Stunned, Mizuki stood there speechless. “H-how are you doing that?” She managed to finally ask.

The cat didn’t flinch; he appeared to be observing Mizuki’s every movement.

“Where is this?” Mizuki asked again, gesturing at her surroundings.

Still the cat cocked its head at her, its long ears twitching. Those glittering eyes held hers without blinking.

And suddenly there were words forming on the air before her. They seemed to be written in swirls of light. Light just as orange as that which had guided her through the gloomy passage—the color of fire, yet not like flames at all.

*This is Mourathan*, the lettering read. *In Viagonish, that means Mirror Mountain.*

“Oh,” she said in a small voice, “What’s Viagonish?”

*The language of Distalar,* read a new set of letters.

“Oh,” repeated Mizuki. “And what’s Distalar?”

*Everything,* answered the fwriting.

“Ah,” Mizuki glanced around her once again and sighed. *Mirror-like rocks. Cats that wrote on the air with orange light. So I’ve gone crazy? I’m dreaming? Maybe I’m sick with a fever, and this is—what does Mama call it—delirium?*

“If I may ask, what is your name? Mizuki dared to ask the cat.

*I don’t know that I have a name,* the letters read.

“Then how do people call you when they need you?”

*There are no people in Distalar.*

“None? Only animals, then?”

*Yes. And when they need me they send a message. Usually it says “Where is the Dailox?*

“Then your name is Dailox,” Said Mizuki firmly.

*I suppose so.* Dailox looked at her again, twitched his tail, and asked in light, *And what do* *animals call you?*

“My name is Mizuki Su, and it’s not animals that call me that but people,” Mizuki added quickly.

*So there is more of your kind?*

“Yes. Many. Hundreds of Thousands. If there are no people in Distalar, how do you know about people?”

*There were people, once. The last one died a time ago.*

“Oh. But... who rules Distalar now?”

*What is ‘rules?’*

“Rules is . . . who commands. Who governs Distalar.”

*No one at all now.*

“Ah,” said Akari. She fell silent for a while, deep in thought. At last she asked “Dailox? Do you know why I am here? Only this morning I was exploring a Cave in Japan, and now suddenly I’m in Distalar. Or is this only a dream?”

“I have never had a dream, since I never sleep. But our Queen dreamed many times and always gathered the animals to tell them of her dreams. And no, I have not an inkling why you are here. I guided you out of the cave only because you seemed so lost there.”

“But the cave is in Japan!” Mizuki protested. “How could you see me there?!”

“I didn’t see you. My light saw you.”

All at once, Akari realized that the day light had been growing dim around her. A worried look came into Dailox’s eyes. All was still and silent. It looked like Dailox was listening for something.

“Is something wr—” She didn’t get to finish.

*Be quiet!* Dailox’s written words flashed. Mizuki looked around in the direction he was listening. A blur of black raced past some bushes . . .

Then she was struck broadside by a living cannonball and hurled to the ground.