



# EARTHCHILD

Katriena Knights

*Earthchild by Katriena Knights*

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*To Mom, for feedback on plot work,  
and Doug, for thoughtfully inserting the occasional  
grunt while I ramble on and on.*

# ONE

She had always been Noisy Girl. As she came to the edge of a new life, she thought of no new name, but walked quietly through the forest behind her mother, thinking, “I am Noisy Girl, and I come to a new place.” Her fingers made the words against the long fall of her pale hair—hair that made her more like her mother; except that it didn’t.

Her mother, Walks Crooked, stopped a moment until Noisy Girl caught up to her. Walks Crooked laid a hand on Noisy Girl’s arm; a hand with long white fur on the back of it, and black fingers. Noisy Girl’s arm was covered with white fur, as well, but it was the fur of a winter jumper, not her own. Beneath it her skin was pink and smooth.

“Is it all well?” Walks Crooked formed the words with her long black fingers and Noisy Girl nodded, though she wasn’t certain it was the truth.

“It is well. I’ll go.”

“The Loud-Talking People are your people. There’s no doubt of it, and it’s where you should be.”

“Yes,” said Noisy Girl, making the word emphatic with sharp movements of her hands and the involuntary guttural sound that was part of what had earned her her name. For a moment, she wasn’t sure whether she meant to convince Walks Crooked or herself. Then she said, in complete honesty, “I want to learn who I am.”

Walks Crooked laid her hand against her daughter’s hairless cheek, then turned away just as the tears grew in her eyes. Noisy Girl swallowed hard.

She had always been Noisy Girl.

After today, she would never be Noisy Girl again.

\* \* \*

Commander Jeff Anderson rested his forehead against the shuttle window, watching the planet Denahault grow large beneath the ship. They’d be landing in less than an hour. As usual, after the ten-day trip from Earth, the last few hours on the shuttle seemed interminable.

Jeff had shipped out as a passenger for the first time in a number of years. He’d made the trip to Denahault two years ago, but that time he’d been second-in-command of the ship that brought him there. It had been nice to just sit back and enjoy the ride this time.

From this altitude, Denahault’s main continent seemed smaller than he remembered. Maybe because his last trip had been to Farhallen, and Farhallen’s main landmass made Africa look small. Denahault was beautiful, though, sheathed in the blues and greens that meant life. And, better yet, a place where Jeff could get out, stretch his legs and breathe air that hadn’t been treated through shipboard recirculation filters.

As if in response to his thoughts, the shuttle’s air pumps kicked in, sending a breeze wafting past his face. He turned his cheek toward it and accidentally met the gaze of the young woman sitting next to him. Her eyes were wide with awe.

“It’s so beautiful,” she said, blurting it out as if she’d been waiting for the chance to let her trapped feelings fly. “I never imagined it would be so beautiful.”

Jeff smiled. Her enthusiasm appealed to him. It had been so long since his first time in space that he'd forgotten the unbridled awe. "All the inhabited planets are," he said, "and a good many of the uninhabited ones."

Her eyes widened even further. "You've seen them all?"

"I've served on ships going to all but one of the colony planets."

"So you're here on business?"

"No." He looked back at Denahault, again remembering the last time he'd been here. "I'm here for a wedding."

\* \* \*

The shuttle finally came to rest on a landing pad on the perimeter of Denahault Prime. Patience strained nearly to the breaking point, Jeff waited for his turn to disembark. His legs ached to run, or at least walk briskly. His lungs itched for real air. Nothing smelled quite like the air on Denahault.

Finally, he stepped down to the tarmac. He breathed deep and long, letting his legs stretch to take up the distance to the long expanse of sidewalk leading to the terminal building and baggage claim.

He'd more than half-expected Trieka to be waiting for him, but he saw no sign of her. With the wedding in two days, she was probably wrapped in last-minute preparations. Not for the first time, he wondered why she'd opted for a full wedding instead of a temporary civil contract. The latter would have been simpler to execute, and far simpler to dissolve if her marriage turned out to be a colossal mistake.

After another quick scan of the crowd to be sure he hadn't missed her, Jeff went to get his luggage. It was already waiting—his military status gave him some clout, especially in the planetary sticks. He hefted his bags and headed for the nearest door.

"Commander Anderson?"

Jeff turned to acknowledge the unfamiliar voice. The young man behind him wore jeans and a T-shirt, his long blondish hair pulled back in a ponytail.

*Delinquent.* Then Jeff remembered he was on a colony planet and that he'd been in the military far too long. "Yes?"

"Mr. Fairfax asked me to meet you here. He and Ms. Cavendish send their regrets. I'm Madison Jeffries."

"Is everything all right?"

"As far as I know." Madison reached for one of Jeff's bags and Jeff handed it over willingly while reshuffling the knee-jerk judgments he'd made about this disheveled, but startlingly polite, young man.

Madison went on. "Trieka—Ms. Cavendish—got a call this morning from friends in Forest Walk. I'm not sure of the details, but they needed her in her capacity as liaison with the natives."

"Interesting." Jeff hoped he hadn't arrived on the eve of a native uprising. All the news from Denahault since the planet had changed from EarthFed to private management had been good. But news took two weeks to travel from Denahault to Earth, and a lot could happen in two weeks. "Fairfax went with her?" That might be an indication of the seriousness of the situation, as Trieka was capable of handling just about anything on her own.

"They requested a second translator." They'd reached the embassy, and Madison fell back a step to let Jeff in the front door ahead of him. "Like I said, I'm not sure of the details, but I don't

think it's anything serious."

They were halfway up the elevator before Jeff thought to wonder where they were going. "The hotel rooms aren't on the middle levels anymore?"

"They are, but we're upstairs. Fairfax had the top floor of the building converted to a penthouse apartment."

"Of course he did." Jeff's tone proved harsher than he'd intended.

Madison didn't miss the implied criticism. "He's a good guy. He and Ms. Cavendish have been instrumental in establishing communication with the natives. EarthFed certainly couldn't have handled it as well as they have."

The elevator door opened and they stepped out into a large, unexpectedly understated foyer. Jeff was surprised he actually felt comfortable in it, not afraid to move for fear of breaking something. He also felt, strongly, the influence of his erstwhile commanding officer, the soon-to-be Mrs. Harrison Fairfax.

"I guess he must be," he conceded, "or Trieka wouldn't be marrying him."

"And I wouldn't be here, either."

Jeff smiled. As a measure of Fairfax's character, Madison's loyalty spoke highly. And it would be good of him to remember that.

\* \* \*

The Loud-Talking People had cut down trees and made houses from them. To Noisy Girl, who'd lived her whole life in the shelter of a natural cave, this seemed both bizarre and fascinating.

But even more bizarre and fascinating were the Loud-Talking People themselves. The noise seemed incessant, as they opened their mouths and made peculiar rhythmic sounds. Noisy Girl thought they looked strange as well, until she remembered they looked just like her. They had smooth, almost hairless skin, ranging in color from pinkish, like her own, to a black-brown nearly as dark as the skin of the White Fur People. Over it they wore garments amazingly constructed of woven cloth finer than anything she had ever seen. They were strange and beautiful and very, very noisy. They were her people, and they frightened her.

With her mother, she watched the village from a nearby ridge. They were close enough to see details of the houses and the people, close enough to hear the odd sounds that came from the Loud-Talkers' mouths, but hidden by the forest growth that dominated the overhanging ridge. It would have been a good site from which to fall upon the little settlement, had they been so inclined. Noisy Girl shook her head as the thought passed through her mind, negating it. It wasn't the kind of thing that usually occurred to her.

"They sound like tree-climbers," Noisy Girl signed to her mother, thinking of the furry creatures who hung by their tails from the tree branches, chattering incessantly to each other.

"They have fine houses," Walks Crooked replied. She pointed. "Look. Children."

One of the women below squatted as a small boy ran to her. A horrible noise came from his small mouth, an unarticulated sound of distress. The woman gathered him into her arms and brushed her mouth against his head, crooning against his sun-colored hair.

Something too vague to be a memory stirred in Noisy Girl's heart. She pressed her fingers against her lips as the boy's howling faded. Within a few moments, he laughed and ran away.

"They can be kind," she said.

Her mother smiled. "They can be unkind, as well. But I think they will not be so to you."

Noisy Girl frowned. "Will you come with me?"

"I will."

The woman who caught sight of them as they slid down the ridge knew only a few words of the White Fur People's language, but she tried. She smiled, made a great deal of noise, touched Noisy Girl as if she couldn't believe Noisy Girl was real.

"No talk well," she'd said, obviously uncomfortable with the hand gestures. "She talk well. Find her. You wait."

"She wants us to wait," Walks Crooked said, then her mouth crooked into a smile. "At least, I think that's what she said."

Noisy Girl recognized the nervousness behind Walks Crooked's smile. She herself swallowed to calm the jumpy nausea caused by her own nerves.

"I don't want to go," she said suddenly, a desperate sound straining at the back of her throat. The Loud-Talking woman turned and looked at her, concern on her face. What did that sound mean to these people who used sounds as a matter of course?

"These are your people," Walks Crooked said.

"You are my people."

Walks Crooked cupped Noisy Girl's face in a white-furred hand. "Learn about them. You can always change your mind later, if things don't go well."

Noisy Girl nodded, blinking back tears. She couldn't help the sounds in the back of her throat. Until this moment, she hadn't been certain the White Fur People would want her back. She'd been loved and cared for among them, but she couldn't help the doubt—the fear that they'd jumped on the chance to introduce her to her own people so her strangeness would no longer disturb their world. She'd lived with that fear all her life.

"Thank you," Noisy Girl said.

Several hours later, with the sun now past its zenith, they still waited.

Noisy Girl couldn't fault the Loud-Talkers' hospitality, though. They'd provided comfortable places to sit, on wooden constructs unlike anything Noisy Girl had ever seen, in a small room of one of the remarkable wooden houses. The woman brought them warm sweet drinks and hot bread with fruit spread. She sat with them and they all tried very hard to converse. They didn't get much beyond asking for more drinks and indicating appreciation of the food, but it gave Noisy Girl hope. If she could feel some measure of acceptance already, maybe she could find a place among these people that she'd never quite been able to make among the White Fur People. But everything here was so different. The sounds they made fascinated her. Could she learn to do that?

All her life, she'd been defined by the sounds she could make. In this world, those sounds would become commonplace. That realization suddenly clarified the enormity of the changes she faced.

A shift in the voices in the next room told her something had changed. Their companion, the woman who'd met them on the ridge, quickly left the room, following the sounds.

Noisy Girl sat straighter. Next to her, Walks Crooked laid a hand on her knee. She laid her hand on top of her mother's and clutched at it, grasping at any link to familiarity. Her other hand fingered the string of amber beads she always wore. The texture of the smoothly polished stones had always calmed her. They helped now, but at the same time felt alien and strange. What would these people think of her?

From the other room came two more people, a man and a woman, accompanied by the woman who'd kept them company over the past few hours. The man was tall and slim, the hair



on his head a dark brown touched with red. The woman was small, her hair a shocking orange.

The woman smiled, and her hands danced.

“Hello. My name is Fire Hair, and this is my mate, called Long Nose by the People Who Live at the Edge of the Mountain. We were asked to come here to talk to you.”

Noisy Girl glanced at her mother, shocked by the small woman’s identity. The stories of Fire Hair and Long Nose, who’d made possible the present interaction between the Loud-Talking People and the White Fur People, had traveled even to Noisy Girl’s isolated village. Those stories, in fact, were why she had come here.

Walks Crooked lifted her hands. “I am Walks Crooked, from the People by the Shores of the West Sea. This is my daughter, Noisy Girl. She came to our tribe as a very small child. When we heard of you and the peace that had begun between your people and ours, we knew we should come here so Noisy Girl might learn of her true people.”

Fire Hair nodded. “From the West Sea to here is a journey of many miles and much danger. You have come alone?”

“The dangers are not great for those who know these forests. Our village is small, and now is the best time for fish, so no one else could be spared for this journey.” Walks Crooked didn’t mention the other reasons. There’d been great debate about whether the journey was worth the risk. The West Sea tribe was distant and isolated, and fear still reigned when it came to dealing with the strange Loud-Talkers.

“May I speak to your daughter and call her by her name?”

“You may.”

Fire Hair’s attention turned to Noisy Girl, and her apprehension grew again. It was tempered, though, by Fire Hair’s attitude—her respect for Walks Crooked and her obvious knowledge of the customs of the White Fur People.

“Noisy Girl, I greet you with happiness. You are welcome to come with us and visit the tribe of the Loud-Talking People. If you wish to learn more of us, we will gladly teach you.”

“I’ve never been away from my village,” said Noisy Girl, feeling strangely at ease with this new acquaintance. “All of this is so strange.”

Behind Fire Hair, the man—Long Nose—joined the conversation with equally flawless gestures. “Perhaps your mother would wish to come and stay for a time, until you decide if you wish to remain with us or return to your village.”

“Yes,” said Walks Crooked. “I would do that, if it would be accepted.”

“It is accepted,” said Fire Hair. “You both may come and be welcome among us.”

And so it began.

\* \* \*

The rest of the penthouse suite was much like the foyer. Large, obviously expensive, but not off-putting either. Jeff saw Trieka’s influence in the decorating—natural fabrics that might have been made by settlers, tables of knotty wood. Normally he didn’t pay attention to matters of décor, but in this house he seemed to notice every detail. He didn’t like to admit it, but he was almost consciously looking for signs of discord. Some indication that Trieka hadn’t fallen into a love match, but into an accident of circumstance.

He could tell himself it was because he wanted to look out for her, and in a way that was true. He knew next to nothing about Harrison Fairfax, and his and Trieka’s courtship had been bizarre enough to make Jeff skeptical. But, if he were totally honest with himself, he had to admit there

was more to it than that. Until he'd received the wedding invitation, he would have sworn his feelings for Trieka had died a long time ago. But they still lurked, just enough to hurt if he let himself think about it.

The room where Madison took him featured a wide window offering a panoramic view of the forest abutting Denahault Prime. Wingback chairs with upholstery of maroon velvet were arranged to take best advantage of the view, which Jeff admired while he drank the excellent coffee Madison supplied. It was the kind of view Trieka would like. Of all the colony ship captains he'd known, she had been the only one to actually revel in the wildness of the colony planets. In spite of the way it had come about, he wasn't surprised she'd ended up back on Denahault.

Jeff had served as Trieka's second-in-command when she'd been captain of the *Starchild*. Before that, they'd attended the academy together and had been close friends.

In the beginning, he'd wanted to be more. He hadn't thought she'd shared his feelings, though, so he'd redirected them. In the end it had been for the best, since they'd ended up working so closely together. But part of him had always cared more than he should have.

Thus the concern about Fairfax. Jeff knew almost nothing about him—he hadn't been able to share that piece of Trieka's life and it bothered him. He'd been carrying his secret torch for years—the least she could have done was ask his opinion before accepting Fairfax's proposal. But Trieka had always been her own woman, had always walked her own path without concern for what anyone else might think. Jeff, now facing his own fork in the road, often found himself wondering what she'd do in his position.

"Can I get you more coffee?" Madison's voice interrupted his musings.

Jeff perused his forlornly empty mug. "Please, it's very good."

"It's from Earth," Madison said. "No one's been able to get the beans to grow here, so Fairfax buys it and basically gives it away to anybody who wants it. He says no human being should be forced to live without good coffee."

"Okay, I get it. He's a nice guy."

Madison smiled ruefully. "I was rude earlier. I apologize. I owe him a lot."

"What do you do for him? Besides make coffee?"

"I was the caretaker at his New San Fran estate until he sold it six months ago. He asked me to join him out here. I'm still doing caretaker duties, but I'm also working on language acquisition tools to help the colonists communicate with the natives. They—" He broke off, cocking his head at a rustle of sound from elsewhere in the house. "Sounds like they might be back."

Jeff followed Madison back through the house, he assumed toward the foyer. He was sure it would be at least a day or two before he could navigate the house alone. He was used to small shipboard quarters and the slightly larger accommodations supplied on space stations and planetside near the usual docks. This penthouse apartment felt like a small city to him.

He'd guessed their destination correctly, though. They stopped in the big wood-paneled foyer. And there waited Trieka.

Not just Trieka, though. Fairfax was with her, along with two others.

Not many people, Jeff realized with an intellectual lurch, had met a non-human sentient entity. In fact, so far, the natives of Denahault were the only intelligent life humankind had encountered beyond Earth. And now Jeff had just become one of the elite few to see one in person.

The creature looked like a white ape, with long silky fur and a black gorillalike face. It

smiled, though, as Jeff's gaze fixed on it. No, not *it*, he corrected himself. *Her*. The curves beneath the fur were unmistakable.

"Jeff!" Trieka exclaimed, pulling his attention away from the creature. "I'm so glad you're here." She shook his hand, then brushed a kiss across his cheek. "Sorry we weren't here to meet you, but something came up."

"It's okay. I understand." He glanced briefly at Fairfax, acknowledging the other man's presence without really looking at him.

"This is really kind of exciting," Trieka continued. She turned toward the native woman, her hands moving in graceful gestures while she spoke. This was the language of the White Fur People, Jeff understood, a complex and effective sign language, because the natives lacked the capacity for verbal speech.

"This is my friend," Trieka said aloud. "He's come to visit from my world. Let's call him Star Man. Star Man, this is Walks Crooked, of the People By the Shores of the West Sea, and this is her daughter, Noisy Girl."

Her daughter. Jeff hadn't seen the other woman at first. She was trying to hide behind Fairfax. But, as Trieka said her name, she moved forward and smiled shyly. Her green elfin eyes regarded Jeff without quite meeting his gaze.

She was taller than Trieka, but not unusually tall for a woman, with the palest blonde hair he'd ever seen that hadn't come from a bottle. Her clothes appeared to have been pieced together from a number of small white pelts, giving her a fur covering almost the same color as the native woman's. But, beneath it, she was unmistakably human.

He wondered how old she was. Anywhere from sixteen to twenty-five, he thought, then found himself hoping she was on the higher end of that estimate. Then he wished he knew what to do with his hands. Preferably something she'd understand. Finally, feeling as hesitant as she looked, he waved.

She answered with a puzzled smile and a small sound from the back of her throat. Not a word or anything that even approximated a word, just a rising sound with a question in it.

That sound suddenly brought an understanding of the profound differences between the settlers and the natives. That ability to shape sounds had been enough to brand this woman Noisy Girl. And now, from the other side of that gulf, Noisy Girl had come, presumably to reclaim her origins.

"I hope you don't mind, Jeff," Trieka said, "but I need to take a little time to get these two settled in. Maybe Fairfax can show you around the place, if Madison hasn't already done it."

"Go ahead. It's no problem."

And it wasn't a problem, not really, but it was strange to watch Trieka bustle off with the native creature and the odd human woman while he was stranded with Fairfax. Fairfax smiled a little—from what Jeff had seen, nothing on Fairfax's face ever moved more than a little—and gestured toward the rest of the house.

"Madison took care of you, I hope?"

"He made coffee." He followed Fairfax back to the large sitting room, along a different route than the one Madison had taken.

Fairfax nodded. "Good. He knows how to treat a guest." They sat down, Fairfax sinking into a velvet-upholstered wingback chair with a vague sigh. "It's been a long day."

"So I gather. What's the story?"

"They showed up in Forest Walk this morning. No one there knew enough handspeak to talk to them, so they sent for us. The girl was found twenty-five years ago by the native woman,

Walks Crooked. Her family had been killed along with a small colony of humans. A windstorm, Walks Crooked said. Walks Crooked had no children, and had lost her husband a few years before, so the tribe granted her petition to adopt the baby. When she heard about the recent changes, she decided Noisy Girl needed to learn about her own people.”

Jeff nodded soberly, wondering at the decision. How much pain had accompanied it? Was Noisy Girl even now regretting it? He had a moment to wonder why the situation seemed to affect him so deeply, and why he was relieved to discover she was at least twenty-five, then Fairfax went on.

“I never got a chance to thank you in person for your role in the... situation.”

Situation. An interesting way to refer to the series of incidents that had nearly led to the downfall of EarthFed. In the end, they’d been able to isolate the damage and repair it with a series of reorganizations, but EarthFed would never be the same again. Which was probably for the better.

“I did what Trieka asked me to. I’m just sorry things turned out the way they did for her.”

Fairfax’s mouth quirked into an almost-grin. “I don’t think she is. I know I’m not.”

“Maybe not now. But she was a good captain. I’m sure her decision to leave EarthFed wasn’t an easy one.”

“No, it wasn’t. But now... She’s blossomed here. As good as she was at her job with EarthFed, she’s even better at what she does now.”

“As long as she’s happy.”

Jeff didn’t think any of his doubts had leaked into his tone, but the slight lift to Fairfax’s eyebrow told him otherwise. The man *did* have facial expressions, after all. You just had to pay attention.

“She wouldn’t be here if she wasn’t happy. I think you know that.”

Touché. Jeff did know that. In fact, he probably knew more about Trieka than anyone.

With the possible exception, he was forced to admit, of Harrison Fairfax.

\* \* \*

In the face of Fire Hair’s kindness and hospitality, Noisy Girl didn’t know whether she felt more or less comfortable with her decision to come to the Loud-Talking village.

The place was full of bizarre things she didn’t understand. They’d ridden to the big village in a strange vehicle that floated above the ground and moved so fast it made her dizzy. The big village was full of even larger buildings than those in the little village—Forest Walk, Fire Hair had called it. And the buildings in the big village weren’t wood, but some strange hard substance like rock.

She and Walks Crooked had tried not to stare, but it had been difficult. It was difficult even now, as Fire Hair showed them to a large beautiful room filled with mysterious things.

“This is a special room,” Fire Hair said. Noisy Girl watched her hands closely. While Fire Hair’s command of the White Fur People’s language was remarkable, she spoke a slightly different dialect. “I have students stay with me from time to time—White Fur People who wish to learn more about the Loud-Talking People. This is the room they use. It’s not like a dwelling of the White Fur people, but the bed is low and nothing here should confuse you very much.”

She took the time to show them a small room reserved for tasks of personal hygiene, then she excused herself.

“I’m sorry to leave you so soon, but my friend Star Man has come a long distance to be with

me for my wedding. It's considered polite to spend time with guests, so—"

"Please," Walks Crooked broke in, adding a shaking-hand gesture apologizing for the interruption. "We've taken enough of your time. We did not know about your celebration, and I am sorry for bringing this disruption."

"There's no need to apologize." Something made Noisy Girl certain Fire Hair told the truth. She wasn't sure what. If she could work that out, she imagined she'd be further along in her understanding of these too-strange, too-familiar people. "If you need anything," Fire Hair added, "push this button on the wall. It makes a sound elsewhere in the house, and I'll know to come."

"We thank you," said Walks Crooked. "May the Winds blow warm upon your wedding day."

"Thank you." Fire Hair smiled broadly, a sparkle of delight in her eyes.

As their hostess departed, Noisy Girl folded her arms over her chest and looked around the room, afraid to touch anything.

"All who have known her say she is a woman of honor," said Walks Crooked. She sat on the bed while Noisy Girl watched, taken aback at her mother's boldness. "It will be well."

Noisy Girl considered, then made herself cross the room to sit next to her mother. The bed was comfortable, low and wide and spread with both woven blankets and furs. A mixture of the natives and the Loud-Talking People, just as Noisy Girl was.

Perhaps it would all be well, as her mother kept saying. Right now, though, it was just confusing.

## TWO

Still functioning on shipboard time, Jeff woke early. The not-quite risen sun leaked gray-pink light into the big bedroom. Jeff closed his eyes and rolled over, but quickly decided there was no point.

He'd noticed the deck outside his room last night, but it had been dark, so he hadn't gone out. Now he went to the sliding doors, which opened automatically, and stepped out.

The building disappeared behind him.

Fighting vertigo, Jeff froze, staring at the place where his bedroom had been. He could still see the outline of the door, vague and ghostly in the pale morning. He made himself remember that it was relatively easy to create illusions like that, and that this house was owned by someone with enough money to do it on every deck if he wanted to. Then, slowly, he turned around and made himself relax so he could enjoy it.

All the sensory evidence indicated he stood on a small platform suspended in midair with no handrail or attachment to anything at all. All around him, he was surrounded by the raw sights of Denahault.

To the east and a little south, the sky was pink with coming sunrise. The view held him for a time as he watched the sun peek above the horizon. This was the natural, unblocked view from the balcony—and it was spectacular. It had been a long time since he'd seen a sunrise like this, unimpeded by buildings or rows of spaceships.

It was hard to stop staring. The beauty boggled him. The endless wide forest, rising and falling like waves on an ocean; the vast sky and incredible stretch of horizon. In this moment, he could understand why Trieka would want to stay here. A moment later, he realized he never could.

He turned to look in the other direction. The view was just as spectacular this way, as distant contours obscured by the darkness slowly became visible as the sun rose. But that wasn't what interested him. More intriguing were the glimpses of reflective mechanisms, the holographic lenses which combined to precisely recreate a view which was, in actuality, obscured by the hotel building. He'd have to ask Trieka about it later; he'd never seen such an elaborate setup outside the academy's flight simulators.

He looked for a time, puzzling out bits and pieces of the hardware, searching for glimpses of the building through the holographic facade. It was possible, he concluded, to get used to feeling like you were standing on a tiny platform suspended in midair.

Suddenly he heard a voice from inside. He couldn't make out the words, but it sounded like Trieka. Disorientation took over again as he stepped toward the door—a door he couldn't see. For a split second, his stomach lurched as his brain insisted he was in danger of falling to his death. Then he took another step and the door reappeared. Just the door, though, seemingly suspended, surrounded by scenery, as if it were an opening into another dimension.

*Only Fairfax would have something this elaborate installed in his house*, Jeff thought with a stab of jealousy as he went back into the room.

The voice was, indeed, Trieka's, and issued from an intercom near the bed. It was an audio-only intercom, which surprised him. Apparently Fairfax didn't toss his money around

indiscriminately, after all.

“Commander Jeff Anderson,” she was saying, “report to mess immediately.”

There was a smile in her voice, and Jeff echoed it as he punched the “reply” button. “I’d be glad to, if I knew where the hell it was.”

“I figured you’d be up. Head down the hallway and take a left. There’s a kitchen there, and if you go through it and follow that hallway, it’ll take you to my kitchen.”

Jeff shook his head. Two kitchens. “I’ll be there in five.”

On the other hand, he thought as he traversed the first kitchen—the guest kitchen, he supposed—if you had this much house, you might as well have two kitchens.

The place was like two houses next to each other, with the guest half laid out to function as an independent dwelling. That made sense too. The guest side wasn’t any less opulent than the other, either. All of it combined to make one feel ridiculously welcome.

Trieka was brewing coffee. The smell hit Jeff halfway down the second hall.

“Your Fairfax is a big believer in coffee, isn’t he?” Jeff said as they sat at a surprisingly homey kitchen table. She’d already set out mugs, cream and sugar and a large plate full of cinnamon rolls.

“Yes, he is. And so am I.” She transferred a roll to a smaller plate and licked her fingers. A ring flashed on her left hand. It hadn’t been there last night. “The local stuff is okay in a pinch, but there’s nothing like the real thing.”

He had to agree as she retrieved the coffeepot and filled both their mugs.

“So, do you like your room?” She gave him a mischievous look over the rim of her coffee mug.

“Once I recovered from the heart attack. You could have warned me.”

“I thought about it, but I know how much you like gadgets. Please tell me you tried it last night.”

“No, not until this morning.”

“Damn. It’s even better when it’s pitch-black.”

Jeff laughed. “Still the sadist, I see. I hope there’s nothing like that in the room where you put your other guests.”

“Oh, please. I’m only that mean to you.”

Her grin warmed him, and he couldn’t help but return it. He’d missed her more than he’d realized—he’d been so busy, he’d forgotten to notice. His new commanding officer was competent and gave Jeff room to grow, to stretch his skills, but their relationship was purely professional. With Trieka, there’d always been that extra element of friendship and attunement, a special chemistry he’d never encounter again. Looking at the ring on her finger—a remarkably modest ring, considering its source—he squelched yet another surge of useless regret.

“So,” she said, picking at her cinnamon roll, “have you decided how long you’re going to stay?”

“I actually have a six-month leave scheduled.”

Her eyes widened. “Wow.”

“I’m considering a job offer.”

He watched her face change as his announcement soaked in, watched her eyes grow even wider as the smile rose on her face.

“Your own ship?”

“That’s right.”

“I’m happy for you. You deserve it.”

“Thanks.”

He waited for her to ask the next logical question, but she didn’t. She studied him a moment, though, and he knew she was wondering.

He hadn’t decided yet, though. At first it had seemed an easy enough choice, and he’d nearly said yes and signed the papers the moment he’d been asked. But Admiral Barkley had asked him to think about it, so Jeff had agreed. It had been a long time since he’d taken a vacation anyway. Away from the daily grind of shipboard work, and face to face with the consequences of his relentless pursuit of his career, the answer wasn’t as obvious.

“What ship is it?” Trieka asked finally, and he thought he saw a flash of regret in her eyes. He almost didn’t want to answer.

“The *Starchild*,” he said gently. “She still hasn’t been assigned a permanent crew.”

She nodded. “I can’t tell you how much I’d love to know you’re piloting that ship.”

“I know. But I have to think it over.”

She nodded, her eyes distant. He let the silence drag before asking, “So how are the other guests doing?”

“Fine as far as I can tell. They haven’t contacted me on the intercom, which I showed them how to use, and short of installing spy cameras in that room—” She shrugged. “White Fur People tend to be early risers, so I’ll check if I don’t hear from them in an hour or so.”

“What about Fairfax? He sleeps late?”

She dismissed her fiancé with a wave. “He just went to bed an hour ago. He was trying out a new sub-space transmitter—uplinking with somebody-or-other for real-time financial transactions. Judging by the swearing, it didn’t work.”

“What do you see in him?” Jeff asked, then took a quick gulp of coffee to hide his surprise at hearing the words come out of his mouth.

But Trieka just laughed. “I haven’t been able to answer that question for myself, Jeff. I think it’s pure chemical attraction. He really is a decent human being, though, in spite of all the money.”

A good answer. It would have been easy for her to be defensive. He decided to stick his foot in it again. “What does he see in you?”

“A raging bitch, most days.” She grinned and snagged another cinnamon roll. “Chemistry, Commander. It’s all about chemistry. And you and I were both too busy with astrogation to figure it all out.”

He answered with a rueful smile. True enough. The path he’d taken in life hadn’t left much room for romance. Or even plain old-fashioned lust. And the more he threw himself into his work, the less he got, and the less he got, the more he threw himself into his work. He’d been doing it since academy days, when the ploy had worked well enough to keep his mind off the woman sitting across from him.

“I’m glad you’re happy,” he said, realizing the silence had stretched too long.

She nodded. “You can stay here as long as you like.”

“Shouldn’t you check with Fairfax?”

She snorted. “He knows better than that.”

The last vestiges of doubt slipped from Jeff’s mind. “Good.”

\* \* \*

Morning woke Noisy Girl from a restless sleep. The bed had been too soft, and she’d been



plagued by strange dreams she could no longer remember. They'd been noisy dreams, though, with people talking. She hadn't dreamed about talking people for years—not since she was very young.

Next to her, her mother still slept. Walks Crooked hadn't said anything yesterday, or the days before that, but Noisy Girl knew the trip had exhausted her. They'd traveled nearly a month over rugged terrain and through dense forest. The disfigured foot that had earned Walks Crooked her name made it that much more tiring.

Noisy Girl herself stretched stiff muscles as she slipped out of the bed. Careful not to wake her mother, she tiptoed through the room, examining things she'd barely had time to notice before.

The mirror in the bathing room caught her attention, as it had last night. She'd seen her reflection in still water, but it had never looked so clear or so real. Last night she hadn't wanted to look. It had disoriented her to see the irrefutable evidence of her strangeness. Her pale hairless skin and fleshy, mobile lips looked suddenly ugly and threatening.

She looked at herself more closely this morning, absorbing details. She did have some hair on her face, barely visible, above her upper lip and along her jawline. Her pale skin had variations in its color, also faint, along her cheeks and forehead. She had a red spot on her chin, one of the hot hurting bumps she often got near her monthly cycles.

She didn't even know if that was normal. The White Fur People only menstruated twice a year. Something else she could find out from Fire Hair—one more of a countless number of questions.

A hand touched her shoulder. Long used to the silence of the White Fur People, both in their communication and in their movement, Noisy Girl turned to smile at her mother.

"I hope they have good food here," Walks Crooked said. "I'm hungry."

Noisy Girl laid a hand on her mother's arm, more aware of the soft fall of silky fur than she'd ever been in her life.

"I'll use the talk-box," she said with her free hand.

She pushed the bright red button Fire Hair had shown them yesterday. Within moments, a large square above the button lit up and Fire Hair's face appeared. Noisy Girl stared at it, dumbfounded. Looking at her mother, she saw the same disbelief.

"Don't be afraid," Fire Hair said, lifting her hands so the gestures could be seen in the small area of the lit image. "This is only a picture of me. I'll come in a few minutes to help you find the eating place."

