

The Terralano Venture: Book Two

By the Light of the Silvery Moons

by

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

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Author's Foreword

This is a story I never actually intended to write. *Agree to Disagree* was planned as a stand-alone novel and I had no plans for a sequel. However, several readers asked me to write one and I gave what for me is the usual non-committal answer that I would when and if I came up with an idea.

Agree to Disagree was a “first contact” story. For those who may be new to the various sub-genres of science fiction, a first contact story is about the initial meeting of two intelligent species and usually of the consequences of that meeting. Many, maybe most, of these initial contacts take place in outer space although I think they can be on a world. They also most often involve the first meetings between humans and aliens. You could write one between two non-human species, but it’s a good idea to give one’s readers points of commonality with at least some of the characters and that’s easier to do with human characters.

First contact stories are old hat in science fiction and most of the good angles have been used – done to death, in fact, but like most popular types of stories they come back into fashion whenever modern

culture changes sufficiently that our vision of our own future changes as well. Maybe I'm not patient enough to wait for such a change, so I came up with a slightly different angle. I wondered about what might happen if high-tech humans ran into a bunch of aliens who used magic. I saw it as a refutation of Clarke's Law, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." From my point of view it would not make much of a difference. People are people and their means of doing things, whether by magic or technology, are not as defining beliefs, ethical systems, moral compasses and what have you. Terrans and Lano are compatible although not identical along those lines so the basis of their technologies was a mere curiosity.

In this new story, I thought it might be interesting to have the Terran and Lano encounter really different species. In the Lano language they are called Carono or "Stone People," and they really are different as you'll see. Just a couple notes about them. They have only a single gender and while this was simple enough to conjecture, finding a personal pronoun for a Caron was not. They are neither male nor female although the Terralano will think of them as such, based on personality. I could refer to one as "it," but it felt wrong to refer to a sentient being as "it." I tended to side-step the issue and most of the time avoided third person pronouns when the Carono spoke. That didn't help in other matters, however. The Carono speak differently from us. The concept of using sound is, well... alien to them, but they do use smell and telepathy. And yet I have them using phrases like, "talking out of the wrong mouth." That's how the Terralano might have translated the phrase and it's easier to read than, "projecting signals from the wrong transceiver organ."

But in the end this story is only peripherally about the Carono and actually it's about the ongoing relationship between the Terrans and their Lano friends...

Jonathan E. Feinstein
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Prologue

"Sirs," First Navigator Krinzz reported to the commanding triad. "We have detected a strange object two thousand planetary units to our upper side."

"What sort of object?" Second Captain Gleanzz inquired. "An asteroid, perhaps?"

"An asteroid would not be a strange object," Third Captain Lakizz argued, "would it, First Navigator?"

"Um," First Navigator Krinzz replied uncertainly, not wishing to disagree with any of his captains, "I suppose that would depend, sirs."

"Now, now," First Captain Jerakinzz interrupted. "It is not fair to try to involve our first navigator in a purely internal argument. First Navigator, I smell you have a conundrum for us."

“Yes, sirs,” Krinzz agreed quickly. “It is a most puzzling scent. My triad believes this object is a ship of some sort, but it is strange, alien. It is certainly not something I would want to travel on.”

“Why?” Third Captain Lakizz asked. “Stone is stone, is it not?”

“This does not seem to be stone,” Krinzz explained. “It looks to have been built of bones and nerve tissue.”

“What?” Second Captain Gleanzz asked, astonished. “That’s impossible! Who would fly in such a disgusting vessel?”

“Different people, perhaps,” First Captain Jerakinzz speculated.

“Different people?” Third Captain Lakizz asked. “Surely none of the colonies has sunk so low as to build ships out of their own bodies.”

“Probably not,” First Captain Jerakinzz agreed, “but the materials that make up our bones and nerve tissue, our entire bodies, actually, occur naturally in nearly every solid world we have visited. It is possible these people are using those materials rather than the bodies of their dead.”

“It is still a disgusting concept,” Second Captain Gleanzz opined.

“To us, perhaps, but maybe these people are not like us,” First Captain Jerakinzz pointed out. “It is obvious these are aliens. It has taken us seven hundred cycles of space exploration, but at last we have discovered another form of intelligent life.”

“Intriguing,” Second Captain Gleanzz remarked.

“We must meet these strangers,” Third Captain Lakizz told his triad.

“Agreed,” First Captain Jerakinzz told them, “First Navigator Krinzz, return to your triad and set a course toward these aliens.”

Part I_{-Vis} it to Another Small Planet

One

Madame Malana Di Masai handed Captain Susan Ho of the Meriwether II a fifth brightly wrapped package. "Oh, and can you see this is delivered to my niece in Garani?" Malana was the ambassador from Treloi, the home planet of the Trelendir, a loose confederation of planets settled by a space-faring species who called themselves the Lano. She stood less than one and one half meters tall and kept her steel-grey hair tied back. Her skin was a nice amber shade, considered healthy for a La, but her face was wrinkled, betraying her age. At a time when most of her former classmates were beginning to enjoy retirement, Malana was still going strong and had no plans for a quiet life. She was not wearing Lano clothing, however. Instead, she had chosen to wear a dark red Vietnamese ao dai over white pants. Since coming to Earth, Melana had worn a wide variety of Terran fashions although more often than not she seemed most comfortable in various long dresses and robes.

"Of course," Sue replied, attempting to balance the package with the others. In contrast to Malana, Sue towered over the La by thirty-three centimeters and wore her smooth black hair down to its natural limit where it reached to the backs of her knees.

"Here. Let me help," Eesai di Sonea told Sue, taking two of the packages. Eesai was taller than Malana, although only by a few centimeters and kept her dark blonde hair sensibly short for space travel since accepting a job with Meriwether, Inc., although over the last year she had allowed it to grow back a little and wore it in a loose flip style that looked as though the wind was blowing it in just the right way. It constantly amazed Sue that Eesai's hair fell into that shape naturally without the tedious preparation most human women might have needed to accomplish the same look.

It was a fair trade. Eesai regretted cutting her hair and would love to grow it as long as Sue did even though it would have meant extra preparation time while suiting up for work in freefall. As it happened, however, the natural limit Eesai's hair would grown was at least a foot shorter than Sue's. Eesai, a captain retired from the Treloian Navy, was now the captain of Meriwether I, the first human ship to ever encounter an alien race. That ship was currently in the shipyard undergoing normal maintenance and upgrades, which prompted her to ship out with Sue.

"Thanks," Sue replied and turned back to the others. Standing to the left of Malana was her administrative assistant Helani Bi Lano and to her right was Commodore Lewis Clark Anspach, CEO and Majority owner of Meriwether Inc. He was also Sue's and Eesai's boss. "Helani? Are you sending anything home?"

"No," Helani smiled. "My husband followed me to Earth and he sent presents to his nephews just last month." Sue delicately did not ask if Helani had family on Treloi. Her name, "Bi Lano" proclaimed all too clearly that she had been a foundling or an orphan of unknown antecedents. Lano names were like that. Malana's "Di Masai" meant "Daughter of Masai." A male La's name would normally sport the patronymic "Ki" meaning "Son of" but "Bi Lano" merely translated as "Born of the Lano." Lano who wore the "Bi" patronymic were considered of lower status by other Lano, but Malana, although of high status birth, had cast aside such snobbery early in life and had many friends and associates who were "Bi Lano."

"Eesai, are you sure you want to ship out with Sue?" Clark asked her. "Meriwether I will be ready to lift again before you can get back."

“You can’t fool me, Clark,” Eesai laughed. “You’d love the excuse to skipper her again.”

“Well, I can’t deny that,” Clark agreed, “but you realize that you could find yourself grounded for six months or more on your return, right?”

“It’s a risk I’ll take,” Eesai nodded. “I haven’t been home in over three years. First there was my hitch on Inillien, then I came to Earth with Madame Malana until we left for the Treaty negotiation. After that I signed on with you and it’s been over a year since then. Time to go see family. Besides, I’m looking forward to traveling on the new ship.”

“She’s not new anymore,” Sue laughed. “She’s been out on two missions. This is lucky number three.”

“Maybe I should be sending you out on another exploratory mission,” Clark mused.

“Why tempt the Fates?” Sue countered. “We did very well on the last two; monopoles, precious metals and a life-sustaining planet.”

“But not one humans or Lano could live on,” Clark reminded her. “Too much methane in the atmosphere. It could be terraformed, but that would wipe out the life you found. We have laws against that.”

“Seems silly to me,” Eesai opined. “It’s not intelligent life.”

“We don’t know that for certain,” Sue argued. “We couldn’t land on the planet and while there were no cities on the surface, a civilization could be troglodytic or submarine in nature.”

“Regardless, there is much our scientists can learn about life in general by studying that planet as it is,” Clarke added. “However, I see Jerry waving from the airlock. I suspect Ground Control is getting impatient.”

“We aren’t scheduled to lift for an hour,” Sue pointed out.

“Schedules have a tendency to change,” Clark reminded her.

“Yes, sir,” Sue threw him a sardonic salute. “Come on, short stuff,” she added to Eesai, “time to go earn our pay.”

“Aye aye, Ma’am,” Eesai gave Sue a dose of her own medicine then ducked out of the way of Sue’s playful swat, a blow that would never have connected even had Eesai not moved out of the way.

“We’ve been moved ahead in the queue,” Jerome Isaacs informed them as they reached the airlock.”

“Will miracles never cease?” Sue remarked dryly. “When do we lift now?”

Jerry checked his watch, “Twelve minutes.”

“You’re kidding!” Sue exclaimed. Jerry shook his head. “Yikes! Do we have time to finish the pre-lift checklist?”

“With a minute to spare, maybe,” Jerry replied. “I gave the orders before coming to find you.”

“Thanks, Jerry,” Sue told him. “Eesai and I had better get to the bridge. Could you stow these packages for us? Thanks.” She turned to wave at Clark, Malana and Helani, but they’d already retreated from the spaceport tarmac.

“Sure, no problem,” Jerry replied as he started closing the outer hatch. Both Sue and Eesai were gone by the time he finished securing the airlock.

Since their meeting with the Lano a year earlier the employees of Meriwether Inc had doubled and while Sue had chosen most of the best of the old crew to man the new ship, over half her crew had not been on board the Meriwether I on that now historic voyage. Charles Rowntree, her ship’s communications officer, was one of the new faces on board. Sue missed Chen Li McGrath, Charles’ counterpart on Meriwether I, but she couldn’t raid the older ship of all her talent. Not only would it have been a disservice to Eesai, but as a shareholder in Meriwether Inc, it could have eventually hurt Sue financially. The newer personnel, like Charley, were not automatically shareholders, but could opt to buy shares if they so desired. Also all crew members received both a base salary and a percentage of any profit made by their ship while on board. With two successful missions under his belt, Charley had reinvested much of his pay, a practice Sue welcomed, since it meant he intended to remain a part of the company for some time to come.

“Tower’s playing silly buggers with the schedule, Skipper,” Charley informed her as she and Eesai entered the bridge.

“So I hear, Charley,” Sue replied with a sigh. “Are we on schedule to lift?”

“Oh, we’ll take off even if it means not actually firing the thrusters until we reach orbit, Skipper,” Charley laughed.

“Now that would be something to see,” Eesai laughed. “I didn’t think we had an elevator tall enough to put the ship on.”

“Actually, they tried to build just such an elevator a century ago,” Charley informed her. “The benefits would have been enormous, of course. Ships would stay on a docking platform at the top and crew, passengers and the like would ride up and board.”

“And a lot of fuel would have been saved just getting out of the gravity well,” Sue added.

“Is that really possible?”

“Evidently not,” Charley replied. “Theoretically, it is. It’s basically a very long and vertical bridge, but our engineers were never able to find a material with sufficient tensile strength in the temperature range the structure needed to endure. Even the attempts at composites failed to meet even the lowest safety requirements.”

“Just as well,” Eesai shrugged. “That would have been too strange to trust.”

“And the look over the edge would have given even an experienced spacer vertigo,” Sue added. “How’s Lani doing in Engineering?”

“She reported in just before you got here, Skipper,” Charley replied. “Her department is ready to lift

on your command.”

“Excellent,” Sue replied.

“Five minutes and counting, by the way,” Charley added.

“Navigation ready,” Eesai reported.

“That was fast,” Sue remarked.

“Control gave us our course out to Saturn, Skipper,” Eesai replied. “From there it was just a matter of calculating how to use the gravity sling to send us on our way to Treloi. Besides, I cheated.”

“How’d you do that?”

“I logged in to the ship’s computer yesterday afternoon,” Eesai told her, “and ran a series of trajectories. It was mostly for the practice, but all I really had to do was to plug in the numbers from exercises that matched our revised lift-off time and verify they were still valid.”

“So you got lucky,” Sue concluded.

“Only in that I ran the numbers for early launches as well as late ones,” Eesai replied. “I never would have on Treloi, of course.”

“Treloi Control never changes your launch times?” Sue asked archly.

“Almost never,” Eesai replied. “The government may rise and fall with the sun, but port control is steady as a rock.”

“Nice to know,” Charley commented. “T minus four minutes and counting.”

“You know, it’s really unfair you got Lani and Jerry on your ship,” Eesai remarked banteringly.

“Our engines are partially based on the hybrids Lani and Erich developed in Rendezvous System. They’re more Lano than any other engine on a human ship,” Sue replied. “and you wouldn’t have split her and Jerry up would you?”

“Of course not,” Eesai agreed. “They’re married.”

“Actually we’re only half married,” Jerry laughed as he entered the bridge and strapped himself into the unused seat of the Defense station. As an exploratory ship, both Meriwethers had defense stations but they had never been used except as defenses against meteors and other space debris. Exploration vessels rarely needed to defend themselves against anything else. “We’re married on Earth, but Lani wants to have a Lano ceremony too. Can’t say as I blame her,” he added. “Lano marriages begin with the birth or adoption of a child. We have none until we adopt her sister’s daughter.”

“It should be a great party, Jerry,” Eesai told him.

“T minus three minutes,” Charley inserted

“Lani tells me her family always has a big... uh... blowout – is that the correct term? – for these

occasions.”

“She’s told me the same thing,” Jerry chuckled. “And, yes, it’s the right term even if, as slang, it’s a bit of an anachronism.”

“Hey, Jerry,” Sue teased, “not everyone gets to celebrate two wedding nights for the same marriage, you know.”

“Not too many Lano get to celebrate theirs that way for that matter,” Jerry responded. “Remember in most cases the woman has just given birth. Jumping directly into a night of hot sex is not likely what’s on her mind at that point.”

“You wouldn’t catch me doing it,” Eesai remarked, and then blushed the bright red-orange Lano associated with embarrassment. “At least not from the stories I’ve heard,” she muttered, looking away from the others.

“T minus two minutes to lift-off and counting,” Charley announced into the shipboard public address system. “All departments report status.”

“Minerology is comfortable,” Jerry remarked lightly. Everyone ignored him as a series of reports came in from over the ship and Sue got down to the business of launching her ship.

At one minute before the launch, Charley announced the final warning that everyone should be strapped into their chairs for the lift-off. Strictly speaking this precaution was usually unnecessary. Modern space vessels lifted smoothly and comfortably with artificial gravity maintaining inboard gee force at a comfortable one Earth gravity. However, as infrequently as it happened, it was not unheard of for a launching ship to be buffeted by crosswinds as she left the atmosphere, so the old regulations about being secured to one’s seat during takeoff survived.

Charley counted down the last minute and Meriwether II lifted smoothly and on time. Two hours later she swung gently beneath the rings of Saturn and then headed for Treloi.

Two

“Meriwether II, Captain Susan Ho commanding, requesting landing coordinates,” Eesai announced to Ground Control on Treloi as they approached. Charley’s command of the language known as Lani was improving, but Eesai volunteered to handle verbal communication with Control, “just in case an emergency comes up. It is my native tongue, after all, and I think in Lani.”

“No need to explain,” Charley told her amiably. “If something starts happening fast, we don’t want to start worrying about which words to use or whether Control had just asked me to devein an elephant.”

“That would be something to see,” Eesai laughed before turning back to her job. She may have taken over approach communications, but she was also still piloting the ship for the same basic reason. “Because I know this port,” she had explained to Sue.

Sue had not been as amiable about Eesai’s reasoning as Charley. “I’ve landed in strange ports as often as I’ve landed in familiar ones,” she retorted. “It’s not that big a difference.”

“It could be,” Eesai explained patiently. “It probably won’t be a problem, but in an emergency I can respond more naturally to instructions in Lani.”

“Welcome to Treloi, Meriwether,” Control greeted them in Terrañol. “Please set down at Landing Area Three. Coordinates being sent now.”

Eesai turned as she felt Sue’s eye’s boring a hole in her back and shrugged sheepishly to the captain. “Thank you, Control,” she replied in Lani. “Meriwether out. I guess we’re not the first Terran ship here?”

“Not hardly,” Sue laughed. “It might be the first time Meriwether Inc. has sent a ship to the Trelendir, but there have been a least a dozen trading missions over the past year. We make a percentage on each such mission, but Clark decided it was time to cut out the middle man. That’s why we didn’t sell our monopolies on Earth this time. They command a much higher price here.”

“I should have remembered that,” Eesai admitted. One of the virtues Sue admired most about Eesai was that the La rarely tried to bluster through an error or try to make excuses. It was a trait she wished more of the crew exhibited.

“Well, you’re still new to the commercial side of space travel and exploration,” Sue told her.

“Maybe,” Eesai allowed, “but I do understand the basics of running a business. It doesn’t matter if we’re prospecting for monopolies or running a glarno ranch. The point is to in some way produce a product and then sell it for the best possible price. You have to balance supply and demand, with quality, timing and location. If there are too many monopolies on the market on a certain planet, you make a lot less than you hoped. If the price differential is great enough, you can make more by transporting them elsewhere, but you have to be careful since everyone else in the market knows that too and if too many competitors get there ahead of you, you may as well have just taken your money at the first planet and gone out again, hoping for a better trip.

“It’s the same thing when we raise glarno,” Eesai continued even as she guided the ship down to Fentala Space Port. “Glarno produce delicious meat and quality leather. The bones, hooves and horns can also be used for a wide variety of products from glue to medicine. Of course some glarno are higher quality than others. The top quality beasts always command a good price, because there are never very many. The next lower quality, choice, is where all the real money is. If too many ranchers have a good year we all make less and so on.”

“You’ll have to show me,” Sue told her. “Can humans eat glarno meat?”

“You did often enough last year,” Eesai told her. “Touchdown in five minutes.”

Eesai stopped talking except to give progress reports until she finally announced they had made contact with the space port surface and Sue ordered Lani to put the hybrid engines on stand-by. All through the ship the shock absorbers attached to the craft’s landing struts groaned for a few seconds as

planetary gravity claimed its hold on the ship.

“We’re here!” Eesai announced.

“Fentala Control to Meriwether II,” a male voice sounded over the comm. screen’s speakers. At a port on a human planet there would have been an associated picture on the screen but one year after the signing of the Treaty of Rendezvous, human and Lano technicians were still working on mutually compatible graphics systems. “We confirm positive contact with the landing pad. Port officials are en route to your airlock.”

“Thank you, Control,” Eesai replied. “Meriwether II out.”

“What sort of port officials are we expecting, Eesai?” Jerry asked.

“Oh, the usual,” Eesai shrugged. “Port fees, customs, import taxes and the like.”

“We’re supposed to be exempt from customs and taxation on our cargos for another twenty-nine years,” Jerry pointed out.

“We still need to declare what we’re bringing in,” Eesai countered, “and we’re not exempt from port fees.”

“Good points, Eesai,” Sue commended her. “Jerry, do you have our inventory reports ready?”

“I’ll print them out,” Jerry replied, “and have them in the aft conference room before you can get there.”

“Good,” Sue nodded. “I’ll go down to the airlock and escort our visitors. Eesai, please have all department heads report there. You too, of course.”

“Aye, aye, skipper!” Eesai saluted. Jerry chuckled then hurried off to prepare his report.

“This isn’t the navy, you know,” Sue told her friend. “You don’t have to salute. Um, you don’t make your crew salute, do you?”

Eesai laughed. “Not at all, but some habits die hard.”

An hour later Sue and Eesai were strolling through the spaceport considering their options. “This is no place to go shopping,” Eesai warned her when she caught Sue stopping to look through the windows.

“Hmm?” Sue replied. “Oh, just getting a feel for your world.”

“Strange place to start,” Eesai laughed.

“Oh, I get it,” Sue nodded. “Fentala Port looks just like any other Trelendir spaceport?”

“Not really,” Eesai shook her head. “Fentala is unique on any world, Lano or human. Colonial spaceports are neither this large nor do they have gates like an airport. On Cereloi we might have been instructed to set down on a pad a mile or two out from the terminal and use a bus to get to the gate.”

“That’s not all that different from the situation at Port Wallaby,” Sue reminded her.

“True enough,” Eesai agreed, “but the port on Cereloi only has the one gate. Of course, there the customs officials come to the ships for the passengers as well as the cargos, so the terminal is mostly just a place for the administration officers to hang out and for folks to find a ride into town.”

“I have to admit,” Sue told her, “while I’m glad Treloi hasn’t pulled out a Terran-style brass band to welcome us, I would have thought your news agencies would be anxious to mark the first visit by any of the crew of the first Meriwether to Treloi.”

“It does sort of surprise me too,” Eesai admitted. “I mean you’re some of the first humans to ever be discovered by the Lano.”

“Hey, Pint-sized,” Sue laughed, “we discovered you.”

“It’s all relative, Tall-drink,” Eesai bantered playfully. “Besides, Meriwether II isn’t the first human ship to land here. Others have been coming here for months now. We’re just not a novelty anymore, I guess.”

“Stop!” they heard an outraged female voice shout. “Thief!”

Turning, Sue and Eesai saw a scruffy-looking male La running toward them holding what was obviously a woman’s handbag. Behind him was a garishly, but expensively dressed female La. She wore a long flowing dress with many long colored ribbons floating all around it as she jumped excitedly and continued to shout, “Stop him!”

Sue took a step to her right as the thief approached and then she stuck her arm out straight and caught the La across his throat. The thief hit Sue’s arm and was instantly knocked down on to his back, gasping for breath. Eesai quickly pinned the man to the floor and Sue grabbed the woman’s bag back even as port security approached to arrest the thief.

“You know,” Sue confided to Eesai, “I’ve never actually seen anyone do that outside of professional wrestling. They call it a clothesline.”

“I can see why,” Eesai admitted. “You humans don’t know your own strength, though. I couldn’t have done that.”

“I’m sure you could,” Sue disagreed. “It’s a matter of using your opponent’s momentum against him. That’s why I hit him at neck level.”

“I thought that was as low as you could reach,” Eesai chuckled.

“Oh, thank you, both of you,” the lady whose purse Sue was still holding told them. Sue handed her the bag and she immediately opened it and started pulling bank notes out. “I must reward you. I really must.”

“No need,” Sue replied quickly.

“Right,” Eesai added quickly. “Any decent La would have done the same. Uh, any human too.”

“But you deserve a reward,” the woman insisted. Sue and Eesai continued to decline any monetary reward so the woman finally replied, “Well, then you must at least come take hoi with me.”

“Hoi?” Sue asked, awash to the Lani term.

“It’s similar to tea,” Eesai interpreted. “And even more varied, and yes, we’d love to share hoi with you, Lady...” she trailed off.

“Kilana Di Lana,” she replied. Eesai nodded – definitely a noble woman’s name. “Call me Kilana,” Kilana added expansively. “All my friends do.”

“Pleased to meet you, Kilana,” Sue replied and introduced herself and Eesai.

“Why don’t you two come join me later this afternoon?” Kilana suggested.

“We can do that,” Sue agreed and accepted Kilana’s calling card. “See you this afternoon, Kilana.”

“I look forward to it,” Kilana gushed.

Once away from the noble La, Sue handed the card to Eesai and asked, “Is this a good neighborhood?”

“The best in all Pansili,” Eesai remarked. “You need to pass a credit check just to ask the price of the properties out there.”

“You’re kidding?” Sue asked.

“No,” Eesai replied, completely serious. “It’s not polite to ask how much one’s property is worth in any circle but property is sold from time to time. When you get to neighborhoods like Kilana’s the residents can afford to make sure that only serious inquirers can learn the value of the land and buildings. It’s not really a big mystery however, and if you know where to look, it does not take all that much work to at least find out the selling price from the last time the property changed hands.”

“How often does this sort of property change hands?” Sue asked.

“Not very,” Eesai explained. “That’s why you need to prove you can afford to make a respectable bid before learning the asking price. The previous sale price could be from generations earlier. However, even a century ago that neighborhood was expensive.”

“Well, at least we’ll know how the rich folks live,” Sue shrugged.

“You could have just asked Captain Alano,” Eesai retorted. Alano Ki Matchi had been the commanding officer of Inillien on her initial encounter with Meriwether I two years earlier.

“Commodore Alano, you mean,” Sue corrected her.

“Now, yes,” Eesai nodded, “but during most of my service, he was my captain.”

“He’s rich?” Sue asked.

“If you knew our culture you wouldn’t even have to ask,” Eesai remarked. “The Matchi family has been among the noblest in the Trelendir for... well at least as far back as anyone can trace their ancestors. Alano’s directly descended from an ancient line of kings. Matchi, his earliest named ancestor,

lived at least two thousand years ago. There are all sorts of legends about him, in fact. Most of them are probably untrue, but that's legendary for you."

"Strange," Sue mused. "He didn't seem the sort. Oh, he's noble in bearing, but I just assumed that was the old 'officers and gentlemen' thing."

"Well, I didn't know him when he first entered the service," Eesai admitted. "He may have had to learn a few rather hard lessons back when he was a kid. Probably did, but you know he didn't have to serve on a ship. With his contacts he could have had a nice safe desk job, put in his mandatory two years and spent the rest of his life in idle contentment."

"Now that I really can't see him doing," Sue laughed. "Not happily. So he's the heir to an ancient throne, is he? Does being royalty come with perks on Treloi?"

"Only the inherited wealth of the family," Eesai laughed, "and the prestige, of course. We haven't had kings in over a millennium and that's a Treloian millennium. Our years run a little longer than yours do."

"Not all that much," Sue countered, "but when you stack up a thousand or so, I guess the difference adds up."

"Anyway, Matchi was just one of a number of ancient kings," Eesai continued. "Most of the upper class claim descent from one or more kings, although a lot of those claims are disputed by historians. Of course I'm no expert and most of what I know on the subject is from booklets you can buy in the same stores we pick up groceries."

"Supermarket tabloids?" Sue asked, laughing.

"Well, they don't have the gossip and scientific impossibilities yours do," Eesai told her, "but it's the same sort of mentality. I think the stories are popular because most of us don't know our families back more than two or three generations, so, deep down, a lot of folks like to think they could be long lost royalty. My earliest named ancestor, Sonea, is my mother. Most Lano names are like that. I knew my grandparents, of course, and my mother's mother is still alive. You'll meet her tomorrow, but most Lano take their patronymics directly from one of their parents."

"So yours is a matronymic?" Sue asked as they finally reached the exit from the Terminal.

"Well, in Terrañol, I guess," Eesai shrugged, looking for a cab to hail. "In Lani we don't make the distinction. Never a cab around when you want one. We could take a bus, but we'd spend half the day transferring from one line to another."

"Can we just call for one?" Sue asked.

"I guess we'll have to," Eesai admitted. "Oh wait, there's one now."

A wide, green and yellow vehicle came rolling up to the terminal, but then Eesai spotted a sign that told her it was already hired. She was about to look for a public comm-set when she noticed Serafyma Ivanoff, Meriwether's chief chemist and Lilla Di Lasai, second communications officer, heading confidently toward the taxi. "Hey, you two!" she called. "Is that your cab? Mind if we split the ride?"

"Sounds good to me!" Lilla replied, beckoning Sue and Eesai to join her and Serafyma. They all loaded their bags in the vehicle and then got inside.

“So what are you two up to?” Sue asked Serafyma.

“I’m finally getting to meet my Lano relatives,” Serafyma replied.

“And they’re finally going to meet you too,” Lilla added excitedly. This was a very different Lilla than the easily frightened young officer who once served with Eesai on Inillien. In the last two years she had grown up quite a bit and had come to embrace the strange and unknown, whereas before she behaved as though it was just something she would have to endure. Like Alano, she could have stayed at home, any La could, really. While all were required to serve at least one hitch in the active military, there were plenty of posts available that were, in actuality, no different from sitting in what the Terrans called a “cube farm.” Lilla had felt compelled to sign on a Navy ship and had even briefly seen action during the failed revolt on Cerelei.

Battle had not hardened the young La like meeting the humans had, however. She was still a timid young thing when Inillien broke down in Rendezvous System and was forced to send out a distress signal. She had been beside herself when the strange and ugly Terran ship hove into view and always nervous around the strange giants who had come to their rescue until she nearly died. Lilla and Eesai were crossing between ships when the engineers from both finally got Inillien’s engine running and Inillien took off like what the Terrans called a “bat out of Hell.” The flimsy and flexible bridge between the two ships broke instantly and Eesai and Lilla had been flung out into open space.

Sue and Serafyma quickly left their own ship to rescue the two Lano before they could float more than a few miles away. By the time Jerry could pick them up in the Meriwether’s pinnace, Lilla was holding her arms around Serafyma for dear life. The two had been almost inseparable ever since.

There had been a formal adoption ceremony before the two ships parted and the two women, La and human had accepted each other as sisters, but so far Serafyma had yet to have the opportunity to visit her new relatives.

“A bit of that going on this trip,” Eesai remarked.

“Indeed!” Serafyma agreed. “Have Jerry and Lani set the date yet? I wouldn’t want to miss the ceremony.”

“It will probably be in a few days,” Sue remarked. “They promised to let us know. I’m sure Lani’s family needs a bit of time to make the arrangements. Unlike their first wedding, they want this one to be a big party.”

“I thought the party on board Meriwether I was nice,” Lilla remarked, “but I suppose nothing like what Lani’s family will put on here.”

Three

“Thanks for the lift,” Sue told Serafyma and Lilla on exiting the taxi.

“Be sure to let us know when Jerry and Lani...” Serafyma began while Sue retrieved her and Eesai’s luggage.

“You may know before we do,” Eesai laughed. “My folk’s ranch is way out in the middle of nowhere.”

“Have a good trip!” Lilla replied as the taxi sped off.

“That worked out well,” Eesai remarked, “although now that I think of it, I probably should have called ahead to see if Ferni was home.”

“Yes, that might have been smart,” Sue remarked dryly. “But it’s a warm morning and we can sit around if we have to.”

That wasn’t necessary. As they approached the door of Eesai’s brother’s home two boys came running out of the house shouting, “Auntie Ee! What did you bring us?”

“Well, that gets to the heart of the matter,” Eesai chuckled.

“Meno! Jano! You know it’s not polite to demand presents,” a stern female voice barked at them from within the house. “Eesai! This is a pleasant surprise. And who is your very tall friend?”

“Fala Di Cressa,” Eesai replied, “I present my dear friend and colleague, Susan Ho of Hawaii, Earth. We just landed a little while ago. Sorry about descending on you unexpectedly.”

“You’re always welcome here, dear,” Fala assured her.

“Well, I did mean to call ahead,” Eesai explained, “but we got slightly distracted at the spaceport.” After giving the boys their expected presents, she explained how they had met Kilana.

“You space people have all the exciting adventures,” Fala laughed. “Come in. Ferni’s out in the garden. You got lucky and landed on his day off.”

“Oh good,” Eesai nodded. A few minutes later she and her brother, Ferni Ki Sonea, were chatting excitedly, catching up on the last two years and a bit. “How’s Mom and Dad?” she finally asked.

“They’re both fine, although I think they’d like one or both of us to take over the ranch,” Ferni replied. “I’ll admit, I’m tempted. Both Fala and I are tired of military desk service and I think the boys would be better off outside of the city.”

“That’s your rural roots showing through,” Eesai laughed.

“Well, maybe,” Ferni agreed, “but growing up on a glarno ranch didn’t harm either of us.”

“Except I didn’t learn how to swim until I visited Earth,” Eesai retorted. “Face it, the Mondir Desert isn’t known for its expansive lakes.”

“I never have learned to swim,” Ferni admitted, “and there are plenty of pools available here in Mati.” Mati was the middle class suburb Ferni and Fala had settled down in.

“It’s over-rated,” Eesai told him, “although it comes in handy if you want to go sailing.”

“Especially if the boat capsizes,” Sue added.

“Which your peapod did several times as I recall,” Eesai retorted. “You just think that’s normal because you grew up in the middle of an ocean.”

“Excuse me,” Sue replied in mock indignation, “I grew up on the Big Island... in the middle of an ocean,” she concluded before Eesai could. “Besides, we both wore life preservers.”

“Good name for them,” Eesai shot back. “I’m pretty sure I told you that at the time.”

“So are you leaving for the ranch tomorrow?” Ferni asked.

“Right after breakfast,” Eesai replied. “I’ve been telling Sue all about it practically since we met.”

“Right after we both learned to count to ten,” Sue laughed.

“How do you know I wasn’t telling you how to milk a glarno before we’d learned each other’s languages?” Eesai challenged her.

“Jerry taped everything you and Lilla said,” Sue replied. “If nothing else he would have been infernally curious as to why you chose to talk about herd animals in space.”

“He taped everything?” Eesai asked uncertainly.

“Yeah, but don’t worry, we didn’t take offense when you found us grotesquely large and ugly when we first met,” Sue explained.

“I never thought you were ugly,” Eesai denied, “and Lilla was practically afraid of her own shadow.”

“Relax,” Sue told her. “Given some of the odd life forms we’ve found on habitable planets it’s amazing we look as much alike as we do. And we are fairly large compared to you. It’s no big deal. You know we should probably figure out how we’re going to get to Kilana’s house.”

“Who?” Ferni asked. “Another shipmate?”

“Not even close,” Eesai laughed and explained their encounter in the airport.

“You got lucky,” Ferni replied. “Theft has been up in the city lately and most of the thieves are going about armed with knives and guns.”

“For all I know he might have been too,” Sue told him. “He was too busy trying to breathe to think about fighting back.”

“Why don’t you borrow my car?” Ferni offered. “I’m not planning to go anywhere this afternoon and if I do, I can use Fala’s.”

“Thanks,” Eesai told him enthusiastically. “You wouldn’t believe how they drive around on Earth. Most of their cars fly.”

“Sounds dangerous,” Ferni opined.

“That’s what I thought,” Eesai nodded emphatically, “but except for a few antique roads for hobbyists, there’s nothing to drive on outside of their cities and even in the cities most vehicles fly at various assigned levels. Very confusing.”

“Now, that I agree with,” Sue laughed, “but then Hilo isn’t exactly Honolulu. We don’t need multi-tiered driving lanes. But seriously, don’t you find it excruciatingly dull to always keep your cars on the ground?”

“Not at all,” Ferni replied, with a slight smile. “I find it sensible. If the engine suddenly stops we glide to a halt, but if we were flying and the engine stopped, we would crash.”

“Not in Terran cars,” Sue replied. “First of all, we have two systems that keep us aloft. If one goes, the other will get us down safely.”

“The real safety issue in Terran cars,” Eesai remarked, “is that they are driven entirely manually, at least while in the cities. According to what I heard there, the chance of one falling out of the sky is about the same as one of our cars leaving one of the *thaliripi* -generated tracks.”

“Wait a minute,” Sue stopped her. “Your cars run on a track? I haven’t seen that.”

“Well, it’s *thaliripi*,” Eesai replied. “What you call magic. The whole point is not to have to see the tracks. So all we have to do is input our destination and the car will take us there and incidentally do so safely and efficiently, always avoiding crashes, obstacles and the like.”

“How do you avoid hitting other cars?” Sue asked

“It’s all in the *thaliripi*,” Eesai replied. The concept of *thaliripi* had greatly confused the humans when they first encountered it. It turned out the Lano could do things that seemed magical to humans although the Lano considered it a form of science. There had been a long series of discussions between Madame Malana and Jerry Isaacs, Meriwether’s closest thing to an anthropologist, over the nature of *thaliripi*. Some of it, Jerry concluded, was psionic in nature; basic telekinesis and other forms of “commands” delivered through a form of mind power nearly all Lano could do naturally, although most Lano’s abilities stopped at programming their cars and turning lights on or off. It took serious training and considerably more natural ability to become *athalua*, a wizard. Eventually the humans of Meriwether stopped trying to figure out how it worked

“But you can leave the tracks, can’t you?” Sue asked.

“Only outside the city,” Eesai explained. “It would take *athalua* like Malana to break the *thaliripi* inside the city.”

“But do you know how it works?” Sue pressed. “Could you construct such *athalu*?”

“I’m not *athalua*,” Eesai pointed out. “I’ve learned a few useful tricks from Malana and she thinks I have potential, but it takes years to become one. It also takes a lot of money.”

“As a shareholder of Meriwether Inc., you’re making a lot of money,” Sue pointed out.

“So maybe I’ll take up a new career in a decade or two,” Eesai told her. “Malana’s gone through several. We’d better get going though. I don’t want to be late for Kilana’s hoi.

Four

Serafyma and Lilla had to ride another two hours before reaching Lilla’s home on Treloi. Lilla’s family lived in a small town in the hilly country to the north of Pansilli. Her father, Lerano Ki Lasai, was a chemist who worked for a local research lab and her mother, Sheri Di Gomi, ran a small souvenir store that was attached to their house. Her younger sister, Ralani Di Lasai, was still in secondary school.

“What sort of souvenirs?” Serafyma asked as they got out of the taxi.

“Knickknacks, mostly,” Lilla explained as they retrieved their bags. “Bori County was the first capital of united Treloi, although it’s hard to believe when you look around now. The first several Presiding Generals or Peegees met with their Council of Generals here. Well, not here, about two miles that way,” she pointed to the east. “There’s a school house there now. Anyway about half the income of the area is from tourism. Ouch!” she concluded as Serafyma clumsily dropped one of the bags. True to form, it landed on Lilla’s foot. Somehow when Serafyma got clumsy she was never the one to suffer physically from it.

“Sorry!” Serafyma gasped. “Why am I so clumsy?”

“It’s all right,” Lilla told her. “I’m not hurt. I was just startled, is all. It’s not like that bruise I got on Earth a few months ago.”

“I’m sorry about that too,” Serafyma apologized yet again.

“Forget it,” Lilla laughed. “It’s just your nature. What is it Jerry calls you, Sera?”

“A klutz,” Serafyma replied. “Literally it means ‘a block of wood,’ but the more common usage is for a terminally clumsy person and yeah, that’s me. I’m a klutz.”

“Maybe,” Lilla allowed, looking up at her tall, adopted sister, “but you’re a loveable klutz. I just have

to learn how to duck faster, is all.”

“Maybe I’d better stay out of your Mom’s china shop, though,” Serafyma chuckled.

“Why?” Lilla asked innocently, but by then they were at the front door and Serafyma wasn’t able to answer before Lilla opened the door and shouted, “Hello in there! Anybody home?”

Inside, a teenaged Lano girl was sitting on a couch in front of a large vid screen. Unlike Lilla, she kept her hair fairly long and it was shiny jet black. However, that hair hung down limply in strings as though she really didn’t care what it looked like. Her clothing had been chosen to match her hair, though and she wore a black sweater over a dark grey skirt. Her only concession to color was a small bright red clip in her hair that seemed to be shaped like one of the local flowers, although so far Serafyma had not noticed any red flowers on Treloi.

“Ralani!” Lilla called from the doorway. “Come over here and give me a hug!” Ralani got up almost reluctantly but she did hug her sister, albeit perfunctorily. “Ralani, this is our new sister, Serafyma Ivanoff. I told you about her last time I was home. Sera, this is Ralani Di Lasai.”

“Nice to meet you at last,” Serafyma told the teen. “Lilla’s told me all about you.”

“Did she?” Ralani retorted. “Good trick since she’s never here.”

“Ralani!” Lilla protested.

“You sound like Mom,” Ralani muttered the accusation.

“Nevertheless,” Lilla continued, “Sera and I took the Oath of Adoption. We’re sisters. She’s your sister too.”

Ralani took a long look at Serafyma. From Lilla’s point of view it was a study of contrasts. Where Ralani was short, although not for a La, with black hair and a disturbingly sulky attitude, Serafyma was tall, red-headed and cheerful. “Hugging you will be like climbing a tree,” Ralani remarked.

“Not if I get down on my knees,” Serafyma retorted, matching her actions to her words. On her knees, Serafyma was a few inches shorter than Ralani, but it was a closer match. Ralani gave her a quick hug before returning to the couch and her vid show.

Lilla wasn’t about to let her off that easily however, and she and Serafyma sat on the couch next to the teen. “So where’s Mom and Dad?”

“Out,” Ralani replied. “They’ll be home later.”

“You dyed your hair again, I see,” Lilla remarked cautiously. Ralani, she knew, had the same natural light brown hair the vast majority of Lano did.

“You hate it, don’t you?” Ralani told her.

“I think you looked better when it was bright red,” Lilla told her.

“That was over a year ago,” Ralani reminded her.

“Mmm, yes,” Lilla agreed, “an eternity ago. So how’s school?”

“Who cares,” Ralani countered.

“I do,” Lilla asserted. “How do you expect to get into a good college if you don’t study?”

“I pass,” Ralani told her.

“Just pass?” Lilla pressed.

Ralani stared at her sister. Lilla had never been this assertive before. She normally just took anything people told her without comment. “I’m doing okay, I guess. It’s just not fun and the other kids, well forget the other kids. It’s no fun.”

“It’s school,” Lilla told her. “It’s supposed to be work.”

“There’s no reason you can’t enjoy it anyway,” Serafyma cut in. “Ralani, aren’t there any subjects you do like?”

“Not this year,” Ralani replied. “It’s all hard work and garbage.”

“Garbage?” Lilla asked. “What about Literature classes? I thought you loved reading.”

“Not the trash they’re making us read,” Ralani replied, “The Depths of Treloi. What a piece of braph!”

“The Depths of Treloi,” Lilla told her, “is one of the great classics of Trelendir literature. And watch your tongue.”

Ralani stuck her tongue out at Lilla, “Nah, can’t stick it out far enough.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes before Lilla tried again, “So what else is new since I was home last?”

“Who cares?” Ralani told her again, but catching a look on her sister’s face she continued, “You do, I guess. Nothing of any consequence. Nothing ever happens in Bori. You know that.”

“I like it that way,” Lilla replied. “It’s good to know that no matter how long I have to be away, it will still be home when I get back.”

“I’d rather live in Pansilli,” Ralani told her. “At least things happen there.”

“Things can happen here, if you want them to,” Lilla told her. “Come on, Sera, let’s get unpacked.

“Where are you two going to sleep?” Ralani asked, showing more interest than she had so far.

“Well, I’ll sleep in my room and Sera can have the guest room,” Lilla replied.

“You’re going to make her sleep on the floor?” Ralani countered.

“What happened to the bed?” Lilla asked.

“Mom sold it about a year ago,” Ralani informed her.

“No problem,” Lilla replied. “We’ll both sleep in my room.”

“You’re going to sleep in the same bed?” Ralani sounded slightly shocked.

“It’s a big bed and during training in the Navy I slept in a bunk that was closer to some of the other girls, than Sera and I will be,” Lilla told her. “You wait until you have to serve your hitch.”

“You don’t get your own room?” Ralani asked uncomfortably.

“Not during training, kid,” Lilla replied. “Don’t worry. It’s not all that bad and you can get used to worse than that. It gets easier when you realize that nobody is particularly comfortable that way.”

“Great,” Ralani replied apathetically. “Something else to endure.”

Lilla laughed and led Serafyma to the bedroom. They had just finished unpacking when they heard the front door close and they heard a woman calling. “Hello! Lilla?”

“Mom!” Lilla shouted back and dragged Serafyma behind her as they went back to the room with the vid screen. A mature couple were standing just inside the door looking expectantly as Lilla rounded the corner. Lilla’s mother had been holding her arms out, ready for a hug, but both parents froze and their faces became several shades paler when Serafyma came into view.

Lilla’s father pointed at Serafyma and demanded, “What from the deepest Hell is that?”

Five

Sue admitted that while she found the Treloian cars boring, she was impressed by the automated system by which they moved from one place to another. “It must be one amazing spell to keep us moving so well,” she remarked to Eesai.

“*Thalu*,” Eesai corrected her. “Calling it a spell sounds so primitive.”

“It’s all magic to me,” Sue replied. “I can’t even work the door of this thing. Is it really that hard to build a mechanical handle?”

“Like on a spaceship?” Eesai asked, “I doubt it, but cars have been made like this for as long as I’ve

been alive. Longer, really. It's just the way we do things. Of course if we get more humans here, there may be a vogue for manual devices of all sorts. Anyway, no *onethalua* builds a road. Actually *nothalua* s build roads as far as I know. This is all done by technicians working with machines. It's the machines that do the real work."

"You'll have to show me one of those machines some time," Sue remarked. "A mechanical wizard must be something to see."

"If it really were a mechanical*thalua* ," Eesai considered, "that would be something to see. The machines aren't intelligent. They have one job they're programmed to do and they do it well. Really, from what I could see, Earth wasn't any different. Just different sorts of machinery is all."

"If you say so," Sue replied. "Actually from what I know of Meriether II's engines they may as well be entirely magical instead of merely half so for all the difference it would make."

"Did you really understand the engines in Meriwether I?" Eesai asked.

"Well, I've worked in a starship engine room, but only as an engineer's assistant," Sue admitted, "and, at that, it was just a temporary assignment. All my real training was in navigation."

"You weren't on the command track?" Eesai wondered.

"No," Sue shook her head, "and yes, I suppose. I was never in the military. I was always merchant marine. There was no officer candidate school for me to attend, but there were always more certificates to earn. I started training as an unlicensed spaceman, but that's no way to make a living, so I started working toward my certs as an assistant navigator. Then after I had that, I started working toward the master navigator's papers. Well, I might never have gotten past that point, and if I hadn't continued, I'd probably be shipping out under your command. I worked on my mate's certifications; third, second and finally first. Then I finally earned my master astronaut's license.

"A lot of spacers do that sort of thing," Sue continued. "Spacers come and go on some commercial ships, especially those on which the crew and officers don't own a piece of the company. So you'll see a lot of crewmen and women studying for their next certificate because you never know when the next opening is going to come up and you can't get it if you don't have the certs. Also, you have to recertify every so often."

"Why didn't I know that?" Eesai asked. "Am I working illegally?"

"Not at all," Sue laughed. "You have military service under your belt and having served as captain of your own ship, you were automatically qualified as a master astronaut. Someone should have told you that."

"Clark may have," Eesai tried to remember, "but with everything else he told me, I can't remember now."

"Well, your current certificate is good for five years and you can renew automatically so long as you have served without incident," Sue explained. "If there is an incident, mostly making bad decisions in an emergency, you'll have to stand for an investigation same as you probably would have in the Treloian Navy, and depending on the results you could keep your license, lose it, or have to sit in examination same as if you were earning it for the first time."

“Are you sure my experience in the Navy applies?” Eesai asked. “I mean when these regs were devised your people didn’t even know Treloi existed.”

“The Treaty of Rendezvous established that,” Sue replied. “It was in the clause covering mutual recognition of laws and customs and what not. So a Lano captain in your Navy is the equal of a four-ringer in ours. However, I know Clark bought you a fresh set of the rules and regulations for your cabin in Meriwether I. You should study and memorize them. First of all, if you have to sit an exam, and you could even if it’s established a crewman or officer was actually at fault, you’ll need to know the regs in order to pass the tests. Also, every captain has to be a space lawyer. The regs are so complex that almost nobody knows them all, so sometimes you can wiggle out of trouble by knowing something an investigator doesn’t. That doesn’t happen very often, but it does happen. You may use my set to study until you get back to your own ship.”

“Thanks,” Eesai told her. “I will.”

“And you should buy a copy of at least one good study guide,” Sue advised. “They contain sample tests and, since the correct answers to some of the questions are not the way we operate in real life, it’s good to know when the exam varies from your experience. Also you’ll find practice exams on the computers of both ships. You won’t be the only one taking them in your spare time. Oh my! Is this Kilana’s estate? I’ve seen main streets that aren’t as long as this driveway.”

“Wow!” Eesai gasped. “It’s tremendous! I knew Kilana was well-off but I didn’t know she was this rich. I’ve never seen a place so huge!”

“Louise Anspach’s estate is probably larger,” Sue remarked. “She owns that whole mountain her house is on.”

“Louise isn’t a La,” Eesai pointed out. “On earth anyone can have an estate like this if they have the money to buy it with. In the Trelendir only Lano of a certain high rank are even allowed to build a home like the one you see ahead of us. I’ve only met two Lano who were even remotely entitled to live like this.”

“Malana?” Sue asked.

“Absolutely,” Eesai replied. “Malana Di Masai was born noble and even if she had not been, her son is now the Peegee. Just look at the size of the grounds!”

“You grew up on a ranch,” Sue noted. “I haven’t seen it yet, but certainly a ranch must be larger than this estate.”

“Larger?” Eesai echoed. “Yes, but that’s a ranch. It’s working land and our home is much smaller than this one. This is an estate. A ranch uses all its land efficiently. This is all gardens. Pretty, yes, but if we had tried something like this, even if it wasn’t illegal for people of our station, our neighbors would have scorned us for wasting valuable resources like land and water. Of course, unlike me, you didn’t grow up in a desert so you probably have no idea how much water it takes to keep a garden this large.”

“Sure I do,” Sue responded. “I grew up on a tropical island, but even on that island the climate wasn’t all rain forests. Some parts of the Big Island are very dry, indeed.”

“Hilo is not a desert,” Eesai pointed out.

“Not at all, but even within city limits the annual rainfall varies from one hundred thirty inches of rain to two hundred up slope and six miles further upslope from the city limit is half again as wet. Some parts of the island receive less than ten inches each year.”

“Mondir gets a bit more than that,” Eesai remarked, “but it all comes down over the course of a single month and it’s dry for the rest of the year.”

“My point,” Sue told her, “is that while we may not have had a shortage of rainwater, the plants native to the island could never have survived without sufficient rainfall. As you go from place to place on the Big Island you can see a vast range of plant life. It’s pretty obvious to anyone who keeps their eyes open. You’d have seen it yourself if we had the time to go to more places. Well, so much for climatology. The car seems to have stopped.”

“Well spotted, big girl,” Eesai laughed.

They got out of the car and were met by one of Kilana’s servants. “Lady Kilana is expecting you, ladies,” he told them politely. “She is waiting for you in the hoi room.”

“A room exclusively devoted to drinking Treloian tea?” Sue asked Eesai.

“It’s a Lano thing,” Eesai replied. “Rooms in our houses are more specialized than in Terran homes.”

“I didn’t notice a hoi room in your brother’s home,” Sue observed.

“My family is well-off middle class,” Eesai shrugged, “not nobility. Ferni’s hoi room is also the family room and library. However, it’s not the kitchen or dining room. The truly poor only have one or two rooms to live in, but the more rooms you have, the more specialized they can be.”

“Come to think about it,” Sue decided, “it’s not all that different on Terran worlds. Those who can afford a larger home will set rooms aside for special functions. Lots of people have private libraries or crafts rooms of one sort or another. I just didn’t grow up like that.”

“But you owned the ocean,” Eesai reminded her.

“No, I just borrowed it from time to time,” Sue laughed.

“Anyway, you’re right, but we take it to extremes compared to you. The more house we can afford, the more specialized the rooms are,” Eesai explained.

Kilana was just overseeing the selection of the Treloian version of tea as Sue and Eesai arrived in the hoi room. “You’re here!” Kilana enthused, “and perfectly on time.”

“Thank you for inviting us, Kilana,” Sue replied.

“Oh tush, it’s the very least I could do,” Kilana assured her. “I was just selecting the blend. Do you have any preferences?”

“I’ve never had any sort of hoi,” Sue admitted and Eesai stepped forward and inspected Kilana’s assortment.

“Ooh!” Eesai breathed. “You have Rualna Blend. I haven’t tasted it in over a year.”

