

PERFECTION
UNLEASHED
A Double Helix Novel

JADE KERRION

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ISBN: 1469980355

ISBN-13: 978-1469980355

**PRAISE AND RECOGNITION FOR
“PERFECTION UNLEASHED”**

Second place winner, Science Fiction, Royal Palm Literary Awards, 2011

Finalist, Science Fiction, Next Generation Indie Book Awards, 2012

“A breakout piece of science fiction”—Royal Palm Literary Award judge

DEDICATION

To Mark, for the joy, love, and life we share.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My deepest thanks to my father-in-law, Doug Waters,
whose faith and financial support made this novel possible.

I would also like to thank my editor, Bobbie Christmas,
and my cover artist, Jason Alexander.

ONE

On another Friday night, she might have been out at a Georgetown bar, accepting drinks from attractive men and allowing them to delude themselves into imagining that they might be the lucky one to take her home.

Tonight, she had work to do.

The hem of the white lab coat brushed about her legs as she strode toward the double doors that barred entry to the western wing. No one paid her any attention. Scientists and lab technicians scurried past her, nodding at her with absent-minded politeness. On Friday evening, with the weekend beckoning, no one thought about security.

Where men faltered, technology kept going.

The corridor seemed endlessly long, and the security cameras that pivoted on their ceiling-mounted frames bore into her back. She knew that her image likely featured on one or more of the many monitors at the security desk, but a combination of training and nerves of steel steadied her. She resisted the urge to twitch or to hurry her pace.

Each step brought her closer to an ominously glowing red eye on the security panel beside the door. Undeterred, she waved her badge over the panel. Moments later, the security panel flashed to green and a heavy lock slid back. Another small triumph. It usually took a series of them to make a victory.

She lowered her head, ostensibly to look down at the tablet in her hand. Her long, dark hair fell forward, concealing the lower half of her face from the security camera as she walked through the open door. "Entering the western wing," she murmured, trusting the concealed microphone to pick up on her whisper.

"Good luck," Carlos's voice responded through the tiny earpiece inserted in her right ear. "All's clear out here."

"I'm really glad the security pass I programmed for you actually worked," Xin added, a whimsical tone in her voice.

Zara was glad, too. She had a solid plan. Two of her finest associates backed her up—Carlos Sanchez waiting in the car concealed off road outside Pioneer Labs, and Mu Xin poised in front of a computer in her Alexandria home—but she could come up with a list of a half-dozen things that could still go wrong.

“I’ve finished checking the employee log against the National Mutant Registry,” Xin continued. “You’ve lucked out, Zara. Apparently Pioneer Labs isn’t big into hiring mutants. You won’t have to contend with any telepaths or telekinetics tonight.”

Good. That was one thing she could strike off her list.

Another long hallway stretched in front of her, but the glass-enclosed research station on the left drew her attention. Two lab technicians huddled around a network of computers, their attention focused on the output pouring from the whirling terminals. Her gaze drifted over the lab technicians and focused on Roland Rakehell and Michael Cochran, the famous co-creators of “Galahad,” the perfect human. The two scientists stood in contemplative discussion in front of a liquid-filled fiberglass chamber.

The man floating within the sensory deprivation tank, his head encased in a metallic hood and his face covered by breathing apparatus, writhed in agony. Wires monitoring heart rate and brain waves trailed from his naked body. Jagged edges leaped hysterically off the computer readouts as mind and body convulsed, shuddering with madness and pain.

One of the lab technicians spoke up, “Professor, his brain waves indicate that he is waking.”

Roland Rakehell glanced at his watch. “Right on time,” he noted, his voice tinged with disappointment. “I guess the miracles can’t come thick and fast every single day.”

“We made him human, not superhuman,” Michael Cochran said. “Besides, we don’t really have time to record a miracle today.” He glanced at the two technicians. “Roland and I are meeting investors for dinner, and we have to leave now. Take Galahad back to his room. Make sure he gets something to eat.”

Silently she pushed away from the viewing area and continued down the corridor. Her violet eyes betrayed the faintest flicker of confusion and consternation.

Galahad.