The image disappeared. Noisy Girl stared a moment longer, then looked again at her mother.

"Sometimes," Walks Crooked said, "I think it's better not to ask too many questions."

\* \* \*

A few minutes later, as promised, they were led through the strange mazelike structure to a large room that smelled of food. They sat down at a large table while Fire Hair gave them hot beverages and sweet-smelling pastries.

Noisy Girl thanked her host, suddenly self-conscious. Her discomfort stemmed not from Fire Hair's presence, but from the presence of another Loud-Talking Person—the tall, light-haired man she'd seen last night. He didn't seem threatening, but she felt uncertain in front of him, as if she had to do everything exactly right.

As she tried not to stare, he leaned toward Fire Hair and spoke to her quietly in the strange

sounds she knew she'd have to learn to make. She listened closely, but the sounds meant nothing to her. How could this string of noises possibly make words?

Then she watched in surprise as Fire Hair moved her hands and Star Man echoed the motions. He turned toward her and signed with careful precision, "Good morning."

Suddenly Noisy Girl found herself staring into dark blue eyes—a color she'd never seen in a person's eyes before—a sky color. There was nothing frightened or uncomfortable in those eyes. Perhaps it was wishful thinking on her part, but she thought she saw an offer of friendship.

Reassured, but at the same time discomfited, she turned to her mother. There she saw something even more perplexing; the small, wise smile that appeared on Walks Crooked's face on rare occasions—occasions when Walks Crooked was certain she understood something that seemed beyond understanding. And she was usually right.

But right about what?

Noisy Girl decided that, this time, she really didn't want to know.

The rest of the breakfast was quiet and sociable as Fire Hair continued to demonstrate words and small phrases to Star Man, who picked them up quickly. Noisy Girl found herself watching his hands when he spoke to her—and when he didn't.

Finally Fire Hair stood. "I don't want to leave you where you'll be uncomfortable," she told Noisy Girl and her mother, "but I have to take care of some things to do with the wedding. You can come with me if you like."

Star Man spoke. Fire Hair looked at him, her reddish eyebrows lifting.

"Star Man says he would take you and your mother around the city, if you'd like."

Noisy Girl looked at her mother in astonishment, then at Star Man, then back at her mother. Walks Crooked had that look on her face again, as if she knew something Noisy Girl didn't. Of course she did. She always did.

"You should go," said Walks Crooked. "I'll stay here. I have an ache in my foot."

Walks Crooked's disfigured foot often ached. But she hadn't acted very achy this morning when she'd risen from bed. It seemed suspicious to Noisy Girl, but she wasn't sure why.

"I could stay with you if you don't feel well."

"No. It's not necessary. I'll find something to do here, and you can learn more about the city to help you decide if you wish to stay."

She couldn't argue with that. It was, after all, the reason they'd come here in the first place—so she could learn.

"All right," she gestured to Fire Hair. "I would be honored to accompany Star Man on a tour of the city."

Fire Hair relayed the information and Star Man smiled. He looked directly at Noisy Girl with those blue eyes and said with his hands, "Thank you."

She smiled back, and felt her throat make a soft, happy sound. He smiled in return. *He's a good man*, she thought, unbidden. When she looked at her mother, her mother was inscrutable.

\* \* \*

For a few minutes, as they prepared to venture into the minor sprawl of Denahault Prime, Jeff wondered if he knew what he was getting into. He still wasn't sure why he'd volunteered to be Noisy Girl's escort. She couldn't speak a word of English, and although Trieka had shown him a few phrases in the White Fur People's language, they'd already jumped right out of his head. He'd be lucky if he could remember how to say hello.

He could smile, though, so he did, and she smiled back, showing her teeth a little too much. It didn't seem threatening, but almost feral, as if she were one of the aliens who'd raised her. It didn't help that her two front teeth were a shade too big.

They stood on the stairs in front of the embassy, silent for a long moment while Jeff considered where they should go and what they could do. She didn't seem bothered by the silence, or his scrutiny as he indulged himself in a moment of just looking at her.

She was pretty, he supposed, her face a little too long, her body too thin, her pale hair clean but straight and lifeless. The odd patchwork clothes added to her feral look. When he'd first seen them, he'd wondered how they could possibly be comfortable, but closer inspection showed they fit like her own set of fur. Constant use had undoubtedly rendered the leather as supple as her own skin.

Her hands moved. He had no idea what she was saying, but there was a question on her face. He nodded and led the rest of the way down the steps. Shopping, he thought. He'd never met a woman who didn't like to shop.

Denahault Prime wasn't big, but it had grown in the two years since he'd last been here. What had once been purely an administrative center had grown into a full-fledged city, with a residential area and a small market. Jeff headed for the market. He didn't have any cash, but the stores should take his military chit.

Noisy Girl walked beside him in unnatural silence, her eyes wide as she looked around at the buildings and the people. The expression of awe lit her face from within, and Jeff couldn't help but smile, looking at her. He'd never met anyone who could be awed by something as simple as a few buildings. Soft sounds came from her, expressing emotion she couldn't vocalize. Jeff noticed her fingers moving against her thighs, as if she were talking to herself.

He stopped her with a hand against her elbow. She turned, her face expectant.

"Jeff," he said, pointing to his chest.

She frowned, looked at his chest, then into his face.

"Jeff," he repeated.

She nodded soberly, then made the gestures he recognized as Trieka's invented name for him, "Star Man."

Jeff nodded. "Yes." Then, slowly and carefully, exaggerating the movements of his mouth, he repeated, "Jeff."

She nodded. Soberly, looking into his face, she said, "Shaff."

"Yes!" Inexplicable elation filled his chest. "Yes. Jeff."

"Shaff," she said again, then suddenly laughed, an odd barking laugh, jumping up and down like a little girl. "Shaff Shaff Shaff Shaff Shaff!"

Her first word, and he'd taught it to her. Better yet, it was his name.

She grabbed at him, still jumping up and down, still laughing, sounding like an annoying little mutt-dog that had barked outside his bedroom window every night for six years while he was growing up. He laughed with her and grabbed her hands, holding tight while some part of him marveled at his own enthusiasm.

Finally she stopped and wiped her eyes. Only then did he realize there'd been tears with the laughter. But she still smiled her wide bright-eyed smile, so he wasn't concerned.

Sobering, she slipped her hands from his and spoke with her fingers. It took him a moment to recognize the gestures as her name. He repeated them as best he could. Frowning, she took his hands and moved them, finger by finger, gesture by gesture, through the sequence. Then she laid his palm flat against her chest.

Her odd garment was soft and warm under his hand, and he was struck by a sudden urge to feel her skin beneath. It could only be softer, warmer. He stared at his own hand and held very still.

She let go and looked at him expectantly. He repeated her name and was rewarded with her wide smile.

“Shaff,” she said aloud.

“Noisy Girl,” he answered with his hands.

She laughed. He took her hand and led her into the brightness of the market.

\* \* \*

The town was bright and big and noisy, but Noisy Girl was beginning to accept those things as a natural part of the Loud-Talking People’s world.

She would be noisy too, she decided. She’d said her new friend’s name, and other words would follow as soon as she could learn them.

She pointed to things as they walked and Jeff said their names for her. She listened carefully to the sounds and tried to repeat them, but they didn’t sound right. It didn’t matter. She was beginning to shape the sounds that until now had held no meaning for her. It was a good beginning.

The place they walked through reminded her of the summer fair, when tribes of the White Fur People met to trade goods and news. Her people always brought bags of dried fish that they traded for fruits from the inland tribes. Other goods would be spread out on blankets on the ground, and the people would barter over them, fingers flying as trades were negotiated.

Here, many shopkeepers had set up their wares on canopied tables, and buyers looked over and picked through them. Sounds flew back and forth, staccato, almost rhythmic, until goods changed hands.

Noisy Girl stopped beside one booth to watch, fascinated, as a man traded several small pieces of green paper for a basket of nuts. Elsewhere, tables were draped with cloth, or piled with fruits and vegetables. Each table seemed to be in front of a small building. They must ply their wares from inside when the weather was bad.

Fascinated, yet nearly overwhelmed, she clung to Jeff, holding his arm as they walked among the tables. His presence calmed her somehow, made everything seem less intimidating. For a moment, she wondered why she felt so comfortable with him, then decided she’d rather enjoy the feeling than worry.

Suddenly she stopped, staring. The table in front of them was covered with brightly colored clothing. She’d never seen cloth in such beautiful colors before, and when she reached to touch, its softness amazed her.

Without thinking, she picked up the top-most garment from the nearest pile. It was beautifully bright—red, yellow, blue and green in bold geometric patterns—and when she held it against herself, the impossibly fine fabric fell past her knees.

The man behind the table began to speak to her. Suddenly afraid she might have done something wrong, she looked at him. He was smiling, making expansive but meaningless gestures. She smiled back and looked at Jeff. He touched her arm the same way her mother might have, and she understood that, no matter how strange it all seemed to her, everything was all right.

Jeff spoke to the other man, his voice adopting the cadence that seemed to be associated with

bargaining. His sounds captured her as she listened to the tones and rhythms, her hand stroking the soft incredible fabric against her body.

Finally he laughed, shook his head and handed a small card to the other man. Noisy Girl smiled at his laughter. It was a good sound, natural like the wind or moving water, not strange like the talking sounds. Voices were all different, she realized—Fire Hair’s higher-pitched and lilting, Long Nose’s a lower range with textures that reminded her of tree bark, and Jeff’s lowest of all with undertones that made her think of fog, or the smell of smoke. The man behind the table had a voice that sounded like ice cracking in the springtime.

She focused on Jeff’s voice, not sure why the sound calmed her, then realized he was looking at her, smiling. She raised her eyebrows and made a questioning gesture. Before he could answer, she realized what it must be. She still held the marvelous garment. It wasn’t hers—it belonged to the merchant man. Reluctant, she laid it on the table, folding it carefully.

Jeff’s hand touched hers, stilling her movements. When she looked up, he took the garment and handed it back to her.

The action was unmistakable. He’d purchased it for her. What had he traded for it? It must have been something marvelous, that he could barter it for this beautiful thing. She wanted to tell him she couldn’t possibly accept such a valuable gift from him, but she didn’t know how. And what if refusing the gift were seen as an insult? She couldn’t bear to have him think badly of her, or to think she thought badly of him.

She held it against her, smiling, hoping to show her thanks. It didn’t seem enough. Looking down again at the bright cloth, she realized what she should do.

Laying her pretty new clothes aside, Noisy Girl shed her old furs, then slid the new garment over her head. The fabric was so soft it felt like she was wearing water, and the bottom edge floated gently against her shins.

There. Now Jeff would know how much she liked his gift. She looked at him, beaming. He had an odd expression on his face, but then he smiled as if to reassure her.

She’d done something wrong, she was certain, but she didn’t know what. She turned to the other man to judge his reaction. His face had gone strangely red, but he said nothing as he handed her a cloth bag to put her furs in.

Whatever she’d done, it must not have been too awful, she decided. With her new bright clothes on and her old white furs in the bag, she took Jeff’s hand and they went on.

\* \* \*

“...so she just stripped right there and put it on.”

“At least you know she liked it,” said Fairfax.

Jeff glanced down the table at Noisy Girl. He wasn’t comfortable talking about her while she sat only a few feet away. But her smile reminded him she had no idea what he was saying. Even if she had, he didn’t think it would have bothered her because she had no idea why what she’d done might seem unusual.

Trieka gestured with her fork. “She has no concept of nudity, Jeff. Think about it. She’s lived her whole life among people who are physically incapable of being naked.”

He nodded. That part made sense to him. “But the merchant—he barely blinked an eye.”

“It’s a frontier planet. Most of the people here left Earth because they wanted to get away from the restrictive environment. There’s a lot of acceptance here. As long as you aren’t hurting anything, nobody really cares what you do.”

“Personally, I’m highly in favor of women running naked in the streets.”

Jeff stared, barely believing the comment had come from Fairfax. It must have, though, because Trieka, grinning, smacked his arm. Fairfax, unfazed, opened his roast beef sandwich and added another spoonful of horseradish.

Jeff decided it would be easier to change the subject than to dwell on the fact he’d never in his life had so much fun shopping with a woman. And that it would have been fun even if she hadn’t taken her clothes off. “There have to be rules, though. Don’t tell me the whole planet is anarchist.”

“Not as many rules as there were,” said Fairfax, “and there weren’t many to begin with.”

“But how do you keep order?”

“I decentralized things. The settlements favored independent rule, so that’s the way we went. It’s worked well so far. There’s legal counsel available on a case-by-case basis, but nobody’s asked for it yet.”

“There’s no centralized government at all?” Compared to Earth, with the governments of the various countries all coordinated through EarthFed, what Fairfax described sounded like a recipe for disaster.

“It was the only logical choice,” Fairfax said with a shrug that made Jeff think the conversation had gone as far as Fairfax wanted it to. And Jeff didn’t know the man well enough to press on.

“It’s really okay, Jeff,” Trieka said. Her eyes laughed at him. She’d been ribbing him about his conservatism for as long as he’d known her, and this was just another addition to the tradition. “So far the only people running naked in the streets are—well—people who hang out with you.”

Jeff shook his head. He had no choice but to accept her teasing in the spirit in which it had been intended. “So, Fairfax, you’re marrying her tomorrow?”

“Yep.”

“Better you than me.” He glanced at Noisy Girl, who was still involved in her meal. She’d eaten only a bite or two of her sandwich, apparently more interested in the vegetable platter. “There was one thing...” he ventured, not sure he should ask. “When she was... stripped... I saw something—”

“Those are called breasts,” said Trieka.

To his chagrin, he felt himself blushing furiously. “I’ve seen *those* before. I meant the mark under her arm.”

“It’s a tattoo,” said Fairfax. “It means she was initiated into her tribe.” He paused, his eyes flicking toward Trieka. “Want to see mine?”

Jeff’s face was still hot. “I’ll pass, thanks.”

Noisy Girl waved then, capturing Trieka’s attention. Jeff watched as they conversed. Noisy Girl began with a smile, but her expression sobered as the conversation progressed.

“Is something wrong?” he asked. Noisy Girl looked distressed.

“Nothing serious,” Fairfax said. He’d seemed to be paying more attention to his food than the two women, but obviously his appearance had been deceiving.

Noisy Girl sat back in her chair. Her hands were twisted in her lap, and tears stood in her eyes. Fairfax’s attention shifted from his sandwich and he gestured toward her. She gave a strained smile and shook her head. Walks Crooked contributed to the exchange, her gestures quick and insistent as she spoke to her daughter.

Then, suddenly, Noisy Girl spoke the only word she knew. “Shaff.” She pointed at him.

“Shaff, Shaff.”

Trieka looked at him. “You didn’t tell me you were teaching her to talk.”

Jeff shifted, staring at his plate. His sudden embarrassment made no sense to him. “It’s the only word she knows.” At Trieka’s arch, too-amused look, he added defensively, “It just sort of happened. More importantly, why’d she say it now?”

“She needs a date to the wedding.”

His eyes widened. “What?”

“I invited her to the wedding. She’s not crazy about the idea. There’ll be too many people and she’s not comfortable with humans. Walks Crooked says if she doesn’t go, it’ll be a horrible insult to me and Fairfax. So she just said she’ll go if you go with her.”

He glanced at Noisy Girl, surprised at the anguish on her face. The look made him want to rush to her rescue. “Well, I’m going anyway, so what’s the big deal?”

“So it’s a date?”

He shrugged. “Sure. Why not?” He ignored the mischief in Trieka’s eyes.

But, when she relayed the information, he couldn’t dismiss the look on Walks Crooked’s face so easily. He could have sworn, at that moment, she looked smug.

# THREE

Fire Hair's wedding day dawned bright and beautiful. Noisy Girl watched its dawning from outside the room where she'd slept. Through a wide door, she'd found a caged-in platform seemingly hanging from the side of the building. It was high in the air, and at first she'd been afraid to stand on it. It had been strange and disconcerting to be so far above the ground, and had made her sick and dizzy at first. She'd stood very still for some minutes, waiting for her sight and her stomach to adjust. When it had, she'd realized the view from this height was staggeringly beautiful.

Walks Crooked stood by the door, half inside the building. She'd come as far as the rail once, a few minutes ago, then had turned back. The doorway was as far as she'd go.

Testing herself, Noisy Girl put her hands on the rail and leaned forward, looking down at the ground. A long way down. People walking below looked tiny. She swallowed, disconcerted again, and turned her gaze forward to watch the sun rising over the forest.

"I can't see the ocean," she said, turning to her mother.

"The ocean is a great distance away. We're a very long way from home."

Except Noisy Girl wasn't supposed to be. She was supposed to be closer to home than she'd ever been in her life. After yesterday and the time she'd spent with Jeff, she felt a little more like she belonged. He, at least, had been willing to help her. That was why she'd wanted him to accompany her to the wedding celebration today. She wanted to go, and had understood that to refuse would have been rude. But even with her mother with her, she didn't think she'd be able to bear so many strange humans.

At least if Jeff were there, she'd be assured of a familiar face. There'd been too many strange faces lately. Trieka's parents and sister had arrived last night, to stay in another guest bedroom, and other guests had passed through to greet the soon-to-be married couple. The barrage of hairless faces and loudtalk had pummeled her senses. Everything here was so strange.

Even the sunlight seemed different, so far from the ocean. She pushed away from the railing and went to her mother. Looking relieved her daughter had finally come back to safety, Walks Crooked led the way back into the bedroom.

Inside, Noisy Girl sat on the bed. A thought had occurred to her last night, when she'd lain awake staring at the darkness, listening to her mother's breathing. She'd wanted to talk about it then, but couldn't.

"Mother," she said now, hesitant even though she had, over the years, spoken to her mother about things more complicated than this.

"Yes?" The other woman added a gesture of reassurance.

"Fire Hair and Long Nose are to be married today. Is that something I could do if I stayed here?"

"Yes."

Though she'd expected the answer, the implications washed over her in a flood she could barely comprehend. Last night she'd tried not to think about it, afraid the answer might not be what she'd hoped.

"They would put no limits on me because of who I am, where I come from?"



“I don’t believe they would. You’re one of them—you should be able to live a full life as one of them.”

Tears pricked her eyes. Overwhelmed, she half-ran to the bathing room.

She sat down on the floor and folded her hands in her lap. It was a posture of openness, meant to calm the mind. The Wind Messengers knew she needed calm. Folding her fingers around her beads, she closed her eyes and the tumult of emotion began to quiet.

When she felt like she had some control again, she let herself think.

She could find a lifemate. She could have babies with him. It was something she’d never dared even dream about.

She’d been accepted by her family of the White Fur People, but, because she wasn’t truly one of them, she’d grown up knowing she’d always be alone in that way. She could never take a lifemate, never raise her own family. Here, among her own people, she could do all those things.

Equilibrium restored, she went back to her mother.

“Are you all right?” Walks Crooked asked.

“I am.” She looked out the wide window, at the risen sun and the expanse of forest. “I have to stay here,” she said. “No matter what, I have to stay.” She looked back at her mother, desperate for understanding and receiving it in Walks Crooked’s earnest expression. “I want a family of my own.”

\* \* \*

She wore her new clothes for the wedding. The bright color seemed appropriate for the occasion; bright and happy. At the same time, it still felt strange to her, as she’d never worn anything but white fur or her own strange pink skin.

Jeff had accompanied her and her mother and now walked comfortably between them. His clothes were black and white, and his hair lay more neatly than usual. The two combined to make his appearance noticeably different. Noisy Girl kept looking at him, to make sure he was still the same person. He seemed puzzled by her attention, but smiled from time to time as if to reassure her.

She didn’t need reassurance, though, not really. Until she found herself in the middle of a swarm of wedding guests.

She’d been watching Jeff, and keeping an eye on her mother, whose limp seemed more pronounced today. One minute she was trying to judge the expression on Walks Crooked’s face, the next she looked up and found herself drowning in color.

She stopped short. Quite simply, she’d never seen so many colors all at once. Her world had been brown and green, gray, water-blue, sky-blue, fur- and snow-white. Suddenly around her were green and red, blue, yellow, pink, purple and colors she had no names for.

They hadn’t even reached the people yet. As they came closer, the noise grew, a din of overlapping voices and competing rhythms. She edged closer to Jeff, seeking some sense of solidity, something to ground her. Obliging, he took her hand.

The contact startled her, but she didn’t have time to think about it, for just then she saw something she’d thought never to see again.

White Fur People. A crowd of them, gathered together next to a table. They seemed uncomfortable, out of place.

Without thinking, she broke free and ran to them. After a few steps she slowed, looking back to make sure her mother followed. They went together, Jeff following at a short distance.

The White Fur People seemed taken aback by Noisy Girl's approach, until she started to speak. Then they gathered in close, all talking, introducing themselves. These were the People Who Live at the Edge of the Mountain, the tribe who'd rescued and welcomed Fire Hair.

Six Toes and Goldenseal, Brown Hands, Always Mother. The familiarity of the names made her feel like she was in her own world again, surrounded more by familiarity than strangeness. But they seemed more comfortable speaking to Walks Crooked, and after a few minutes she found herself watching while her mother talked.

She should have worn her furs instead of the bright dress. But perhaps it would have made no difference. She was no longer one of them. She hadn't been since she'd walked into that first house in Forest Walk. It wasn't that they tried to exclude her or intentionally snub her. It was that they didn't know how she related to them.

She didn't know the answer to that, either. Disquieted, she turned to see Jeff standing behind her, watching. She couldn't say what she wanted, wasn't sure what she would say if she could. But when he smiled, everything seemed easier.

With his smile fresh in her mind, she stepped closer to her mother and eased her way into a conversation. Because this might be her last chance to do so.

Though she didn't understand much of what was happening around her, when Jeff touched her arm a few minutes later, she followed him.

Everyone was moving across the wide lawn. There were perhaps two hundred people—the largest crowd she'd seen since her last trip to the summer fairs. At least fifty were White Fur People. A few humans mingled with the natives, all of them speaking competently with their hands. Noisy Girl blinked in surprise. Obviously Fire Hair and her mate weren't the only ones who'd learned something of the native language. Maybe Jeff could learn too.

At the far end of the lawn sat rows of wooden chairs. In one area near the front, bright yellow blankets had been spread on the grass. The natives sat comfortably on the blankets while the humans sat just as naturally in the chairs. Again, she found herself between the humans and the natives, left to choose between an empty chair next to Jeff, and a space on the yellow blanket next to her mother. After a moment's consideration, she sat by her mother.

She had no idea what to expect, but was surprised when the air filled with a sound unlike anything she'd ever heard before. It was like the sound of birdsong, but louder, fuller, and carried by a slow steady beat she could feel moving through her whole body. Looking around, she realized the central sound of the music came from a human.

A tall brown-haired woman stood in front of the crowd, near a soaring framework covered with white flowers. She opened her mouth exactly as if she were speaking, and the clear sweet sound cascaded out.

Noisy Girl sat transfixed along with the other White Fur People. It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever heard. Her body swayed with the sound, the slow, flowing rhythm soaking into her blood and her breathing. When it stopped, she blinked away tears.

In her life with the White Fur People, she'd listened to the sounds of birds, the wind, the ever-present ocean, and had used her strange voice to mimic those sounds. Many in the tribe had been frightened by her ability, but Walks Crooked had enjoyed the sounds, listening to her make them in the evenings, when they sat alone by the fire in their small cave. But nothing she'd ever heard from the Loud-Talking People so far had been anything like this.

The humans seemed appreciative, but not shocked. Was this a normal part of their lives, something that happened every day? She couldn't imagine having that kind of beauty occurring as naturally as the sound of the wind or running water. She looked at her mother and saw a

similar awe in her eyes.

“Beautiful,” Walks Crooked said. “Perhaps you could do it as well. You were always good at mimicking sounds.”

The thought stunned Noisy Girl so much she had to stop thinking about it. She could only assimilate so much at a time, and right now she needed to pay attention to her hosts.

Fire Hair and Long Nose wore beautiful clothes that transformed their appearance as much as Jeff’s clothes had changed his. She wanted to touch the frothy stuff that flowed from Fire Hair’s white garment. It reminded her of the foam that tipped the ocean waves.

They spoke words to each other, led by a human woman Noisy Girl thought was a shaman of some sort. A pair of humans translated for the company of White Fur People. Words of love, promises to be with each other for the rest of their lives. Beautiful thoughts and words. There had been so much beauty already in this strange new world.

When they’d spoken the last of their pledges, Long Nose pressed his mouth to Fire Hair’s, tenderly. Still another new thing. The White Fur People touched each other’s faces to express affection. Noisy Girl touched her own lips. What would that caress feel like? She glanced at Jeff, at his full human lips so unlike the thin mouths of the White Fur People. His mouth was mobile and lovely. Perhaps he would teach her this new thing if she asked.

Her face went suddenly hot. Why had the thought embarrassed her? She returned her attention to the laughing newly married couple, and decided that, when she pledged herself to her lifemate, she would throw flowers and make sure there was beautiful music.

\* \* \*

Trieka looked splendid in her wedding gown. The gown was traditional, not overly frothy, and Trieka looked as natural in it as she’d ever looked in her captain’s uniform. Jeff took a moment to indulge his still-lingering regret, then found his attention seized by Noisy Girl, bright and lovely in the dress he’d bought for her yesterday. It was a casual dress and she wore it artlessly, with bare feet, but her artlessness included a grace many more sophisticated women would have killed for. Her wheat-gold hair hung straight down her back, waving as she walked, and her green elfin eyes sparkled.

She clung to his hand as they walked to the other end of the garden where the reception would be held. He’d thought she might prefer the company of the White Fur People, but here she was. And he was glad.

The wedding had made him sentimental. He found himself feeling warm toward his companion, with a silly urge to lead her under one of the rose trellises and kiss her. If he blamed it on the wedding, he could forget he’d had similar urges yesterday, in the unromantic market. Avoiding the roses, he steered her toward the hors d’oeuvres table.

Much of the food was unfamiliar even to Jeff, but he put on a brave face and sampled several things for Noisy Girl’s benefit, to show her it was okay. But she’d already begun picking through the offerings with an enthusiasm that made him think most of what she selected was native offerings. She pointed at one dish, piled with oddly colored sliced fruits, and smiled at him. Gamely, he put some on his plate, then pointed to the cheese puffs. She grinned and took some.

They sat at a table and he watched her eat, entranced with her lack of self-consciousness. She ate neatly and gracefully with her fingers, ignoring the utensils, chewed with her mouth closed, wiped her fingers on the napkin and spilled nothing. From time to time she hummed, a sound that could only signify contentment.

When a waiter came around with drinks, she took one and sipped daintily, then looked at Jeff to see what she should do next. He set his glass next to his plate, and she did the same, smiling. Then, finished with that lesson, she tapped the glass delicately with her fingernails, cocking her head to hear the clear sound that came from the crystal. She noticed everything, paused to experience any moment that looked interesting before moving on.

“How are you guys doing?”

Jeff looked up to find Trieka next to him. He’d missed her arrival, too absorbed in watching Noisy Girl. “Great.”

“Good to hear it. How’s she getting along?”

“She seems to be enjoying herself.”

Smiling, Trieka turned to Noisy Girl, signing and speaking aloud at the same time. “I hope you enjoy the food.”

Noisy Girl’s response made Trieka slide Jeff a sidelong grin. “She likes the food and the company too.” She patted him on the shoulder. “Keep up the good work.”

Before he could protest, she had breezed away.

In spite of Trieka’s implications, which Jeff didn’t feel obligated to take seriously, he was glad Noisy Girl was having a good time. He wasn’t sure he’d be able to comport himself with the same kind of ease if he’d found himself in the middle of a native wedding ceremony.

Music started from the other side of the garden. A live band, Jeff noticed, and he leaned back in his chair as a woman began to sing—the same woman who’d sung “Ave Maria” during the ceremony. She had a lovely voice, versatile, sliding now into a slinky blues number. Relaxed as he was, enjoying the music, it took him a moment to notice Noisy Girl’s reaction.

She’d leaned forward in her chair, her gaze riveted to the band, her body literally shivering as she listened. He couldn’t quite see her face, turned as it was toward the other side of the garden. Thinking she might be frightened, he touched her shoulder.

She turned to him, her smile so wide it fairly glowed. Her hands moved rapidly, then slowed. She looked a little embarrassed.

He smiled and took her hands, folding them between his. Desperately wishing he could speak so she could understand, he stood, still holding her hand, and pointed toward the band.

She nodded enthusiastically and took off, practically dragging him across the garden. So much for the communication gap.

Jeff pulled her to a stop a few feet away, afraid she was going to run right into the middle of the band. As it was, the singer gave her a sidelong, concerned look before returning her attention to the rest of the crowd.

Noisy Girl seemed unaware of the effect she’d had on the other woman. It was as if the music had cast a spell over her, rendering her oblivious to anything else around her.

Jeff watched for a time, then resigned himself to settling in for a long wait. He really hoped she’d want to dance.

Twenty minutes later, the band took a break.

“Are you a fan?” the singer asked Noisy Girl, stepping down from the dais.

“She doesn’t speak English,” Jeff said, not wanting to go into a long-winded explanation. Not speaking English was bizarre enough these days without throwing in the rest of it.

“Oh. Well, tell her I’m glad she enjoyed the set.”

“I will.”

Noisy Girl seemed content to stand and wait for the musicians to return, but Jeff wanted a drink. He pulled gently on her hand, pointing back at the food. She hesitated, but followed.

He procured drinks, then led her around the edge of the garden, away from the bulk of the crowd to where they could look at the flowers. This area had been added since the last time he'd visited Denahault. The plants all must have been native—he didn't recognize any of them.

Noisy Girl seemed content with the quiet. Jeff had hoped she would be. He needed some time away from the bustle to collect his emotions. Many of the White Fur People also seemed to have drifted in this direction. The silence must be a blessing after spending the afternoon listening to the mass of Loud-Talkers.

Heading toward the quieter parts of the garden, they passed Trieka and Fairfax, talking to a young woman who held a miniature recording device. Amazing that media would schlep all the way from Earth to cover a wedding. Then again, it was Harrison Fairfax's wedding.

"...so how will this relocation affect your operations?" Nice romantic question.

"Day-to-day operations shouldn't change at all. If my being off-planet proves too difficult for the companies I've been directly involved with, I'll either restructure or hire someone else to take over the managerial role."

"No chance of heading back to Earth?"

"Not on a permanent basis. My wife—" he paused to give Trieka a small smile, "—is dedicated to the situation here on Denahault and, as of last year, so am I."

Jeff led Noisy Girl closer, thinking Trieka might appreciate the interruption. She caught his gaze and smiled. How could she not smile—Jeff's thought was more than a little sarcastic—when her new husband had just promised to reorganize his vast empire rather than leave her side? Then again, he couldn't see Fairfax shuttling back and forth to Earth on business, not with his propensity for hyperspace sickness.

"We have guests to attend to," Trieka said before the reporter could fire off another question. "This is intended to be a day for friends and family."

"One more question?"

"Quickly," said Fairfax.

"I've heard rumors about a 'wild child' being brought in by the natives. A human who was raised by them and can't speak English and can't function in human society. Can you comment on this?"

Jeff froze, forgetting for a moment that Noisy Girl couldn't understand what had just been said about her. He looked at Fairfax while desperation warred with pure anger. How dare they talk about Noisy Girl that way? Then, just as sharply, humor broke through. The "wild child" was standing right here, functioning quite well in human society, thank you very much.

Fairfax met his gaze. Jeff wasn't sure what the other man saw, but when he looked back at the reporter, a stiff formality had replaced the more relaxed attitude of his earlier response. "If a human child was raised by the White Fur People, I'm sure he or she would have a nice civilizing affect on the rest of us." He turned away, cupping a hand around Trieka's waist as he steered her toward Jeff.

"Thank you for your time," said the reporter, obviously wondering what she'd done wrong. She hesitated, probably wondering if she should try for one more question, then put her recorder back in her jacket pocket and departed.

"Only one reporter?" Jeff asked as the newlyweds approached.

"It was one or none," Trieka answered. "Fairfax set it up with the bigshots at MediaNet. One reporter and he or she can sell the story to anybody." She looked reflectively toward the woman's retreating figure. "She's going to make a mint."

"Wow. Too bad it couldn't have been Jenna."

"We tried to get Jenna," Fairfax said. "You wouldn't believe how hard we tried. But she was on assignment in the United Balkans and her contract had her locked."

"That's too bad."

"Yes, it is. I might have trusted her with Noisy Girl."

Jeff nodded. "I hope Ms. Second String doesn't run with what she heard."

Fairfax smiled. "I'll take care of it."

Jeff had no doubt he would.

They strolled for a time, stopping here and there to talk to other guests, mostly natives who seemed to have all discovered Noisy Girl could talk to them. The news had spread quickly, Jeff assumed. From time to time, he heard music again, soft, as if from a distance. He wondered if the band had started playing again, but there was no instrumental backup.

They sat on a wooden bench under a tree to finish their drinks and he heard the music clearly, soft and careful, in a sweet, pure voice easily as fine as the band's vocalist had demonstrated. Jeff closed his eyes, impressed by the exactness of the tones.