“Oh, you know the Rualna?” Kilana asked, betraying a touch of surprise. From her reaction Sue guessed it was a very expensive blend of hoi.

“I used to sail under a captain who preferred it,” Eesai explained. “He would invite me to drink with him once in a while.”

“Well, you have very discerning tastes, Eesai,” Kilana approved. “and if you had no preference I was going to suggest it as well. Shall we have it with Suaeno berries?”

“Sounds delightful,” Eesai began, “but it might be safer if we don’t. Suaeno berries have not yet been vetted as safe for humans, but they are closely related to Madla fruit which causes a rash in over half the humans who were tested.”

“Oh, too bad,” Kilana sounded disappointed. “Suaeno is a favorite of mine and I so wanted to share them with you both. Still, it would be poor hospitality were Sue to come down with a bad rash or worse, just because I want a few berries in my hoi. Oh, I should start heating the water.”

She rushed over to the next table, giving Sue and Eesai a chance to admire the richly appointed hoi room. While the two spacers studied the carved woodwork, Kilana turned on a gas fire under a large iron kettle. The kettle was an impressive affair. While made of iron, an ornate design had been worked into the metal and the large vessel looked as though it could hold several gallons of water. Sue’s initial assessment that it would be too heavy for most Lano to lift was confirmed when she spotted a brass spigot sticking out of the far side of the kettle.

While the water heated up, Kilana happily fussed with the hoi brewer in which she carefully measured enough of the dried and hand-rolled leaves into a tightly woven wire basket which she then lowered into the fine glass brewer. The brewer was not entirely made of transparent glass. Most of the lower half of the vessel was, indeed transparent, but the very bottom and the upper third were decorated with swirls of opaque blue and white. When steam was flowing freely out of the kettle’s spout, Kilana carried the brewer to the kettle and opened the spigot, allowing the boiling water to half-fill the brewing chamber. She placed the brewer on a trivet and closed the top with a conical glass cover that matched the rest of the brewer and allowed it to steep for a few minutes while she placed exquisitely fine cups on a table in front of her company. Finally, she poured the hot reddish liquid into the cups and bade them to, “Enjoy, dears.”

“Kilana, dear,” they heard a male voice asking from outside the room, “Would you happen to have an extra cup of... Oh, I’m sorry I didn’t know you had company,” he concluded even as he entered the room. Sue and Eesai looked up to see a very familiar face.

“Commodore?” Eesai squeaked.

“Alano?” Sue asked at the same time.

“Uh...” Alano Ki Matchi replied, staring in shock at the two women.

“There’s plenty, Alano, dear,” Kilana told him. “I didn’t realize you knew my company or I’d have invited you too. Of course you know them. You must know all the humans who come here. Right?”

“Hardly,” Alano replied, still not taking his eyes off Eesai who, in turn, was staring back at him, open mouthed. “but Captain Eesai Di Sonea was my second in command on Inillien. I’ve told you that.”

“Have you?” Kilana asked vapidly. “I don’t recall.”

“And Susan Ho was one of Clark’s officers on Meriwether,” Alano continue. He turned to Eesai and Sue. “I didn’t know you were on Treloi.”

“Just landed this morning,” Sue replied as Eesai’s eyes started jumping back and forth between Alano and Kilana.

“And stopped a thief who tried to steal my handbag,” Kilana added.

“Good,” Alano replied, obviously distracted. “Good.”

“Well, Captain Eesai, I’ve been looking forward to having you here,” Alano told her, a touch of uncertainty in his voice. “But I would never have dreamed my sister would invite you first.”

“Sister?” Eesai asked. She was still obviously startled, but the word cut through her confusion and instantly got her attention.

“Half-sister, really,” Alano chuckled. “We have the same mother. Don’t worry,” he added, seeing Eesai start looking around all of a sudden. “I believe she’s vacationing on Herreloi this season. Can’t say I understand the attraction of going off to an entirely different world just to sit on the beach for a few weeks, but then I’ve seen most of the Trelendir already. So what mission brings you to Treloi?”

“We brought in a cargo of monopoles,” Sue replied, “and, of course, Eesai’s using the opportunity to visit family for the first time since we signed the Treaty.”

“Ah, and how are your family, Eesai?”

“Well - so far as I know,” Eesai replied. “We haven’t had time to fly out to the Mondir Desert.”

“Of course,” Alano nodded, as though not knowing what to ask next. So he asked about Clark, about Malana and about the various people he had known from Meriwether I. And gradually they all grew a bit more comfortable as Sue and Eesai told him about their recent missions. “Sounds wonderful,” Alano sighed as Sue finished describing her most recent exploratory/prospecting mission. “Well, while you have been out exploring the galaxy, I’ve been commanding a desk here on Treloi.”

“You don’t sound very happy about it,” Sue observed.

“I much preferred my captaincy,” Alano admitted. “Oh as a commodore, I’m supposedly in charge of a fleet, but it’s a fleet of small courier ships and I carve out orders from a small office on a ground base just outside Pansilli. It’s not easy to sit in an office day after day when the men and women under you get to travel to the known worlds.”

“You could resign your commission and ship out with us,” Sue suggested. She held the serious expression on her face a full second before adding, “Eesai could use an assistant pilot.”

Alano chuckled at the joke, but turned back to Eesai, “I thought Clark offered you a captaincy.”

“He did,” Eesai confirmed. “Meriwether I is my command now but she’s stuck in dry dock for a few months while she undergoes routine maintenance and upgrades. When Sue told me she was bound for

Treloi, I was at leisure, so I signed on with her for the trip. I figure it's a good chance to return the courtesy from when we first went to Earth and Sue showed me around. Tomorrow morning we'll fly off to the Mondir."

"Wish I could go with you," Alano admitted.

They continued to catch up, chatting about the news within the Trelendir as well as in the Terran Confederation until the hoi was gone, then Alano gave Eesai and Sue a tour of the estate. They walked through various gardens and, at Alano's insistence, stayed to have dinner with him on a patio beside a small artificial pond with a tall waterfall. It was one of Alano's favorite places on Treloi, he confided.

"So, when will you be back in Pansilli?" Alano asked sometime later.

"We're only in port for a week," Sue replied, "so unless something happens we'll probably only be back here on the last day. I believe Jerry and Lani are planning to seal their marriage in Lano fashion that day."

"Well, I was hoping you could spend another day or more here," Alano admitted, his attention more on Eesai than Sue. "I really should offer the hospitality of the estate to Jerry and Lani too. Do you think they'd like to celebrate here?"

"I think they would love it," Sue assured him. "Are you sure we wouldn't bring down the property values, though?" she teased.

"You might," Alano admitted, a devilish expression forming around his eyes. "That would show the neighbors, huh? A snobbish lot, really. I'm ashamed to say I used to think like them too. Kilana never did though. You should be here on the nights some of her musician friends are here. Hmm, maybe I should ask them here too, make this a real, um blow up?" he concluded uncertainly in Terrañol.

"Blow out," Sue corrected him, "but you'd better make sure Lani and Jerry don't have other plans first. I'm sure Eesai and I will make the time to visit for a while in any case. Right, Short Stuff?" she added playfully.

"Huh?" Eesai asked distractedly again. "Oh yes, right."

Six

All of Lani Di Ressia's large family were overjoyed to meet Jerry and they spent their first evening in port surrounded by Lano of all ages eagerly asking questions about Earth, the Terran Confederation, and

space travel in general. Lani's teen-aged twin sisters insisted on flirting with Jerry which at first bothered Lani. The girls had not been interested in men at all on her last visit. Then she realized Jerry not only was not taking them seriously but was subtly turning their advances down politely. The rejection fired the two girls up even more until their college-age brother, Tomalo, imitated them outrageously with a blatant pass at Jerry as well. After that they glared at their brother for a bit but eventually started behaving themselves and Lani was able to snuggle comfortably in the crook of Jerry's arm as they chatted with the family.

It was also Jerry's and Lani's first chance to meet their soon-to-be adopted daughter, a young La, Lani's sister had already named Tricia Di Ressa. "I looked through a list of Terran names, Lani's sister Gesai told them excitedly. "Tricia sounded almost like a Lano name too so I thought it would be perfect."

"Works for me," Jerry laughed as he held baby Tricia in his arms. "Are you sure you don't mind sharing her with us?"

A Lano marriage could not be considered official without at least one child, but being of different species, there was no way Jerry and Lani would ever have children of their own. Adoption was always an option and the romantic Lano thought of adoption as the ultimate expression of love since it meant the adoptive parents would do anything to remain together. Gesai and her husband had offered to share parentage of Tricia with Lani and Jerry when they first heard of their engagement.

"Of course not," Gesai laughed. "That's what family is for and little Tricia will be both Terran and Lano."

"She'll be Terralano!" Tomalo shouted happily.

"That has a nice sound to it," Jerry remarked. "Did you just make that up?"

"No," Tomalo replied. "It's a word we've been using on campus for the last year. Anytime we discuss the Treaty of Rendezvous we refer to the volume of Terran and Lano space as Terralano. Even the professors have started using it to discuss Terralano economics and politics and such."

"Glad to hear someone's thinking ahead then," Jerry nodded. "Our peoples are going to be associating with one another for a long long time to come. That sort of thing tends to rub off after a while. In a thousand years or so I wouldn't be surprised to find we had grown into a single unified culture."

"Hey! I have a professor who said the same thing just last week," Tomalo replied. "Do you really think so?"

"So long as we're talking with and trading with each other, it's a possibility," Jerry nodded. "Of course each colony will probably maintain a distinct character just as each individual person would, but our points of commonality would, I think, far outweigh our points of difference."

Just then the comm set rang and Lani's father went to answer it. A minute later, he came back and said it was for Jerry.

"Hello?" Jerry asked as he put the receiver to his ear. Both Terran and Lano comm sets were capable of two-way video communications, but on the Lano worlds it was customary to start with the picture off and speaking into a receiver for the sake of privacy. After establishing communication it was common to switch on the picture and speak without the handset, or not if the conversation was short or intentionally kept private. "Oh, hi, Commodore! Wonderful to hear from you. What may I do for you this

evening?" He spoke on the phone while the others listened. "Uh huh? Yeah? Hey, that would be perfect. Yes, thank you. I'll discuss it with Lani and get back to you with the details. Thanks again!"

"What did Captain Alano want?" Lani asked as Jerry concluded the call.

"Alano's a commodore now, remember?" Jerry replied. "Anyway, he's offering us the use of his estate for the wedding party. He's also inviting the entire crew of the Meriwether to join him as well, so I guess we're doubly invited."

"The Matchi estate?" Lani's mother worried. "What will we all wear?"

"Whatever you might have for the party," Lani replied.

"We can't just go to the Matchi estate looking like a bunch of poor country cousins," her mother continued. "We'll need to all go shopping for something new and fancy."

"Not too fancy, Mother," Lani warned her. "We'd look just as ridiculous showing up for a barbecue in formal attire."

"And I got the impression Alano didn't have a formal ball in mind," Jerry added. "Tell you what, though. I'll give Alano a call back tomorrow and ask him how we ought to be dressed. He might assume other Lano would know, but I'm just a dumb human and don't know your customs yet."

"What's a barbecue?" Tomalo asked curiously.

Jerry and Lani along with Gesai, her husband, Rorri Ki Thanis, and Tricia went down to the Pansilli Central Courts Complex to file the legal documents that would legally make Tricia Lani's and Jerry's daughter and to thereby apply for a license to wed under Lano law. The judge, however, was hesitant to grant them their request.

"A Lano marriage should be a union between a male La and a female La," Judge Bermi Ki Tolora told them sternly after an overly conscientious clerk turned the matter over to him. "You, Mister Isaacs, are not Lano, therefore this marriage would not be legally valid."

"You actually have a law that says that Terrans may not wed?" Jerry asked, surprised.

"Of course you may wed," Judge Bermi replied humorlessly. "You may wed other Terrans, but not Lano."

"Why the Hell not?" Lani demanded, hastily adding, "uh, Your Honor?"

Judge Bermi raised his eyebrows, but let the verbal lapse pass, "Because the only reason for marriage is to give children a healthy and normal environment in which to grow up. It stands to reason that if a couple are physically incompatible to have a child in the natural manner, then there is no reason they should be legally wed."

"That's ridiculous!" Gesai told him. "There are many couples who are incapable of having children.

Adoption has always been our way to provide for marriage in cases like that.”

“That, young lady,” the judge retorted, “is because we do not penalize Lano for anomalous physical handicaps. Terrans are a different matter. It is absolutely impossible for a La and a Terran to breed.”

“Gene-splicing?” Jerry wondered out-loud.

“Would such a child be capable of bearing children like itself?” the judge asked pointedly. “I seriously doubt you could do it at all, but even if you did the child would probably be sterile.”

“You seem remarkably well-informed on a biological subject for one who is supposed to be a legal expert,” Jerry remarked dryly.

“I do try to keep up,” Judge Bermi told him smugly.

“Then you should know that issue has not been proven one way or the other,” Jerry told him.

“Well, you may feel free to use that proof, when you get it, in appealing my decision,” Judge Bermi told them, “but until then, the license is denied.”

Lani was in tears as they left the Civil Courthouse. “Jerry? What will we do now?” she asked plaintively. She had fallen in love with Jerry almost from their first meeting, but it had taken a long campaign on her part before he had come around to accept the concept of marrying outside his species. Now all her planning and preparations were crumbling around her.”

“We’ll appeal, of course,” Jerry told her comfortingly.

“With what?” Lani asked. “You heard Judge Bermi. We need scientific proof Terrans and Lano are interfertile.”

“That’s his opinion,” Jerry replied. “That’s what judges do, of course. They make decisions. But that doesn’t mean they always make the right decision, that’s why there’s always an appeals process. We have it in the Terran Confederation and you have it in the Trelendir. It might even be a defining mark of an enlightened civilization, but I wouldn’t hold out for that. Me, I’m still searching for intelligent life in the universe.”

Lani laughed as she always did when Jerry made jokes like that, then she added, “I was hoping to find some on Treloi.”

“Maybe we’re just looking in the wrong building,” Gesai suggested.

“Could be,” Jerry nodded. “So we’ll file an appeal. Before we do, however, I think we ought to hire legal counsel.”

“Why?” both Lani and Gesai asked.

“Because a lawyer will have a greater knowledge of the laws and regulations than any of us do,” Jerry replied. “He or she will also know which arguments will carry greater weight before a judge. Of course it will be up to us to provide as much evidence as our chosen representative will need.”

“Lano don’t use lawyers for most civil cases, Jerry,” Rorri told him.

“Rorri’s right,” Lani agreed as they found a small restaurant across the street from the courthouse. They walked in and sat at an open table. “Lawyers usually only represent clients in criminal cases. I know it’s different on Earth, but...”

“Most civil cases are probably not precedent setters,” Jerry pointed out. “This is something entirely new. Judge Bermi made a snap decision based on his beliefs just now. He made it sound as though it was based on the law of Treloi. He even tried to make it sound as though it was based on the law of the Trelendir, except we all know better.”

“We do?” the other three asked in unison.

Little Tricia started making soft crying noises so Gesai, rocked her a bit and she quieted instantly. “She’s such a little angel,” Gesai cooed. “Harchi wouldn’t quiet down until he had cried himself out at this age.”

“We do, yes,” Jerry told them after smiling at his sister-in-law and Tricia. “You all know as well as I do that the Trelendir is a very loose confederation of colonized worlds. There are only a few laws that bind the member worlds and even I know that none of them are even remotely related to marriage. I seriously doubt the laws of Treloi are that restrictive either. What the judge was basing his decision on was his understanding of Treloian marriage customs and his opinion of why they are what they are. We need to show that his belief should not have the force of law. For that we need someone well-versed in Treloian law to speak on our behalf.”

“Okay,” Rorri nodded, “You’ve convinced me. Where do we get that sort of lawyer?”

“You don’t have a family lawyer?” Jerry asked.

“Of course, we do,” Rorri replied, “but she specializes in estate planning and small business law.”

“Interesting combination,” Jerry remarked. “Do estate lawyers often practice business law on the side here?”

“A lot of small businesses are run from the owners’ homes,” Rorri replied “and the biggest part of it is to know what official forms are needed, so it’s not all that different.”

“Obviously the legal profession here really is different,” Jerry remarked. “Well, that’s okay. I imagine she can refer us to someone who specializes in the sort of case we need to pursue.”

“I’ll give her a call and ask,” Rorri told him.

Seven

"I want that thing out of my house!" Lerano Ki Lassai demanded. He and Lilla's mother had been up all night arguing the matter with Lilla. Serafyma was emotionally hurt by the frigid reception, but on Lilla's advice, she went to bed early while Lilla stayed up late to talk with her parents.

"Serafyma is not a thing," Lilla insisted. She had lost track how many times she had repeated those words. "She is my sister."

"Lilla, dear," her mother cut in. Throughout the long night, Shaeri Di Gomi had been attempting to act as a moderator between her daughter and her husband. It was a situation she was completely inexperienced with. There had been some bad arguments of this sort with their younger daughter. Ralani was a sulky teenager who seemed to have taken a dark attitude toward life in the last year or so. It was distressing to both parents because the girl was actually quite intelligent and pretty and yet she went out of her apathetic way to appear otherwise. Lilla, on the other hand, had always been the good girl. She was shy and soft spoken and almost never disagreed with her parents and when she did, until now, she had always deferred to the law as laid down by Lerano.

"What, Mother?" Lilla asked defiantly. "Renounce all family honor? Is that what you want me to do? Sera and I took the Oath of Adoption. It is one of the most sacred vows a La can make and I will not renounce it. Serafyma is kin. Just accept it."

"That thing is no kin of mine," Lerano told her angrily. He refused to show his confusion, but even Ralani had never stood up to him like this; certainly not for more than a few moments. His younger daughter usually just retreated to her room and sulked for the next few days.

"I told you," Lilla hissed back at him. "Serafyma is my sister. She's a talented and successful chemist. She is a Terran, but she is definitely not a thing!"

"How dare you?" Lerano began to shout. He had tried that several times, but Lilla, the daughter he remembered as the shy and easily cowed one, was as immovable as one of the walls of his home.

"I dare because I was brought up to be a proper La," Lilla told him coldly. "Family is important to me and Sera is family."

"No!" Lerano replied hoarsely.

"Yes," Lilla shot back calmly.

"Dear," Shaeri tried again, "perhaps we can compromise. You shocked us with this you know."

"Shocked you?" Lilla asked unbelievably. "I told you about Serafyma over a year ago. I told you she wasn't from the Trelendir."

"Well, I guess we just thought she was from some colony we hadn't heard of before," Shaeri told her.

“I told you she was human,” Lilla reminded them.

“I thought that meant she was from the Planet Huma,” Shaeri shrugged.

“And all those stories on the news?” Lilla asked. “I know the vid screen wasn’t broken and even if it had been there are still newspapers.”

“Well,” Shaeri admitted, “perhaps we didn’t think it through. Look, maybe if you’ll give us a bit more time to get used to the idea...”

“Hmmp!” Lerano snorted.

“What are you saying, Mom?” Lilla asked suspiciously.

“Well, perhaps if you just don’t bring her around until we get used to the idea,” Sheari suggested.

“Unacceptable!” Lilla shook her head vehemently. “You two were the ones who taught me about the sacred oaths. By the Oath of Adoption this is as much Sera’s home as it is mine.”

“I don’t recognize your oath,” Lerano denied.

“The oath binds every member of my family,” Lilla reminded him, “or are you disowning me?”

“Lilla, dear,” Shaeri gasped. “No!”

“Well, I don’t see a lot of alternatives,” Lilla told them. “if you repudiate my oath, you repudiate me.”

Lerano was about to fire back another retort but Shaeri heard the sounds of someone moving elsewhere in the house and shushed them both. A few minutes later, Serafyma entered the kitchen where they had been arguing to find Lilla apparently in a stare-down with her father and Shaeri trying to pretend nothing was wrong or out of the ordinary.

“Um, uh, good morning,” Serafyma greeted them uncertainly. “Gee you all look tired. Um... been up all night catching up, right?” She knew she was not fooling anybody, but she was determined to push on through. “Tell, you what; why don’t I make breakfast this morning?”

“Good idea, Sera,” Lilla told her. “Uh... Serafyma has the most wonderful recipe with eggs and bread.”

“French toast,” Serafyma supplied.

“Right. The Lano equivalents of the ingredients taste different, but I’m sure they’ll be just as good,” Lilla told them hopefully. For a change, Serafyma didn’t drop anything clumsily.

Eight

Eesai rented an odd contraption called a jumper in order to make the trip northward to the Mondir Desert. The jumper seemed as though it was half-jet and half a flying car and, according to Eesai, much safer than the flying vehicles humans rode on Earth. “Like the ground cars,” she explained, “it’s all programmed by *thalirip*. We just punch in our destination and we’re off.”

“I would feel a lot safer if there was a control wheel or a joystick or something,” Sue commented.

“I wouldn’t,” Eesai laughed. “I know you could fly this thing and I could too, but the average La wouldn’t know yaw from pitch. There would be thousands of crashes every day.”

“And these things never crash?” Sue asked.

“Never,” Eesai confirmed. “The navigation system isn’t entirely unlike the one used by ground cars.”

“What?” Sue laughed nervously, “Do we have flying, magical invisible tracks to follow?”

“Not quite,” Eesai chuckled. “Actually this system is rather similar to the Terran Global Positioning System save that our transmitters are ground-based. So the GPS equipment on board keeps safe and accurate track of where we are at all times and even adjusts for course if there turns out to be a storm ahead or some sort of restricted flying space, like a city. But we don’t have any of that ahead of us today. It will be a straight shot to the edge of the desert.”

“It looks weird out there,” Sue opined.

“How so?” Eesai asked.

“Well the predominant color is a brighter green than I’m used to,” Sue replied. “Earthly greens aren’t normally this bright from the sky.”

“Well, yes, I did think your Hawaii looked a bit dull from the air,” Eesai admitted, “but every world has its own distinctive range of colors. You must have noticed that in your travels.”

“To tell the truth,” Sue admitted, “I haven’t actually landed on a lot of other worlds. A few of the Terran Colonies, but that’s it. We mostly would just stop in for supplies then lift off again. No one pays us to write reviews of the local spaceport bars, you may have noticed.”

“I wonder why not,” Eesai laughed. “You know a publication like that could be dead useful for a spacer setting down on a new colony world. A list of the better restaurants and bars within easy distance of the spaceport would save time.”

“I don’t know,” Sue shook her head. “Most spacers I know don’t really care about the ambience of the bar they’re getting drunk in. They’re more concerned about the water to alcohol ratio in their drinks. If the whiskey isn’t watered down, that’s good enough for them.”

“That could be useful to know too,” Eesai replied. “Maybe it could add bits and pieces about places of interest on those worlds too. So a bored spacer could find something to do on his day off.”

“There are usually scads of such booklets and brochures available in every port,” Sue pointed out. “Tourists read them and some spacers, but most don’t. Most just want to drink until they can’t anymore. If a fight breaks out, they can blow off steam that way and it’s probably cheaper than the bar bill, in most ports anyway.”

“Our crew won’t, will they?” Eesai asked, nervously.

“Maybe one or two will,” Sue shrugged. “Many of our crew are shareholders, so they tend to behave better. The others know I’ll lift without them if they’re sleeping a drunk off in a jail cell or in the hospital with a broken skull, and they don’t get paid until their return to Earth so if they’re left behind the next paycheck is a long way away and not getting any closer if they have to walk home. Why?”

“It’s just that there are some rather stiff penalties for public drunkenness and rowdiness on most worlds of the Trelendir,” Eesai replied. “Jail terms, public service, really heavy fines mostly, but most Lano spacers know which places they can go where the likelihood of getting into trouble is lessened. There are bars that charge more, but expect fights to break out on a regular basis. The higher prices cover the damage, so the owners don’t press charges, having been paid off in advance. There are also arenas where spacers can actually box or wrestle if they want to exert themselves that way. They’re fairly popular among the military, actually. You can bet on the contestants and the drinks aren’t too bad.”

“And if some spectators start getting rowdy, they can just enter the ring?” Sue asked.

“Right.” Eesai nodded.

“Well, like I said there are only one or two who might get in trouble in my crew. Remember, I hand-picked this lot from the crew of Meriwether I so if any crew is likely to cause trouble, it’s yours and they’re not with us this trip.”

“I’ll have to remember to warn them next time we fly into Trelendir space,” Eesai decided. “But what if some of the crew gets arrested?”

“That happens from time to time,” Sue replied. “It’s one of the reasons Clark wants us doing round trips to Solar System when we’re exploring or prospecting. Less chance of losing a vital crew member to the vagaries of frontier justice. However, if it’s just a fine, the company will bail the offender out and take the amount out of his or her pay. Something more serious? Well, failure to be on board one’s ship when she lifts is a breach of contract. Every spacer knows that. And in many cases the ports just want them off planet as soon as possible.”

“Not here,” Eesai remarked. “If one of our men or women earns a jail term or a long stint of public service, they’ll serve it. No exceptions.”

“Well, first time on a Lano planet?” Sue considered, “The company will probably be lenient and offer a ride home at the end of their sentence, assuming we have a ship in port when it’s convenient. Of course they will ride home on a ticket they pay for out of their own pockets unless there are some really extenuating circumstances. You know, I wish you had mentioned this before. I’d have had you lecture the crew before planet fall.”

“It didn’t occur to me at the time,” Eesai admitted. “Every Lano spacer knows the rules and regs and

the laws of the Trelendir as they apply to off-duty spacers. Ha! It's all spelled out in the spacers' manual."

"Military, you mean?" Sue asked.

"All Lano ships are owned by one military service or the other, Sue," Eesai explained. "A lot of young Lano serve their minimum terms in what you would call our Merchant Marine. It satisfies the requirement and is less dangerous than the Navy."

"Is it?" Sue wondered. "There are dangers on any spaceship."

"Less likely to get shot at as a merchant spaceman than as a gunnery technician," Eesai remarked.

"You have that many wars within the Trelendir?" Sue asked.

"Not wars," Eesai shook her head. "But there are malcontents in a few of the colonies. That's not surprising since many colonists left their worlds because they weren't happy there. I've noted that you have similar problems in some of your colony worlds."

"Requests for secession," Sue replied. "No one has been shooting at the military."

"Well, it doesn't happen frequently here either," Eesai shrugged. "But every so often a secessionist movement gains just enough support that they feel they can force their views on the rest of the world population. It happened on Cereloi a few years ago. I was there, serving under Captain Alano at the time. Inillien was attacked by rioters and we barely got aloft in time. I earned a commendation that day for my quick and cool-headed thinking under fire and that's why Alano chose me as the captain of Inillien to succeed him. I think I shocked him when I resigned my commission so soon after the promotion."

"You probably did at that," Sue laughed. "I got the impression he was married to that ship."

"In a way," Eesai replied softly. "But he understood why I did it. He knew I'd always wanted to be on an exploratory ship. He understood that I wanted to be among the first to walk on the ground of a new world and see things no one else had ever seen before."

"And a good thing he did, because you might have stopped loving him," Sue remarked.

"What?" Eesai asked, as though she hadn't heard what Sue had said. The orangey blush, spreading across her face told a different tale.

"It's not really a secret, you know," Sue told her, "not from me anyway. I know you too well by now and, even if I didn't, the cow eyes you made at him last night would have tipped me off."

"Cow eyes?" Eesai asked, awash to the phrase. Then she shook off the question. "You don't understand."

"I don't?" Sue asked lightly, amused.

"I like Alano, sure and I respect him. I served as his second in command for a fair amount of time and we got to know each other very well," Eesai explained a little too quickly. "I'm not in love with him."

"No?" Sue pressed.

“Of course, not,” Eesai shook her head. “That would be ridiculous. The difference in status alone...” she trailed off, her face now a blotchy orange of embarrassment. “It shows?”

“Well, I doubt many others have had my chance to notice,” Sue told her calmly. “I wouldn’t be surprised if Malana saw it from the start, but she’s different.”

“She’s *athalua*,” Eesai remarked.

“I doubt her ability to use magic...”

“*Thalirip*,” Eesai corrected her instantly.

“Whatever,” Sue shrugged. “I doubt that’s what would have made her notice. She’s very wise and she’s had a lot of experience in all sorts of things. I’m sure she’s seen more than one or two... uh,” she paused searching for the words.

“Lovesick lieutenants longing hopelessly for their captains?” Eesai suggested, casting it in the least delicate way she could.

“Not the way I’d have described the situation,” Sue replied, “and once again, I doubt your seats aboard Inillien had anything to do with it.” *And they probably had nothing to do with the way he looks at you*, Sue thought silently. Her friends were going to have to work this out for themselves. Sue knew her talents as a matchmaker were non-existent. “Look, let’s forget we even had this discussion and move on to something else. Um, are we coming in for a landing? The ground looks closer and the dominant color of the vegetation has changed.”

Eesai looked outside the jumper and smiled. “Yeah, most of the plants around here range from brown to orange. I feel better already! I grew up with these colors, you know. Even though it’s been years, green plant life looks odd to me. These are the colors of home!”

“So we are getting ready to land?” Sue asked again.

“I hope so,” Eesai laughed, “because we’re already over the Misonea ranch. It’s a combination of my parents’ names, Miso Ki Garace and Sonea Di Paci.”

“Miso and Sonea,” Sue repeated. “Nice way to combine their names and it sort of sounds like another Lano patronymic.”

“It is almost,” Eesai nodded. “The word *mi* is an Old Lano possessive modifier. Just as *di* means ‘daughter of,’ *ki* means ‘son of,’ and *bi* means ‘born to,’ *mi* would mean ‘owned by’ or ‘possession of.’ They chose the name for all those reasons. And see those buildings ahead? Those are the ranch house and barns. We’re here.”

Nine

“You have an interesting case Mister and Mrs. Isaacs,” the lawyer, Anea Di Tolea, told them. “I don’t normally take civil cases, however.”

“This is not a normal civil case,” Jerry replied.

“Indeed it is not,” Anea agreed. “You do realize that you are essentially proposing to sue the State for your right to marry, don’t you?”

“The thought had occurred to me,” Jerry agreed. “That’s why we needed representation of your caliber.”

“Flattering,” Anea smiled. “I may even be as good as you say. I’m not being immodest. My record speaks for itself. However, it is not commonplace for individuals to treat directly with the government this way.”

“I realized that it was unprecedented for an individual to attempt to negotiate a business contract with the government. The CEO of our company learned that fairly early on, but is there any law that says we cannot sue the government?”

“A law?” Anea echoed. “None that I am aware of. People do have legal recourse when wronged by governmental action, you realize, but it has always been in the form of a class action. What you need is to be considered a class of only two people. And before you ask, no there is no law against it, but there is no precedent for it either.”

“The legal system in the Trelendir has some differences from what I’m used to in the Terran Confederation,” Jerry admitted, “but it sounds like we have some definite points of commonality too. I had not thought of this as a class action, but then I ‘m not a lawyer. It’s obvious this case should be for the class of all mixed couples present and future.”

“Perhaps,” Anea allowed, “but with only you two named in the class, we’re going to have an up-hill battle getting the judge, whoever that turns out to be, to take us seriously.”

“Maybe there is something we can do in advance to make our case appear as serious as it needs to be,” Jerry suggested.

“Hold on,” Lani stopped them. “Did you just say you would take the case?” she asked Anea.

Anea thought about that. “Not directly, but you have talked me into it. What did you have in mind, Mister Isaacs?”

“Well, it’s become a regrettable practice by Terran lawyers to present their cases to the public in the form of press conferences. They have to be careful just what they say, of course, but in some ways they’re free to say anything they please since they don’t have to worry about the evidence to back up their claims.”

“Doesn’t sound like particularly principled behavior,” Anea commented.

“Of course not,” Jerry chuckled thoughtlessly, “they’re lawyers. Uh... um... oops?”

“No, no,” Anea sighed. “I’ve heard all the jokes. What do you get when you cross a lawyer with a demon from Hell?” she quoted tiredly.

“Nothing changes,” Jerry replied, then asked in return, “What’s the difference between a lawyer and a bucket of pond scum?”

“The bucket,” Anea replied. “How can you tell when a lawyer is lying?”

“His lips are moving,” Jerry shot back. “Why won’t sharks attack lawyers?”

“What’s a shark?” Anea asked, puzzled.

“A large carnivorous fish,” Jerry replied, “noted for attacking suddenly and viciously. Sorry, I should have realized that would have been a Terra-centric joke. You probably wouldn’t get the light bulb jokes without explanation either. I take your point, however. Lawyers get a bum rap.”

“Well, there are always a few people in any group who are lacking personal integrity,” Anea admitted, “but it only takes a few bad lawyers to paint the rest of us in the same color.”

“I’m sorry,” Jerry apologized. “I spoke thoughtlessly. It was especially foolish considering we’re asking for your help.”

“The one thing a trial lawyer has to have is a thick skin, Mister Isaacs,” Anea replied seriously. “I’m a big girl and I’ve learned not to take offense at slights that are not really aimed at me. A press conference bringing your case to the notice of the public is not a bad idea, actually. While we can say nothing that could be construed as attempts to prejudice the case itself, we can announce our intentions. The news media will no doubt take notice and help spread our claims. If enough members of the public voice their support, we’ll have a better chance of getting a second appeal.”

“You don’t think we’ll win on the first appeal?” Lani asked.

“Frankly?” Anea countered. “No. We won’t even get a fair hearing. That’s why we need to get the public involved. The appeals judge will listen to our arguments and then rule against us. Be honest with yourselves here. This is a very important issue and whatever way it is finally settled it will determine how similar cases will be handled on all Lano worlds for the foreseeable future.”

“Not Lano worlds,” Jerry disagreed. “Terralano worlds.”

“Excuse me, Mister Isaacs?”

“Lani’s younger brother tells us the college kids have started referring to Terran and Lano space together as Terralano,” Jerry explained.

“He said Tricia would be Terralano,” Lani recalled.

“Sounds as if there are a fair amount of college students who might already be on your side,” Anea

remarked. “Adults often overlook college students and their enthusiasms, but there have been quite a few times in the last few hundred years during which they have influenced the general public of all ages. College age protesters all over the Trelendir were responsible for bringing an end to the imperialistic old colonial laws over two hundred years ago, you know.”

“What happened?” Jerry asked.

“We have not always been a confederation of worlds,” Anea replied. “The original Trelendir was made of Treloi and her colonial possessions. Over half the colonies were threatening to secede in what would have been a very long and bloody war. There had already been a number of incidents and they were rapidly escalating. I don’t know how much of the Trelendir would have been left when it was over, but a movement began on the college and university campuses. It advocated peace and abolishment of the laws that established the colonies as possessions. The situation remained tense for several years but finally the diplomats and politicians got the idea the kids had understood from the start and the Trelendir as we know it today was founded.”

“Interesting,” Jerry remarked, “and not without parallels in Terran history. Student protests on Terra have caused wars to end, laws to change, governments to fall and, in general, history to be made.”

“So our people have that in common as well,” Anea remarked.

“I was one of the first scientists to conduct anything remotely resembling a sociological comparison of our peoples,” Jerry told her, “and I concluded we have far more in common than not. If it were not for our biological differences I could believe we are all of the same people.”

“So you think Terra might one day be part of the Trelendir?” Anea asked interestedly. “A reasoned argument like that could sway the judge.”

“Not the Trelendir,” Jerry told her, a big smile on his face. “The Terralendir.”

“That has a nice sound,” Anea remarked. “Let’s go with that. Just one more thing, however. Why won’t sharks attack lawyers?”

“Professional courtesy,” Jerry smiled.

Ten

Eesai was amazed at how naturally Sue fit into the life on the Misonea Glarno Ranch. From the moment the jumper touched down near the ranch house, a wide stucco-covered building Sue repeatedly referred to as a hacienda only to have to explain the Terran word, she had become one of the hands, chipping in with the chores and asking questions that helped her to improve at unfamiliar tasks. Eesai was also delighted to see her parents accept Sue as naturally as Sue adapted to life on the ranch.

For two days, Eesai and Sue helped rebuild fences, maintain milking machinery and groomed the kahchta. A kahcht was a large riding beast some seven feet tall at the shoulders. It was a mammal, but the fur over most of its body was almost microscopic, giving it a smooth, hairless look. They varied in color from bright orange to deep brown, although all kahcht had a bright yellow mane which continued as narrow stripes down their backs and culminated at the tips of their tail stubs.

Mounting a kahcht was an art, especially for a La, but even Sue needed coaching on how to properly climb up and down using the ladder-like foothold that hung down from the saddle. The beasts looked fierce, but were actually quite docile. They could run through the desert for hours without stopping to rest and while they would eat often and drink profusely when in their stables, they could go for days in the desert without food or water. They were, in fact, the ideal critter to ride around the desert on while checking up on the glarno herds.

The milk glarno lived in the barns and in the fenced fields around the ranch complex, but Eesai's parents also kept glarno for their meat, skins and other body parts and that breed did best when allowed to wander freely in and around the Mondir Desert.

"No one knows why they seem to like living inside the desert," Eesai told Sue. "There's not a lot in there they can eat and precious little water,"

"Last I checked that was the definition of a desert," Sue remarked, "a distinct lack of water, that is."

"Yes," Eesai agreed, "although there is food and water if you know what to look for and where to look for it. However, perhaps that's why they do come back out of the desert often. They have to eat and drink."

"So they prefer to live on the fringe of the desert," Sue decided. "Do they have any natural enemies that live just outside the desert but not inside?"

"Not anymore, but packs of foranoi used to stalk them a thousand years ago," Eesai replied. "Ranchers exterminated them in these parts long ago before we understood the nature of ecology. Turned out the foranoi were suppressing a number of pests that we eventually had to find ways of countering as well."

"That's always the way," Sue nodded.

"Yeah," Eesai agreed. "You know, that's probably why they spend so much time in the desert. The foranoi wouldn't have lasted long inside the Mondir although they did well enough on the periphery. The glarno needed the food and water, but the desert provided safety."

"I must say I'm glad I tasted glarno meat before I knew what one looked like," Sue admitted. "I expected something that looked like a cow, but those creatures don't look like anything I've ever seen. Five feet tall and four feet wide with those tree-trunk legs and the three horns and the fur patterns. Little black triangles?"

“A surprisingly effective natural camouflage,” Eesai remarked. “It allows them to hide in the grasses when outside the Mondir.”

“Hard to believe,” Sue shook her head.

“You’ll probably get to see for yourself tomorrow when we go camping in the desert,” Eesai told her. “It will give you a real taste for what it used to be like to herd glarno before *thaliripi* advanced enough to provide our modern conveniences.”

“Conveniences I’m totally incapable of using,” Sue pointed out.

“Yeah, someone should start thinking about finding a way to allow humans to function in Lano society as though they weren’t handicapped,” Eesai teased, then abruptly got serious. “That’s not a bad idea, actually. I wonder if there is a way to allow humans to operate Lano switches and similarly simple machines.”

“It sounds like a job for *athalua*,” Sue noted. “We only know one of them and she’s a bit busy these days.”

“There is that,” Eesai admitted, “but don’t you get tired relying on me to turn out the lights for you?”

“Actually, you’ve been amazingly subtle about that, you know,” Sue told her. “We banter back and forth like old friends who grew up together, but, in matters like the lights and other minor spells I cannot cast, you just quietly take care of the matter without comment, like last night when you walked to the guest room with me then turned the lights out on your way out. I thought that was exquisitely courteous.”

“It would be rude to constantly rub your face in it,” Eesai replied.

“But aren’t you getting tired of having to take care of me that way?” Sue asked.

“No,” Eesai denied. “Not in the least. You’re my friend and...” She paused for maybe a tenth of a second then said, “You’re my best friend. You helped me on Earth and now it’s my turn to help you. I enjoy doing it, and really what’s the big deal about turning on the lights or opening the outer door for you?”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to be a burden,” Sue remarked.

“Never!” Eesai assured her.

As Eesai had predicted they did spot a herd of meat glarno on the way into the desert. The animals were grazing on a stand of orangey-brown grass with blackened tips. “You were right,” Sue remarked.

“Of course I was,” Eesai laughed. “About what?”

“The way those odd markings make the glarno hard to spot when their in the grass like that. Did the wolves that hunted them rely on sight to do so?”

“Wolves?” Eesai asked. “You mean foranoi? Well, I’m no expert, but most of the predators around here use both scent and sight to hunt with and until Lano settled here, the foranoi were the top predators so I imagine they must have been very good at it, but it’s one thing to scent your prey and another to see precisely where it is. The glarno markings are such that the foranoi wouldn’t know exactly where their

prey was until it moved.”

“So if it’s like such things are on Earth,” Sue remarked, “one or two glarno might have been caught when a pack attacked... the foranoi hunted in packs, didn’t they?”

“How did you know?” Eesai asked.

“I didn’t,” Sue admitted. “It was a lucky guess, but even if one or two were caught the natural camouflage allowed the others the time to get away.”

“Makes sense,” Eesai admitted. “Did you study that sort of thing in school?”

“Biology?” Sue asked. “Not since my freshman year in college. I majored in Astronomy with a minor in Comparative Cultures.”

“That’s why Clark assigned you to learning Lano?” Eesai asked.

“It’s why he allowed me to horn into the team he had already selected; Jerry, Achmed and Chen,” Sue replied. “Achmed, you’ll recall, got busy on the medical side, working with Wallo, so you didn’t have much to do with him and when we realized you were a woman, the others started deferring to me. I guess they figured we’d get along better. Silly supposition, come to think of it. We could have detested each other on first sight or in your culture women might have been the dominant gender. For all we knew at the time your men might have been nonsentient so that anyone we would meet would be female. It worked out all right, though.”

“It worked out perfectly, if you ask me,” Eesai agreed. “Come on, we’re going too easy on the kahchta. They like to run and they need the exercise.” With that she signaled her mount to break out into a gallop. Sue was left in the dust, but for only a few seconds, then she urged her own animal to do likewise and by late afternoon they were deep inside the Mondir Desert.

“It’s very pretty here,” Sue opined as Eesai chose a campsite at the top of a tall mound of firm earth. Around them there were several dunes of dark red sand and half a mile to the north there was a tall cliff that in the late afternoon sun was sparkling in every color of the rainbow.

“Quartz,” Eesai told her.

“What?” Sue asked.

“Those colors are being caused by quartz crystals in the outcrop refracting the light of the sun,” Eesai explained. “We got here just in time to enjoy the show. Let’s get our tent set up, then we can sit back and watch the show for a while.

They worked quickly. Soon the tent was erected and their gear was unloaded from the backs of the kahchta. “This is one of your favorite places, isn’t it?” Sue asked as the colors began to fade.

“It’s like Alano’s waterfall garden is for him,” Eesai confirmed. “Or that secluded beach of yours. I don’t get back home very much anymore, but when I do, I always find an excuse to come out here at least once. Come on,” she continued, getting back to her feet. We have an hour and a half before full dark. I want to get closer to the cliff.”

Sue shrugged and they rode up to the base of the cliff where the desert floor seemed to be made up

of pure white sand instead of the iron-rich red sand that was prevalent elsewhere. When they reached the outer limit of the white sand, Eesai reined in her beast and slid nimbly down to the desert floor then started running closer to the cliff itself.

Mildly curious, Sue climbed down as well and followed her friend. She half-expected Eesai would start climbing the cliff, but instead she started digging carefully into the sand. Sue paused to examine that sand and saw it was entirely made up of small quartz crystals that must have fallen from the cliff. As Eesai continued to dig it became apparent the white layer was less than a centimeter thick and she was already about ten centimeters into the dark red-brown dirt below that. Finally with a satisfied, “Ah ha!” Eesai stopped digging and stood up with a large crystal an inch thick and six inches long in her right hand. She opened her canteen and poured a few drops of the precious water within on the crystal, rubbed the resulting red mud off and presented Sue with the now mostly clean quartz.

“That paperweight in your cabin,” Sue recalled. “It came from here too?”

“Yep,” Eesai grinned. “My way of carrying a bit of home with me wherever I go. Now you have a piece of it too.”

Sue smiled and replied simply, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Eesai told her. “Now let’s see if we can find something fresh to eat for dinner.”

They returned to their camp just as the sun dropped beneath the horizon with an assortment of roots, leaves and the stalks of a small succulent they found growing between two large stones. To Eesai’s disappointment, however, Sue’s food-testing kit showed that everything Eesai had found was either poisonous or non-nutritious for humans. Of the items that were not outright poison, only one was not suspect, according to the tester, of causing allergic reactions in some. “Good thing I brought trail mix and other munchies,” Sue remarked lightly. “And I really like the juice from this one root. It’s tart and berry-like. I’ll bet it would go over well as a breakfast drink. Is it very common?”

“Not really,” Eesai admitted. “You can find quite a bit of it in the Mondir, but I don’t think it grows elsewhere.”

“Too bad,” Sue shrugged. “Can I help you prepare some of the other stuff?”

“Better play it safe,” Eesai shrugged. “I’m just going to cut them up into finger foods anyway and it might be best to keep the poisonous juices from getting on you.”

“That’s probably safe enough,” Sue shrugged, “but you’re right. If the toxins can be absorbed through my skin, it could get nasty. Especially since the only human physician I know on Treloi is Achmed MacGregor and he’s visiting Wallo this week. Any idea of where?”

“No,” Eesai admitted, “but I imagine your ambassador must have a physician on staff. But we’re still a day’s ride from anywhere. We won’t take that sort of stupid chance.”

“Besides, I’m sure there are all sorts of other stupid chances we’re taking just spending the night in the desert,” Sue laughed. “I imagine it gets cold out here at night.”

“Very,” Eesai confirmed, “but don’t worry. The tent is self-heating. We’ll be cozy.”

“That’s good,” Sue nodded. “I’ve never been very fond of the cold. Even when I’ve gone skiing it

was mostly for the hot cocoa by the fire afterward.”

“Then why ski at all?” Eesai asked. “Just take the cocoa and the fire.”

“It seemed like a package at the time,” Sue admitted. “I had to take one with the other.”

They watched the moons and stars come out in silence. “Two moons?” Sue asked finally.

“Five actually,” Eesai replied, “although the largest is the size of Earth’s moon. It hasn’t risen yet and the other two are pretty small and distant so they just look like stars on first glance. These two you can see are call the ‘Twins,’ Hoini and Falta. They continued to watch the skies quietly until Eesai finally pointed at one dim light about forty degrees above the northeastern horizon, “There it is,” she told Sue.

“There what is?” Sue asked.

“Earth,” Eesai replied. “Well, Sol actually. Your sun.”

Sue did some mental calculations and decided her friend was right, “Yeah, I guess it is,” she nodded. “Sure doesn’t look like much from here, does it?”

“Our sun doesn’t look like much from Earth either,” Eesai admitted. “Just two small stars in each other’s sky. Just as well, though. The really large ones don’t seem to have inhabitable planets.”

“Inhabitable by our types of life anyway,” Sue amended. “But you’re right. If one of our stars was that much larger than the other it’s likely we might never have met.”

“You don’t know that,” Eesai told her. “I’m glad our people were so similar, but there’s no reason we can be the only sorts of life to travel in space.”

“We won’t know for sure until we find someone else,” Sue remarked, “but I’m glad we found each other first too.”

“Yeah,” Eesai replied softly. “Uh, Sue? I’ve been thinking about something the last few days since we arrived at the ranch. Now don’t feel I’m trying to pressure you or something, but you fit in so well around the ranch and my folks liked you immediately and...”

“What are you getting at?” Sue asked. “You sound so nervous.”

“Yeah,” Eesai admitted. “A little. A lot, really.”

“Hey, calm down,” Sue advised. “Take a few deep breaths. We’re friends. I doubt you’re going to trip over your own tongue so badly you have to be scared. Heck, I don’t think I’ve even seen you so worried, not even when you first woke up in the Meriwether sickbay surrounded by a bunch of ugly giants.”

“You’re not ugly,” Eesai told her. “I never thought that. You are a giant, though, but what I’m trying to get at is...” She took a deep breath and decided to plunge on, “I’d like you to be my sister.”

Sue was silent for a few seconds. “Oh. You mean the Oath of Adoption like Serafyma and Lilla took? Yeah, okay.”

“Really?” Eesai asked. “You don’t have to, you know. It’s not really very common even among Lano. It’s just that... well...”

“No, I want to do it.” Sue told her. “Eesai, you’ve felt like a sister to me since we first started being able to talk to one another. Maybe a bit longer. Yeah. Since we were able to communicate. So do we need witnesses or something? Do we need a justice of the peace or a ship’s captain?”

“As many witnesses as possible is good,” Eesai explained, starting to calm down a little. She realized she’d been tensing up for this moment since the afternoon before. “But the two involved are all that is needed. I’d like to do it in front of my parents if you don’t mind, though. I asked them about it first. The oath is binding on all family members you see and if there was a problem... but they’re fine with it. They liked you on first sight too, I guess.”

“I don’t mind,” Sue replied.

Just then Eesai’s communicator rang from inside her pack. “Timing is everything,” she laughed realizing the golden moment had just ended abruptly. “I don’t recognize the caller,” she commented. “Eesai Di Sonea here.”

“Captain Eesai, I’m glad I found you. Is Captain Susan with you?” an unfamiliar male voice asked.

“Captain Ho is here,” she replied, politely stressing the correct form of Sue’s name and title. “I’ll put her on.”

“No!” the caller stopped her. “That’s not necessary. I need both of you, is all.”

“Who is this?” Eesai asked, halfway to irritation.

“Didn’t I say?”

“No you didn’t,” Eesai replied dryly, “and you’re not scoring any points for clarity at the moment.”

“Comes from being a politician, I suppose,” the man replied self-deprecatingly. “My apologies. Points, did you say? Like in a game?”

“It’s a Terran phrase,” Eesai explained, “along with the game ‘Silly Buggers,’ which I’m starting to get the feeling you’re playing with me.”

“No, not at all, Captain. This is Tauko Ki Masai. I believe you may have met my mother?”

“And worked with her for a year on Earth,” Eesai replied. “To what do I owe a call from the Presiding General? I would have thought a mere captain, and a retired one at that, was beneath your notice.”

“I’m not at liberty to discuss the matter over an unsecured line, Captain Eesai, but if you and Captain Ho could meet with me at your earliest convenience I would be in your debt.”

“Well, we’re in the middle of the Mondir at the moment and a day’s ride from anywhere,” Eesai explained. “It’s not safe to travel in the desert at night, so I don’t think we could get back to Pansilli until the day after tomorrow. We can be there in the morning if we fly back in the jumper all night.”

“That will have to do then, Captain. I’ll see you both in a day and a half then.”

Eleven

Jerry and Lani worked with Anea to quickly draft an appeal to their case. As Anea had explained, the first appeal was doomed to failure but it would open the doors of the Treloian legal system to begin a class-action suit. However, the way to win was to not take any step for granted. While Lani spoke to her brother about mobilizing his friends, Jerry was sitting in the office of the Terran Ambassador, Radji Gupta.

“I’m not sure it would be proper to become officially involved at least until after the initial appeal, Mister Isaacs,” the ambassador told him.

“That doesn’t seem to stop any earthbound ambassadors from officially protesting anything from a human rights case to the price of coffee in their local doughnut shop,” Jerry argued.

“We’re not on Earth, Mister Isaacs, and I would like to think I hold myself to a higher standard. As it happens I agree with you. There is no legitimate reason I can discern why you cannot be married to your wife by the laws of the Lano, but it is also possible, probable I would say, that on appeal a judge will reverse the initial decision. I assure you that if that does not happen I will protest directly to the Council of Generals.”

“What’s the Council of Generals?” Jerry asked. “I thought the Presiding General was in charge.”

“He is,” Radji replied. “He presides over the Council. The Council is elected from the active list of generals and admirals on Treloi. Theoretically any retired general officer could come out of retirement and sit on the council as well, but that doesn’t happen very often or so I’m told.”

“Interesting,” Jerry considered. “I hadn’t realized I’d entirely missed learning about the political structure of the Trelendir.”

“Not the Trelendir,” Radji shook his head, “Treloi, but most of the colonies have similar structures. Some are a little more democratic is all.”

