

Enigma

Synopsis

BRITTA, 28-year-old ambassador for her home planet of Galileo, is disappointed when her revelation of a potential new colony to her fellow Lost Colonies Alliance ambassadors gets a ho-hum reception. Enigma's technology-inhibiting properties make trips to or communication with the cloud-shrouded surface difficult, which they've solved by creating a space elevator to the surface from their orbiting space station. To make her day worse, Britta experiences strange episodes where she compulsively obeys selective commands from those around her, prompting her to seek help from her best friend, CRYSTAL.

Crystal's sharp intellect confirms the worst possible scenario: the biotronic WetWare on Britta's left arm—a life-saving device possessed by most citizens across the Lost Colonies—has been infected by behavior-altering malware, a feat thought impossible. The discovery surfaces that her Fortunian boyfriend TANNER installed the malware as part of an insidious plot to catapult the success of his company.

Or so Tanner believes. Captured and commanded to not communicate with anyone, Britta discovers that Tanner's lurky assistant DUVALL is in fact an alien sleeper agent for the terrifying Uu'nok who forced humanity from Earth 10,000 years ago. To protect his identity, Duvall sabotages a drop pod and sends Britta on a doomed trip to Enigma's surface where her body is unlikely to be recovered. Britta fights extreme G-forces and uses the available equipment to survive decompression, ejection from the pod, and a near-fatal plummet when the severed space cable destroys 2 of her 3 parachutes.

Bruised and exhausted, she wakes to an enormous snarling silver animal resembling a tiger. Unable to even speak, she escapes by humming a lullaby, only to later stumble across a carnivorous horse-creature. Britta fights a desperate battle that leaves half of her face and torso acid burned, along with a torn calf muscle she can't even stand on. The giant cat, who Britta nicknames GOLIATH, returns with a dead critter as a peace offering, after which Britta begins the agonizing, kilometers-long journey with her new companion to the nearest local settlement, her one-and-only mission to warn the Colonies that the Uu'nok have returned before she dies from inevitable WetWare failure.

Meanwhile, Crystal finds herself with no memory of what happened to Britta, as the primary murder suspect, and infected with the same malware that now prevents her from investigating, or from even leaving the station. Crystal recruits the handsome Entropian ambassador, BARD, to disable her WetWare, which allows them to escape on a docked ship after Tanner chases them through the station with a vibro-sword. Crystal's fold science expertise enables them to evade pursuit, but a desperate maneuver triggers a deadly split-wormhole event that knocks Crystal unconscious and leaves the fate of their ship unknown.

A grueling trek through alien wilderness exposes Britta to a few surprises, including a near-encounter with a slaver ship and witnessing Goliath walk on water. Goliath leaves her at an isolated medieval cabin belonging to REESE, a severely scarred colonist who, despite Britta's inability to speak, takes her weary self into his home and cares for her wounds with unexpected expertise. Britta's WetWare mysteriously continues to function, granting a much-needed extension to her lifespan, which she will need because neither Reese nor anyone on this planet appears to possess any technology at all, let alone the means to contact the orbiting space station. The mystery of Enigma deepens, however, when she sees Reece conjure fire out of seemingly thin air.

Crystal regains consciousness to learn from Captain TELAWANI that her unsafe fold resulted in 4 crew deaths, the ship is stranded 50,000 lightyears from anywhere, and that Crystal is their only hope of getting home. While swapping her infected WetWare out for a clean one, she discovers that Bard's is also infected. The process of swapping it out and subsequent engine repairs brings them closer together, revealing that they share similar pasts, although Crystal continues to doubt his true intentions, compounded by issues with her own self-image.

Britta receives an unexpected visitor one day during her recovery while Reece is away. MAE suggests that Britta ask him to take her to the inn, which he had never mentioned but later agrees to. The comfy medieval inn stirs a new excitement in Britta—the home she'd never visited. Mae is less happy to see her there. Her anger peaks in an unexplainable feat of hydromancy that causes liquids to leap out of their cups, leaving Britta and Reece drenched.

Friendly monks from a nearby monastery check in. They educate Britta about their god, EFREUS, and the elemental gifts S/He bestowed to defeat the evil Skyfallen, which prompts her to remain quiet about her true origins. Her tenuous sanity breaks when she sees Goliath's likeness on their holy medallions. The stunning revelation finally prompts her to reveal the entire truth to Reece. The conversation draws them intimately close, spawning a night of love, the morning

after which Britta's WetWare finally fails, marking a one-week countdown to her death unless she receives treatment from her people.

Crystal successfully returns the ship to Entropian space only to be immediately arrested. She reveals the malware problem to Telawani, who agrees to bely her arrest to give her time to stop the spread.

Slavers arrive from a local Fire-kin hold who present a challenge for Britta's professional decorum. A cry for help from the younger fire-kin, AARON, provokes a daring confrontation between Britta and a high-ranking Fire-kin named SADIE. Britta's natural diplomacy wins the woman over against the odds, triggering a startling transformation for the better. Determined to complete her mission before she dies, Britta recruits Reece, Sadie, Aaron, and a kindly Earth-kin monk named BOB into an unlikely fellowship to seek help from the god-kitty reputed to live in the crater where the original colony ship may have landed.

While Duvall deploys to Enigma to deal with Goliath / Efreus, Crystal engages space pirates in a dicey partnership that leads Telawani's crew to mutiny, forcing Crystal to betray Galileo's coveted fold technology to the pirates in a desperate play to gain their help to save the Colonies.

The fellowship's journey is slowed by Britta's steady health decline. The crew hits a hard stop when slavers attack. Britta fails to bluff her way out, so she resorts to a show of strength from her kin party members that backfires in a landslide that buries Britta and leaves poor Aaron dead. The traumatic loss prompts her to reveal her true nature to the rest of the party, all of whom except for Mae take it well.

Britta has to be carried in a stretcher by the time they reach the crater. A brief search reveals the ship has been buried. Inside, however, is surprisingly untainted. Britta's ingenuity and love of ancient crafts allows the party to restore power. In such poor health that she can barely breathe, Britta broadcasts her warning about Duvall to the space station moments before passing out.

Crystal's dangerous sprint around the Colonies, powered by a fold engine she cobbled together from spare parts, ends with inoculating the space station orbiting Enigma against the malware. Now free of its influence, she and the space station make a one-way trip to the source of Britta's broadcast in a courageous attempt to save her from organ failure and Duvall.

The Uu'nok catches up to them just after the rescue shuttle lands. While the doctor struggles to keep Britta alive, Vicean warriors team up with Reece to defeat Duvall, but even with the numbers significantly in their favor, they can't injure the Uu'nok faster than he heals.

The tide appears to turn when Efreus arrives, but the cat refuses to fight. Instead, Reece and the other Kin use their staggering abilities and the teamwork they learned during their long journey to end him permanently.

Then, despite their best efforts, Britta dies.

A service is held in the space station in her honor, attended by the most influential people in the galaxy and the fellowship who enabled her success. Crystal faces consternation from her own people, for the first time making her consider a future with Bard on Entropia.

On the surface below, Britta, whose body had sunk into the earth before the party could retrieve it, reaches a hand up through the dirt to scratch Efreus' ear.

END