When he closed his eyes, the voice seemed suddenly nearer. And when he opened them again, he realized it was right next to him.

Noisy Girl, tipping her half-empty glass back and forth in her hand, was humming an absolutely perfect rendition of *Ave Maria*.

He listened, entranced, as she hummed the song straight through without a hitch. Then, curious, he hummed the first few bars of a current tune the band had played. He knew most of the song, but when he faltered through the bridge, she kept going without missing a note.

"Wow," he said. She kept surprising him, gloriously.

She looked at him and tried to repeat the word. "Waw."

"That's right. Wow's about the only way to say it." He squeezed her hand, wishing he had some way to express his amazement. "Let's go see if the band's set back up yet."

\* \* \*

It was late when they finally went back to Fire Hair's big house. Noisy Girl was tired, and her feet hurt. She hadn't seen her mother for hours, and wondered how she was doing. She should have paid more attention instead of basking in the wonderful music.

Jeff took her to the door of her room, squeezed her hand, smiled, and left her with the feeling she should have done something else. Maybe someday she'd understand enough of the strange loud language of her own people to find out how she should act around them. Now she just let it go and went inside.

A loud noise greeted her, like a waterfall. Curious, she went toward it and found herself in the bathing room. Walks Crooked lay in the big bathing basin, long fur floating around her. Steam curled from the surface of the water, which still cascaded from a protrusion in the wall. The room was filling with steam, as well as a soft flowery odor.

"This is wonderful," Walks Crooked said, lifting her hands out of the water. The blissful expression on her face confirmed her words.

"I was worried your foot would hurt."

"It does. But this makes me forget all about it. I should bring one of these home with me, so I can have hot water all the time."

Noisy Girl laughed, then stopped, putting her hand over her mouth. Her laughter barked like the laughter of the White Fur People. Human laughter was lighter, more like music. She sighed.

“What’s wrong?” her mother asked.

“This is all very hard,” she answered. “I don’t think it will get any easier.”

Concern filling her face, Walks Crooked sat up. “Have you decided to stay?”

“Yes. I have to. There’s so much to learn—”

“Good.” She seemed unaware she’d interrupted her daughter. “Because I’ve decided to go.”

“I know. In a few days.”

“Tomorrow.”

Noisy Girl blinked. “I thought you were going to stay until I was sure.”

“It sounds like you’re sure. And you acted today like you’re sure.”

“Mother, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to leave you alone—”

“That’s not what I meant. I was fine with the others. They were all very kind. And they offered to let me go with them when they leave tomorrow.”

“You’re going to go with the Mountain Edge folk?”

“Yes. They’re not far away, not really. I’ll visit with them for a time before I go home. You can send word to me there if you decide not to stay here.”

Tears welled in Noisy Girl’s eyes. She’d hoped for more time to adjust before her mother left her. “Why can’t you stay here?”

“This place is too strange for me. It’s too loud and the food makes me ill.”

“It’s strange to me too.”

“Yes.” Walks Crooked grinned then. “But you have your Star Man.”

To her own surprise, Noisy Girl felt her face grow hot with embarrassment. “He’s not *my* Star Man. He’s been a friend.”

Her mother sobered. “Yes. And you need a friend. I decided it was all right to leave because I know he’ll take good care of you. So will the other humans. I talked to the others about Fire Hair and her mate. Both are held in great respect by the Mountain Edge tribe. I’ll miss you, Noisy Girl, but you’ll be safe.”

Noisy Girl nodded, blinking back the tears that refused to subside. She could go with her mother, she knew, but it wasn’t what she wanted to do.

“I’ll miss you too, Mother.”

## FOUR

Noisy Girl wasn't the only one with tears in her eyes the next morning. Walks Crooked enveloped her daughter in a smothering embrace, finally forcing herself to let go when Noisy Girl began to live up to her name, making exaggerated choking sounds and trying without much insistence to wiggle free.

Soon enough, the tears turned to laughter as the farewell dissolved into a series of exaggerated embraces. Fire Hair, dashing tears from her eyes, hugged everyone in succession—Goldenseal and Six Toes and Always Mother, finally hugging Noisy Girl until they were both laughing. By the time she waved her final good-bye, Noisy Girl felt more hopeful than sad.

As they walked back toward the big house, Noisy Girl said, "I need to start learning. Can you start to teach me right away?"

Fire Hair nodded. "As soon as we get back."

\* \* \*

Noisy Girl couldn't say Fire Hair's human name. As hard as she tried, she couldn't get the sounds to come out of her mouth.

"It's all right," Trieka told her. "It'll come in time. Right now I have some things that will help you understand. We'll worry about speaking later."

The "things" Trieka had were strange and made Noisy Girl nervous. But she trusted her new friend and sat still while Trieka put the strange black plugs in her ears. Sounds filled her head—the rhythms of Loud Talk.

"Where I live, people speak more than one language. These sounds were put together to help people learn my language. I hope it'll help you begin to understand what other people are saying."

Right now it sounded garbled and confusing, but Noisy Girl was willing to try anything. And if Trieka said it was safe, she had no reason to be afraid.

"Just close your eyes and relax," Trieka said. "Listen to the voices. Go to sleep if you like. Then we'll see what happens."

Skeptical, Noisy Girl did as she was told, relaxing into the sounds as she stretched out on the couch in the sitting room. Within a few minutes, she had drifted into sleep.

\* \* \*

Jeff overslept. He often did within a couple of days of arriving planetside. It was his body's way of adjusting to time changes. After one late morning, he'd be back on track.

This had been a very late morning, though. The clock in his room put local time at eleven A.M. He'd slept right through breakfast.

Trieka was still in the kitchen, though, looking at a series of maps on a portable desk computer. "About time you got up," she said as he came in.

"Is this the kitchen or Grand Central Station?"



“More like home base. I like it here. It’s nice and bright, breezy in the summer, and it always smells like cinnamon rolls.”

“You could make your office smell like cinnamon rolls, too, with the right scent disks.”

“I tried that. It’s not the same.”

Jeff went to the refrigerator, giving her a questioning look.

“Help yourself,” she said.

“So where’s your guest?” He found milk and, surprise surprise, leftover cinnamon rolls. He put three of the big rolls in the Quikheet. He normally didn’t eat this much sugar, but Trieka had excellent taste in pastry.

“Language acquisition. It’s a subliminal immersion program designed for non-English speakers. I’ve got her in the sitting room so she can sleep through it. I don’t know if it’ll work, but I figured it was worth a try.”

He nodded. “I learned Japanese with something like that.”

“Me too. It worked, but it made me queasy.”

“I was supposed to do two hours a day, but I could only stand forty-five minutes. How long has she been under?”

“Not quite twenty minutes. I’ll wake her up in ten.” She tapped her computer keys. “So, have you been thinking about that ship assignment?”

“No, I really haven’t.” Which surprised him. He’d assumed the question would consume his thoughts night and day until he made a decision. Lately, though, he’d been more occupied with Noisy Girl and her dilemmas. She’d managed to take his mind off all his opportunities—the one he’d missed as well as the one waiting. “I’ll deal with it when the time comes. Right now I think it needs to roll around my head for a while.” He chewed thoughtfully. “There’s nothing like subliminal tapes for her language, is there? I mean, there couldn’t be, since it’s not spoken.”

“No, nothing like that at all. Why?”

“I want to learn.” There. It was out. Trieka could make whatever conclusions she wanted.

She did, of course. He could tell from her sly smile. “Madison’s been working on some standard instructional materials. I’m sure he’d love to have a test subject.”

“That’d be great.”

“I’ll tell him.”

“Thanks.”

He didn’t choose to examine his motives then, nor did he choose to examine them later, when he walked again through the market and found himself wondering what Noisy Girl would think of everything he saw. He covered more of the market today than he had with her, investigating the smaller, more tucked-away merchants. There were things here she hadn’t seen on their previous trip, things that would have sent her eyes wide and her mouth smiling. She would have loved the bright colors, the sounds, the talking, the music.

The music. He thought about the wedding, about her beautiful, untrained voice. She’d loved those sounds. Anyone who loved music that much needed to have it in her life constantly.

One booth, nearly hidden at the end of a narrow cul-de-sac, was stacked with music disks. Glancing over them, Jeff found music of myriad varieties. Vocal, instrumental, ethnic, sounds from a thousand different cultures. He grabbed a basket and filled it.

This was going to cost him a fortune, he realized, looking at the stacks of little disks. He should stop and work out his budget, see how much he could afford. Instead he offered the merchant a figure for the whole collection. It must have been too high, because the merchant nodded and took his military chit without protest.

It didn't matter, though. Noisy Girl was going to love them.

\* \* \*

Noisy Girl didn't realize she'd fallen asleep until she woke up. Trieka was leaning over her, smiling.

"How do you feel?" She shaped the words with her hands, but Noisy Girl frowned, listening to the sounds she made. She still didn't recognize them as meaningful, but they seemed clearer, more differentiated. She sat up.

"I feel fine. Why did I fall asleep?"

"The teaching sounds make you fall asleep so you can learn faster."

"If I learn too much, I won't be able to sleep tonight." She laughed, but stopped at the sound of her own voice. "I laugh wrong."

"I don't think it's possible to laugh wrong."

"But I don't sound like you."

"You might never sound like one of us. All you can do is your best."

"But what if people don't like me?" She appreciated Trieka's honesty, but she couldn't bear the thought of still being an outsider, even among her own people.

"Not everyone is going to like you. That's the way things work. So you find the ones who do and stick with them." She said it with a smile, but Noisy Girl knew it hadn't been meant as a joke.

"But everyone likes you."

Trieka made a snorting noise. "That's about as far from the truth as you'll ever get. Now, would you like something to wear besides that dress? I know it's pretty, but you'll probably want to wash it sooner or later."

Noisy Girl agreed. To her surprise, Trieka pointed to a large bag on the floor. "Take your pick."

The bag was filled with clothes. All were unfamiliar to her, though she'd seen Trieka and other humans wearing similar things. She held them up one at a time, figuring out how they were to be worn and judging their size. Finally she settled on two items and pulled them on. They were a little big, but comfortable.

"Very nice," Trieka said. "Some of the ladies from Forest Walk brought these down yesterday. They thought you might like something to wear besides your furs. They all really liked your dress, by the way."

"People I don't know brought these for me?"

"Yes. And I think a lot of those people like you. Does that make you feel any better?"

"Yes, it does." She slid her hands over the soft material covering her breasts, then over the rougher, dark blue cloth on her legs. "Do you think Star Man likes me?"

Trieka smiled. "Yes, I do."

"He's your friend. Do you mind that I like him?"

"I think it's wonderful that you like him, especially since I'll be leaving soon."

"You're leaving?"

"Only for a few days. Long Nose and I are going on a trip together to spend time alone."

Noisy Girl nodded. "It must be wonderful to have a lifemate."

"It is."

"Do humans always mate for life?" Her young friends among the natives had done some

experimenting as they approached puberty, but the mating act was considered sacred.

“No, not always. It’s different than it is with the White Fur People. People don’t respect sex as much.”

“That’s sad.”

“Yes, it is. But some people take it more seriously than others. Since you’re inexperienced, you might want to look for someone who’ll take it seriously for your first time.”

Again, she appreciated Trieka’s frankness. It was nice to know there was someone she could count on to tell her exactly what she needed to know. “Does it work the same for humans? I mean, are the parts all the same?”

“Pretty much. I don’t think anything will surprise you. Based on what I know about the White Fur People, you probably know everything you need to know.” She paused, flexing her fingers against her knees. Noisy Girl wondered if her hands were tired from signing, or if she was just thinking. “Is there any particular reason you’re asking me these things?”

“I couldn’t have a mate before. Now I can. This is important and I don’t want to do anything wrong.”

Trieka laughed. “Well, if you’re like me, you’ll do a lot wrong. But I managed to get it right eventually, so I suppose that means there’s hope for everyone.” She stood. “Come with me. Let’s go get something to eat.”

\* \* \*

When Jeff returned to his room, he was surprised to find a stack of vid-disks on top of his TV. Trieka had left a note, scribbled on paper. It had been a long time since he’d read a note that hadn’t been sent via wrist comm.

*Take a look at these. Prototype instruction tapes from Violet Eyes and Madison.*

He slid a disk into the player and sat on the bed. A petite furry native appeared on the screen, signing while the shaggy Madison provided translation. Jeff watched with interest. The production needed refinement, but they’d work for his purposes. He picked up the controller, rewinding so he could figure out—again—how to say hello.

Two hours later, he was starving and his eyes hurt from staring at the screen. He turned it off and headed for the kitchen.

It was deserted this time, so he rummaged through the refrigerator and made himself a sandwich. Somebody had a thing for horseradish, he noticed—three jars sat on a shelf on the back of the door.

He’d just sat down when Trieka wandered in.

“I was hoping I’d find you here.” She fetched a soda from the fridge and sat next to him.

“What’s up?”

“I wanted to let you know I’m leaving tomorrow morning. Fairfax and I are heading out on our honeymoon. If you can call it that.”

“Where are you going?”

“The other side of the continent. There’s a native settlement and an area that looks promising for human development. We’re going to take a look and see if we can work something out.”

“Sounds romantic.”

She laughed. "You have to remember Fairfax and I conducted most of our courtship in those woods. So it's a little more romantic than you might think."

"I suppose it would be. I just assumed you'd be off to Hawaii or Australia or something."

"We're not getting on a spaceship until Christmas. I've had enough of Fairfax's hyperspace sickness this year, thank you very much."

He laughed, remembering the problems Fairfax had had on the flight two years ago. "I can understand that. How long will you be gone?"

"Two weeks."

He nodded soberly, taking the opportunity to chew. That would leave Noisy Girl at loose ends, and it didn't seem fair. She'd left behind everything she knew. Now Trieka was leaving, and he knew Noisy Girl saw her as a lifeline.

"How will your guest get along?"

"You mean Noisy Girl?" At his slight grimace, she went on, "It *is* her name, Jeff. You *can* call her that."

"It's not very flattering."

"Try calling your husband Long Nose. You'll get used to it."

She had a point, he supposed. But she hadn't answered his question. "So how will Noisy Girl get along?"

"Madison will be here. He's not as fluent as Fairfax or I, but he gets by." She shrugged. "I offered to postpone the trip, but she said she didn't want to disrupt our celebration."

"I could stay." The words came out of his mouth before he was able to think about what he'd said. But, on quick reflection, he decided he meant it. In fact, he couldn't think of anything he'd rather do.

Trieka studied him, looking surprisingly unsurprised. "You wouldn't have a problem staying another two weeks?"

He shrugged. "I have a six month leave, and I'm in no big hurry to get back on a ship. I hate being a passenger."

"I hear that. All right, then. If you want to stick around and help, it'd be greatly appreciated. Especially by Noisy Girl, I think. She seems to like you."

Not sure how to respond, Jeff finished the last bite of his sandwich and picked up his dishes. Turning back to Trieka, he said, "Did you know she can sing?"

She cocked her head in interest. "Really?"

"She can hum every note of a song after one hearing. She was doing it at the wedding. And her voice is beautiful."

Trieka's face had stuck somewhere between a frown and a grin, as if she were trying to weigh the implications of Jeff's revelation and figure out how to rib him about it at the same time. "Interesting. I'll pass that along to Madison. If he can incorporate music into her training, it might help her."

"Which reminds me, do you know where she is? I bought her something when I was at the market."

The grin won. "You bought her something at the market?"

"That's what I said." Normally her teasing didn't get to him, but this time it made him uncomfortable. "I picked up some music disks. I thought she might like them."

She nodded sagely. Jeff was getting tired of people acting like they knew things he didn't. "That was very kind of you. She's in the sitting room listening to more language tapes. In fact, it's time she took a break. Would you like to do the honors?"

“Sure. Just tell me how to get there.”

\* \* \*

Noisy Girl woke with a start as a hand touched her arm. Woozy, she pulled the plugs from her ears and sat up straight. Jeff stood next to her.

To her surprise, he lifted his hands and signed, “Hello.”

“Hello,” she replied.

“Fire Hair says stop.”

She frowned. Jeff’s halting gestures took her a moment to interpret. He must mean Trieka had said she needed a break. “How long have I been asleep?”

He shook his hand back and forth, indicating he didn’t understand. She rubbed her arms. Last time, Trieka hadn’t let her sleep very long, saying the sounds could make her sick if she listened too long. So she probably hadn’t slept very long this time, either.

“Enough listening,” she said, not caring whether he understood or not. It was enough to know he was learning, and that maybe, in a few days, they could talk more extensively, either in her language or in his as they both continued to learn. The prospect excited her. She liked to listen to his voice, and it would be nice to understand what he was telling her.

“Enough?” he repeated, but she was sure from the way he made the shape that he hadn’t seen it before. She smiled.

“Enough,” she repeated. “Thank you for waking me.”

“Thank you,” he repeated. “You’re welcome.”

He’d probably talk funny for a while, she decided. In the hope that he’d be patient with her when she started talking funny, she’d be patient with him now. It was only fair.

She rubbed her eyes. They felt gritty from sleeping. As much as she wanted to learn to speak, she didn’t think she could do any more listening today. With more sleep, she’d be up all night, brooding about things that didn’t deserve brooding over. Plus her eyes would stick shut if they got any gooier.

“You well?” Jeff asked awkwardly.

“I’m well. Yes.”

“No sick?”

“No.”

“Good.”

He stretched his fingers, frowning, then signed again, hesitant. “I have a thing for you.” He lifted a bag from the floor. It looked like the bag they’d gotten in the market yesterday, to carry her furs home. Something inside made a noise, like pieces shifting against each other.

“A gift?”

He didn’t understand that, and said again, “Thing for you.”

“A gift.” She repeated the gesture, “Give-thing,” and he nodded.

“A gift,” he said. “A gift for you.”

She smiled at his quick comprehension. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He held the bag out to her. She opened it. It was filled with strange small flat boxes.

“What is it?”

He took one of the boxes from the bag and walked across the room with it. A large black box sat on a table, one of many mysterious boxes she’d seen in the big house. Jeff took something

from the little flat box and slid it into a slot on the black box. He pushed a button, and suddenly the room filled with music.

Noisy Girl's eyes widened. Turning around, Jeff smiled at her reaction. "Good?"

"Very good. Thank you. It's beautiful." She was sure he didn't understand everything, but it didn't matter. The music swirled around her, a mix of many different sounds that moved next to, around and inside each other. It reminded her of the music from the wedding.

Suddenly she realized all the tiny boxes were full of music. The thought brought tears to her eyes. Overwhelmed, she ran to Jeff and put her arms around him.

He stiffened, then relaxed, returning her embrace. He felt good against her, warm and strong. His smell filled her nostrils, different from anything she'd ever smelled before. A strange feeling rose in her body, making her skin feel warm and light.

Suddenly uncomfortable, she backed away. He smiled, his hands still cupping her elbows.

Returning her smile, he let go of her to say, "I go. You listen."

"Yes. I'll listen."

He showed her how to make the music, then left her alone. She stood for a moment in the middle of the room while the sounds whirled around her, then lifted her arms and began to dance.

# FIVE

Six days later, Noisy Girl had reached a state of constant lightheadedness from listening to the language programs. It was worth it, though. When Jeff spoke to her now, she could understand nearly half of what he said.

But she still couldn't speak. She was beginning to understand how the different sounds fit together to make words, but she couldn't make her own mouth form the sounds. Some of them were easy, like the "ahs" and "ohs" and "uhs" that came in the middle of words, but many of the sharper shorter sounds escaped her.

So when Jeff asked her what she wanted to drink with her breakfast, she answered with her hands. "White drink."

"Milk," he said aloud as he poured. "Say it. Milk."

"Mahk," she said, making a face.

"That's good."

"No, it's not!" She gestured emphatically, adding sharp hand-shakes more suited to an argument. "I'll never talk like you. I can't do it."

Calmly, he set a plate of fried eggs and the glass of milk on the table in front of her. "No, you won't. You'll always sound a little different."

She swallowed hard. She didn't want to cry in front of him, but at the moment it seemed inevitable. The language study had interrupted her natural sleep patterns, and the moon was nearly full. She always became moody around the full moon, right before her cycles. And she'd forgotten to ask Trieka about that, so now she found herself worrying that the pattern wasn't normal.

Carefully, she took her fork and poked at her eggs. If her hands were busy, she couldn't talk, and if she didn't talk, maybe she wouldn't cry.

"It's okay," he continued. "Most people who learn English as a second language have an accent. People will just think you're exotic and foreign."

She didn't know what "exotic" or "foreign" meant, but she understood "okay." She peered at him, searching for a sign he was lying. "True?" she said, out loud. The word sounded mushy.

He smiled. "Yes. Absolutely true." He picked up his own fork. "You just keep practicing. You're doing great."

She didn't believe him, but decided to let it go for now. He'd learned her handspeak so quickly, it made her jealous. But, she had to admit, he used the wrong words from time to time or made gestures that made no sense at all.

Eating her eggs calmed her. She loved the taste—they were very different from the wild bird eggs she was used to. The milk was good too, unlike anything she'd ever had before coming here. She drank, then wiped her mouth on her napkin like Jeff had shown her.

"Can you teach me more today?" she asked in handspeak. "I want to learn. I really do. It's just so hard."

"I know. I've learned languages before, and it's not easy. Yes, of course we can work more today."

She nodded, reminding herself that, a week ago, what he'd just said would have been nothing

but a collection of garbled sounds. Frustrating as it was, she was making progress. "Thank you."

\* \* \*

He took her to the gardens, where they'd gone for the wedding. She didn't understand why, but it was a pleasant place to be with the wide lawns, flowers and soft bird sounds. Noisy Girl relaxed as they walked, feeling more like herself surrounded by grass and birds than she did surrounded by walls and the strange things in the big house.

Jeff was silent for a time as they walked, then he began to name things.

"Sky," he said.

She looked up.

"Right. Now, I know you know the words. I want you to *show* me you know them, and then I want you to say them. Sky."

"Sky," she repeated. It didn't sound right to her ears, but he nodded.

"Good. It doesn't have to be perfect. Grass."

She pointed down. "Gass."

He growled at her. Startled, she looked up and saw his smile. He was just demonstrating the sound, and making faces as he did so. "Grrrrr. Grrrass."

She laughed; she couldn't help it. "Grrrass."

"Grrreat! Trreee."

They continued, word by word, walking through the soft breeze and warm sun. Soon, it was less work than game as he spoke and she aped him, doing her best to isolate the sounds and repeat them.

Finally he stopped, sitting on the grass. Reverting to handspeak, he said, "That's enough for now, I think. You're doing very well."

She answered in kind. "I wish I could do better."

"You will."

She sat next to him. Casually, as if it was the most natural thing for him to do, he draped his arm over her shoulders. "You're working very hard. It'll pay off." He gave her a gentle squeeze and let her go, pulling something out of his jacket pocket with his free hand. He touched a button and music drifted out.

The tune was soft and sweet, and shortly she found herself humming along. Jeff watched her, smiling. As the song came to an end, he said, "Not everyone can sing like that, Noisy Girl. Did you know that?"

Surprised, she said, "No. I thought all Loud-Talkers could do that."

"Some of us can sing, but not very many have a voice like yours, and few can listen to a song once and repeat it like you can."

"What does it mean?"

"It means it might be something you could pursue in the human world. It's a gift—you should use it."

She leaned back on her elbows, mulling what he'd said. "I used to sing to the birds in the forest. I could hear songs in the water, and the wind, and I could sing those too. My family thought it was sweet, but strange. They're very quiet as a rule, the White Fur People."

"Yes, I'd noticed. So that's why they called you Noisy Girl?"

"Partly. When I was a baby, they said I made a lot of strange noises. I think now I might have been trying to speak like a human, but they couldn't teach me so I stopped trying."



“That’s probably what happened.” He shifted, turning more toward her, and for a moment she thought he was going to touch her again. “It’s going to be hard for you to learn not just the language, but everything about us. But I think your voice might help you adjust. If you follow a natural talent, it can give you a direction.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You could make music. It could be your job, your way of living.”

It seemed incredible, but his expression was serious. Noisy Girl nodded soberly. “I think I might like that.”

“I think I would too.” He grinned then. “I do love listening to you sing.”

Unaccountably, her face went hot. But she had to be honest with him—she knew no other way. “I’m glad.”

\* \* \*

By the end of the day, Jeff felt like he’d worked as hard as Noisy Girl had. Doing his best to help her with something so obviously difficult, trying to demonstrate how to speak when he’d been talking so long he wasn’t even sure how he made the sounds anymore, presented a greater challenge than he’d expected. But not quite as great as resisting the urge to touch her hair, hold her hand or, God forbid, kiss her. Those challenges, too, had been unexpected. He wasn’t sure why he suddenly felt so strongly for her. She was so different from any other woman he’d ever been attracted to.

He had to get those thoughts out of his mind. Granted, she was a grown woman, but he couldn’t help thinking of her as innocent. Raised as she had been, among such primitive people, she couldn’t know anything about human interaction. Hell, she probably didn’t even know what sex was. The last thing he wanted to do was scare her, and acting on too-human impulses would likely do just that.

Plus he had other things to think about, which he hadn’t given any thought to at all for the past week. He was supposed to be using this time to think about the promotion he’d been offered. Admiral Barkley would be expecting an answer when Jeff returned to Earth. And though no deadline had been set, he felt obligated to get back to his superior as soon as possible.

So, captaincy or no captaincy? The answer should have been easy. Why wasn’t it?

The first colony ships had headed for Farhallan and Cutter’s Star when Jeff was a little boy. The news reports and fictionalized movie accounts had captured his imagination. By the time he’d entered puberty, he’d decided he wanted to be a starship pilot. An accelerated high school science and mathematics program had gained him early eligibility to apply to the EarthFed Academy, and he’d plowed through the challenges there with single-minded efficiency, determined to have a starship before he was thirty.

At the time, the job had been more dangerous, with colony ships still not fully equipped to protect humans from hyperspace exposure, and most missions focused on finding habitable planets. Now space travel was about as safe as earthbound travel, and most experts agreed that all the habitable planets within reasonable traveling distance had been found. The farthest-flung of these was a two-week trip, straining the limits of current technology. Further exploration would take a new kind of ship. Scientists predicted technology would allow trips as long as a month within the next five to ten years.

Back in his academy days, Jeff would have said he wanted to be the first on that new ship when it was ready to go. Now he wasn’t so sure. He still thought he might like to captain a ship,

but he wasn't sure he'd be good at it. Colony ships now were little more than delivery services for colonists. Trieka had been good at it, and Jeff had learned a lot from her, including his own limitations. But he was thirty-two now, and the original goal didn't seem so urgent since he'd passed his self-imposed deadline.

Thinking in circles was getting him nowhere. Frustrated, he stretched out on the bed and reached for the remote to turn on the TV.

His intercom dinged. Abandoning the TV, he turned that on instead. To his surprise, Noisy Girl's face appeared on the small screen.

"Shaff," she said. "Help, please."

Her attempt to talk surprised him. She'd made progress today, but had still seemed overly self-conscious. He was happy she was trying to use what she learned, even happier she was using it to talk to him. "What's wrong?"

"Mah-son—" She stopped, tried again. "Mah-son." In handspeak she added, "Long Hair Man."

"Madison," he supplied.

She nodded. "Mah-son say help me pikkah mah-sheen."

"Okay." He wasn't completely sure what she'd said, but he was game to go on.

"Call Mah-son. He no room. You help?"

"I can help you. Where are you?"

"Room. Room mine."

"Okay, I'll be there in a few minutes."

By the time he knocked on her door, he'd decided "pikkah mah-sheen" was probably the TV. That was easy enough. But when Noisy Girl let him in, she pointed instead to the computer.

"Pikkah mah-sheen," she said. "No wahk."

She was going to sound British when she got better, he thought with a grin. British and mushy.

He sat at the desk in front of the computer and turned it on. "This is kind of complicated, but I can show you the basics."

"Com-pah-cah-ted?"

"Hard to learn," he clarified. "Especially since you can't read."

"Read? What read?"

He pointed to the letters on the keyboard. Some people still used them, though he preferred direct voice activation. That wouldn't work for Noisy Girl, though, until her pronunciation improved. "These letters stand for sounds. When you put them together, they make words."

She stared. After a moment, she opened her mouth, then shook her head and lifted her hands instead.

"You mean you can use the letters as another way of speaking?"

Jeff nodded. "That's right. A lot of what's on the computer—the picture machine—is written in words, so you have to be able to read to use it."

"I want to learn to read."

"We'll get to that. Here, you can get started using these little pictures." The icons had words on them, but the images were descriptive enough she should be able to find her way through basic navigation. "Touch the screen here, and here, and then here..."

Within twenty minutes, they were surfing a local network. Jeff found pictures of local flora and fauna and they exchanged words for them. Noisy Girl's enthusiasm proved contagious.

"You name some of the animals different, but some the same," she noticed. She'd reverted

completely to handspeak. Jeff didn't blame her. Talking aloud was still a laborious process for her. She'd done well to do as much as she already had today.

"That'll help you remember some of them, then."

"Right. Can you learn from this box?"

"Yes."

"Can it teach me to read?"

"I can probably get you started."

"Good. We'll find that before you leave."

He watched her explore on her own for a time, but felt like he was intruding. Finally he got up and sat in a chair next to the bed, turning on the TV.

The sound grabbed her attention and she turned. "Another picture box?"

"This one shows stories." Rather advanced ones too, he thought as he quickly flipped channels away from a scene of a couple kissing passionately. He recognized the show from previews he's seen on MediaNet about a year ago. Denahault received stacks of entertainment and sports audio-visual disks a few times a year from Earth, news every two weeks. The shows were sent out via satellite broadcast to the settlements who wanted them.

"What was that?" Noisy Girl asked. "I saw that at the wedding. What's it called?"

Jeff was tempted to feign ignorance, but it was probably too late for that. He switched back. The couple had stopped kissing, instead looking into each other's eyes, caressing absently. Jeff hoped it didn't get more graphic.

"They're just talking."

She gave him an arch look, as if she knew full well he was trying to divert her attention. "I mean before, when they touched mouths."

"That's a kiss," he admitted reluctantly.

She didn't understand his discomfort with her question. A kiss couldn't be a private thing, like sex, or Fire Hair and Long Nose wouldn't have done it in front of the crowd at the wedding. Plus she'd seen people in the garden yesterday kissing their children. She guessed that, like the face-touching caresses used among the White Fur People, kissing could be used as a sign of general affection, or as a precursor to mating. So it seemed fairly harmless to her.

"Kiss," she repeated. She had to say it because there was no word for it in her own language.

"That's right." Jeff turned his attention to the story machine. The picture on it had changed to a group of people in bright-colored clothing throwing a ball to each other across a long grassy field.

Wishing she knew what was going on in his head, she left her chair and sat next to him on the bed. "The White Fur People do this."

She touched his face, stroking his cheekbone, trailing her fingers down his jaw and under his chin. His eyes closed and she felt his jaw clench under her fingers. Concerned by his reaction, she drew her hand away. She'd thought he liked her. Could it be he was just doing a favor for his friend, that in truth she repulsed him?

That didn't feel right, though. Surely it was something else.

"Did I do something wrong?"

An advantage to handspeak—he had to look at her to see what she was saying. In his eyes she saw a turbulent mix of emotion, including the one she'd hoped to see—desire. She'd seen that look pass between couples before. Apparently lust was lust, whether you had fur or not.

"No." He took her hand gently. "What does that mean?"

With her hand captured, she could have spoken in abbreviated, one-handed gestures, but she

didn't think Jeff would understand. "I think same kiss."

He swallowed, studying her face, then his free hand came up to touch her. He echoed her caress, fingers sliding across her temple, into her hair, down to the back of her neck. Her skin came to life under his touch, tingling and warm. Gently, he tipped her chin up until she looked into his eyes. Then he bent toward her, touching his lips to hers.

His soft mobile mouth moved gently, testing. She answered the caress, amazed at the way his mouth felt, at the way it made her feel.

He drew back too soon. Tempted to pull him back and keep going, Noisy Girl looked into his face. He was frowning.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She shook her head. "No sorry. Nice. More."

She grinned, and Jeff laughed. "No, no more. I don't think it's a good idea."

"Why?"

"I'm supposed to be teaching you to talk, not to kiss."

She laughed, not sure why she found it funny. Flopping back on the bed, she said with her hands, "You're a good teacher."

He looked uncomfortable, and she still didn't understand why. "There are some things I shouldn't be teaching you."

"Why?" She sat up again, serious. "Why shouldn't I learn these things from someone I trust?"

He seemed taken aback. "You trust me?"

"You've given me no reason not to."

"I'm honored." He frowned again, looking at his hands. When he spoke again, it was in handspeak, still fumbling a little, but easier for her to understand than loudtalk. "I can think of no greater thing for you to give me than your trust. I am deeply grateful and I don't want to do anything that would betray that trust. So maybe I shouldn't—" He stopped, finished out loud. "Maybe I shouldn't kiss you again."

Noisy Girl had known many men of honor, and her instincts told her Jeff was exactly like them. She thought a moment, studying his face. Then she said out loud, slowly measuring her words, "Do you think if you kiss me again, it might lead to something more?"

"Yes."

"What if I don't mind?"