“For a military-run government, Treloi is amazingly democratic,” Jerry pointed out. “All officers are voted into office. Every leader is voted in at every level for that matter. It’s one hell of a way to run an army but it seems to work for them.”

“It’s not as open as all that,” Radji disagreed. “Elections do not determine one’s rank. Rank is

earned. Your wife's rank is equivalent to a navy lieutenant commander for example. She could be elected to a position holdable by any lieutenant commander or major for that matter. She probably wouldn't be because her training is as an engineer, but she was chief engineer aboard Inillien because she was nominated by Captain Alano and ratified by the other engineers. Alano Ki Matchi was nominated to the captaincy of Inillien by his admiral. A number of other captains currently awaiting commands of their own were probably also on the ballot, having been nominated by other admirals. In addition to them, any other captain-ranked officer could have run for the office as a write-in candidate. Your wife, for example could not have, being only a lieutenant commander. Do you understand?"

"I do and that much at least I did know," Jerry nodded. "And were you aware that every person within the Trelendir has a military rank?"

"Of course," Radji replied.

"Did you know that includes you and me?" Jerry pressed.

"Well, as ambassador from the Terran Confederation, I understand that I am considered a general by courtesy," Radji nodded, "but it is only a courtesy."

"It's no courtesy," Jerry replied. "According to the Laws of Treloi and the Trelendir there is no such thing as a courtesy or honorary title. You could enter the Council of Generals at any time, thereby declaring yourself on active duty."

"That would not be appropriate behavior for an ambassador," Radji replied.

"It has quite a bit of precedence within the Trelendir," Jerry pointed out. "In fact that is essentially what you are doing when you visit the council or file a protest or conduct any sort of business there. I'm not saying you should take an active role in Treloian politics, but it wouldn't shock the Peegee or his council if you did."

"That's an interesting interpretation of Treloian custom," Radji admitted. "Do you think Madame Malana Di Masai believes she has such privileges within the Terran government?"

"Technically, by the terms of the treaty, she probably could," Jerry mused, "but Malana is too smart to try to do something like that. I would like your help with my case, however. The appeal is scheduled for this evening."

"Their courts have a night shift?" Radji asked, surprised.

"They have a truly twenty-four hour society," Jerry replied, "Well okay, actually it's closer to a twenty-five hour society and they divide the day by thirty-two, but you get the idea. Anyway, the appeal is this evening. Their judicial system is much more streamlined than ours. Our attorney assures us the appeals judge will reject our appeal simply because what we are proposing will set a new precedent. That means we must sue the state. It's a rare procedure and has not been done by an individual in recorded history. We can't have any confidence that such a suit by individual would be taken seriously so it has to be a class action. However, we still need the state's permission to file suit. At the moment that is all we're asking you to help with."

"You want me to make an official request to sue Treloi on your behalf?" Radji asked.

"You may start off unofficially if you like," Jerry told him. "It may just take a friendly call to the

Peegee.”

“All right, Mister Isaacs,” Radji decided. “Should I mention you and your wife are friends of his mother?”

“Wouldn’t hurt, although with Malana I think that will only narrow us down to half the population of the Terralandir.”

“Is that the best he would offer?” Lani asked Jerry an hour later.

“I think he’s trying to pick his fights carefully,” Jerry explained. “Of course so far I don’t think he’s had a lot of fights. He’s only been here a year and the Treaty of Rendezvous is still enjoying a honeymoon. That may be about to end, though, and even he realizes it. How did it go with Tomalo’s friends?”

“It wasn’t just his friends,” Lani reported. “It turned out Tomalo has been talking to people for a year since we got married. I ended up talking to about two hundred students, at least at first. Their numbers must have doubled by the time I was done and those were just the ones who showed up on short notice. They intend to demonstrate outside the courthouse this evening to show their support, but their protest will begin in earnest if Anea is right and the appeal is rejected. That scares me a bit.”

“Why?” Jerry asked. “No matter what happens, we’re still married, you know.”

“It’s not that, dear,” Lani told him. “It’s the students. They’re planning to protest on our behalf. They feel so strongly in the concept of Terralano and we’re a living symbol of that concept. Tricia will be even more of one if we’re allowed to adopt her. They want a galaxy with humans and Lano living together as a single society so much I think they would fight for it.”

“They might well at that,” Jerry replied. “You know we probably ought to invite Serafyma and Lilla over. They’re Terralano too since they took the oath of adoption.”

Tomalo ran into the house just then and announced, “Better turn on the Vid. Someone’s trying to stop the appeal even before we can make it.”

“What?” Jerry and Lani asked as one.

“Just look!” Tomalo told them as he reached his hand upward and waved a simple “On” *thalu* at the screen which lit up immediately and resolved into the face on an elderly male La. Beneath him were the words “Breaking News” and “Invasion From Earth?” Still beneath that was a ticker line that was displaying minor news stories on the installment plan.

“Marriage is the union of a male and female La,” he told the camera calmly, but with the fire of zeal burning clearly within his eyes. “These proposed unions between humans and Lano are affronts to nature and must be blocked.”

“Who is that guy?” Jerry asked.

“General Taomi Ki Taomi,” Tomalo responded. “Shh and listen!”

“That is why,” General Taomi continued, “I have proposed an amendment to the Constitution of Treloi within the Council of Generals that will ban all forms of interspecies marriage by defining marriage as a union between male and female Lano. When passed and ratified, all so-called interspecies marriages will be automatically nullified and any couple attempting to claim marital status within the Trelendir will be subject to fines and jail terms.”

“Can he do that?” Jerry asked as the general made a few concluding remarks. “Can the Council of Generals pass a law that will be binding on the rest of the Trelendir?”

“Sounds like he thinks he can,” Tomalo replied.

“What’s with the repetitious name?” Jerry asked a few minutes later as advertisements filled the Vid screen. “I thought Lano custom was to never name a child after its parent.”

“Ah, now that’s an interesting phenomenon,” Tomalo replied with a laugh. “Sorry, that’s something one of my professors says far too often. Do you know what it means when a La is named Bi Lano?”

“I’ve met two Bi Lanos,” Jerry replied. “They had been foundlings as children so otherwise had no patronymic.”

“Right,” Tomalo nodded. “Same thing.”

“Not always,” Lani corrected him and turned to Jerry. “What it means is that General Taomi decided he was the start of his own lineage and thereby named it after himself.”

“True,” Tomalo agreed, “but generally only foundlings do it because they’re ashamed to call themselves Bi Lano.”

“There is that,” Lani agreed. “Jerry, you know what a stigma such a name can be.”

“Malana and Eesai both explained it,” Jerry admitted, “but both Doctor Wallo and Malana’s assistant Helani don’t seem much bothered by it.”

“That has a lot to do with Malana,” Lani told him. “She’s a truly great La and has never felt the prejudice other Lano have toward those without known ancestors. Even I was a bit of a snob before I got to know Doctor Wallo and that’s a shame because he’s a dear old gentleman who doesn’t deserve that sort of treatment.”

“But if everyone knows this is just a way to cover over the Bi Lano patronymic,” Jerry asked, “why does anyone do it?”

“It can be a show of strength,” Lani replied.

“Instead of acceptance,” Tomalo added. “I have more respect for those who call themselves Bi Lano but don’t let it stop them. Wait, the commercial’s over.”

On the screen, the words, “Breaking News” reappeared, but “Invasion From Earth?” had been replaced with “An Affront to Nature?” and the show’s anchorman was introducing four new commentators. Two were from the Council of Generals – General Yeolano Ki Teratchi and Admiral Berna Di Hasai and the other two were obviously paid political pundits who were regulars on the show because Tomalo groaned on seeing them, “Them again? Must be nice not to have to work at an honest

job.”

General Yeolano spoke first, “I agree most heartily with my esteemed colleague, General Taomi. The Terrans are nice enough people but...”

“You wouldn’t want your sister to marry one?” Admiral Berna cut in abruptly, scorn dripping from her words.

“No, as a matter of fact I would not,” Yeolano replied. “The Terrans are our allies, but we are not biologically compatible with one another so we can never interbreed. The purpose of marriage is to provide a safe and stable environment for children to grow up in. If there are no children, there is no need for a marriage. That is why we do not even allow childless Lano couples to marry.”

“Unless they adopt a child,” Berna corrected him. “A couple wishing to start a life together has always been able to fill that requirement through adoption. I do not see why it should matter if one of the adoptive parents is Terran. Conversely, we should consider a marriage valid if the adoptee is a human child.”

“Nonsense!” Yeolano shot back. “Lano marriage is for bringing up Lano children.”

“Children are children, General,” Berna replied, “Are you saying Terran children aren’t as important as Lano children? Because you certainly seem to be saying that Terran parents aren’t as good as Lano ones.”

“I am sure that Terrans are perfectly good parents to their own children,” Yeolano replied, mustering up what dignity he could.

“And an adopted child would be their own,” Berna shot back.

“I do not think so,” Yeolano replied. “How could a Terran teach a Lano child his basic *thalirip*?”

“Don’t know about you, but I learned most of my *thalirip* in school, General. I suspect you did too,” Berna reminded him.

“But a parent should be able to help his child practice,” Yeolano replied.

“My parents used Doctor Sporai’s Guide to Children in such things,” Berna replied. “Didn’t yours?”

“Nonetheless,” Yeolano sputtered.

“General, Admiral, let’s let our other speaker get a word in, please?” the anchorman moderated. “Calana Di Hatchi of *Our Trelendir*, how do you see General Taomi’s proposal?”

“The general is a very wise man,” Calana started. “He realizes the danger of mixed species marriages even before we have any to deal with...”

“They haven’t heard of us?” Lani asked.

“and is diligently moving to keep it from being a problem,” Calana concluded.

“Oh, I’ll make it a problem, you little fatcha!” Lani growled at the screen.

“Way to go, Sis!” Tomalo cheered.

“Let’s hear what the other one has to say,” Jerry suggested.

“Oh he’ll be on our side,” Tomalo laughed, as the program broke for commercials. “They always do that sort of thing. It’s easier than actually trying to analyze the news.”

“We have the same sloppy sort of news coverage on Earth,” Jerry remarked. “It presupposes that there are two sides to every issue, but no more than that. So they haul in spokespeople from widely divergent points of view and have them argue it out in the least useful manner. There is no serious attempt to find a middle ground, just to widen the game between two points of view while ignoring any other possibility including that of compromise. I think what always bothers me the most in this approach is that it demonstrates intolerance to people as a role model. The news agencies that employ this style of news presentation aren’t really interested in journalism, they’re interested in ratings and figure that by presenting every important issue in a reality show format, they’ll get more viewers. There was a time that such debates were seriously presented and even though the differing sides still never agreed, there was at least a modicum of reasoned discussion and a trace of mutual respect. Not anymore. These boffos are just aiming to get the last word.

“That little ‘Breaking News’ banner is hackneyed and tired too,” Jerry continued sourly. “You used to only see those words when something truly world-shattering had happened. Maybe an important leader was assassinated or war had been declared. But that pulls in the viewers too, so they use it now to let us know a celebrity marriage is on the rocks or to glue us to the screen for what would otherwise be a story of only local interest.”

“You’ve only been on Treloi a short time,” Tomalo observed. “How did you know all that?”

“It’s a cyclic thing in the news business,” Jerry replied knowingly, “and it happens in the Terran Confederation too. In another decade or two someone will be successful with a more serious and in-depth format and suddenly all the other broadcasters will copy them slavishly. Then for a brief period you will see a lot of journalistic integrity, but don’t get too used to it. Little by little the circus clowns and carnival freaks will find their ways back in front of the cameras.”

Tomalo laughed, but asked, “What’s a carnival?”

“Tell you later,” Jerry replied as the commercials came to an end.

The Fourth member of the panel, Geralo Ki Tama was a councilor on the Pansilli City Council, which meant he was at least a Lieutenant Colonel. “What we have to remember,” he told the others sententiously, “is that we live in a time of changes. People always become nervous during such times. What were once certainties start to disappear, leaving us worried about life in general. When this happens it is only natural to seize on something or someone who symbolizes that change and uncertainty and to unthinkingly attack them.

“This hysteria concerning interspecies couples is that same sort of nonsense,” Geralo continued. “It will pass in time so long as we all keep our wits.”

“You wish!” Jerry shouted at the screen. “I thought you said he’d be on our side.”

“He’s obviously not on anyone’s side,” Lani agreed. “or maybe he’s planning to run for political

office again soon.”

“Or maybe he’s never really stopped,” Jerry remarked. “It sounds like he’s trying not to disagree with either side until he know how the public feels.” He flicked his hand at the screen as though trying to use the *thalu* to turn it off. “There’s never any magic around when you need it,” he grumbled.

Lani turned off the Vid screen and told him. “At least we’re still married on Earth. They can’t take that away from us.”

“That first fool, General Taomi Bi Taomi, is trying to,” Jerry reminded her.

“Ki Taomi,” she corrected him gently adding in a warm hug. Hugs were one of the few forms of intimacy Humans and Lano could share freely and easily and Lani had a weakness for the way Jerry smelled, “but I like the way you put it. Too bad it would get you challenged to a duel if you used it in public.”

“That would be one way to put him out of the way,” Jerry remarked, “but it’s too late to try it now. People are obviously already picking up sides. Oy!”

“What, dear?” Lani asked, concerned.

“Back in school I used to be one of the last guys left when playing pickup games,” Jerry recalled, “but maybe I’d better start boning up on Treloian political parties.”

“Tomalo, why don’t you explain that,” Lani suggested. “I’ve been off-planet for years.”

“Okay,” Tomallo agreed and took a deep breath. “General Taomi is the leader of the Cosonai Party which was originally founded by Cosonai Ki Wembo shortly before his assassination thirty years or so ago.”

“Who was this Cosonai?” Jerry asked, “a beloved Peegee?”

“A Peegee,” Tomallo laughed, “but hardly beloved. He served all of two weeks before being shot down during his first appearance in front of the Council of Generals. Three of the Generals shot him as he entered the Council chamber. They were arrested and executed, of course, but to this day generals are still allowed to go armed into a meeting of the Council.”

“I’m not sure if that’s a high sign of civilization or just the opposite,” Jerry observed, “but it does indicate how many enemies he had in there who didn’t shoot. So what sort of party is it?”

“A small one,” Tomalo replied. “I think they have five members on the Council. Their politics are archconservative in all the worst ways. Absolute intolerance for anything new or different, but willing to spend any money they can get their hands on to further their own goals. They operate by preying on people’s fear of the unknown and different. We’re living in more liberal and accepting times these days so they haven’t been very successful at it, however.”

“Until now, maybe,” Jerry remarked. “How about the other parties?”

“Well, the Conservationists are nominally in charge because they made a deal with the Liberals. The Peegee is Conservationist, of course. Their main platform is the ecological and sociological preservation of Treloi. I don’t know how they’ll view a mixed marriage although the Liberals ought to be with us.

After that there are a dozen or more other minor parties. There's even still one Falkonin party member left over from the purge year before last."

"We heard about that," Lani told him.

"I'll bet you did," Tomalo laughed. "Their corruption extended throughout the Trelendir. Ha! I wouldn't be surprised if they had agents on Earth, but that's still more members than the Treloian party has left. The junta they tried to replace the Peegee with left a bad taste in everyone's mouth. Most of the minor parties that are left have been splitting back and forth with the coalition government depending on the issue, so we really don't know what the Council of Generals will do."

"We need to make sure they know the populace is on our side," Jerry told him.

"Are they?" Lani asked.

"Sure hope so."

Twelve

Lilla swept Serafyma out of the house directly after breakfast on the pretext of showing her the sights in the small town. However, after having been up all night arguing with her parents, all Lilla wanted to do was sleep, so after buying a few sandwiches and something to drink from a market in town, they continued on to a quiet stream bank where Lilla and her school friends used to go in their free time.

"I couldn't help but hear what was going on, you know," Serafyma told Lilla.

"I was hoping you hadn't," Lilla admitted, leaning against a wide tree whose branches reached out over the stream. "That was so embarrassing!"

"I understand," Serafyma told her. "Look, I can go back to Pansilli if that will make it easier. I can sleep on the ship and maybe help Jerry and Lani with the arrangements."

"I don't want you to go," Lilla told her stubbornly.

"I don't want to leave you either," Serafyma replied, "but I think I'm causing you more pain just being here."

"No," Lilla shook her head.

"I don't blame you, Lilla," Serafyma continued, "but I'm causing trouble in your family. I know how important family is to you, but right now I'm the one threatening to tear it up."

"No," Lilla repeated.

"It's true," Serafyma insisted. "If I go back to the ship your parents will stop fighting with you."

"No, Sera," Lilla shook her head once again. "That's not true. They want me to renounce the Oath of Adoption and I won't do that. They, or at least my father, won't stop pressing me on that point, not if you go back. He'll see that as a sign of weakness. Dad is good at spotting weakness, but I'm not showing him any this time and you're the strongest person I know."

"I'm not that strong," Serafyma replied. "Sue is capable of bench pressing more than I can in the gym, for example."

"I didn't mean that sort of strength," Lilla told her. She put a hand over Serafyma's heart and added, "This sort."

"I'm not so sure of that," Serafyma sighed.

"I am," Lilla affirmed. "I know my Dad. He loves us, but he has to be the boss. The only way to deal with him when he acts that way is to be equally stubborn. Part of the problem is that I've never stood up to him before. I've always been the obedient daughter. Ralani is the rebel."

"And she uses passive resistance," Serafyma noted. "What's with the Goth look?"

"Goth?" Lilla wondered, but went on without waiting for an answer, "That's new. Last time I was home she was wearing garish colors and had her hair set to stick out at all angles using *athalu*. She has some talent with *thalirip*, but not the drive to pursue it, I fear."

"Could be your Dad convincing her not to, whether he knows it or not," Serafyma replied.

"Could be," Lilla remarked, starting to yawn. "*Thalua* schools are expensive and really are beyond our means."

"So she would need a scholarship?" Serafyma asked.

Lilla yawned deeply again, "Oh, Excuse me! Well, yes, and she's smart enough, but lately the motivation has gone into her rebellion. Do you mind if I nap?"

"No, go ahead," Serafyma laughed as Lilla used her lap for a pillow and promptly fell asleep, leaving Serafyma to ponder their conversation.

Lilla woke up two hours later when the local children got out of school and started showing up in the small park-like area. She and Lilla ate their picnic lunch while watching the kids who were about Ralani's age mostly, playing with a floating disk or studying together. Finally, the two women packed up and returned to Lilla's home.

Everything was quiet that night, and the next morning Lilla and Serafyma really did go out sight-seeing around the town. It was a pleasant enough day until they returned home.

“Lilla?” he father asked as they entered the house.

“I’m here,” Lilla reported, sticking her head into the kitchen.

“Come here and sign this,” he told her.

“What is it?” Lilla asked suspiciously.

“Annulment papers,” he replied. “I went to the court building this morning and spoke to the judge. Based on another case in Pansilli just yesterday, he believes interspecies adoptions have no legal validity. All you have to do is sign them and you’re free of the human.”

“What?” Lilla asked coldly. “We’ve been through this. Sera is my sister and that’s that! I don’t care what some fusty old judge thinks. I know what’s right and you should too, since you’re the one who taught me.”

“Lilla, I am your father and I’m telling you to sign this,” he repeated.

Lilla looked disdainfully at the short stack of pages and made a flicking gesture with her hand. It wasn’t her intention to cast *athalu*. She never even suspected she had more than an average talent at *thalirip*, but as she did so the papers on the table suddenly shredded themselves into thousands of tiny pieces that flew in every direction, falling to the floor and counters like confetti. “Sign what?” she asked several heartbeats later.

Lerano Ki Lasai just stared at his elder daughter in shock. Gradually, he broke eye-contact and looked around the room where the last of the paper shreds were just settling.

“Don’t bother getting those printed up again,” Lilla told him angrily, “Next time I could miss my target.” She let loose a short, frustrated scream and stomped out of the kitchen directly into Serafyma who had been watching quietly from the doorway.

“Interesting demonstration,” Serafyma noted, once she had dragged Lilla back to her room where she could calm down. “I didn’t know you could do that.”

“Neither did I,” Lilla admitted. “This is terrible!”

“Why?” Serafyma asked.

“I could have hurt him. I could have hurt myself,” Lilla explained. “*Athalua* without training is dangerous to herself and everyone around her... or him. I didn’t realize I had the talent, but I do know that now that it has woken up inside me, I am going to need training or risk harming everyone in my vicinity anytime I lose my temper.”

“Eesai doesn’t take lessons,” Serafyma pointed out, “and Malana said she had the talent if she cared to pursue it.”

“Malana gave Eesai some training,” Lilla explained. “The most dangerous time is when the talent awakes. Malana’s training eased Eesai’s talent into wakefulness, but mine just exploded out of me. That’s different. I could be very powerful, but I need the training that will allow me to control myself.”

“And you said those lessons are expensive?” Serafyma asked thoughtfully.

“Very!” Lilla confirmed. “I need to stay calm.”

“Maybe you should take a nap,” Serafyma suggested. “Meanwhile I want to find out what this other case was your Dad was talking about. I have a bad feeling about it.”

“You think it might have been about Lani and Jerry?” Lilla asked.

“Who else?”

Thirteen

Tomalo’s organizational skills, and those of his friends, were nothing short of magic as far as Jerry and Lani were concerned. When they showed up at the Court House for their appeal, the area was filled with students wearing shirts or pins emblazoned with the words, “I’m Terralano!” on them. There were also numerous banners and placards bearing the same slogan. The crowd cheered as Jerry and Lani arrived and two young Lano women rushed up to press “I’m Terralano!” pins into the couple’s clothing.

Anea Di Tolea met them at the courthouse doorway and advised, “You probably want to take those pins off before the entering the courtroom.”

“Why?” Jerry asked. “You said we weren’t going to win tonight anyway. May as well make a statement that will lead into the class-action suit.”

“Hmm,” Anea considered. “I was planning to use the Terralano concept as the basis of that case. You’re right. Are there any more of those pins around? I might as well have one too.”

“Unless you want one of the shirts,” Lani suggested whimsically. Jerry chuckled. Lani was not normally given to whimsy. She was a fairly serious-minded La, but Jerry’s sense of humor had been starting to rub off and under adversity it showed.

“Actually, I do, but such informal attire would be more than inappropriate, it could get me thrown out of court,” Anea admitted. “The judge can do that if I go too far, but pins of this sort are worn all the time. Admittedly the attorneys who wear them are generally considered a bit show-offish, but by the time this is over, I’ll have been called a lot worse. Have the media shown up yet?”

“I saw three mobile studios setting up as we arrived,” Jerry remarked.

“Only three?” Anea asked. “We’re not being taken seriously enough yet. I called all fifteen with local

news desks. Well, the missing twelve will be hitting their heads on those desks when they realize what they missed.”

“Especially after General Taomi’s announcement this afternoon,” Lani added. “What does that do for our case, Anea?”

“Quite a lot, actually,” Anea smiled. “I couldn’t have asked for more even if I thought I could have tricked him into jumping the gun that way. He should have waited until tomorrow morning, but there’s a fanatic for you. I wonder how he found out about your two, though.”

“Probably from our student friends,” Jerry speculated. “While we seem to have tapped into a culturally liberal enthusiasm that’s currently in vogue on the campus, I’m sure there are more reactionary sorts running around the university as well. Someone who disagrees with us told someone else and since rumor spreads faster than the speed of light...” he trailed off.

“Yes, that’s probably it,” Anea agreed. “Well, whoever it was, they did us a big favor. Had General Taomi kept his bigoted mouth shut, we would have had a lot more work ahead just getting our class authorized. Now that he has proposed a Constitutional amendment it will be a simple matter to establish the class. In fact if we weren’t doing it, someone else in the Council of Generals would have had to, since hearings on changes to the Treloian Constitution are handled in an adversarial format; Pros versus Cons, just like in a trial. This will automatically give us allies within the Council itself, something that might not have happened for a few years had this gone the normal way of such trials. Well, let me cadge a pin and then we had better not keep the judge waiting.”

The judge, instead, kept them waiting while she concluded another appeals case just ahead of them on the docket. Finally Judge Balani Di Hosai called the next case. “The court will now hear case 14N-9015 Ki Isaacs and Di Ressia versus the City and County of Pansillia,” she announced formally. “Opening arguments may be submitted in writing at this time.”

“Pleasing Your Honor,” Anea interrupted, “but I would prefer to make my statement into the record verbally.”

“You may if you wish, Counselor,” Judge Balani replied calmly, “but that won’t make a lot of difference since we will not be moving on to testimony or anything else this evening.”

“That is somewhat unusual, Your Honor,” Anea observed.

“So is this case, Counselor,” Judge Balani replied, “and with the currently pending Constitutional amendment being considered by the Council of Generals, anything I might decide would be quickly reversed or at least rendered a waste of time on its passage or rejection. I see no reason to spend all night here only to have the matter settled by the Generals in the morning.”

“The Constitution cannot be amended that rapidly,” Anea asserted.

“Then I shall pend this case until that matter is decided,” Judge Balani replied. “Do you still desire to make a verbal statement?”

Anea, glanced briefly into the courtroom gallery, spotting “I’m Terralano!” shirts and pins everywhere. “I do, Your Honor.”

“Proceed then,” the judge instructed.

Anea knew she was playing to the crowd that evening, and to the world of Treloi via the few news reporters who had chosen to show up, so she launched into a long and impassioned statement that had the people in the gallery breaking out into applause several times until the judge threatened to have the gallery cleared if they could not contain themselves and act in a “manner befitting the dignity of the court.”

Finally when the opening statement was over, the Counsel for Pansilli merely handed a copy of his statement to the judge and the case was officially continued until after the amendment could be voted on.

“Is that good news or bad?” Jerry asked.

“That depends on what happens in the Council of Generals,” Anea sighed. “Judge Balani has effectively blocked us from filing that class-action because our initial appeal is still officially pending. If the amendment is voted down then we’ll probably win the case on the spot. If it is ratified though, the appeal will be dismissed without further hearing and from what I’ve seen of the amendment in its current form you two will be forced to publically renounce your Terran marriage or pay a substantial fine.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Jerry protested.

“Of course it’s ridiculous,” Anea agreed, “but it will also be the law. What’s worse is, if you refuse to annul your marriage, you will be subject to increasingly heavier fines and jail terms every time you attempt to land on a world of the Trelendir. What bothers me almost as much is that we don’t have any say within the Council of Generals.”

“Maybe I can talk to the Presiding General,” Jerry wondered.

“He’s a busy man and not likely to take your call,” Anea warned him.

“But he might,” Jerry told her, “I’m a close friend of his mother so there’s a good chance he’ll give me a few minutes out of love and courtesy to her. Oh, hey! I just remembered, Malana sent a package to him on Meriwether II. I wonder if it’s been delivered yet. That would get me in quickly, wouldn’t it?”

“Could be,” Anea agreed.

“I’d better go to the ship right now and check that out,” Jerry decided.

“Uh uh,” Anea stopped him. “First we have a press conference. Then you can inventory your ship.”

“Aw, Mom!” Jerry joked, “Wouldn’t you rather I cleaned up my room?”

“Press conference first,” Anea decided, “or the mess on your floor will be the last thing on our minds.”

The press conference was brief. Anea made a statement with the student protestors cheering and booing at the appropriate times. As soon as it became apparent that the ideal venue for their protest had moved however, the various leaders started making plans for the next day. “We’ll probably be up all night making phone calls to other schools all over the planet,” Tomalo told Lani and Jerry as they rushed to Anea’s waiting car.

“Good,” Jerry commended him. “If he’s smart, the Peegee will see me tonight, but somehow I suspect he’ll put me off until your friends are picketing his office.” He helped Lani in through the door

before noticing Tomala had started back toward the other students. “You’re not coming with us?”

“Told you,” Tomalo laughed. “I’ll be up all night calling friends and making contacts. See you in the morning, or afternoon or whenever!”

“And there I thought I’d be the only one missing sleep tonight,” Jerry remarked.

“No,” Anea replied, “I doubt any of us will be sleeping. After I drop you off I have a number of calls to make, letters to write and probably a dozen interviews to give. The various news organizations who snubbed us this evening will be at my door with a battering ram by morning.”

“Any chance they’ll be camped out on Lani’s lawn?” Jerry asked.

“Oh my, yes!” Anea replied. “Do you have security?”

“I’ll make sure we have,” Lani promised.

“This all seems somehow familiar,” Jerry shook his head. “Earth went crazy when we landed with Malana and Eesai on board. Now Treloi is doing pretty much the same. At least you don’t have religious fanatics frothing at the mouth to get involved.”

“Not yet,” Anea replied. “They may well poke their feet in before this is over, though. General Taomi likes to play up to that sort.”

The ride to the spaceport seemed to take forever, but they finally arrived. “You sure you don’t want me to wait?” Anea offered.

“I have a few calls to make too,” Jerry replied. “God only knows how long that will take me. Don’t worry we’ll keep you fully up to date.”

“You’d better,” Anea laughed. “I charge double when I miss the fun stuff.”

Fourteen

Knock, knock!

Serafyma heard a soft rapping on the guest bedroom door. Before she could react the door opened and Ralani Di Rессia slipped into the room. “May I come in?” she asked shyly.

“You’re here,” Serafyma shrugged and smiled at the reclusive teen. “So what can I help you with?”

“What’s it like on Earth?” Ralani asked.

“Not all that different from Treloi, that I can see,” Serafyma answered. “The people, plants and animals look different, but for all that, I often have to look closely to see the differences. Of course, I’ve only seen a small sample of Treloi so far, and I haven’t seen everything on Earth either.”

“What have you seen?” Ralani asked.

“Well, I grew up in a city called Kiev,” Serafyma told her. “It is in a region called Ukraine.”

“Is it a big city?” Ralani asked.

“Pretty big, yes,” Serafyma replied. “As of the last census some four million people live there. Do you like snow?”

“Oh yes,” Ralani smiled. Serafyma was startled. It was the first time she had seen Ralani smile. It did wonders for the girl’s face, “I love when there’s a heavy coating that makes everything look so pretty.”

“What do you consider a heavy coating?” Serafyma asked.

“Maybe two centimeters,” Ralani replied.

“We get a lot more snow than that,” Serafyma told her, “and there’s always some on the ground for half the year. Believe me you can get really tired of the color white by the time spring comes around.”

“Sounds nice,” Ralani opined.

“Wait until you’ve had to live through a winter like that for yourself,” Serafyma laughed. “But it’s home to me.”

“You took Lilla there?” Ralani asked.

“It was summer at the time so it was fairly warm, but yes, I did,” Serafyma told her. Then she went on to discuss other aspects of Kiev, from the flag with the Archangel Michael on it to the Dnieper River to her favorite sushi bar on Shevchenko Boulevard. They chatted like that for over an hour before Ralani finally got to the matter she had really come to see Serafyma about.

Suddenly Ralani went silent and just stared at Serafyma for a long moment. As that moment passed however, tears began rolling down Ralani’s face. A few seconds later she was crying noisily. Not knowing what else to do, Serafyma took the girl in her arms and made comforting noises.

“Dad doesn’t like you,” Ralani told Serafyma between tears. “He wants you to go away.”

“Yeah, I got that impression,” Serafyma nodded.

“I don’t think I’m supposed to like you either,” Ralani continued uncertainly.

“That’s a decision you have to make for yourself, you know.”

"I don't want you leave, Sera!" Ralani started crying all over again.

"Then I guess I'll have to stay and keep coming back whenever I'm on Treloi," Serafyma told her. "Because I'd sure hate to lose a little sister like you."

"Even if you have to fight the rest of the family?" Ralani asked.

Serafyma laughed. "Sometimes families fight. I'll just have to win you all over one at a time. " Ralani broke gently free of Serafyma's embrace to look deeply into the larger woman's eyes and Serafyma looked back. "You know, I think Lilla is wrong. You look good with black hair."

"I do?" Ralani asked. "I dye it."

"I was fairly sure you did," Serafyma chuckled, "but you don't take care of it. You wear it all straight and unshaped. Straight hair is okay, but you could still use a bit of styling and, dear, when was the last time you washed it?"

"The dye comes out when I do that," Ralani confessed.

"Eww," Serafyma remarked, wondering how long the girl went between washings.. "Can't you get a permanent dye?"

"I've never heard of any," Ralani replied.

"Well, that sort of makes sense," Serafyma noted. "There aren't many Lano who dye their hair, are there?"

"It's something kids my age are doing," Ralani told her. "Adults aren't all that interested."

"Well, if you really want black hair, I think there may be some permanent dye on board Meriwether II," Serafyma offered. "I'll ask Sue. Don't tell anyone, but I think she touches up her color. We can go to the ship tomorrow if you like and check out the stores. And I promise to send you more after my next trip to Earth. Or would you like an assortment? You don't want to over-bleach or color your hair. You could damage it badly."

"I've tried all sorts of colors," Ralani told her. "Black's okay, unless I could get something in your color."

"Oh? You like red hair?" Serafyma asked.

"Is that red?" Ralani asked. "It's not very bright."

"It's what we call red, or one color we call red. Some women have red hair that looks sort of orangey, but mine is more of a mix of red and light brown. "I can get you some dye similar to this. What's your natural color? Is it light brown, like Lilla's? Ralani nodded. "That should be easy then. Look, why don't you wash your hair and then I'll help you cut and style it."

"I like it long," Ralani protested.

"So I'll cut it long," Serafyma laughed.

An hour later, Shaeri Di Gomi, looking for Ralani, opened Serafyma's door quietly to discover Serafyma playing a game with Ralani. The girl's hair was now a brownish gray and Shaeri barely recognized her daughter. Not only was her hair quite different and far more becoming, but Ralani was laughing and holding herself a bit straighter. She backed quietly out of the room and bumped into Lilla.

"Looking for something, Mom?" Lilla asked.

"Your sister is in there with Serafyma," Shaeri told her.

"Sera won't hurt her, Mother," Lilla told her tartly.

"Not what I meant," Shaeri told her hastily. "I think Sera is good for Ralani. She's laughing and smiling and playing a game. Anything is better than just sitting and watching Vid."

"Sera's good people," Lilla replied. "Of course she would be good for Ralani."

"Well, anyone who can reach your sister and get her to do something other than sulk can't be all bad," Shaeri admitted. "I think she tried to wash that awful black stuff out of her hair too. It's still a bit gray, but..."

"It takes several washings to get it all out," Lilla told her. "Mind you it might just be that Sera is going to give her a more permanent black from the ship. Humans dye their hair all the time."

"Does Sera?" Shaeri asked.

"I'm pretty sure that's her natural color," Lilla replied. "Why?"

"Actually, I kind of like it," Shaeri admitted.

"You want some dye that color?" Lilla asked, slightly amazed.

"No," Shaeri said a little too quickly. "I couldn't."

"So will you help convince Dad to change his stubborn mind?" Lilla asked.

"I can try," Shaeri told her.

Fifteen

“You have some impressive friends, Mister Isaacs,” Presiding General Tauko Ki Masai told him. “I suppose I could have resisted Ambassador Gupta’s demands and Commodore Alano’s requests, but frankly the thought of being spanked by my mother when she got back was enough to grant you this appointment.”

“I appreciate you seeing us, sir,” Jerry replied, after a quick covert wink to Lani, “especially at this time of night.”

“General Taomi is a mad kahcht. He’ll strike at anyone and anything that tries to stop him,” Tauko explained. “We’ll be voting on his damned amendment as early as tomorrow afternoon unless I can find a way to block it. If you’re going to talk to me about it while it might still do some good, we only have between now and breakfast.”

“You think the amendment is going to pass?” Jerry asked.

“I honestly do not know which way it is going to go,” Tauko told him tiredly. “The issue is tearing my coalition apart. The Liberals are unified against it, but the Conservationists are divided.”

“It’s not just your generals who are picking up sides, however,” Lani told him. “Did you notice these pins we’re wearing?”

“I’m Terralano!” the Peegee read. “I noticed and was planning to ask about that.”

“It’s a movement from the college and university campuses,” Jerry explained. “Ever since the Treaty of Rendezvous was signed, a large number of the students have been looking forward to the marvels of a shared universe. They coined the term Terralano to describe humans and Lano living and working together and you’ll be seeing a lot of them around here tomorrow morning from what I hear.”

“You’re just full of good news, aren’t you?” Tauko remarked sourly. “So not only do I have Taomi to deal with, but now I hear a few dozen college students will be walking around the complex.”

“Try a few hundred,” Jerry suggested. “That’s how many turned out for the appeal this evening and right now they’re all calling their friends. I suspect ‘I’m Terralano’ is going to be the most repeated phrase around here tomorrow.”

“Terrific,” Tauko sighed.

“You’re the Peegee,” Jerry pointed out. “Isn’t there something you can do to delay the vote? I’m fairly sure that once the student protests get noticed we’ll see a shift in attitudes in Lano of all ages.”

“I preside, Mister Isaacs,” Tauko replied. “I can veto a bill I don’t like and also cast the deciding vote on the odd occasion there is a tie in the Council. Other than that, I have to work through persuasion when it comes to legislative matters.”

“Does the Council always vote on such substantive matters without a thorough debate?” Jerry asked.

“The debate will be thorough, by our definition,” Tauko told him.

“What about testimony from individuals with expert legal opinions, sociological opinions, or who are potentially affected by the change?” Jerry asked.

“Now that’s not a bad idea,” Tauko agreed. “Are you sure you’re up to a being interrogated by the Council? It can be an exhausting experience.”

“We can take it if we must,” Jerry replied. “You can also interview Captains Ho and Eesai as well as the rest of our crew.”

“Yes!” Lani agreed. “Lilla and Serafyma took the Oath of Adoption. Taomi’s wording may affect them as well.”

“Good idea. Do you know where everyone is?”

“Some are staying on the ship,” Jerry replied. “Lilla and Sera went to meet Lilla’s family, and Eesai took Sue out to her folks’ ranch by the Mondir Desert.”

“I guess I have some calls to make,” Tauko sighed. “Next time please try to see me during business hours when my aides are on hand.”

The Chamber of Officers was a large building that stood on a hill a mile away from the Presiding General’s House. The two edifices faced each other with a long oval pond between them. Both had been faced with bright white stone and their mutual reflections could be viewed from each of the buildings. The Peegee’s House, however was surrounded by other official government offices while the Chamber of Officers was isolated from the rest of Pansilli by a series of monument-filled parks and a wide circular road. The entire area around the Chamber, that next morning, was filled with thousands of protestors, all wearing “I’m Terralano!” pins and shirts. Many were carrying placards and banners, but all were shouting their slogan, “I’m Terralano!”

Jerry and Lani arrived just behind General Taomi, who they could hear shouting things like “What is all this nonsense?” and “Go home you idiots!” and the ever classic, “I’m doing this for your good.” When cheers erupted for Jerry and Lani he turned around to see what had happened and scowled when he saw hundreds of college students gathered around the couple for autographs, although the distraction they caused allowed him to make it inside the Chamber building without further trouble. Jerry, on the other hand, nearly lost the briefcase he was carrying several times in the crush of admirers.

As Jerry and Lani finally entered the Chamber Building themselves, they were met by several crew members from Meriwether II in the lobby. “Over here,” they heard ship’s doctor, Achmed MacGregor, calling them. “I just can’t let you two out of my sight, can I?” he asked.

“You know us,” Jerry laughed. “We love the limelight. Where do we go now?”

“The Council of Generals has a room set aside for witnesses,” Achmed told him. “Evidently they spend a lot of their time in hearings of one form or another.”

“Why not?” Jerry shrugged. “Our government does. It does kind of beg the question why I had to be the one to suggest this, however.”

“Wouldn’t know,” Achmed told him with a shrug. “Go on into the waiting room. You two are the stars of this show, after all. I’m going to stay out here and direct others.”

Jerry nodded and Lani steered him out of the lobby into a much quieter room filled with chairs, a large table and a Vid screen on the wall. Several other crew members were already seated watching the screen which, so far, only showed the actual Chamber of Officers starting to fill up.

“Anyone heard from Eesai and the captain yet?” Jerry asked them.

“They went camping in the desert,” one of the assistant engineers replied. “They won’t be in until sometime tomorrow.”

“Well, this is better!” they heard Serafyma’s voice from the doorway. “Jerry, Lani? What’s going on?”

Serafyma entered with Lilla and Ralani whose hair had been dyed to match Serafyma’s. Ralani was also now dressed in a brand new pair of jeans and a Hawaiian print shirt. To Lilla’s eyes, the hair and clothing had transformed her sister amazingly.

“We were getting lonely,” Jerry joked, “so we decided on a class reunion.” Only Ralani laughed at that, Serafyma and Lilla just rolled their eyes, having experienced Jerry’s sense of humor too often. “And who is this young lady?” he asked, indicating Ralani. “New crew woman?”

“Could I?” Ralani asked eagerly.

“Not until after college and compulsory service,” Lilla reminded her. “Jerry, Lani, Ralani is my little sister. We came into town to give her a makeover and got swept up in all this. You don’t think she’ll have to testify, do you?” she asked after being brought up to date.

“Hey!” Ralani protested. “I want to be Terralano too!”

“According to that pin on your chest,” Jerry remarked, “you already are.”

Just then the Council of Generals was called to order on the screen and they all turned to watch the proceedings. Nothing seemed to happen for a few minutes but Lilla explained, “They’re probably waiting for the spectator gallery to fill up. Shouldn’t take too long with that crowd out there.”

“Always nice to play to a packed house,” Jerry laughed.

Once that was taken care of Tauko stood up and announced, “The Chair recognizes General Taomi Ki Taomi.”

“Sir,” Taomi, replied with a formal salute to the Presiding General, “I would like to call the question.”

“I would too, General,” Tauko replied, “but new evidence has come to light over night and I am using executive privilege to put the matter on hold until we can interview some experts on Terran-Lano coexistence.”

“That’s Terralano!” a shout came from the gallery. Several others muttered agreement.

“The members of the gallery will please remember they are here as guests of the Council,” Tauko rebuked them gently, “and should sit quietly without interrupting the business of the Council. Thank you. However, yes, we are to sift through evidence presented by Terralano experts.”

“What sort of evidence?” Taomi demanded. “And how dare you use that word in this chamber?”

“Ah. I was unaware that ‘Terralano’ was an obscenity,” Tauko retorted.

“It is not, sir,” Taomi replied, “but to use it betrays your own bias in the matter.”

“You are not required to be neutral in any debate, General,” Tauko replied. “Why should I? I know I have generally allowed the Council to argue matters back and forth without injecting my own opinion, but it’s never been a secret that I have one and in this case, I think it’s important to know where we all stand. I suspect my mother Malana Di Masai would call herself Terralano if she was here right now; something you should keep in mind, considering you proposed her for my job yourself little more than a year ago.”

“Who was it that said a year is a long time in politics, sir?” Taomi asked.

“Haven’t the foggiest, General,” Tauko shot back.

“I think it was Groucho Marx,” Jerry remarked as he watched the screen. This time most of the room laughed at his joke, although Ralani wanted to know who Groucho Marx was.

“And who are these so-called experts?” Taomi demanded.

“Why the crew of Meriwether II, of course,” Tauko replied, “although I have invited several sociologists and psychologists in as well.”

“Then I respectfully withdraw my call,” General Taomi remarked and sat back down.

“Is there any further business before we invite our guests into the Chamber?” Tauko asked. There was. There almost always was as several Generals and Admirals had minor bits of business, none of which were related to the Terralano matter, to take care of. Tauko tolerated this because officially he would have to close the current session and reconvene as an investigative body before the witnesses could be questioned.

Finally, after a long hour, the crew of Meriwether was invited into the Chamber and everyone filed out of the waiting room to seats that had been arranged in front of most of the generals and admirals. “You, young lady,” Tauko remarked, spotting Ralani sitting happily between Serafyma and Lilla, “seem a little young to be working on a starship.”

“I am, sir,” Ralani replied, nodding her head, “but I’m Terralano too, you know.” She didn’t say it with complete certainty, but could not help but smile when there was scattered applause from the balcony.

“I suppose you must be,” Tauko admitted dryly, ignoring the now fading noise from the spectators. “Your name, young Terralano?”

“Ralani Di Lasai, sir,” she replied feeling a little more sure of herself. “My sisters are Serafyma Ivanoff and Lilla Di Lasai, both crew on Meriwether II, uh, sir.”

“Your sisters, you say?” Tauko asked.

“Yes, sir,” Ralani replied. “They took the Oath of Adoption over a year ago.”

“Ah yes,” Tauko noted, sorting through some papers, “I believe I heard of that. So how has that been working out?”

“Sir?” Ralani asked.

“Have there been any problems in the household?” Tauko asked her.

“Well, my parents were shocked to meet Serafyma a few days ago, but Mom’s come around now. Dad’s still sounding like General Taomi though,” Ralani replied, “all gruff and disapproving.” There were scattered chuckles throughout the chamber. “But, you see, it’s not disapproval for any real reason. It’s not like she dropped a pot on his head or anything.”

“Sera, you’re improving?” Jerry whispered to Serafyma. There had not been anyone on Meriwether I who had not been injured at least once by Serafyma’s eager clumsiness. Serafyma, reached out and hit Jerry lightly on the arm for the remark, but otherwise said nothing.

“It’s just ‘cause she looks different,” Ralani concluded. “That’s all.”

“Young lady,” Taomi addressed her gruffly next, “I suppose you fell in love with her on first sight.”

“I couldn’t have cared less about Sera on first sight, General,” Ralani replied, refusing to show nervousness in front of the growling La. Her father had tried the same tactic on her, apathy had gotten her through then, but she had changed in the last day and realized she had the right to her own opinions. “When she and Lilla came into the house I was more interested in what was on Vid. Look, I was a wreck. You seen... uh... have you seen the kids all dressed in black? The news calls them ‘Apathetes.’ I was one of them. Life was meaningless, I thought, hopeless. Just something you had to suffer through before you died.”

“If that was your attitude, why didn’t you kill yourself?” Taomi asked.

“General, do you have any notion what the word ‘apathy’ means?” Ralani asked acidly in reply. “Look it up. The point is you just don’t care. Not about life and not about death, but you just keep going on because you don’t care enough to bother one way or the other. I thought you had to be smart to be a general.”

The chamber erupted in laughter and Tauko had to gavel them back to order, while Taomi sputtered in indignation. “Young lady,” Tauko admonished her gently before Taomi could say something far harsher. “We prefer to keep up a certain level of cordiality in this Chamber. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Ralani replied. “I’m sorry, General. And that’s something I probably wouldn’t have said a couple of days ago. I would not have cared what you said or thought. That’s different now.”

“And what great *thalu* did this human cast that made you change your ways?” Taomi asked her sarcastically.

“She offered her love, General,” Ralani replied softly but clearly. “That’s all. No conditions, no demands. She just gave me love like any other member of the family might and she accepted me as I was. Well, she did cut my hair and help me get it to this color, but that was because I wanted her to.”

“And your father?” Taomi asked.

“My Dad has a problem he has to work though, General. It might take him a little longer than the rest of the family, but he’ll catch up to us eventually,” Ralani told him confidently. “I love my father even if we don’t agree on much of anything, but I know he isn’t stupid, just stubborn.”

Taomi glared at the teenager for a few moments then growled, “No further questions.”

Other officers questioned Ralani on a number of subjects, including the “Apathetes” and Ralani knew from Vidcasts that some of their children were the same way she had been. She answered their questions but couldn’t offer a “cure” for apathy. She could only explain how she had come out of it. “And it doesn’t go away all at once either, sirs and madams,” Ralani told them all. “I’m much happier than I was a few days ago, but apathy is something that once it gets into you keeps trying to drag you down. I can still feel it in the back of my mind. It wants to get out again. I just don’t want to let it. I think maybe everyone has a little apathy bug in them deep down, but we all need to find our own way out of it. Me, I’m going to start living again. Check with me again in a year or two and we’ll see if that’s worked out.”

“Thank you for coming here today, Ralani,” Tauko told her finally. “You weren’t on our witness list, but I’m sure we all appreciate your testimony. It is a bit past time for lunch, May I suggest we reconvene in, say, two hours? May I have a motion to that effect?”

Sixteen

Sue and Eesai were making their way out of the Mondir when Eesai’s mount suddenly bellowed and started limping so heavily that Eesai was nearly thrown from the beast’s back. “Whoa, big fella!” she attempted to calm him with partial success. Sue slowed her own mount down and turned back to see what was wrong. “I’m not sure, but I think he twisted his leg,” Eesai explained over the wails and bellows of the kahcht.

“He’s barely using that leg,” Sue noticed.

“Yeah,” Eesai nodded. “It’s fairly noticeable from up here.” She slid down to the ground and started inspecting the kahcht’s leg. “Ouch!” she exclaimed a few minutes later. “He picked up a thorn in his foot. Hope it’s not a fierast thorn. Could you hand me the pliers?”

“What’s fierast?” Sue asked giving her a pair of pliers..

“Poison,” Eesai explained. She pulled out an inch-long thorn from the kahcht’s foot. “Yep, fierast. Too bad. Oh don’t look like that! It won’t kill the poor beast, but he isn’t going to be happy with the world for some time in a little while. It’s going to slow us down. Actually it’s going to stop us unless we call for help.”

“We promised to rush back to Pansilli,” Sue pointed out. “Can you call for help out here?”

"I'll call my folks," Eesai told her. "They'll send a couple hands out to find us. Good thing we're on a regular trail." She made the call then reported. "It will be a couple of hours. Let's put up the tent. The kahchts might thrive in this heat but right now I would kill for large frozen lemonade."

"Do you have those on Treloi?" Sue asked.

"I know a nice shop by a beach," Eesai told her, "several dozen light years off in that direction. But we have warm water that tastes like the inside of an old canteen."

"You're quite a saleswoman," Sue told her sourly, unloading the tent. "Let's set this up next to that rock. If our rescue is a bit late that should be the shady side by then."

"The tent auto-cools during the day just like it heats at night," Eesai told her, "but that looks as good a place as any."

"So did you use to have to be rescued out here a lot?" Sue asked.

"Never," Eesai replied, "but Dad talked a lot about what to do if something happened. That's why we carried in twice as much water as we needed and we have the temperature regulating tent. "We're a bit short on food since you can't eat off the land, but actually, we've never been more than a couple of hours from home."

"Took us longer to ride out than that," Sue remarked.

"Yeah, but we're flying out," Eesai told her.

"The jumper?" Sue asked.

"Sadly, no," Eesai shook her head. "The jumper needs a bit of a runway, the ground here isn't smooth enough."

"More magic?" Sue asked suspiciously.

"*Thalirip*," Eesai corrected her, "and you could say that. Our entire technology is based on it, after all. The vehicle is sort of like a helicopter and the ranch has one. Well, I guess it is a helicopter, but we call it a floater."

"A helicopter, how ordinary," Sue laughed.

"Would you like me to help you grow wings?" Eesai countered.

"Umm, better not," Sue replied, struggling to keep a straight face. "I'd have trouble getting them inside my spacesuit."

"You would have trouble getting them inside the house," Eesai countered. "Do you have any idea how large those wings would have to be to lift you? The muscles to power them alone would make it hard to get through the door."

"There's something the comic book artists never take into account," Sue laughed. "Did the Peegee say why he wanted us?"

“He didn’t say,” Eesai told her. “He said he couldn’t speak over the line because it was unsecured. Must be something important, though if it’s so hush-hush.”

“It could just be good, old-fashioned paranoia,” Sue pointed out.

“There’s a possibility,” Eesai agreed. “Oh hey! There’s a plant I didn’t find last night. Get your food tester out.” She walked a few yards and knelt beside a few golden grass-like leaves. Digging in the desert floor with her knife she soon was able to pull a large root up and out of the dirt.

“I don’t know how you even spotted that,” Sue remarked as she took a sample for the tester. “Well, it’s not poisonous to me, but not a lot of nutrition to it. Probably high in fiber, though.”

“Good enough,” Eesai told her. “It’s a close relative to the one you liked last night. It should keep us occupied for an hour or two.”

The kahcht Eesai had removed the thorn from began to bellow. “We should help the poor thing,” Sue remarked.

“No need,” Eesai told her calmly. “Watch.”