She would never have imagined it, but apparently the scientists had no qualms treating their prized creation like a common lab animal.

“Xin?” she murmured quietly.

“Right here,” was the immediate response.

“Approaching the suite.”

“I’m one step ahead of you,” Xin said. “I’ve gotten through the security system and rerouted all the cameras in the suite to a static video feed. You’re clear to enter.”

The second door opened into a large suite pressed up against the western wall of the laboratory complex. No gentle ambient lighting there, just harsh pools of unforgiving white light blazing over the bed and table, leaving the rest of the large suite in muted shadows.

Was it through deliberate design or neglectful oversight that no attempt had been made to humanize Galahad’s living quarters? Empty shelves lined the wall. The small metal table and matching chair were severe, the narrow bed unwelcoming. She had seen third-world hospital wards offer far more comfort to its occupants.

Footsteps echoed, drawing closer, and then paused outside the door. There was no time to waste. She strode across the room, slipping into the shadows that obscured the far side of the suite moments before the door slid open again.

The two technicians she had seen earlier half-dragged, half-carried Galahad into the room. It staggered with exhaustion, trying to stand on its own. The technicians hauled Galahad up and dumped it unceremoniously in a wet, shivering heap on the bed.

One of the technicians cast a backward glance at the unmoving figure on the bed. “Pete, are you sure he’s going to be okay?” he asked the other.

“Eventually. It usually takes him a while to recover,” Pete assured the younger man. He pulled out two sealed nutrient bars from his pocket and tossed them onto the table. “Let’s go.”

“I think we should at least get him a towel or put him under the sheets.”

Pete snapped. “How many times do I have to say it? Let him be, Jack. He doesn’t want to be helped, though God knows I’ve tried often enough. He wants to be able to do things for himself, at least here, in this room. It’s the only dignity he has left; let’s leave that to him.”

“It was *bad* today.”

The older man inhaled deeply, sparing a quick glance back. Galahad trembled so hard it seemed as if it would shatter. It curled into a fetal ball, perhaps to protect itself from further violation. “I know. And the best thing we can do for him right now is leave him alone,” Pete said as he stepped out of the room and allowed the door to seal shut behind them.

The impact was thunderous—not audibly—but she felt it nonetheless. It was the sealing of a prison cell.

Zara had wondered what kind of luxuries and privileges the incomparable Galahad—the pinnacle of genetic perfection—enjoyed. Now she knew the answer.

She watched in silence as Galahad stirred, slowly standing and leaning on the wall for support as it staggered toward the bathroom. She had yet to get a

good look at its face, but the blazing light did not leave much of its body to imagination. It was slender but well muscled, powerful and graceful, in spite of its obvious exhaustion—the promise of perfection come into fruition.

She waited through the sound of running water. Patience had never been easy for her, but she possessed the instincts of a hunter closing in on its quarry. Her patience was rewarded when it finally returned to the room, dressed simply in loose-fitting white cotton drawstring pants and a tunic of the same material. As it stepped into the blazing circle of light, her eyes narrowed briefly, and then a faint smile of easy appreciation curved her lips.

She had studied the surveillance video feed Xin had hacked from the central computers of Pioneer Labs the day before, but the wide-angle lenses had not captured anything approximating the full impact of Galahad's beauty. Its rare and lovely color—pale blond hair paired with dark eyes—stood out and attracted immediate attention, but the longer she looked, the more beauty she saw in its exquisitely chiseled features, as flawless as a Michelangelo masterpiece. Galahad was stunningly beautiful—would be stunningly beautiful, whatever the color of its hair or eyes. The scientists had certainly done well; more than well.

Galahad made its way over to a rattan chair, moving with greater ease. It was regaining its strength, though she did not think that it was anywhere near optimal form, not when it had almost collapsed with exhaustion on the way to the bathroom ten minutes earlier. It curled up in the chair and closed its eyes, looking oddly content, despite the fact that it did not fit very well into the chair. Within a minute, she realized from the even rise and fall of its chest with every breath, that it had fallen asleep.

It was time to get to work.