His face changed color, red spots growing on his cheeks. She wondered at the reaction. The White Fur People, with their black skin, never changed colors, and she hadn't quite figured out the significance. But when his face turned pink, Jeff seemed to have trouble looking at her. Maybe it was the same as when her own face felt suddenly hot.

"I don't want to take advantage of you."

"I'm not a child. I know about sex. Just because I haven't done it doesn't mean I don't understand it."

Now he couldn't look at her at all. "There's no way you could understand it. Nobody understands it."

It took her a moment to realize he was joking, even as uncomfortable as he obviously was. She laughed, a warm feeling growing in her chest. He was already the closest friend she'd ever had.

He gave her a wry smile. "It can be very complicated."

"I understand. I know it's different with Loud-Talkers. Fire Hair said you don't always take

it seriously.”

“Some don’t, that’s true.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “You have to be careful.”

“If you made love to me, would you take it seriously?”

“I take everything about you seriously.”

His answer surprised her, seemed to surprise him, as well. He looked at his hands. “You need to think very hard about this, Noisy Girl. It’s a big step. Don’t do it unless you’re absolutely sure.”

His seriousness sobered her. She nodded. “I promise.”

“Good night, then,” he said, standing. “I think it’s time I headed for bed.”

“Good night.”

# SIX

Sex or no sex. In the past, it hadn't been a difficult question for Jeff. Either the opportunity arose or it didn't, and, when it did, Jeff usually took advantage of it. So normally, when a woman asked, he was willing.

This time, he was just plain confused.

He couldn't stop thinking about yesterday's conversation, or yesterday's kiss, for that matter. He'd thought Noisy Girl to be innocent, and she wasn't. She had to be the earthiest virgin he'd ever met.

That was a good thing, though, wasn't it? She could go into an encounter with her eyes wide open, and, if it didn't lead anywhere, she'd be okay.

He wasn't sure he would be, though. Virginity was a little more than he could handle—God knew he hadn't held onto his own one second more than he'd had to.

Uncomfortable with the direction his thoughts had taken, he frowned at himself in the mirror. His depilatory was wearing off. He'd have to find more or resort to a razor. Thoughtfully, he stroked the growing stubble. With military regulations, it had been a long time since hair had dared make an appearance on his face. Maybe he'd give it a few days.

Maybe Noisy Girl would like it.

And there he went again, thinking about things he shouldn't. He shook it off and headed for breakfast.

Madison and Noisy Girl were already at the table, eating the ubiquitous cinnamon rolls Jeff had gotten sick of a week ago. He looked for eggs, discovered a plate ready to go in the QuikHeet.

"Just push the button," Madison said. "I've got it set to cook them skillet-poached."

"Thanks." He'd had no idea Madison had been watching his breakfast selections so closely. Maybe that was his job, but it was creepy if he thought about it too hard.

"Sleep well?" Noisy Girl asked, smiling. She was wearing jeans and a pink blouse. The blouse had full sleeves and a low neckline that came dangerously close to exposing the fact she wasn't wearing a bra. Jeff tried not to look. Madison seemed oblivious. Maybe Madison was gay.

"Yes. It's supposed to be a nice day today. We could go to the market to learn more words."

"Yes. Nice go to market."

She was throwing out words in the wrong order, but she was also grinning brightly and looked lovely. Her hair, no longer limp since she'd started using shampoo and conditioner, hung in gold waves nearly to her waist.

He shifted. "Good. That's what we'll do, then." And he'd buy her more gifts. Maybe spending money would depress him enough to make him stop thinking about kissing her.

\* \* \*

The market was quiet. Jeff had assumed it always bustled, but, on reflection, realized many of the people who'd been there last time had probably been wedding guests. Most of the

population of Forest Walk had attended, as well as a number of off-world guests. Only Harrison Fairfax could have gotten people to jump on a spaceship to attend his wedding.

The slower pace was nice, giving Noisy Girl a chance to absorb her surroundings and learn new words. They stopped by the clothing vendor where he'd bought the bright dress, and he gave her names for as many different kinds of clothing as he could find.

A woman watched the table today. Probably a husband and wife operation, he guessed. Noticing her interest in Noisy Girl, he also guessed she'd heard about their last visit.

"Good morning," he said to her. "How's business?"

Noisy Girl looked up as he spoke, then returned to her browsing. She was entranced with a selection of separates in dizzyingly bright colors. Jeff hoped he had enough credit left on his military chit. He wasn't sure his last salary update had been processed yet.

The vendor also looked toward Noisy Girl. Jeff wasn't sure if she was curious about her or afraid she might start taking her clothes off.

"Business is pretty much back to normal since the wedding." She laughed ruefully. "Which is too bad, because we were making a nice living there for a while."

"It certainly was busier that week."

The woman nodded, looking again at Noisy Girl. "I've heard some stories about your friend. Are they true?"

She'd lowered her voice, at least. Jeff still wondered how much Noisy Girl could hear. "That would depend on the stories."

"Raised by the natives, wild child, taking her clothes off in public." She smiled at the last one.

"Can't deny any of those. She's learning, though."

"We had some natives stop by the day before the wedding. Strange lot, they were. Made me nervous."

"They're good people. And they don't have pockets to steal things with."

That brought a laugh. Noisy Girl looked up and laughed, as well. She joined them, carrying a bright orange skirt.

"What this name?"

"Skirt," Jeff said.

She tried the word, fumbling over the "k." "Many pretty."

"Very pretty," Jeff agreed and corrected at the same time. "Very orange."

"Like ahnge."

"It's not your best color," the vendor put in.

Noisy Girl frowned. "Not good?"

"It makes you look pale. This blue suits you much better."

Jeff backed off while the women bonded. This was good for Noisy Girl. So far, the only people she'd talked to were Madison and himself. It would help her confidence to realize she could communicate with strangers. And it seemed to be doing just that, as she talked and laughed with the vendor. A few minutes later, they'd settled on a robin's egg blue skirt, a white blouse, and a second outfit in medium pink.

"The lady likes color," said the vendor as Jeff handed her his credit chit.

"She's worn white all her life. You can see where colors would intrigue her."

"Yes, I can." She examined his chit. "Military, eh? Are you just stopping over?"

"I'm on extended leave, for the wedding and general R and R. I'll probably be heading back to Earth in a week or two."

“Well, try not to break any hearts when you go.”

She turned to total his purchase, leaving him with a sudden, sick feeling. Was that what he was going to do? Abandon Noisy Girl and go on with his life? Over the past two weeks, he’d been too busy to think about it.

He’d better start thinking hard. Because the last thing he wanted to do was break her heart.

\* \* \*

“I need a new name.”

They sat on a bench by a little pond near the edge of the garden, throwing bread crumbs to feathery creatures that looked nothing like ducks. They liked bread crumbs, though.

Jeff studied her face. She’d made her pronouncement in handspeak, which meant it was important. After nearly two weeks, she was becoming more willing to talk aloud for most occasions, but when she wanted to be sure she was understood, she reverted to her native language.

“Why?” He spoke aloud for the same reason.

“No Loud-Talker would be called Noisy Girl. I want a Loud-Talker name.” She paused, tossing a handful of crumbs, then spoke, “Clothes lady name Anne.”

“That’s a nice name.”

“Need name for me.”

He considered. “Let’s see. There’s Alicia, Melissa, Catherine, Jane, Barbara, Elizabeth—”

“What mean names?”

He shrugged. “Nothing, really. I mean, they do mean something, but mostly people just give their children names they think sound nice. Or they name them after relatives. I was named Jeffrey after my grandfather.”

“Not know fathers and mothers.” She frowned, watching the not-ducks as they pecked at the grass. “Find name mean special. Like Noisy Girl, but nice Loud-Talker name.”

“We’ll have to give it some thought.”

“Many thought. Want name good right.”

He thought about it all day, as they shopped, then wandered the gardens. In the silence of the big gardens, she began to hum. Her light, clear voice rose through the trees, a sweet, random melody that echoed the birdsong.

“Birds,” he said suddenly.

“Birds,” she repeated, as if it were a language lesson.

“No, I mean you need a bird name. An Earth-type bird name.”

She looked up at the trees and smiled. “Yes. Bird name.”

\* \* \*

After dinner, he found pictures of birds on the computer. Bird after bird, kinds Noisy Girl had never seen before. They were different from the birds she was used to, smaller, softer.

“These are all songbirds,” he told her. “If you touch the square next to the picture, it’ll play a recording of the song they sing.”

She bent over the little computer, touching the squares to hear the songs. Light sweet twitters, harsher crows, similar yet different from the sounds she’d grown up with. There were words next to the pictures, but she hadn’t begun to fathom reading yet.



“What names?”

“Touch the bird.”

She touched a small, brown bird. “Sparrow,” the computer said. Moving on, she found crows, magpies, mockingbirds, finches, nuthatches... The list went on and on.

“Which ones good names?”

He shrugged. “Which one do you like?”

She considered, touching the pictures again to hear the names, then listening to the songs. “You know girls with bird names?”

“I work with a lady named Robin.”

“Not want same name.”

“Lots of people have the same names.”

She shook her head. “No. Not same name like friend.”

“How about this one, then? Lark. That’s nice, and I’ve never met anybody with that name.”

She looked at the picture of the little brown bird. It was plain, but pretty in its own way. Its song, too, was nice, but not overly flamboyant. Light and airy, happy. She liked that.

“Lark.” She tried the name on for size. “I think I like.”

“You can always change your mind.”

“Lark,” she said again.

“Lark,” he repeated, and she liked it even better when he said it.

\* \* \*

She’d always been Noisy Girl, and now she was Lark. She reminded herself of that as she stood on the steps outside the big house—*Embassy Hotel*, she corrected herself, mouthing the words as best she could—waiting for the return of the newlywed Fairfaxes.

She’d picked her new name two days ago, and she still wasn’t used to it. Of course, it would take more than two days. After all, she’d been Noisy Girl for all of the twenty-five wind-circles since she’d come to the White Fur People. A long time to be one person, then to suddenly be someone else.

It was good, though. She stepped closer to Jeff, who stood next to her, close enough to feel the brush of his sleeve against her arm.

“When will they come?” she asked.

“Any minute now.”

And suddenly there they were, walking up the sidewalk hand-in-hand. Strange emotions surged in Lark’s chest as they stopped, heads close, then laughed and exchanged a quick kiss.

“They love together very big,” she said. That didn’t sound right, though. She tried again. She spoke better when she didn’t think about it, letting herself rely on the knowledge gained from the language tapes. They seemed to put the knowledge somewhere in the back of her mind, where she couldn’t lose it unless she was looking for it. “They love each other very much.”

“Yes, they do. I’m not sure why, but they obviously do.” Jeff laughed a little, and Lark wondered why he found it funny. But his face didn’t look amused. It looked worried, almost...

“Why does it make you sad?”

He stared at her, surprise taking over his face. “It doesn’t make me sad. I’m very happy for Trieka.”

“But you’re sad too. Why?”

“She was a good captain and a good friend. I’ll miss her.”

“She’s still your friend.”

“Yes, but I don’t see her very much anymore.”

Lark thought there might be more than that, but decided she didn’t want to know, even if Jeff were inclined to tell her. Instead she looked at Madison, who was getting ready to give the signal.

He did, and they all shouted “Welcome home!” Trieka, laughing, hugged them one by one—Madison, Jeff and Lark. Lark watched closely to be sure Trieka didn’t hug Jeff too long.

Jealousy wasn’t good. If she kept this up, she’d get a stomachache.

At the house, they went outside to sit around a table on one of the big decks and talk. Lark listened closely, amazed at how much she understood. In a way, it scared her, but she was also grateful that the language tapes had been so helpful, even if she didn’t understand how they worked. It seemed a little too much like magic.

“It’s a wonderful area,” Trieka said. She sat next to her husband on one of the long bench chairs, leaning against him as she talked. “The native settlement is far enough away to make it a great location. The two towns could trade easily, but with enough distance to avoid problems.”

“We thought we’d send in a small group at first,” Fairfax added, “to get the natives used to having someone in the area. Then we’ll gradually grow the colony.”

“Did you ask natives what feel about that idea?” Lark’s contribution surprised herself, but not as much as it surprised Trieka. She smiled broadly.

“My goodness, the language study really paid off, didn’t it?”

“I’ve been hard working. Working hard. Jeff helps much.” Self-consciousness ruined her syntax, as most emotion seemed to. “Not Noisy Girl now. Jeff help me pick name. Lark now.”

“Lark,” Fairfax repeated. “I like it. It suits you.”

“Thank you. Did you ask White Fur People?”

He smiled. “Persistent, aren’t you? Maybe we should hire you as a liaison. Yes, we did talk to the natives. Extensively, in fact. Their leader has some reservations about the idea, but we’ve promised to work closely with him and make sure any concerns are addressed. I think he and the others are excited about the possibilities of trade.”

“Good. Sound like good answers.”

“I hope so.” Trieka leaned back against her husband’s shoulder. “It was a nice trip, in any case.”

Lark smiled, watching them. They seemed so happy, so comfortable with each other. She looked at Jeff, who seemed to be thinking about something else. What would it feel like to lean her head against his shoulder? To kiss him again, more deeply, like lovers? To make love to him?

Too many questions. And she didn’t know if she had time to find the answers.

They ate their evening meal outside, then talked until the sun went down, Lark plunging into the conversation as best she could, feeling more and more like she’d made progress, like she might actually be able to master this strange language at some point. Finally, though, the effort took its toll, and she found herself drifting off. Reluctantly, she excused herself and went to her room.

Alone in the darkness, she allowed herself to think some of the things she’d been trying to hold at arm’s length. Jeff was still Star Man—he’d come from a distant place and would soon go back there. What would she do when he left?

\* \* \*

"I'm leaving soon." Jeff dropped the announcement into a moment of silence. It sounded strange—he hadn't wanted to say it in the first place.

Trieka sipped her wine. They still sat on the deck with the inviting breeze and the clear sky full of stars, no one in a hurry to go inside. For the first time since Jeff had arrived, he didn't feel uncomfortable sitting next to Fairfax.

"I thought you might be. Have you made your decision yet about the promotion?"

"No. I have no idea what I'm going to do. But I can't stay here forever."

"Not if there's nothing keeping you." Fairfax's quiet contribution stabbed to the heart of the matter. He was frighteningly good at that.

Jeff swirled the dark wine in his glass, watching starlight reflect from its surface. "I'm not sure about that either."

"She seems to like you," Fairfax said.

Jeff glanced at Trieka. She'd settled back in her chair, watching their exchange with interest. "Yes," he admitted, "and I like her. But I'm not the only man in the world. She needs to make her own way, and I think I might be interfering."

"Or you might be helping. Either way, it'll be hard to find out if you're a quadrillion miles away."

Jeff considered. His chest felt thick, as if he were coming down with something. But, somehow, he didn't think that was the problem.

"Maybe it'd be better if I left. Because if I take the promotion..." He couldn't finish the thought. If he took the promotion, he'd probably never see her again. Even if she came with him to Earth—if the idea wasn't too overwhelming for her—his job would take him away again sooner or later.

He set down his wineglass. It no longer appealed. Even the dark starlight had lost some of its beauty. "I'll talk to her in the morning."

He went back to his room, then out to stand on the rigged balcony. Surrounded by darkness and stars, he'd never felt more alone.

The choices were strange. A promotion he wasn't sure he wanted, a woman he wasn't sure he loved. How could he not be confused? He stared at the unfamiliar constellations, feeling more displaced than he ever had in his life. Finally, he went inside. Maybe sleep would help.

Or maybe not.

\* \* \*

Something troubled Jeff. Lark had been sure of it from the moment she'd said good morning three hours ago. He hadn't said anything, though, and she wasn't sure how to ask, or even if she should.

But she couldn't ignore it much longer. They sat on the bench by the lake, where they'd come several times now to feed the swimmer-birds. He'd been silent for several long minutes, staring at the water and throwing bread crumbs. She wondered if he intended to talk to her at all.

"Jeff," she finally said. "What's wrong?"

He took a long breath and leaned back in the bench, setting the bag of crumbs aside. "I've been thinking about some things."

"What things?"

"I have to go home soon."

She looked away, at the shining surface of the lake that had been so perfect until now. He would leave, and she'd have to find new friends. Could she find another friend who'd accept her so easily? Could she find another man she thought she could love?

"You have a family far away?"

"Yes, I do. I don't see them very often. I took a long break from my job so I could spend some time here, then go home and see them."

"You should go. Family is much important."

"Very important."

She nodded. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back. When he straightened, he took her hand. She liked the way his hand felt on hers. It was big, strong, warm. It made her feel protected.

"I've been offered a new job. It's a job I've wanted since I was young. If I take the job, I won't come back here for a very long time."

Her chest hurt. She'd known this moment was coming, but imagining the pain was nothing like being in the middle of it. "How long?"

"I don't know. Years."

"This job is much important to you?"

"That's part of the problem. I don't know anymore. It used to be."

"You need time."

"Yes. That's why I took the long break. I wanted time to think."

"If you don't take the job, what will you do?"

"I don't know. If I keep the job I have now, I still won't be here. I travel in space. We stop here from time to time, but not often."

"Travel in space." She couldn't imagine it. Traveling across the ground without having to walk was strange enough right now. "So if you say good-bye, it might mean forever." She couldn't imagine that, either.

"Yes."

She couldn't think of anything else to say. Instead, she straightened, looking at the sky and feeling the weight of Jeff's hand on hers.

"I haven't decided what I'm going to do," he said finally.

"Truth?"

"Truth. Whatever happens, Lark, I won't lie to you."

"Thank you." She studied his face, the forms and lines to which she'd grown accustomed. "I tell truth, also. I don't want you to go."

He squeezed her hand. Maybe he'd say something to make it better, find a solution right now that would answer the question. But he didn't. He picked up his bag of bread crumbs and tossed a handful toward the lake.

## SEVEN

Two days later, Jeff still didn't know what to do. But Lark had been right—he needed to see his family. He'd promised his mother he'd visit during his break, and his mother had promised to get his sister Jenna to join them. A gathering like that hadn't happened in a decade. So, sooner or later, he had to go home.

Then the other part of his life caught up when a message from Admiral Barkley arrived. An Earth ship landed early one morning, carrying updates to MediaNet and a stack of personal message disks. Later that day, Trieka gave him the one marked "Fairfax."

"There's stuff on here for you." He was in the sitting room, using Fairfax's high-powered computer to look for basic reading programs, preferably with music. Trieka sat in a chair across the room while he slid the disk in.

"Commander Anderson, I expected you back on Earth two weeks ago. I don't want to interrupt your vacation, but I was hoping to have an answer from you by now." The admiral looked like he was trying to be reasonable, but having a hard time with it. "It doesn't seem like that difficult a decision. I hope you'll contact me as soon as you return. And if you're concerned about salary issues, I'm sure we can negotiate something."

"Salary issues," Jeff repeated scornfully. If only it were that easy.

"You could take her with you."

Surprised, he turned to Trieka. "Do you think she'd want to go?"

"I don't know. Ask her. She might want to see her ancestral home, and if you go to Earth, you might be able to find her biological family."

He hadn't thought of that. He'd only thought about how difficult and intimidating it might be for Lark to travel to Earth. Not only the journey, but the Earth lifestyle, which was so drastically different from Denahault. And the fact that he still wouldn't be able to stay with her.

"I'll talk to her." The worst she could say was no.

\* \* \*

Lark woke to the sound of the small alarm that triggered the end of her language study session. After the first few monitored experiences, Trieka had taught her to set the earpieces to wake her after a set amount of time so she could study on her own. Lark liked the option; it meant she could fall asleep on her own bed instead of the less-comfortable couch in the sitting room.

As usual, her head spun as she sat up. The dizziness receded quickly, though, as she pulled out the earplugs and put them away.

She was beginning to think the submersion lessons weren't helping anymore. She could understand nearly every word said to her, and using the earplugs didn't seem to help her speaking skills as much as actual practice did. To round off the day's studies, then, she needed to find someone to talk to.

She tried the sitting room first. It seemed no matter what time of day it was, someone was there. Madison did the majority of his work on the powerful computer in that room, and Long Nose—Fairfax, she corrected herself—also worked there often. Besides, she liked the room. The

combination of comfortable furniture and wide scenic windows drew her to sit down and stay for long periods.

Today Jeff sat at the big computer while Madison lounged on the couch watching one of the language recordings he'd made with the native girl Violet Eyes. He appeared to be reviewing the recording for content, going backward and forward over the same section, then making notes on a palm computer. Lark sat next to him.

"Busy?" she asked. "Would I bother you?"

"You can bother us any time you like," Madison replied with a smile. "In fact, you can help me. Do these translations match?"

He played the section again while she paid rapt attention. "Close. I'd say 'place' instead of 'house.'"

"Great." He made a note and moved on.

Lark turned her attention to Jeff. "Hello, Jeff."

"Hi." He turned to her. "I have something for you too. How'd you like to learn to read?"

Excited, Lark abandoned Madison to sit by Jeff. "Yes! I'd like that many much. Very much. Show me."

"I found a program here that matches all the basic sounds of English with letters and letter combinations. It's meant for children, but it's pretty thorough..."

He showed her how to use the program, which was set up like a game. Within a few minutes, she was laughing at the antics of a puppy on the screen and barking basic consonant sounds back at him. Perky music filled the background, and, at intervals, the puppy was interrupted by the same sounds set to the lilting tune.

"Do you like it?" he asked.

"Yes. This is fun."

"Good. I'll set it up on the computer in your room, so you can use it whenever you want."

She watched with interest as Jeff saved the game to one of the tiny storage disks she was becoming familiar with. She'd have to learn about that eventually too. Computers seemed to be an integral part of human society. So far, she could do everything she wanted to by talking to or touching the screen, but she knew from watching Jeff and Madison that there was more.

"There," Jeff finally said, dropping the disk into his shirt pocket. "Let's go load it up."

Back in her room, it took him only a few minutes to add the game to her computer. When he was done, though, instead of heading back to the sitting room, he turned around in his chair and gave her a look serious enough to make her nervous.

"We need to talk."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "What about?"

"About me leaving."

She swallowed. "Soon?"

"I have to. I thought about what you said and you're right. I need to see my family. If I don't go now, I might not see them again for a very long time."

"And then you have to take new job and go out into stars to do... What do you do?"

"Fetch and carry, mostly. But I have another idea."

"What idea?"

"You could come with me."

She stared. The thought had never occurred to her. She'd assumed she would have to stay here. White Fur People rarely traveled far from their own villages—why would she travel away from her entire world? It hadn't even entered her mind that she could do so.

“Go into the stars?”

“Right. You could go back to Earth with me.”

She shook her head. “Strange idea. Not sure I like it. Is it scary in the stars?”

“Not really. It’s mostly boring. It’s a long trip from here to Earth and there’s not much to do on a spaceship.”

“Why would I go?”

“Trieka mentioned you could search for information on your birth parents.”

She stared again, more shocked by this than by the idea of leaving her home. “My birth parents?”

“Yes. Since your parents were colonists, EarthFed should have DNA information on file. We can match your DNA with theirs. It might take a while, but it would answer some questions for you. Plus, you’re from Earth. Your roots are there. You could learn more about yourself and where you came from.”

She tipped her head, studying his face. He sounded excited. “You think this is a good idea?”

“I think it could be. You wouldn’t have to stay if you found it too difficult. We could put you on a ship and send you back here. It’s not an irrevocable decision.”

Lark wasn’t familiar with the word, but she gathered from the context what it meant. “Irrevocable,” she said, out of habit, because she always tried out new words when she heard them. “Let me think about it.”

He smiled. “Good. That’s good.” He stood, rubbing his hands on his jeans. “Would you like to go for a walk?”

They took their usual route through the park, but without their usual conversation. Lark couldn’t stop thinking about the question Jeff had asked her, and he seemed similarly absorbed. But, even preoccupied, she noticed their silence wasn’t strained. Even with the weighty decision that lay between them, they were comfortable together.

Later, she sat curled on a chair in front of her little computer, trying to play the reading game. It had seemed cute and fun earlier; now it just seemed silly. Too many thoughts crowded her head, and she found it impossible to comprehend the idea that the little marks on the screen represented sounds.

Finally she turned the computer off. She needed to talk to someone. Not Jeff—he was part of the problem. Going to the intercom, she pressed the button that contacted Trieka’s room.

Trieka didn’t answer, though. Instead, Fairfax’s face appeared on the small screen.

“Can I help you?”

He didn’t sound upset, but Lark decided to play it safe. “I’m sorry I bother you. Is Trieka there?”

“No, she isn’t. I think she’s on her way to see you.”

“Oh.” Startled, she found herself wondering if he’d read her mind. Then she remembered she was just like him and she couldn’t read minds. “Why?”

“She has messages for you.”

Just then a knock fell on Lark’s door. “I think she’s here now. Thank you.”

She flipped off the intercom and answered the door. Trieka stood in the hallway, holding a computer disk. “I have something for you.”

Trieka brought the messages up on the computer screen. Lark peered over her shoulder at the meaningless markings. Silly game or not, she needed to learn to read. “What do they say?”

“A friend of mine from Forest Walk brought them today when he came to pick up the messages from Earth that came in this week. They’re from the Mountain Edge tribe. Your

mother is still staying with them. Her message for you is right... here."

An image of Walks Crooked appeared on the computer screen. "Greetings to you, daughter." Her hands danced through the words. Lark watched with rapt attention. She'd seen many such images since coming here, but they still amazed her. "I have enjoyed my time here with the Mountain Edge tribe, but I think the time has come for me to return to the ocean. Please send a message back to tell me if this is all right with you, or if you need me to come back for you. I hope all is well, and I hope to hear from you soon."

Walks Crooked's image disappeared. "I miss her," Lark said, staring at the blank screen. She'd tried hard not to think about it, so hard that she'd forgotten about that pain until just this minute, but she did miss her mother terribly, as well as her friends and extended family among the White Fur People. Tears rose suddenly, and she couldn't hold them back. Embarrassed, she turned away from Trieka and sat on the bed.

Trieka joined her, sitting close and putting an arm around her. Lark leaned automatically into the embrace, sniffing.

"I don't know what I want. Want mother, want friends, want Jeff—" She stopped, flung up her hands in desperation, then started talking with them. It was so much easier than struggling through the confused jumble English had suddenly become. "I miss my mother and my friends at home, but I can't go back, can I?"

"You can." Trieka spoke aloud. Lark was grateful for her comforting embrace. "I don't think it would ever be the same, though."

"I know. I just don't know what to do."

"Jeff talked to you about going to Earth?"

"Yes. I never thought about anything like that. Mother told me there were humans here who came from the stars, but it never occurred to me that I was from the stars too. And to *go* there... I can't even imagine it."

"What do you think your mother would tell you to do?"

Lark frowned. She hadn't thought of that. Why hadn't she thought of that? Had she been working so hard at becoming human that she'd forgotten who'd raised her?

"My mother wants me to be happy. She wants me to have a lifemate and a family. She also wants me to know who I am. It's why she brought me here."

"You can learn about yourself here. You could probably find a husband also, raise a family in one of the colony settlements and be completely happy. Is that what you want?"

Lark shook her head. Thoughts of Jeff nagged at her heart. Aloud she said, "Jeff will go to stars."

"Yes, he will. And he might never come back."

"If I go with him, will I ever see my mother again?" That was the biggest question, she suddenly realized. Even after their short acquaintance, she found it hard to imagine life without Jeff. But she found it even harder to imagine a life where she never again saw Walks Crooked.

"You could see her again. If you go with Jeff and things don't work out, you can come back here to live. If you go and things *do* work out, you can come back here to visit. You couldn't visit very often, but even if you stay, you probably would only see your mother a few times a year."

It was true. It was also too much to think about all at once. She shook her head, hoping the action would put her thoughts in order. It didn't.

"Lark..." Trieka sounded hesitant. Lark had never heard her speak with anything less than complete confidence.



“What?” She hoped it wasn’t something bad.

“Do you love Jeff?”

Startled, Lark stared. “I don’t know.”

“If he leaves without you, you may never know.”

She considered that. Of all the troubling thoughts she’d had today, that was one of the worst. “How much did you give up to love Long Nose?” She wasn’t sure why she asked the question, but knew she needed the answer.

Trieka smiled sadly. “Everything. But in the end it turned out to be nothing at all.”

Lark gave a wry grin. “That really doesn’t help very much.”

Trieka laughed. “I’m sorry. It’s all I’ve got.”

\* \* \*

Jeff also received a message from Forest Walk. He watched it, then set it aside, perplexed. Or, technically, he watched the introduction.

“This part of the message is for you, Star Man. I know I can trust you to act according to my wishes.” He rewound the message here, unsure of the signs. More certain on the second viewing, he went on. “The rest of this message contains information for my daughter. I have asked that it be recorded on its own, rather than mixed with other messages, so you may keep it safe until she is ready to read it.”

Walks Crooked paused and he saw a darkness fill her eyes. “There will come a time,” she began again, slowly, “when my daughter will need to know about where she comes from and the people who gave her birth. When the time comes for you to give her this information, you will know. Before then, don’t pass this message on to her, and don’t view it yourself. This is the end of my introduction. Please stop watching here.”

Jeff paused only a split second before bringing the recording to a halt. He stared at the computer screen for a moment, then ejected the disk and slid it into his pocket.

\* \* \*

Lark spent the rest of the evening trying to concentrate on the reading game. Before she finally gave up and went to bed, she’d managed to learn a few things, but was certain she had a great deal of work ahead of her.

She slept poorly and woke early, visions of stars dancing around her, the jaunty songs from the game marching over and over through her head. With no idea what it was like to travel in space, her imagination chose to conjure bizarre and frightening images and haunt her with them. She wished for part of the night that she was back home where the sound of the nearby ocean could lull her to sleep, and if that didn’t work, a sleeping draught from the tribe’s healer certainly would. It seemed easier than tossing and turning in a bed that seemed suddenly alien. Finally, she pulled a blanket off and rolled up with it on the floor.

Early as it was when she woke, she’d hoped for some solitude in the kitchen. Instead she found Jeff, looking as bleary as she felt, drinking coffee. In front of him on a plate sat an uneaten cinnamon roll with a fork stuck in it.

“Good morning,” she said, suddenly uncomfortable. It bothered her to be uneasy around him, but the question hanging in the air between them made it inevitable.

“Hey.” He pushed the fork from side to side, narrowing his eyes at the roll. “I hope you slept

better than I did.”

“I don’t think so.”

“That’s too bad.” Sighing, he finally looked at her. “I don’t want to push you, but I really need an answer. I realized last night that I can’t stand not having my life planned at least two weeks ahead of time.”

“I’m sorry to give you very problems,” she snapped, before realizing his voice had sounded odd. Maybe he hadn’t been serious. It was easier with handspeak, where a crook of the finger indicated sarcasm.

He smiled wryly, but the smile didn’t seem very happy. “I was kidding. Sort of.” He made the crooked-finger gesture and Lark smiled.

“Sorry.” She poured herself coffee and sat next to him. “Hard choice. No sleep for me too.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have asked you to come with me.”

“No. I’m glad you asked.” She tore a piece off the cinnamon roll and ate it. He pushed the plate closer to her. She wouldn’t have been comfortable stealing food from anyone else, she realized. For a moment she forgot about the discomfort and the question and just looked at his face. Did other human women find him beautiful?

“If I go with you,” she finally asked, “and things don’t go well, I can come back home?”

“Yes. No question about it. I’ll make sure you get back here.”

“But what if things do go well?”

Taken aback, he was silent a moment. “I don’t know. I suppose we’d have to figure that out when and if it happens.”

An honest answer. She couldn’t ask for more than that. “I still need to think. Can you wait a little while longer?”

He nodded. “I’ll do my best.”

\* \* \*

She spent the day alone. Walking through the park, she listened to the wind, trying to hear what it might be saying to her. Finally, she wandered from the usual path and found a quiet spot in the woods. Hundreds of miles from here, far to the west, the sea beat the shore in an unceasing rhythm. There, her family worked and played to the sound of the waves.

Closing her eyes, she could almost hear the sound, merging with the whisper of the wind through the trees. She fingered the string of amber at her throat. The smooth beads slid through her fingers one by one as she listened to the wind, to the memory of the ocean, and to her own heart.

It seemed only moments had passed, but the forest had grown dark around her. Startled at the disappearance of nearly half the day, she got up, stretched her legs and headed home.

As she started up the stairs to the front door of the Embassy Hotel, she realized she’d made her decision. From the wind and the sea and her soul, it had come to her.

She hoped it was the right one.

\* \* \*

Jeff didn’t start to worry until the dark began to fall, though he’d spent most of the day wondering where Lark was.

“She can get along in the woods far better than any of us,” Trieka reassured him at dinner,

while he sat staring at the empty chair where Lark should have been.

It didn't help. "Why would she be in the woods?"

"Thinking," Fairfax offered.

Jeff waited, hoping he might add something else, but he didn't. Jeff's mouth tightened. Trieka obviously adored the man, but he rubbed Jeff entirely the wrong way.

"Why can't she think indoors?"

Fairfax pointed his fork at him. "Would you mind a word of advice?"

"Yes."