The injured animal continued to make pained noises, but the other one walked over and stood next to it, making what sounded like comforting noises. The injured one lay down on the ground and the other laid down with it, rubbing its head and neck against that of the hurt animal. After a few minutes, the two animals were making crooning noises in unison and continued to do so until the floater arrived.

“That was the weirdest thing, I’ve seen in a long while,” Sue remarked. “Do a lot of your animals help each other that way?”

“No, just the kahchts,” Eesai replied. “We think it’s a sort of empathy but even the *topthalua* aren’t in agreement about it.

Half an hour later they were packing their bags, while Eesai’s mother prepared a meal for them to eat in the car, but they had two delays before leaving. First, Sue insisted on taking a shower. Then after both had cleaned up from the desert, they stood in front of Eesai’s parent and some of the ranch hands and formally adopted each other as sisters. Immediately after that, they boarded the jumper and headed back to Pansilli.

“Feeling a bit rushed?” Sue asked Eesai.

“A bit,” Eesai admitted. “I’d actually hoped we would have a chance to hold a party to celebrate our oath.”

“We will,” Sue promised. “We’ll just have to do it in Pansilli, I guess.

“Hey, one good thing is coming from that thorn,” Eesai pointed out. “We’ll get into Pansilli several hours earlier than planned. We should be there by midnight.”

“Great,” Sue remarked. “Wake me up around dinner time.”

“What makes you think I’m staying awake?” Eesai asked.

Seventeen

Ralani's impromptu testimony in front of the Council of Generals earned her instant stardom with the media. Lilla and Serafyma instantly fell into the role of personal security on the teen's behalf, keeping the reporters at bay and telling them to contact Meriwether, Inc. if they wanted to schedule an interview. A few reporters weren't smart enough to take that for an answer and when they pressed closer, Serafyma advised them to "Wait for her book."

"She's writing a book?" one of the reporters asked.

"Isn't everybody?" Serafyma shot back.

"Sera," Ralani protested once they found some relative privacy in a restaurant, "I'm not writing a book."

"Maybe you should," Serafyma replied. "A teenager's view of the Terralano experience. It might be very popular."

"I've never written anything that long," Ralani admitted.

"No first-time writer has until they do," Serafyma told her. "Don't worry, you don't have to write a book."

"It sounds interesting, though," Ralani told her. "How does one start?"

"I don't know," Serafyma laughed. "I've never written a book either."

"Fiction or Non?" Jerry asked as he and Lani joined them.

"Autobiography," Serafyma told him.

"Ah. Start with an outline," he advised.

"I hate making outlines," Ralani wrinkled her nose.

"Me too," Jerry agreed. "But you need to figure out what you want to say and in what order. You can make it linear – start at the beginning and work your way up, or you could skip back and forth over your life. One thing you could do is start with this morning and then go back to various points in your life. You know, describe the court room and what happened up to the point Tauko started talking to you, then go back to your earliest memories. Next you can go over Tauko's questions and maybe discuss how you felt when Lilla went to space. Then General Taomi's questions, and then maybe Lilla's first return home, or maybe something that happened in school. The thing is as you get later into the testimony, you get closer to the present. Follow me?"

"I guess," Ralani nodded.

"I think you were marvelous this morning," Lani told her.

"I just hope Dad wasn't watching it," Ralani replied. "I'm going to be in so much trouble, I think. We were just supposed to be coming to the ship to fix my hair."

"Looks fine to me," Lani commented.

"You didn't see it yesterday," Ralani laughed. "Anyway we told Mom and Dad we were going to finish getting the black dye out and maybe see about finding something new to wear."

"Last night when we told them, that was the plan," Lilla pointed out.

"Yeah, but it wasn't when we left just before dawn," Ralani replied. "I wasn't supposed to be testifying either, but who would remember that now?"

"I wouldn't worry about that," Jerry laughed. "Your Dad may try to ground you, but I'll bet all the kids at school will be jockeying up to be your friends."

"Some of those kids are why I went Apathete," Ralani replied. "So who's up next this afternoon?"

"Me," Jerry replied. "You sort of stole my thunder this morning, but that's okay. I enjoyed the show and it will make my little bombshell all the more effective."

"Why?" Serafyma asked. "What are you going to do?"

"Watch and be amazed!" Jerry chuckled.

Getting back into the Chamber of Officers turned out to be a challenge. Not only were there representatives from the entire Media of Pansilli in attendance, but from all over Treloi and several off-world news services had taken note of the hearings as well. Also the crowds of protesters had swelled over the morning and by the afternoon the zone around the Chamber of Officers was filled not only with thousands of Terralano protestors but with contingents of anti-Terralano as well, although the protestors wearing "I'm Terralano!" far out-numbered the others.

Several large portable Vid screens had been erected outside the Chamber building and they appeared to be showing a selection of anchor people explaining what had been going on during the morning session. Jerry guessed, accurately, that they would be broadcasting the afternoon session for all to see.

When the protesters spotted Ralani, more than a few ran up asking for her autograph and those of the others to a lesser extent. At first they were only too happy to sign, but as they became increasingly closer to the time the session would reopen, Jerry and Serafyma started pushing their companions closer to the Chamber of Officers. Finally Ralani, realizing she, as the only witness so far, was the center of attention, asked her admirers to please help them get back to Chamber.

It was like she had cast *athalu* all her own. No longer impeding their progress, the people around them started clearing their way and soon a path opened up directly to the front steps of the gleaming white building.

“Neat trick,” Serafyma opined. “Maybe our family has two *thalua*s.”

“Who knows?” Ralani laughed.

They might have had no trouble getting inside, but many of the generals had no such luck and the crew members from Meriwether II were left sitting in the waiting room an extra hour before being summoned into the Council Chamber. “Are all of us actually needed?” Achmed wondered.

“Probably not,” Jerry replied, “I’ll ask Tauko if he can give us a schedule for the next few days, maybe then only those of us who are supposed to testify will have to be here.”

“I have school again tomorrow,” Ralani pointed out.

“I suppose being summoned back to the Chamber of Officers is a valid excuse for being absent,” Jerry laughed, “and will probably count for extra credit in civics class.”

“It turned out okay,” Ralani told him, “but I’d rather not have to do that again anytime soon.”

“You mean you might be willing to do it again in the future?” Jerry bantered.

“Uh, . . . maybe,” she replied with a blush.

“Lilla, I think your sister may be looking at a career in politics,” Lani noted.

“Planning to be a general, Rel?” Lilla asked playfully.

“Admiral,” Ralani corrected her. “I’d like to go to space and see some of the other worlds, like you did.”

“I did it to face my fear of the unknown,” Lilla admitted.

“And look how well that turned out,” Jerry laughed. “You ran into more unknowns than most people ever will.”

“And some very strange giant creatures,” Lilla shot back. “Good thing they gave me a job.”

Finally they were summoned back into the chamber. There was something different about the noise and activity in the large room and craning his neck, Jerry noticed that instead of the hundreds spectators who had filled the observation gallery during the morning, that area was now entirely filled with cameras and reporters. “We’ve lost our audience,” he told the others.

“No,” Lani shook her head, “We’ve gained a much larger one. This is being broadcast live all over the planet and will be all over the Trelendir in days.”

“Yeah, but I always did like playing to the house,” Jerry chuckled as he started taking papers out of his brief case. “Oh well, no help for that now.”

Just then Anea arrived and squeezed herself in next to Jerry. “Sorry I couldn’t be here this morning,” she told him breathlessly, “but you seemed to do fairly well without me. You should have called, you know.”

“Sorry. It all happened so fast, I knew I was forgetting something,” Jerry admitted. “I certainly shouldn’t have forgotten to get advice from my councilor, but I didn’t think of this as a trial until they started questioning Ralani.”

“How did you know having a pretty and vivacious teenager in the group would work out so well?” Anea asked.

“Pretty and vivacious?” Ralani asked in amazement. “Me?”

“We got lucky,” Jerry told Anea. “Actually she was just along for the ride, but she caught Tauko’s eye and he asked a few questions out of curiosity mostly, I think.”

“Yes, but General Taomi didn’t realize she wasn’t the intended first witness,” Anea countered, “and once he took his shots at her, all the others followed suit. You handled them well, girl,” she told Ralani. “If you decide on a career in law, look me up. I could use an associate who doesn’t lose her head under fire.”

“Mister Isaacs,” Tauko asked, “are you ready this afternoon?”

“I was ready this morning, sir,” Jerry replied. “Shall we?”

Tauko led Jerry through a carefully thought-out line of questioning in which Jerry recapped the highlights of what had happened since Meriwether I’s first encountered the stricken Inillien in the middle of Rendezvous system. There was a special interest paid on the growing relationships between the two crews.

“Well, we didn’t all love one another on first sight,” Jerry explained at one point, “and both ships had a few crew members who were decidedly hostile toward the aliens of the other, but for the most part we quickly found common ground and forged friendships.”

“And more?” Tauko asked.

“Rarely,” Jerry shrugged. “Lani and I fell in love, but we were the only case of that. If you ask me, I suspect relationships such as that between Serafyma Ivanoff and Lilla Di Lasai will be far more common; close friends who choose to adopt each other into their families.”

Tauko’s questions eventually ran out and, as in the morning, General Taomi rushed forward to get his turn. “Mister Isaacs, do you know the definition of species?”

“Actually, I’ve been polite about titles on Treloi,” Jerry replied, “but it’s Doctor Isaacs and yes, as a matter of fact, I do. Why? Did you leave your dictionary at home?”

Taomi scowled as his colleagues chuckled at his expense. “No, I have it right here. A species is defined as ‘a biological class of individuals ranking directly below a genus or subgenus. Species members are those who are capable of siring or bearing young who in turn are capable of the same.’ Do I have that right?”

“Close enough for government work,” Jerry remarked, earning more laughter. “Your definition leaves out a lot of details and exceptions, like isolated populations and the definition of genus and what have you, but yes, two members of the same species – opposite sexes, of course – are capable of bearing

viable young of the same species. This is in contrast with the sterile mules that can be produced by breeding members of two closely related species. Additionally, in the wild, species can be differentiated as populations who might be capable of breeding, but who physically cannot for some reason, which usually comes down to geographical separation. We do not make that distinction in the case of sentient species, of course.”

“And would you claim you and Lani Di Ressia are the same species?” Taomi pressed.

“No, not even close,” Jerry replied, “but we are of one heart.”

“How sweet,” Taomi mocked. A murmur in the chamber should have been an indication the general had gone a bit too far. The faint disapproval in the Chamber was being echoed live across Treloi and what was faint disapproval from his colleagues turned to instant outrage just outside and in many households and offices where Lano had stopped to watch the proceedings. Lano were, by and large, a romantic people and as they warmed to Jerry’s profession of love, they chilled to anyone who would make fun of it. Inside the Chamber, however, none of that was immediately obvious. “But you are not of the same species, are you?”

“I already said that, yes,” Jerry replied.

“Are you aware of Lano marriage customs?” Taomi asked, now in a calmer and quieter voice.

“I’m aware you have some,” Jerry replied and grinned. “I have even studied them extensively.”

“Then perhaps you are aware that no couple is considered to be married within the Trelendir without having produced a child?” Taomi pressed his advantage, “and that without a child there is no marriage.”

“Yes,” Jerry nodded, “a very enlightened situation, I’m sure.”

“And as you just testified yourself, no child can be produced by members of different species,” Taomi continued, “and therefore no members of different species can ever be married!” he finished triumphantly.

“General,” Jerry asked smugly. “Are you acquainted with Lano marriage customs?”

“What the Hell do you mean by that?” Taomi roared.

“Well, it just seems to me you have forgotten the most distinctive marriage custom your culture enjoys,” Jerry replied. “Adoption. There have been cases, not particularly uncommon from what I can tell by reading the records, in which Lano couples are for some reason incapable of bearing a child. It’s tragic, but it happens. In most cases such a couple breaks up because the shame of being unable to have a child is too much for them, but every so often a couple is so emotionally attached that they choose to adopt a child rather than end their precious relationship. That is what Lani and I intend, and we have the most adorable baby on Treloi lined up. See? This is she.” He handed Taomi a picture. “That’s Tricia Di Ressia, soon, I hope, to be Tricia Di Isaacs. Isn’t she adorable?”

“Yes, quite,” Taomi replied frostily. “I assume this is for the record?”

“Of course,” Jerry nodded and Taomi passed the picture up to Tauko, who soon had it displayed on a large screen used for such evidence. “She’s healthy, happy and one hundred percent Terralano.”

“There’s no such word as ‘Terralano!’” Taomi shot back.

“Tell that to our friends outside,” Jerry countered. “I believe you would find more than a few people willing to debate the point.”

“That’s not the point!” Taomi shouted. “Any two Lano are at least potentially capable of having a child. A mixed couple of Terran and Lano never could.”

“Sure we can,” Jerry countered, “by adoption.”

“Such a child would be psychologically harmed by being brought up in such an environment,” Taomi claimed. “Any child brought up by parents of a different species is destined to be warped, mentally damaged, deranged.”

“Really?” Jerry asked. “You have a lot of case studies to that effect, do you? Can you even point to one instance in which a Lano child has had a Terran parent or vice versa? You can’t and we both know it, so do yourself a favor and sit down, General.”

“What? How dare you!” Taomi raged.

“Look, General, I know you take this issue seriously,” Jerry told him, “but the fact of the matter is you and, with all due respect to the other generals and admirals here with us this afternoon, none of you have any say in the matter. It’s too late. If you had a problem with this you should have said something over a year ago. I had trouble sleeping last night and reading legal documents usually solves that problem for me, so these two documents came to mind. I’d like them put into the record.”

“What the Ponoï are these?” Taomi asked suspiciously. Jerry wasn’t acquainted with the word, but it must not have been a polite one, judging from the reaction from the other generals in the hall.

“Well, the first one is the marriage license Lani and I received while on Earth,” Jerry explained.

“Very nice,” Taomi replied sarcastically, “but this is not binding within the Trelendir.”

“Actually that’s Terralendir, General, whether or not you like that word any better than ‘Terralano,’ and oh yes, it is binding, as per the provisions of this other document.” Out of his eye, Jerry caught a page delivering a message to Tauko Ki Masai. The Presiding General opened the envelope and started to read.

“You’re mad!” Taomi laughed harshly. “This is a copy of the Treaty of Rendezvous.”

“That’s correct,” Jerry agreed. “Have you ever read it? Fascinating reading, really.” Up at the Peegee’s chair, Tauko lost some color from his face and he was looking visibly shaken.

“There are no provisions for interspecies marriage in this.”

“Actually, I would direct you to the section regarding mutual respect and recognition of legal entities within both spheres of influence,” Jerry directed him. “Marriage, ladies and gentlemen, is a legal entity in both the Terran Confederation and the Trelendir. Now since I have a valid marriage license, you are bound, by the terms of this treaty to recognize the marriage I enjoy with Lani Di Ressia.”

“This is garbage!” Taomi shouted.

“This is a matter we will have to take up again at a future session,” Tauko interrupted. “It’s late and I’m certain tomorrow will be an even longer day than today. I will entertain a move to adjourn for the day.”

Eighteen

Lilla’s and Ralani’s home was unnaturally quiet that evening. Ralani had turned off the Vid screen when it turned out she couldn’t blink without seeing her own face on most of the channels. She eventually went to her room to study. “If I’m going to be famous,” she remarked dryly to her sisters, “it better not be for being stupid.”

Lilla and her mother were quietly discussing the events of the day and also about Lilla’s recently discovered talents with *thalirip*. Her father had been abnormally silent throughout dinner and was still sitting in the kitchen reading the evening newspaper. Serafyma, after two hours of trying to come up with an alternative, finally took a deep breath and entered that kitchen.

She stood there for a minute or two, just looking at Lerano Ki Lasai, until he pulled his own head out of the paper. “So,” she asked quietly, but determinedly, “what is it you have against me? Do I smell bad? Were you frightened by a human as a baby? What?”

He stared back at her for a long time before replying equally quietly, “It’s not natural.”

“Well,” Serafyma smiled, “I’m not big on organic foods, but I assure you I was born in the usual way. Not a test tube involved.”

“What?” Lerano asked, confused.

“The problem with wiseass comments is they all too often depend on a common cultural background,” Serafyma sighed. She sat down at the table across from Lerano and continued, “Lano have never researched artificial birth methods, have they? No, I thought not. Actually the only unnatural thing involved here is the fact our peoples did not meet sooner. In all the vastness of space, I’ve heard it said, the odds of meeting another space-faring race was about once every dozen millennia. With odds like that, we should have met you before we even left the Solar System.”

“That makes no sense,” Lerano told her, but without heat.

“There’s a saying among engineers,” Serafyma told him. “A fifty-fifty chance is always a million-to-one against, but a million-to-one chance comes up your way nine times out of ten. Yeah, I

know that doesn't make sense either, but how many times have you flipped a coin only to lose the toss? More often than even odds would suggest, right? I think it's a derivative of Murphy's law; if anything can go wrong, it will."

"We have a similar saying in *Thalirip*," Lerano admitted, not quite looking at her. He was silent a while longer. Then, "So you're an engineer?"

"No," Serafyma shook her head. "Actually I'm a chemist. We try not to let there be anything that can go wrong."

Lerano smiled, "So am I. Did you know that?"

"Lilla told me," Serafyma smiled. "She talks about you and the rest of the family all the time."

"I, uh, like what you did with Ralani," he told her, still not able to meet her gaze.

"I didn't do so much," Serafyma denied. "She was ready to come out of that shell anyway."

"No, it must have been you," he insisted, finally looking directly at her face. "Her mother and I tried and tried to get her to behave like a normal La..."

"You probably tried a bit too hard," Serafyma decided. "She was rebelling. Trying to force her to behave otherwise just encouraged her to continue rebelling."

"We thought we were being too permissive," Lerano commented.

"I wasn't here, but at one point you might have been," Serafyma replied. "It's possible to do both. The thing is, I might have gotten lucky. By the time I met Ralani she just wanted to be accepted for who she is. We all do, I think. Anyway, I came along and didn't make comments on the way she looked or acted, well not until she had already opened up. Good timing is all, and maybe it took a new face as well. It's hard to say. People aren't as simple as chemistry."

"You can say that again," Lerano told her, starting to open up a bit himself. "But she kept changing hair colors and styles and even her behavior."

"Of course she did," Serafyma laughed. "She's a teenager. She's experimenting; trying to get to know herself. That's normal enough. She'll probably try a few more things before she's done."

"Do you have children?" Lerano asked.

"No, I'm not even married," Serafyma laughed. "Terrans marry and then have children, usually. Call us backwards if it makes you feel better. I do have a kid sister a year or two older than Ralani, though."

"But she's a Terran," Lerano pointed out.

"People are people," Serafyma shrugged. "Terrans and Lano have some cultural differences, but give us a century or two and we'll probably all be one Terralano culture."

"Do you really think so?" Lerano asked.

"I've already seen it," Serafyma replied. "As soon as we were able to talk to the crewmen of Inillien

we started making friends. The only problems engineers who worked together on Inillien's engines had was understanding each other's technology."

"I saw Ralani on the Vid this morning," Lerano admitted. "I never knew she could be so poised and self-confident. I was very proud of her even though I didn't agree with what she was saying at the time. You did that."

"Not really," Serafyma denied once again. "I gave her a haircut and helped dye her hair, and Lilla found some Earth-style clothing that fit her. All the rest was her. I think when the Peegee started asking her questions she was so surprised she forgot to be shy. After that she was in shock, but don't be surprised if she starts being more assertive around the house."

"As you said," Lerano replied. "She's a teenager. So why did Lilla and you choose to take the Oath of Adoption?"

"It started when Sera save my life," Lilla told him from the doorway.

"Why didn't you two say so sooner?" Lerano asked, shocked.

"It shouldn't have made a difference," Lilla replied. "Besides we have worse problems now."

"Such as?" Lerano asked.

"Such as where we're going to find the money to pay for my *thalua* classes," Lilla replied quite seriously.

"Getting into a university program is going to be difficult enough," her father informed her.

"I bet Malana will give you a recommendation," Serafyma suggested.

"Malana Di Masai?" Lerano asked. "Do you really know her?"

Nineteen

Sue and Eesai tried to return to Eesai's brother's home, but Traffic Control refused to accept that destination and put them in a holding pattern around Pansilli. "What is this?" Sue asked. "Did we miss curfew or something? They didn't roll up the streets did they?"

"This is strange," Eesai admitted. "I'll check." She fiddled with the instruments and a computer

screen lit up between them. “Huh! Look at that!”

“Wow!” Sue gasped theatrically. “You know I can’t read Lani hieroglyphs.”

“Jerry says it looks more like cuneiform,” Eesai laughed, “but it’s as alphabetic as Terrañol. Your first guess was correct, however. The city is under curfew due to the riots”

“Riots?” Sue asked. “When did that happen?”

“I wasn’t here either,” Eesai reminded her. “According to this, we’ll be in a holding pattern until morning unless we choose another destination.”

“Can we land at the spaceport?” Sue asked.

Eesai entered the coordinates. “Yes, that’s allowed. At least we get to sleep in our own beds.”

“And hopefully find out what’s been going on,” Sue commented.

They landed near the Meriwether II and were met at the airlock by Jerry and Lani. “Welcome back,” Jerry told them. “Eesai’s mom called ahead and let us know when you were supposed to return.”

“We weren’t planning to come back to the ship tonight,” Sue told him.

“It’s the only place you could have landed,” Lani told her. “There’s a curfew on.”

“Yeah, we noticed,” Sue remarked dryly. “What happened?”

They went to the ship’s wardroom and sat down at one of the tables while Jerry described the events of the day. “We have a recording of the testimony if you want to see it,” he offered.

“Later, if it becomes necessary,” Sue decided.

“You have to see how well Lilla’s kid sister did,” Jerry told her.

“Something to look forward to on the way home unless you think I really need to see it now,” Sue told him.

“For now you don’t need to,” Jerry admitted reluctantly. “By the way, if anyone asks you, you’re both Terralano.”

“Terralano?” Eesai asked.

“It’s what the college kids have been calling us since the treaty was signed,” Jerry explained. “The opinion is not unanimous however, and there were contingents from both sides of the issue at the Chamber of Officers today. Everything seemed to be peaceful enough, with only a few insults shouted, but just after dark, peace became a blessed memory. We were advised to stay in the ship tonight just in case we had to perform an emergency lift.”

“Lano do seem to have a penchant for attacking spaceships when they’re angry,” Eesai commented. “That happened to Inillien one trip to Cereloi a few years ago.”

“Well, it’s been quiet here, thankfully,” Jerry told her, “but there have been fires in the city.”

“All because you two want to be married in the Lano way?” Sue asked. “Incredible. Tell me more about this General Taomi, though. The man sounds dangerous.”

“Very,” Eesai told her. “He’s been investigated for illegal operations several times over the years. He’s never been indicted, but lack of evidence does not equal innocence if you ask me.”

“A lot of people who have crossed him over the years have turned up conveniently dead too,” Lani added.

“Should we be at battle stations, do you think?” Eesai wondered.

“Sis, this isn’t a military ship,” Sue told her, “We don’t have battle stations.”

“We could fake it,” Eesai told her.

“Wait a minute,” Lani stopped them. “Sis?”

“Oh, yeah,” Sue admitted. “We adopted each other this morning.”

“You couldn’t wait until the crew could witness it?” Lani asked.

“We wanted a simple ceremony with my parents witnessing,” Eesai told her.

“Well, that’s reasonable,” Lani admitted. “But you aren’t getting away without a big ship-board party. Hey! Now you both really are Terralano.”

“Funny, it doesn’t feel different,” Eesai grinned. “So is it our turn to testify tomorrow?”

“I’m not sure,” Jerry admitted. “Tauko Ki Masai ended the session today a bit abruptly and early this afternoon. He tried to make it seem like a natural break, but he had just received a note of some sort and was looking ashen.”

“Ashen?” Eesai asked. “Lano skin doesn’t turn that color.”

“Okay, he turned pale yellow,” Jerry admitted, “but if I had the expression he had on his face as he read the note, I’d be ashen. He sent a message just after the curfew was declared to say he wanted to see us first thing in the morning. I figure he wants our help cooling off the tempers of the protesters.”

“I guess we’ll have to wait and see,” Sue shrugged. “Let’s set watches though, in case we have to lift in a hurry.”

“I thought we didn’t have battle stations,” Eesai teased her.

“We can fake it,” Sue retorted.

A small convoy of limousines with armed escorts arrived next to the ship half an hour after dawn. A dozen uniformed Lano got out as their leader climbed up to the Meriwether’s airlock. “We’re here to escort you and your officers to the Presiding General’s Office,” she informed. Sue.

Sue look down on the convoy and soldiers below. "Is the situation really that bad?" she asked.

"Best not to take chances, Captain."

"Very well. Not all my officers are on board at the moment, you realize," Sue replied, "and I don't care to leave the ship unoccupied."

"Bring who you feel is appropriate," the army lieutenant advised."

"Four of us then. Give us a few minutes and we'll be ready," Sue decided.

"Yes, Ma'am."

Another half hour later and Sue was looking out at Pansilli from the windows of Tauko's office. "Interesting, what you've been doing with your city, General," she remarked dryly. "Not sure about the choice of changes, though. I think I liked it better a few days ago." She had decided to take Eesai, Jerry and Lani with her to the early morning meeting.

"It's amazing how quickly one can destroy a few buildings, Captain," Tauko agreed sadly. "How was I to know this Terralano issue was so volatile? When I first came to office, I was able to unite the people of Treloi. Now we seem to be falling apart again."

"We're falling apart, sir," Eesai remarked, "because you're failing to lead. You cannot just sit back and expect this interspecies marriage thing to blow over. You need to guide the Lano of Treloi. Make a statement, pro or con... right or wrong. Something, anything to show that you're in command."

"Heh," Tauko laughed humorously. "You sound like my mother, Captain."

"I worked with her on Earth," Eesai replied. "Madame Malana tends to rub off on people."

"Yes," Tauko nodded, a thin smile on his face. "Yes she does."

"So is that why we're here?" Sue asked. "Trelendir mating customs? We're supposed to be lifting in another two or three days and I suppose you could give us the bum's rush, but the problem won't really go away. You'll be having more Terran-Lano couples all the time. Most of us will just adopt each other like Eesai and I did, but Jerry and Lani are just the first to get married. It's going to happen because our peoples really are very much alike. We're compatible."

"The captain is right," Jerry chimed in. Sue shot him an amused glance. Jerry rarely referred to anyone on Meriwether by their ranks. "Humans and Lano are a natural mix. We're everything we both hoped we would find in another space faring species."

"My original intention, when I called Captains Ho and Eesai back from the desert, was to discuss the Terralano issue. I'm a very deliberate sort of person. I don't like to charge into a problem and just hope I'm doing the right thing. Looking out at the city, I guess I might as well have done just that. However, a more important matter came up yesterday afternoon. Captain Eesai, I'm afraid I'm going to have to reactivate your commission."

"You can't do that," Eesai argued. "I resigned."

"Actually, I can do that," Tauko disagreed. "That's the thing about a system of government that

retains a vestige of its military past. It's an obscure and ancient law, but anyone can be drafted into service in a time of emergency."

"I've never heard of any such law," Eesai remarked suspiciously.

"I said it was obscure and it has not been invoked on Treloi in over five hundred years, but it is still on the books and frankly, your services are needed for the good of Lanokind, for Terralanokind for that matter."

Eesai's brow furrowed. "Sir, I'm a retired captain and I only served at that rank for a few weeks. How do you even know my name?"

"You're far too modest, Captain," Tauko told her. "As it happens both Commodore Alano and my mother have officially commended you for your behavior and accomplishments on meeting the Terrans last year. You have quite a lot of bonus pay waiting for you, I understand."

"Always nice to know," Eesai shrugged. "It could have been deposited in my account, you know. Even so, why me? Shouldn't you be drafting Commodore Alano? He commanded Inillien after all."

"I don't need to draft Commodore Alano," Tauko smiled, "He never left active service, and he will accompany you in an advisory capacity."

"Accompany me where?" Eesai asked. "What's happened?"

"A few months ago one of our exploratory vessels went missing way out in the frontier to galactic east," Tauko explained.

"So in the opposite direction from Terra," Eesai interpreted.

"Yes," Tauko nodded. "We sent a ship out to look for it, but that disappeared as well."

"I don't think I like the way this is going," Jerry told him uneasily.

"Me neither," Tauko retorted. "We sent off a second rescue mission and they were just recently recovered heading back into the Trelendir on a somewhat haphazard course. When we managed to board the ship, the crew was found alive but badly disoriented. The log book told part of the story, however.

"In search of the two missing ships, they encountered a strange ship in space, something even more alien than these ugly Terran ships we have seen of late," Tauko explained.

"Hey!" Sue protested.

"He has a point, Sue," Jerry told her. "The Lano ships with their double helix hulls and sky-silk sails really are prettier than our hulks."

"Depends on what you like," Sue shot back. "I can fly our ships. I can't even turn on the lights in one of theirs."

"My apologies, Captain Ho," Tauko told her quickly. "My prejudices are showing this morning."

“If that’s your only prejudice, General,” Sue replied, “you could do a lot worse, but I do think my ship is gorgeous.”

“Indeed,” Tauko nodded, “and in this case far more useful than one of our own. Captain Eesai. The log we found gives the coordinates where the strange ship was encountered. After that the record is somewhat less than coherent.”

“Wait a minute, sir,” Eesai told him. “You want me to take out another ship and probably lose yet another crew?”

“Actually I was thinking you should take Meriwether II,” Tauko replied.

“Whoa!” Sue stopped him. “Meriwether is my ship.”

“Yes it is, Captain,” Tauko agreed easily, “but you see, that old law does not specify that it only applies to Lano and, as the Treaty we’ve all been using to justify Terralano marriage and adoption states, all Terrans within the Trelendir are subject to its laws.”

“What does that mean?” Sue asked suspiciously.

“It means you’ve just been drafted,” Eesai chuckled.

Part 2—Stop Me If You’ve Heard This Before

One

It took over an hour for Sue to calm down. During that time Jerry and Eesai did a lot of negotiation with Tauko. In exchange for Meriwether’s services, along with standard compensation for expenses, cost of the charter and hazard pay, Tauko promised to put the full influence of his office in favor of Terralano marriage rights. Also every member of the crew would earn an upgrade in rank on successful completion of their mission. Jerry realized that the humans wouldn’t really care what their ranks in Lano society were, but the Lano members of the crew would.

“We’re going to need more Lano on board,” Sue considered.

“Given the records, that might not be a good thing,” Eesai told her. “We don’t know what happened to the first three crews, but something drove them crazy. Do you really want more than a handful of

insane Lano running around your ship?”

“Do I want any?” Sue countered.

“Not really, no,” Eesai chuckled.

“I want a Lano doctor, though,” Sue decided. “Achmed is good, but he’s not an expert on Lano medical problems and we should probably commandeer a Lano soma unit or two.”

“That would be nice,” Eesai agreed. “I have one on Meriwether I and it suits me so much better than the human models.”

“There’s a good reason for that,” Sue pointed out. “Do you think we could recruit Doctor Wallo?”

“He’s a fine old La,” Eesai commented, “but he’s retired.”

“He’s Malana’s age,” Sue pointed out, “and she hasn’t exactly been slowing down lately.”

“Malana is an exceptional La,” Eesai remarked. “I doubt she will ever retire. Still it won’t hurt to ask Wallo. Achmed visited him while we were up north. We’ll have to send him back there in a jumper. Our dear doctor chose the simple life and has no Vid or Comm units.”

Six hours later a green and gold jumper set down on a lush tropical island and rolled up to Doctor Wallo Bi Lano’s beach house. “What’s all that racket?” Wallo demanded as he stepped outside. He spotted Achmed MacGregor and Alano Ki Matchi stepping out of the jumper. “Oh, visitors again. Welcome back, Achmed. And Commodore? To what do I owe this honor?”

“Mind if we come in and sit, Doctor?” Alano asked.

“Unless you would prefer to sit on the beach,” Wallo gestured at the expanse of white sand and clear blue water.

“Tempting,” Alano considered. “Well, why not? This is some marvelous tropical paradise you found yourself.”

“Got it for a song and a badly sung one at that,” Wallo laughed. “Go, have a seat, I’ll bring us something to drink.” He pointed them toward a large canvas sunshade with a picnic table under it and soon returned with a pitcher of cold juice and several glasses. “Sorry it’s not alcoholic,” he apologized, “but I don’t have anything Achmed can drink without going blind and it didn’t seem courteous to drink while he cannot.”

“I don’t imbibe alcoholic beverages anyway,” Achmed replied. “You two may drink if you like.”

“This is fine,” Alano decided. “Doctor have you been hearing about what’s been happening on the mainland?”

“The point of living here is so I don’t have to, Commodore,” Wallo replied. “Why? Has some movie star gotten divorced yet again?”

“Probably,” Alano shrugged. “Who cares?”

“They would be crushed to hear you say that,” Wallo laughed. “So?”

“We’ve had a bit of excitement the last few days concerning the legitimacy of Terralano marriages and adoptions,” Alano informed him.

“Terralano now? Nice word,” Wallo commended him. “Does it mean anything?”

“Evidently enough so that people are arguing both for and against the concept it embodies,” Achmed told him and went on to describe the hearings and subsequent riots.

“Silly people!” Wallo scoffed. “What difference does it make. There’s never a superfluity of love in the universe so if any two people can find happiness together regardless of species, I say good for them!”

“No arguments from us,” Alano assured him.

“Didn’t expect there would be, Commodore,” Wallo replied. “Okay, so why did you come? I assume it’s not my sterling company and I seriously doubt my insights would do anything to quell the riots. Oh it might do those idiots some good to spend time on an island, but there aren’t enough islands in the Trelendir to accommodate that many.”

“We’d like to persuade you to come out of retirement, Doctor,” Alano told him and went on to explain about the missing ships and the one that did come back.

“Back to space again with barely the time to pack my toothbrush, huh?” Wallo laughed. “Jump out of this nice cozy existence and into yet another death-defying situation?”

“Well, I can understand your reluctance,” Alano began, “but...”

“I’ll do it,” Wallo told him. “Retirement is boring and a mission into the frontier to encounter an unknown danger is probably slightly less risky than teaching first year students.”

“Marvelous,” Alano enthused. “We’ll be shipping out on Meriwether II.”

“Meriwether?” Wallo asked. “Why not one of our own ships?”

“The one that managed to return was heavily damaged,” Alano explained. “The engines’ power had been all but drained and most systems were dead, but we haven’t the slightest notion how or why. We’re hoping that by using a Terran ship, we can avoid that sort of problem and if not, we’re no worse off than we would have been.”

“Well, let me pack a few things and kiss my retirement goodbye,” Wallo shrugged.

Susan Ho, however continued to be less than sanguine about being drafted into the Treloian Navy. Certainly the rank of Captain was flattering especially since she had no previous military service, but in spite of calming down she still resented being drafted. While Achmed and Alano were talking to Doctor Wallo, Sue was in Ambassador Gupta’s office. “I have read and reread the terms of the Treaty, Captain,” Radji told her patiently, “but what Presiding General Tauko did was fully in accord with the agreement.”

“How?” Sue asked.

“You may recall that during the negotiations I argued with Madame Malana on several important points, insisting that those points were too broadly drafted. Such negotiations are always a matter of give and take, of course.”

“And what did you get in return?” Sue demanded angrily.

“A mutual defense pact,” he replied easily. “Presiding General Tauko chose the mechanism he understood best, but actually he could have co-opted your services under that clause.”

“Oh come on,” Sue protested. “Meriwether II is an exploration and mining ship. How could that have been justified as defense?”

“The same way commercial vessels have been commandeered over the centuries, Captain,” Radji explained. “In an emergency the Terran Confederation could have done the same. It’s been done before on both space and sea craft in times of war and other emergencies. During the First World War, for example, the sister ship of the RMS Titanic was refitted as a hospital ship, the HMHS Britannic.”

“And in fairly short order, she got sunk by a German U-boat,” Sue replied.

“The prevailing wisdom, backed by strong evidence, is that she hit a mine,” Radji corrected her.

“A mine laid in her path by a U-boat,” Sue maintained. “It was a war-time tragedy that would have been far worse had she been full of wounded soldiers, but at least she had been repainted as a hospital ship and thought to be fairly safe especially since the White Star Line corrected all the known defects from the Titanic. She sunk even faster than her older sister. But at least the Britannic wasn’t being sent out to seek out an enemy ship.”

“You don’t know that for certain either,” Radji pointed out.

“Maybe, but I know the Meriwether isn’t armed much better than she was,” Sue told him acidly.

“You have meteor defenses,” Radji pointed out.”

“The laser and the few missiles we have are intended to nudge a space rock into a slightly different orbit. Not likely to be effective against a weapon that makes people go crazy.”

“That is not a certainty either,” Radji told her. “Look, just think of this as a special charter.”

“More like an offer I can’t refuse,” Sue slumped in her chair.

“That too.”

Two

Once resigned to the potentially hazardous voyage, Sue's mood lifted and at times even seemed giddy. To sweeten the deal, Tauko had supplied the ship with the finest foods available on Treloi, all of which had been proven safe and, in some cases, nutritious for humans.

"Wish I could be going with you," Ralani told Lilla and Serafyma.

"First get yourself through school," Lilla advised. "Oh and try some of those *thalirip* aptitude tests. I wish I had. If I'd known I had the talent, the Navy would have paid for my training."

"Really?" Ralani asked.

"The service never has enough *thlua*," Lilla nodded.

"Hey, little Terralano," Serafyma hugged Ralani, "you take care of yourself and stay away from those reporters."

"Hard to do," Ralani admitted. "They're everywhere. I'm surprised they haven't been covering the riots. Isn't that more important than what I did?"

"Probably," Serafyma agreed, "but you're a happy story. They don't get to report many of those."

"Will they get tired of me, do you think?" Ralani asked.

"For your sake, I hope so. Just ignore them and they'll eventually get bored," Serafyma advised.

"I hope so," Ralani replied. "My school's headmaster is getting tired of them sneaking into the building."

"I'll bet," Lilla chuckled. They hugged one last time and then boarded Meriwether II.

"Hatch is sealed and secured," Serafyma reported over the intercom shortly afterward. "Area around the ship is clear."

"Thanks, Sera," Eesai replied from the bridge. "Attention all hands! Prepare for liftoff in fifteen minutes. Departments report when ready."

"I like that touch," Sue told her. "Asking all departments to report before lift-off is a good idea."

"It's the way we did it in the Navy," Eesai explained. "Do you think it bothers anyone?"

"Nah!" Jerry told her as he stepped on to the bridge. "We're big boys and girls. We can take it."

"I still think I'd feel better if we were taking one of the Treloian war ships," Sue remarked.

"Not me," Eesai told her.

"What do you know I don't?" Sue asked.

"Probably a bunch of things," Eesai shrugged. "Our schooling and training was completely different after all, but in this case I just noticed something I think you missed. The Treloian ship that came back,

sort of. The energy had been all but drained out of her engines. Short of using up the fuel over the course of several months, that's not supposed to be possible. Meriwether's engines are hybrid Terralano jobs. They use most of the same principles, but they aren't identical. These engines are also far more heavily shielded than on any Lano ship and we're as fast or faster than all of them, even Inillien."

Lilla rushed onto the bridge just then and sat down at the communications console.

"I hope I'm not out of place on your bridge, Captain," Alano commented from the hatchway.

"You're always welcome here, Alano," Sue told him. "Or should I be saluting and calling you 'Commodore, sir' now that I seem to have been drafted?"

"Technically, I suppose this is a military mission, but I'm here in an advisory capacity," Alano told her, "and besides if you don't tell anyone about our breach of military etiquette, neither will I."

"Sure! This is Liberty Hall, Commodore," Jerry laughed. "You can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard!"

"What?" Alano asked, uncertain how to react.

"Sorry," Jerry apologized, "Just an old saying from a series of popular fiction from the Twentieth Century on Earth."

"Lift-off in five minutes," Eesai announced to the ship. "Engineering, still waiting for your report."

"Lani, here," the chief engineer finally reported three minutes later. "Firing up these engines isn't as instantaneous as on a Lano ship. Engines are primed and ready."

"Thank you, Engineering," Eesai replied. "Stand-by to apply power."

"Galaxy, ho!" Sue shouted to the bridge a moment later.

"Galaxy, ho!" Jerry echoed exuberantly, followed quickly by the other humans on the bridge..

"What?" Eesai, Lilla and Alano asked as one. "These humans are crazy," Eesai added in a loud aside to Alano.

"Old kids' Vid show," Jerry explained. "It involved intrepid explorers who every week scooted off the far rim of the galaxy for wild action and adventure. It was a bit hokey, but every time they lifted off, they'd shout, 'Galaxy, ho!'"

"I loved that show," Sue sighed.

"One minute to lift-off," Eesai announced and counted down the final minute, finishing up, "Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Galaxy, ho!"

"What was that, Meriwether?" Port Control asked over the radio even as the ship slowly lifted off.

"Oops," Eesai admitted sheepishly. "I forgot Lilla would have an open link to Control.

"It's an old Terran custom, Control," Lilla covered. "Sorry about the confusion."

“You’re in the Trelendir now, Meriwether,” the controller admonished her.

“We’re all Terralano, Control,” Lilla shot back.

“Point taken, Meriwether,” Control admitted. “Good luck out there.”

“What do you know?” Jerry laughed, “A sympathizer.”

“I believe you’ll find most spacers will easily accept the Terralano concept, Jerry,” Alano told him as Eesai and the others worked diligently to get the ship aloft and on course. “It’s something we were trained for. Admittedly it was in terms of the united Trelendir, but it applies as well to the Terralendir.”

“Hmm,” Jerry considered. “I wonder what my fellow Terrans will make of suddenly being called Terralano.”

“Do you think there will be a problem?” Alano asked.

“If I said, ‘no more so than on Treloi,’ would that make you nervous?” Jerry countered.

“Moderately, yes,” Alano admitted.

“Well, I guess that confirms it,” Jerry chuckled. “We are all Terralano.”

“What course, skipper?” Eesai asked Sue.

“Good question, little buddy,” Sue replied. “I’m in no hurry to kill us all off. We know where we’re supposed to go, but for caution’s sake, let’s swing out a few dozen light years rimward and then sweep in toward our target system.”

“What will that accomplish?” Eesai asked.

“It will give us a chance to conduct a discreet survey of the neighboring systems,” Alano replied in Sue’s stead. “If the log we recovered is at all accurate, our ships met an unknown and possibly hostile space-faring people. All three of our ships went to the same place, so if these aliens are hostile, they could be waiting for more of our ships to arrive. This would give us a chance to possibly detect colonies of these people. Good thinking, Sue.”

“You’re giving me too much credit, Alano,” Sue laughed. “I was just hoping to sneak up on them by coming in from another direction.”

“That works too,” he told her.

“Clearing the atmosphere,” Eesai reported.

“Tell engineering to put it in second gear,” Sue ordered. “Let’s see if we can beat our previous records.”

“Aye aye, skipper!” Eesai confirmed. She relayed the order and for the next ten minutes the acceleration was greater than the on-board artificial gravity could counteract. “Getting a bit heavy in here,” Eesai commented.

“Yeah, I know,” Sue grunted back at her. “What a rush, huh? This is what our early astronauts had to put up with just to reach orbit.”

“Ours too,” Alano told her. “I don’t envy them for a moment.”

“I do,” Jerry admitted. “Imagine being the first person to actually see his world from space. Must have been magnificent.”

“It still is,” Alano replied.

“The view is the same, but it’s not new. Every school kid knows what their world looks like from space. Every world has thousands of pictures of that view. But it had to have been different to have seen it for the first time before anyone really knew for sure what it would look like,” Jerry told him.

“I think you’re a romantic, Doctor Isaacs,” Alano laughed against the heavy acceleration.

“Sure I am,” Jerry laughed. “That’s why Lani loves me so much. “

“I knew there had to be a reason,” Alano chuckled.

“That,” Jerry retorted, “and I play a mean game of chess.”

Alano kept silent, deciding he did not really want to know.

“Approaching maximum speed,” Eesai reported. “Prepare for normal gravity.”

Three

Sue’s cautious approach yielded no clues as to what they might be headed into. When just passing through a system, it is all too easy to miss the planets, and while they managed to spot several gas giants, one of which had a moon that seemed over half molten, and a number of potentially Earth, Venus or Marslike worlds, they did not detect as many as they knew a more careful survey would find. They did not have time for a careful survey, but Meriwether’s scientists dutifully catalogued their findings. Jerry found a rich monopole signal coming from a binary star system and spent the next two days preparing the papers necessary to stake a claim. It was a long way out for a Terran ship to come, but with a claim on the system, Lano prospectors would have to pay royalties on anything found there.

Sue finally gave the order to approach their target system. It was not an empty system by a long shot.

It had twelve planets that they could see and two relatively dense asteroid belts. However, they spotted all those as quickly as they did because the second Treloian rescue mission had the time to survey the system while looking for the lost ships. Using the coordinates and orbital projection from that ship's log, they soon found one of the missing Lano ships.

"Jerry," Sue told him over the intercom, "I'd like you to take a small boarding party over there and see what there is to see."

"Nothing good, I'm sure," Jerry commented, leaving the inevitable "Why me?" left unspoken. Jerry was actually chief geologist and anthropologist on board, but he was also the most senior officer on Meriwether II. Such jobs naturally fell to him to organize. Jerry was a hands-on sort of person so he almost always went on such extra-vehicular missions himself; so much so, that Sue had naturally assumed he would now.

"If you don't mind," Alano spoke up. "I think I'd like to be part of the party."

"We don't normally send flag rank officers on such dangerous missions, Commodore," Eesai remarked.

"I don't think this will be all that dangerous, Captain," Alano replied, "and I am getting cabin fever just sitting around and watching the rest of you do your work."

"You're an advisor," Eesai told him. "That's your job."

"So now I'm advising Jerry to take me along," Alano retorted.

"For an initial survey," Jerry decided, "two of us should be sufficient. Suit up and I'll meet you in the pinnace."

"Do you normally wear environment suits on your smaller vessels?" Alano asked as he followed Jerry off the bridge.

"Of course not, but that ship over there is almost completely dead in space," Jerry replied. "There are a few small energy sources we're detecting, but nothing powering life support. It's almost as cold as space there and I don't know if there's any air. Even if there is, there's bound to be a lot of dead people on board that ship. You don't want to breathe what's in that air."

"No, I suppose not," Alano agreed. "You know I've never boarded a dead ship before."

"Then you have at least as much experience as I have," Jerry laughed. "We're lucky on one count so far, though."

"What's that?" Alano asked.

"The last Treloian mission didn't get beyond this point. They were under attack before they could board and see what had happened," Jerry explained. "Then again, maybe we aren't all that lucky."

A few minutes later they were in the Meriwether's pinnace, a small vessel, much larger than a life pod and able to go further distances. The original use for such ships had been as tenders for the larger vessels that never actually landed. However, over the last century the giant luxury space cruisers had all but disappeared. Their pinnaces found new uses as secondary vehicles in all manner of spaceships. They

were especially popular on exploratory ships, where they were used to quickly visit and examine sites of interest. Being smaller, they were also more fuel efficient and capable of crossing interstellar distances in an emergency, although the survivors at the end of such a trip were likely to be hungry and either bitter enemies or lifelong friends. There was no privacy aboard a pinnacle. The interior was a single cabin with chairs that could be folded flat to sleep on or even folded into the floor if the extra space was needed to haul something large.

"I'll say this much for the Lano," Jerry told Alano as they closed the distance between the two ships, "You do build beautiful ships." Like many Lano ships, the one they approached looked like someone had taken two gleaming spires and twisted them together. In this case one spire was golden and the other silver. All along the curving fuselage, large expanses of a brightly colored cloth stood out on booms. The cloth was called sky silk although it was not organic in origin. It was actually a finely spun and woven metallic alloy and, rather than catching a solar breeze, they were actually part of the impellor system that provided propulsion to Lano-built ships.

"This is Halerien," Alano remarked. "She's the same class as Inillien and should have the same internal floor plan."

"I'm glad I have you along then," Jerry told him.

"That's the real reason I volunteered," Alano admitted, "but if I had said that in Eesai's hearing, she would have claimed that she was at least as qualified to be here. She is, of course, but I must admit feeling a bit protective of her. She would carve my guts out if she knew that, however."

"I'm not so sure of that," Jerry told him. "She might be flattered."

"Or she might hate me for life," Alano countered. "Not a risk I'm willing to take. Besides, I really did want to do something constructive."

"Ha! I knew we had forgotten something," Jerry remarked as he pulled up to the Halerien's airlock.

"What's that?" Alano asked.

"When Meriwether I and Inillien met in Rendezvous System, we built a bridge to connect the two ships. Our airlock is not going to fit Halerien's."

"Good thing we have spacesuits then," Alano pointed out. "I'm more worried about getting inside the ship if there is no power to the airlock doors."

"Don't you have a mechanical failsafe device for that sort of emergency?" Jerry asked.

"No, but any entry-level *thlua* could do it," Alano replied.

"Then could you?"

Alano laughed. "I barely have enough talent to turn the lights on. However, the airlocks have a reserve power supply and, if this one hasn't been drained, we can still enter the ship."

"And if not?" Jerry asked.

"We'll have to go back and get Eesai," Alano admitted.

“Or Lilla,” Jerry added. “She came back with a stack of books *onthalirip* . I understand she had a breakthrough while at home.”

“No one was hurt, I hope?” Alano asked.

“Just a few pieces of paper,” Jerry replied. “For that matter, Lani probably has enough talent to open that door.”

“True enough,” Alano agreed. “An engineer has to be able to cast a series of initialization *thalu* s on any of a ship’s systems.”

They tried the airlock door and discovered it was powerless. “Back to Meriwether then,” Jerry remarked. Back inside the pinnace he called the ship, “We need *athalua* or a engineer to get through the airlock. Lilla, do you feel like taking a spacewalk?”

Jerry was certain he heard the La gulp nervously at the prospect, but she came back a moment later, “About time I stretched my legs, sir.”

“She’s come a long way since Inillien,” Alano remarked. “I always used to wonder why she had volunteered for that sort of duty when she seemed frightened of her own shadow.”

“Some of us feel the need to confront our fears,” Jerry commented. “Vollunteering for precisely the sort of mission she fears most might be her way of doing that.”

“She’s a braver La than I am, then,” Alano replied. “I doubt I’ve ever truly appreciated that before.”

“Learning keeps us young,” Jerry laughed as he docked with Meriwether.

Lilla boarded the pinnace immediately, carrying her spacesuit. “I figured I could get dressed on the way over,” she explained.

“Here,” Alano offered. “Let me help you suit up. It will go faster that way.”

“Thank you, Commodore,” Lilla replied.

Lilla had no trouble opening the airlock doors, but allowed Jerry and Alano to enter the ship first. “Hmm, I wonder if I’ve been using my own *thalu* s to do things like that all along,” Lilla mused as they stepped into the dark corridor beyond the airlock.

“What do you mean?” Alano asked.

“Well, that didn’t really feel any different to me than how I might normally open the airlock,” Lilla explained. “That might also explain why my breakout wasn’t as violent as some. I’ll have to ask one of my teachers when I get into a university program.”

“I don’t suppose you could get the gravity working in here?” Jerry asked.

“I wouldn’t even know where to start,” Lilla admitted.

“The artificial gravity is still working,” Alano noted, “but just barely. It feels like we’re floating, but

our feet do eventually touch down on the deck. We ought to get up up to the bridge. The central staircase should be just around the corner.”

“I’m not complaining, sirs,” Lilla told them, “but where are all the people? This ship was lost with all hands on board, or so we believe.”

“Probably all at their battle stations,” Alano speculated. “No one has a station in the hallways, but we’d better brace ourselves for what we find on the bridge.”

Climbing the central stairway under low gravity took care and deliberate movements, but they eventually made their way on to the bridge. “I’m going to be sick,” Lilla told them on getting her first look.

“Do it on your own time,” Alano advised, “and outside that spacesuit. Trust me on that second part. I got sick inside my suit once. This is incredible and horrible. Did they kill each other?”