Galahad did not stir as she silently crossed the room. A*STAR had demanded fresh DNA samples obtained as directly from the source as possible. Hair or skin samples would be acceptable, and both were typically abundant in a bathroom. She pulled test tube and tweezers from the pocket of her lab coat and knelt to examine the bathroom counter.

Something flickered in the corner of her vision.

Instinct and trained reflexes took over. In a flash, her dagger was in her hand. She spun, the black serrated blade slicing outward.

Galahad reacted with uncanny speed. It dove to the side, dropping into a roll and coming up in a battle crouch. Her dagger slashed through the air where Galahad had been standing a moment before. Galahad's dark eyes narrowed as it assessed her. Its body shifted into motion, preparing to defend itself.

She too reassessed, readjusted. Her attack should not have missed. Galahad's battle instincts had been trained and polished to perfection. Apparently it was *more* than a common lab animal.

Her dagger lashed out once again in a graceful, snake-like motion, and Galahad evaded by dodging to one side. The blade sliced harmlessly through the air so close to Galahad that it must have felt the chill breath of the dagger's passing against its skin.

Galahad's silent and sinuously graceful movements were driven by so much speed and agility that strength—although abundant—was superfluous. It matched her, step for step, dodging each attack with a grace that made their deadly waltz seem choreographed. There was no doubt that Galahad was good, far better than anyone she had ever contended with. In spite of its obvious fatigue after a long and difficult day, Galahad possessed flawless timing and impeccable spatial precision, allowing it to escape injury by fractions of a second and a hairsbreadth. It had nerves of steel. It taunted her with its proximity and tempted the kiss of her blade, never straying too far as it sought an opening.

She saw the dark eyes glitter dangerously and knew that something in it had shifted, had changed. She thrust her blade at its face.

In less than a heartbeat, it was over.

With a swiftness that left her stunned, Galahad twisted its hand to catch her wrist in an iron grip. It sidestepped, yanked her forward, and drove its knee into her thigh. Her leg weakened and collapsed. Its superior weight drove her to the ground and kept her there without any visible effort.

A perfectly sequenced attack, executed with flawless precision and stunning speed.

Gritting her teeth against the pain, she recognized the inevitable outcome as it eased the dagger from between her nerveless fingers. She cursed soundlessly. She had underestimated its skill, perhaps to her folly. It suddenly released her, pulled her to her feet, and then stepped away from her. Some emotion she could not decipher rippled over its flawless features, and to her amazement, it flipped the dagger over in its hand and held it out, hilt first, to her. "I don't know why I'm fighting you. You came to kill me; I should thank you for your kindness."

She reached out and accepted the dagger from Galahad as her mind raced to understand the incomprehensible. Galahad held her gaze only for a moment before it lowered its eyes and looked away. She saw its throat work as it fought an internal battle to suppress its survival instincts, and then it turned its back on her deliberately and walked out of the bathroom.

She could have struck the fatal blow. Galahad was offering her the chance. She could pull Galahad's head back and apply the faintest pressure to the dagger's blade across its jugular. She could extract the tissue sample she had been sent to collect, and then leave, her mission completed.

She could not bring herself to do it. Oddly enough, something in her wanted it—wanted *him*—to live.

“Zara?” she heard Xin’s voice softly inquiring in her ear, her tone concerned.

“I’m all right,” she murmured. “Give me a minute.” She paused by the bathroom door and watched him make his way toward the wide windows. He kept his back to her as he stared out at the manicured lawns around Pioneer Labs. Was he waiting for her to strike?

Well, she could play the waiting game too. She followed him and then turned, casually leaning against the window as she looked up at him, her gaze coolly challenging.

Several moments passed.

Finally he broke the silence. “Who sent you?” he asked quietly without looking at her.

She had expected the question, but not the calm, neutral tone in which it was asked. No anger. No hatred. No fear. Just a simple question, driven more by politeness than by any real need to know. “Does it matter?”

He inhaled deeply and released his breath in a soft sigh as she neatly evaded his inquiry. He tried another question. “Are you from around here?”

“Washington, D.C.”

“I’ve seen media clips of that city. It’s beautiful.”

She offered a nonchalant shrug as a response to his statement. “It’s pretty enough, I suppose. I take it you’ve never been there.”