Trieka chastised him with a push to the shoulder. "Listen to him. He's rich."

"All right, what's the advice?"

"If you want to pursue anything with this woman—even just friendship—you need to accept her for exactly who she is. If she wants to change, you can help, but whatever she doesn't want to change, you need to leave alone. No matter how well she adapts to human society, there's always going to be a part of her that's pure White Fur People. Accept it or leave right now, because if you can't deal with it, you're going to break either her heart or her spirit. I don't know about you, but I'm not crazy about either option."

Jeff stared. It was the longest speech he'd heard Fairfax make outside a press conference. And he wasn't done.

"Take Trieka for example." His face had changed. Jeff suspected a grin, but he wasn't sure. "Before I could love the woman, I had to accept the inner man."

Trieka snorted. "If you won't talk about my inner man, I won't talk about your inner whiny little girl."

Fairfax smiled and returned his attention to his dinner.

"How the hell do you two put up with each other?" But Jeff knew Trieka well enough to understand why she found herself content with a rather taciturn but extremely self-confident smartass. They were frighteningly alike.

"Sex," said Trieka brightly. "Lots and lots of sex."

"I really didn't want to know that."

"Hey, you asked."

He shook his head, more amused than embarrassed. It was nice, being able to tease her again. He'd finally let enough go.

"Is it time for dinner already?"

Jeff's head jerked toward the door, afraid he'd imagined the voice. He hadn't. Lark stood there, hovering, looking unsure of her welcome.

How could she be unsure? He bolted from his chair and had her in his arms before he could think about it, holding her close. Her skin was still cold from the night air. "Where have you been?"

"Thinking."

"Thinking," Fairfax repeated. "I told you."

Trieka looked at Lark, then at Jeff, then laid her fork down. "I don't know about you, dear, but I'm full. Let's go."

Fairfax looked mournfully at his half-finished steak. "Stuffed. Lead the way."

Jeff watched them go, reevaluating their relationship for the hundredth time since he'd arrived. But when he looked back at Lark, all other thoughts fled.

Her hair had gone flat and hung in mournfully straight lines around a face tinged red from the cold. She took the chair next to him and he saw something new in the way she moved.

Confidence, he thought, but contained, as if she were afraid to let it change her. She folded her hands on the table and looked at them, then at Jeff.

“So you were thinking?” he said when she didn’t volunteer anything.

“Yes. I thought for very time. You might say praying maybe. I find a quiet, and the wind talks.”

“What did the wind tell you?”

“That I will be me still if I go to the stars.”

The fist around Jeff’s heart loosened. “You’re coming with me?”

“Yes.”

She reached out to him as if asking for reassurance and he took her hand, holding it tight. He didn’t have to leave her. Not yet.

He touched her face, letting his fingers caress the long, clean lines. The touch was more erotic than her earlier demonstration had been. It was meant to be. Her face lifted and he bent to take what she offered. Her mouth quested, sensitive to his shapes and movement. Lost in her heat and taste, he held her a long time before finally backing away.

“I’ll take care of you.”

She looked into his face, her eyes soft. “I know. If I wasn’t sure, I wouldn’t say yes.”

Jeff didn’t know how to answer. Her trust humbled and frightened him.

*I love you*, he wanted to say, but maybe he was wrong.

\* \* \*

“Who are you writing to now?” Lark watched with interest over Jeff’s elbow as he typed a message to his parents the next morning. It should have bothered him, he supposed, but it didn’t, mostly because he knew she couldn’t read what he was writing. And because, when she bent closer to watch, he could smell her hair.

“My family. I want to let them know when to expect me.”

“I should send message to my family.”

“I think we can manage that.” He forced himself to focus on his letter, even as she brushed against his arm.

*Dear Mom and Dad,  
I should be leaving Denahault in a few days. Expect me home around the 20<sup>th</sup>.  
I’ll give you a call from the spaceport. Sorry I took so long to get back. I’m  
bringing a guest with me—I’ll explain later. Haven’t decided about the promotion  
yet. Tell Jenna I hope she can make it.*

Considering the price of interstellar transmission, he’d been inexcusably wordy. And he’d be lucky if the message got there before he did. He deleted the reference to the promotion and the first line, then removed all the words he could without rendering the message illegible. His parents would understand—they could do the math.

“You didn’t say much,” said Lark.

“I can’t. They charge by the word.” He saved the message and opened a blank page for her. “I’ll turn on the voice activation for you. You can just speak your message and the computer takes care of the rest.”

“Why did you use the keys?”

“Because I can type faster than I can talk. Plus it’s easier to edit.”

“But my family can’t read.”

“Trieke will be sure it’s translated, or, if you want, I’ll get equipment to tape a visual message.”

She shook her head. She knew she should wait and send a message in handspeak, for her mother’s convenience, but suddenly she felt like, if she didn’t get this over with now, she’d never have the courage again.

She cleared her throat. She’d talked to the computer before, but felt self-conscious now in front of him.

“Mother,” she said carefully, watching the word appear on the screen. “Please go back to home and be sure I am safe. Decided I that to go—” She stopped. “I have decided to go with Jeff to Earth to find out about Earth family. Long trip and I will miss.” To her surprise, her voice caught. She swallowed, looking at Jeff even though she didn’t want to. He laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. “I very miss you much. Will message again when I return. Love and miss you.”

“That’s all?”

“All.” She swallowed again. The thickness in her throat didn’t ease. Jeff’s hand tightened a little on her shoulder and she laid her own hand on top of it.

“You’ll see her again.”

“I hope.”

She let him draw her to him, laying her face against his warm chest. He was big and solid and touching him made her feel like nothing could ever go wrong again.

*I love you*, she wanted to say, but wasn’t sure they were the right words.

# EIGHT

As expected, a passenger ship arrived later that week. Hoping the usual craft schedule hadn't been changed, Jeff waited with Trieka near the landing area for the shuttle passengers to disembark.

"There's Robin," Trieka said after a minute. She grabbed Jeff's arm, jumping up and down. The small Chinese-American woman caught sight of them and changed course, breaking into a half-run.

"Trieka!" she exclaimed, dropping her luggage as she ran into the other woman's embrace. "It's so good to see you!" They jumped up and down a few times, then Robin let go to hug Jeff. "You too!"

"It's been forever," Jeff agreed. "We missed you at the wedding."

"I know. I wanted to come, but they had me on temporary assignment on *Cutter's Dream*."

Trieka made a face. "The Cutter's Star-Farhallen monotony gig?"

"That's the one. It wasn't so bad, though. I ran one dropoff as second-in-command."

"Great! It's a good training run."

Jeff nodded. "I ran it for six months before I signed on the *Starchild*. It'll bore you to tears, but you learn a lot if you pay attention."

"I think that was the idea." She peered at Jeff again, as if just realizing something. "Why are you still here?"

"It's a long story." Companionably, he draped an arm over Robin's shoulders, picking up her luggage at the same time. "I'll tell you on the way."

\* \* \*

"So Jeff has a girlfriend," Robin concluded as they rode the elevator to the penthouse.

"No, just a friend who happens to be a girl who happens to want to accompany me to Earth to learn about her heritage."

"You protesteth way too much, blondie." Robin laughed, and Jeff didn't miss the smirk on Trieka's face, either.

Holding on to his composure by a thread, he said, "I hope you don't act like this when you're on duty, Lieutenant Wu."

"You know I do," she replied, then the elevator door opened. "Holy smokes, Cavendish!"

Trieka shrugged. "Yeah, it's a nice apartment."

Robin took in the large foyer, shaking her head. "This room by itself is bigger than shipboard quarters."

"The bedrooms are even bigger," Jeff volunteered.

"Now I know why you haven't come home yet."

It was a better explanation than insisting he was obsessed with Lark, so Jeff took it. He wasn't obsessed with Lark anyway—just maybe, possibly, half in love with her.

They stopped again in the kitchen, where Fairfax and Madison sat drinking beer and consulting over something on one of the small portable computers that seemed to be ubiquitous

wherever Fairfax lived. Fairfax stood as they came in, extending a hand to Robin.

“Lieutenant Wu. Nice to see you again.”

Jeff was surprised to see something like a blush rise along Robin’s cheekbones as she shook Fairfax’s hand, then remembered comments Robin had made when they’d first encountered him two years ago. “Nice to see you too. I’m sorry I missed the wedding.”

“So were we. But I’m glad duty has brought you by.”

“Can I get you a drink?” Trieka asked her guest, seemingly unperturbed by Robin’s reaction to her husband.

“Sure.” Robin accepted the beverage and sat down at the table. “So where’s this Lark person I keep hearing about?”

Fairfax had returned his attention to the computer, but still managed to answer the question. “She’s in the sitting room using the big computer. Madison found more reading games and she’s playing with them.”

“That’s Madison, by the way,” Trieka put in, nodding toward him. “If you need anything, he’s the one to ask.”

Robin nodded a greeting, smiling. Jeff accepted a beer from Trieka, feeling guilty because he’d normally be on duty this time of day. Old habits died hard. As the others continued to chat, he found his thoughts drifting toward the sitting room. New habits didn’t go down too easily, either.

After a time, the conversation shifted to the upcoming trip, and what might help Lark feel less intimidated.

“I think it’d help a lot if she met you, Robin,” Jeff said. “Let’s go see what she’s up to.”

\* \* \*

He missed Lark over the next few days. While he’d hoped she and Robin would get along, he hadn’t imagined they’d hit it off this well. It really was a good thing, but he couldn’t help feeling a little jealous.

She was learning from Robin, he noticed. One morning, she came to breakfast wearing makeup. Delicately applied, it transformed her without changing her. The effect took his breath away. The next day, her hair was different, trimmed into layers and falling in soft waves past her shoulders. Again, he didn’t know what to say. He’d known she was pretty from the first time he’d seen her, but now she was edging toward beautiful.

With time on his hands, he couldn’t figure out what to do with himself, and ended up recruited by Madison to help with the language videos. The program was in a constant state of revision, and the man had him doing everything from translating to demonstrating handspeak for the camera. Madison brought Lark in on the project as well, and the work brought the language more firmly to Jeff’s hands. Which was fine with Jeff—the more he had to do, the less he had to think. And he enjoyed spending time with Lark.

The days passed too quickly, and soon it was time to think about their approaching trip. Jeff spent a day packing, planning to help Lark for the rest of the evening if she’d let him. But she knocked on his door as he was laying his last pair of socks in his suitcase.

“I was just about to come help you pack,” he said as she walked past him into his room.

“I’m done. Robin helped.”

“You two seem to be getting along well.”

“I like her. She’s a bird-girl like me.” Lark grinned. “She tells many stories about you.”

He shook his head. "I was afraid of that."

"I'm glad for more than one friend on a trip to the stars."

He saw the distress in her eyes then, as she took an unsteady step toward him, her arms crossed over her chest. "Were you afraid on your first journey?"

"Yes."

It was enough. She walked into his arms. He held her, feeling her soft quaking, trying to determine if she was crying or not.

After a time, she stepped away from him. Her eyes were dry. "Sorry. I act like a baby."

"No, you don't." He slid an arm over her shoulder, steering her toward the deck. "I want to show you something."

Outside, the sun had just begun to set, but that wasn't what Jeff wanted to show her. He took her hand as he manipulated the controls for the holographic projectors. A minute later, they stood suspended in the middle of a deep, dark, starry sky.

She drew a sharp breath, her hand tightening in his. "How did you do that?"

"Special lights, mirrors, a projector. If you look closely right over there, you can still see the sunset."

"It's beautiful."

He looked up and around at the infinite dome of stars. "Yes, it is."

"That's why you do what you do. Because of the beauty."

"That's a lot of it, yes." He turned her gently and pointed. "That star there—that's where we're going."

"I can barely see it."

"It's a long way away." His arm found her shoulder again, drawing her warmth into him. "How long did it take you to travel from your home to Forest Walk?"

"Nearly a moon-phase. A month I think the word is."

"Right. A month. Traveling from here to Earth takes about ten days."

He'd told her that before, but he wasn't sure she'd remember. Her slow nod told her she did. "Such a long way in such a short time."

"I'd explain to you how it works, but I don't even really understand it."

"It's all right. I have less afraid knowing you and Robin will be there."

"She's a good friend." He knew that from experience.

"She showed me things to make me smell nice, but they made sneezing." Lark laughed. He squeezed her closer as the sound filled the artificial darkness. Her laugh had changed, becoming less harsh. She didn't sound like a Chihuahua anymore.

"You smell nice, anyway," he said, and turned to rest his face against her hair, to smell the curve of her neck.

She stilled in his embrace. Her heart pattered against his chest, faster than it should have been beating. For a moment, he wished she were a regular Earth-girl, up for a quick, possibly meaningless tumble. But he couldn't change who she was, nor could he change the fact that anything that happened between them would be far from meaningless.

He kissed her because he had to, because he would have regretted it if he hadn't. His straying hands moved too close to her breasts. She arched into him, and had she been any other woman, he would have pressed her to the floor and taken what she so blatantly offered. But he couldn't be sure she understood where this could lead. So he savored the kiss as long as he could without losing control, then gently bent back away from her.

"We should go inside," he said, letting his fingers comb through the soft length of her hair.



“Please, no. Tell me more star names.”

Some of the heat between them dissipated as he took a step back. “For a while,” he conceded, mostly because he didn’t want her to leave.

So he told her more star names, until the artificial darkness gave way to real night. Then he kissed her once, on the forehead where it was safe, and sent her on her way.

\* \* \*

They boarded a shuttle after breakfast the next morning. Not sure what would happen, Lark clung to Jeff’s hand. He picked a seat near a curving window. Through it, she saw the distant terminal building, where they’d said farewell to the Fairfaxes.

“I’ll miss them,” she said.

“Me too.”

She didn’t have much time to reflect on it, though, as a sudden roar filled the small ship and her seat began to shake beneath her. Reflexively, she grabbed at Jeff. “What’s wrong?”

He slipped a hand over her shoulders. “Nothing’s wrong. That’s the engines. They make a very big, very loud fire that makes the ship go. They’re warming up right now. We’ll take off in a few minutes.”

Numerous straps and buckles lay on the seat around them. Lark watched with interest as Jeff fastened them around himself. Trying to copy his actions, she managed to buckle the lap belt, but the shoulder harness eluded her. Jeff undid a series of twists in the belts and buckled her in.

Looking around, she noticed everyone else in the ship had already buckled up. A few regarded her curiously. The attention made her uncomfortable. If they wanted to talk to her, they should talk, not stare.

“This ship takes us to the stars?” He’d told her everything about the trip, but sitting and listening to the engines and feeling the ship shake, she couldn’t remember a word of it.

“Only partway. We’re flying to the Denahault space station where we’ll board the *Starchild*, which is in orbit around the planet. She’ll take us to Earth.”

“I remember.” Remembering made her feel better. “That ship flies for ten days.”

“Right. And we dock at Earthstar II for a day, then take another shuttle to Earth.”

“Attention, passengers. Takeoff will commence in ten minutes. Please make final preparations.”

“What means that?”

He unrolled the mesh bindings from the seat between them and helped her fasten them into place. They stretched across her whole body, holding her arms and legs down. She hoped she wouldn’t have to wear them for very long. They were confining and uncomfortable.

Everyone else on the small ship had wrapped themselves in mesh, though, so she wasn’t alone in her discomfort.

When the takeoff engines fired, the noise changed so much it frightened her again. The sound hurt her ears, and she couldn’t cover them because her hands were confined by the mesh. She looked desperately at Jeff.

“It’s okay. Just sit still and don’t panic.”

More people were staring now. Jeff shifted and his fingers touched hers, finding a path through the webbing.

“She’s never been on a shuttle before,” he said. He smiled a little as he addressed the woman next to him, but his eyes sparked with irritation. “She’ll be fine.”

Lark hoped he was right. The shuttle lurched forward, then its movement steadied until it rolled smoothly down the takeoff strip, faster and faster. Outside, the world rushed by, then became a blur. Lark closed her eyes.

The ship tilted under her until she lay nearly on her back, her hand clutching Jeff's so hard, she thought her fingers might break. An invisible hand pressed on her face. She struggled to swallow, then to breathe.

"Jeff..." she managed, barely, her voice strangled.

"Almost there," he said. "Almost there..."

"Almost" was a relative term, she decided a few minutes later when the pressure had grown even stronger. More air pressed out of her lungs than she was able to draw in. She struggled to pull in a breath, her head going light and dizzy. For an interminable moment, she was certain she'd lose consciousness...

Then, abruptly, the pressure disappeared. She panted, breathing, welcoming the strange tinny air as it rushed into her lungs. The ship leveled out, moving to a nearly horizontal position again.

"There," said Jeff. He sounded steadier than she felt, but less winded. She was gratified to hear other occupants of the ship panting. Maybe she was the only one who'd been afraid, but she hadn't been the only one affected by the intensity of the takeoff. "The rest is easy."

The captain's voice sounded again, seeming to fill the small passenger area. "You may remove secondary restraints. We've escaped the gravitational pull of Denahault and are now on course to dock with the *Starchild*. Estimated time in transit—two hours, forty-six minutes."

"And fifteen seconds," Jeff added. Lark recognized his tone and smiled. He smiled back, unbuckling the fasteners that held the webbing over her. "Look out the window."

While he unfastened his own webbing, she turned and gasped. She could see nothing but stars. "It's beautiful."

"Yes, it is. Look over there." He pointed across the ship to the opposite window.

"Winds and Water!" She barely realized she'd signed the words, they'd come so automatically. The view was dominated by a great sphere of green and blue, wisped with white. Swallowing, she gathered words to speak aloud. "What is it?"

"That's Denahault."

"It seems so small."

"Compared to the rest of the universe, it is."

"I never thought it could be so small." The world was vast, she knew. She could spend a lifetime and never see all of it. She'd known people who had traveled into the wilds and never returned, others who'd dedicated their lives to exploring as much as they could of the unpopulated areas around the White Fur villages and had never traveled more than a few miles from home. Now that unimaginably vast world fit in a window. She shook her head. Her mind had been turned upside down.

"I know," Jeff said gently. "It was that way for me the first time too."

The woman next to him laughed and shook her head. "It's just a planet."

"No," he said. "No, it's not."

\* \* \*

The Denahault space station appeared at first in the windows as a distant blip of silver. As they approached, though, it grew and grew until the entire window was filled with silver.

The space station had a strange shape, she thought, with two separate, somewhat cylindrical

sections seemingly attached at a single, relatively small point. One section seemed newer than the other, reflecting more silvery light, while the other was duller and marked with wear and pockmarks. She pointed this out to Jeff.

"The shinier side is the *Starchild*," he explained. "She's docked at the station, awaiting passengers."

Lark nodded. She couldn't imagine that rather unassuming lump of cylindrical metal carrying them over the incredible distance to Earth. Then again, there wasn't much about this trip she *could* imagine. She had no references, no past knowledge to base conjecture on. She'd chosen to have herself catapulted into a strange world where she wasn't sure her mind would even be able to function.

There were always people, though, their flat, hairless faces and the constant rumble of socialization she'd almost grown used to. When she disembarked with Jeff from the shuttle to the strange, unassuming space station, it was in the midst of a bumping, jostling crowd of familiar-looking people. Somehow that made it easier to manage.

The space station presented them with a sequence of narrow corridors, down which they were directed by uniformed crew. They passed through a slightly larger area where signs said something about passengers. Lark barely managed to make out the single word before they were ushered through a large door with rounded corners, a very short corridor, and then into another, slightly larger area with another sign that said something about passengers.

"This is the *Starchild*'s orientation area," Jeff explained. "The crew helps the passengers find their way to their quarters here, and people get final accommodation assignments if they don't have them already. I know where we're going, so we can keep moving."

They threaded their way along the edges of the crowd. Along the outer wall was a large white board. Jeff perused it, shifted position, then pointed. "Here. This is us." Lark looked to where he pointed and made out the word Jeff, with "rey" on the end, plus other letters that were part of his name. Below it was her own name; just "Lark," by itself. Jeff pressed his thumb to a dark oval next to his name. "Your turn."

She pushed her own thumb into the spot next to her name. Glancing to one side, she saw several other passengers doing the same thing.

"That records our thumbprints to give us access to our rooms." He took her hand. "Let's go."

After so long in the Fairfax's big house, the ship seemed cramped and tiny. Lark had to remind herself that she'd spent nearly her whole life living in a dark, low-ceilinged cave with her mother, two aunts, an uncle and nine cousins.

Jeff, too, made a face as they walked along the corridor. "I shouldn't have stayed so long," he said. "I let myself get spoiled."

"Where will I stay?" Lark asked.

"Right next door to me. The ship isn't carrying very many passengers, so I made sure you weren't stuck all by yourself. I didn't think you'd like that."

"Thank you. Where will Robin be?"

"She'll bunk with the crew. But don't worry—we'll see plenty of her."

She followed him down the narrow corridor to their rooms. Jeff showed her how to unlock the door with the thumbprint scanner, and she went in.

The room was, at best, a quarter of the size of her room in the Fairfax house. She tossed her suitcase on the tiny bed, thinking she'd been spoiled too. But the room was cozy. A small desk and chair sat next to the bed, and a door in the wall led to a closet with a toilet and a showerhead. Through the wall, she thought she heard Jeff moving in his own room. She knocked on the wall.

To her delight, he knocked back. Moments later, the knock repeated itself on her door.

“Did you need something?”

“No.” His prompt response surprised her as much as his concern. “I was playing.”

He smiled. “I thought so. But if you do need something, it’s a good way to get my attention.” Glancing at his watch, he added, “We need to attend shipboard briefing in half an hour. I’ll come back when it’s time.”

So he was right next door, only a knock away. The knowledge eased her worries. Opening her suitcase, she began to transfer the contents into the tiny drawers under the bed. She’d brought only a few clothes, since Robin had said space would be limited. She’d also brought disks with her reading games, and the music disks Jeff had given her. She could imagine being without a change of clothes—she couldn’t imagine being without music.

She’d just finished unpacking when he knocked again.

“Let’s go,” he said. “If we get there early, we can get a better seat.”

Seating didn’t seem to be a problem. The briefing room held only thirty seats barely wide enough for a medium-sized person, but only a few were occupied. Only two or three more people drifted in after Lark and Jeff chose their places.

“This is a severely under-booked flight,” Jeff commented. At the front of the room, just in front of their seats in the second row, a tall man in a uniform stood making notes in a palm computer.

“More like an under-attended session,” he told Jeff. “Most of the passengers have done this before, and we don’t have many to start with.” Putting his computer in a jacket pocket, he smiled. “So how was your vacation, Commander Anderson?”

“Interesting. And relaxing.”

“I hear you’re up for a promotion.”

“That’s right. I haven’t made up my mind, though.”

“I heard that too. Feel free to wander while you’re on board. Maybe you and the lady will hit it off.”

“If we haven’t hit it off by now, I don’t think we’re going to. But that’s not the issue, anyway. It’s more personal.”

“Well, I won’t beat it out of you. Good luck, whatever you decide.”

Intrigued by their exchange, Lark settled in her chair to listen. It seemed odd that the captain knew Jeff, though it made sense once she thought about it. It served to remind her how much wider his world was than hers, and how much wider hers was about to become.

The briefing was full of words she didn’t understand, but she caught the gist. She was to follow orders whenever they were given, and if she felt sick, she should push the red button on the wall by her bed. When she repeated that back to Jeff afterward, he seemed satisfied.

“We won’t make the transition to hyperspace for a couple days, so I have time to go over that with you. In the meantime, just pay attention and follow orders. We leave orbit in an hour, so I’ll help you strap in.” Lark made a face and he smiled. “Don’t worry. It’s not nearly as bad as the shuttle takeoff.”

To her relief, it wasn’t. In this case the safety restraints were more precautionary than vital. The slow movement of the big ship lulled her as she lay strapped into her narrow bed—a berth, Jeff had called it. If space travel was no worse than this, she thought she could get used to it.

\* \* \*

Due mostly to the sparsely occupied flight, and partially to his status as EarthFed military, Jeff was able to sign up both himself and Lark for the crew breakfast. They'd both be up, anyway, he suspected, and given Robin's duties as navigator, it was the best way to ensure they both got to spend some time with her.

He met Lark in the corridor outside their rooms. Her perky smile demanded a response.

"What are you so happy about?"

"I'm going to learn to read," she said, fairly jumping on her toes as they headed for the mess. "I decided to use all the time that way, so there's no boring."

He nodded. She'd been using the reading software sporadically since he'd found it for her, and he'd seen her read simple words from the computer. Her progress had seemed fast to him. "That sounds like a good idea."

"What will you do?"

He shrugged. "I guess I'll do some reading too. There's a nice library in the ship's computers. I'll probably download some books."

"Books. Books tell stories?"

"Right. You can program the computer to read them out loud to you too. You might like to try that."

"Yes. You show me."

Her enthusiasm was more than contagious—it jumped through the air and attacked. Jeff grinned, thoroughly infected. "I will."

They joined the line in the mess and found Robin right in front of them. "Too early for you?" she asked.

"Not at all," said Jeff.

"I figured you'd been sleeping in while you were in the lap of luxury."

"I tried. Trieka kept calling me on the intercom every morning at 0600."

"She's a slave driver, isn't she? Does she make her husband get up that early too?"

"From what I saw, she can't get Fairfax to do anything he doesn't want to and vice versa."

"That's good to hear. I wasn't there long enough to get a good feel for him."

"He seemed okay." He knew Robin had also been concerned about Fairfax's relationship with their ex-commander. They'd discussed the whole bizarre story on various occasions.

Lark looked from one to the other, seemingly surprised by the conversation. "Trieka and her husband love each other very much. Why do you ask questions?"

He smiled at her indignant tone. "Because she's our friend, and we worry. But I think you're right." He shifted his attention to Robin. "So, what's new in the shipboard library?"

After breakfast, he showed Lark how to access books in the ship's library, and how to program the computer to read them for her. Then, at her enthusiastic insistence, he found several MediaNet sites where she could read and listen to information about Earth.

"That should keep you out of trouble for a while," he told her, keying up a comprehensive animal information site sponsored by the Rocky Mountain Zoological Society. She was absorbed in the brightly colored pictures before he finished loading it. He backed away, leaving her to her adventure. "I'll see you at lunch."

# NINE

By the time they were ready to make the hyperspace jump, Lark had learned to read several basic words as well as the names of a selection of zoo animals. She'd also found a book to listen to, an involving story of love and intrigue that kept her coming back for more. As she listened to the words, the natural rhythms of the language seemed to fill her head. Surely if she did this every day, she'd be able to talk like a native Earther in no time.

She found other things to fill her mind, though, when she spoke with Jeff at breakfast.

"You'll want to start packing things in your room," he told her. "We reach the jump site just after lunch, and everything needs to be secured."

She made a face. "Will it be as bad as the shuttle takeoff?"

He shook his head. "Hyperspace transition can be stressful, but it's usually not physical. There are dreams sometimes, and it can be upsetting. But medical is always ready to help." He gave her a reassuring smile. "Don't forget about the red button on the wall by the berth in case you get sick or start to feel strange."

So she spent the morning securing her room and worrying. Since the briefing on the first day, she'd tried to put out of her mind the warnings about hyperspace sickness and the orders to call a medic immediately if anything went wrong. The thought of visions in general didn't worry her particularly—she'd been raised to accept them as gifts—but the idea of being mysteriously ill concerned her. Rather than dwelling on it all, she'd preferred to eat her cheese and drink her milk, as they'd suggested as a precautionary measure, and assume nothing would go wrong.

The announcements began right after she and Jeff came back from lunch. "We will arrive at the Denahault jump site in approximately one hour. Please be sure your quarters are secured."

Caught in the process of leaving Lark at her door, Jeff paused to squeeze her shoulder reassuringly. "Your room looks ready. Just relax until they give the orders to strap in. Don't forget I'm right next door if you need me."

She almost asked him to stay, but she'd sneaked a peek at his room right before lunch and knew he had work to do before it could be considered secured. So she turned on her computer and listened to her book, which proved involving enough to take her mind off her fears.

"All passengers, please secure yourselves in your berths. Hyperspace jump will commence in fifteen minutes."

The captain's voice jolted her out of the story. Hastily, she turned off the computer and re-secured it, then strapped herself in. The red button stared at her from the wall. She'd barely noticed it until now, when all she could think about was what might happen to make her need to push it.

If she'd understood what hyperspace was, and what about it was likely to make her sick, she might not have been so frightened. But it was another unknown, and she'd faced too many in too short a time.

"Transition commencing in five, four, three, two, one..."

The engines wailed, the sound howling like the death knell of a giant blue sea-rider. She'd heard that awful sound once in her life, when a sea-rider had beached itself near her village. This sound wasn't exactly the same, but the forlorn pain in it brought back the memory.

“So you do remember yourself.”

Her head jerked toward the sound. “Mother!”

It couldn’t be her mother, though. Walks Crooked was an unimaginable distance away, probably still on her journey back to the seaside village where Lark had grown up.

“Noisy Girl,” her mother said. “I’ve missed you.”

Then she saw what she hadn’t seen before—the deep wrinkles on her mother’s face, the yellowish tint to her fur. This wasn’t the mother she’d left behind on Denahault. This was a mother of decades in the future.

“I’ve missed you terribly, Noisy Girl. You went away and you never came back. Why did you leave me?”

“Mother—” But she stopped, because another voice had spoken the same word at the same moment, in the same voice. Suddenly, next to her mother, she saw herself. She, too, was older, but time seemed to have treated her more kindly than it had Walks Crooked. The lines on her face were barely visible, and if her body had thickened with the years, it was cleverly disguised with bright clothing.

“Mother, I have a new life on Earth. I have a husband and children. There’s no time for visits to a place that means so little to me now.”

“I raised you, Noisy Girl. I saved your life.”

“I’m not Noisy Girl anymore—”

“I am!” Lark’s voice howled above the strange, impossible voices of the others, but they seemed not to notice her at all. They merely stood, regarding each other as the sound of the hyperspace engines rose higher and more painful, then slowly died. As the engines wound down, Lark’s visitors faded, disappeared.

Her emotions didn’t, though. A lump of tears rose hard in her throat, strangling the words she tried to make. “No,” her hands fluttered. “No. I want to go home. I want to go home...”

\* \* \*

Jeff wanted to check on Lark as soon as they finished the transition, but had to deal with his usual nosebleed before he could do anything. It wasn’t bad this time, but still needed attending. The shipboard medic had given him some pills just before the jump. Over his years of military service, he’d tried several remedies, but nothing had worked. These pills, unlike the scores of others, did seem to help, though. He looked more closely at the label. Fairfax Pharmaceuticals. Making the world a better place for EarthFed officers with mysterious nosebleeds. At least Fairfax occasionally directed his money to a worthy cause.

All uncharitable thoughts, and Jeff was surprised he was still having them. He thought he’d gotten over that. He applied one more tissue to his beleaguered nose. The bleeding had stopped except for a few speckles. He unfastened his restraints, though the captain had yet to make the official announcement.

He pressed the button to open Lark’s door. She’d agreed to leave it unlocked during the hyperspace transition so he could help if needed.

“Lark? Are you okay?”

“You’re not told to be out yet,” she said. Her voice sounded strange. Something had happened—he was certain she’d been crying.

He came to the berth, reaching automatically for her buckles. His hands bumped hers. She drew hers back, letting him unfasten the complicated restraints. “What happened?” he asked as

she sat up.

“Does hip...happer...hopper—” She stopped, discovering once again that there was a big difference between hearing and understanding a word and actually being able to wrap her mouth around it. “Does hopper-space make true visions?”

“I don’t know.” He didn’t bother correcting her pronunciation, too concerned about what might have happened. “Are you all right?”

“I think so, maybe.” She rubbed her eyes. “I saw sad something.”

And it had definitely affected her, or she would have said her words in the right order. Over the past few weeks, he’d learned to judge her emotional state by how badly she mangled the English language.

“Would you like me to stay?”

“Yes.”

He sat next to her and she reached for him. He let her hold him, held her in return. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

So he held her, sitting still as she became heavier and heavier in his embrace. After a time, he realized she’d fallen asleep. Carefully, he disentangled himself from her limp arms and eased her back onto the berth. He didn’t want to leave her. Instead, he sat at her desk and turned on the computer.

\* \* \*

She dreamed, and the dreams were nearly as vivid as the vision. She lived in a big house with more rooms than she could count. Many of the rooms were filled with strange things she didn’t recognize, machines similar to the ones she’d seen at the Fairfax house, other structures which meant nothing to her. At least three of the rooms held tiny beds, obviously meant for babies.

And, in one room, hidden far behind the others, she found her mother.

They said nothing to each other, but Walks Crooked smiled. All around her on the floor lay the tools and decorations of the White Fur People’s culture—stone knives, artfully constructed bows and arrows, strings of amber beads, wind-hoops used in the Growing and Harvest festivals. The room seemed brighter than any of the others. As she stood in the doorway, her mother reached for her, and Lark woke.

A small tapping sound came from the other side of the room. Looking up, she saw Jeff hunched over her little computer, using the keyboard instead of the voice activation. So as not to wake her, she assumed. She sat up slowly. The dream still swam in the back of her head. Its images had meant little to her, but when she thought about the small room where her mother lived, a sense of peace came to her. Whatever the dream had meant, it had been closer to truth than the vision.