“Kind of looks like it,” Jerry remarked. “We already knew those aliens had something that causes insanity. These poor people must have been completely over the edge. My guess is that they somehow thought they were being attacked and thereby attacked the first people they saw in self-defense. Sadly, the first people were their own crewmates.”

“And thinking they had been betrayed by their mates would have made the situation worse. Why haven’t these bodies decomposed, however?”

“Look at the tell-tales on your suit,” Jerry instructed. “It’s about minus sixty degrees Celsius in here. I’m not sure what that would be on your thermometers, but...”

“Blindingly cold,” Alano replied. The word “blinding” in Lani was considered mildly impolite in such contexts in much the same way the word, “bloody” might be in Terrañol.

“You got it,” Jerry told him. “I see a few lights flickering on the displays. What are they?”

“Mostly the computer banks,” Lilla replied. “There’s a chance we may be able to retrieve the log, the recording of all shipboard telemetry, and some other files that could be of use.”

“Can you download them?” Jerry asked.

“Possibly,” Lilla replied, “but I’d like to have Lani and Eesai working with me, or vice versa,” she added hastily.

“Let’s take a look around the rest of the ship,” Alano suggested. “The emergency bridge could be functioning better and we should check out the engine room.”

“Yes, Lani will want to be briefed before coming over here,” Jerry agreed.

Four

“I’ll never call a Terran ship ugly again,” Lani promised several days later.

On her first trip into Halerien, Lani managed to bring a reserve power supply back on line. It wasn’t enough to power the entire ship but at least the doors and computers were working. The data storage banks of the computer system had been damaged, but the backup systems restored enough for the Terralano crew of Meriwether to get their first clear look at the unknown aliens along with various log entries from the captain and his officers. Halerien had evidently been the first ship to encounter these new people and neither ship had done more than carefully look over the other at first.

“Looks like floating cowpie,” Jerry opined as they viewed the records in the conference room, “with portholes.”

“Obviously they do not share a common set of aesthetic values with us,” Sue added dryly.

“What’s a cowpie?” Eesai asked.

“You know what comes out of the back end of a glarno?” Sue asked her in return.

“Ah,” Eesai reacted knowingly. “Jerry, you’re right. It does look like a cowpie.”

“With portholes,” Jerry added. “Quite a few of them, it looks like.”

“To me,” Lani observed, “it looks like someone lobbed several globs of molten rock together, let it solidify, then they went in and hollowed it out.”

“That may be how it was built,” Alano agreed, “although it seems to me that there must be easier construction methods.”

“Maybe they like drilling out large globs of basalt,” Jerry commented. “Could be an artform for all we know. We can’t go letting our own cultural aesthetics get in the way. I’m willing to bet the captain of that ship is as proud of her as Sue is of Meriwether.”

“Probably is,” Alano agreed. “Wonder what they think of us.”

“Probably think we’re all ignorant barbarians who can’t help but use primitive construction techniques,” Jerry replied. “It’s all relative, you know.”

“Those port holes are strangely spaced,” Sue noted. “There’s a band of them around the middle, uh edge? Well you know where I mean and they’re evenly spaced. There’s another evenly spaced ring of them on what I guess may be the top, although it could be the bottom, front or back.”

“I suspect that’s their bridge,” Eesai guessed. “If I’m right that’s the top.”

“What makes you think it’s the bridge?” Lani asked.

“Well the way it seems to be moving looks like the edge of that rocky splat goes forward,” Eesai remarked. “Maybe they have multiple bridges and crews for them, but that seems more complex than needed. From the top ring they can see in any direction, which explains why the construction doesn’t seem to have a permanent fore and aft like Terralano ships do.”

“I agree that ring might be a bridge,” Jerry told her, “but it could be the bottom too.”

“Oh come on!” Eesai protested. “I think people tend to build ships based on their own shapes and ways of thinking. Our eyes are on our heads and our heads are on top just like our spaceships. What sort of creature would have eyes on its bottom?”

“One that evolved on a world on which the predators attacked from below I would guess,” Jerry replied. “I’m not sure you’re right about spaceship design. Terran and Lano ships are built that way, but back in the twentieth century Earthlings built airships in which the bridge was on the bottom.”

“If they put the bridge on top,” Sue pointed out, “the pilots wouldn’t have been able to see where they were going. For now though, I don’t think we need to worry about where they keep their eyes. What else do we know about them?”

“Not a lot,” Jerry replied. “The people aboard Halerien called them the Carono.”

“The stone people,” Eesai translated. “It fits their ship in any case.”

“What did Lano call humans before we started talking to each other?” Achmed asked.

“Aliens,” Eesai grinned. “On Inillien we were more concerned about thumbing for a lift than worrying about what to call the neighbors.”

“If my sense of scale is correct,” Jerry continued, “those port holes are fairly small; only six inches in diameter.”

“Smaller windows stand up to the pressure differential between an atmosphere and the vacuum of space better than larger ones,” Lani pointed out.

“Agreed,” Jerry nodded. “It’s also possible they are there for aesthetic reasons, and that they have external cameras that give them far more panoramic views.”

“Or else they like looking through peepholes,” Sue told him.

“Um, yes,” Jerry replied, obviously annoyed by yet another interruption. “The recorded instrument readings indicate that blob moves by the emission of a tight and powerful ion beam, vaguely related to a device once used on interplanetary probes in Sol System although this one is much more powerful. It’s still a fairly slow method of propulsion.”

“In-system only then,” Sue guessed.

“Right,” Eesai agreed. “At the rate that beam accelerates them, we’re talking millions of years to get from one star to the next. Any idea what they use for interstellar flight?”

“What makes you so sure they don’t live in these woods?” Jerry countered.

“You would have mentioned it already,” Eesai told him perceptively, “and recommended we hold this conference at battle stations.”

“You have me there,” Jerry admitted. “There’s no sign of a Carono civilization in this system so far, and that ion drive is by no means enough to power interstellar flight. I’m not even sure if it’s good enough for interplanetary trips. It’s more likely used for close maneuvers, unless the Carono are extraordinarily patient.”

“They could be,” Achmed commented.

“They would need to truly be ‘Rock People’ to have that sort of patience,” Jerry replied.

“The fact they’ve attacked three ships so far,” Sue pointed out, “argues against extraordinary patience.”

“We all have our faults and weaknesses,” Jerry argued. “Our predecessors here may have inadvertently insulted the Carono. All you need is one gesture misunderstood as unforgiveable and you could be at war. Your telepathic radios might have hurt the Carono for that matter.”

“Our exploratory ships have started carrying Terran radio sets as well since we met you,” Alano told him.

“Or the radio could have been misunderstood as a radiation weapon then,” Jerry commented. “We do know that the Halerien attempted to open communications for several hours. After that the recordings become rapidly garbled and hard to make out. A short time later there is a loud blast, well a strong blast of noise on the standard Lano communications channel and then all recordings stop completely.”

“That ion drive,” Alano asked. “Does it leave a trail of ions?”

“Of course,” Jerry nodded. “‘For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.’ It was good enough for Sir Isaac and it still applies today. At least for the purposes of our discussion. The drive emits a stream of ions and the ship moves in the opposite direction. So yes, there should be a trail we can follow if it hasn’t dissipated by now.”

It turned out the trail was diffuse, but detectable. “If this had been their system or even one they visited frequently, I doubt we could have followed this trail,” Jerry commented when he showed Sue what he had accomplished.

“Can you tell which direction this trail leads?” Sue asked.

“Not from looking,” Jerry admitted, “but the records from Halerien show it approached from the inner system, so the trail probably leads outward.”

“Okay, we’re not getting paid to count the stars,” Sue decided. “Let’s follow this trail and see what we find.”

It did not take long to find the end of the trail. “Huh!” Eesai commented from the pilot’s chair. “It just stops. They must have some form of interstellar drive after all.”

“Either that or they decided to drift for a while,” Sue speculated.

"I thought of that," Eesai assured her, "but there's no sign of the ship along the path of the thrust and... ah, here it is. I was just running calculations through the computer. No gravitationally significant objects have been in this path since Halerien went missing, so it wouldn't have used a gravity sling either. I doubt she's anywhere in the system."

"We have to make sure of that," Sue told her.

"We don't have time to do a full survey," Eesai pointed out, "but Jerry and Alano are conducting a deeper scan of the inner system."

"Inner system?" Susan asked. "How do we know these people didn't evolve in the outer system?"

"Jerry thinks their use of stone indicates a species that grew up on a stony, rather than a gaseous planet," Eesai replied.

"Or the large moon of a gas giant," Sue countered.

"I seriously doubt this is their system in either case," Eesai told her. "If it were, we should have detected ion trail traces all over the system. We just have a few scattered ones out here, which if you play connect the dots would indicate they came here from the next system to the east and, after an encounter with Halerien went back again."

When the deeper scan came up dry, Sue ordered the Matsya-Tron-Lano drive activated and they were whisked off to the next system. The system in which Halerien was found appeared to be normally full of planets and asteroids, but this new system, while it had only eight major planets, boasted two very dense asteroid belts.

They did not immediately detect ion trails, but they did catch the signal of a Lano distress beacon. Following that signal, Meriwether soon found the final missing ship, Larelien. The Larelien, while built along similar lines as all Lano ships, was a war ship. Her spiral hull had been painted gloss black and her skysails were dark gray. She was heavily armed and far more powerful than a ship of Halerien's class. "That may be why her distress beacon is still working," Jerry opined.

"Or else they found a way to shield it from the energy draining weapon of the Carono," Eesai countered. "Most of the rest of that ship is dark and without power."

"Was this the first rescue ship?" Jerry asked.

"She was," Alano informed him.

"I wonder if she chased the Carono here rather than simply following their trail," Jerry commented.

"The Carono have a fairly devastating weapon," Alano disagreed. "Why would they wait until they were in this system to turn and fire?"

"Maybe they were just trying to get away and thought they couldn't be followed?" Jerry speculated.

"Maybe," Alano allowed. "Trying to think along alien lines is challenging, isn't it?"

"It is," Jerry agreed. "The scary thing is we're supposed to be the experts."

Once again they made their way on board the Lano ship with Lilla's *sthaliripi* c aid. This time, however, life support was still operational and the main reason it was so dark and cold was that someone had turned off most systems. However, they were still forced to use their environment suits until all bodies had been moved into a cargo bay they decided to establish as a morgue. They had done likewise on the first ship. Once isolated to a single chamber, Larelien's air filters soon cleared away the stench of death.

Achmed and Wallo approached Sue on the second shift after Larelien's life support had been turned back on. "Captain," Wallo requested, "we would like to conduct a series of autopsies on board Larelien. You did not allow that in the case of Halerien," he added.

"It would have meant bringing the bodies on board Meriwether," Sue replied. "You two pointed out the risk of disease, after all. You could have worked on the other ship."

"No, we couldn't have, Captain," Wallo replied politely. "It was too cold and the bodies were frozen solid, too cold to thaw out."

"As long as you do your work on Larelien," Sue told the doctor, "you may do as you wish, provided you take every precaution to avoid the spread of disease."

"Of course, Captain," Wallo agreed.

Meriwether had been equipped with all the latest Lano technology, which only the few Lano on board could operate, but it also made Meriwether II the most advanced exploration and investigative ship in the Terralendir. "Something is blocking a lot of our instruments, however," Eesai reported to Sue after three days along side the Larilien.

"I believe it's the distress beacon," Lani added.

"Is there any reason you have to leave it on?" Sue asked.

"Well, no, I suppose not," Lani considered.

"It's just that Trelendir regulations require a beacon on any abandoned ship," Eesai added.

"We're here now," Sue commented. "Is she still technically abandoned?"

"She doesn't have a crew," Eesai pointed out.

"Okay, let's try it this way," Sue decided. "Do Lano regs define what constitutes a beacon?"

"A signal that helps to keep it from being any more of a shipping hazard than necessary," Eesai remembered.

"How about a flashing light?" Sue suggested.

"One light?" Lani asked. "I'm not sure I could stretch the regulations that far."

"We'll set all the navigation lights flashing," Eesai decided. "Make that ship look like one of your Christmas trees."

"Good," Sue nodded. "Do it. Oh, what's Serafyma working on? I haven't seen her lately."

“She’s assisting the doctors in their autopsies,” Eesai reported. “She doesn’t know medicine, but she knows how to perform chemical analyses with the best of them.”

“Okay. I’m feeling pretty useless here,” Sue admitted. “All I’m doing is giving orders while the rest of you do the work.”

“You are the captain,” Eesai pointed out.

“Yes, but that’s no excuse to let my bottom get fat in the command chair,” Sue replied. “I’d like to scout around the area with the pinnacle.”

“We need that for going between ships,” Eesai told her. “Lano ships don’t carry their own taxis with them.”

“They should,” Sue remarked.

“I agree,” Eesai nodded. “Not sure I would have a couple years ago. I probably wouldn’t have, in fact. It’s just not the way we do things. We could probably make a bridge from supplies on board Larilien like we did at our first meeting. Lani, do any of your engineers have the time to do something like that?”

“Not air-tight,” Lani replied, “and it would have to be a flexible tube made from standard conduit like we used on the first meeting. The job we used for the treaty negotiations took a month to build in a planet-side shop.”

“Let’s do that,” Sue told her. “Having the pinnacle free to act as a scout or rescue boat is important. We’ll use suits in the conduit tunnel just like last time. Worked out well enough then.”

“I wasn’t planning engine modification this time,” Lani replied. “I wasn’t even planning to take them off stand-by.”

“We may eventually,” Sue pointed out. “Haliren’s engines were dead, but we’ll be able to fly this ship out of here.”

“With a crew of four Lano?” Eesai asked.

“There are jobs humans can do over there,” Sue commented, “aren’t there?”

“All the switches work by *thalirip*,” Lani explained. “It will be best to tow her home. I can set the engines to just tick over, so to speak, so there won’t be all that much drag on Meriwether.”

“Will that work?” Sue asked. “Our star drives work by different principles.”

“Meriwether is a hybrid,” Lani replied. “When her interstellar drive is engaged it is compatible with Lano propulsion systems. It will work.”

“Nice to know,” Sue nodded. “Okay, for now, let’s turn off the beacon and make the lights flash all pretty and build that bridge.”

Once the bridge was in place, Sue and Serafyma took the pinnacle out for a closer look at the

asteroids in their vicinity. “This is more up Jerry’s normal line of work,” Sue admitted to Serafyma, “but I had to stretch my legs a bit.”

“I don’t blame you,” Serafyma laughed. “Besides, I work with Jerry all the time. We don’t need him here for a preliminary survey. We’ll get an inkling of what’s out there immediately, but the full details take hours or even days of analysis. I’m getting some interesting readings up ahead, by the way.”

“Monopoles?” Sue asked.

“No,” Serafyma replied, “but some very rich metallic ores, I think, and the usual carbonaceous chondrites, but you know there’s a fashion on Earth and some of the colonies for the crystals found in some and my readings look like the sort to indicate the presence of those crystals popularly called chondy gems. Nothing is certain yet. A few microscopic crystals might give us the same readings, but their presence alone is promising. Let’s move closer.”

As they approached the source of those readings, Serafyma grew continually more excited. “I’m sure of it now. We’re surrounded by chondy gems. Fair-sized ones at that.”

“Should we grab a few to bring back as samples?” Sue asked.

“Absolutely. These rocks around us contain dozens of chondies each. Normally the concentration in a rich deposit is more like one gem in every cubic kilometer of space rock,” Serafyma explained.

“My God!” Sue exclaimed, “If this area is ever mined by humans on a regular basis, rhinestones are going to cost more than these things.”

“Doesn’t bother me in the least,” Serafyma laughed. “For now we may have just paid for the trip even without all the bonuses and benefits the Peegee offered.”

“No complaints from me,” Sue laughed.

They were all their way back to Meriwether when Jerry radioed an alert to Sue.

Five

Jerry and Alano were working together in the sensor room deep within Meriwether II. There was no reason they couldn’t have done the same work from the bridge, but after a few days on station beside Larilien it became apparent that they could not work undisturbed up there. The sensor room was rarely visited unless something broke. It allowed the two men to accomplish much more than they might have from the bridge, not the least of which occurred when Jerry discovered he could tap into some of Larilien’s readouts through the radio link Lani had established. Once he knew that, it was a simple matter for Lani to connect them to all of Larilien’s sensor banks. “This is more like it,” he chortled.

“Stereoscopic sensor arrays.”

“We do seem to be resolving images from much farther away,” Alano commented. “Like that anomalous asteroid.”

“You know if this was a bad Vid program,” Jerry replied lightly, “that anomaly would turn out to be the returning Carono.”

“Uh...” Alano paused, “actually...”

“It does seem to be accelerating, doesn’t it?” Jerry asked.

“Better call battle stations,” Alano advised.

“That’s Sue’s job,” Jerry replied. “What’s the ETA on the anomaly?”

Alano punched a few numbers into a console and reported, “About three hours at current acceleration, assuming they’re going to decelerate and come to rest in this vicinity. A little under an hour if they don’t plan on slowing down.”

“Enough time we don’t have to panic,” Jerry decided. He leaned over to an intercom patch and called the bridge, “Sue?”

“Sorry, Jerry,” Lilla’s voice replied, “She and Sera are making a quick survey of the area around us.”

“Oh, maybe there’s no need for concern,” Jerry started to relax. “Do you know the pinnacle’s coordinates?” Lilla shot back a series of numbers to him. “Oh heck. Could you patch me through to the pinnacle, please?”

“Sure thing, Jerry,” Lilla chuckled. “Your wish is my command.”

“Now where did she pick that one up?” Jerry whispered to Alano, forgetting Alano would be even less acquainted with Terran popular stories than Lilla.

“Sue here, Jerry,” Sue told him via the comm. relay.

“Sue we need our captain on board, we have company coming. ETA fifty minutes to three hours. I advise pulling all personel out of Larilien and disconnecting the bridge for safety sake.”

“Good advice,” Sue commended him. “We should be docked in about five minutes. I’ll see you up on the bridge.”

“Alano and I will finish up here in our den of iniquity and be on our way shortly,” Jerry replied. “Come on, Alano. We can continue our scans from the bridge.”

“We’re going to have to,” Alano replied. They got up and started closing down the auxiliary displays. “Jerry, you seem to be a very versatile guy; geologist, comparative cultures, piloting.”

“And nominal first mate,” Jerry replied, “although Eesai has been filling that role on this trip.”

“You don’t mind?” Alano asked. “Most spacers would.”

“I’m usually too busy to mind,” Jerry replied. “And Eesai is a better officer than I am any way.”

“She was the best in the Treloian Navy,” Alano remarked. “I’m not surprised Clark gave her a job.”

“But you were disappointed she accepted it?” Jerry asked.

“After the fact,” Alano admitted. “I appreciated her as an officer but not as a person until she was suddenly beyond my reach.”

“You should tell her that,” Jerry advised.

“It wouldn’t be enough to get her to leave Meriwether, Inc,” Alano noted.

“Why should that matter?” Jerry asked. “Alano, I know you’re high-born in Lano society, but while Eesai might look like a trophy wife, she would never be satisfied to be one.”

“If that was all I wanted, there are all too many young women lined up for the job and would be even if I looked like one of Eesai’s glarno.” Alano laughed. “Well, everything is shut down. Let’s get up to the bridge.”

By the time they arrived on the bridge, everyone else was already at their stations. “What took you boys so long?” Eesai asked conversationally.

“We took a short cut,” Jerry remarked. “Have you spotted our bogey yet?”

“Our what?” Eesai asked.

“The approaching object,” Jerry interpreted. “We don’t know for certain what it is. It’s just a blip on your screens, so we call it a bogey. Long range sensors say it’s a rock, but we think it’s accelerating.”

“It’s probably a rock with an engine attached,” Eesai remarked.

“Good description for a Carono ship,” Jerry laughed and gave her the coordinates.

“I see it now,” Eesai confirmed. “It’s big.”

“Compared to what?” Jerry asked.

“Well, us for one,” Eesai replied. “It was hard to make out the scale from the visual records we saw, but that thing approaching us is five times the size of Meriwether.”

“Given the construction method it would have to be,” Jerry debated. “Still that is a little larger than I estimated.”

“There’s no proof this is the same ship the Larilien encountered,” Sue told them both.

“If it is a ship,” Alano warned her.

“You think it isn’t, Commodore?” Sue asked.

"I'm fairly certain it is, but we should try not to jump to that conclusion," he advised. "If it is a ship, we're as ready as we can be. If it isn't, it might just be a motorized rock in which case we might have to evade it. Let's wait until we can get a visual sighting."

"We should have one in a few minutes," Lilla announced. She was sitting next to Charley Rowntree, her section chief, so while he monitored the comm. channels, she was able to relay his findings to the rest. "Unknown object is just coming up within range of the long-range camera."

A few minutes later they got a clear view of the object still headed their way. "Well, we still don't know which way is up for those guys," Jerry noted. "That ship is coming at us about twenty degrees off our vertical."

"When they get closer," Eesai pointed out, "we can analyze their artificial gravity, if you think it's really all that important."

"It could be," Jerry remarked.

"How?" Eesai asked.

"I don't know," Jerry admitted, "but then who knows when any knowledge will suddenly become irreplaceably useful. It does look like the same flying splat the recording showed. Seems hard to believe ships built that way would ever end up with any two that look alike,"

"How did they know we were here?" Lilla wondered.

"They may just be investigating why the distress beacon got turned off," Sue pointed out.

They continued to monitor the Carono ship's approach. "Well, Jerry, if it helps," Eesai told him, "that area we think might be the bridge is on the bottom, unless the crewmen like hanging upside down. No arguing with gravity."

"Says you," Jerry laughed. "I argue with gravity a bit more every day. 'I'll bet Doc Wallo argues with it even more than I do and you will too when you're my age or his.'"

Eesai laughed. "Not what I meant, and you know it. The Carono ship is definitely decelerating now." She pause while the onboard computers made calculations. "It looks like they might come to rest about ten miles away from us."

"Or they want to approach very slowly," Alano pointed out.

"A Terran ship is probably going to be new to them," Jerry added, "On the other hand they may think we're horning in on their property."

"Larilien isn't their property," Eesai denied.

"They might think so," Jerry explained. "Spoils of war and all that."

"What's that strange smell?" Alano suddenly asked.

"Eww," Lilla agreed, "That is bad – like something died."

"I smell it now too," Eesai confirmed.

"I don't smell anything unusual," Sue remarked. "Is Lano olfactory sensitivity that much greater than human?"

"Normally just the opposite," Jerry told her, "although, our sense of smell isn't so much better that you'd notice most of the time. And I don't smell anything either. I'll call sick bay, though. Achmed and Wallo have devices to tell us if something's in our air."

"Nothing unusual," Achmed reported instantly over the intercom. "We already checked when Doctor Wallo sated complaining about a strange smell here too."

"Keep trying to figure it out, please," Sue requested. "With a strange ship approaching, the last thing we need is a wonky life support system. Eesai, is it a strong smell?"

"Not really or at least not yet," Eesai replied. "Carono ship is continuing to decelerate. ETA is now about two hours if they come here at all."

An hour later Jerry remarked, "I think I'm starting to smell it now."

"About time," Lilla snapped at him and apologized instantly, "Sorry, sir. The smell is making my head buzz."

"Mine too," Alano noted. "It's very distracting. Eesai?"

"Huh? What?" Eesai asked. Then she shook her head a bit and replied, "Sorry the buzz is bothering me."

"I'd better check on Lani," Sue decided. "If our chief engineer is similarly distracted, we could be in very deep trouble. Engineering, report."

"Status normal, Captain," Lani replied. "Engines are running well and ready to move us on your command."

"Good, Lani," Sue replied. "Do you, uh, smell anything down there?"

"Nothing unusual, Captain," Lani replied, "just the usual grease and ozone, the smell of hot metal and that sort of thing. Is there a problem?"

"Not in engineering," Sue told her. "Continue at stations, please. Maybe the engines mask the smell?"

"That wouldn't help against the buzzing if it was caused by some chemical in the air," Jerry replied.

"Except that Achmed and Wallo cannot detect any such chemical," Eesai added.

"Medical?" Sue called over the intercom.

"Yes, Captain?" Achmed answered.

"I'd like you and Wallo to go down to Engineering and see if you can detect the smell there," Sue commanded.

“Wallo’s rather disoriented at the moment. I think it would be best to let him rest,” Achmed advised.

“Then put him in a wheelchair and push him all the way,” Sue told him. “Lani isn’t having any trouble and we don’t know if it’s her or her engines.”

“Yes, captain,” Achmed replied uncertainly. “Medical out.”

“Speaking of medical, I could use an aspirin,” Jerry remarked, “but it’s not that bad.”

“Achmed, here in Engineering now,” the ship’s doctor called up to the bridge. “No difference in the atmosphere, but Wallo is recovering rapidly.”

“Must be the engines or the engine room,” Jerry remarked. “We have heavy shielding there or the rest of our instruments would get overpowered by the RF noise. Lilla are you picking up any anomalous signals?”

“No,” she told him, “but I only monitor the normal range of radio communications. Even on Lano ships we don’t monitor telepathic channels, which if I follow what you think is happening, is what we’re picking up.”

“Hmm, what do you think I think is happening, Lilla?” Jerry asked.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” Lilla countered.

“Not from this side of my eyes,” Jerry retorted. “Go ahead and amaze me.”

“Well, it should be obvious,” Lilla replied defensively. “The smell and buzzing is getting stronger the closer the Carono approach, right? But Lani’s engine room shields block out the signal. The Carono might be broadcasting on our telepathic frequency. Of course we’re not capable of interpreting the signal. Trained *Lanothalua* can communicate by sending thoughts back and forth.”

“Even barely trained ones can do so,” Eesai remarked. Her voice was slightly slurred, “so long as they are communicating with a master.”

“Yes,” Lilla agreed, “but we can’t communicate that way with humans, even those who claim to be telepathic themselves. Madame Malana has tried on several occasions. The shapes of our thoughts, or some other metaphoric description if you prefer, are different, and perhaps the frequencies we use don’t quite match so the best we can get is a bit of noise from each other. Malana believes that, even if our frequencies matched it would be like learning a foreign language. Well, there aren’t enough Terralano of either species who are proficient telepaths for it to ever be a common mode of communication anyway, and it is possibly easier to understand spoken rather than thought language anyway.

“I just assumed,” Lilla continued, “that Jerry was working up toward the explanation that the Carono were sending us a telepathic signal, whether intentional or not, I don’t know, but it’s evidently not compatible with anything we understand.”

“And why can Lano pick up this signal better than humans?” Sue asked.

“A couple possibilities come to mind, Captain,” Lilla replied. “First of all, it’s apparent that Lano have more naturally telepathic potential than humans and second the Carono frequency is closer to ours

than yours.”

“Good thing we have a mixed crew then,” Jerry remarked. “Uh, Alano, you aren’t looking so good. Maybe you should get on down to engineering?”

“Eesai and Lilla should too,” Sue decided.

“I’m not doing too badly,” Lilla argued. “I grew up having to work in a hostile environment from time to time. I just grit my teeth and do what I have to.”

“But this time you don’t have to and we may need you later,” Sue told her. “Besides, it looks to me like Alano and Eesai could use your help getting to the engine room. Don’t worry, Charley can talk for himself if he has to.”

“Gee, thanks, Captain,” Charley shot back sarcastically.

“Well you have been letting Lilla do all the talking,” Sue chuckled. “Lilla, go!”

“Wait a minute,” Eesai mumbled. “Oh that’s better. That’s much, much better!”

“What did you do?” Lilla asked.

“Malana gave me a few lessons while we were working together,” Eesai explained. “She taught me how to communicate telepathically, but that’s actually quite dangerous if that’s all you know. It leaves you horribly vulnerable because of increased sensitivity, so she also taught me how to build a mental shield. It’s really the same process, just in reverse. What I don’t understand is how you have done as well as you have regardless of being used to distractions... oh. I see.”

“What?” Lilla asked.

“You do it naturally, don’t you?” Eesai accused.

“I’m not doing anything,” Lilla denied.

“You just think you aren’t,” Eesai told her, “because you have your shield up without even having to think about it.”

“I can hear and smell the assault on us,” Lilla told her.

“So your shield isn’t perfect,” Eesai shrugged. “I’ll help you with that, but I couldn’t even talk straight and look what it’s doing to the commodore.”

“Oh my,” Lilla gasped. “We’d better get him down to the engine room.”

They got Alano to the engine room where there was barely a whisper or a sniff of the mental assault and Eesai coached Lilla on how to improve her already impressive mental shield. They were back on the bridge before the Carono ship arrived.

Eesai caught Lilla making notes on a pad of paper and asked what she was up to.

“I’m trying to devise *athalu* that will allow Lani and Alano to leave Engineering safely,” Lilla replied.

“Better put it aside for a bit,” Eesai advised. “We’ll be having company in a few minutes.”

Lilla had just finished putting her notes down when the Carono ship slowed to a halt half a mile away from Meriwether II. “They don’t seem to be attacking physically,” Sue observed. “Let’s try some form of communication.”

“I’ll try flashing our running lights at them,” Eesai told her. “It worked when we met you.”

“I thought we flashed the light at you first,” Sue recalled.

“Does it matter?” Eesai asked. “It worked.”

They spent the next few hours flashing a series of numbers at the Carono ship, but the strangers didn’t respond to the visual signals, nor did they respond to radio hails on any known frequency. Eventually, Sue decided, they would only wear themselves out on full battle stations and she devised duty shifts to keep defenses and communications manned, while they could also get some rest.

The next three days were spent trying all manner of lights and radio waves, but the Carono ship just continued to sit half a mile sunward of the Meriwether. Finally Lilla suggested they try telepathy. “Well, we’ve tried everything else,” she argued when Sue hesitated to allow it.

“Very well,” Sue finally agreed. “Give it a shot, but be very careful. From all you have told me so far, the Carono attack via telepathic frequencies.”

“It might not be an attack,” Lilla argued.

“Possibly not,” Sue admitted, “but they might not realize your message isn’t an attack and Eesai made it quite clear that you’re vulnerable to real attack while you’re broadcasting.”

“I’ll be careful,” Lilla promised. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and sent a simple greeting across the space between the two ships. Almost immediately everyone on board was buffeted by mind-stunning blasts of thought coming back at them. Even the humans were disoriented by the chaos of sound and smell that answered Lilla’s probe.

Lilla, herself, had briefly clapped her hands to her ears and, almost as quickly, fell to the floor, unconscious. Eesai, who had tried to keep her shields up, succeeded only for a few seconds, before the Carono mental blast etched its way into her mind and she fell to the deck as well, although unlike Lilla, Eesai never lost consciousness. She did, however, twitch in agony for the next five minutes until the attack ended.

“What the heck was that?” Sue asked as the mental blast subsided.

“I think they said, ‘Hello,’” Jerry replied, trying to help Eesai sit up.

“Bridge, this is Engineering,” A voice other than Lani’s called over the intercom. “What’s happening up there? Our Lano crewmembers are completely out of any meaningful action.”

“Jerry,” Sue decided, “Get some help and take Eesai and Lilla down to the engine room. If Doctor Wallo is awake and coherent ask him if the Lano have any medications that turn off their telepathy, although do me a favor and explain what happened.”

“What did just happen?” Jerry asked.

“I was hoping you could tell me,” Sue replied tiredly.

“Well, I think we established that the Carono communicate along telepathic lines,” Jerry replied massaging his temples.

“Maybe they just fight that way,” Sue shot back.

“Fighting is a form of communication,” Jerry replied. “Not a very good one, I’ll agree, but...”

“Maybe Lani could build some sort of machine that could do our talking for us?” Sue suggested.

“A machine?” Jerry asked.

“A telepathic radio, maybe,” Sue explained. “We could launch it to a point equidistant between our two ships, forming a long equilateral triangle, so when they reply, if what we just experienced was their form of speech, it won’t be directed at us.”

“Is telepathy directed?” Jerry wondered, “or is it broadcast in every direction at once?”

“They must have a way of talking to each other as individuals,” Sue maintained.

“Why?” Jerry asked. “They could have a single hive mind sort of intelligence, like some insects. Well, okay, the idea is worth trying, but there is no reason such a psychic radio, assuming we can build one, has to be above or below us, depending on how you see directions in space, up and down is all relative here. It would be nonexistent if not for artificial gravity and theirs is still askew relative to ours. If telepathy is directable, it would be better to put the device on the other side of the Carono ship. We can still send radio waves to it, but their response would head directly away from us.”

“Sounds good,” Sue decided. “Do it.”

“If it can be done,” Jerry agreed. “I’d better go see how Lani is doing, but we need someone to handle the comm. unit until Charley comes on duty.”

“I’ll do it,” Sue told him. “I was part of communications when we tried talking to the Lano, after all.”

Six

To Jerry's surprise, Lani said she would have no trouble with a telepathic radio. "It's just a matter of frequency, dear. Our spacesuits have small telepathic transmitters in the helmets, in fact. I thought you knew that. The person wearing them speaks into a microphone just like you do, but the device converts the sound into a telepathic projection and the transceiver at the other end does the same."

"Interesting way to build them," Jerry remarked.

"It was based on what *thalua* had been doing for centuries by themselves," Lani explained.

"Of course," Jerry nodded. "And is it directable?"

"Not when *athalua* does it," Lani replied, "but our radios transmit a directionally polarized signal."

"But is Carono telepathy directional?" Jerry mused. Lani shrugged. "Well, I suppose we'll find out soon enough. Hmm... humans had to discover radio waves, but Lano already had an example to follow."

"It wasn't that easy," Lani laughed. "Just because *ethalua* were doing it, we still didn't understand why. Earlier Lano just thought of it as magic until we started applying scientific principles to what we now call *thalirip*."

"But knowing it could be done, must have helped," Jerry remarked, "and on discovering how it worked, your own understanding of radioactivity and other related matters must have gotten a running start."

"I suppose," Lani nodded, "but a few centuries ago it was just magic – mysterious and unknowable – we knew it worked but the only ones interested in why were the *ethalua* and they didn't have the scientific training to make an informed investigation. That came slowly. Anyway, I can build this hybrid transmitter for you, but I'll need parts from Larilien. Can we reattach the bridge between the two ships?"

"I'll talk to Sue about it," Jerry told her. "Better have your human engineers do it, though, just in case the Carono decide they don't like it. Humans will be disoriented, but not crippled. Speaking of which, how are Lilla and Eesai doing?"

"Look for yourself," Lani told him. Eesai was sitting up, with Alano hovering by her side attentively. Lilla was still unconscious with both Wallo and Achmed tending to her. There was an intravenous drip attached to one arm. "That last attack was felt even through all our shielding, but it's back to normal down here now. Lilla took the full brunt of it, although Wallo says she should recover quickly, especially with that drip thing plugged into her arm."

"It's not just saline solution to keep up her fluids?" Jerry asked.

"I wouldn't know," Lani admitted. "All my patients are machines. The doctors use saline and other potions; I use grease and oil. It's a shame we don't have Erich with us this time around." Erich Schwartzwald was the chief engineer aboard Meriwether I. He and Lani had solved many hybrid engineering problems two years earlier on the first meeting between humans and Lano.

"He has his own mechanical patients to tend," Jerry reminded her.

"I know," Lani agreed, "but he has such a talent at making incompatible systems compatible. It would be useful just now."

“It would,” Jerry agreed, “but I’m confident you can do it too.”

“Thank you, dear,” she replied, giving him a warm hug. “Looks like Lilla is coming around. Go see how she is. I’ll start in on that transmitter.”

Jerry was reluctant to let go of his wife, but did so and rushed to Lilla’s side in time to hear her say, “What’s that bag thing you have plugged into my arm?”

“A saline drip,” Achmed replied. “We were worried about your fluid levels.”

“How long?” Lilla asked.

“Were you out?” Jerry finished for her. “Not long, but we didn’t know how long you would be out, kid. How are you feeling?”

“A little bruised,” Lilla replied from her cot. “Did I fall?”

“Out of your seat,” Wallo told her gently. “Don’t worry. You didn’t break anything.”

“Then may I sit up?” Lilla asked. “Am I tied down?”

“Just a precaution,” Achmed assured her, loosening the heavy cloth straps they had improvised.

“Now I want you to sit up slowly, Lilla-child,” Wallo instructed her as the last of the straps came off. He kept her down with gentle pressure from his right hand. “You may feel a little dizzy. You will if you get up too fast, just like if you get out of bed too quickly in the morning. But if you do feel dizzy, I want you to lie back down again. No acting tough.”

“I promise,” Lilla sighed, a slight rebellious note in her voice.

“Uh uh uh!” Wallo laughed. “I know that sound. Just play along with me a few minutes.”

“Oh, all right,” Lilla agreed reluctantly. “I’ll be a good little girl. I’m not all that young, you know.”

“Compared to me you are,” Wallo chuckled, but took his hand away from her shoulder. “Go ahead, sit up normally.”

“What about the bag thing?” Lilla asked.

“Ignore it,” Wallo advised. “If you feel dizzy we’ll need to leave it in a while, if not, we’ll take it right out.”

“Okay,” Lilla shrugged and pushed her legs out and over the edge of the cot. Then she sat up.”

“How do you feel?” Wallo asked.

“Stiff and sore in a few places,” Lilla admitted, “and my mind is still buzzing from my encounter with the Carono, but I’m not dizzy.”

“Are you sure?” Wallo pressed.

"I know how I feel," Lilla told him.

"My my, you have gotten feisty," Wallo laughed. "A bit of spirit is good, especially if you intend to pursue a career as *athalua*, but do try not to lose your adorability along the way."

"Yes, sir," Lilla replied meekly. "May I return to duty?"

"If you feel up to it," Wallo replied.

"I do," Lilla insisted, getting to her feet. "I must. My books are in my cabin."

"Books?" Wallo asked.

"*Thalirip*books," Lilla explained. "I bought several to study while on this mission, but now what I learn might be vital to the mission itself, and I promised to try to work out *athalu* that will allow you, Lani and the commodore to leave this deck."

"That would be nice, but establishing peaceful communication with the Carono will accomplish the same thing, you know."

"Then there will be something else I'm needed for," Lilla replied. "I wish Malana was here."

"Me too, child," Wallo told her. "Me too."

Lilla was not able to devise the *thalu* she intended, but her budding talent became essential several hours later after Lani had finished building the telepathic transmitter. "Building the mechanism is a snap," she told Lilla, "the trick is initializing it, which we're probably going to have to do several times. It's something that might normally fall to me, but it's not something I've ever done and I've always been a hands-on kind of girl. My specialty is in building hardware. Mindware? I'm passable, but, from what you've shown me, you have more potential than I have."

"But what if this is beyond me?" Lilla worried.

"Then I'll give it a shot," Lani shrugged, "or Eesai will. And we'll just keep trying until we get it right. You never know whether you can do it until you try, but I think you're our best shot at doing it right. We're probably going to have to do it several times to get the frequency right and to figure out how to send a signal that can be understood. Now here's the *thalu* we need to use. Fortunately, transmitters do occasionally need to be reinitiated, so it's in the manuals."

"Why do you have Lano engineering manuals on this ship?" Lilla asked, puzzled.

"Some are my personal copies," Lani admitted, "but most of what we have here I dragged over from Larilien when I realized we would need them here."

"You left engineering?" Lilla asked.

"It was a necessary risk," Lani told her. "I'm the only one onboard who would know which books we would need. They had an entire library over there. I can't imagine why; books on all sorts of ships and their parts, most of which Larilien doesn't have."

“Maybe they belonged to Larilien’s chief engineer,” Lilla suggested.

Lani thought about that. “Yes, that’s probably it,” she decided. “Now we need to cast the first few *thalu s* while assembling this beast.”

They worked deep into the next watch, but when they were done, they had a fully functional transceiver mounted inside a probe that could be steered remotely from the Meriwether’s bridge. It was launched shortly thereafter, but due to caution on Sue’s part, they allowed it to travel in a long circuitous course that she hoped would not seem threatening to the Carono.

The solution was successful, but only after a week of different attempts and retrievals of the probe. Each time they tried something new; psionic white noise that could be shut on and off in the same code they had tried with the lights, various warbling tones, and all sorts of different frequencies until the Carono finally responded with something the probe understood as thought images, heavily clouded by another, very complex signal. Once Lani found a way to filter out that signal, which to their equipment was only so much noise, they were at last able to speak, in a fashion, to the strangers.

Seven

“At last, a coherent message!” First Communicator Gerimzz exclaimed.

“I was beginning to think they didn’t know how to talk,” Third Communicator Threadnizz remarked.

“This is not much better,” Second Communicator Yarowzz told them. “It’s baby talk. So simplistic and not a hint of how it is supposed to smell. How can anyone communicate without scent?”

“I think these aliens are very wise,” Gerimzz told his traid. “Even on our own colony worlds language smells different. Oh yes, you can almost always figure out what someone is saying, but these are alien people. There is no chance they would speak our language. So we start with basic thoughts. Then once we have built up a vocabulary of sorts, I’m certain we can fill in the scents.”

“Such strange thought pictures, though,” Yarowzz noted. “They are so limited.”

“They are not panoramic,” Threadnizz pointed out. “But they are stereoscopic. Do they close one eye, do you think?”

“They may only have two,” Yarowzz considered.

“That can’t be a viable way to live,” Threadnizz argued, “only looking in one direction at a time.”

“Can you see above yourself very easily?” Gerimzz asked pointedly.

“Danger comes from around or below,” Threadnizz replied. “Why should I need to see above me?”

“Maybe on their world danger only comes from the direction they face,” Gerimzz speculated, “or

they always turn to face danger. Perhaps that is why their probe is on one side of us while they are on the other. Maybe they show a peaceful demeanor by not facing you. They might not realize we cannot turn away from them unless we show them our upper sides.”

“That’s a hard scent to smell,” Threadnizz commented. “It’s like nothing any sane person would think.”

“They cannot be insane,” Yarowzz disagreed. “A race of the insane could not travel in space, but they also must think differently because they are different.”

“They might be too different,” Threadnizz pointed out.

“That is not our job to decide,” Gerimzz told them both. “It is our job to find a way to talk to them.”

“This used to be an easy job,” Threadnizz sighed.

“And now it is an exciting one,” Gerimzz told the third communicator. “One that might provide promotion and honor for all of us.”

Eight

“Well, we can trade images,” Eesai commented to Sue in the captain’s cabin, “and we can and have established a series of numbers and chemical elements again, but where do we go from here?”

“We can use pictures to demonstrate verbs, I suppose,” Sue remarked, “and at least these Carono or whatever they call themselves aren’t trying to kill us after all.”

“That’s a mercy, although Lani, Wallo and Alano still need to stay on the engineering deck for the time being, just in case,” Eesai pointed out. “I think we’re going to need to meet them face-to-face just like we did on our first meeting.”

“That’s going to be difficult to pull off,” Serafyma told them from the open doorway. “Sorry, I hope I’m not barging in.”

“Not at all,” Sue told her. “The door is open. What do you mean it’s going to be difficult to pull off?”

“Well, if my sensors are at all accurate, the Carono shipboard temperature is one hundred ninety-five Celcius.”

“So I don’t imagine they’ll invite us around for hoi,” Eesai remarked. “Can life exist without liquid water?”

“Of course it can,” Sue told her. “Otherwise their ship wouldn’t be that hot.”

“Sorry, I meant can life as we know it exist without liquid water?” Eesai corrected herself.

“Life as we know it doesn’t exist at nearly twice the temperature of boiling water,” Serafyma told her. “Well, I think some bacteria may be adapted to conditions like that.”

“I doubt it,” Sue told her. “I think the most resilient microbe ever found could only survive up to one hundred fifty-three and that wasn’t on Earth, but one of the colonies.”

“I don’t think organic life can hold together at one hundred ninety-five,” Eesai remarked.

“Then the Carono can’t be organic,” Serafyma concluded.

“What then?” Eesai asked.

“I’m not sure. There could be several possibilities, but I think we’ll have to wait and see for ourselves,” Serafyma told her.

“Oh make an educated guess at least,” Eesai requested.

“Silicon-based is my best guess,” Serafyma told her. “The Lano name, Carono or ‘Rock People,’ may be literally true.”

“Rock people?” Eesai asked. “How can they move? Are they part molten?”

“Not at those temperatures,” Serafyma assured her. “But there is a vast array of silicon compounds, especially silicone, that can be flexible.”

“Silicone creatures,” Eesai considered. “Like rubber?”

“Maybe,” Serafyma nodded.

“It wouldn’t burn at that temperature?” Eesai asked.

“No, there are many variants that are stable at that temperature and higher,” Serafyma told her.

“Rubber people?” Eesai mused.

“Well, maybe their skin and tissues are,” Serafyma nodded, “but maybe only their joints are silicone. Maybe their skin is made up of articulated metal plates. The thing is we won’t know until we meet them, or learn more about their language.”

“I think it’s time we tried exchanging air samples,” Sue decided.

“I’ll take a bottle to their ship,” Eesai volunteered instantly.

“All right,” Sue told her, “but don’t stay on board that ship if you can help it. We want to talk, not

slow-cook a La.”

“Sue’s right,” Serafyma added. “None of our suits will protect us against that sort of temperature for more than an hour or two.”

“Oh, and, Eesai,” Sue added with a smirk, “please don’t faint this time.”

Eesai’s face turned bright orange. On their first meeting Eesai, had performed a similar mission, delivering an air sample to Meriwether I, but nervousness, excitement and shock had gotten to her and when, out of curiosity, she tried to peek in on the humans, she had fainted. The incident had worked out for the best as the humans had been forced to bring her inside the ship and that, in turn, started face-to-face communications, but she could not help remaining embarrassed about it even two years later. In spite of the bright color spread across her face, Eesai came back, “No fair! If the neighbors hadn’t been so big and ugly, I wouldn’t have been so shocked.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sue laughed. “I’ve heard that song before. Just don’t get curious about the neighbors.”

“Actually, that’s why we’re here,” Serafyma reminded them. “How about if I go with Eesai? Always good to have a backup.”

“Having one of each Terralano species is a good precedent, Sera,” Sue agreed. “Okay, how soon can you be off?”

An hour later, Eesai and Sue were hugging just inside the airlock, a far cry from their earlier banter. “Be careful, little sister,” Sue whispered to her.

“I will, big sister,” Eesai promised. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Serafyma and Lilla having a similar conversation a short distance away. “Maybe we should have sent those two?”

“Another time, maybe,” Sue replied. “Well, we’re not accomplishing anything on this side of the airlock. Go drop off that bottle and hurry on back.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Eesai grinned and picked up her helmet. She and Serafyma finished suiting up and stepped into the airlock together while Sue and Lilla rushed forward to the bridge.

“I would feel better if I were making that trip,” Jerry told Sue quietly as they waited for the first report from Eesai and Serafyma. “You know Sera is a bit of a klutz.”

“I can’t afford to lose you,” Sue told him just as quietly. “You’re the closest thing we have to a language expert on board.”

“But you can afford to lose Eesai?” Jerry asked.

“No!” Sue told him immediately, “but someone had to do this and she spoke up first.”

“But Sera?” Jerry repeated his concerns.

“Eesai is much more nimble than the average human,” Sue laughed.

“So long as Sera doesn’t try getting fancy with the pinnacle,” Jerry shot back, remembering his own injury at Serafyma’s hands. There wasn’t a crew member who had served on the first Meriwether who

had not at least had a bowl of soup spilled on him because of Serafyma's occasional bouts of clumsiness.

"They aren't taking the pinnacle," Sue told him. "Besides, Serafyma never makes the same mistake twice."

"I know," Jerry agreed. "That's why I'm so worried. She's an amazingly inventive woman."

Down in the airlock Eesai was just getting ready to open the outer door. "I'd be happier if I were wearing a Lano-made suit," she confessed to Serafyma. "These human suits are fine and safe, but even scaled down to my size, this one doesn't quite fit."

"Our anatomy is not exactly identical," Serafyma admitted, "but all of ours come with jet packs."

"But they use your air supply to work," Eesai objected as she waited for her eyes to adjust to light conditions outside the ship. "It's a marvel of efficiency, but the more maneuvering you do, the shorter the time you have outside the ship."

"This shouldn't be a long mission," Serafyma pointed out.

"You never know," Eesai replied. "Well, I suppose we can extend our range by kicking off. Just use our jets to correct our flight path."

"I'm not as accurate at free-jumping as you are," Serafyma told Eesai. "I don't know any human who is, so if you don't mind, I'll use my jets."

"Suit yourself," Eesai shrugged and jumped out of the airlock and directly toward the Carono ship.

"I don't know how she does that," Serafyma muttered to herself as she used her jets to follow. "Must be half monkey."

"I heard that," Eesai told her.

"You were supposed to," Serafyma replied.

In spite of seeming to leave Meriwether at a high rate of speed, the Carono ship was still half an hour distant. After the first fifteen minutes, however, Lilla radioed a message from the bridge, "Sera, Eesai, the Carono airlock seems to be opening. Sue suggests slowing down your approach."

"Will do," Eesai agreed. She looked ahead and saw what looked like two ovoids leaving the Carono ship and starting to head toward her and Serafyma. "Sera, let's brake to a halt and let them come to us. If they seem to be hostile jet off in any other direction, but not directly back to the ship."

Serafyma applied her jets as she asked, "Why not straight back? It's not like they don't know where our ship is."

"Because that's the direction they're headed and they're already in motion. If you want to evade them, you have to go another way," Eesai explained.

"Whatever sort of creatures they are," Serafyma remarked, "they're wearing spacesuits, aren't they?"

"I was pretty sure that would be the case, even if they are essentially living rubber balls," Eesai

replied. "They need to breathe air as far as we can tell, even if we don't know just what they do breathe. Soundings of their ship revealed there was some sort of internal atmosphere."

"Did you say rubber balls?" Serafyma asked. "From what I can tell, they are more discus-shaped, with a fat bulge in the middle and ten limbs."

"Looks like that to me," Eesai agreed. "Five of those limbs appear to project, evenly spaced from one side of the discus body; I would guess those are legs. The other five are just as evenly spaced, but seem to stick out from the perimeter of their bodies."

"Arms?" Serafyma asked.

"Unless they prefer to roll along their rims," Eesai remarked, "but given the way they are floating toward us, I doubt they do that, except maybe for fun."

"Fun?" Serafyma asked.

"Haven't you ever rolled down a hill?" Eesai asked.

"Well, sure, but..." Serafyma responded. "Oh, yes, I see what you mean. Could be an extreme sport to them."

"Too bad we can't try it," Eesai laughed.

"We could build a discus-shaped vehicle," Serafyma suggested.

"Not the same thing," Eesai decided. "You know, I don't think they are quite so discus-shaped as we thought. Now that they are closer it's more like a rounded, five-point star, slightly concave between the points, which we think are arms."

"If those arms are evenly spaced," Jerry radioed them from the ship, "they likely have five or more eyes, also evenly spaced. It's possible they have no set front or back."

"They could have a preference, however," Serafyma argued, "analogous to our own right and left handedness, although Lano are all ambidextrous. I'm jealous of that, by the way."

Jerry kept a retort to himself, but could not help but wonder how much more clumsy Serafyma might be at times if she had to stop and think about which hand to use. Then he decided, she might actually be more coordinated if she actually stopped to think.

"I think they're talking to us," Eesai reported. "I just got a sniff of something really horrendous and my mental shields are having trouble staying up. Sera, are you okay?"

"I don't smell or hear a thing," Serafyma confirmed.

"I'd better get back to Meriwether while I can," Eesai decided, handing her airbottle off to Serafyma.

"I'll ready the pinnace, just in case," Jerry told them. "We should have done that before."

Eesai didn't want to seem to be running away, but the smell and mental noise was really bothering her, so after a slow retreat for a few minutes, she boosted her speed even as the Carono representatives

approached Serafyma.

Serafyma was puzzled as the two Carono stopped several dozen yards away from her and then only one actually drew near. Now that she could judge their size, she saw they were approximately two meters wide and nearly as tall, assuming they could stand on straight legs. Those legs, if that's what they were, were being held in a half bent position, so Serafyma could not tell for certain.