“I don’t get out much, and the last time was a good while ago.” He shrugged, a graceful motion that belied the bitterness in his voice. “I’ve seen media clips endorsed by Purest Humanity and other pro-humanist groups. There is no place for me in your world.”

It was pointless to deny the obvious, but before she could open her mouth to toss out the retort on the edge of her tongue, an animal-like cry resonated through the complex. It was a ghastly sound, starting at a low pitch akin to the sound a lost puppy might make and then rising until it was a banshee’s scream. “What was that?”

“It’s an experiment in another part of the building.”

“It doesn’t sound like anything I recognize. What is it?”

He tossed her question back at her: “Does it matter?”

“Not if you don’t care.”

“It’s been going on for as long as I can remember.”

His matter-of-fact statement was like fuel to fire. Her eyes flashed. “And you feel nothing? No anger? No pity? You’re inhuman.”

“I thought you’d already decided that,” was his mild rejoinder. “Isn’t that why the pro-humanist groups want me killed?”

She hesitated. Somewhere along the way—she was not even sure when—she had stopped thinking of Galahad as an “it” and had started relating to it as a “he”. She had attributed to him all the responsibilities of being human, but none of its rights or privileges, in effect placing him in the worst possible

no-win situation. She recalled his anguished convulsions in the sensory deprivation chamber. How much pity did she expect him to dredge up for another creature in a position no different from his own? Very little. In fact, none at all.

She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. The anger subsided. “Do they conduct experiments on you too?” she asked softly.

He stiffened. Without meeting her gaze, he answered the question, choosing his words with care. “I...yes, they do, sometimes.”

“What did they do to you today?”

He averted his gaze and bit down hard on his lower lip. He shook his head, said nothing.

“You looked like hell when they brought you back. I want to know, please.”

He was silent for so long she thought he was never going to answer the question, but then he spoke in a measured, neutral tone. “They gave me a highly concentrated sleeping pill and then injected a hallucinogen, to induce nightmares. They wanted to see if I could overcome the effects of the sleeping pill to wake up.”

“Did you?”

Another long pause. His reply was a softly anguished whisper. “No.”

“How long did the experiment last?”

“About eight hours, perhaps nine.” He laughed, low and melodic, but it was a humorless sound. “I slept all day, and I’m exhausted.”

“Why do they do that?”

“It’s simple; because they can. Humans and their derivatives, the clones and in vitros, have rights. I’m considered non-human, in large part because of the successful lobbying of pro-humanist groups, and I don’t have rights.” Galahad released his breath in a soft sigh. Long eyelashes closed over dark, pain-filled orbs as he inhaled deeply. He opened his eyes and met her gaze directly, holding it for a long, silent moment. The corner of his lips tugged up again in a bittersweet half smile. “I’m tired. I need to lie down. You can do what you need to do whenever you want.”

“Wait!” She grabbed his arm as he turned away from her. “You want me to kill you?”

“Isn’t that what you came to do?”

“Do you actually *want* to die?”

He waved his hand to encompass the breadth and width of the impersonal and deliberately dehumanizing room. “I’m not sure this should count as living.”

“But you’re not human.”

“No,” he agreed, his voice even. “No, but I am alive...just like any other human. This isolation drives me crazy. I know this is not the way others live. This isn’t living.”

He looked away. His pain was real, his anger compelling. In spite of it, she had seen him smile a few times and wondered whether his twisted half-smile could ever be coaxed into becoming something more. In silence, she watched as he turned his back on her and walked to his rattan chair. He seemed tired, emotional weariness draining his physical strength. Slowly he settled into the chair, drawing his legs up and curling into a vaguely comfortable position. Apparently he had chosen to deliberately ignore her. He was tuning her out and was once again trying to find solace in the few things he had left, such as a worn chair and his own company, trying to get through each cheerless day and lonely night.