“Jeff,” she said, and the word sounded strange, as if she’d just learned it.

He turned to face her, smiling. “How are you feeling?”

“Better.” She swung her legs over the edge of the berth. “Can you help me write a message to my mother?”

\* \* \*

That night at dinner, she asked him again about the visions.



“Hyperspace does that sometimes. It can let you see the future, the past, possible futures, ways your life could go if you make different choices.”

“So what I saw wasn’t a dream, but it wasn’t a True Seeing, either.”

He smiled a little, shaking his head. “I don’t really know how to classify it. You’d have to ask somebody in the Church of the Forked Paths. They’re the experts in hyperspace prophecy.” His smile faded. “If it bothers you, you can get medicine from the ship’s doctor so you can sleep through the transition back to normal space.”

She considered. “I think maybe not. I wonder too much what I might see.”

And she hoped, though the hope might have been silly and selfish, that the next vision might tell her exactly who she’d married.

\* \* \*

Lark’s dismissal of her bout with hyperspace sickness didn’t stop Jeff from worrying. Visions weren’t uncommon during conversion, but if they became too overwhelming, they could induce a form of psychosis that was notoriously difficult to treat. He reminded himself she was a grown woman, capable of making her own decisions. He also reminded himself she hadn’t seemed the worse for wear after the experience. She’d been raised, after all, in a society that placed great emphasis on shamanism, prophetic visions and the like. It was easier to accept such things when they weren’t viewed as a threat or an aberration as they were in his own culture.

Sometimes he wished he could have visions instead of nosebleeds. Maybe he’d see something that would help him decide what to do about his job.

The *Starchild*’s interim captain had generously offered him free access to the ship. Jeff had taken advantage of it, wandering everywhere. Most of the crew knew him, so he wasn’t a distraction as he sat in an observer’s chair on the bridge or poked his nose around the engine maintenance tubes.

*This could all be mine*, he thought, standing quietly as engineering personnel monitored the ship’s performance via a wall covered with meters. The head engineer could crunch every number on the wall in a matter of seconds, spitting out a fair assessment of the ship’s condition as fast as any computer could. He didn’t have much of a social life, but Jeff had been able to spark a conversation with him once or twice. He’d gotten on well with Trieka too.

That was the kind of thing a ship’s captain needed to know. He wondered if the series of interim, on-the-job-training captains had bothered to build any kind of relationship with the crew. He doubted they’d had time.

He continued his impromptu tour, wandering through the mess hall, the backstage food preparation areas where he dutifully donned gloves and a facemask before stepping past the door, even into the miniscule hydroponics closet where the walls were covered with miniature peppers, lemon-orange vines and high-vitamin lettuce. Interim captains or not, the *Starchild* was ship-shape.

And Jeff wanted her. His waffling had been due to too much time away. The slow tour had been like reacquainting himself with the body of a lover. The lust was back. He wanted this ship, had always wanted this ship. He couldn’t imagine any other course for his career than to become the *Starchild*’s captain.

He walked back to his quarters, trailing his fingers along the corridor walls, watching the play of light on the oddly shadowed alloys. This ship had been born in space and would die in space. Jeff couldn’t claim the former, but had a feeling he’d someday claim the latter.

So the decision had been made. But, try as he would, he couldn't keep from wondering what that would mean for Lark.

\* \* \*

"So how many months a year do you spend in space?" Lark asked Robin.

"Generally nine consecutive months."

It was late in the evening, and Lark was tired, but Robin had taken time out of her limited off-duty hours, and Lark appreciated it enough to stay up an hour or so later than usual. "So you get—" she calculated with her fingers, trying to remember how many months there were in an Earth year, "—three months off?"

"Right. I usually take two months in a row and save the third for emergencies."

"How did Jeff get six months off?"

"He saved it. He was never much for vacations."

Never much for vacations. So he spent month after month in space, rarely coming home to relax or to see his family. She wondered how much longer he would have gone without a break if Trieka's wedding hadn't come up.

"What if you have a—" She searched for the word. "A husband or a wife? When do you see them?"

Robin leaned back in Lark's desk chair, putting her feet on the desk. "Some couples manage to get assigned to the same ship. But if you're married to a civilian that option's not open. There are various ways to manage to spend time together, but it can be really difficult. That's why most spacebound couples opt for short-term relationship contracts instead of full marriage status—" She broke off and sat forward suddenly, her feet hitting the floor with a smack. "Okay, spill it. Why are you asking?"

"Because I want to know."

Robin smiled. "You're getting very good at that. Avoiding a question is a very human trait, you know."

Lark returned her smile. "White Fur People don't like to lie. So it's important to know how not to answer questions."

"You can tell me. I'm your friend. Besides, I think I know the answer."

"Then why ask me?"

"Just making conversation."

Robin fell silent, and, for a moment, Lark thought she'd offended her friend. But Robin's frown didn't look angry. Finally, she said, "Exactly how many human men have you become acquainted with?"

Lark considered. "Jeff, and Fairfax, and there was Madison, who worked for Fairfax... Nobody else, really. I met a few men in the shopping places, but they weren't friends. Just people I talked to once or more times."

"Then you haven't had enough experience to know if you really want to go after Jeff."

"I'm not after Jeff—" She broke off, realizing Robin had received her answer by pursuing the question backward. She should have seen it coming—her mother was a master of that technique. She gathered herself quickly. "I don't know what you even mean."

Robin laughed. "Don't start with that *no hablo inglés* crapola. You know exactly what I mean."

"Talk with your hands and maybe I understand." She'd been caught and she knew it. "I very

like Jeff, but I'm not sure. My people mate for life."

Sober again, Robin nodded. "That's a tough one."

"It sounds very different for you."

"A life partner's usually the goal, but not very many people achieve it. Don't the White Fur People ever choose the wrong partner and have to try again?"

"Sometimes. Not often. Most partners know each other very well before mating."

"Again, a good goal."

Lark quirked an eyebrow at Robin's sardonic laugh, not sure why her statement was funny. "I don't know what to do." She hadn't meant to sound so forlorn.

"You could do worse than Jeff, even if it's just for a temporary commitment."

"I don't think I want temporary."

"That may be the best you can do. He's a space man, always will be. And do you want kids?"

"Oh, yes. Very."

"If you had his babies, they might never know their father."

Lark looked away, blinking.

"I'm sorry, Lark. I want you to know exactly what you'd be getting into."

She shook her head. "It's okay. It's good I know." *Before I do something stupid.* But she was afraid it was too late for that.

She lay awake later, thinking about temporary relationship contracts and what it would be like to marry a man destined to spend his life in space. It didn't seem right. She wanted a husband and a family, a unit she could depend on. That was the way life was supposed to work.

At least, the way it worked among the White Fur People. Among humans, it was apparently different.

But it could be the same, couldn't it? Trieka and Fairfax were life-mated. Their wedding ceremony had said nothing about short-term arrangements. "Until death parts us," she remembered them saying. *That* was how it was supposed to be.

Would Jeff see it that way? She wasn't sure. His job obviously meant everything to him, which was probably why he hadn't already found a woman to share his life with. She had to respect that decision—but how would it affect her?

There was too much to think about, too many decisions. Finally, she cast them all to the Wind—were there Winds in outer space?—and let herself go to sleep.

\* \* \*

The same thoughts were still in her mind the next morning when Jeff came to accompany her to breakfast. He smiled at her, but something odd sat in his smile, something that made her hold back the questions she wanted to ask.

Their breakfast conversation was reserved, but when they'd finished eating, Jeff suddenly smiled and said, "Would you like to see the ship? I talked to the captain yesterday and got permission to give you a full tour if you'd like."

She nodded. She wanted to see it, see what she could learn, but more than that, she sensed it was important to him. "I'd like that very much."

So he led her through the *Starchild's* corridors and secret places, telling her stories about his days as second-in-command. He told her about the special mixtures of metals that allowed the ship to move sleekly through space and hyperspace, about how the ship had been built attached to a construction station in Earth's orbit.

"It's a beautiful ship," she told him. She'd seen the sleek, silver curves of it and recognized the beauty there, but seen through Jeff's eyes, it was something more profound.

"Yes. They're all beautiful in their way, but there's something special about this one." He smiled at her. "I guess you never forget your first love."

"No, I guess you never do." She tried not to hear the sadness in her voice, and wasn't sure he heard it, either, as she followed him down another corridor to a tiny room filled with green plants.

"Space-grown vegetables," he said, and plucked a green leaf from the wall. "This was the first ship with a hydroponics closet, and one of Trieka's science crews perfected this variety of lettuce." He gave her the leaf. "This was salad at yesterday's lunch."

"You love this ship, don't you?"

His eyes told her he knew why she asked the question. "Yes, I do."

"Then you've made your choice."

"Yes."

She nodded. "Show me more."

\* \* \*

He'd been afraid she wouldn't understand, but somehow, miraculously, she had. Not only about how the ship worked, about the power that hurtled it through space and the much less esoteric human rhythms that drove its inner workings, but about how he fit into those rhythms, how they often echoed the beating of his own heart. He couldn't have expressed it to himself, until he saw the understanding in her eyes and it all became so clear that it hurt. He didn't know what to say to her.

When he'd shown her the entire ship, they walked back toward their rooms, she still holding the scrap of green lettuce, which had wilted slowly in her hand. She eyed it thoughtfully, drawing it again and again over one bent thumb as they walked. Finally, they stopped in front of her door.

"Come in with me," she said without looking up at him. He did.

She laid the leaf on the table, then sat on her bed while he stood uncertainly just inside the door. The room was so small, he stood nearly on top of her. She looked at the floor for a time, then finally at his face. "I understand," she said.

He swallowed. "You really do."

"I could never take you away from something you loved so much." He watched her hands as they echoed her spoken words, until she no longer spoke aloud at all. "Right now, I think I want nothing more than to stay with you, but you can't stay anywhere. I want to love you, Star Man, but I don't know if I can follow the rules of your life."

Slowly, he sat on the chair by the desk. "What rules?" he asked softly.

"That your job would come first. That I would be alone for a long time without seeing you. Where would I live and what would I do? How could I be alone so much while you fly among the stars?"

"Maybe I'm not the right person for you." The words were hard, but he needed to say them. "You haven't had time to find anyone else. Someone else might be better."

She shook her head. "I don't think so. My mother knew the first time she saw you, and she has a talent for these things. I might find someone else and be happy, but the love would never be the same."

“You can’t know that—”

“I do know.” The graceful movements of her hands, the placid expression on her face, belied the emotion he knew lay behind her words. “What I don’t know is how I’ll learn to live with it.”

“So you’re saying there’s no hope for us.”

“No. I’m saying I have to be with you and do whatever I can to make that my life. Then, if I have to move on, I’ll know it was meant to be that way.”

Jeff’s throat hurt. He swallowed the thick pain, but it wouldn’t go away. “How can you be so sure?”

“My mother taught me how to listen. I think not enough Loud-Talkers have learned this. They spend too much time talking and can’t hear their own hearts.” She stopped, folded her hands, then began again, quietly aloud. “I heard your heart today as you showed me this ship. How can you not listen to that?”

He nodded. She did understand, far more than he’d ever expected. But she wasn’t done. He watched in confusion as she slid off the berth and came to him, sitting in his lap. He shifted, taking her small weight, feeling her warmth, smelling her scent. Slipping her arms around his neck, she laid her head against his shoulder.

“Even if you can’t be the only, the single one forever, I want you to be the first.”

It took him a moment to realize what she’d said. When it finally made sense to him, he put his arms around her, held her close. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

What would he think of her now, she wondered. She nestled against him, listening to his heartbeat, feeling the warmth of his arms around her. Holding herself still, she realized how much she still didn’t understand about men, about humans, about herself.

Then, gently, he took her chin in his hand and lifted her face. His mouth moved gently against hers, soft, questing, learning. She made a small sound in the back of her throat as his tongue touched her lips, outlining them, then slipped past and touched her tongue lightly before he withdrew.

“I know how much you want,” he said gently. “If you can give me time... I need to be sure I can give it to you.”

“But—”

He laid a finger against her lips. “I’m not saying no. I just need time.”

She started to move away, but he drew her closer instead. For a long time, she sat in his arms, listening to his heartbeat, wondering how much time he needed, and if she could wait that long.

# TEN

To Lark's surprise and disappointment, the transition back to normal space caused little more than a headache. She'd hoped for a vision, something to tell her exactly what Jeff's problem was. Instead, it looked like the Winds had left her to work it out on her own.

He hadn't exactly ignored her through the last part of the trip, but the atmosphere between them had been strange. He'd seemed preoccupied, and she couldn't help wondering what had so thoroughly captured his attention. She hoped he was considering her suggestions, and that one morning he'd tell her what he'd decided. Even if he rejected her, she wouldn't have to deal with the suspense any more. But the days passed, they returned to normal space, and he said nothing.

Not quite two days after the exit from hyperspace, the *Starchild* docked at another space station. Expecting something similar to the tiny Denahault station, Lark was surprised when she stepped from the ship into a passenger seating area larger than the shuttle docking bay on the Denahault station. She looked up at Jeff, eyes wide.

"This is just one room, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. This is Earthstar II. It holds a permanent population of two thousand people, which is about the same size as Denahault Prime."

"The Big City."

Jeff smiled. "Right. Big for Denahault. Earth is a very different story."

"How long will we be here?"

"Not long, but I'll show you what I can."

They went to their rooms first. Again, Jeff had arranged for neighboring quarters, but there was a door between them on the inside. It was bolted shut, but Jeff explained they could open it if they wanted to. She waited for him to say he'd be coming to sleep with her, but he didn't. There was certainly room—the beds were nearly three times larger than the berths on the *Starchild*, and the rooms themselves were similarly larger.

"This is nice," she said, tossing her bags on the big bed. "It smells different."

"There's more air here. The *Starchild* relies on recirculated air. The space station has a huge hydroponics section, and the plants keep things fresher."

She nodded. She didn't quite understand the concept of plants making air, but she knew they were essential for life. The Trees and the Winds and the Sea, after all, made a sacred triad for her people. Among the inland tribes, the Sea was supplanted by the Earth, but the concept was similar.

"It feels... cozy."

His smile warmed. "I'm glad you like it."

They unpacked, then he took her down the corridor to an eating place he called Mabel's. They sat at a small table in a corner and ate spicy soup Jeff said was the best chili in outer space. It was good, she had to admit, but the spices made her nose run.

She was blowing her nose for the fiftieth time—and beginning to understand why the chili had been served with a huge stack of paper napkins—when Jeff suddenly leaned forward.

"I've been thinking," he said.

Surprised, she lowered her messy napkin, scrunching it in her hand, then discreetly sliding it

into the disposal slot under the table. "Have you?"

"Yes. About what you said."

She folded her hands primly on the table. "What did I say?"

His lips thinned. Good. He deserved to be irritated after keeping her waiting so long. "You said you wanted—" He broke off, looking at the empty tables around them.

"The chairs can't hear you, Star Man," she said testily, mocking him with his White Fur name.

"Why are you angry?"

"I'm not angry."

"You sound angry."

"I'm a little angry."

"Why?"

"Because you took so long. I didn't think it was much hard of a question."

"Well, I thought it *was* much hard of a question."

He mocked her back, and she couldn't say she liked it very much. Looking at her folded hands, she tapped her thumbs together. "So you have an answer?"

"I'm going to try."

"I'll listen."

"Okay." He hesitated, looking at the table, and she suddenly felt guilty. He was nervous, and this was going to be hard for him. She held herself still, waiting for him to speak. "Okay," he repeated, "I've given this a lot of thought over the past several days. I don't think you want to go ahead with this relationship without some kind of commitment. Am I right?"

She frowned. This was starting to remind her of the law-giving meetings the elders held every month during the full moon. Negotiation and compromise. A lot of talking. Not much sex. "If I were still bound to the rules of my people, I would say yes. A mating indicates a long-term commitment. But you're not bound to those rules—"

"But, even though you're not with them anymore, you think like them. I don't want any misunderstandings—"

She flipped her hands in an incredibly rude gesture she rarely used. He stared blankly—obviously his education in handspeak hadn't included obscenities. "I'm not a child, Jeff. I understand things work differently with humans. I don't need you to sign a contract or take sacred vows. I'm willing to risk this with you because I trust you. Can't you accept that?"

He blew out a breath. "I don't want to hurt you."

"That's my risk, isn't it?"

"I just want you to be sure."

"I *am* sure. Jeff, if I really wanted to take a risk, I'd sleep with someone else."

His face flushed. "You trust me too much."

"Maybe. But I have good..." The words escaped her. "I have good feelings for this kind of thing. For reading people."

"Instincts?" Jeff offered absently.

"Instincts. My mother taught me well."

"Women's intuition."

"It's a highly developed skill among my people."

He looked into her eyes, some of the tension gone from his face. "All right. Give me the rest of the afternoon. I'll see you in your room at 1800 hours and we'll see what happens."

"So romantic." She rolled her eyes, not entirely serious.

He smiled. "I'll see what I can do."

\* \* \*

He was making this far too complicated. He didn't think he'd ever in his life spent so much time worrying about a date. He didn't even know if he should aim for seduction, since she'd told him the conclusion could be foregone if he wanted it that way.

She needed to be seduced, though. She was a virgin and thus entitled to the absolute best he could give her. Plus, he really thought he might be in love with her. Everything had to be perfect.

That was too much pressure. He needed to relax and listen to his instincts.

He spent the rest of the afternoon making arrangements. By 1800, he was either ready or petrified. He wasn't sure which. Carrying a single rose, he knocked on her door.

Her attention went straight to the flower. "Oh! It's beautiful!" She took it and buried her nose in the soft petals, eyes closed to enjoy the delicate fragrance.

"They grow them in the hydroponics area. It's mostly dedicated to foodstuffs, but every once in a while somebody really needs a flower." He decided not to mention he could have gotten her a dozen roses on Earth for the same price.

"It's beautiful." She took his hand. "Come in."

"I can't. We're going to Mabel's for dinner."

Her delicate frown surprised him. "Really? Why?"

"I wanted to treat you to a real date."

"A date?"

"Some time to spend together, talk, just enjoy each other's company. It's dinnertime, so I thought we'd start with dinner." He quelled irritation, reminding himself she wasn't criticizing him, just unfamiliar with customs he took for granted.

"All right. Sounds fun."

At least it sounded fun. Hopefully it wouldn't be a total disaster. He took her hand as they walked down the corridors to the small restaurant. She still had the flower, smelling it from time to time and tracing the dark red petals across her cheek.

Mabel's wasn't very busy. It never was, unless a passenger ship was docked. Passenger missions had been few and far between of late, what with the restructuring of governments on the newly independent colony planets. Jeff had talked to Mabel herself about it earlier. The restaurant had been set up to serve the space station's population of government employees and scientists, and was partially subsidized, so the decrease in customers hadn't hurt her monetarily.

In any case, slow business had made it possible for him to get a table in a corner where the lights had been turned down for appropriate atmosphere. Mabel had even supplied a flowered tablecloth.

He pulled Lark's chair out for her and slid it under her as she sat down. She smiled at him and laid the rose on the table.

"This is nice," she said. "We're all alone."

"Sort of. I thought it'd be nice to have quiet so we can talk."

"What about?" The frown had returned, delicate lines between her golden eyebrows.

"Don't worry, I don't have the conversation planned."

"That's good, because I thought you might." She let him sweat a moment, then grinned. "See? I know you well enough to tease you."

"Yeah, I guess you do." Which was a good thing, he supposed. Trouble was, she was getting



good at it. His only recourse was to change the subject. "I hope you like the dinner I arranged."

As if on cue, a waiter arrived, pushing a cart topped with dome-covered plates. The whole setup should have cost a mint, but Mabel had been remarkably generous. Under the domes were plates filled with grilled fish and vegetables.

Lark bent over the plate, inhaling the odor. "This is wonderful. I haven't had fish since I left home."

"I know. I thought you might like it." It had been flash-frozen and shipped from Earth, and had lost flavor in the process, but it was still good.

She seemed to approve, eating with her charming brand of delicate gusto. The waiter poured wine and she drank that happily, as well.

"Be careful with the wine," he cautioned. He didn't want her falling-down drunk.

She laughed. "I know. It makes me dizzy. I don't want to be dizzy."

"No. That wouldn't be good."

There was a live band tonight, and they started playing about the time dessert arrived. Jeff had opted for chocolate. Women liked chocolate—it was a rule. Lark seemed not to be an exception, but the music drew her attention as much as the rich dessert, as she ate slowly and swayed to the music.

"This is all lovely," she said. "I think a date is a good idea. We should have more."

"That would be fine with me." He laid down his fork. He liked chocolate, too, and the almond-tinged mousse had been wonderful. "Do you like the music?"

"Yes. Very much. Do you think—" She broke off and shook her head. "Never mind."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me. Do you want to sing with them? This is Mabel's, not Carnegie Hall. They'd probably say yes."

The spark in her eyes told him he'd hit the mark. "Do you really think so?"

"There's one way to find out."

He waited for a lull in the music, then spoke briefly to the vocalist, who agreed. Jeff had thought he would—he'd been here on nights when the live performance had turned into something more like karaoke. With her bright, unquenchable enthusiasm, Lark took the stage.

He'd suggested a few numbers, chosen from the albums he'd given her, and the band followed his lead, launching into a contemporary number Jeff had heard wafting from her room on more than one occasion.

To his surprise, she knew not only the music, but the lyrics, though they weren't completely clear when voiced in her odd, mushy accent. She sang without hesitation or self-consciousness, her sweet, flexible voice moving with the surety of a longtime professional. Within moments, the musicians were smiling in frank appreciation, and the group's vocalist joined in, singing harmony. The additional voice didn't seem to distract her at all; instead, her voice grew stronger, working the harmony in a way that spoke of professional training, but Jeff knew was pure instinct. He smiled, unexpected pride swelling in his chest. He'd always found her beautiful, but now, singing out her heart in that incredible, unexpected voice, he found her exquisite.

When she'd finished the song, the band launched into another, but she shook her head, stepping off the low dais.

"Come back any time," the vocalist said.

"Why did you stop?" Jeff asked as she returned to their table.

"This is our date. I'm supposed to spend time with you." She smiled back at the band, who'd

started into another song. "That was fun, though."

"You're very good," he said, genuinely surprised by her talent. He'd known she could sing by herself, and quite well, but joining other people was a different challenge. She'd handled it beautifully.

"What next?" she asked, her smile brilliant.

"Let's go for a walk."

He took her to the observation lounge. They sat at a small table near the huge curved transparent wall where the stars shone like a carelessly scattered bag of diamonds, and the great, blue sphere of Earth drew the eye. It still amazed Jeff with its pure beauty. From here, it looked unsullied, as if man had never touched it. The night side would be scattered with lights, echoing the surrounding stars, but the day side appeared as pristine as it must have been on the day of its birth.

"It's beautiful," Lark said. "It doesn't look very different from Denahault."

"Not from here." He reached across the table to take her hand because he wanted more than anything in that moment to touch her. "From the ground, it's a different story."

"You'll be with me."

Her trusting smile humbled and frightened him. How could he promise to protect her from dangers she couldn't imagine? But he would promise, and he'd do the best he could. "I'll be with you as much as I can."

It seemed an appropriate time. He slipped his free hand into his jacket pocket and withdrew a small velvet box. Gently, he laid it on the table. He'd bought it earlier in the day at one of the space station's newer shops, on an impulse, as he'd tried to work his way around the delicate dilemma Lark presented.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Open it."

She withdrew her hand from his and picked up the soft maroon box. He tried not to be impatient as she caressed the velvet, sliding her fingers around the small object as if it were something wonderful and new. He supposed it was to her. Another woman would have ignored the box entirely, bent on discovering the contents. Her admiration of it made his heart warm.

Finally she tipped the lid upward. He studied her face for a reaction, but saw only a small reflective frown. After a moment, she looked up. "Rings?"

"Yes."

"They're very pretty." He could tell from her tone she was waiting for him to explain the rings' significance, or if they had any at all.

"Call them promise rings," he said finally. "I thought about having a contract drawn up, but you said you didn't want that. So I got the rings instead, as a symbol of my promise to take care of you and be with you for as long as you want to be with me." He paused, then took the plunge. "And to love you."

Tears glittered through her smile. She pulled the larger ring out of the box. "Give me your hand."

He held out his hand, suddenly conscious of the three or five other people in the room, the sudden silence that had fallen. He didn't want to look up. He should have taken her back to his quarters for this, made it a private moment. But she seemed unaware of anyone but him as she slid the ring over his finger. Then she handed him the velvet box, and he slid the matching ring over her left ring finger.

From elsewhere in the lounge came applause. Embarrassed, he tried not to look, but Lark,

grinning, stood and took a bow. "They're happy for us," she said, sitting back down.

He dared a sidelong glance, barely meeting a variety of warm smiles. "Yes, I think they are." He kissed her hand, looking at the silver filigree ring, the way it fit her finger, how right it looked. "I love you, Lark."

"I love you, Star Man." She leaned across the table and kissed him. "Take me back to my room."

She barely let the door close behind them before she was in his arms, her mouth finding his, her hands finding their way under his shirt. *So much for a slow seduction*, he thought. Then he quit thinking entirely and lost himself in her enthusiasm.

He'd made love to more experienced women, but never one with such exuberance. She kissed him hard and long, following his lead as his tongue found hers and danced with it. Her lithe warm body responded to his every move until they were hot and bare and stretched across the bed that seemed huge after the narrow shipboard berths. It was far too late to turn back now, and he didn't want to. If he could have everything he wanted in his life, it would be this woman and the *Starchild*.

She stretched long and sleek beneath him and he explored her with his hands, cupping her breasts, feeling the long bones of her ribs, tracing the round tattoo beneath her right arm. Her skin was milky in places where the sun had never touched it, brownish and marked with tiny scars in other places where sun and the forest had left their signs. He didn't think he'd ever seen anything so beautiful as the thorn-scratches on her ankles, or the odd blue-black mandala under her arm.

Then his fingers moved between her legs, found her hot and damp. Her hips jerked as he explored, tracing each fold, resting his fingers a moment against the evidence of her virginity. He hoped he wouldn't hurt her.

"Have you done this before?" he asked, his voice quiet, strained with the effort of self-control. His erection grazed her legs, steely and insistent, while he forced himself to ignore it.

"Not with a partner," she answered. The image of her pleasuring herself sent all the blood rushing from his head. He couldn't think anymore. Instead, he put his mouth to her.

Lark was far from ignorant concerning sex, but she'd never anticipated this. She knew how her body worked, knew what caused pleasure and what brought the deep, pulsing fire. But what she'd discovered on her own was nothing compared to what Jeff coaxed out of her now.

She held still, letting herself feel. Jeff's mouth and hands teased her for a time, then he shifted his body over her, his mouth on her breasts. She slid her hands down his back, reveling in the smoothness of his skin, excited by the tension beneath it. She knew he held back, also knew he had no reason to. Lowering her hands to his hips, she shifted under him, opening her thighs until his thick steely erection nudged against her.

"It's all right," she whispered.

His mouth met hers and he kissed her deeply, urgently, as his body moved. He entered her and she flinched, then froze, at the sharp unexpected pain.

"Jeff—" she started.

"It's normal," he reassured quickly. "It only happens the first time. Are you all right?"

She held very still, making herself relax. He'd moved inside her, the full hard length of him filling her, demanding her to move against him. He held still as well, his back trembling beneath her hands. He wanted to move, she could sense it, but she wasn't ready.

She took a long slow breath, then let it out. The pain had receded, and suddenly she knew she was safe. Her hips shifted almost without her willing them, and she closed her eyes as he began

to move, stroking her deeply from the inside while his fingers moved between them, teasing her center where the pleasure rose. Fire built within her, then spiraled through her body until time seemed to stop as Jeff, his hands holding her head, stilled against her. His body shook a little; she felt him pulse inside her, then his eyes opened to meet hers. He smiled.

She shifted under him and his smile faded.

"I'm sorry I hurt you."

"It's all right. I just didn't know."

"I should have said something."

She touched his lips, silencing him, then traced his cheekbones, slid her fingers through his hair, down his throat, across his shoulders. Her hands smoothed the soft fur on his chest, down to the taper of his waist.

"It won't hurt the next time, will it?"

"No."

"Then let's do it again."

# ELEVEN

Lark woke surrounded by Jeff's warmth, content and comfortable in it. He breathed quietly next to her, deep in sleep. Rolling toward him, she pressed her face against his back and draped an arm over his waist.

"Good morning," she said. Artificial lights in the room simulated sunrise, even to the tinge of pink. She preferred the real thing.

He stirred, then rolled to face her, wrapping his arms around her and kissing her firmly on the mouth. She lost herself in his taste for a moment, enjoying. The adventure of discovering him had just begun.

"Good morning yourself," he said when he'd finished kissing her.

She nestled against him, still warm and languid from last night's lovemaking. She felt beautiful. She had a question, though, one she should have asked earlier. "Jeff..."

He lifted his head. Looking up, she found concern in his eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just—I wondered—do you think we made a baby?"

He brushed hair back from her face, frowning softly. "No. I take a shot every year so I don't get anyone pregnant. It's a requirement for all unmarried EarthFed officers."

She frowned. "That's horrible."

"Sometimes it seems that way. But if I fathered a baby by accident, it wouldn't be good for anyone—me, the mother or the baby."

She thought about it, stroking the soft hair on his stomach. "I suppose it might not be. For some mothers." But it made her sad. "Do you want to have babies?"

"Some day."

A sadness filled her a moment, then receded, replaced by something else when she noticed the effect of her stomach-stroking. "Maybe we should practice, then."

She plunged under the covers to begin a new adventure. His stomach growled as she explored his body, but he didn't complain.

\* \* \*

When they finally made it to breakfast, Mabel's was swamped with people. Jeff hadn't seen it this busy in a long time.

"The shuttle must have come in late last night," Jeff explained as they stepped into the long buffet line. "We'll be leaving later today, but, in the meantime, we have to put up with the crowds."

"That's well," said Lark. Her hair was mussed; she hadn't bothered to comb it after their morning tumble. She grinned at him and corrected herself. "That's all right."

Smiling, he combed his fingers through the hair falling down her back, straightening it. "Aren't you hungry?"

"Starving."

She didn't seem impatient, though, clinging to his hand as they waited, playing with his fingers, laughing as they chatted. Others in the line looked at them from time to time, smiling.

No one told them to get a room, so he assumed they weren't being too offensive.

When they finally sat, she attacked her food with her usual enthusiasm, eating nearly as much as he did. He supposed she needed to replenish her energy after last night. He liked it, though, that she could eat without apologizing or seeming self-conscious. He'd always liked that about Trieka.

Watching her eat made him think about what she'd said this morning. And, more importantly, what he'd said. He'd never thought about having a family—not really. His thoughts had been mostly occupied with promotions within EarthFed, the path to his goal of captaining his own ship. Kids didn't fit into that picture very well. Not at all, in fact. It was one of the reasons he'd seen Trieka as a good match. He'd found out early in their friendship that she couldn't have children. That fact had made the dream—and he knew now it had been only a dream—of a potential relationship last a little longer than it might have under other circumstances.

Lark was a different story, though, a very different woman. And, watching her shovel down waffles and bacon, he wondered what it would be like to father her child.

He shook his head, trying to dislodge the image. He'd never had that thought about another woman. She noticed the movement and looked up at him, pausing with a heavily laden fork in midair. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

She shrugged, but he could tell from the look in her eyes she didn't believe him. She let it drop, though.

He was thinking too much again. He knew where life seemed to be taking him, knew what goals he'd set for himself and how to reach them. There was no point throwing that away on a whim, particularly when all the things he'd wanted seemed so close.

"Commander Anderson!"

His thoughts were broken as a uniformed man approached their table. Jeff recognized the uniform of a space station's captain. It took a moment longer to place the face.

"Commander Stanton," he said. "I guess it's Captain Stanton now, though."

"For the moment. Mind if I sit?"

Jeff glanced at Lark, who shrugged. "Sure. Have a seat."

Stanton took one of the extra chairs. "This station hasn't had a permanent captain for five years."

"I thought I heard differently about a year ago."

"That was when I signed on. It was supposed to be a permanent post for me then, but I negotiated it to two years." He grinned. "Wish I'd made it one."

"You don't like your job?" Lark said.

Stanton looked at her with some surprise. "I'm sorry?"

"Why are you sorry?"

"He means he didn't understand what you said." This surprised Jeff—he'd been listening to Lark talk for so long he'd forgotten she had any kind of accent at all. "Could you say it again?"

Lark paused, then spoke again slowly. "You don't like your job?"

"It's a bit dull, especially when you'd rather be in space." He glanced at Jeff, then said to Lark, "Where are you from?"

"Denahault," she answered, then said it again when Stanton shook his head.

"I mean originally."

"I don't know." She'd become suddenly more subdued than Jeff had ever seen her. Frustrated, he was sure, by Stanton's difficulty understanding her.

"She's new to English," he said. "So what are they planning to do when you leave?"