Serafyma held the bottle out to the Carono who looked at it questioningly. She tried tapping a code to indicate the contents, in case the visual code on it was unintelligible to the aliens. For her troubles she was bathed in a stream of mental noise and smell, but she held steady until the Carono finally accepted the bottle. She was just about to leave when a third Carono exited the ship and jetted over to them rapidly. That one gave her a large, round object before all three of the Carono turned and started to return to their ship.

"What did they give you?" Sue asked Serafyma from Meriwether.

"Not sure," Serafyma admitted as she too started her return, "but I think it might be a sample of their air. There are some markings on the outer surface that could be our code. But I'll feel better if we let the computer analyze it first. How is Eesai?"

"I'm much better now," Eesai radioed. "I'll meet you outside the airlock."

Nine

"I think we're actually establishing a meaningful dialogue faster this time," Jerry told Sue in his office later that day. "The Carono understood the concept of an air sample much faster than we did."

"True enough. On the other hand I think we were just as quick off the mark when Eesai brought us a bottle," Sue pointed out. "Do we have an analysis of the container Sera brought back?"

"Sera's working on it now," Jerry replied. "Anyway the air sample thing has worked twice now. The Lano were quite clever to come up with the idea and I'm putting it on a list of recommendations of ways and means to go about a first contact with an alien species. After two times I think we get to write the manual."

"Don't forget to dedicate a chapter to me," Sue told him dryly. "I see you've been drawing again."

"I drew a lot of Lano faces when we met them," Jerry explained. "It helped me understand them, so I've started the same with the Carono. So far I only have them in their spacesuits, of course, so there's

no chance of getting facial expressions and body language. Well, I suppose some body language comes through, but not a lot and we don't know how to interpret it in a five-legged, radially symmetrical organism. Hmm, they're a little like some starfish, although not very much, I guess."

"Not much at all," Sue told him. "Radial symmetry is all they have in common that we know of."

"Jerry?" Serafyma's voice sounded over the intercom, "Do you know where the skipper is? I have the results of the air analysis."

"Sue's right here, Sera," Jerry replied. "You want to come here or should we go there?"

"Better yet," Serafyma told him, "both of you meet me in Engineering. That way we'll let everyone know at once. I'm out."

"She's out," Jerry remarked. "Well, I guess we ought to be too."

"The Carono air sample is amazing," Serafyma enthused. "The atmosphere of their world is thick in sulfur and its compounds with high amounts of methane, carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide."

"Sounds like a rich organic soup," Jerry noted.

"Perhaps, but someone left the soup on the stove too long," Eesai remarked. Everyone turned to stare at her. "Sorry," she shrugged. "Spending too much time in Jerry's company, but I think the metaphor may be apt. Is organic life possible at the temperatures on their ship?"

"Not as we know it," Serafyma admitted, "but we have already discussed the possibility of silicone-based life. Silicone is, on Terralano worlds a class of synthetic compounds built on a backbone of silicon-oxygen pairs, but carbon atoms frequently bond with that chemical backbone. While such compounds must be manufactured on worlds inhabitable by Terralano, it is not impossible for them to form naturally under certain conditions that some non-terrestrial worlds might enjoy. If the Carono are from such a world, it is probable that, given their atmosphere, their silicones do have carbon in them and technically they would be organic life, since that would be part of their make-up, but it would be best to think of them as being silico-organic.

"Silicon is closely related to carbon, being directly below on the periodic table of elements and it forms much the same sort of chemical compounds that carbon does," Serafyma continued. "Their properties differ, of course, but there are enough of them that silico-organic life has been hypothesized in classes since the Twentieth Century. Now it is possible we'll find out how close we were."

"Twentieth Century?" Eesai chuckled. "Doesn't that start in another eighteen years?"

"Point taken," Serafyma nodded, "Lano calendars aren't the same as Terran and in the future we may be counting from the start of the Terralendir."

"Is that officially started?" Alano mused.

"I would count from our first meeting," Sue replied.

"That would make this Year Three A.T.C Ab Terralendir Conditia," Jerry added.

"Latin mixes strangely with Lani," Achmed commented.

“Right now we need to find out how Terrañol or Lani mixes with Carono,” Sue decided. “How can we accelerate the process of communication with the Carono?”

“By talking really fast,” Jerry snapped.

“Funny,” Sue retorted dryly.

“Problem is we can’t live in their environment and I suspect they would find ours unbearably cold,” Serafyma remarked.

“I suspect you are correct there,” Wallo told her. “While you were out there trading souvenirs, Achmed and I were scanning the encounter from here. Their suits are nearly as hot as the interior of their ship.”

“Every day is a beach day on their world,” Jerry remarked, “But I’ll pass going for a dip in what passes for an ocean there.”

“Good idea,” Serafyma told him. “My best guess is sulfuric acid. . . no too hot for that to be a liquid. It’s probably something really corrosive.”

“Can’t beat the exfoliation experience,” Jerry shot back.

“Beauty treatments, no,” Sue brought them back in line. “Talkies, yes. Get on it, please.”

“Are you in a hurry to get them a message?” Jerry asked.

“Yes,” Eesai replied. “I want to tell them to stop shouting. Every so often they forget to talk to the probe and send a blast directly at us, or haven’t you noticed?”

“I’d notice those mental blasts if I was two months in the grave,” Jerry agreed. “We’ll get back on it.”

Building up a mutual lexicon with a totally alien species is bound to be a long, slow process, but Jerry and Eesai thought they were making good progress until they got to the matter of verbs. Every time they tried to broach the subject, anyone attempting to talk to the Carono became overwhelmed with all sorts of horrible smells and mental buzzing.

“We already have *athalirip* -based transmitter,” Jerry mentioned to Alano one afternoon. “Couldn’t we build a similar device to handle translations for us?”

“Maybe,” Alano nodded, “but first we need to be able to understand what they are saying.”

“So we need a computer than can cast spells,” Jerry concluded.

“Ha!” Alano laughed. “That might work, if you could pull it off, but it wouldn’t change the fact that the *thalua* who builds the translation parts of it needs to understand the language to be translated.”

“That actually makes sense,” Jerry agreed. “A computer needs to be programmed before it can work correctly, but you can hear their thoughts.”

“And smell them,” Alano replied, wrinkling his nose in the memory. “So can you. Do we understand them? Of course not. We don’t speak the same language.”

“Worse, I am starting to believe their language is partially made up of projected smells,” Jerry told him. “We’ll never be able to speak to them that way, of course, so we’ll have to make up a new language all of us can use.”

The breakthrough finally came from one of the linguistics team on board the Carono ship. “I send you greetings,” the Carono projected one afternoon, surprising everyone on board. “Can you understand what I say?” Lilla tried thinking back a reply, but after a few seconds of Lilla’s trying, the Caro continued, “Sorry thinking. You not speak loud enough to hear clearly. Could you use your speaking machine?”

“We hear you,” Lilla repeated through the transceiver. “You actually speak too loudly for us.”

“Ah! We had been wondering why transceiver in wrong direction,” the Caro replied much more softly. “Is better?”

“Much better,” Lilla agreed. “We can move the transmitter if it bothers you.”

“The directional difference confusing,” the Caro replied, projecting intense relief. “I am Third Communicator Threadnizz or that is the best approximation I can make without the olfactory element of speech and must apologize for contacting you without warning.”

“No need to apologize,” Lilla replied quickly even as Eesai started moving the probe to a location between Meriwether and the Carono ship. “We’ve all been working toward this moment since we got here. Oh, where are my manners? I am Lilla Di Lasai, assistant communications officer on our ship which we call Meriwether II.”

“Your ship has name?” Threadnizz asked. “It is not alive. Is it?”

“It is a convention among the Terralano,” Lilla explained. With the probe moved, Eesai busily signaled everyone else involved in communications to come to the bridge. We name our ships after great people, hopeful ideals or even just sounds that please us.”

“Sounds?” Threadnizz asked. “You talk with sounds?”

“The Carono don’t?” Lilla asked.

“Who are Carono?” Threadnizz asked.

“Oh, sorry, it’s our name for you,” Lilla told Threadnizz. “Presumptuous, I know, but we felt the need for a name. What do you call your people?” Lilla was suddenly assaulted with a heavy volcanic, sulfury odor. “Wait. That smell is your name for yourselves?”

“You don’t use smells to talk?” Threadnizz asked. “I suspected. To us speech without smell is just baby talk. There is no sound or thought image for our name, it is pure smell. What does Carono mean?”

“The Stone People,” Lilla replied. “We named you for your ships.”

“It suits,” Threadnizz told her after a pause. “Call us Carono.”

Lilla introduced the rest of the Terralano who had been working on a mutual language. “Nice to meet you all,” Threadnizz replied. “Please excuse, I have been ordered to report to Command Triad. I will be back as soon as I can.”

“Three captains?” Jerry wondered.

“Why not?” Sue asked. “Maybe they take turns or work in shifts.”

“Or maybe they have three sexes,” Eesai speculated, “so everything they do is in groups of three. You heard him... uh, her?”

“Sounded a bit like a her, maybe,” Jerry replied, “although I don’t know why.”

“Anyway, she called herself Third Communicator,” Eesai went on. “Wouldn’t that imply there are two others?”

“Or there were two others,” Jerry replied. “Maybe she only communicated to thirds, whatever those are.”

“No need to make this as complicated as possible,” Lilla told them. “We can just ask.”

“But why were we talking to the Third Communicator?” Jerry could not help but wonder. “Wouldn’t we rate the first one?”

“Might not be his shift,” Sue replied.

On the Carono ship Threadnizz nervously approached the Command Triad. “Third Communicator Threadnizz,” First Captain Jerakinzz demanded, “why have you opened communications with the aliens without the other members of your triad?”

“First Captain,” Threadnizz replied humbly, “I was taken by surprised. We have been trying to talk to the aliens for a long time without success, I had no reason to expect my silly idea would work.”

“So trying it alone was to avoid embarrassment when it failed?” Second Captain Gleanzz asked.

“My triad members refused to consider the notion of using baby talk,” Threadnizz replied.

“Understandable,” Third Captain Lakizz replied, “but it was still not the right procedure. Our civilization depends on the triad, Third Communicator. In the future we expect you to work with yours. Now, go report to them and then keep communicating with the aliens.”

“Yes, Captains,” Threadnizz replied. “Thank you.”

“The Third Communicator may be too smart for the rest of the Communications Triad,” First Captain Jerakinzz considered.

“Do we replace the Third, or the other two?” Second Captain Gleanzz asked.

“We do not want to lessen our abilities to communicate,” Third Captain Lakizz pointed out.

“And this is not the time to replace any Communicator,” First Captain Jerakinzz told them, “but when we next reach Homeworld, we may want to, if we can, find two more like the Third.”

Threadnizz dreaded speaking to its triad. The idea of trying simple sentences as though talking to an infant had been discarded by the others as potentially insulting to the strangers. That Threadnizz would try it anyway was a sign of discension and that was never good.

“You did what?” Second Communicator Yarowzz asked angrily after listening to Threadnizz’s apology and explanation. “We agreed not to.”

“You must admit it worked, however,” First Communicator Gerimzz reasonably. “Threadnizz, please do not act on your own again.”

“Or we will cast you from the triad!” Yarowzz warned.

“No, Yarowzz,” Gerimzz replied gently. “Threadnizz has reminded us this day just why the triad structure is so powerful. As a triad we act as one, but we are also three individuals with differing ideas. We each bring something to the triad the others do not. We must keep in mind that sometimes the majority is wrong as we were this time. Threadnizz’s idea was correct, but we rejected it. Threadnizz was also wrong by breaking the triad to communicate with these Terralano, but the time for recriminations is past. Let us revitalize the triad and move on.”

“Thank you, First Communicator,” Threadnizz replied gratefully.

“Must we continue to use such simple speech?” Yarowzz complained.

“The Terralano do not understand our smells,” Threadnizz replied.

“Barbarians!” Yarowzz muttered.

“The literal meaning of the word is ‘foreigners,’” Gerimzz noted. “Yes, they are foreign to us. Perhaps we seem as barbaric to them as they do to us. We need to learn more.”

“At least now,” Yarowzz considered, “we do not have to speak out of the wrong mouth.”

Ten

After an hour of waiting by the comm. Station, all but Lilla and Jerry drifted back to their normal jobs. “What’s taking them so long?” Lilla asked another hour later.

“Perhaps they are trying to decide what to say to us,” Jerry speculated. “Threadnizz sounded a bit surprised to have actually been talking to us.”

“You mean she didn’t know what she was doing?” Lilla asked.

“No,” Jerry laughed, “I mean I doubt she expected what she tried to work. We’ve been trying to get a meaningful dialogue here for weeks and I’m sure they have as many ideas as we have. After a while you try stuff just for the sake of trying anything. I don’t know what she did, but it probably seemed silly to her at the time.”

“I greet,” Threadnizz told them suddenly.

“Welcome back,” Jerry replied. “Did you have a nice conversation with the captain?”

“I spoke with Command Triad,” Threadnizz replied, “and now I and my triad speak to you.”

“Your Command Triad?” Lilla asked.

“No, Lilla Di Lasai,” Threadnizz replied, “The Communications Triad of which I am Third Communicator. I introduce First Communicator Gerimzz.”

“I greet,” Gerimzz added, there was a faint whiff of sulfur along with his words.

“And Second Communicator Yarowzz,” Threadnizz concluded. There was a loud mental blast accompanied by a plethora of unpleasant odors.

“A bit loud and smelly there,” Jerry replied without thinking.

On the Carono ship Threadnizz glared at Second Communicator Yarowzz. “I told you to speak softly, slowly and in simple terms.”

“I forgot,” Yarowzz told Threadnizz angrily.

“You did not believe me,” Threadnizz accused.

“We must still learn their language,” Gerimzz pointed out. “Threadnizz, you talk to them, we will listen.”

“Apologies,” Threadnizz told the Terralano. “My triad has trouble believing you do not use odors to communicate. The olfactory component of our language is automatic. It is only through concentration that we can suppress it.”

“Whereas none of us could ever master telepathic olfactory signals,” Lilla replied. “Sound is our primary communications medium.”

“Sound.” Threadnizz repeated. “You said that before. We find it incredible. Hmm? Oh, my First wishes to know how you can distinguish a vocal sound from other noises.”

“Probably the same way you can tell communication odors from other smells,” Jerry replied. “Your mastery of our language seems to be improving rapidly.”

“Thank you,” Threadnizz told him. “Now, I’m certain you have as many questions for us as we have for you.”

Jerry reported later, “It appears they have no genders as we think of them. When they wish to produce young, they form a mating triad. It evidently takes three to make a baby. Actually, it sounds like they may be quite a romantic sort of people, as the mating triads are often formed just for long-term companionship.”

“We were partially right about silicones making up parts of their bodies,” Serafyma added, “although their skin is mostly silica and their bones are metallic.”

“Mercury running in their veins?” Sue asked almost jokingly.

“It’s a mercury-gallium mix with a lot of what we might think of as impurities, although of course those impurities are what makes for a healthy Caro,” Serafyma replied. “They were somewhat horrified at first when they thought we had built our ships out of the bones of our dead.”

“Do they know what happened to the Treloian ships and their crews?” Wallo asked.

“I think they suspect there was some sort of problem,” Jerry replied, “but have not quite puzzled out what it was. We have been hesitant to tell them, although I suppose we should answer truthfully if they ask. They seem so quick to apologize for even the slightest imagined problems that I did not want to saddle them with guilt over the deaths and injuries of three crews.”

“This Threadnizz sounds like a linguistics genius,” Sue remarked.

“Quite probably so, although First Communicator Gerimzz is able to communicate with us now. Yarowzz is having trouble keeping smell out of his speech still,” Eesai replied, wrinkling her nose.

“I should mention that while Threadnizz did answer our questions about the Carono birds and bees, it seemed distinctly uncomfortable about the subject,” Jerry added. “They evidently do not consider that polite conversation. Keeping that in mind, Threadnizz was amazingly forthcoming about taboo subjects. It told me it had taken classes in comparative societies in what I assume was college, and that these subjects were studied dispassionately in the classroom.”

“And the less mature students probably snicker about it as much as our own do in biology,” Serafyma noted.

“Threadnizz did assure us, however, that there is little the Carono would find offensive when asked by such extreme strangers,” Lilla added. “I think we will need to advise our ambassadors not to inquire about Carono children, however.”

“As it happens, they only mate in season, when conditions are right, which is why so many Carono go to space,” Jerry told them. “The conditions up here are never right so they are not forced to have children. It’s a bit of a paradox, since they do form mating triads as we said. I guess they just don’t like to talk about it.”

“But we have established certain subjects as safe for small talk,” Eesai reported. “Evidently everyone talks about the weather and even the Carono can do nothing about it. Too bad we’ll have to meet in space, but even up here there is weather of a sort. That, however, will be a matter for ambassadors to be

inventive about and that brings us to our next topic.

“The Carono we have been talking to admit they are not empowered to speak for all their kind. Our own commission does not go much farther for that matter,” Eesai continued. “They need to arrange for a triad of Negotiators to be assembled just as we’ll have to allow appointed ambassadors to take the next step.”

“So it is time to leave?” Sue asked.

“Nearly so,” Eesai told her. “It is traditional for Carono to exchange gifts with new friends.”

“What sort of gift?” Sue asked.

Eesai looked to Jerry and signaled for him to continue. “Gifts of this sort should be something of value to the giver but not necessarily to the recipient, although the best gifts are valuable to both.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” Sue admitted.

“I’m sure the Carono will understand if Terralano have a different set of values, of course,” Jerry told her. “I’m sure we do, in fact. In any case the exchange in a case such as this is properly made between ship captains, although Lilla and Threadnizz will be exchanging personal gifts.”

“They have three captains” Sue noted. “Do I need to present three gifts?”

“No, we worked that out,” Jerry assured her. “Normally there would be a triple exchange between triads but as we do not function in triads they are willing to adapt their custom.”

“All right,” Sue agreed. “So when do we make the exchange?”

“Tomorrow morning at the start of the first watch,” Jerry told her.

Because the Terralano and the Carono could never meet without one side or the other staying inside environment suits, they chose to conduct the gift exchange in free-fall between the ships. All three captains of the Carono ship were there with the triad of communicators. Meeting them were Sue, Jerry, Eesai, Lilla and Alano, all of whom had spoken to the Carono communicators over the course of the past three weeks.

“First Captain Jerakinzz presents Captain Susan Ho a gemstone of his own crafting,” First Communicator Gerimzz announced. First Captain Jerakinzz floated forward with a two-inch wide egg-shaped object with bright red and yellow stripes and looked at the waiting Terralano.

Sue used her jets to propel herself until she was directly in front of the first captain. “This,” she announced over her radio to be echoed telepathically by Eesai, “is a statue of the Goddess Pele, crafted from the stone of my homeland.” She gave the basalt figurine to the Caro and accepted the large gem. Sue felt she ought to make some sort of speech about mutual respect and alliance, but this, she had learned, was not the Carono way. That they were making this exchange of gifts said it all.

Both captains backed away but before the party could break up one of the other Carono came foreward and asked, “Lilla?”

“Here, Threadnizz!” Lilla waved and moved closer.

“This has always been my favorite piece of art,” Threadnizz told Lilla, handing her a five-inch wide disk of a translucent orange material. There was a button on the side that when pushed caused the object to change shape and color through an extended cycle of patterns and shapes.

“It’s lovely,” Lilla replied. “I have a toy from my childhood, soft and cuddly that was my own pride and joy, but I suddenly realized it would probably burst into flame when you brought it on board your ship.” She paused to experience Threadnizz’s gentle telepathic laughter. “Instead, I have this watch that was a gift when I graduated High School. It tells time as we measure it on my planet. And our Chief Engineer assures me it can withstand what you call a normal environment.”

“Pretty!” Threadnizz enthused.

“We will tell our Leading Triad of you and of our agreement to meet here again at the specified time,” Gerimzz announced on behalf of First Captain Jerakinzz before the Carono turned back to their ship.

“Are the tow cables secured to the Larilien?” Sue asked Eesai.

“They are,” Eesai told her. “Lani is already there with two engineers. Wallo is there too and Alano and I will be headed there next.”

“How about Lilla?” Sue asked. “You’ll probably need every available La on board.”

“Yes and some humans too,” Eesai agreed, “but we’re just a skeleton crew. The whole point is to make the towing operation as free of stress on Meriwether as possible.”

“All right,” Sue decided. “Let’s get going. I’m going to miss you, Short Stuff.”

“We’ll be talking constantly, Tall, Dark and Hairy,” Eesai shot back.

“Hairy?” Sue protested.

“Well, those lustrous locks of yours are longer than I am tall,” Eesai explained. “See you soon.”

On board Meriwether II, Sue stepped onto the bridge to find the night watch officers on duty. “Larilien isn’t the only ship with a skeleton crew,” she remarked. “Do we have a pilot on duty?”

“Tommy’s down in sick bay, Skipper,” Lilla’s replacement informed her.

“Well, there’s no need to wait,” Sue decided sitting down in the seat. “I’ll pilot. Please call Larilien and verify they are ready to engage engines.”

“Aye, aye!” the communications officer replied.

“Are we ready to get out of here?” Jerry asked as he entered the bridge.

“Jerry?” Sue asked. “I thought you would be on Larilien.”

“I would be dead weight there,” Jerry admitted. “Besides, I have a ton of writing to do between here and Pansilli.”

“But Lani. . .” Sue started.

“Lani’s got enough on her shoulders keeping those engines balanced practically single handed,” Jerry replied. “I would be a distraction if I were with her.”

“I’m glad I have a few senior officers on board,” Sue admitted. “I hadn’t realized how many of our top positions were filled by Lano.”

“That’s good,” Jerry told her. “It means you’re becoming Terralano. One thing though. You gave the Carono first captain an idol made from basalt from Hawaii.”

“That’s right,” Sue replied. “Pele is the goddess of volcanos. Given the normal Carono environment, it seemed appropriate.”

“I thought it was supposed to be bad luck to remove any lava from Hawaii,” Jerry pointed out.

“Ha!” Sue laughed. “That’s just what we tell the tourists. If they had their way, the Big Island would have been carted away one stone at a time centuries ago.”

Part 3 Meanwhile, Back on the Farm...

One

Larilien was left in a parking orbit around Treloi, allowing the crew of Meriwether to reunite and descend to the surface of the planet. “Welcome back Meriwether II,” Pansilli control greeted them. “You may land on the pad adjacent to that of Meriwether I.”

“Meriwether I is on Treloi?” Eesai asked.

“Evidently, your ship has come in,” Sue remarked dryly. “My guess is Clark took her out, although

why he came here we'll have to wait to find out."

The trip down to Pansilli spaceport was routine and smooth. Chaos did not descend until after Sue had commanded they finish with engines.

"Skipper?" Eesai reported, "Clark is on the line."

"He should know enough to wait until we're ready to crack the airlock open," Sue whispered to her. "Put him on the viewer, please."

"Hello, Sue!" Lewis Clark Anspach greeted her. "I know you're busy, but we need to talk before you let anyone go on planet leave."

"Is there a problem, Clark?" Sue asked.

"This planet has gone crazy in your absence," Clark explained.

"It wasn't all that sane at the time we left," Eesai commented. "Want me to see about opening the hatch?"

"Please," Sue told her. "Clark, I'll meet you in my day cabin. Eesai, sounds like we'll need all our senior officers, oh, and Lilla."

"Lilla?" Eesai asked. Lilla was only a junior officer on Meriwether II.

"I have a sneaking suspicion this is going to involve all our Terralano pairings," Sue replied.

"Not every problem on Treloi involves humans, Sue," Alano pointed out.

"I don't see Clark getting jumpy about any purely internal matters," Sue told him.

Sue rushed through her preparations for the port authorities, but to her surprise no one from Customs was waiting at the airlock. Instead she found Clark standing in the doorway with Malana Di Masai and her personal assistant Helani Bi Lano.

"Do you have any idea of what's been happening here?" Clark asked after they had all been seated and all had a chance to greet each other.

"Are you referring to the Terralano debate?" Sue asked calmly.

"Debate?" Clark echoed, "It's more like a riot."

"Our Lano counterparts seem to be as passionate as we are," Sue told him, "or have you forgotten how Earth reacted to the discovery of the Lano?"

"Told you so," Malana commented to Clark.

"Wait up," Sue told them. "How long ago did you make planetfall?"

"Just a few hours ago," Clark told her. "We had just finished opening our hatch when word came you were in orbit. Since then we've been watching the reports on the Vid."

“That’s it?” Sue asked. “News reporters here aren’t any different from the ones on Earth, Clark. If the story isn’t sensational enough, they’ll go out of their way to make it so. There were riots before we left, but while the city hasn’t been totally repaired yet, from what we could see as we came down, the situation seems to have calmed down. If there’s any chaos to come it will be from the discovery of the Carono.”

“Who?” Malana asked.

“Another space-faring people off to galactic east,” Sue remarked. “We’ll tell you all about them in a bit. So what’s got you two in such a panic?”

“I’m not in a panic,” Malana denied. “I’ve been trying to tell Clark that there’s nothing to be alarmed about the fact that the Peegee asked to meet us on board Meriwether I before we disembarked.”

“That depends,” Alano cut in. “Is Tauko still the Peegee?”

“Was that in doubt?” Malana asked.

“I saw stranger things happen a year and a half ago,” Alano told her. “Let’s not forget how many changes of government we went through, just because it was learned we weren’t alone in the blackness of space.”

“It’s a small galaxy,” Malana quipped.

“And getting more crowded all the time,” Eesai chuckled.

“Yes, tell me about these Carono,” Malana requested. “I suspect this is why Tauko recalled me from Earth so soon.”

“Is that why you brought Meriwether I here, boss?” Eesai asked.

“Excuse me,” a crewman interrupted from the doorway, “but the Presiding General is asking to come on board.”

“By all means,” Sue nodded, “let’s not keep him waiting.”

Tauko arrived in the day cabin a few minutes later, hugged his mother and greeted the others, then quickly got down to business. “The navy is already bringing Larilien down to the surface and they’re going to want to fully debrief you, Commodore, but before they do, I wanted to hear your report first.”

“Commodore?” Sue asked.

“I promised everyone a jump in rank for this mission, along with the monetary compensation,” Tauko reminded her. “That includes your own rank within the Trelendir.”

“I think I prefer to be called Captain on my ship, but when on Treloi, I guess,” Sue shrugged. She and the others went on to describe what had happened over the course of the mission and the agreement they made with the Carono.”

“I don’t think the deaths they caused were intentional,” Eesai told Tauko at one point. “We avoided

asking directly, but we got the impression the Carono were as puzzled by what had happened as we had been. They honestly did not know what their amazingly strong psionic transmissions could do to us.”

“I believe we can build a machine that will shield us from accidental harm,” Malana considered.

“The engine deck on Meriwether II shielded us from any but the strongest broadcasts,” Alano added. “I ought to know, having spent a lot of time down there.”

“Don’t kick yourself, Alano,” Sue told him. “You were still instrumental in establishing meaningful contact, although it was Lilla who probably accomplished the most of us all.”

“Is that an official commendation, Commodore?” Tauko asked softly.

“If not, I’ll make it one,” Sue replied, making Lilla blush deep orange.

“I would add my own commendations as well,” Alano told Tauko. Eesai, and Jerry soon echoed that sentiment.

“Good,” Tauko replied. “That probably calls for an additional bonus. By the way, did any of the Lano members of this crew realize they still had back pay waiting for them?”

“I did,” Eesai admitted, “but only because you mentioned it when we were here last. I didn’t have time to retrieve it last trip.”

“Wait a day before you do,” Tauko advised. “I’ll have your bonuses deposited for you as well.”

“What about our human friends?” Alano asked.

“They were drafted into service,” Tauko replied, “but I think we can bypass the military pay system in their cases. Now it’s my turn to tell you what’s been going on here.

“Since you lifted off,” Tauko continued, “word of the Terralano controversy has spread across the Trelendir. We’ve only heard from the nearer colonies so far, but it appears that the notion is having the same effect there as it did here except, that without living symbols of Terralano culture, the reaction is far less violent and also by and large more positive. That doesn’t surprise me, since the colonies tend to be more ready to accept change. The colonists were originally looking for change anyway.

“We’ve also heard from some of the nearer Terran colonies,” Tauko went on. “They took the concept almost for granted.”

“We went through a lot of those arguments two years ago,” Clark told him, “while we were preparing to negotiate in Rendezvous System. Remember, we had Malana and Eesai appearing nightly on our news broadcasts. We didn’t have the word ‘Terralano’ at the time, but the concept was gradually accepted and several tabloids made nuisances of themselves when they covered Jerry’s and Lani’s wedding.”

“Ah, yes, that wedding,” Tauko replied to Jerry and Lani. “At the moment it is still being argued vociferously in the Council of Generals. You have strong allies as well as enemies in the Chamber of Officers. Some of your friends are currently trying to push through an amendment to our Articles of Governance in favor of recognizing interspecies marriage and adoption. Your enemies keep rephrasing their demands to abolish and annul such pairings and it’s a close thing. Neither side has the votes to get

their amendments passed, although we might be able to tip the scales.”

“How so?” Alano asked.

“I imagine you and Rear Admiral Anspach here would not be opposed to such an amendment,” Tauko replied.

“We don’t sit on the Council of Generals,” Alano replied, “and since when is Clark an admiral?”

“We have to assign him some rank and since he has two commodores under his employ...” Tauko shrugged. “And while you are not required to be active within the Council, Alano, your new rank does entitle you to do so. I believe that in spite of the prestige of your family, you are the first Matchi to achieve the rank of rear admiral in two generations.”

“Three,” Alano corrected him after pausing to think about it.

“Just between you and me,” Tauko continued, “I don’t really believe we need to amend the Articles of Governance. All individuals within the Trelendir, especially on Treloi are already equal in the eyes of the Law. However, Doctor Isaacs and Captain Lani made some very compelling statements on their last visit and that charming Ralani Di Lasai, your sister, Commander, has continued to win people to the Terralano cause.”

“She should be spending more time with her schoolwork,” Lilla worried.

“She said the same to me just last week,” Tauko laughed. “I don’t think you need worry on that account, however. She was doing homework in my waiting room and half our conversation was asking for my help with an essay she was writing. She has, however, quite without meaning to, become a leading voice among the Terralano Party.”

“Terralano Party?” Malana asked interestedly.

“Yes,” Tauko nodded. “I’ve never seen a new political party grow so quickly. My own party is in danger of being swallowed up by them, but then I’m seriously considering joining too. It’s currently strongest on the college and university campuses and it is still almost two years until the next major elections, but it is already becoming mainstream. I just hope I don’t have to stand for re-election against Ralani.”

“Ralani is a high school student,” Lilla pointed out. “She doesn’t have the rank to be a candidate for Presiding General.”

“Anyone can be a candidate, actually,” Tauko corrected her. “They just cannot be on the ballot unless they are a general or an admiral. There have been some write-in campaigns that came close, however.”

“I can’t believe she would want to be Peegee,” Lilla shook her head.

“She doesn’t,” Tauko replied. “She’d really like this whole thing to quiet down so she could get back to school and friends. The point, before I got distracted, is that Lano are a romantic people at heart and even the brief testimonies of Ralani, Jerry and Lani were enough to persuade many former opponents of the Terralano concept. That’s why I recalled you from Earth, Mom. I’m hoping you can inject a note of rationality in the whole mess.”

"I don't relish having to spend the rest of my days in the Council Chamber, Tauko," Malana told him. "It was people like your generals who originally drove me to join the circus. I figured if I was going to deal with clowns, they might as well be honest ones." Beside her, Helani used a hand to cover an automatic grin. Eesai grinned at her openly, wondering how after all these years with Malana, Helani hadn't learned to keep a straight face when Malana went off on that particular rant.

"That was a long time ago," Tauko reminded her. "Before I was born, in fact."

"The nature of those people hasn't changed," Malana retorted, "even if their names have."

"The issues have," Tauko told her tiredly. "We'll need to give a press conference. I have one scheduled for tomorrow afternoon. It should give you all time to tell your tales to the Navy either tonight or in the morning."

"Tonight," Sue decided. "I'd rather go into your conference with a full night of sleep. Most of what the Navy will want is in my written report, I'm sure."

"You had time to write a report?" Tauko asked.

"Most of my friends were on Larilien on the way back," Sue explained. "There wasn't much else to do when I was off watch."

"They'll want to know why you salvaged Larilien but not Halerien," Tauko pointed out.

"Halerien's engines were dead when we found her," Sue replied. "Meriwether II isn't a tug, the strain could have been too much for our own engines. Even if not, it would have taken us months to bring her back. Larilien's system had been put into standby mode before any damage could occur. She could have flown back on her own except we didn't have a large enough crew to manage that safely."

"I see," Tauko nodded.

"We did make note of Halerien's coordinates, however," Eesai added. "It won't be hard to send a recovery mission."

"I'm sure the Navy will be satisfied with that. I think we'll need to meet for an hour or two before the press conference tomorrow so we can get our stories straight," Tauko suggested.

"Huh?" Sue asked.

"The population of this world does not yet know of the Carono, Commodore," Tauko told her. "Discovery of you Terrans was enough to topple three governments, the first of which I thought was quite stable. Right now everything is uncertain and there's no saying what this news will cause."

Two

“Lilla!” Ralani shouted, all but bouncing up the ramp to Meriwether II’s airlock. Her parents followed behind at a somewhat more dignified pace. Shaeri looked scandalized when Ralani nearly bowled Tauko Ki Masai over at the top of the ramp, but Tauko did not seem to mind at all. “Sorry, General Tauko,” the teen apologized instantly

“Nice to see you again, Ralani,” Tauko replied smoothly. “I trust you have been well?”

“Yes, sir,” Ralani replied, nodded. “And you?”

“Very well, thank you,” Tauko smiled. Ralani took the opportunity to introduce her parents before the Presiding General could excuse himself and then finally felt free to fling herself at Lilla and Serafyma.

“Just a bit of a change,” Serafyma chuckled.

“I know,” Ralani admitted. “It’s disgusting isn’t it? But I can’t help it. I feel happy.”

“Whereas before you didn’t feel much of anything,” Serafyma guessed. “That was probably a defense against normal teen anxiety, just not a very healthy one. Besides, you’re so much more adorable when you smile.”

“That’s what worries me,” Lerano Ki Lasai admitted wryly as he and Shaeri reached the top of the ramp. “Okay, this one is a more normal happy person, but now she has a dozen boyfriends.” Both Serafyma and Lilla laughed.

“I do not,” Ralani denied. “Most of them don’t interest me at all.”

“Just as well,” Lerano told her. “Now let me hug your sisters.”

“There’s a change as well,” Lilla pointed out, although Lerano ignored that. “We’ve been asked to stay on board tonight,” Lilla told her parents a short time later. “Would you like to come in, though?”

It was difficult to get any privacy on board the ship, however, as people kept stopping them in the corridors to ask about what had been happening on Treloi in the last few weeks. Finally, it was Ralani who suggested they spend some time talking about it where anyone could listen. “I’m getting used to it anyway,” she admitted. Serafyma steered them toward the ward room when most of the ship’s officers soon joined them.

“After you guys left,” Ralani told them, “the place was a bit crazy for a few days. Pro-Terralano protesters were getting into fights with the Antis.”

“Is that what they call themselves?” Jerry asked.

“Ha!” Ralani laughed. “Of course not. People don’t like to admit they’re against anything these days. They say they are Pro-Trelendir and claim any attempt to form the Terralendir is treasonous. What they

don't realize is the Terralendir is already here. The very laws of the Trelendir establish the Terralendir because they include anyone we associate with. The Rendezvous Treaty ratifies that. We are one people."

"Funny," Malana chuckled, "but I don't recall that provision when I signed it."

"It doesn't say it outright, Madame Malana," Ralani told her, "but it talks about the mutual recognition and respect for the laws and traditions of the Trelendir and of the Terran Confederation."

"Yes," Malana agreed, "but that's a respect between two sovereign entities."

"But the laws of the Trelendir don't really recognize any other sovereign entity," Ralani told her. "They apply to all known worlds."

"That was before we met the humans," Malana disagreed.

"Oh," Ralani nodded. "Okay. So when were those laws revised?"

Malana thought about that. "Good point," she admitted finally. "Ought to be fun running that one past Radji Gupta when I get the chance. You said it was crazy for a few days. What happened next?"

"Well, the army moved in to help the police in the major cities and all protesters were required to say in advance where they intended to demonstrate. Anyone demonstrating without making arrangements in advance was arrested, and of course permission was not given to any two groups of protesters who were not in agreement."

"And that worked?" Jerry asked.

"After the first few mass arrests," Ralani replied. "The police couldn't arrest more than one or two hundred, but the Army has its own way of doing things. There were about ten thousand Antis rounded up when they tried to break up a scheduled Pro rally outside the Chamber of Officers. They came in and just marched the Antis to a makeshift prison camp on the edge of the city."

"They're still there?" Malana asked.

"No," Ralani replied. "There was a hearing the next day and the judge gave them all a choice. Pay a stiff fine now or face a formal trial. The fine was nothing compared to the potential jail terms, so most of them paid on the spot. The more stubborn ones held out for a week and then they paid their fines too. There were a few other incidents like that all over Treloi. Protesters from both sides were fined and repeat offenders are still awaiting trial.

"It was about at that point the Pro-Terralano leaders came looking for me," Ralani continued. "I think they wanted a poster child."

"That isn't what they got though," Shaeri added.

"Not the way they expected," Ralani agreed. "I never did know enough to keep my mouth shut or take orders and when they threw me in front of the cameras I spoke my mind. I didn't agree with everything they were saying and wasn't about to say what they wanted on all counts."

"Such as?" Serafyma prompted her.

“Some of them wanted to mobilize the Trelendir to annex the Terran Federation,” Ralani related. “When one interviewer asked me about it I told him what I thought of that idea. Sure, I believe in the Terralendir, but it can’t be an empire. Terrans have to join because they want to, not because some political zealots want to go out and force them.”

“Not that they could,” Sue remarked.

“True enough,” Jerry agreed, “but it would start a war between Terra and the Trelendir.”

“That’s what I said,” Ralani told him. “I also said that anyone who felt we should try annexing Terran worlds were not pro-Terralano.”

“We were very proud of you for that,” Shaeri told her.

“Yeah, but the death threats took a bit of the shine off that golden moment,” Ralani pointed out.

“Death threats?” Lilla asked worriedly.

“It was scary at first,” Ralani admitted, “but then I thought about what you would do.”

“Stop talking to the press?” Lilla asked.

“That was a temptation,” Ralani admitted, “but I decided that hiding wouldn’t accomplish anything, so like I said, I did what you would do and faced up to my fear. I kept talking. The threats kept coming but then the police tracked the threats down to a few crackpots. One really was one of the Pros who went too far, but the other two were just people who did that sort of thing all the time. After they were arrested, the threats stopped for a while. The other ones who wanted to annex Terra and her colonies tried several times to disrupt my own appearances on the Vid and at rallies. That was a bit frightening too the first few times, but the police and the army were arresting anyone who made trouble so none of them got too close.

“Little by little, more Pros started asking for my opinions. I’m the only one who testified in front of the Council, I guess, so they seem to think my opinions are important. I’m one of the leading voices now,” Ralani shrugged. “Strange that it all started just because you wanted to dye and cut my hair.”

They talked deep into the night and Ralani and her parents stayed on board Meriwether II rather than going home. Malana, Clark and Alano were sitting alone in the ward room after the others had gone to bed. “Now that’s the sort of relationship, sisters and brothers rather than husbands and wives, I think will be the mark of the Terralendir.”

“You too?” Clark asked at the term “Terralendir.”

“Ralani convinced me,” Malana admitted.

“I’ve known you for about two and a half years,” Clark pointed out. “You are a charming lady and a dear friend, but you are also one of the most headstrong and stubborn people I know. I have a hard time believing you would change your mind just because a cute teenager said you should.”

“You’re right,” Malana laughed, “but you see, I had not made up my mind before we spoke. I intend to keep an eye on that one, though. Treloi needs more like her.”

"You might not say that had you met her a month ago or so," Alano told her. "I hadn't met her either. In fact tonight was the first time I saw her in person, but by her own testimony she was an Apathete."

"Really?" Malana asked. "That makes her all the more remarkable. The Apathetes in general are intelligent, sensitive young people who have turned away from the ugliness in the world. They are nonconformists of a classic sort, really. Dressing alike and acting alike in a way that sets them apart from their peers, and staying isolated from most of society. This Ralani, however, came out of that protective shell and under her own power, I understand. That's quite unusual at such a young age. I mean those who survive will sometimes grow out of their desire for the dubious comforts of non-conformity. Others find themselves forced back into mainstream lives by their families, which sometimes works and just as often makes things worse. But choosing a mainstream life as early as she did after being an Apathete? Quite unusual."

"As is her sister," Alano told her. "On Inillien I used to wonder why Lilla chose to serve in the Navy. She was shy and easily frightened. She's grown up a lot since then too. Did you know she's a budding *thalua*? Her talent woke up spontaneously shortly after Meriwether II's arrival here."

"She broke through?" Malana asked, stiffening perceptibly. "Was anyone hurt?"

"I don't believe so," Alano replied.

"Good," Malana relaxed. "To awake at her age... Most spontaneous *thalua*s who break through after puberty tend to injure or kill themselves and the people around them. She was very lucky."

"She's aware of that," Alano noted. "She came on board with a trunk full of books, talking about going back to school to get the right training."

"I'll have a talk with her in the morning," Malana promised. "I can help her ease through before she actually finds a school."

"And maybe you can recommend her to a school too?" Alano asked. "Her abilities, rudimentary as they are, were pivotal in establishing communications with the Carono. I'd say she's going to be a very talented *thalua*."

"Sounds like I'm about to lose a good comm. officer," Clark commented.

"Pay her tuition," Malana suggested. "Make it on the proviso that she continues working for you for a few years. I know she doesn't want to be apart from Serafyma and at her age, the basic training won't take more than a year. After that she'll need to take classes for years, but they'll mostly be week-long seminars and classes she can do by correspondence. It's the slow path to a doctorate, but Lilla's not all that old and the more she learns the more valuable she'll be to Meriwether, Inc."

"That works for me," Clark agreed. "Looks like I'll be talking to her in the morning."

"What about Ralani?" Alano asked. "Lilla tells me she has a bit of the talent too."

"Does she?" Clark asked. "She seems more like the sort to go into politics."

"It didn't stop me," Malana told him, "and if the girl has the ability, best to bring it out now, even if she never exploits it later."

“Her family isn’t rich or noble, Malana,” Alano warned her. “No, that isn’t snobbery coming out. All I mean is they were having trouble figuring out how to pay for Lilla’s graduate studies. Ralani still has her entire university education ahead of her.”

“I did have certain advantages growing up,” Malana admitted, “but she wouldn’t be the first promising young student I have given tuition money to. I’ll have a talk with her as well and we’ll see. Looks like I have a lot of talking to do tomorrow, especially with my son.”

Three

“We should see if Ambassador Gupta is available this afternoon,” Malana told Tauko while they shared lunch. “We’ll need him in the negotiations with the Carono.”

“Why include the Terran ambassador?” Tauko asked. “The mission and initial contact was during a Trelendir Mission.”

“On a Terran ship,” Malana pointed out. “One you commandeered on, if you ask me, a very flimsy interpretation of an old law that may not actually be in effect any longer.”

“The Presiding General has the right to requisition the services of any citizen and any equipment he needs in a time of emergency,” Tauko reminded her.

“Actually that passage reads, ‘the President of the Congress of Officers,’” Malana told him. “One could argue that the Presiding General does have that job, but not exactly that title. It’s why you were the first to invoke it in centuries. It belongs to a form of government we no longer have.”

“My legal advisors,” Tauko began.

“Oh please, Tauko!” Malana stopped him. “I taught you better than that. A leader must live not only by the letter of the law, but by its spirit.”

“And when they are in conflict,” Tauko added, “it is best to lean toward the spirit. Yes, I remember. You would have made the same choice.”

“I would have requested Meriwether’s assistance,” Malana agreed, “but I wouldn’t have tried to wrap it up in legal flimflamery like you did. I’m sure Sue would have agreed for the same terms you forced on her. However, you did one interesting thing.”

“What’s that?”

“You really did inaugurate the Terralendir,” Malana snickered.

“I don’t recall doing that,” Tauko told her.

“When you started assigning Trelendir ranks to humans,” she reminded him. “The moment you did that, you set a precedent that said any humans who either reside or even visit the Trelendir are automatically accorded rank and status in keeping with their positions within the Terran Confederation. You even have a human sitting on the Council of Generals.”

“Clark Anspach isn’t going to actually be an active member of the Council,” Tauko replied. “Uh, is he?”

“If you didn’t want him to, why did you make him a rear admiral?” Malana asked pointedly. “Appointment automatically gave them both five-year terms in the Council. After that they would have to stand for re-election just like any other general or admiral, but they have some time to go before even bothering to think about reelection, which the rest of the Council is up for next year, aren’t they? That means neither Clark nor Alano need to stand for election for six years. So why did you do it, if that wasn’t your intention?”

“Well, I figured his position as the owner of a Terran spaceline made him roughly the same rank as Alano Ki Matchi,” Tauko commented.

“No, as best I can figure it,” Malana replied, “Clark should have been a commodore in our system. He wasn’t on the mission which gained Alano his promotion. You can’t take it back now, though. You sent him the official papers and everything. Also every human member of Meriwether II now has a Trelendir rank from able spaceman first class to commodore.”

“Well, yes, it seemed only fair since they were acting on behalf of the Trelendir, Mom,” Tauko explained.

“They were,” Malana nodded. “Tell me, at which point did you decide to actually come out as Pro-Terralano?”

“I’ve been sitting on that particular fence,” Tauko told her. “I like the idea, but politically...” he trailed off as a horrified expression crossed his face. “I really did all that, didn’t I?”

“You did,” Malana agreed. “Now you may as well get the other foot wet, because anything less will look like weakness and indecision.”

“But that hinges my entire administration on the Terralano question,” Tauko realized.

“To which the answer is, ‘Yes,’” Malana replied. “Look at it this way. You are the Peegee of Treloi, but while you have more influence over the Trelendir than anyone else currently in office, you are not the ruler of the Trelendir. By the laws and customs of the Trelendir, the worlds of the Terran Confederation are as much a part of the Trelendir as the Lano colonies are.”

“In practice, I would be a damned fool to try to make that claim in public,” Tauko told her.

“No kidding,” she replied dryly, “although you’ve come very close in your actions to doing just that.

The Terran worlds are no more tightly bound to Earth than the Lano worlds are to the Trelendir, but the Terrans are far more independent of us than our own colonies are and you do not have a lot of influence in the Terran Confederation.”

“I never thought I did,” Tauko admitted, “no more so than Malvina Smythe has here.”

“Malvina’s been a fine president on Earth,” Malana commented. “If she visited here would you accord her the rank of General?”

“I suppose I would have to,” Tauko nodded. “She’s the same as any visiting Presiding General in that way. You don’t think she would try to be an active member of the Council, do you?”

“Malvina has enough to do at home without worrying about sticking her nose in here,” Malana laughed. “If she did visit, and by the way, she has expressed an interest in doing so, she would probably merely want to address the Council, just as other visiting Peegees do. I doubt she would even think of herself as a general in the Trelendir. You see, the Terran Confederation may be a part of the Trelendir by our custom and law, but not by theirs. Not yet, anyway, even if the reporters both here and on the nearby Terran worlds, maybe on Earth itself by now, are referring to us all as the Terralendir. And that’s why we need Radji in on the negotiations and at the press conference. We need an official Terran voice.

“Just one more thing along those lines,” Malana added.

“Promise?” Tauko retorted.

“No,” Malana laughed. “The Terralendir is taking shape all around us even as we speak. We really are all Terralano. Your own behavior shows you believe it to the core of your being. If we want to have a chance to guide it into its eventual shape, we had better cast aside all pretenses of indecision and neutrality on the subject. Act now and it will be a smooth transition, or smoother than it has been so far. Otherwise I see every world in the Trelendir experiencing the same confusion Treloi has. You’re the leader. Start leading!”

“Eesai Di Sonea said something similar to me,” Tauko commented. “At the time I told her she reminded me of you.”

“Eesai’s a smart woman, although not as salty as I am,” Malana chuckled. “Give her time. But next to Helani, she was my best adjutant ever.”

“Only you would use a full captain as her assistant,” Tauko laughed.

“She was a first subcaptain at the time,” Malana told him. “I thought she was throwing a lot away when she retired in favor of joining Clark’s company, but if she hadn’t, I doubt she would have been a commodore for years yet. All our lives have changed since we met the humans.”

“For the better, I think,” Tauko admitted, “though you won’t get General Taomi to agree with that.”

“Is that old windbag still around?” Malana asked. “I really don’t know how he gets reelected.”

A bell rang on Tauko’s desk. “Presiding General, sir?” a voice asked, and then went on, “You have a press conference in five minutes downstairs.”

“Thank you, Nerano,” Tauko replied. “Let’s go.”

“Do you know what you’re going to say?” Malana asked as she got out of her seat.

“I did until a few minutes ago,” Tauko shrugged. “Now I’ll just have to wing it.”

Four

“This is Talani Di Garaso, filling in for Ballo Ki Witzai, and this is TNN Now!” the anchorwoman introduced the dinner-time news program. A Bannner in bright blue appeared near the bottom of the screen that read in Lani letters, “Breaking News!” An introductory fanfare of music faded out and Talani Di Garaso continued. “This afternoon, Presiding General Tauko Ki Masai, in a press conference in which he was expected to announce his decision regarding the Terralano question, announced the discovery of another space-faring species that he called the Carono or Stone People. Communications were opened once again by the crew of the Terran ship Meriwether in the employ of the Treloian government. That crew also included several former crewmembers of Inillien, the first Treloian ship to make contact with a Terran ship, including Commodore Alano Ki Matchi, one time captain of Inillien.”

“The Carono are silicon-based life forms,” a recording of Tauko announced. “They have five arms and five legs arranged evenly around their round, but slightly flattened, bodies and organize their society in triads, teams of three individuals who work together cooperatively. Like us they are curious and inquisitive about the universe around them and desire to live with us in peaceful coexistence. They do not, however, live comfortably on worlds of the Terralendir, finding them far too cool for their sort of life. Our atmospheres are also not mutually compatible. However, they have agreed to negotiate a treaty with the Terralendir similar in nature to the Treaty of Rendezvous.”

Tauko’s announcement was prematurely cut off and Talani went on, “Immediately following the press conference General Taomi Ki Taomi made the following statement...”

“Once again Presiding General Tauko has attempted to distract us from the real problem,” the image of General Taomi told the viewers. “First he disrupted the normal workings of the Council of Generals with his abortive hearings into the so-called Terralano problem, then he tabled those hearings with the claim our ships were being attacked by some unknown enemy. Now he follows that manufactured emergency with the announcement that the very same trouble makers, who attempted to destroy our society with the immoral and disgusting practice of interspecies marriage and adoption, have gone and added yet another species with whom we might join.

“What a coincidence this happens exactly at the time we are considering an amendment to the Treloian Articles of Governance against this very practice. I say it is time Presiding General Tauko admit this is all just a political ploy on his part and that he resign from office forthwith. To this end I intend to

submit a demand for his impeachment first thing tomorrow morning.”

Taomi’s image disappeared from the screen to be replaced by Talani once more. “General Taomi went on to deny the existence of the Carono as just another of the Presiding General’s crimes against the Trelendir...”

“I notice they gave Taomi Bi Taomi more air time than they gave General Tauko,” Ralani griped as she turned the sound down. They were back in Meriwether’s ward room with her parents and some of the other ship’s officers. Sue allowed most of the crew to go on leave that morning, but the officers chose to spend nights on board for the sake of security.

“They always do that sort of thing,” Lilla commented. “It’s their strange and twisted way of showing how fair they can be. Taomi Ki Taomi,” she emphasized the correct patronymic, “and his Cosonai Party members have repeatedly criticized TNN as being unfairly biased against them.”

“While Gaomi News is clearly biased in their favor, giving them three times as much air time as they do General Tauko’s Conservationist Party,” Ralani replied. “And I may as well call him Bi Taomi. Everyone else does.”