Outside, a rabbit, safe from predators in the falling dusk, emerged from its burrow and hopped across the small patch of grass in front of the large windows of the suite. Zara watched as a faint smile touched his face, briefly transforming it. His personality seemed wrapped around a core that was equal parts weary indifference and tightly controlled bitterness, but there was still enough left in him to savor the small crumbs that life saw fit to throw his way. If his quiet strength had amazed her, his enduring courage humbled her. As she watched him, she knew he had won the battle he had wanted, so badly, to lose. He had proved his right to live, even though there was no purpose in living in a place like this. He knew that fact intimately, and so did she.

Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

“Zara, we’ve got trouble.” Carlos’s voice cut through the silence of her thoughts, his habitual calmness edged with tension. “Lots of vehicles incoming. Purest Humanity logos. Could be a protest forming; they look seriously pissed.”

She took a few steps away from Galahad. Annoyance disguised flickers of anxiety in her voice. “They’re about two days too early. They’ve been gathering on Christmas Eve each year.”

“Well, looks like someone had a change of plans. I’m estimating about forty...fifty cars, at least twice as many people.”

“They won’t get through the gate,” Xin said. “It was designed to keep out APCs.”

“Uh...The gate just opened...*Por dios*...They’re driving in!”

“What?”

“No kidding, I swear to God.” The tension in Carlos’s voice escalated. “Someone must be screwing around with the security system.”

Zara suppressed a hiss of irritation. “Find that person, Xin, and disable his access. I don’t want to have to fight my way out of here.”

“I’m on it, but I can’t guarantee they won’t get to you. If they’re already through the gate, they’ll be pounding on the front door in seconds. You don’t have time; get moving. And Zara, if you don’t take Galahad with you, he’s as good as dead.”

Zara's mind raced through the options available to her, the possibilities. She shrugged, dismissing the many logical reasons why she should not do what she was about to do, and took her first step down her path with a terse and coolly decisive order. "He's coming with me. I'll get us out of the building. Carlos, stand by for an extraction."

"Copy that."

She stepped toward Galahad. "You need to change into something else." The thin cotton tunic and pants he wore would not provide sufficient protection from the chilly night air. Besides, his clothes looked like something issued to long-term residents of mental hospitals. Something with fewer negative institutional implications would work better at keeping him as inconspicuous as possible.

He blinked in surprise, her voice jerking him back to reality, and he looked up at her. "There is nothing else to wear," he said. He released his breath in a soft sigh, his gaze drifting away from her to the rabbit outside the window.

Nothing else? A quick search of the suite confirmed his words. The only pieces of clothing in the suite's large and mostly empty walk-in closet were several pieces of identical white cotton tunics and pants, a subtle but highly effective dehumanizing strategy. "We're leaving anyway," she told him as she returned into the living area of the suite. "Get up. We're going."

He stared at her in bewilderment. "Going?"

Zara exercised exquisite politeness and reminded herself to be patient with him. "I'm getting you out of here."

A glimmer of understanding tinged with wary hope swirled through the confusion in his sin-black eyes, but he still did not move from the chair. "I thought you came to kill me."

Not precisely, but perhaps it wasn't a bad thing if he kept believing it, especially if it would make him more tractable. Things were complicated enough; an uncooperative captive would heighten the stakes and the danger of their situation. "I've changed my mind."

"Changed your mind?"

"It's a woman's prerogative," she told him, a wicked smile curving her lips. Her tone softened slightly. As huge as this step seemed for her, it must seem even larger for him. "I want to help you. Will you come with me?"

He met her gaze, held it for a long moment, and then finally smiled. "Yes."

The simplicity of his answer staggered her, to say nothing of the heart-stopping power of his smile. It was a smile that could melt iron. "You trust me," she said, "but you don't even know my name."

"It would be ungracious not to trust someone who has already passed up on several opportunities to kill me." He uncurled from his chair and stood. His manners were at least as exquisite as his looks. He made no mention of

the fact that he had beaten her in a fair fight and then refused to follow up on his advantage.

Maybe he considered it irrelevant. The important point was that she did not. The fight she had lost had, after all, been the critical turning point. She smiled up at him, suddenly realizing that his dark, fathomless eyes did not seem nearly as distant and empty as they had several minutes earlier. “I’m Zara Itani.”

He smiled faintly, the warmth from his smile briefly lighting up his eyes. “Zara, I’m Galahad.”