"I don't know. Rope in some other poor sucker, I suppose." He paused, glancing again at Lark. Jeff held his breath, hoping he wouldn't ask her another question. She needed the practice, but he didn't like seeing her so uncomfortable.

Stanton's question, though, was directed at Jeff. "I heard a rumor there was an exchange of rings in the observation lounge last night. Are congratulations in order?"

Self-conscious, Jeff took a moment's refuge in his coffee. "It's not a formal engagement, if that's what you mean."

"Does that mean you're not taking the job?"

This surprised Jeff, but only for a moment. The EarthFed rumor mill had always been fast and accurate. "You mean the *Starchild* job?"

"What other job have you been waffling about? Rumor has it the admiral's starting to lose patience. I even heard he was interviewing new candidates."

Jeff lifted an eyebrow. *This* he hadn't known about, and was inclined to doubt if only out of pride. "He told me I had six months to make a decision."

"I don't think he figured it would take you that long." Stanton's gaze slid to Lark and he smiled. "I guess he's not apprised of the full situation."

"No, he's not, but this isn't going to affect my decision." He realized it was a lie as soon as he said it. How could Lark not affect his decision? He sipped his coffee, shuffling pieces of his life randomly in his head. A few of them fit together nicely; others felt more than a little orphaned.

Stanton's grin told him the captain had seen right through him. "Just decide, Commander. Some of the other candidates are getting impatient."

He slapped Jeff's shoulder and laughed as he departed. Jeff watched him bemusedly. He had no idea who the other candidates might be, but he hadn't included Stanton on his short list. It was something to think about, he supposed, but he doubted space station experience translated well to shipboard. They were two different animals.

"He couldn't understand me," Lark said suddenly, interrupting his thoughts.

He turned his attention back to her, surprised to see distress in her eyes. "*I* can understand you."

"You're not the only person in the world I have to talk to."

He smiled, thinking she was making light of the situation, then saw the tears in her eyes. "Lark, you've only been speaking English for a few months. Hell, you've only been talking *out loud* for a few months. Give yourself a break."

She blinked, and the tears disappeared, but the anguish didn't leave her face. "I have to be able to *talk* to people."

"You *can* talk to people. Stanton didn't even try, and some people have trouble with accents. Don't let one bad experience upset you."

Surprisingly, she laughed. He looked at her, questioning. "What?"

"Sometimes it hurts the first time."

"Okay, now I'm glad nobody can understand you." He stood, taking her hand. "Let's go. We need to pack."

\* \* \*

The shuttle to Earth left just before noon, making Lark glad she'd eaten a large and early

breakfast. She'd eaten enough she wouldn't have to worry about getting hungry, but not so much she'd have to worry about losing it during the flight. Her stomach was in her throat anyway, trembling with anticipation approaching fear. Not so much fear of the journey—Jeff had told her it would be much easier than the liftoff from Denahault—but of what would happen once they landed. Her exploration on the computer had told her a little about what Earth looked like and how people lived, but she didn't know how she would fit in there. Then there was the question of meeting Jeff's family...

"Nervous?" he asked, helping her adjust her seatbelts.

"Why would I be nervous?" There. She'd mastered sarcasm, if that was what it was called.

"My family is going to like you."

"So you keep saying. Why do I not believe you so well?"

"Because you're thinking about it too much." He finished with her belts and settled back in his seat, draping an arm over her shoulders. "Just relax and look out the window. It'll be your first close-up view of Earth."

She took his advice, putting thoughts of what waited below out of her head as best she could. As they began to move away from the station, it was easier as she lost herself in the slow movement of the shuttle. In fact, the shuttle seemed not to move at all; rather the space station seemed to back away from them, then the starry sky rotated and Earth appeared, moving closer and closer.

"It's beautiful," she breathed.

"Yes, it is."

"From here, you can't tell anyone lives there at all."

"Believe me, plenty of people live there. If it were nighttime, we'd see the lights."

She relaxed in his half-embrace as he pointed out the continents and countries. They were landing at the spaceport in New SanFran, he explained. His family would meet them, then they'd take a public airshuttle to their home in Upper Detroit. Lark wasn't sure what it all meant, but it sounded faster than walking. And when he pointed out locations on the slow-moving planet below, she realized it would be much faster than walking. The two cities were half the wide North American continent apart.

As they approached the planet, signs of human habitation became clearer. A mesh of silver enveloped large portions of the continent, broken here and there by stretches of forest and mountains.

"It's all metal," she said, a twinge of fear in her stomach.

"Unfortunately, yes. Except for the areas where building has been banned. This is a heavily populated planet." He pointed. "See that brown and green stretch there? That's the Rocky Mountain National Ranges. There's still a lot of forest there. You'd like it."

It looked like about the only place she *would* like, but she didn't say anything. She had to give the place a chance, for his sake. For her own sake—for the sake of their relationship.

But, looking at the silver crisscrossed planet, she had a sinking feeling she wouldn't be there very long.

\* \* \*

The gentle descent and soft expert touchdown was a pleasant surprise. When the shuttle eased to a stop, Lark unbuckled, stood up, and stretched mightily.

Jeff grinned. "I know—it's a long time to sit still."



"Yes. Much long time." She half-heard her error, but didn't bother to correct it, even knowing it betrayed her anxiety. "How long to sit when we airshuttle?"

"Since that's a long trip too, we'll take a break before we leave."

"Good. I could use one."

They followed the other passengers down the gangway into the spaceport. Lark held his hand, nervous again, and disappointed their course hadn't taken them outside into the fresh air. Out the windows, the sun was shining, the blue sky filled with puffy clouds. But apparently any firsthand experience of it would have to wait.

Inside the spaceport, she found herself surrounded by bright lights and strange smells. Some of the smells made her stomach growl. It had been a long time since breakfast, and now that the trip was over, she was past ready to eat. Without realizing, she altered their course, heading for an area under a bright sign where people sat eating.

"Mom! Dad!" Jeff changed their direction, pulling her attention back to the surrounding crowds. Three people were heading for them. The older couple must be Jeff's parents, the young woman his sister Jenna. She looked more like her mother than Jeff, but she was tall, blonde and pretty like her brother. Jeff had told her about his family during the trip. There was Jeff's grandfather, as well, who lived with Jeff's parents. He must have decided not to come.

After a quick round of introductions, Lark was relieved to hear food mentioned. A few minutes later, they were heading for the tables she'd spied before.

"Good Italian food, I've heard," Jeff's mother said.

"It's not bad," Jeff replied. "I've eaten here a few times."

"It smells good," Lark put in hesitantly, wondering if she'd be understood.

"That it does," replied Jenna, and Lark breathed a quick sigh of relief.

Jeff, catching her reaction, smiled. Jenna had an uncanny ability to understand anything anyone said as long as it vaguely resembled English. She was fluent in four other languages as well. It was one of the many skills that made her invaluable as a newscaster.

"Do you have luggage?" his mother asked.

"It'll be shipped straight to the airshuttle docks."

"Good. We bought tickets good for the rest of the day. I think we have four flights to choose from."

"Great. That'll give us a chance to stretch our legs."

They sat down in the restaurant and, within minutes, had food. Lark dug in with her usual enthusiasm. Jeff joined her—he hated taking shuttle trips over the lunch hour.

"So," said Jeff's father after a time. "Lark, is it? Tell us a little about yourself."

She looked up hesitantly, first at Jeff, then at his father. Jeff smiled encouragement.

"I'll try," she said. "Sometimes I don't speak clearly, so tell me if there's a problem."

Jeff's father grunted. "You sound fine to me. Talk."

Jeff grinned behind his hand as Lark's initial look of wide-eyed surprise was replaced by relief. She began to talk, speaking a little more slowly than usual, captivating his parents with stories of her childhood among the White Fur People.

Jenna listened for a few minutes, then leaned toward Jeff. "Did you know there's been a media blackout on this story?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean nobody I've talked to knows anything about your friend. Think about it—human child raised by aliens. It's a great story. But it hasn't left Denahault. Somebody's locking the media on their end. I even talked to the girl who covered the wedding. She knew something but

she wasn't telling."

Jeff couldn't help laughing. "Fairfax said he'd take care of it. I guess he did."

"I see. It's good for your friend. It would have been God-awful for her if he hadn't. Those news types are such leeches sometimes." She grinned. "I'd sure like to have that story."

He smiled back, sure she had plenty of equally juicy stories in her queue. "You'll have to talk to her about that."

"Put in a good word for me?"

"Hey, I already hand-delivered one exclusive this decade. You still owe me."

"All right." She shrugged. "Whatever. I don't need you anyway."

"No, I'm sure you don't." He took her ribbing as it had been intended—a sibling squabble.

She smiled behind her coffee cup. "So, are you sleeping with her?"

"Is that any of your business?"

"Of course it is."

"Of course it's not."

She shrugged again. "Whatever. I wouldn't blame you if you were, though. She's—well, she's not spectacularly pretty, I guess, but she's got zing to her."

"Thanks so much for your approval."

"You're welcome. I know it's really important to you."

"Like air."

"Of course."

Laughter rose at the other side of the table. Jeff wondered what story Lark had just told, then realized she hadn't told him very much about her childhood. He was probably missing something he wanted to hear, all because of Jenna's journalistic nosiness. He'd torment her for that later.

"It was a long time before they let me go fishing again," Lark finished. More laughter punctuated what must have been a rewarding conclusion to the story he'd missed.

"So the White Fur People don't talk aloud at all?" Jeff's father had always had an interest in languages—probably one of the reasons Jenna was so good with them.

"No. They only use handspeak." She demonstrated, introducing herself, translating aloud at the same time. Jeff recognized the old sign for "Noisy Girl," but aloud she said, "Lark."

"Oh, it's lovely," Jeff's mother said. "Show me how to say something."

Jeff leaned back in his chair, smiling. He'd hoped his family's usual ebullience would win her over, and vice versa, and it seemed to be working.

So he sat back, enjoyed his pasta, and listened to her tell stories he'd never heard about life with the White Fur People. To hear her tell it, it was neither as primitive nor as lonely as he'd imagined, and he couldn't believe he hadn't asked her to tell him these stories before. In his efforts to help her learn to be human, he'd ignored the part of her that wasn't.

Finally, after the tale of the brown hopping creature she'd captured in the woods and made into a pet, Jeff's mother glanced at her wrist comm.

"My goodness, it's nearly four," she exclaimed. "We need to get going."

Jeff's father poked his own comm. "I'll call Grampa and let him know we're running late."

Wide-eyed with distress, Lark said, "I'm sorry. I talked too long."

"Don't worry about it," Jeff's father said. "No harm done. We'll just grab dinner on the shuttle." He winked at Jeff. "Your mother's always wanted to do that."

Jeff grinned at his mom. Airshuttles, though they provided several levels of service, were known for both their exorbitant food prices and the exotic menu they offered for those willing to pay for more than a hot dog. "As if you'll even be hungry before we get to Detroit."

"I think I could manage to eat." Laughing, she winked at Lark. "And I enjoyed every minute of your stories, so don't feel bad about it. In fact, I want to hear more as soon as we get settled on the shuttle."

Pleased at the lightness of the atmosphere, Jeff took his mother's hand, taking Lark's hand in his other as they started down the corridor toward the airshuttle stations.

"Doesn't anybody ever walk outside?" Lark asked.

"They do now," he explained. "This is an older port—at the time it was built, the pollution in this area was so bad they enclosed the entire port."

"There's still an old domed city not far from here," his mother added.

Lark couldn't imagine poisonous air. "Is the whole planet like that?"

"Only small areas, now," said Jeff. "There's been a lot of work done to clean up the air, particularly since fossil fuels were completely abandoned twenty-five years ago."

"We can go outside later?" She didn't know what fossil fuels were and didn't care at the moment. She was beginning to feel claustrophobic in spite of the high ceilings and the wide window-walls. The air just didn't taste right.

"Not until we get home." He shifted, letting go of her hand to drape his arm over her shoulders. "I'm sorry. I should have realized it would bother you and made different arrangements."

"It's all right."

"The food'll make up for it." His mother laughed again. Jeff smiled. He hadn't realized how much he missed that laugh. He should have come back to visit sooner.

Looking at Lark, the reality of his situation struck again. If he took the job on the *Starchild* and they continued their relationship, he'd be lucky to see her three or four months out of the year. He couldn't imagine going without her smile, her laugh, her singing, for that amount of time.

It was the choice all seafarers and spacefarers and explorers had made since the beginning of time. The wide-open spaces over the seas or between the stars or the voice of the woman you loved.

His mother made another joke about the food, but this time Jeff found it hard to laugh.

## TWELVE

The trip from New SanFran to Upper Detroit took almost two hours. The time flew for Lark as she told more stories to the appreciative audience of Jeff's family and nibbled on a tray of exotic snacks. Of course, most things would have seemed exotic to her, but Jeff's mother—Rose, she'd finally insisted on—seemed equally surprised by the fragrant, often strong-flavored food.

The airshuttle reminded Lark of the space shuttle, but it was larger, leaving more space for passengers to move around. They were in First Class, Rose explained, due to military vouchers Jeff had saved. Those toward the back of the shuttle had less room. Still, the trip lacked the extreme acceleration and confining safety restraints of the space-bound shuttle, which was fine with Lark.

Though the trip wasn't unpleasant, she was happy when it ended. Leaving the shuttle, they stepped out into yet another connecting tube that led into yet another building where they retrieved their luggage. But, from there, they exited through a sliding glass door and finally stepped out into air.

She'd hoped to see the sky. Instead she saw high, straight buildings that soared to dizzying heights above her head. Between the straight edges of the tops of the buildings, small strips of sky peeked through, spattered with pale stars.

"Hazy tonight," Jeff commented.

"It's been that way for a few weeks," Randall, Jeff's father, explained. "We're due for a detox end of the month."

"It's still not as bad as it was."

"No. Hell, when you were a kid, we couldn't go outside for twenty-six days of a month."

Baffled by their conversation, Lark craned her neck to see the barely visible stars. The idea of air so dirty you couldn't go outside was as alien to her as the sweeping silver lines of the giant buildings.

"Are we taking the tube?" Jeff asked.

"Only way to go," Randall answered.

That meant more canned air. As the five of them rather ungracefully maneuvered their way through the crowd to the tube station, Lark realized she didn't care so much anymore. The fresh Earth air—the air she'd waited so long to experience—smelled funny.

\* \* \*

The tube provided small quarters and fast speeds. Lark sat in a small seat next to Jeff and watched the silver world go by in a blur. It was too fast—so fast it made her stomach wrench and her head spin. After a few minutes, she closed her eyes and tried to relax in her too-small seat. Jeff laid a hand gently on her knee.

Fifteen minutes later, they disembarked at a tube station in what Jeff called the Flint sub-district of East Upper Detroit. From there, they rode a cramped public airbus, disembarking in front of yet another tall building. This one had a tiny, flowery yard in front of the glass doors. Lark tried to sound out the words on the sign in front and managed to make out "Green

Meadows,” but the other two words escaped her.

“Here we are,” Jeff announced, leading her toward the glass doors. They stepped down from the bus and stopped to stretch on the sidewalk in front of the building. “Look up, if you want to see stars.”

She did and was rewarded by a wide stretch of velvety black sky. The buildings here were spaced further apart, and the stars were visible, but washed out by the lights that lined the sidewalks and illuminated the tiny yard in front of the Green Meadows building.

“No haze,” she said, not wanting to sound disappointed. She was glad Jeff had pointed out the clearer sky, but wished the stars could be brighter, more like home.

“Nope. They’ve done a good job keeping it under control here.” Jeff gave one last, enthusiastic stretch and picked up one of the suitcases the bus attendants had unloaded from the cargo area. “Let’s see if Grampa’s still up.”

Inside the front door, a young woman sat behind a tall desk. She smiled as they came in. “Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Anderson, Ms. Anderson. Welcome back, Commander.”

“Hello, Jenny,” Randall said. “This is Lark, Jeff’s friend.”

Jenny smiled and Lark self-consciously smiled back. “Do you want to file her stats now?” Jenny asked. “I know it’s late. We can wait until morning.”

While Lark wondered what Jenny was talking about, Randall said, “We can do most of it upstairs. I’ll bring her back down in the morning to finish.”

“It’s a date, then.” She reached under the edge of the desk and a door opened in the right-hand wall, revealing the inside of an elevator. “See you tomorrow.”

They all stepped into the elevator. “That was a security issue,” Jeff told Lark. “They don’t have that kind of checkpoint equipment on Denahault.”

The elevator rose and she lurched. “They don’t have elevators this fast, either.”

Or buildings this tall. The elevator seemed to rise forever, in spite of the speed. Finally it stopped and the door opened. The panel next to the door read “32<sup>nd</sup> Floor.” The Big House on Denahault had only had twelve floors.

The Andersons’ apartment was small, but the floor plan and arrangement of furniture made it look bigger. After determining that Grampa was sound asleep, Rose escorted Lark to a small bedroom with two beds. One side of the room had obviously already been claimed.

“You’re sharing with me,” Jenna told her as Lark set her suitcases down.

“Where will Jeff be?”

“On the couch in the living room. Mom and Dad are old-fashioned that way. They wouldn’t let me sleep with my boyfriend last time I visited and we had a five-year contract. They say anything less than ten years isn’t serious enough to sleep together under their roof.” She laughed as if she found it genuinely amusing, then flopped onto her small bed. “I’m beat. Talk to you in the morning.”

Tired as well, Lark sat on her own small bed, fingering her silver ring. It symbolized a promise, but not enough of a promise for Jeff’s parents. The thought saddened her. Would she ever get a firmer commitment from him?

Jenna’s side of the room had gone dark, and the light on her own side had faded considerably since she’d walked in. She dug through her suitcase for a nightgown and changed clothes, then slid into the small bed. She lay quietly for a long time, listening to muffled voices as the others got ready for bed. Jeff’s voice reached her once or twice, soft and rumbly in conversation with his father.

Finally, the house fell silent. The lights in her room had faded to nothing, leaving her in near-

darkness. A faint light came from the hallway, leaking in under the door. As the silence fell she could hear Jenna's breathing, deep and long in sleep. Lark closed her eyes, letting her other senses work to get a feel for the house and its occupants.

The house smelled odd in some ways and familiar in others. Here in the bedroom, the air was filled with smells she'd learned to associate with man-made materials and cleaning products. She could tell the Andersons used different cleansers for their sheets than the *Starchild* crew or the Fairfaxes. She also smelled kitchen odors, which seemed to fill most of the small apartment. She couldn't distinguish individual smells, but the combination was homey and comforting.

This was a good place, a place where she could sleep. The small quarters reminded her of her cave by the sea. But *her* mother would have let her sleep with Jeff.

She'd nearly drifted off when something woke her. She opened her eyes, tensing reflexively. More light had come into the room from around the partially opened door. She sat up. Blinking, she made out Jeff's face in the space between the door and the wall.

"Are you awake?" His voice came in a breath, barely audible.

*Of course I'm awake. I just sat up.* She said nothing, though, instead slipping silently from the small bed and going to him.

In the hallway, he kissed her, deep and abrupt, devouring her mouth in a way that made her blood sizzle. She could do nothing but respond; couldn't even think as his mouth moved over hers. After an eternity of heat, he bent and picked her up, carrying her into the living room.

He'd spread a blanket on the floor next to the couch and now he laid her on it, lowering himself next to her. Lost in his caresses, she kissed his throat, his shoulders, until, laughingly, he whispered, "Shhhh," in her ear.

A realization struck her, and she pushed Jeff back. "We shouldn't be doing this."

"Why?"

"Because your mother doesn't approve."

"She'll never know."

"It doesn't matter, Jeff. She doesn't want us to sleep together in her house, so we shouldn't."

Jeff flung himself onto the blanket with a soft burst of frustrated laughter. "You mean we can't sleep together the whole time we're here?"

"No, just not in your mother's house unless she changes her mind and gives us permission."

"And this is the kind of moral code the White Fur People raise their children under?"

"Yes."

"I hate the White Fur People."

She laughed at his petulance, then kissed him. He pulled her on top of him. The tension in his body and the obvious evidence of his desire were almost more than she could ignore. But she pushed herself away after a short indulgence.

"I'm sorry, Jeff. It's not right. It's like lying."

"It's also like not getting laid." He sat up. "It's okay. I'll survive. Then I'll find someplace really nice where we can spend tomorrow afternoon naked."

She slid a hand down his cheek. "That sounds like a good plan."

It was hard to leave him, but she did, and tiptoed back into the quiet bedroom.

\* \* \*

First awake the next morning, Lark lay in her bed, hesitant to go into the living room for fear someone might think she'd spent the whole night there with Jeff. So she stayed in bed, watching

the light grow slowly in the room and thought about him.

She couldn't say she regretted her decision to turn him down last night—she knew it had been right—but her body wasn't very happy about it. She'd only gotten a taste of what it was like to love him with their single night's encounter on the space station, and she wanted more. Maybe it wouldn't have been so wrong to make love to him last night. She could have slipped back to her own bed, and no one would have known—

A stirring in the hallway caught her attention. Someone was up. She glanced at Jenna, who showed no signs of waking any time soon, then quietly changed clothes and went to investigate.

Grampa was up. Lark found him in the kitchen, making something that looked like coffee, but didn't smell quite the same as what she'd drunk in the Fairfaxes' house. He looked over his shoulder as she came in.

"Good morning," he said, turning his attention back to the coffee. "You must be Jeff's friend."

"My name's Lark." She sat at the table, studying his back. He stood slightly stooped, like many of the elders of the White Fur People, and his hair was white. He puttered a moment longer, then turned around.

"I hope I made enough coffee."

"I can go without."

"Don't think you'll like my coffee?"

"I didn't mean—"

He winked, and she smiled. He was like the rest of them, teasing her. She didn't mind.

He sat down across from her, studying her face. His scrutiny reminded her of the tribal elder, who from time to time called the members of the tribe to his presence and looked them over just as Grampa did now. She saw age and wisdom in his eyes and in the numerous lines on his face.

"I like you," he said finally.

"Thank you. You remind me of someone I know."

"Someone extremely old, I assume?"

She liked his smile. It was much like Jeff's. "Very old. In my tribe, we'd call you Elder, and come to you when we needed wisdom."

Grampa laughed. "If only my kids were as smart as your tribe."

"Everything would go more smoothly, I'm sure."

She turned to see Jeff walking in from the living room, shirtless, hair standing up. He didn't look like he'd slept well.

"Good morning, Commander," Grampa said. "Having trouble sleeping on an Earthbound surface?"

Jeff glanced at Lark. "Something like that."

Grampa looked from one to the other, then smiled. "I see. Libido's keeping you awake. I've been there. A *long* time ago."

He got up to pour the coffee and Jeff sat next to Lark. "He pays a little too much attention," he said under his breath. At Grampa's laugh, he added, "And he hears a little too well."

Lark blushed, realizing what Jeff meant. She hadn't recognized the word "libido," but it suddenly made sense. Her face still burned when Grampa set coffee in front of her.

"Don't be embarrassed," he told her. "Jeff's mom will be glad to know her plan to torture you was successful." He put the coffeepot back and resumed his seat. "So, what do you two have planned for today? Besides sneaking off for some privacy."

"I need to talk to you about that, Lark. I thought we could go down to the hospital and get

your DNA test started.”

She stared into her coffee. She hadn’t expected to face that question so soon. Somehow, she’d thought there’d be time to adjust, to get used to being on Earth, before the quest for her biological family began.

Jeff eyed her quizzically. “What’s wrong? Do you want to wait?”

“No. I just—I’m having trouble getting used to the idea.”

He smiled. “You’ve had a few weeks.”

“I know, but I haven’t really been thinking about it.”

He laid his hand on hers, squeezing gently. “It’ll be fine. Don’t worry. They’ll just take a little blood, then we’ll wait for the results. And when they come back—well, then you’ll know.”

She looked at him, and something in his face didn’t seem right, as if he knew something she didn’t. “What will I know?”

He shrugged, his gaze sliding away from hers. “Who your parents were. That’s all.”

She nodded. He was right—it was nothing to worry about.

Except for getting there, first in the airbus, then the tube. Crowded onto the cramped smelly airbus, the oppressive feeling she’d had last night returned with a vengeance, magnified by the press of people filling the small area. The tight quarters smelled of sweat and artificial fabrics, skin creams, hair treatments, colognes, all against the backdrop of recirculated air and inadequate ventilation. She felt sick. Putting a hand over her mouth, then over her nose, she tried to screen out the worst of the smells.

“Morning commute,” said Jeff, shifting in his scrap of space next to her. Last night about half the seats had been empty; today there was barely room to breathe, much less sit. “Everybody’s trying to get to work. The tube’ll be packed too.”

“I hate this,” she managed. She had squeezed her nose shut, making it hard to talk.

He put an arm around her protectively. “It’s only fifteen minutes, then we can take a fresh-air break before we get on the tube. Not a long one, though—we don’t want to miss our appointment.”

She closed her eyes, blocking out as much as she could of her surroundings. Still her heart beat too hard, her breath came too fast, bringing with it the smells she was trying to keep at bay. Only fifteen minutes. It seemed like an eternity.

Screening out the smells with her hand proved useless. She shifted her efforts to her beads instead, fingering the smooth amber while her fingers spelled out prayers to the Five Winds. Apparently, they couldn’t hear her here, though, as more people joined the throng every time the bus stopped. She closed her eyes and let the prayers take over her senses, blocking out the physical reactions that made her want to break through the window and run down the street under the swarms of cars and airbuses.

Suddenly, someone pulled her arm. Panicking, she tried to jerk free, but the hand tightened. Her eyes shot open, but the meditation had disoriented her. The world seemed to spin, then dip and rock.

“Lark, we’re here.” Jeff had hold of her arm, trying to steer her out of the bus onto the platform leading to the tube station. Other people pressed hard behind them, grumbling.

Still disoriented, she managed to respond to his prodding, following his lead onto the station platform. Grumbling and swearing followed them, which she barely registered. Jeff moved between her and the other passengers, blocking the harsh looks and harsher words.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m sorry. It’s just—Too many people. Too much, very—” She broke off and, frustrated



with her pointless stammering, talked with her hands. "There are too many people and they all stink. I need air and room."

Jeff frowned, holding her hands gently. Even he stood too close. She tried to step back, but found herself against a wall.

"This is making you claustrophobic."

"If that means a fast heart and being afraid of getting squashed, then yes." Even her handspeak fumbled now. Not thinking about how he might react, she disengaged one hand, put it in the middle of his chest, and shoved him backward. He was too heavy to budge, but took the hint and stepped backward.

"I'm sorry. But if you can stand to stay here just a few more seconds, I think we might get a chance to breathe."

She closed her eyes and waited, aware of the rushing noise and the loud melange of voices around them.

"Take a deep breath," Jeff said. "Slow and deep. We're almost there."

The breathing helped a little, but her heart didn't slow down until Jeff finally took a long step back and took her elbow, drawing her out onto the platform. She opened her eyes. The platform wasn't empty, but only a few people stood on it now, most of them looking anxiously at their watches.

"That was the eight o'clock bus," he said. "It's always the most crowded. There'll be another one in fifteen minutes, and it'll be full, but not as bad." He touched her hair. "Are you all right?"

She lied with a nod of her head. She needed trees, birds, air that didn't smell like sweat and metal. Maybe, if she stayed long enough, she could get used to the press and scurry of people, but she wasn't sure.

"I'm sorry," Jeff went on. "I didn't know it would bother you so much."

"I didn't, either. It wasn't so bad last night." She'd regained some composure. At least she could talk out loud again.

"It wasn't as crowded last night."

"No, it wasn't. Will the tube be as bad?"

"The tube is never as bad as the bus, because there aren't any standees. But I'm sure it'll be full."

"Can we wait for one that's not so full?"

"They'll all be pretty full until after lunch, and our appointment's at nine. I'm afraid we'll have to catch the next one to be sure we make it in time. The military hospital is all the way on the west side of Detroit Metro."

"That's a long ride?"

"About a half-hour." Her grimace didn't escape him. "If we get on first, we should be able to get you next to a window. That should help."

She hoped it would. But she had a feeling the window wouldn't be one she could open.

It wasn't, and looking out at the rushing scenery wasn't much better than looking into someone's shoulder or lap. The panic tried to return, making her feel as if something had taken control of her body, something small and primal and very, very scared.

So Jeff, disregarding the safety regulations, traded her seats, then talked to distract her from her fear. He showed her how to order drinking water from the robo-server sliding up and down the center aisle. The water helped too. It was cold, clear and fresh-tasting, unlike the air.

The half-hour on the tube passed more quickly than the quarter-hour on the airbus, but, by the time they disembarked at the West Detroit tube station, she was in serious need of a

restroom. Here, she could find humor as Jeff rushed her through the crowd to the nearest ladies' lounge. She came out laughing.

"So much for the water cure," she said.

"Hey, if it works, it's almost worth it." Jeff laughed, draping an arm over her shoulder.

This tube station was a building rather than an open platform, and it was huge. Terminals along the perimeters announced tubes departing for destinations she'd never heard of. She tried to puzzle out the names, but only managed a few, one being the New SanFran spaceport where they'd been yesterday. She pointed the terminal out.

"This is a hub for tubes and airshuttles both," Jeff explained. "Most of the larger metro areas have them." He looked at his wrist comm. "We have enough time to stop for a few minutes. Would you like to take a break? Get some coffee or something?"

"Yes," said Lark without hesitation. As he led her to one of the station's several cafés, she asked, "Do they have real coffee?"

Jeff laughed. "Fairfax managed to spoil you too, did he? Of course they have real coffee—for a price."

So they sat for two cups of real coffee—though Jeff requested decaf for Lark—and homemade cinnamon rolls, in honor of the much-missed Fairfax house cuisine. He explained what "decaf" meant, and she agreed it had been the best choice.

Then came another walk across the terminal, to catch an airbus that took them into the heart of Detroit Metro. This one wasn't nearly so crowded, but she clung to Jeff's arm and prayed while her heart pounded furiously in her throat. Outside, the air looked grimy and dark. Gray buildings rose to the sky on every side, each one not much different from the next until she felt like she was trapped inside an endless maze of steel and stone.

Finally, he steered her off the bus onto a covered sidewalk, and from there into one of the monolithic buildings. She wondered how he could be sure he was in the right one since they all looked the same. They rode an elevator up innumerable floors, then disembarked into a room painted white, where the air smelled like chemicals and bland music played in the background. They sat in chairs and Lark tried her best to relax.

The nurse who took her blood sample was gentle enough, though she commented on Lark's high heart rate and blood pressure and suggested she come back for a physical as soon as possible. Then she sent them on their way, promising someone from the office would call as soon as the test results came back from the lab.

"All right," said Jeff as they rode back down the infinite elevator, "let's go have some fun."

He took her to a park in the middle of Detroit Metro, where there was grass and trees and people riding horses and walking dogs. But the entire place, huge as it was, was covered with a dome, and she could tell the bright blue sky above them had been achieved, not by nature, but by a man-made mechanism of some kind.

"Color filters in the dome and holographic imagery," Jeff said when she asked him about it. "Detroit air is still a mess, mostly because the city hasn't voted for any of the proposals to clean it. There's a federal mandate now, so work's being done, but it's on a long-term schedule. This area's not scheduled for atmospheric scouring for two more years."

"Why would people not want clean air?"

"Because they wanted the crime rate down first. Three years ago, we couldn't have walked safely through this park. Most people decided they'd rather keep the domes and get rid of the criminals. Where Mom and Dad live, the crime rate wasn't as high, so the scouring took higher priority."

A difficult decision, she decided, and one she couldn't imagine having to make. On Denahault, the air was clean and the White Fur People lived in relative harmony with each other.

"Do you think your people will make my planet look like this some day?"

He looked at her, studying her face. "It's your planet too, Lark, and your people."

Only then did she realize what she'd said. "Not really, Jeff. Or at least it doesn't feel like it right now."

# THIRTEEN

They stayed in the park a while longer, but it no longer seemed the safe haven it had been intended to be. The falseness of it saddened Lark. To her, it was a reminder of what this planet had once been, and a warning of what Denahault could become.

Finally, Jeff looked at his wrist comm. "We should head back, grab some lunch at the tube station." His voiced lacked its previous enthusiasm.

She felt guilty for that; her own doubts and questions were affecting him. Trying to sound lighter, she said, "That sounds like a good idea. I'm hungry."

On the short ride back to the station, she made herself think about lunch instead of the crowded airbus. In truth, the crowds weren't nearly as bad as they'd been earlier.

At the station, they chose a Mexican restaurant since she'd never had burritos. They were good, spicy and fresh, washed down with icy cola. The soda was also new. It was too sweet, she thought, but good. They finished the meal with fluffy sopapillas drizzled with honey and chocolate sauce.

By the time she finished eating, her spirits had risen considerably. And, in the not-so-crowded restaurant, her claustrophobia had retreated, giving her an opportunity to think about something else.

"Is there any place here," she said quietly as they left the restaurant, "where we can be alone?"

Jeff, who'd remained pensive even as her mood had lightened, suddenly grinned. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Probably."

"Good." He took her hand. "I have an idea."