“It’s not polite,” Lilla told her.

“Neither is he,” Ralani retorted.

“Girls, behave,” Shaeri admonished them.

“They are behaving,” Lerano told her calmly. “They’re discussing the matter politely between themselves even if they are not being polite to General Taomi. I’m not sure that man deserves their politeness.”

“No,” Serafyma disagreed. “He deserves both politeness and respect even if we don’t agree with anything he says. Of course that’s easier to say than to do. He is one of the most disagreeable people I’ve ever encountered. Ralani, turn the sound back up. It looks like something else is happening.”

“This just in,” Talani told her audience, “Tauko Ki Masai and several other Conservationist Party members are making a statement. We bring it to you live.”

Tauko could be seen on the screen, stepping up to a rostrum festooned with microphones. Behind him stood two dozen others, including Malana, Alano and Clark. As the camera moved around the scene, Sue and Eesai came into view, standing at the edge of the crowd. It was not readily apparent if they were part of Tauko’s entourage or among the spectators.

“There has been some confusion of late regarding the Conservationist stand on the Terralano Question,” Tauko spoke into the dozen microphones. “It is our intention this evening to put an end to all uncertainty on that count. As of now, we are disbanding the Conservationist Party and as one have joined the Terralano Party. We hold true all the ideals of the former Conservationist Party, but we also believe in the Trelendir – the growing union between the Trelendir and the Terran Confederation. To that end we will do our best to encourage increasingly closer relationships between Lano and Terran worlds as well as Lano and Terran people. We fully support marriage and adoption between our peoples as good and wholesome institutions and will fight any wrong-minded attempt to block such couplings.

“To that end,” Tauko continued, “we are introducing legislation tomorrow morning that will prohibit

any laws that restrict interspecies marriage and adoption. That will include the laughable amendment by General Taomi Ki Taomi and his Cosonai Party. The time has come in the Terralendir to look forward into the future with hope, unity and love. That is the core plank of the Terralano platform. Thank you.” Tauko and the others left the screen without taking any questions.

“Well, that should make life interesting,” Jerry remarked as he turned the sound down again.

“I had wondered where Sue and Eesai had gotten themselves off to,” Lani added. “I’m surprised they didn’t want Ralani making the speech.”

“I don’t want to be a politician,” Ralani protested, “and, thankfully, I’m still too young to run for anything but class president.”

“Malana didn’t want to be a politician either,” Jerry told her.

“Shouldn’t I try to learn from others’ mistakes?” Ralani countered.

“No one else does,” Jerry laughed, “but I do have more than a few questions for the Terralano Party, not the least of which is how long are we supposed to hole up on the ship?”

He got his answer a short time later after Malana called from the Presiding General’s mansion. “Sorry we left you all out of today’s festivities,” she told Jerry, “but that second bit was done on the fly. We’re sending over some limousines to pick you up, they should be there shortly.”

Two long cars arrived a few minutes later to collect them. “No drivers?” Jerry wondered.

“They’re like the taxis,” Lani told him, “except these appear to be preprogrammed.”

“I still feel like we’re being pushed around,” Jerry grumbled.

“I’m thankful to be able to get off the ship,” Wallo told him. “I’d really like to get back to my retirement.”

“Why can’t you?” Jerry asked. “As far as the newsies are concerned, you’d just be another La on his way from Point A to Point B. It isn’t like you’ve been taking up with some young strumpet from Earth, or whatever the Lano equivalent is.”

“Malana asked me to stay in town,” Wallo explained. “She felt I might be needed to testify to the Council of Generals. I suppose I could have flown back and forth, but once I get home, I’m not likely to want to leave again soon.”

They were ushered into a large banquet room on the first floor of the Presiding General’s mansion, where along with the leading members of the new Terralano party, were Malana, Sue, Eesai, Clark and Alano. “Care to tell us what’s going on?” Jerry asked.

“Dinner,” Malana replied. “We thought you might like to join us.”

“We could have sent out for pizza,” Jerry replied.

“On Treloi?” Malana countered.

“Actually, yes,” Ralani told her. “It’s become very popular in the last few months since it was introduced from Earth.”

“Heh,” Malana chuckled softly. “Maybe we should have called out for pizza at that. Do they have pepperoni?”

“What’s that?” Ralani asked.

“I guess not,” Malana sighed. “Well, I’ll have to see about the joys of Treloian pizza another time. Let’s all be seated and we can discuss what’s been happening.”

“We saw both press conferences,” Jerry told her.

“Good,” Malana nodded. “That will save us a lot of time.” They were seated before she continued, “The only thing that has really changed this evening is that the Presiding General’s Party, and therefore the majority voice in the government, is now unequivocally on the Pro side of the Terralano question.”

“Made it sound like you were intending to force everyone else to go along with you,” Jerry commented.

“This is a government, Jerry,” Malana pointed out. “In effect that’s what governments do. Two or more sides argue over a point and eventually take a vote. The winner of the vote gets their way and the others have to live with it.”

“Fine for the members of the government,” Jerry remarked. “They at least had a say in what was happening. How about the people? How about the People of the Terran Confederation? Who has been representing them here?”

“You have, Jerry,” Malana told him, “and Clark and Susan and Serafyma and everyone else from Meriwether, Inc.”

“None of whom are empowered to speak for the people of Terra and her colonies,” Sue came in on Jerry’s side.

“We’re friends, Malana,” Jerry pointed out, “both personally and via the Treaty of Rendezvous System, but you seem to be assuming that Terra is already part of the Terralendir. I’m not even sure if Earth has heard the term yet.”

“They should have by now,” Malana replied. “And you already know that technically the Trelendir encompasses all known worlds and their systems.”

“Which would include both the Terran Confederation and the worlds of the Carono now,” Jerry argued. “Do you really think the Carono will be all that happy to hear they are part of the Terralendir?”

“Technically, I suppose they are a part of us, as are the human-settled worlds,” Malana nodded, “but in practice, none of us are so naïve. Humans are part of the Trelendir when they are within the volume of space marked out by our worlds. Being here is our only real requirement for citizenship.”

“But that would leave any visiting human subject to military service here,” Sue protested.

“You were recently drafted, Commodore,” Malana pointed out. “You seem to have survived.”

“That’s not the point,” Sue countered. “I was shanghaied as was my crew. If you really want to hear the truth, none of us have been adequately compensated for being tricked and forced into a life-threatening situation, especially since we were sent off without adequate preparation or defenses. Never mind that we came through with what we had. It was of no thanks to the Trelendir whatsoever.”

“Well, I did tell Tauko he had gone too far invoking that old law,” Malana admitted.

“It’s not going to do anything to establish the Terralendir if he ever tries to invoke it again,” Sue told her, “and if he does, I’ll personally kick him in the teeth.”

“Not if I beat you to it,” Eesai told her.

“I suppose I had better apologize then,” Tauko commented from behind them.

“You can start,” Sue told him tartly. “It’s going to take a lot of apologies before I can forgive and forget.”

“Even if I offer more compensation for the mission?” Tauko asked.

“This is not about money or rank, Tauko,” Sue told him. “It’s about the same mutual respect you’ve been going on about all afternoon.”

“You’re right,” Tauko admitted, “and I was wrong. Along with everything else we will revoke that old law so no one can ever be forced into military service merely because they are on a Lano planet.”

“That’s a start,” Sue admitted grudgingly.

“Well, I’m still more concerned about the Carono,” Jerry pointed out. “We are so alien to them, they can’t even tell a human from a La and their triad-based society is not likely to integrate smoothly with the Terralano model. If you want to include them, you need to make the concept open-ended and you need to recognize that they might not like us that way. They might just want to be friends.”

“You have a point, Jerry,” Malana admitted. “I’m sure the Terralendir will respect the Carono if they wish to remain a people apart from us, especially since we cannot settle on any of their worlds, nor can they settle on ours. I like the way you argue, though. Too bad we can’t find a valid excuse to make you an admiral too.”

“Heavens forbid!” Jerry laughed. “I’m still surprised Clark agreed to sit on the Council.”

“Only while I’m here,” Clark told him. “But you do know this should settle the matter of human-Lano marriage in the Trelendir.”

“I don’t know that at all,” Lani put in. “All I know is that Tauko made some nice speeches, but that isn’t going to shut Taomi Bi Taomi up.”

“I am fairly certain we have the votes to clear away Taomi’s proposals and slide our own in,” Tauko assured her. “I’ve certainly made enough deals to see it through.”

“What sort of deals?” Eesai asked.

“Politics is a game of give and take, Commodore,” Tauko replied. “I inserted various addenda, mostly funding for various pet projects in order to get the requisite votes for the bill Admiral Alano will be proposing tomorrow.”

“Another tradition blown to heck,” Malana laughed. “New members of the council are generally expected to be quiet for the first year in office allowing the more senior members to do all the talking.”

“It’s only a tradition,” Alano told her, “not a law, and I don’t imagine I’ll be in a position to run for re-election anyway, so I might as well make use of the time I have. Besides, Jerry, if this works, you can adopt little Tricia by this time tomorrow. The offer of my estate is still open, you know.”

“One thing I know about politics is that there are a thousand ways to stall a bill in process,” Jerry remarked. “I can’t believe Taomi doesn’t know all of them.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Tauko told him. “In your absence, I discussed the matter with several justices on the Supreme Court of Treloi. As far as they are concerned, your species is no longer an issue since you have now technically served in the Navy of Treloi and on your return were promoted to captain. While not flag rank, captain is higher than many career men get, and, merely having served for even so short a time you would have qualified as a full citizen of Treloi even by Taomi’s definitions. In short, Supreme Justice Julai Bi Lano is more than willing to certify the adoption and marriage.”

“Once you set that precedence, the silliness is likely to die down,” Malana added.

“I seriously doubt that,” Jerry remarked, “but so long as Lani is still willing, we’ll do it and, Alano, thank you for the use of your estate. I’ve heard a lot about it and look forward to visiting for myself. I just hope we can get Lani’s family ready in time.”

“Ready?” Lani laughed. “They were ready before we ever got here together the first time. I’ll go make a few phone calls and let them start spreading the word. Admiral, do you need a list of guests?”

“Me? No, but it might be a good way to keep the press corps away should they hear about it,” Alano told her. “I assume you want a nice private wedding.”

“Already had one,” Lani laughed, “but I’ll not turn down another. I’ll have Mom call back with a list.” She rushed off to find a phone.

“Well, there’s one problem solved,” Malana sighed.

“Or initiated,” Jerry added. “Don’t get me wrong, I’d marry Lani a thousand times over if that’s what it takes, but I really can’t see this as solving the Terralano question.”

“I keep telling people this,” Malana replied, “but the answer to the Terralano question is, ‘Yes.’”

“Well put,” Jerry replied amidst the chuckles around the table. At the far end, he noticed Ralani scribbling rapidly on a Terran-made, pseudo-ceramic notepad. He decided Serafyma or Lilla must have given it to her from ship’s supplies, and continued, “but people aren’t all that logical. Terrans aren’t and Lano aren’t either. The verdict is still out for the Carono, but I suspect they aren’t that different either. Merely saying, ‘This is the right way,’ is not going to convince people.”

“No it isn’t,” Sue agreed. “We need something to distract our detractors from the matter of interspecies marriage and adoption until it becomes established enough in most folks’ minds that they

won't care. The good news is we came back here with just such a distraction."

"The bad news," Tauko told them all, "is that the last time we had that same distraction the government not only fell, it bounced like a rubber ball."

"No time to worry about that now," Malana told him firmly. "You've made your announcement. It's time to see just where it will take us and how well we can keep to our intended course."

"I'll admit I came perilously close to a vote of no-confidence," Tauko replied, "and for a while there, getting out of office seemed like a pretty good idea."

"That was because you let the Terralano question go around and around without your guidance," Malana told him.

"Hey, I'm only the Presiding General," Tauko protested. "It's not like Treloi won't keep turning without me."

"I'm glad to hear you've kept some proper perspective," Malana commended him, "but it is always better to leave at the end of a term than to be forced out of office at the end of a no-confidence vote."

"That wouldn't get me out of office," Tauko shrugged. "I still have enough pull with the minor parties to build a viable coalition."

"There are too many important matters to settle to start getting distracted by useless politics," Malana reminded him.

"Yes, Mother," Tauko chuckled.

"What are you doing down there, girl?" Malana asked Ralani.

"It's a notepad," she held the pad up for Malana to see. "I'm taking notes. I particularly liked your answer to the Terralano question, but what I'm really writing down are your observations about politics."

"Ah, I've corrupted you without trying, have I?" Malana laughed. "Well, why don't you come over here. That way you'll be sure to hear everything I say. I've been meaning to have a long chat with you all day anyway." Jerry moved to make room for Ralani before Malana continued, "So I am led to understand you have some talent as *athalua*?"

"No, that's Lilla," Ralani shook her head. "I haven't done much along those lines since primary school."

"Well, given your sister's budding abilities," Malana replied, "we should probably make sure you aren't similarly talented, because I can already see you are."

"I am?" Ralani asked.

"You are," Malana confirmed. "Even if your sister hadn't told me about your *thalirip* grades, I can see the talent within for myself. Even if you don't wish to pursue *thalirip* as a career, it would be best to awaken that ability fully now while you are still young. It would be far more dangerous if it happens when you are fully adult like your sister. The talent can be a bit cranky when it wakes up in an adult." Ralani laughed at Malana's joke. "Come and see me tomorrow morning while the others are in the Chamber of

Officers and we shall make a start, hmm?”

Five

Talani Di Garaso was not looking as fresh and chipper the next morning as she had the previous evening. So far as anyone on board the Meriwether II could tell, she had obviously not gotten any sleep all night.

“We’re back,” Talani told her breakfast audience. “This morning we have with us General Yeolano Ki Teratchi and Admiral Berna Di Hasai, both of the Council of Generals to give us their viewpoints of last night’s announcement by Presiding General Tauko Ki Masai. Admiral Berna, would you like to go first?”

“Thank you, Talani,” Berna replied. “Once again General Tauko has inspired us all with his brilliant leadership. The merger with the Terralano Party is more than the mere renaming of the old Conservationists, but has already drawn new members to it from the Liberals and other minority parties across Treloi. This is the beginning of a great new era for Treloi and the entire Terralendir.”

“General Yeolano?” Talani prompted.

“Tauko’s announcement does nothing of the sort,” Yeolano replied firmly. “Once more Tauko and the Conservationists have chosen to answer deep and troubling problems with ambiguous statements about peace, love and unity and distracting us with stories of yet another spacefaring race. Well, I ask you, ‘Where are these Carono?’ I see no proof of their existence. I see no Carono. Stone people, indeed! And here they come, a people who supposedly cannot tolerate our environment, just in time to confuse the whole matter while he offers us a solution that benefits only his friends and cronies.”

“Friends and cronies, General?” Birna asked with well-practiced false amusement. “I assure you that if they are his friends it is only because he has made these bold and correct decisions.”

“Can you deny that all the Terrans involved are friends of the Peegee’s mother, Admiral?”

“No, nor do I need to, General,” Birna shot back. “Madame Malana was on board Inillien on the occasion of her encounter with Meriwether and she rode to Earth on board Meriwether in order to establish official communications with the Terran Confederation. As her only Lano companion was Commodore Eesai Di Sonea, it is only natural she would have established friendships with those humans with whom she associated most. Or are you saying she should have kept herself in seclusion from all humans?”

"I'm saying she should not have gone to Earth in the first place," Yeolano told her. "She had no such commission to do so, she did not speak for Treloi by any stretch of the imagination. Why then did she go to Earth?"

"Somebody had to, General," Birna replied acidly. "No doubt you prefer to stay home."

Yalano started shouting something back at Birna, but Talani stepped in, "I'm afraid we're out of time, just now, thank you for being here, General, Admiral." The video insets of the two guests, from whom the sound had already been muted, although viewers could still see them arguing, abruptly winked out. Talani continued tiredly, "In other news, thousands of people have gathered around the Chamber of Officers, awaiting this morning's session, even though it has already been announced that the gallery for today's session will not be open to the public. TNN will carry this morning's session live when it starts."

"That's enough of her," Sue remarked. "Those of us going to the Chamber or the Peegee's mansion this morning had better finish up breakfast. Our rides are on the tarmac waiting for us. Ralani, I understand there is a car waiting for you. You have an appointment with Malana this morning? Good. Let's get moving, people. We have a long day ahead of us."

Tauko called the Council of Generals to order and immediately recognized Alano. Just as immediately, General Taomi jumped to his feet and shouted, "Objection! This man has not yet served for a year in this body."

"There is no such rule that says a junior member of this body is not allowed to speak," Clark spoke up.

"Objection again!" Taomi shouted. "This man is not even Lano. He has no status in this Council at all."

"I hold the rank of Admiral in the Trelendir," Clark pointed out, "I was just recently granted that rank and I am here. Is there any further requirement that you can actually quote, or are you merely trying to heat the hall up with your hot air?"

"How dare you, human?" Taomi growled

"It's pretty easy, actually," Clark replied. "I just open my mouth and let the words come out. I answered your question, now how about you answer mine?"

"Presiding General," Taomi turned toward Tauko. "Are you going to allow this outsider to violate the collegiality of this Council?"

"The famed collegiality of the Generals of Treloi," Tauko replied, "is a custom and accorded between respected equals. We have no laws commanding respect and frankly, General, neither of you have done much to earn the respect of the other. I would suggest to both of you that respect generates respect, but until that happens you might both at least practice politeness."

"That is not my point, General Tauko," Taomi continued. "This human is not entitled to sit in the Chamber of Officers."

"Why not?" Tauko asked innocently.

Taomi glared at the presiding general as though that should have been self-evident. "He is not a La,"

Taomi announced.

“Yes, General, that is true,” Tauko agreed. “Do we suddenly have a law against it?” There was a whisper of chuckling in the hall.

“No Terran is a citizen of the Trelendir,” Taomi told him, “therefore he cannot sit in this hall regardless of his rank.”

“I’m sorry, General,” Tauko shook his head, “but I’m afraid you are misinformed. The crew of the Meriwether II were recently conscripted into the service of Treloi because a human within the Trelendir does indeed have all the rights and duties of a La. One does come with the other.”

“Then I hereby move that no Terran be allowed to hold a seat within the Chamber of Officers,” Taomi replied.

“I second the motion!” another man shouted.

Tauko looked to see who had spoken. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like to rethink that, General Taomi.”

“You heard me, General Tauko,” Taomi told him.

“It has been moved by General Taomi Ki Taomi and seconded by General Yeolano Ki Teratchi that Terrans not be allowed to hold a seat within the Chamber of Officers. Does anyone care to debate the point? Admiral Birna?”

“Why bother?” Birna asked. “We all know where we stand on the Terralano question and thanks to the Presiding General’s mother we all know the answer to that question. I hereby call that question even if General Taomi did state it in reverse.”

“Anyone else?” Tauko asked. There was a chorus of “Call” around the hall. “A vote in favor of the motion would ban all Terrans from having a seat on the Council of Generals. A nay vote will continue to uphold the principles of the Trelendir. All in favor?”

“I call for a roll-call vote” Taomi demanded.

“Second!” Yeolano chorused.

“Very well,” Tauko sighed. “Are you going to contest Admiral Anspach’s right to vote on this question too?”

“If he is a man of honor he will recuse himself from this vote,” Taomi stated confidently.

“I will if you do, General,” Clark taunted him.

“My right to vote is not at issue here, Terran,” Taomi replied.

“I’m Terralano, La,” Clark replied coldly, “and don’t be so sure of that. You don’t know what I intend to propose when you lose this vote. But, I’m game, I’ll recuse myself from this vote if you promise to recuse yourself from any that pertain personally to you.”

Taomi shot him a predatory grin. "That's a deal, Terran."

"You're on record, General," Clark told him smugly.

Tauko proceeded through the tedious process of conducting a roll-call vote. In the end Clark was allowed to stay by a two-to-one margin. "Well, Terran?" Taomi challenged him.

"I'm Terralano, General," Clark replied. "That vote just proved it."

"Are you going to make your motion now?" Taomi asked beligerantly.

"Patience, General," Clark chuckled. "We'll get to it. However before you interrupted so rudely our colleague, Admiral Alano had the floor."

"Admiral?" Tauko prompted Alano.

"I still say no member of this Council should be allowed to speak for their first year," Taomi protested.

"Are you suggesting we consider changing the rules of this governing body, General?" Tauko asked quietly.

"I am," Taomi replied, and reworded it as a formal motion to be seconded by Yeolano. This time the tedious roll-call vote yielded only one in four votes in favor.

"Admiral Alano?" Tauko asked again.

"General Tauko," Alano replied standing to speak once more. "I would like to thank the Council for their warm welcome and I hope to serve in this chamber with distinction. Thank you."

"That's it?" Taomi asked incredulously.

"That's it," Alano replied innocently.

"General Tauko?" Clark called, getting to his feet.

"You too" Taomi asked beligerantly. "Presiding General, are we going to waste the morning with these introductory remarks?"

"It seems to me that we already have," Tauko replied, "although in Alano's favor, his remarks took less than a minute. Still, it is time for lunch. Is there a move to adjourn?"

"That was a waste of time," Clark noted as they made their way back to the Peegee's mansion.

"We're just getting started," Tauko warned him. "I already have Taomi's amendment to the Articles on my desk. Had he not been so quick to try shutting you and Alano up, he would have realized that I could not entertain any other substantive business until he had a chance to present it."

"Then why did you allow him to make the motions he did?" Alano asked.

"Curiosity, mostly," Tauko admitted. "I knew we had the majority of the Council on our side, but not

by how much. Now that I know how badly his amendment will fail, I intend to rush it through as fast as possible. Normally such an amendment would take weeks or even months to debate, but I've requested all our allies to let the motion be presented without comment. We may still have a long-winded speech by Taomi, but if no one makes a counter speech, the amendment must be voted on immediately. The length of debate is determined by those debating it. First there is a statement on its defense, and then a speech against it. That keeps going back and forth until they run out of debaters. If we don't debate, the amendment comes up for a vote as soon as the first speech is over."

One of Taomi's allies, General Kalano Ki Manari, leader of the Traditionalist Party stepped in just after the lunch break and moved to reopen sessions of the Council to the public. This took even Tauko by surprise, especially when the Council voted in favor of reopening to the public by a wide margin.

Then Taomi finally got around to proposing his amendment with a full gallery and the Vid cameras picking up every word. Taomi Ki Taomi was an experienced politician and as clever as they came. He had not worried about his appearance so long as the cameras were turned off, but the moment they came back on, his entire demeanor changed as he transformed himself into what appeared to be a benevolent grandfather-like figure, concerned only for his beloved Treloi and the traditions of the Trelendir. His speech filled the afternoon and Tauko was forced to end the session before the vote was taken because Taomi had run over the afternoon's scheduled break.

"That wasn't according to plan was it?" Alano asked as he and Clark rushed with Tauko to a waiting jumper.

"Not at all," Tauko admitted. "I have to admit the old bastard was downright elegant and persuasive this afternoon, and then one of the Liberals, our ally no less, moved to adjourn before we could call for a vote."

"Couldn't you have ruled that motion out of order?" Clark asked.

"A move to adjourn is always in order," Tauko explained as they reached the waiting vehicle. A mass of new reporters spotted them and started surging in their direction. "Get in or we'll be stuck here for hours."

Once they were in the air Alano asked, "Can't we just call the question in the morning?"

"We could," Tauko agreed, "but now Taomi and his side have all night to convince the undecideds to vote his way. I also didn't like the way Kalano joined in there. That's got to be trouble."

"Who is Kalano?" Clark asked.

"He leads the Traditionalist Party," Tauko explained. "Normally I would expect him to vote with the Conservationists. I especially would not have expected him to side with the Cosonais."

"But you abolished the Conservationist Party in favor of the Terralano Party," Alano pointed out. "That took you away from the ideals of the Traditionalist Party."

"Only in the matter of interspecies relations," Tauko replied.

"It's enough. My family used to donate to the Traditionalists all the time and I think my sister is a member," Alano commented, "at least technically, though she's looking forward to this evening's festivities as much as anyone is."

“But you’re not a Traditionalist?” Tauko asked.

“No,” Alano shook his head. “Even if I had been, I’m Terralano now.”

“The question is how many of us will still be saying that tomorrow morning,” Tauko worried.

Six

Jerry and Lani had not planned on a large ceremony, but with the crews of both Meriwethers and Lani’s family and friends from Inillien they filled up the better part of the wide grassy lawn that spread out behind the Matchi Family manor.

The sun was low in the sky as Jerry and Lani stepped forward with her sister and brother-in-law, Gesai and Rorri. Gesai was holding Tricia in her arms as they all turned to face the Ressia Family priest and also Supreme Justice Julai Bi Lano. The priest led them through the traditional Lano prayers and then turned the ceremony over to Justice Julai.

“It is my joy and honor today to officiate over this first Terran and Lano marriage,” Julai told them. “There has been much talk recently of what it will mean to be Terralano. Each of us, I think, has our own vision of that future, but seeing the love in your eyes and that of the couple with whom you will bond, I know it will be a bright and glorious future.”

There followed a series of legalistic questions affirming that all four adults knew what they were doing; that Gesai and Rorri were sharing their parentage of Tricia with Lani and Jerry and, since Lano marriages are for life, that they had no misgivings. Then the Priest gave a final benediction and Julai pronounced the two couples bound to each other and officialy changed the name of Tricia Di Ressia to Tricia Di Isaacs.

Just as they were about to kiss, however, a ritual shared in common by both Terrans and Lano, several news jumpers flew over head, disrupting the ceremony. Malana did something and the jumpers turned around and flew away.

“What did you do?” Lilla asked her.

“I shut down their cameras,” Malana told her. “I never did like snoops and it is not hard to do.”

“Sounds like a handy*thalu* to know,” Ralani chimed in. “How soon before I can do it?”

“Not long,” Malana admitted, “the hard part is in knowing when not to do it though. That’s true of all personally accomplished*thalirip*. Also, it’s not something you should do just for your own pleasure.”

“Point taken,” Ralani sighed. “In many ways it was easier being an Apathete.”

“But not as much fun,” Malana laughed.

“It seemed strange without someone shouting ‘Mazeltov,’” Jerry remarked shortly after the ceremony.

“I didn’t get that,” Lani admitted, recalling their Terran wedding.

“It means, ‘Good luck,’” Jerry explained.

“Oh, okay, but you never explained why you broke that glass either,” Lani told him.

“You never asked,” Jerry laughed, but before he could explain his own Jewish wedding customs, they were surrounded by well-wishers.

Looking around, Eesai noticed that Alano had disappeared so she slipped off to the waterfall garden where it turned out he was just sitting and contemplating the water and the sounds of the fall. “So,” she asked softly, “how was your first day on the Council of Generals?”

“Ghastly,” Alano admitted. “Have a seat. I am definitely not cut out for politics. I don’t know how Malana puts up with all that. I truly don’t.”

“She doesn’t,” Eesai pointed out. “I think you might do better as an ambassador like her than sitting on that Council.”

“That all depends on what sort of government I’m representing,” Alano told her. “I couldn’t represent one led by General Taomi, for example.”

“I doubt he would give you the opportunity,” Eesai pointed out.

“There is that,” Alano smiled.

“That’s better,” Eesai told him. “You really do need to smile more often and I mean a real smile with humor behind it, not that defensive mask you use sometimes.”

“You’ve noticed that, have you?” Alano asked.

“When I resigned my commission to join Meriwether, Inc. you told me you’d had your eyes on me, Alano.” In Lano society that had been an admission of romantic interest at the least. “Didn’t it occur to you that sort of thing often goes both ways?”

“Well, sometimes, I suppose, but...” Alano suddenly stopped, realizing what she had just said. “Oh.”

“Yes, oh,” Eesai chuckled.

They were silent for a long time, just looking at each other while the sounds of splashing water filled the small garden. Finally, Alano broke the silence, “I still have my eyes on you.”

“Kind of hard to miss,” Eesai agreed.

“I mean on Meriwether II,” Alano clarified. “I was very impressed. I was stuck in Engineering most

of the time, but you were out there helping establish contact with the Carono.”

“You didn’t just sit and wait either,” Eesai told him, “and it was only because Malana had given me a few lessons, that I could leave the engine deck during my watch. Lilla was the real hero this time. She’ll be a real *thalua* someday. I think her sister will too, though at the moment the poor child is confused by all the possible choices.”

“She is doing well for such a confused child,” Alano pointed out dryly.

“She is,” Eesai agreed. “It’s not the sort of confusions in which she doesn’t know which way to turn next, you know. It’s just that after a long spell of ignoring the world around her, she’s dazzled by all the possibilities suddenly in front of her. It’s like that buffet you arranged for Lani and Jerry.”

“Actually, Kilana handled that part,” Alano admitted. “She’s better at parties than I am.”

“And you’re pretty good at knowing who to choose for what job,” Eesai told him, “A darned good captain, you were. Not a day in command goes by when I don’t wonder at least once how you might handle a situation.” She shook her head and got off that tangent. “The point is there’s so much food out there and such a magnificent variety of it that many of the guests don’t know which to try first.”

“It looked pretty normal to me,” Alano shrugged.

“We’re not all nobles, Alano,” Eesai told him. “Believe me, that is two and a half times what any normal La expects at a party. As our Terran friends would say, you did them proud.”

“Did I?” Alano asked. “It seemed the least I could do.”

“I know. You’ve come a long way from the aloof captain who would have never invited his crew here,” Eesai pointed out. “That’s a good thing, by the way.”

“I was a stuffy bastard, wasn’t I?” Alano asked.

“Don’t worry,” Eesai laughed, “There’s still some stuffiness left to knock out of you.”

“Would you like the job?” Alano asked wryly.

“Just what are you asking, Alano Ki Matchi?” Eesai responded seriously.

“I want to marry you, Eesai Di Sonea,” Alano replied in the same serious tone. “I want to be your husband; for you to be my wife.”

Eesai considered it. “I’m sorry, dear heart,” she told him after a very long pause, “but I’m not yet ready to settle down and have children.”

“The children can come later if at all,” Alano replied.

“You know as well as I do that without children there is no marriage,” Eesai responded, confusion in her voice.

“It seems to me the Terrans have the right idea,” Alano noted. “Sometimes a marriage is to bind two consenting adults. Let’s be a Terralano couple.”

“Could you bear to have a wife, even a Terralano wife who goes flitting across the galaxy on dangerous exploratory missions, leaving you at home for months, maybe a year or two at a time? Because I’m not done with Meriwether, Inc. Clark brought my ship here and I mean to take her wherever she’s headed next.”

“To the negotiations with the Carono then,” Alano concluded.

“How do you know that?” Eesai asked.

“Tauko mentioned it to Clark this evening on the way here,” Alano replied. “He wants two Terran ships to go to the negotiations along with two Trelendir ships. We don’t have the time to send back to Earth for official emissaries, but Ambassador Gupta has consented to negotiate just as he did with Malana last year. Malana will speak for the Trelendir, of course.”

“Of course,” Eesai agreed easily.

“I’m willing to give it a shot,” Alano told her.

“What?”

“I’m willing to see how it works out, having a Terralano wife who goes out to explore the galaxy while I stay home to cook and clean,” Alano told her.

“Somehow I don’t see you doing either,” Eesai laughed.

“Well, I’ll be with you when we go back to the Carono,” Alano told her. “I understand a Terran ship’s captain can officiate over a wedding. I suppose you could do the ceremony yourself.”

“No, I wouldn’t like that,” Eesai told him. “But I suppose we could get Sue to do it. She’d have a better idea of what a Terran wedding is supposed to be. The only one I’ve seen was the one for Jerry and Lani. What about your family? Would they approve of you marrying a common-born ship’s captain?”

“Kilana is the only living member of my immediate family,” Alano replied, “and she’s been saying I was a fool not to marry you since she had you over for hoi. I suppose I ought to meet your family though. I might not come up to their expectations. I’m not particularly fond of glarno, you know, not even marinated and roasted.”

“We don’t eat it any more than we have to either,” Eesai laughed.

“Because any one you eat, you can’t sell?” Alano asked.

“Because if you eat too much, you get so you can’t stand it,” Eesai explained, “but I suppose I should take you out to meet the folks before we leave and my brother’s family lives here in Pansilli.”

“I’ll invite them here,” Alano offered.

“For a first meeting, Ferni will be more comfortable if we go to him. How about tomorrow evening? I’ll give him a call in a few minutes and make sure it’s fine by him.”

“Then you will marry me?” Alano asked.

Eesai smiled broadly. “Maybe,” she teased him. “Depends on what the family says. I’m a respectable La, I’ll have you know.”

Alano’s face fell just a bit at the maybe, but then Eesai kissed him and he stopped worrying about her family.

Seven

“Better have a look at the Vid, Jerry,” Achmed advised him over breakfast the next morning.

This time Jerry did not bother to ask why. The Vid screen had the morning news program on as usual, but with the sound turned off. However the screen was filled with a short video of the previous evening’s festivities at Alano’s manor with the headline, “Illegal Wedding?”

“Where’s that station’s broadcast studio?” Jerry asked angrily

“Uh, somewhere in Pansilli, I think,” Achmed replied. “Why?”

“I’d like to see how well their building stands up to our asteroid laser,” Jerry replied.

“Don’t waste the photons,” Sue advised as she entered the wardroom. “A missile will do a better job. What’s the problem?” Then she caught sight of the Vid screen. “Maybe we should just see if their roof can hold the Meriwether II.”

“You’ll scratch the ship’s paint and Clark wouldn’t like that,” Jerry told her.

“If Clark has seen this, the Meriwether I will beat us to it,” Sue remarked. “Let’s turn up the sound, maybe it’s not as bad as it looks.”

“Once again, this was the scene last night at the Matchi family manor as Terran Jerry Isaacs and Lano Lani Di Ressia formally adopted Tricia Di Isaacs,” an off-screen voice narrated. “This morning no less than fifteen class action suits have been filed to have the union dissolved in various districts of Treloi.”

“Never mind the Vid Studio,” Sue remarked icily. “I want names and addresses.”

“Why?” Lani asked as she entered the wardroom, baby Tricia in her arms.

"It seems some people don't approve of Terralano families," Jerry explained, "and want to dissolve our marriage."

"They can't do that!" Lani denied.

"I sure as Hell won't let them," Jerry agreed.

"While it is possible one or more of the cases against mixed marriages might pass, a special TNN poll shows the overwhelming majority of Lano on Treloi are in favor of Terralano marriage," the news anchor continued with shots of thousands of protestors once more gathered outside the Chamber of Officers. "Violence has already broken out in several cities as Anti-Terralano protestors started rioting last night. The following cities are currently under marshal law..." he went on to name sixteen different cities. "Here in Pansilli, the police so far have managed to keep the peace but have asked the Mayor to reinstitute the strict curfews that were imposed a few weeks ago."

The sceeen resolved to a male La in a business suit. "Speaking from his office this morning, we have General Kalano Ki Manari of the Traditionalist Party. General, we understand that your party is behind these law suits?"

"Not at all," the general replied. "I'll make no secret of the fact that I personally do not approve of any marriage in which children cannot be naturally conceived, but The Traditionalist Party has no official statement on the subject."

"And yet ten of the fifteen suits that were filed this morning were filed by local leaders of your party," the anchorman pointed out.

"I'm not surprised," General Kalano told him smoothly.

"I'll bet you aren't!" Jerry shouted at the screen.

"Shh, Honey," Lani told him, "you're scaring Tricia."

"Oh," Jerry replied a bit more calmly. "Sorry, kid," he added to the baby.

"Traditionalists think alike in such matters because our principles prompt us to," Kalano continued.

"Much like robots with the same programming," Sue commented.

"And today in the Council of Generals we intend to back General Taomi's amendment to the Treloian Articles of Governance definining marriage as a union between a male and female La both capable of bearing viable children."

"But won't that also invalidate marriages between Lano whose only children were adopted?" the anchor asked.

"It will," Kalano replied, "but we have always maintained that such unions were as unnatural as mixed species marriages. It is time to get back to the fundamental and pure traditions of our society and that begins today."

"I don't know about Lano history," Jerry remarked, "but Terran history is filled with villains who claimed to want a pure society. All of a sudden I wish I were a general just so I could be in the Chamber

today to call him out.”

“You don’t have to be a general to challenge him to a duel, dear,” Lani told him. “Just select someone to act as your second and have him deliver the challenge.”

“Ask Clark,” Sue recommended, “He’d probably be willing.”

“Willing to do what?” Clark asked as he, Alano and Eesai entered the wardroom. Jerry explained what they had just seen. “No, I won’t act as your second, because I intend to challenge the bastard myself. How does one challenge a La to a duel?” he asked Alano. “Scream and leap?”

“Dueling is illegal,” Alano told him, “That’s why we work through seconds and why such challenges are delivered privately. I would offer to deliver your challenge, but Kalano would never accept it anyway and if we admitted we had challenged we could be arrested for attempted murder. He’d love that. Let’s just defeat his foul amendment and then propose one of our own.” In the background the intercom buzzed and Lilla, on duty at the comm. Station, asked for Sue. Sue picked up a handset and started talking quietly.

“You know Taomi will attempt to block us anytime Tauko tries to recognize us, just like yesterday,” Clark pointed out.

“I can outwait any of his ploys and today Tauko won’t have a reason to close the session early.”

“One moment, General,” Sue said into the phone. “Clark, Alano, it’s General Tauko looking for you.”

Clark took the handset, “Yes? Don’t do that. Uh huh? Uh huh. Is there a minimum quorum? What do you mean, ‘What’s a quorum?’ I mean does a certain minimum number of generals have to be present? Yes, I see. This afternoon then.”

“Now what?” Alano asked.

“The other shoe just dropped,” Eesai remarked.

“What other shoe?” Alano asked.

“Not a Lano concept?” Jerry asked.

“Not one Alano would have experienced,” Eesai smirked. “I’ll explain later, dear. Clark?”

“As you said,” Clark agreed. “The other shoe dropped. The riots and protests are just a diverting means to an end. With the mood so tense, Tauko has decided to postpone the next session of the Council until this afternoon. You heard me trying to convince him not to, but he’s afraid that if he convenes this morning we won’t have enough supporters present to block Taomi’s amendment.”

“Couldn’t you just filibuster until you have enough votes?” Jerry asked.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Clark remarked. “Alano, do you know what a filibuster is?” Alano shook his head. “Well, it’s changed radically back and forth over time, but originally someone who had the floor could keep it so long as he kept talking. There were cases in which politicians would read through the dictionary or the phone book just to keep having something to say. It was a way to hold up the business

of the American Congress long enough to convince senators and congressmen not to go ahead with their plans. Since then other Terran Governments on Earth and her colonies have used one or more forms of filibuster.”

“It won’t work here,” Alano told him. “Oh, you can talk as long as you like, but once a matter is on the table our laws say it cannot be removed until voted on. Once you get done talking, Taomi or one of his allies will call the question. Even Tauko cannot call the session closed if there isn’t a majority to approve the move to adjourn.”

“But if they pass this amendment, can’t we turn around and repeal it the next time we have a sufficient number of votes in the Chamber?” Clark asked.

“That used to happen a lot,” Alano explained, “so one of the amendments, the twelfth, I believe, states that all changes to the Articles must stand for a minimum of the duration of the current term of the Council, just over a year in this case.”

“So we’ll have to wait and meantime there are fifteen cases in your courts trying to annul our marriage,” Jerry concluded.

“In the old days they used to categorize such rulings as legislating from the bench,” Clark recalled, “and made a big fuss about how it blurred the distinctions between the Legislative and Judicial branches of government.”

“I’d rather not use that sort of rhetoric now,” Jerry told him. “It was only ever used by politicians whose side had just lost a case. For some obscure reason, the winners never saw it that way, but the truth is there is no such thing. Judges don’t legislate from their benches or anywhere else. They merely make decisions based on the evidence placed before them. They can check through a pile of legal precedents but when there is no precedent they have to do what they think is most in keeping with the law of the land. Any so-called “legislation from the bench” is a delusion by a poor loser.

“The trials are just a distraction anyway,” Eesai opined. “They’re a side show and won’t mean a thing unless Taomi gets his amendment. Here’s an idea, though. If the amendment goes through, it could be modified by another amendment when you have the votes. You know amend it to mean it only applies to Lano born on the thirty-first of Summersend.”

“The month of Summersend is thirty days long,” Alano explained to the others. “I’ll keep that in mind if we get desperate.”

With the army clearing a safe path to the Chamber of Officers, the Council of Generals came to order an hour past mid-day and General Taomi immediately took the floor to present his amendment to the Articles of Governance of Treloi. He did so by simply reading it into the record and then sat down without a speech in its favor.

“Tauko just passed me a note over the computer link,” Alano told Clark. Clark was unable to work the *thethalirip* -based computer terminals in the Chamber. “He says we’re two votes short.”

“Time to filibuster,” Clark told him. “General Tauko?”

“I told you that won’t work,” Alano reminded him.

“The Chair recognizes Admiral Anspach,” Tauko announced unable to keep curiosity out of his

voice.

“Tell Tauko I’m stalling for time,” Clark told Alano. “General, I notice that my esteemed colleague did not see fit to justify his proposal with so much as a brief statement along the lines of ‘I’m General Taomi and I approve of this message.’ But the fundamental changes such an absurd amendment will make to Treloi and, should this disease spread, to the rest of the Trelendir cannot be allowed to pass without all men of good conscience standing up to voice their opposition. To that end, I am honored to be the first.

“Never before have I encountered an amendment like the one General Taomi has proposed here. First of all he has given us a shiny new definition of species since he seeks to exclude any La who has the misfortune of being unable to have children for reasons of health or inclination or, well any other problem. I know for a fact that the worlds of the Trelendir have allowed same-sex couples for centuries and yet, General Taomi would exclude them too. He also has a new definition of citizenship. That definition, I am led to understand is complete bollocks. A strict definition of a citizen of the Trelendir is someone who is here. Less strict definitions include all known sentient beings whether they think they are in the Trelendir or not. But General Taomi wants to split us up into two groups; first class citizens who are allowed to marry and second class ones who are not.

“I assure you that the best scientific minds of the Terralendir,” Clark continued, “will call us a load of prats if we allow this definition of species to stand for the same reason they occasionally have to point out to some legislatures why the value of Pi cannot be arbitrarily set to three, no matter how simple it would make geometric calculations. As for the definition of citizen, we need merely wait to get lynched by the good people of Treloi. If we go ahead with this nonsense, we’ll deserve what we get.

“I would also like to point out that the idiotic wording of the amendment would automatically annul all human-human marriages on Treloi. I doubt Ambassador Gupta would be very happy to hear about that,” Clark continued, remembering that the Lano didn’t have the concept of diplomatic immunity nor was the Terran Embassy accorded extraterritorial status here. “And yet any human within the Trelendir can be drafted into military service. Ladies and gentlemen this amendment is nothing short of institutionalized bigotry and its adoption... its very proposal betrays Treloi and the Trelendir by stomping on the traditional values of the people.”

“Are you calling me a traitor?” Taomi interrupted.

Clark smiled at the general. He thought back and realized that perhaps he had. He had said the proposal was treasonous; ergo the proposer was a traitor. Clark let the smile continue just a bit longer and finally replied, “I just think you failed to think the matter out properly. Now that I’ve explained it to you, if you fail to retract the proposed amendment... well that’s different, isn’t it?”

“Terran, I’ve killed men for less,” Taomi hissed.

“You work cheap then,” Clark shrugged the threat off.

“Is Admiral Anspach done talking now?” General Kalano asked.

“Not hardly,” Clark laughed and continued on to give an impassioned speech, much of which had been cribbed from famous Terran speeches regarding civil rights. It was long and rambling but after an hour he began to run out of material, so he pulled a pocket terminal from a pouch on his belt and started reading, “Congratulations on your purchase of the CT7900 Series pocket terminal. This device is guaranteed to give you years of reliable service under the most extreme conditions. Should this device

ever stop working the ConTac Corporation will cheerfully supply you with a replacement. Would you like to set up the screen now? Say Yes or No. Yes. Good, please use the stylus to tap on the spot each time it appears.”

“What is this?” Taomi demanded.

“It’s my speech,” Clark replied, quickly tapping his way through the screen set-up.

“Presiding General Tauko,” Taomi turned to Tauko, “I demand you silence this Terran. It’s bad enough he is speaking when he has already recused himself from the vote, but...”

“I’ll keep my word, Taomi,” Clark promised. “I will not vote, but I will have my say.”

“You’re speaking gibberish,” Taomi raged.

“I’m speaking perfectly good Terrañol, General,” Clark responded.

“The language of this Chamber is Lani,” Taomi shouted back.

“Is that official?” Clark asked Tauko.

“I’m not sure,” Tauko chuckled. “It’s never come up. Parliamentary?” he asked a quiet, elderly La near the edge of the podium.

“There is no official language of this Chamber,” the parliamentarian replied. “Admittedly I believe Lani has always been used in the past, but there is no reason Admiral Anspach cannot speak any language he pleases.”

“But I don’t speak Terran gibberish,” Taomi protested.

“I do,” Clark whispered to Alano, “fluently.” Then he raised his voice, “I would gladly wait until a native translator from Gibber can be called, but the general would also have to hold off on calling the question.”

“This is nonsense,” Taomi shouted, “and it’s out of order, I demand he be silenced.”

“Actually, General,” Tauko replied firmly, “you are the one who is out of order at the moment. Now be seated before I am forced to have you ejected from the Chamber until you can learn to behave in a civilized manner.”

Taomi glared at Tauko, but slowly sat back into his seat. Clark was then permitted to continue on. By now he was up to establishing verbal recognition on the device, which gave him several long speeches to read, and then once he had finished setting the device up, he was able to connect to the databanks of both Meriwethers from which he tapped into a vast library of literature. He was just getting into the final chapter of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter when five generals and admirals arrived in the hall and Tauko signaled that he could stop. But Clark held him off and bit and kept reading.

“We have our votes,” Alano whispered urgently. “What are you doing?”

“Finishing the story,” Clark whispered back and went back to read the final page before thanking the Council for their time. There was a scattering of applause, mostly from the gallery, as he sat down, but

Clark was unable to determine if it was for the story or if they were just thankful he had finally stopped talking. Checking his watch, he noticed he had gone on for nearly four hours.

General Kalano then got up and made a long-winded speech about preserving the unique and precious culture of Treloi.

“I suspect Eesai is going to be annoyed with me,” Alano whispered to Clark. “We were supposed to have dinner with her brother’s family tonight.”

“Could be a late dinner,” Clark replied, his voice very hoarse. “This windbag has been going on for an hour and a half.”

“Look who’s talking,” Alano laughed. “Although you’ll have to lend me that story if Eesai and I ever have children.”

“I’ll send you the entire set,” Clark promised. “Oh, is Kalano finished speaking? Finally!”

“Presiding General” Alano got to his feet. “I would like to call the question.”

“We’re not ready,” Taomi replied. Under normal circumstances the collegiality of the Council would allow for such an unofficial stall.

“Tough,” Clark rasped.

“We are,” Alano replied to Taomi.

“I move to adjourn,” Kalano spoke up.

“Second!” Yeolano chorused.

“There is a motion to adjourn on the floor,” Taomi announced. “All in favor?”

It was late and the generals and admirals were tired. The motion for adjournment passed by one vote.

“Very well, we will reconvene tomorrow morning,” Taomi announced. “This session is closed.”

Eight

“Sorry I’m late,” Alano apologized to Eesai’s brother as they walked through the door.

“I expected that,” Fermi replied. “We’ve all been watching you on the Vid. We were afraid you might have to cancel altogether.”

“Well, that’s the one good thing about adjournment,” Alano replied, “but who knows what tomorrow will bring. I wish we could have killed that amendment once and for all.”

“You ought to see who’s on Vid now!” Eesai’s nephew Meno enthused.

“Something amusing, I hope” Alano asked.

“Yeah!” Meno laughed. “It’s that General Kalano.”

“I don’t find him amusing at all,” Eesai remarked. “If he has his way I lose a sister.”

“Mom and Dad forget to tell me something?” Fermi asked.

“Didn’t I tell you? Didn’t they?” Eesai asked. “I’m sorry, Fermi, with everything else happening it must have slipped my mind. Sue and I took the oath of adoption.”

“Well, I should hope so!” Fala Di Cressia, Fermi’s wife, exclaimed. “When you were here last you two were acting like twins.”

“Not identical twins,” Eesai grinned, “but I’m so sorry. We did it before we left the ranch.”

“And now you’re here to show off your intended,” Fermi chuckled. “At least you didn’t forget to tell us that.”

“I called Mom and Dad last night too, though I don’t know when we’ll manage to get out to the Ranch,” Eesai remarked.

“So our little Eesai isn’t expecting a bundle of joy anytime soon?” Fermi teased her.

“Little Eesai isn’t even trying to yet,” she shot back. “Do you think Mom and Day will be shocked if I told them Alano and I are considering a Terran-style marriage at least for the next few years?”

“I’m sure they’re too happy to know you’re getting married by any standard to worry about it,” Fermi told her, “but let’s see what this General Kalano is saying. Looks like he’s in Treloi Plaza. Does he expect to get taken seriously there? Every political hack and nut job makes speeches in the Plaza.”

“Not Kalano,” Alano remarked. “He very rarely makes any public speeches but he’s thought of as an influential man so when he does, everyone takes notice. I’m sure he’s using Treloi Plaza for the historical significance.”

“You’re the politician,” Fermi shrugged.

“Last week, I might have offered to send over my seconds,” Alano laughed, “but one can’t help but want to keep an eye on the dangerous people of Treloi, and Kalano is near the top of the list.”

Kalano’s speech was as long winded as the one he gave following Clark’s filibuster, although less

obviously inflammatory. As he spoke, however it became apparent he was speaking in euphemistic metaphors. He continued on his theme of keeping Lano society pure and ideal and when he finally got directly to the subject of Lani's and Jerry's marriage, he carefully did not condemn it because the couple was of different species, but because they defied Treloian law to get married when they did, rather than waiting for the results of the debate within the Chamber of Officers. He went on to say that the same applied to those deluded people who had taken the Oath of Adoption with Terrans. "It was a happy day today when the Court of Pansilli ruled that all Terran-Lano pairings were illegal," Kalano told the crowd.

"When did that happen?" Eesai asked.

"Just before you got here," Meno told her, "but as far as Jano and I are concerned Sue is still our aunt."

"Yeah!" the younger Jano chorused.

"The courts made the right ruling. It's time to make Treloi pure again. Go and spread the word of what I have said, my friends. Go and Make Treloi a Lano world again."

"Alano, dear?" Eesai asked sweetly. "Would you mind terribly if I sent my seconds to visit that wretched excuse for a man."

"Yes, dear," Alano replied, "they might get in the way of my aim and I would hate to hurt our friends as much as you would. I am taking that man apart piece by piece if I have to. No," he corrected himself seeing the growing fervor in the crowds. The people below him were what Ralani had been calling Antis. As the Vid camera panned through the crowd it was apparent they were carrying torches and cudgels. It was a primitive scene unlike any Alano had witnessed outside of history books. Even as Kalano finished his speech, so obviously crafted to not actually encourage violence, his followers were surging out of the Plaza and breaking shop windows as they passed. At least one was caught throwing his torch through a broken window. The crowd was shouting "No Terralano" even though Kalano had never used the term. "Tomorrow will be his last day on the Council, however, if I have anything to say about it."

"What are you going to do?" Eesai asked nervously.

"If those people make as much of a fuss as I fear they will, I intend to have him arrested for inciting a riot. He can hide behind, 'Go and spread the word of what I have said,' and claim it wasn't an incentive for violence, but he's doing nothing to stop it now and it looks to me like he's smiling even with two of the Plaza buildings on fire."

"Better call the Vid channel and request a copy of that recording," Fermi advised, "but you know Kalano has been accused of such things before and gotten away with them. He was arrested twice during the unease following the meeting with the Terrans."

"No problem," Alano told him. "If I can't deal with him in the Council meeting, I'll borrow Eesai's ship. Those Terran ships are still equipped with chemical propulsion units."

"We don't actually use them anymore," Eesai told him. "The artificial gravity can get us off any world."

"Yes, but you still have them and I know where Kalano lives. There won't be much left after I set a rocket off on top of it," Alano pointed out."

"I hope it doesn't come to that," Fermi told him.

"Me too," Alano sighed. "Maybe Tauko will have a better idea."

"Not Clark?" Eesai asked.

"If I know Clark and by now I do," Alano replied, "Sue is probably using physical force to stop him from using one of those ships himself."

"I just thought of something," Eesai remarked. She ran to the comm set and made a call. A few minutes later she came and sat back down next to Alano.

"What did you just do?" he asked.

"Two things," she replied, "I put Meriwether I on battle stations and also requested they pick us up in an hour and a half in the ship's pinnace."

"Did you pass the word on to Sue?" Alano asked.

"I didn't need to," Eesai replied. "She had already called my ship to warn them. Sue's a smart lady and she doesn't take her eyes off the news either."

Outside the house they could hear the wail of sirens. "We're way out in the suburbs," Fermi noted. "They can't have gotten here yet."

"They can if someone was planning in advance," Alano told him. They raced outside and looked around but nothing seemed to be wrong. "Of course the police may be instituting a curfew to be on the safe side. Maybe we should call the local precinct."

"I don't think they appreciated my call," Eesai remarked a short time later as Fala and Alano brought dinner to the table, "but they did give us clearance to fly the pinnace in, but only because you're on the Council of Generals, dear. Maybe it's good to be a politician after all."

"Don't get too used to it," Alano advised her. "I don't intend to stay on the Council any longer than necessary."

"Well, you have six years to change your mind, but I would rather you didn't. You would be much happier in a space ship, you know."

"Admirals don't get to command ships," Alano remarked, "And running a fleet is not quite the same."

"Ever thought of buying a ship?" Eesai asked.

"You know all ships are government owned," Alano told her.

"Not Terran-made ships," Eesai pointed out.

"I hate to let my prejudices show," Alano admitted, "but Terran ships always look so old fashioned."

"Only on the outside," Eesai told him. "They have devices well ahead of Treloian ships, especially their long-range sensors, and if you have the ship built, they can give you sky sails. Clark had Meriwether

I fitted with two impellers during the refit and plans to do the same for Sue's ship next year when it goes in for its regular maintenance. In fact Meriwether II already has mounts for the sails. They just didn't have time to work out a few problems in the new hybrid drive before she was scheduled to lift. Even without them she's as fast as Inillien. Clark tells me in a straight race, Meriwether I would leave her sister behind in the asteroid dust, though the younger ship is better on the curves. But if you want something that looks like Inillien, they could build an approximation."

"How much do such ships cost?" Alano asked.

"Talk to Clark," Eesai shrugged. "Maybe he wants a partner. I know his sister Louise owns a large percentage of Meriwether, Inc. She bankrolled Clark originally, but even with her money they would need a third partner if they wanted another new ship."

"You know that for certain?" Alano asked.

"They talked about it one evening while I was visiting Louise. You should see her place, by the way. Talk about a view! You can see for miles and miles and miles."

"Something to look forward to," Alano smiled. "I'll talk to Clark about it tomorrow. It's one thing to buy a ship, but another to start a company. A partnership sounds interesting, especially if I can get a ship of my own to command again."

"Are you two going to eat?" Ferni asked amusedly, "or talk about spaceships all evening?"

"We can do both," Eesai laughed, "and so much more polite than talking politics!"

"Can I ride on your spaceship?" Jano asked Alano.

"I don't have one yet," Alano chuckled, "but maybe. We'll have to see, Okay?"

"Okay," Jano agreed

Nine

While Eesai and Alano were enjoying dinner, Tauko Ki Masai was going hungry as he tried to deal with the chaos that was rapidly enveloping his world. "You're going to need to impose martial law over the whole planet you know," Malana advised him.

"That wasn't even done two years ago when you first started consorting with aliens, Mom," Tauko

replied.

“If it was, we might not have burned through so many governments,” Malano pointed out, “though I don’t miss the Falconins. But if you don’t believe me about bringing in the troops, take a look out that window. Kalano’s really done it this time.”

“He did not actually say anything incriminating,” Tauko replied.

“That depends on how you see it,” Malana told him. “Along with the martial law, I suggest you have as many of Kalano’s associates as you can find picked up for questioning.”

“I can’t do that,” Tauko protested. “They have their rights. We cannot arrest them without adequate suspicion.”

“Sure you can,” Malana told him. “Call it protective custody. And the questioning can be done for their own good.”

“Can’t say I like the sound of that,” Tauko replied looking out the window for himself. Most of the fires were on the sites that had been destroyed before Meriwether II’s mission to meet the Carono, but a few previously untouched buildings were burning.

“I’m not telling you to use torture,” Malana told him disgustedly. “Just offer them a bit of safety and in that spirit you can ask a few other questions about what happened tonight. Half of them will babble for hours given half a chance. One of them is bound to say something that will allow us to arrest Kalano. You don’t even have to offer any of them immunity from charges, although you can. Get Kalano and maybe Taomi and the rest don’t really matter. However, whether you can get them or not, you’d better have the Army and Navy in place by daybreak.”

“The army is already here in Pansilli,” Tauko replied, “and half the other major cities on Treloi, but I’ll give the orders to bring the Navy and Marines in to help keep the peace.”

“And then get something to eat,” Malana advised. “You won’t make any difference by missing a meal, so you might as well not be hungry.”

Tauko laughed in spite of the situation. “You used to say things like that when I was still in grade school,” he recalled.

“Not much has changed except I liked your playmates better back then,” Malana replied. “You need to get that amendment put out of the way as soon as possible, you know.”

“I know,” Tauko agreed. “Most of this chaos is because one of those stupid judges was foolish enough to actually hear one of those bogus class action suits Taomi and Kalano came up with.”

“One is all it takes, evidently,” Malana replied. “I’m surprised they only had one judge in their pockets, though.”

“No, all of them were,” Tauko replied. “It’s just that the one here in Pansilli was so stupid he actually heard the case whereas the others knew enough to hold off until the Council could make its own decision. When I get a chance, I’m planning to have this particular judge investigated. I suspect he has more than one or two skeletons in his closet – see, I can use Terran phrases too – and Taomi or Kalano were able to hold those skeletons over his head. It’s the only reason I can come up with why he felt he

had to come to a decision in a single day.”

“Unless he actually believes that rubbish about cultural purity,” Malana speculated.

“If that’s the case I want him suspended now. The least he could have done was given a semblance of impartiality,” Tauko complained. “With all this going on though, I may have to cancel tomorrow’s session of the Council.”

“Don’t do that,” Malana warned. “That’s exactly what Taomi and Kalano want. The longer this goes on, the harder it is going to be to slap them down as they deserve.”

“You saw what I had to go through today,” Tauko pointed out, “and unless you can think of some way to get around it, the first order of business is taking the vote on that damned amendment.”

“No, you’re stuck there,” Malana agreed. “The question has been called, so that has to come next, but as long as you’re calling in the Navy and Marines, I think a security force for each general and admiral is in order.”

“I’d love to be able to only assign them to our allies,” Tauko grumbled.

“I’ll bet you at any odds you care to quote, most of the Cosonais and Traditionalists won’t allow you to send them guards,” Malana told him. “They’ll be too afraid you’ve ordered them killed.”

“Good idea,” Tauko smiled.

“Tauko!” Malana warned him menacingly.

“Not order them killed, but I had thought of just having the guards assigned,” Tauko explained. “If I only offer them as you suggested, you’re right, the offer will be refused by most of them. I won’t tell them I plan to have the guards move in by jumper. Our people will be able to fly to the Chamber of Officers, while the others will come through the streets as usual.”

“We should call Clark and Alano next,” Malana told him.

“I will, but first I need to have the Navy and Marines deployed, including the special guard units for our Council members. Then I plan to take your advice and have a sandwich,” Tauko told her. “After that, I’ll talk to Clark and Alano. If we get past the stupid amendment, Alano plans to propose an amendment of his own, And I’ll want our Terralano people on hand for the debates that is bound to cause.”

“Can’t you just let it go through as you had planned handling Taomi’s amendment?” Malana asked.

“Too many of our allies want a chance to speak and you know Taomi and Kalano won’t let an opportunity to attempt to block or at least delay us go by,” Tauko replied.

“Politicians!” Malana commented disgustedly.

Tauko had just finished eating when his mother told him to look at the Vid screen.

“This just in,” the late night anchor reported. Below the talking head a large red banner proclaimed “Breaking News!” and “Death in the Streets!!!” “Several people have been killed and more injured as

rioters clashed with soldiers on Harasai Street this morning. A military spokesman said warning shots were fired into the air, but when people started throwing rocks on the troops, the soldiers shot to defend themselves. Three of the soldiers were wounded in the incident and are currently being treated at the same hospital the wounded rioters were taken to. We'll have more for you on that when we have it."

"That's all I need," Tauko moaned.

"You have emergency powers, haven't you?" Malana pointed out.

"What did you have in mind?" Tayuko asked hopefully.

"Call the Council back into session immediately," Malana told him. "Have the security guards you assigned ferry the members of the Council to the Chamber now."

"Those guards are just moving into place now," Tauko told her, "It will take at least two hours to assemble everyone fairly."

"Good," she replied. "Make the call, then see if you can take a nap. You're going to need it."

"So much for that planning call to Alano and Anspach," Tauko replied. "It can't be helped, though."

Two hours later, Tauko did call the Chamber of Officers to order in emergency session. "We have an amendment to the Articles of Governance on the floor at this time," he told the groggy generals and admirals, and by the laws of this Chamber we cannot move on to other matters until that has been voted on."

"Objection!" Taomi shouted.

Tauko glared at the man. Taomi, he thought, had no right to look so well rested when even the sun would be sleeping another two hours. "On what grounds, General? It is your own amendment. I would gladly let you withdraw it, but it's too late for that."

"I object on the grounds that this session is not being held legally," Taomi told him.

"Parliamentarian?" Tauko asked calmly.

The parliamentarian rattled off a series of words like section, subsection and paragraph interspersed with numbers and free-standing letters and concluded, "In times of martial law the Presiding General will have the power to convene the Council whenever necessary."

"The following amendment proposal stands on the floor," Tauko announced and read the actual wording of Taomi's proposal. "I remind you all that it needs sixty percent of the votes to pass. All in favor?" he asked.

"Objection!" Kalano shouted this time. "I demand a roll-call vote."

"Parliamentarian?" Tauko asked.

The elderly La recited another address, adding, "All votes in an emergency session shall be voice votes unless the chair deems they be too close to call fairly."

Tauko smiled smugly. He was particularly proud to have thought of that one without Malana's help. "All in favor of the amendment signify by saying 'Aye.'" He paused while the members voting affirmatively shouted at the tops of their lungs. "All oppose, say 'Nay.'" This time the Chamber rumbled under the roar of the vote. "Chair rules the Nays have it. The amendment has fallen. Is there any further business?"

"I have," Alano spoke up quickly.

Tauko breathed a sigh of relief. In all the running around before this session he had not had time to coach the junior members of the Council so he had merely hoped they would know what to do. "The Chair recognizes Rear Admiral Alano Ki Matchi."

"I hereby propose the following amendment to the Articles of Governance of Treloi," Alano proclaimed. "All people, regardless of species, shall be equal under the law of Treloi and shall be subject to the same rights, privileges and duties. This shall be known henceforth as the Terralano Principle."

"Objection!" Taomi shouted.

"Object all you like," Alano laughed. "That's still my proposal." Many of the other members laughed as well.

"I second the amendment," Clark added.

"You said you would recuse yourself," Taomi claimed.

"I promised to recuse myself from the vote on your amendment," Clark told him calmly, "not this one."

"You have no honor," Taomi accused.

"On the contrary Taomi Bi Taomi," Clark stressed the "Bi" patronymic. There was an audible gasp from the other Council members at the obvious insult. "I have quite a bit of honor. That's why I seconded the Terralano Amendment. If you have any objection to it, I suggest you debate that in a minute when the floor is open. If you have objections to me, I recommend you try sending your seconds around." There was another gasp at that statement. Dueling happened frequently enough, but being illegal it was never mentioned in the Chamber. However, Clark had not challenged Taomi, a fact that did not escape anyone's notice. He had merely stated that he was available for such a challenge from Taomi.

Kalano whispered something to Taomi and Taomi smiled.

"The new amendment has been moved and seconded," Tauko proclaimed. "Is there any debate?" Outside the Chamber that would have been a stupid question. A dozen hands shot up at once. And the debate began.

Tauko decided to show fairness, by allowing Taomi to go first, but he was not doing the rash general any favor. The amendment had taken everyone by such surprise that any debate at this point would be off-the-cuff. Clark carefully took notes while Taomi rambled on so he could counter the points one at a time. However, as Taomi went into the second half hour of his tirade, citing such phrases as "the intentions of the framers of the Articles of Governance," "the unnatural mixing of species," and "contrary to the laws of the Gods" Clark got distracted by the display on Alano's terminal. Unable to operate a Lano terminal, Clark had done without, but he recognized the Lani numerals to one side of the screen.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Our constituencies,” Alano told him.

“We have a constituency?” Clark asked.

“Yes,” Alano nodded. “All Councillors are at large representatives and in times of martial law, a citizen may change his representative on a moment’s notice. Normally one can only do that every five years, but I noticed before coming here that the news agencies are reminding people of that particular right. It doesn’t happen all that often, after all, We don’t represent a large number of citizens, but my own constituency doubled from two thousand to four just after I proposed the Terralano Amendment. Yours went up too, but not as much. At the moment Taomi’s constituency is wavering a bit because he’s wandering all over the place, and it went way down after his amendment failed. People like to back a winner, I guess.”

“It’s still before dawn,” Clark observed. “Most people must still be asleep.”

“That’s how I see it. Expect those numbers to get really volatile in a few hours.” Alano predicted.

Eventually Taomi wound down just as the sun was rising outside and Clark took his turn at rebuttal. He only spent some fifteen minutes talking but in that time managed to knock down each and every point Taomi had made. “You just gained twenty thousand constituents,” Alano told him.

“I would love to know who they are,” Clark replied.

“Um, students mostly,” Alano replied, “I guess that’s no surprise, although you seem to have hit a chord of some sort with working women between the ages of thirty and forty. Interesting.”

“Strange,” Clark countered.

The debate continued all day as various Cosonai and Traditionalist Councillors got up to voice their objections to the Terralano Amendment as even they were calling it. By the rules of the Chamber each member could only speak once over the course of the debate. The only exceptions were the ones who proposed and seconded, so Clark and Alano got up three times over the course of the long day to defend their proposal and as the day wore on. And all day, Alano kept his eyes on the numbers in front of him.

As the day progressed, food was brought into the Chamber because Tauko was not willing to adjourn and enough of his supporters backed him to make it stick. As dinnertime approached, however, Alano spotted something on his terminal that made him smile and when the current speaker stopped, he got up and told Tauko, “Presiding General, I call the question.”

Tauko frowned, but didn’t dare question Alano out loud, but Clark could tell Tauko wasn’t certain the amendment could pass with a sixty percent majority. “The question of the Terralano Amendment has been called,” Tauko proclaimed. “The proposal reads, ‘All people, regardless of species, shall be equal under the law of Treloi and shall be subject to the same rights, privileges and duties. This shall be known henceforth as the Terralano Principle.’ Sixty percent of the vote must be cast affirmatively for the amendment to pass. All in favor, signify by saying, ‘Aye.’ All opposed, say, ‘Nay.’” Tauko listened carefully. “The chair decides a roll-call vote will be necessary to determine the outcome.”

The roll-call progressed slowly, but as they got to the end only fifty-five percent of the attended

generals and admirals had voted in favor of Alano's proposal and Tauko sadly announced the results.

"Presiding General!" Alano got to his feet, "I call for a recount of the votes weighed by our constituencies."

"Excuse me Admiral Alano?" Tauko asked over Taomi's and Kalano's objections. "I don't believe that can be done."

"Point of Information," the parliamentarian piped up. "All votes are weighted by the constituencies of the representative officer."

"Well, yes, but that's automatically processed into the tabulation, isn't it?" Tauko asked in the resulting silence.

"Normally, the constituencies of each representative do not change, sir," the parliamentarian replied, "but we are in a state of martial law during which a citizen may change his representative as frequently as he likes. It is possible that has changed since we started."

"Really?" Tauko murmured. "You learn something new every day."

"Objection!" Taomi shouted. "The vote should stand as our constituencies stood at the start of debate."

Tauko looked at the elderly La who knew all the rules of the Chamber far better than anyone else. "Votes in times of martial law are valued at the time of the vote," he announced and followed up by quoting the chapter and verse.

"And how does the vote stand when weighted by constituency?" Tauko asked the Chief Recorder of the Chamber.

"One minute, sir, I'm still bringing that up," the Chief Recorder replied. "The vote passes with eighty-one percent of the population represented among the Ayes. I guess that means we now really are part of the Terralendir."

Ten

"Presiding General!" Admiral Birna got his attention. "A point of order if you will."

"Yes, admiral?" Tauko responded.

"I would remind the chair of the Loyalty Clause in the rules governing the Chamber of Officers," Admiral Birna told him. "All members of this body must by vote or public statement support all Articles of Governance and their amendments. No officer may remain a member of this Council so long as he does not do so."

"What?" Kalano and Taomi screamed together.

"Just so," Birna told them smugly. "Either make a public statement in favor of the Terralano Amendment, and I warn you, it must be approved by the members of this Council, or retire now. That goes for anyone on record as having voted against the amendment."

"Councillors may do so by changing their votes in retrospect," the parliamentarian added. There was a flurry of hands being raised for attention just then and by the time it was done, only Taomi and Kalano had refused to change their votes.

"Masterfully played," Malana commended Alano an hour later around the dining table in the Presiding General's mansion. The officers of both Meriwethers were there along with Lilla's and Eesai's family as were a large number of the Terralano Party. "I thought you didn't like politics."

"Hate it," Alano laughed, "but one thing I learned from you is that the best politicians are those who do the job because it has to be done, not because they want to be the ones to do it."

"Well, we're not likely to try playing games with people's lives just for the sake of building up our political legacies," Malana agreed.

"Part of the credit goes to Admiral Birna," Alano admitted. "She was the one who remembered the Loyalty Clause."

"Yes," Malana agreed and called down the table, "Birna! Good show!" Birna grinned back in reply. "She always was the best in her class," Malana told Alano.

"Clark did well too," Alano told her. "It may have looked like all he was doing was seconding my proposal, but we worked it out in advance, mostly last night after Tauko called us. It was mostly his idea."

"I told Taomi. He wouldn't like what I intended to propose," Clark laughed, "but then we decided Alano should do the job. I'd also planned to propose pretty much what Admiral Birna did, except I didn't realize it was already in the law. Too bad, really. I was waiting to remind Taomi he had promised to recuse himself from a vote like that." Just then Ralani came over and kissed Clark on the cheek. "What was that for?" he asked the smiling teen.

"That was for calling him 'Bi Taomi' in the Chamber of Officers," she laughed. "The look on his face was worth a thousand birthday presents!"

"Well, happy birthday, then," Clark laughed, and then he immediately sobered. "I also invited him to challenge me to a duel, didn't I?"

"He won't do that," Alano assured him..

"Oh," Clark replied. "Good."

“He’ll just hire an assassin,” Alano added blandly. Clark started coughing as a bite of food tried to go down his windpipe. “Just kidding,” Alano laughed. “Seriously, I doubt he’ll do anything, but if he does, it will be through his seconds.”

“Who gets to choose weapons?” Clark asked. “Challenger or challengee?”

“What choice?” Alano asked. “You bring the weapon you deem best. There was a case when I was back in school when two friends got into an argument at a bar one night and one went too far and challenged the other. By the time they were sober they both regretted the incident but perceived honor being what it is, they both realized they had to actually go through with the duel. Funniest thing I ever saw; one showed up with a penny whistle and the other with the feather.”

“Huh?” Clark asked.

“They had to duel, but neither wanted to kill the other,” Alano explained, “so they both showed up with non-lethal weapons.”

“Who won?” Ralani asked curiously.

“Well, the man with the penny whistle played a few notes and his friend instantly clasped his hands to his ears and pretended to faint,” Alano recalled. “So I guess the one with the whistle won.”

“I’d have bet on the feather,” Ralani admitted.

“I did,” Alano admitted. “The point is you can bring whatever you care to fight with. You could bring a knife but if your oppoant has a fully automatic weapon, you had better be very fast.”

“A laser rifle then,” Clark decided.

“Or a pistol if you think you can bring it to bear faster,” Alano replied.

“Or a mirror,” Eesai suggested.

“Which wouldn’t do me much good if he decided to bring a sling shot,” Clark replied. “Ah well, morituri te salutamus and all that.”

“What was that?” Eesai asked.

“We who are about to die, salute you,” Clark translated. “In the ancient days of Earth there was an empire in which one of the leading forms of entertainment was to watch two men fight to the death in armed combat of various sorts. The men, called gladiators, would come out before the fight and say that to the emperor.”

“This was entertainment?” Eesai asked.

“Slightly better than teasing wild animals to death,” Alano remarked. “Some of our ancestors did that for the fun of it.”

“They did on Earth too,” Clark admitted. “Well, let’s hope we’ve all grown up since those days.”

In all it was a pleasant evening until one of Tauko's aides came in and whispered something to him that made him shout to get everyone's attention. "Turn on the big Vid screen," he instructed the aide once it was quiet. "I don't know what this means yet," he told everyone in the large room, "but General Taomi was found dead in his penthouse just a short time ago."

"What?" Birna asked. "How? Why?"

"I don't know," Tauko replied. "That's why we're turning on the Vid. I've also sent a request to the Pansilli Police Department and the coroner to let me know when they know more."

"Darned good thing I was here with all of you," Clark decided. "After all that baiting, I could have been accused of killing him."

"Still could, Boss," Sue told him. "Don't worry, Eesai and I will bake you a cake with a file in it."

"She's half right," Eesai laughed. "You could still be a suspect, but you have a tight alibi. Besides, it's possible he killed himself."

"Why would he do that?" Clark asked.

"You and Alano just forced him to resign from the Council of Generals," Eesai explained.

"He was angry at us. It's more likely he would try to kill us," Clark replied. "And he didn't resign. He just refused to change his vote on the Terralano Amendment. He could have easily returned in a week or two and quietly changed his vote after everything had quieted down. Maybe he had a heart attack or a stroke. Do Lano have heart attacks and strokes?"

"Of course we do," Eesai nodded. "The causes vary, but our bodies fail in pretty much the same way human ones do."

"Isn't that strange?" Ralani asked.

"What do you mean?" Eesai asked her.

"I mean, here we, are two species born on completely different worlds. There is no way we could ever interbreed, and our body chemistries are so different we need to serve two types of alcohol at a mixed party like this."

"And they need to be carefully marked at that," Jerry added. "Given all the differences, I'm surprised we don't poison each other when we kiss."

"I'm just as glad we don't," Lani told him.

"But that's what I'm saying," Ralani told them. "Why do we have so many similar diseases? We even have our own versions of the common cold."

"But we can't catch a cold from each other," Jerry told her. "It's parallel evolution. I admit it seems wildly improbable, but there's probably something very basic about evolution we don't understand yet. We know that evolution is not an ever upward process. It's completely random, but it's possible that there's something about our two worlds that caused us to evolve so similarly. It's also possible, though, that it really is a wild coincidence. Look at the Carono. They're nothing like us. They're sort of like living

rocks. Also they can't survive on a world like this and we couldn't survive on theirs. To tell the truth, they're more like what we expected to run into for our first aliens."

"So it's still strange then that we're so alike," Ralani remarked.

"Yeah, right," Jerry agreed. "Given all the infinite possibilities for life in this universe, I'm glad Terrans and Lano met each other first. At our best, it's like we're brothers and sisters to each other."

"Of course," Ralani laughed. "We're Terralano."

"We are, indeed," Jerry agreed.

Tauko's aid came back and spoke quietly with the presiding general for a while who nodded several times and eventually told him, "I'll want that verified."

"News?" Alano asked.

"The preliminary report is that General Taomi Ki Taomi died of a massive stroke," Tauko reported. "We'll know for certain after the coroner finishes his examination, of course. That was the diagnosis made by the doctor who declared him dead."

"Did he have a record of high blood pressure?" Sue asked.

"I don't know that either," Tauko admitted, "but we'll have a look at his medical records. It's possible he did and he wasn't taking his medication."

"There is that," Sue agreed. "It just seems suspicious that he would suffer a fatal stroke tonight of all nights."

"Well, he was definitely under the sort of stress that could raise his blood pressure," Jerry commented.

"Oh God!" Clark moaned. "I killed him, didn't I?"

"No!" Eesai told him immediately. "If he was avoiding his medicine or his annual check ups, then it's his own fault. He did that to himself."

"But he would still be alive if I hadn't been taunting him the last few days," Clark told her.

"You don't know that," Eesai insisted. "If anything it would have been his own bigotry that killed him."

Lilla caught her sister looking pale. "What's wrong?" she asked Ralani.

"I was glad Clark insulted him in the Chamber," Ralani explained. "And now he's dead."

"He was an awful man," Lilla replied, "and he wasn't very nice to you."

"I wasn't very polite to him either," Ralani recalled.

"Now don't you go feeling guilty for that now," Serafyma told her. "You apologized for your

behavior. It's a lot more than he did."

"This just in," Ballo Ki Witzai of TNN said from the screen just above the "Breaking News!" banner. The banner was flashing this time. "General Taomi Ki Taomi has been found dead in his penthouse apartment in Pansilli."

The screen changed to a portrait of the general with the dates of his birth and death along the bottom. "Took them long enough to find out," Jerry remarked.

"Earlier this evening, following today's session in the Chamber of Officers, the influential head of the Cosonai Party went home and appeared to have suffered a massive stroke and died. Reports that an empty bottle of Sodium Tufuosinazate was found near his bed have not been confirmed. Tufuosinazate, a medication normally used to relieve severe muscle aches, has been shown to cause extremely high blood pressure when taken in large doses."

"Why didn't I hear about that yet?" Tauko wondered aloud.

"It might not be true," Birna told him as she came closer. "You know how these stories go. Next they'll probably be speculating over possible foul play. In a year we'll hear a hundred conspiracy theories."

"I want the investigation to be as transparent as possible," Tauko decided.

"We can't interfere with the police investigation," Malana advised.

"No, but there should be one by the Council of Generals," Tauko decided. "General Yeolano would be the acting head of the Cosonai Party, I should probably offer him the job of investigator into this matter."

"No one will be able to say you chose your own insider," Birna agreed.

"I'll call him now and Taomi's family," Tauko decided. "I should offer my sympathy at the least. Excuse me." He got up and left the room.

"It's always something, isn't it?" Eesai remarked in Tauko's wake.

"Who was it that said Life is not a spectator sport?" Sue wondered.

"Jackie Robinson," Jerry replied. "Why?"

"Because at the moment I'm not sure I agree," Sue replied.

"Well, I'm just as glad not to be involved in Taomi's death," Ralani told her, "but whoever this Jac Ki Robinson was, he's right. You can't just sit back and watch it go by. I tried that, remember? You never really feel alive, because you never really are alive that way."

Jerry took another look at the Vid screen. "They're going to wear out that 'Breaking News!' banner if they're not careful."

"It's more appropriate than most of the uses they put it to," Eesai remarked. "Oh, oh! Now what?"

“Shh!” Malana hushed everyone.

“General Kalano Ki Manari, leader of the Traditionalist Party has just called a press conference due to begin any minute. We will bring it to you live as soon as it starts,” the anchorman promised.

“What new hell is he bringing us tonight?” Alano commented.

“I imagine it’s something political,” Clark replied dryly.

“Well, of course it’s political,” Malana told them. “Kalano doesn’t take a breath without considering how it might increase or decrease his standing.”

“You think maybe we could convince him breathing is bad for his political standing?” Jerry asked. “Okay, here it comes.”

The screen resolved into a shot of a rostrum festooned with microphones. Behind it General Kalano was shaking hands with several other men and women as he made his way slowly forward.

“I notice there aren’t any Cosonais up there tonight,” Malana pointed out, “That’s more than a bit suspicious considering how closely allied they have been the last few days.”

“Worse than that,” Tauko told her as he re-entered the room, “General Yeolani collapsed as he sat down to eat dinner with his family this evening and was rushed to the hospital.”

“I’m surprised TNN missed that one,” Lilla commented.

“The family hasn’t announced that news yet,” Tauko told her. “What’s Kalano doing?”

“Holding a press conference,” Jerry supplied.

“I can see that,” Tauko retorted acidly. “Has he said why yet?”

“Give him a minute,” Jerry shot back. “He’s still learning how to walk toward the rostrum.”

“General Kalano is approaching the podium,” the TNN anchor informed the audience.

“He is not,” Jerry snapped. “He’s walking across the podium and approaching the rostrum. I thought only human anchormen were stupid enough to make that mistake.”

“Human, Lano,” Malana shrugged. “When it comes to reporters they’re the same species.”

“You think they could interbreed?” Jerry asked, suddenly amused.

“I’d rather not try,” Malana admitted. “The Gods alone would know what we might get.”

“Village idiots?” Ralani guessed.

“No, some of them already do that on the side,” Jerry laughed.

“Thank you for coming here this evening,” Kalano finally spoke into the microphones. “This evening a serious situation came to light. A situation so grave, I did not feel it would benefit the proud people of the

Trelendir to wait until morning. Corruption in any aspect of life is something that must be torn out as one would a weed in one's garden, but corruption in our government is something we must band together and eradicate lest it destroy us all."

"Is he coming clean?" Jerry wondered.

"Since taking office over a year and a half ago, General Tauko Ki Matchi and his Conservationist Party have engaged in the most despicable practices politicians are capable of sinking to," Kalano continued.

"Doing my job?" Tauko guessed.

"Not content to break all known records for accepting bribes and indulging in cronyism, Presiding General Tauko has made a habit of authorizing blatant invasions of privacy without the benefit of search warrants. Much of this can be accounted for in the thousands of hours of wire-tapping of his political opponents, but I have verified documentation that he has sent his security guards into the homes of private citizens without warning or warrant. Worse, they have not only violated innocent lives with these intrusions but have made a habit of stealing any object of value that caught their eyes."

"You blinding liar!" Tauko growled. The sentiment was echoed throughout the room.

"Most recently there were no less than six subministers in the Department of Commerce who were caught taking bribes, but were they punished? Not in the least. General Tauko transferred them to other jobs and carefully hushed the matter over," Kalano told the audience and continued listing the crimes of the Conservationist Party. Finishing with, "But have no fear, my fellow Treloians, All this comes to an end now and tomorrow I will call for Presiding General Tauko's impeachment in the Chamber of Officers."

"Good trick," Clark grumbled. "He still refuses to support the Terralano Amendment."

"He's already proven himself a liar," Alano disagreed. "He'll just quietly change his vote, then call for Tauko's impeachment."

Malana was thinking along other lines, however, "Tauko, is there any shred of truth to what he said?"

"Only those subministers we caught taking bribes," Tauko admitted. "I didn't move them to other departments, however, but I did allow them to return the money and resign rather than stand trial. It happened soon after I was elected and they were holdovers from Grallo's administration. There are always more minor offices than any party or coalition can fill with friends and family and this lot managed to hang on through the Falkonins, the Treloian party, and into my administration all by doing what the anthropologists call redistributing the wealth. They would take massive bribes and then use part of the money to buy political favors of their own. The last thing Treloi needed by that time was another political scandal, so I took almost everything they had beyond their clothing and one home each and allowed them to resign. All the rest of that was either outright lies or done by the Falkonin Party, two administrations before me. You'll notice he was being slippery in his chronology."

"I noticed he forgot to mention dates altogether," Jerry observed. "Meanwhile, however, he's doing his best to paint you with the Falkonin brush. In fact I noticed he claimed you were in cahoots with Lanili Di Falko."

"Never," Tauko replied. "A Conservationist and a Falkonin working together? Even if I had been willing, the Falkonins were too busy lining their own pockets to bother with alliances."

“I agree,” Malana replied, “but since the Trelioian Party junta came between your government and theirs, people are going to think it’s conceivable.”

“I know,” Tauko agreed. “I ought to have the bastard arrested.”

“No, the bastard is the one who committed suicide,” Jerry remarked.

Tauko lookd at him strangely for a moment then admitted, “Oh yeah, I see what you mean.”

“You can’t have him arrested now,” Birna told him. “Throwing him in jail would just validate his claims in most people’s eyes.”

“Good point,” Tauko agreed. “Is anyone up for a late night press conference?”

“Make it first thing tomorrow morning,” Malana advised. “That way you’ll be at least partially rested and less likely to say something stupid.”

Tauko nodded, “And to think this evening started out so well.”

Eleven

The crowds around the Chamber of Officers had changed in nature the next morning and Tauko was glad to see Security had continued to keep a wide area around the building cleared of protestors, most of whom were holding placards supporting General Kalano’s false accusations.

“They organized just a little too quickly for my tastes,” Clark told Tauko. “Those placards look too professionally printed to be a spur of the moment thing. I’d say Kalano and his people rounded them up and have been getting them into place all night. They probably started planning the placards and banners before Kalano even opened his press conference. Is he here yet?”

“Not yet,” Tauko informed him. “Where’s Alano?”

“He went to visit Yeolano in the hospital this morning, partially to show his genuine concern, but also in the hope we might find out if Yeolano’s injury was natural or not,” Clark explained. “Ah! Here he comes now.”

“Good morning, gentlemen,” Alano greeted them.

"Is it?" Tauko asked tiredly. "You didn't have to speak in front of a hostile press conference this morning."

"You could have cancelled this morning's session," Alano pointed out.

"No I couldn't," Tauko denied. "It would have been seen as an admission that Kalano's lies were true."

"Well, they're truly lies," Clark noted.

"Did you learn anything at the hospital?" Tauko asked Alano.

"I met Yeolano's wife," Alano replied. "Nice lady, I thought, but naturally she's very worried. I hope you don't mind, but I offered her a contingent of Navy guardsmen."

"I don't mind at all," Tauko shrugged. "Do you really think she and her husband need them?"

"Not really," Alano shook his head, "although, just in case, I'm glad she accepted. I also spoke to Yeolano's doctor and I don't think there's much chance of Yeolano's illness being of natural causes. His blood had traces of Sodium Tufuosinazate in it as did his wife and two children. One of the children, his eldest daughter collapsed last night too, although she recovered a few hours later. I spoke to the police too and suggested they check out the water and food in Yeolano's home."

"Someone was clumsy last night," Tauko commented.

"Clumsy?" Clark asked. "I can't say about that. I think they just didn't care how many they killed. We'll need proof, but my guess is that they were able to get Taomi alone and waited to make sure he was going to die. Yeolano has a family, so they took a different approach, but they used the same drug and misjudged how much they would need to induce a stroke. Just as well they used what they had to work with. There are poisons that would have accomplished the job more certainly, but then they were probably trying to make it all look natural. Tell me, does Sodium Tufuosinazate pass swiftly from a Lano body?"

"I think so," Alano replied. "The doctor said he just caught a few traces in the bloodwork because it had taken so long to get a sample. How did you know?"

"Just a guess," Clark replied. "It seemed to make sense if someone really is using it as a murder weapon. Although it seems to me that leaving the bottle at Taomi's to make it look like suicide, makes the natural angle pretty silly if you use the same drug for both."

"Maybe Yeolano killed Taomi and then dosed himself and his family to cover his tracks?" Alano asked.

"Maybe," Clark shrugged. "Or maybe we're dealing with someone as arrogant as the Devil."

"We are, and here he comes," Alano noted. "Let's get to our seats."

Tauko opened the session of the Council of Generals as usual and Kalano instantly rose to his feet and announced, "I request the floor."

"Do you accept and support the Terralano Amendment, General?" Tauko asked pointedly.

“I accept the Terralano Amendment as the law of this land,” Kalano replied.

“Interesting reply,” Alano commented quietly to Clark.

“I caught that,” Clark admitted. “He doesn’t agree with the amendment, but he does admit it is the law. I suppose that technically fills the bill. Next year we’ll have to fight this battle all over again.”

“Or sooner. If he somehow ousts Tauko, he’ll likely have the amendment suspended. It will still be the law, but not enforced,” Alano explained.

“Terrific,” Clark replied sourly.

General Kalano then proceeded to give a longwinded speech in which he accused Tauko of everything short of making the sun rise in the west. He spent several hours doing so, after which the debate began. It went deep into the night and continued on for five more days. Finally after everyone in the Council had spoken their piece, Kalano called the question.

During those five days, the Coroner eventually declared Taomi’s death had been a suicide and the Pansilli Police Department were forced to drop their investigation into the poisoning of Yeolano and his family even though Yeolano remained in a coma. There just wasn’t enough evidence to continue on.

The motion of impeachment failed two-to-one, but Kalano followed that up with a new list of accusations and another move to impeach the presiding general. Fortunately for Tauko, the next day was a weekend so it would be two days before the debate would continue.

Twelve

“Thank you for consenting to see me on a rest day, General,” Helani Bi Lano told Kalano as she entered his office.

“It was as a favor to my wife you understand,” Kalano told her.

“Yes, Salana and I were classmates in college,” Helani replied. “And we’ve remained close ever since.”

“So what can I do for you, Mrs. Helani?” Kalano asked her.

“I want you to recall your motion for impeachment, General,” she told him bluntly.

“Why the hell should I do that?” Kalano laughed.

“Because, if you don’t, I happen to have enough dirt on you to bury you a dozen times deeper than Taomi Ki Taomi,” Helani told him calmly.

“Get out of here!” Kalano stormed at her.

“No, General, I will not,” Helani replied. “Not unless you want me to do my worst. You know what you have done over the course of your career and so do I, starting with your disgraceful behavior on Yinaloi while you were still a lieutenant. All those children, General. Their ghosts still cry out for revenge.”

“I was never on Yinaloi,” Kalano blustered. “You have nothing.”

“I have photographic proof that you were and I have a copy of the orders sending you there and calling you back before you managed to get the originals destroyed. I also have what is probably the only copy of your captain’s report of the incident,” Helani told him coldly. “Don’t mess with me, General.”

“How did you get those?” Kalano demanded.

“That would be telling,” Helani retorted. “I also know what happened on Tisinoi and in Welleens and that was all before you went into politics. Face it, General, I know which closets all your skeletons are hidden in. I also know you’ve been beating your wife, and I happen to care for Salana very much.”

“Ah, I see,” Kalano told her. “Salana told you.”

“Told me and gave me the documentation years ago, for the early stuff anyway,” Helani admitted. “You’ve been a busy boy this past decade and a half. Now here is how it is going to be. You will recall your motion. You will publically apologize to Presiding General Tauko for the false accusations you leveled on him. You may claim new information came to light if you wish, but you and I both know better. After that, you are going to grant Salana an amicable divorce, and the terms had damned well better be generous, and then you will retire to one of the colonies where you will stay out of politics and out of trouble in general.”

“You don’t want much, do you?” Kalano sneered, “and what do I get out of this?”

“General, you get to spend the rest of your life on the wide-open side of the prison bars,” Helani snapped back.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Kalano blustered. “You’re a nothing, a nobody, a Bi Lano. Nobody would believe you anyway.”

“Yes, General,” Helani agreed, “I am a Bi Lano, a foundling. I was a child of no status whatsoever. Everything I am today I accomplished myself. Most foundlings never get over their beginnings because their very names proclaim who and what they are. That’s why General Taomi changed his name. But some of us are different. Some of us learn to be proud to be a child of the Lano, although I intend to change my name later today. I will be Helani Bi Terralano, General. I’m proud of what I have accomplished and I’m proud to be Terralano; too proud to be ashamed of my origins or cowed by a born aristocrat who not only had everything handed to him, but had Daddy bail him out of crimes that should have had him in front of a dozen firing squads.”

“You think you’re so smart, don’t you?” Kalano growled. “You think because you have a bit of dirt on me I’m going to crawl away meekly and do anything you say, don’t you?”

“No, I imagine you’re going to be difficult,” Helani replied, “It’s just that I’m going to be even more difficult. General, I’m offering you the easy way out of this and one with which you can seem to retire with honor. I don’t have to be nice about this and we both know it.”

“I can go quietly,” Kalano told her thoughtfully, “or... I could simply arrange to have you turn up dead somewhere between here and your home.”

“And that,” Helani told him, pulling a small transmitter out of her purse, “has to be one of the ten most stupid things any La has ever said. I was being graceful about this. No more. Here are your orders, General.

“You have one day,” she continued coldly. “Thirty-two hours. By this time tomorrow you had damned well better be off this planet, and if you ever return, if anything even remotely suspicious ever happens to me, to Salana or to anyone else I think you have a gripe against, my little dossier on you will be distributed to every government employee and every newspaper on each and every world of the Terralendir.

“General,” she wound up her speech, “as our Terran cousins might say, ‘You’ve bitten off a whole lot more than you can chew.’”

“I have no Terran cousins,” Kalano told her with the last dregs of pride.

“Then you have nothing of value,” Helani replied coldly. She got out of her chair and walked back to the door. She paused just before leaving the office, to turn and repeat, “One day, General. Don’t let the ship’s hatch smack you on the butt as you board!”

Thirteen

Kalano Ki Manari’s sudden turn-around shocked everyone including himself. He was in no way ready to admit defeat as Helani left his office and in fact was about to make good on his threat to see her dead when he noticed a fat envelope on his desk that had somehow missed his attention earlier.

Opening the envelope, he discovered a short cover letter from his wife and a series of incriminating photographs. It was her way of saying “Goodbye and get lost!”

Even then he continued to rage around his office, breaking various objects and tearing up the

evidence both women had given him, but eventually he went home to discover a completely empty house. While he had been in his office, Salana had taken almost everything from their home in Pansilli, leaving only a trunk and two suitcases neatly packed with Kalano's clothing, his personal records, several pieces of art she had never liked and the bed they had once shared. That was the point at which Kalano finally realized he had lost everything.

The next morning he did exactly as Helani had instructed. Divorces in the Trelendir were rare and usually quite complicated and lengthy procedures, but Kalano discovered that his wife had already taken precisely one quarter of the money out of their joint bank account. Kalano was puzzled by that, but he took the rest and instructed his lawyer to make out papers that would give everything else to Salana. When told it could take months to finalize the matter, Kalano signed a power-of-attorney document giving his representative the right to finalize the divorce in his absence.

After that, he gave a brief statement to the press at the Pansilli Spaceport, during which he simply announced his retirement and muttered a less than sincere-sounding apology to Tauko. A few minutes later he boarded a small merchant ship, the only one remaining in port that planned to lift before Helani's deadline. Within the hour, he was on his way to the mining colony on Wenailan, a moon that circled one of the outerplantets in a system some twenty lightyears distant.

In the Chamber of Officers, everything had come to a halt that day. When Kalano did not appear, Admiral Birna moved to strike his motion from the agenda, but the move was blocked by the General's fellow Traditionalist Party members, so Tauko merely tabled it pending Kalano's return. Then they moved on to discuss the matter of who should be sent to negotiate with the Carono, an issue Birna categorized as having been, "neglected by this body far too long."

Tauko quietly ordered that the Traditionalist party be investigated, following Kalano's abrupt departure from Treloi and a week later the new leader of the Traditionalist Party got caught siphoning party funds into his personal accounts. After that the party collapsed as members hastily abandoned it for various other political organizations. One even joined the new Terralano party and promptly moved that the still-tabled motion of impeachment be permanently removed from the agenda.

"I still can't figure out why Kalano caved so suddenly," Clark admitted one evening two months later at Alano's home. The Council was in recess for the next three months, barring emergencies, and the small fleet of ships was busily preparing to lift for the rendezvous with the Carono.

"I never understood anything about him," Alano admitted. "Maybe he just wanted to go to space again. I know I do."

"Well, as soon as we finish up with the Carono talks," Clark told him, "we'll take you back to Earth with us. My sister owns too much of Meriwether, Inc. for me to merely sell you a chunk, but I don't think she'll be opposed to a third partner, especially one intent on putting in enough money to build another ship. Meriwether III?"

"Maybe," Alano shrugged, "Or maybe this one should have a Lano name. We can worry about that when the time comes, I think."

"Good enough," Clark laughed.

Several people entered Alano's water garden area just then including Eesai, Sue, Jerry, Lani, Malana and Radji Gupta. Malana and Radji were still arguing over the details of the up-coming negotiations. "I'm still not comfortable with the whole concept," Radji was saying. "How can we negotiate as though this

so-called Terralendir is a single governmental entity?”

“We never did explain to the Carono that we were not two separate governments,” Eesai pointed out. “Not sure we had the vocabulary for it during most of the encounter.”

“I’m not sure we do even now,” Jerry added.

“But we’re more than two governments really,” Radji argued. “The Trelendir is a group of confederated worlds. All that really binds you together is the concept of the Trelendir. The Terran Confederation is a little more tightly bound through a vast array of interlocking treaties, but it took a lot of very fast talking on the part of Malvina Smythe to grant me the ability to negotiate on behalf of the Terran worlds. I understand they were still arguing over it when the ship lifted with that news, but they didn’t have time to vote on a new negotiator. Eventually, I suppose they’ll choose an ambassador, but for now it falls to me.”

“Good,” Malana nodded, “since you have more experience with Terralano than any human save the crew of Meriwether II.”

“Anyway, we need to negotiate as one,” Alano told Radji. “As I understand it, all the Carono worlds are ruled by a single Triarchy, at least in theory. It’s a bit weird, isn’t it, Jerry?”

“It’s a lot weird,” Jerry laughed. “They have a sort of parliamentary system with only a House of Lords, except that instead of individuals they have triads and each triad has a single vote, oh, and the triads are elected to their lordly positions. Really not sure how that works. I kept trying to point out it wasn’t a house of lords then and they kept saying that yes it was. I finally decided they had a strange sort of representative feudal system in which the lords are elected from the populace every few years.

“Anyway,” Jerry continued, “they really can’t tell a La from a Terran. I guess we all look alike to them. Well, that shouldn’t be a surprise. Look at us. Lani, dear, stand next to me for a minute.” She smiled and gave him a warm hug. For a moment he was tempted to just keep his arms wrapped around her before he remembered he was trying to make a point. Prying himself loose, he continued. “We’re both bi-pedal and bilaterally symmetrical, having two legs and two arms and one head in the same positions. We both exhibit the same shape bodies in fact. We differ only in height, the color of our skins and hair, although many humans have hair the same color as Lano.”

“Don’t forget the shapes of our ears, dear,” Lani pointed out.

“Compared to the rest that’s even less noticeable to a Caro,” Jerry remarked, “In fact I know some Terrans whose ears are slightly pointed. Not as much as Lano ears, but still... Anyway when you compare us to the Carono, we really do look alike.”

“For that matter,” Eesai added, “the only Lano the Carono had any real contact with were Lilla and me.”

“What did I do?” Lilla asked as she joined them. Serafyma and Ralani were close behind her.

“Spoke to the Carono,” Jerry told her. “We were just explaining to Ambassador Gupta that they couldn’t tell us apart.”

“That’s for sure,” Lilla laughed. “We learned to introduce ourselves each time we met. It became part of the daily greeting.”

“But to negotiate as though we were a single confederation?” Radji wondered.

“It could be the start of something new,” Malana pointed out.

“No,” Ralani differed, “It’s the continuation of something new. We’ve already started calling ourselves the Terralano and our worlds the Terralendir and then there’s the Terralano Amendment. Just as my sisters have done, it’s time we became even closer.”

“The Terralano Amendment was to the Governing Charter of Treloi,” Radji pointed out, “but not to the rest of the Trelendir, nor in any part of the Terran Confederation.”

“The rest of the Trelendir will accept it,” Ralani assured him. “Where Treloi leads, the Trelendir follows.”

“And several Terran colonies have expressed an interest in the Terralendir,” Malana added. “We’ll see what happens after Tauko gets back from Earth and Malvina comes here.”

“When is he leaving?” Radji asked.

“Tomorrow right after he sees us off,” Malana told him. “He’s taking Inillien to Earth, only fair since Meriwether I has been to Treloi.”

“Besides,” Eesai added, “Inillien is still the fastest ship in the fleet, although not as fast as mine.” She allowed a bit of smugness to show.

“Or mine,” Sue added, laughing.

“The plan,” Malana continued, “is to bring Malvina back in time to hear what we come up with after talking things over with the Carono. Who knows? Maybe they’ll have some interesting news for us as well.”

More guests started arriving then and Alano suggested they move out to the large yard so there would be room for everyone he had invited to their send-off party. For the rest of the night, everyone was too busy trying to enjoy their last night on Treloi to worry about anything else.

The next morning, however, Malana realized something had been nagging at her for weeks, so after unpacking her bags in her stateroom on-board Meriwether I, she asked Helani to join her.

“Yes, Madame Malana,” Helani nodded as she entered Malana’s suite. “Did you have some dictation this morning?”

“No, dear,” Malana smiled. “I was curious. Just what did you say to General Kalano the night before he resigned?”

“Madame?” Helani asked innocently.

“Come now, Helani,” Malana chuckled, “I know you went to his office.”

“Madame Malana,” Helani told her with a perfectly straight face, “I assure you I have not the slightest notion what you’re talking about.”

"I see," Malana nodded knowingly. "Thank you, Helani. I think that's all I needed to know. Would you like to join me on the bridge for lift-off?"

"If you don't mind, Madame," Helani replied, "I've never been particularly comfortable during any lift-off, and these Terran ships seem even less reliable than our own."

"Suit yourself, dear," Malana told her, "Would you like a tranquilizing *thalu*?"

"No, thank you, Madame," Helani replied. "It wouldn't be right."

"Care to explain that?" Malana requested.

"Well, anytime something scares me, I find the best way to handle it is to face my fear head-on. Being tranquilized would feel like cheating," Helani replied.

"Thank you," Malana told her. "Isn't it amazing that even after all these years together I can still learn so much from you, dear?"

"As I am constantly learning from you too, Madame," Helani told her in return. "Enjoy the view from the bridge."

"Thank you," Malana replied and started toward the lift. Halfway there she encountered the door to the long spiral staircase that wrapped about the central elevator all the way along the length of the ship. "I can use the exercise," she chuckled to herself and climbed her way to the bridge.

"Meriwether I requesting final clearance for launch," Chen Li McGrath was saying into his microphone.

"Understood. Stand by, Meriwether I," Control told him. "Launch order will be in pairs, Merillien and Ki Fareno will launch first and be followed by Meriwether I and II five minutes later. Waiting for Merillien to finish her checklist."

"Aye aye, Control," Chen Li replied. "Hurry up and wait, Skipper," he added to Eesai. "Welcome back aboard, Madame Malana."

"Malana!" Eesai greeted her. "I was afraid you'd miss the launch."

"Control to Merillien and Ki Fareno," the voice on the radio was saying, "you are cleared to lift. Meriwether I, Meriwether II, launch in T minus five minutes."

"Aye aye, Control," Chen Li replied. Over the radio they could hear Charley Rowntree saying the same thing from Meriwether II.

"Nonsense," Malana laughed. "I'd never miss the chance to sit on the bridge during launch. Where's Clark and Alano?"

"Clark is riding with Sue," Eesai replied, "at least on the way out and Alano is being a dear and trying not to backseat drive on my first lift-off since the old Meriwether was refitted. Not that he needs to worry, I'd only clap him in irons if he got in the way."

“That might be what worries him, dear,” Malana told her.

“Really?” Eesai asked. “Because I thought it might be because when we get to the rendezvous point, Sue is going to marry us in a Terran ceremony.”

“No, I doubt he’ll have that sort of jitters until the night before,” Malana laughed.

“Meriwether I, Meriwether II,” Control ordered. “Lift in T minus two minutes.” Eesai began issuing the final orders in preparation for a launch. Fifteen seconds before launch, however, Sue’s face appeared on the Vid screen.

“Safe journey, Sister,” Sue told Eesai.

“Good launch,” Eesai replied in turn.

Chen Li finished the countdown for both ships, “Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one...”

“Galaxy, Ho!” both Sue and Eesai cried happily in unison as their ships began to rise.

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