He took her down a narrow corridor lined with doors. "It's for stopovers," he explained. "If you need to spend the night in the area and don't have the time or money for a hotel, you can stay here." Small, lighted panels next to the doors indicated occupancy; he found a green one and slid his military chit into the slot. The door clicked and he pushed it open. "It's not fancy, but it'll do."

There was a bed, which was all she really cared about. Perhaps her reservations about making love to Jeff in his parents' house seemed silly, but she couldn't bring herself to go against them. His mother probably wouldn't approve of this, either, but at least it wasn't under her roof.

The room was barely larger than the narrow, starchly-sheeted bed. Lark fell backward onto it, followed by Jeff, who landed half on top of her, laughing. But the laughter faded as his mouth found hers, greedy and wanting, and when he drew away, his expression had sobered.

"Are you all right?"

His voice held too many questions; she wasn't sure what he was asking. "I'm not afraid of this."

He smiled, a little sheepish, a little annoyed. "I mean about the rest of it. The crowds, the people, the smog. Is it all right?"

"No," she answered honestly. "It's horrible and I hate it."

He searched her face as if looking for the punchline. When he didn't find it, he sobered again. "You're serious."

She blinked back unexpected tears. "So far the only thing I like about Earth is your family."

"Well, that's a start, and puts you a few steps ahead of some other girls I've brought home." Still leaning half over her, he slid a hand through her hair. "Maybe you'll like New SanFran better."

"I don't know. I'll try." She rolled toward him, pressing her face against his chest. "I don't want to think about it right now. I don't want to think at all."

Taking the hint, he kissed her again, thoroughly enough to drive all thought from her head. She lost herself instead in his smell, the feel of his hands on her skin as they slid beneath her shirt. When she lay naked beneath him, the press of skin against skin was all she needed to feel.

There was no pain this time—only a rich, glorious fullness that exploded and filled her with stars. But as the stars faded, thought intruded again. He thrust hard and full inside her, riding to his finish. When he stiffened and spoke her name, a tear slid down her face.

She couldn't live without him, not after this.

\* \* \*

He watched her closely on the way home. Though the trip was much less crowded, Lark still spent most of it with her eyes closed, particularly on the airbus where, even in the lighter traffic, people pressed shoulder to shoulder. When they stepped off the bus in front of his parents' apartment building, she shook against the arm he put around her.

"Are you all right?" he asked again.

She didn't speak this time, making a small gesture against her chest that meant, roughly, "I've been better." When they reached the apartment, she greeted Jenna briefly, then excused herself and went to her room.

"What's going on?" Jenna asked, looking up from the computer she'd set on the coffee table. She was sitting on the floor, working in what Jeff would have considered an awkward and inefficient position. "You didn't break her heart already, did you?"

He was too concerned to rise to the bait. "City life doesn't agree with her." He flopped onto the couch. "Where's Mom and Dad?"

"They didn't know when you'd be home, so Mom made Dad take her shopping. I had some work to do, so I stayed home."

"What are you working on?"

"An interview with the new Detroit Metro coordinator of police forces."

"Good stuff?"

"Guarded stuff. He's more politician than cop." She leaned back, stretching. "Right now I'm editing the visuals to show exactly how equivocating he can be."

"Will he like that?"

"Probably not, but I don't exist to make friends." Tapping the keyboard absently, she added, "Have you asked Lark about the story?"

"I didn't have time. I was too busy trying to keep her from losing her mind on the airbus."

"That bad?"

"Worse. She's used to open sky and clean water, breathable air."

"Maybe she should go back to Denahault."

"Maybe," Jeff said, and lapsed into silent brooding.

Jenna leaned across the table and grinned. "You stepped in it pretty good this time, huh?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The big love mess. You stepped right in and sank up to your ass."

"Try my neck," he admitted grudgingly.

She chuckled, then sobered. "You're in a bad spot then, if she doesn't want to live on Earth."

"Yep."

"Maybe she'll like New SanFran better. It's airier and cleaner. They even let people drive cars."

"Maybe." He sat up. "Maybe I'll take her there tomorrow. It'll take her mind off waiting for the test results."

"Are you expecting something bad?"

"I don't know." He told her about Walks Crooked's strange farewell message, the disk she'd entrusted to him.

"That sounds ominous."

"Yes, it does."

"You haven't looked at the disk?"

He gave her a sharp look. "Of course I haven't. It's not my business."

"I hope it's not too terrible."

He didn't answer. Questions about its contents had haunted him since Walks Crooked had given it to him. But that was Lark's business. He'd help her deal with whatever news it carried if necessary, but beyond that he had to stay out of it.

"What about the job?" Jenna's question interrupted his musing.

"I want it," he said without hesitation. "I've wanted that job for years."

"So you're going to take it?"

"There was never any question."

She leaned her head on her hand and studied him, sympathy evident in her eyes. She was younger than he, yet much more cynical. "I hope you get what you want." She shook her head, returning her attention to the computer. "Hell, I hope you figure out what you want."

He wanted to challenge her, but decided it wouldn't be worth it.

\* \* \*

Lark stayed in her room until evening, when Jeff's parents came home with takeout Chinese. She seemed calmer when she emerged, fingering the strand of amber beads as she ate. Jeff wondered what her Winds had told her.

After dinner, Grampa brought out the chessboard and Rose put music on. Not needing an invitation, Jeff sat across the chessboard from his grandfather. No one else in the family cared much for the game, so the board only came out when he came home to visit. At the coffee table, Jenna continued to work on her interview while Rose, on the couch, worked on a large color touchpad. She worked with interactive advertising graphics during the day; at night, she turned her skills to more artistic applications of the same technology.

"It's beautiful," said Lark, sitting down next to Rose.

Jeff was still setting up his pieces on the board. They were carved wooden pieces, sitting on a wooden board, all dating to the late nineteenth century. Grampa refused to play chess on a computer, and this board had been in the family for a long time. "Let's see, Mom," he said as he set his bishops in place.

Rose tipped the large electronic canvas, displaying a mountainous landscape. "It's from the pictures we took last summer on our trip to the Rockies." She tapped her stylus on the board and the sky filled with sunset. Another tap set a sunrise in motion, then she cycled the trees through four seasons.

"The colors are fantastic," Jeff said. "Have you done any more?"

She lowered the canvas, adjusting something with knobs and the stylus. "I have about a half-dozen. I'm talking to my boss about showing them in our building foyer."

"That'd be great. Maybe you could sell them."

"It's not about the money, Jeff."

"Yeah, but a little money never hurt anybody."

Rose only smiled and continued her work.

In spite of her difficult morning, Lark found herself relaxing amidst the sounds of Jeff's family. It reminded her of evenings spent in the caves of the White Fur People, with her mother sewing furs together to make blankets or tending to other household chores, her uncle carving pieces of bone into finely detailed fetish figures. Lark—Noisy Girl then—would sit, watching her grandfather tell the stories of the tribe. The old man had died when she was very young, but she still remembered the sure way his hands had shaped the words in the firelight in spite of the soft shaking brought on by age.

Jeff's grandfather sat shrewdly eyeing the game board, moving the small wooden pieces with a steady hand. The game seemed complex. Intrigued, she joined them at the table to watch. Randall, sitting across from the game, looked up from the palm unit he was reading and smiled.

"Watch close," he said. "You might learn something."

"Watch me," Grampa said. "You'll learn more."

"In your dreams," Jeff muttered. He frowned at the board and moved a piece.

"Who's winning?" Lark asked.

"Nobody yet," said Jeff, while Grampa said in the same breath, "I am."

She smiled. "You've probably seen many interesting changes in your life, haven't you, Grampa?"

He winked at her. "Is that a nice way of saying I'm incredibly old?"

She didn't understand the joke. "What's wrong with being old? The elders hold the stories of the tribe."

"And spout them ad nauseam whenever they get a chance," Randall put in, humor dancing in his voice.

Jeff moved a game piece. It had what appeared to be an animal's head on it. "Lark hasn't heard any of your stories, Grampa. I bet she'd enjoy them."

He studied the chessboard and, after his next move, began to talk. He told about his childhood, days when bad air and crime had conspired to keep everyone indoors. Of the days when he'd served on the Detroit Metro police force, of his wife, who'd died a few years ago, their children, antics Jeff's father had performed when he was small. No one seemed to listen but Lark, but no one protested as the stories went on and on. Grampa didn't seem to mind even when, distracted by the climax of a story that had Lark laughing until she cried, he made a bad move on the chessboard and Jeff claimed victory.

Watching Jeff's sly smile as he prepared the board for another game, Lark suspected he'd goaded his grandfather into telling stories specifically so he'd be distracted.

"You're evil," she told him, signing it.

"I know," he replied aloud, winking. "Another game, Grampa? And more stories, please."

\* \* \*

Jeff woke far too early the next morning, especially considering he'd been up past midnight playing chess. Sunlight had barely begun to seep through the wide bay window in the living room. He sat up on the couch, looking out across the pink-tinged suburbs that stretched as far as the eye could see. The window faced away from Detroit Metro, toward Saginaw and the distant bay formed by Lake Huron. Building after building, a vast stretch of concrete and steel. No wonder Lark hated it.

He dressed in the growing light, and as he picked up his wrist comm, he noticed it was blinking. He pushed the button. Admiral Barkley had tried to contact him twice yesterday. With a long resigned breath, he hit the reply button. The admiral wouldn't be awake yet, but he could leave a message.

What would the message be? He hesitated, watching the comm blink patiently, then finally said, "I apologize for the delay, Admiral. I'll accept the position."

Ending the message, he slumped onto the couch. He'd just achieved a lifelong dream. Why didn't he feel happier about it?

\* \* \*

He had one card left to play when it came to Lark, and he played it during breakfast. She agreed to go with him to New SanFran under one condition—that they wait until after the morning rush.

Still, he felt her unease as they headed for the tube station. It didn't seem to have relented any since yesterday. How long would it take her to get used to this? Would it take years of exposure? Was he really prepared to ask that of her? He held her hand and listened to his heart cracking open.

When they got off the airshuttle at New SanFran, she seemed to relax a little. The tube station here was big and bright with large windows in the ceiling and restaurants with open air patios. They stopped for lunch, then headed for the spaceport barracks.

There were no moving sidewalks in New SanFran, just airbuses and private transportation. Jeff's military chit got them on an airbus for free. The early afternoon traffic was slow, the airbus not filled to capacity. But, even given those advantages, he couldn't help viewing the trip and their surroundings from her point of view, and found it severely lacking.

There were no trees, very little grass, and the air, though cleaner by far than the air in Detroit Metro, smelled and tasted metallic. Compared to Denahault, this place was a technologically desecrated cesspool. The crack in his heart widened a little more. As they landed near the barracks, he took her hand in his. Everything he did now felt like good-bye.

The barracks area took everything that was good about New SanFran and turned it into pure crap. He'd always felt that way about the place—now the thought made him angry, frustrated, and more than a little sad. The EarthFed barracks had been designed as a military installation, not a people-friendly apartment complex. More concrete, more steel, gates of severe-looking iron bars.

Though he disliked the barracks, it had never bothered him since he spent so little time there. Now he thought about what it must be like for the spouses left behind. He didn't have a problem spending a month or two a year here, a week or a day at a time, but what would it be like to live



here for months on end, alone, waiting for your lover to return from the stars?

They took the elevator to his floor and he led her down the hallway to his quarters. A series of electronic boards along the gray-brown walls announced various activities and clubs for military spouses and families. Gardening, racquetball, painting, sculpting. Field trips to Hollywood and Canada, a week-long jaunt to England. Lark stopped in front of one and Jeff waited patiently while she deciphered the print. He said nothing—he didn't know what he could say that would make any of it seem any better. She didn't speak, either, only frowning thoughtfully when she turned away. They continued down the hallway.

His quarters were among the nicer available in the barracks. He could request an upgrade too, once the promotion went through. Even so, he couldn't help a wash of unease and embarrassment as he pushed the door open to reveal the small, sparsely furnished rooms.

Lark took it in silently, her gaze traveling over the small kitchen, the battered couch and brightly colored rugs. Finally she crossed the living room and looked out the window to the garden area, where a patch of flowers grew next to a cultivated area. There was nothing green there yet, but people were wielding hoes and shovels. Probably the gardening class. Around the garden, a walkway meandered through flowering bushes and trees. Jeff had always thought it nice, an oasis in the middle of the unrelenting concrete. He was sure Lark would find it pathetic.

She turned away from the window, looking back at the apartment, her face expressionless.

"I know it's small—"

"I don't mind small." She sat on the couch. "Small is fine. Do a lot of people live here?"

"Two hundred or so permanent residents. Most are like me—gone most of the year on space duty."

She nodded, her gaze drifting again toward the window.

"After the promotion, I'll get a bigger place," he continued, desperate for some positive reaction. "And I'm an officer, so my spouse or contracted partner is eligible to join the Officers' Club. They do a lot of community activities and I'm told it's a good place to make friends if you're Earthbound." He didn't mention how few people had permanent partners or the relentless political nonsense that went on among officers' spouses. Something else he hadn't thought about.

"It's better than Detroit," she said finally.

He sat next to her, slumping in the too-soft couch. Hands folded neatly in her lap, Lark looked at her fingers. He followed her gaze, watching as her hands moved in partial, probably involuntary, signs. He couldn't tell what she was saying.

"You don't belong here," he finally admitted. "No matter how long you stay here, I don't think you'll ever feel at home."

She looked up, tears in her eyes, an expression of infinite relief on her face. "You understand."

"I understand."

She leaned against him and he put his arms around her, cradling her next to his heart. They sat that way for a long time, until his hands began to move. After a few minutes, he led her into his bedroom since the couch was too soft, too narrow, and right in front of the window.

He wanted to love her slowly, but it sped up, heated up, until it became a frenzy of need. She arched into him, demanding, and took him before he was quite ready. His climax came hard and fast, as did hers, and it wasn't until he'd come down from the burning heights that he realized she was crying.

They came in late that night. Only Jenna was still awake, working at the kitchen table. The quiet sounds of her interview with the police coordinator drifted through the front rooms as she tweaked her final edit.

Jeff sensed her watching as he walked Lark to her bedroom.

“Good night,” he told her. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Good night.” She kissed him gently, lingering a moment, then smiled. “Sleep well.”

He stared at the door that closed between them, wanting to open it and go to her. But there was nothing left to say. Finally, he went to the kitchen and retrieved a can of soda from the fridge.

“It didn’t go well?” Jenna asked.

“No.” He started to drink, then set the can on the table, untouched, and put his face in his hands. “I can’t do this to her.”

“It’s like putting a wild tiger in a zoo.”

He peered at his sister through his fingers, surprised at the analogy. “Yes. It’s a lot like that. Except she’s not a tiger. She’s—”

“She’s a lark,” Jenna supplied. “A wild bird who needs trees and grass and clean air.”

“She needs Denahault.”

“Maybe. Or maybe the Rockies.”

He shook his head. “If she lived there, I’d never see her. And can you see her as an officer’s wife?”

“They’d chew her up and spit her out.”

“Either that or she’d change, and she’s done more than enough of that.”

Jenna nodded. “It’s a tough call. Do you think she’s already made it?”

“I think she has.”

“And what about you?”

“I called the admiral this morning and accepted the job.”

“That’s tough, brother mine.” She flipped off the computer and folded it shut. “I’d better head for bed.”

Jeff sat for a time, staring at the open can. Finally, he put it back in the fridge and went into the living room, where his blanket and pillow sat neatly folded and stacked next to the couch. Stripping off his shirt, he realized his wrist comm was blinking. He’d turned it off after lunch, not wanting any calls while he was with Lark. The message was from the admiral.

“Good news, Anderson. The *Starchild* crew will be glad to have you aboard.”

Jeff flung the comm across the room.

\* \* \*

A nurse from the military clinic called the next morning. Lark’s results were ready.

Since they didn’t need an appointment, they left late, avoiding the early morning rush but before the heavy lunchtime traffic. With a new source of stress added, her nervousness showed in incessant chatter. It also made it impossible for her to string words together in English, so the need expressed itself through her fingers. Jeff nodded from time to time, to let her know he was paying attention, even though he wasn’t. His mind was occupied by Walks Crooked’s message disk, which lay like a rock in his pocket.

At the clinic, a nurse led them to a private sitting room and handed Jeff a disk. “Records for

colonists are pretty thorough,” she said. “This should tell you everything you need to know and then some.”

Jeff set up the computer for Lark, inserting the disk and setting it to read the contents aloud, knowing full well she could have done it herself. “Do you want me to leave?”

“No. Stay with me.”

She wasn’t sure why she was frightened. It didn’t make sense, really. All the disk would tell her was the truth about the past. Nothing on it could change who she was, what she had become, or how much her mother had loved her. She prepared herself to listen while Jeff drifted to a back corner of the room. She wanted him closer, but she didn’t tell him that.

The computer began to talk, telling her these were her test results and the date the analysis had been done. “Results taken from comparison of subject’s DNA to samples from the EarthFed database of colonists sent to the planet Denahault during phases one and two of colonization. Results are considered 95.6 percent accurate.”

Pretty accurate, she thought. Then, suddenly, an image of two people.

Blond, both of them, and she saw herself in both faces. Ann and Patrick McCormack, the computer said, and her name had been Patricia Ann McCormack. Something inside her stirred in recognition, not of the names, but the faces. A voice drifted through her mind, wordless. Her mother’s voice. Once, a long time ago, her mother had sung to her.

But they’d died. The pictures showed it—the human village torn apart, strewn here and there, torn wood and broken glass mingled with blood and human bodies. A windstorm, Walks Crooked had told her. They were common near the wide sea, and had taken more than one village of the White Fur People.

But the computer voice droned louder than her memories. “Settlement Four was destroyed two years after establishment. Evidence suggested destruction by an outside force. Investigators suspected an attack by a colony of wild animals in the area. The wildlife colony was destroyed shortly after Settlement Four was established. EarthFed ordered the destruction when assessments determined them to be dangerous to humans.”

Death again. Bodies and blood. But not human this time. This time, the destruction had rained on the White Fur People.

“My God,” Jeff’s voice rose from the back of the room. Lark stared at the terminal and felt her whole body turn cold.

Her parents, the humans who had birthed her, had destroyed a settlement of the White Fur People, believing them to be deadly wild predators. And the White Fur People, the people who’d raised her in love and shelter, had retaliated by destroying the human settlement. She knew such things had happened. The elders spoke of it from time to time, of the Time Before the Great Dreaming when all the White Fur People had lashed out at the humans who seemed dedicated to destruction of the natives. Then the Dreams had begun, and all the elders and sages of the tribes had begun to preach peace and isolationism. Not many White Fur People had died at the hands of humans after that, nor vice versa.

But this had happened before the Dreams. Her mother and father had died brutally, possibly at the hands of her adoptive family.

The computer had stopped talking, having come to the end of its revelations. The portraits of the McCormacks again filled the screen. She stared at them, at her mother’s wide, tilted blue-green eyes, so much like her own, at the shape of her father’s mouth.

Jeff left his chair and knelt next to her. He had another disk in his hand and held it up to her. “Your mother gave me this before we left Denahault.” His gentle voice barely touched the deep,

cold numbness that filled her. “Now I think I know why.”

She didn’t move. Jeff removed the old disk and replaced it with the new one.

Walks Crooked, the only mother Lark had ever known, the mother who might have played some part in making her an orphan, said, “You know the truth now.” The computer was silent, having no ability to translate handspeak. She watched Walks Crooked’s black fingers moving and barely felt the tears sliding hot down her cheeks. “We did a bad thing, a horrible thing, assuming we were protecting our own. The Loud-Talkers slaughtered an entire settlement—twenty-five men, women and children of the White Fur People. They thought we were wild and dangerous. They had no thought of living with the land, only of making it safe for themselves. Perhaps someone—your Star Man, even—can explain why they did what they did.”

Jeff’s hand closed on her shoulder. “Ignorance,” he said quietly. “Stupidity. Arrogance.”

Walks Crooked went on. “As for us, we acted out of vengeance. They had killed so many of us, and we wanted them to die for it. I wish I could say there were dissenting voices, voices suggesting peace, but there weren’t. There was only hatred and a desire for blood. Even the elders said nothing against what we wished to do. They had dreamed nothing of the course they should take. Not then.

“So we killed them. All of them. Except for you. I saw you in your little bed after our men had killed your parents. You were so beautiful and small, helpless, and I’d spent so much of my life wishing for a child. I wrapped you in a blanket and brought you home.

“They wanted to kill you too, but the elder stepped in. There had been enough killing, he said. Now it was time to learn. The Dreaming began not long after that, when the elders told us to keep to ourselves, to move away if Loud Talkers settled near us. There was little bloodshed after that. And now there’s none. But nothing can undo what was done to you.”

Lark pressed her fingers against her mouth, trying to hold back the sobs straining her throat.

“I loved you,” her mother continued—but could she still call this creature her mother? “I loved you the best I could and I still love you. In every sense, you were and are my child. I know this will be difficult for you to face, and I wish I were there to help you. But Dream well, and when you’ve finished Dreaming, I hope to have your love again as my own.”

The message ended, leaving a blank screen. She stared at it. Behind her, Jeff laid a hand on her shoulder.

Everything had changed. Nothing had changed. She was still Lark, and she was still Noisy Girl. But she was no longer certain she could be both.

## FOURTEEN

They made the trip home in silence. Even Lark's fear of the crowds didn't seem to penetrate her distress. Jeff worried more about her now than he had during her earlier panic attacks.

That his instincts had been right about Walks Crooked's message gave him no satisfaction. It only put another huge, strange wrinkle in their already complicated situation. She'd just begun to get used to the idea of being human. Now she had something else, equally huge and equally difficult to assimilate.

They stopped halfway home and he treated her to lunch at one of the better suburban restaurants. She ate very little, though, picking at her food.

"Is there anything I can do?" he finally asked.

She shook her head.

There was nothing anyone could do, she began to realize as, back home, his family tried to draw her back out. She didn't want to be drawn out. She wanted to sink into herself, try to find some way to figure out who "Lark" was. Finally, with mumbled apologies, she retreated to her small bedroom. There she sat on the bed and fingered her long string of amber beads.

She needed to dream. She would pray for dreams, and hope the Winds saw fit to bring them.

No one commented on her silence when she joined the family for dinner. By the looks of sympathy, she gathered Jeff had told them. Earlier, that thought might have distressed her. Now it seemed natural that he'd tell his family everything.

After dinner, she sat in the quiet of the living room, listening to the soft familiar voices. Rose had started a new canvas, and a soft glow filled her corner of the room as she experimented with background colors. Jeff and his grandfather sat bent over yet another chess game. Tonight there were no distracting stories. She missed the sound of Grampa's voice, but the comfortable silence let her mind rest. After a time, feeling sleep tug hard at her soul, she said good night.

Jeff followed her to her room. "Are you going to be okay?"

She nodded, not really believing it. "I suppose I will be in time. Right now I just don't know what to do."

"Can I do anything to help?"

"No."

He nodded, shifting uncomfortably. She thought he might want to say something else, but he didn't. Turning, he started to go, then suddenly turned back and lifted his hands.

"May the Winds bring guidance," he signed, and smiled a little, then left her.

She smiled in return, tears in her eyes at his understanding. The small warm bed seemed to welcome her as she slid beneath the blankets. Within moments, she slept. And dreamed.

\* \* \*

She saw her mother's face. Not the mother who'd raised her, but the mother who had died, brutally, at the hands of the White Fur People. She looked just as she had in the picture Lark had seen that morning. Blonde and pretty, happy perhaps, with a small smile curving her lips.

Then she heard her mother's voice. A true memory, she was certain, a sweet, indistinct voice

that sang. A pure voice, a voice much like her own.

For a moment, it was as if she were with her mother again, feeling the warmth of her arms as the singing voice wrapped her in beauty. Then a roar filled her ears, a sound of relentless danger.

A wind rose, huge and circling, one of the violent summer storms that ravaged the grasslands. Lark had never seen one, but had heard accounts during the summer fairs. It roared through her, around her, and ripped her mother away. Looking up, she saw herself in it, as well, and Jeff, and suddenly it was as if everything she'd ever known had been shredded by the ravaging storm, ripped up by the roots and torn to irretrievable pieces.

The dream heaved as fear took over. She wanted to leave, now, before the fear destroyed her. But she held firm, and abruptly the wind was gone.

She walked down a narrow path in the forest near her childhood home. It twisted and wound beneath dense overhanging branches so she could barely see where she was going. The oppressive tangles and the darkness took her breath away. She began to run. Branches whipped her face and arms. Screaming and tears rose in her throat and she ran and ran and ran...

Suddenly the trees disappeared and the path was covered with sunlight. The roar of moving water filled her head. A small wood and rope bridge, the precarious type the White Fur People built for temporary passage, spanned the water.

She stepped carefully onto the bridge. It swayed under her feet, more than it should have, threatening at every step to plunge her into the torrent below. Finally, sick from the swaying, she stopped halfway and looked down at the water.

It swirled and spun beneath her, in white-foamed rapids the likes of which she'd never seen in reality. For a moment, she was certain she'd plunged into it, or was going to, but the strange, suspended dream-moment passed and she found herself once again safe on the swaying bridge.

The sound of the water rose until there was nothing else in the world. In it, she heard voices—her own, Jeff's, the indistinct rumble of a crowd of humans, all talking at the same time. The sound of starship engines. The roar of wind. The pounding of her own heart.

She looked down at the water again. The white foam had turned pink. Suddenly it was red, blood-foamed water pouring, roiling, roaring under her feet.

Startled, she looked at her hands. Blood flowed from the tip of one finger, dripping steadily into the water. Somehow the small drops colored the pounding foam until the whole river was made of blood. It flowed away from her, relentlessly, the sound of the water gradually became one with the sound of her beating heart.

She woke abruptly, sweating. Her breath burned in her chest and tears burned her eyes. The meaning of the dream eluded her as its memory turned into fear. Her fingers found her string of beads, caressing them until she faded back into sleep.

She dreamed again, this time of the small house, where, in a small bedroom, Walks Crooked sat stringing beads. Noisy Girl again, she walked into the room and sat by her mother, who took her in her arms and held her until the sun rose.

\* \* \*

She woke to light and silence. Jenna no longer lay in the bed across the room. Lark pulled on a shirt and loose pants and went out into the living room.

Jenna sat alone at the kitchen table, again in front of her computer. No one else appeared to be awake. She looked up and smiled as Lark approached. Out the wide living room window, a misty sunset was underway.

“Good morning,” Jenna said. “How are you doing?”

Lark sat next to the other woman. The dream lay heavy in the back of her memory, untangling itself gradually. Its exact meaning still eluded her, but it felt dark and heavy and difficult. “All right, I guess.”

“Did you have bad dreams last night?”

The question caught her off guard. “I had dreams, yes.”

Jenna nodded. “I thought so. I heard you crying in your sleep. I wondered if I should wake you, but it didn’t seem like the right thing to do.”

“Thank you.” It frightened her to know that the important messages of her dream might have been waylaid by Jenna’s act of kindness. It was yet another indication of the gulf between her and the people she should have been able to learn to understand. “My people believe dreams carry messages from the Winds. My dreams weren’t pleasant, but they were important.”

Jenna nodded. “I’m glad I didn’t disturb you then.” She started to say something else, but stopped.

“What are you working on?” Lark asked. She wasn’t sure she wanted to talk about her dream, but she wanted to talk about something.

“Just arranging my schedule. I have a couple of stories to work on when I get back from vacation, and I’m sending out requests for interviews to a few key people.”

“Aren’t you supposed to rest on vacation?”

She grinned. “I am, but I don’t know how. I’m sure you’ve already run across that trait in Jeff.”

Lark shrugged. “Not really. He’s done quite a lot of relaxing since I met him.”

Jenna quirked an eyebrow. “Then you’re an even better influence on him than I thought. Keep it up. He needs more downtime in his life.”

Lark smiled, but the smile was strained. An image flashed—the blood draining from her finger into the turbulent waters. Her life and energy draining away as she stood in the middle of the bridge. It occurred to her she’d not seen where the bridge led. From her old life, that was certain—the woods and waters of her childhood home. But what had awaited on the other shore?

“I can’t stay with him,” she said suddenly, not sure where the decision had come from. “I can’t stay here.”

Jenna chewed her lip, her eyes narrowing as she studied Lark’s face. “You’re sure?”

Hot tears sprung to Lark’s eyes and she blinked them back furiously. “I’m sure. I can’t live here on my own while he’s so far away.”

“Maybe you could live with Mom and Dad?”

“I’d never see him then. I have to either be with him or not be with him. I can’t have it partway.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I’m sure he will be too.”

“I think he already knows.”

Jenna leaned back in her chair, folding her arms over her chest. “This sucks.”

Unfamiliar with the term, Lark frowned.

“It’s not fair,” she rephrased. “It’s obvious how much you two care about each other. There should be some way for you to be together.”

“I don’t know what it is.”

Jenna seemed to want to ask another question, so Lark waited quietly. “Could you...” she trailed off, started again. “If you’d like to tell me about your dreams, I’d be happy to listen.”

Touched, Lark smiled. “Thank you. That’s very kind of you, but I don’t think I’m ready to

talk to anyone yet.” Truthfully, she didn’t think Jenna would understand. There were times she thought Jeff might, but she couldn’t ask him to carry her burden right now. He had his own decisions to make, his own crossroad to face.

“It’s okay,” said Jenna. She reached across the table, gently touching Lark’s hand. “You have good friends, Lark. In fact, I don’t think you know enough about Earth society yet to understand exactly how good.” She withdrew, looking at her own hands, almost as if ashamed. “I was going to ask you if I could interview you for a story. It would have been an exclusive—nobody else would have done the story—because your friend Fairfax stopped the reporters on Denahault from telling anyone about you.”

Lark didn’t understand. “Why would anyone want to know about me?”

“You were raised by aliens. It’s a huge story. And now, with the extra tragedy—” She broke off.

Lark stared, horrified at the implications. None of this made sense. Why would the story of her life interest Earth people? And why would the horrific details of the massacres on Denahault make it more interesting?

“People would *want* to hear about people being killed?”

“It’s not just that.” Jenna sighed. “It’s hard to explain. It’s my job and I can’t even explain it. It’s the tragedy, the emotion, even the affair with Jeff. Maybe especially the affair with Jeff. It’s one of those stories where everybody can read themselves into some part of it.”

“And you want me to tell you all about my life so you can tell the story to everyone on Earth?” The thought made her uneasy—no, more than uneasy. It made her sick. How could Jenna ask this of her? How could anyone bare themselves in this way? This was something she could barely stand to share with Jeff or Jenna on a personal level, much less allow someone to tell the whole world. “I can’t believe you would ask that from me.”

Jenna shook her head, a small, pained smile curving her mouth. “I wouldn’t. Not now. This is too hard for you as it is.” She took a long breath that ended in strained laughter. “My boss would kill me if he knew I was passing this up, but I have to. And I’m not going to tell anyone else about it, either. Those damn media leeches would eat you alive.”

Their conversation had only become more obscure. “Aren’t you a...a ‘damn media leech?’”

Jenna laughed. “Yes, I am. But not today.” She took Lark’s hand again. “I’m here for you if you need me. Strictly confidential, off the record, and all that jazz. I don’t usually approve of media blackouts, but in this case I think Fairfax knew exactly what he was doing. Someday, maybe you’ll give me that story, but not now.”

\* \* \*

After breakfast, she felt the needs of the dream pressing upon her. If she’d been among her own family, she would have retreated into the forest to examine the dream’s images and let them speak to her. Here, there was no place with enough silence.

She sat in her room, counting her amber beads and praying earnestly for guidance, but the dream images only swam around her until she felt as if she would drown. Finally, fighting tears and the sharp edge of panic, she tracked down Jeff.

“I need trees,” she said. He looked at her blankly, and she realized her words had come out as incomprehensible mush. “I need trees,” she repeated with her hands. “Take me to trees.”

He closed his hands over hers, stilling the frantic movement of her fingers. “Are you sure? We’ll have to take the bus.”



"I don't care. I have to—" She broke off, lost as to how to explain. English words wouldn't come to her, and the phrases used by the White Fur People seemed suddenly alien, certainly not something she could explain to him.

He just shook his head, his lips thinning, and clasped her shoulder. "It's all right. Don't worry about explaining it. We'll just go."

"Thank you."

They left, the rest of the family watching with concerned eyes but no comments.

The airbus, fortunately, was sparsely populated. Today, they rode away from the city instead of toward it. This relieved Lark when she managed to notice it. Something huge and ugly grew inside her. She felt like it was about to explode. She had to solve the dream. Only that would end the pressure, ease her pain.

After a time, Jeff asked, "Can you explain any of this to me?" She hesitated and he added, "It's okay if you can't or if you don't want to."

She shook her head, blinking back tears whose source she wasn't sure of. She could barely think. With her hands, she said, "I had a dream. I need to know what it means."

He nodded. "The trees will help?"

"I don't know. I hope so." A sob caught in her throat and she choked on it.

Jeff pulled her close and kissed her hair. "I love you," he whispered.

It didn't help her tears.

When they arrived at the park, Lark had to commend him for his choice. Unlike the metro park, this one had no arching dome, but was open to the bright sky above it. The air still held that ever-present metallic tang, but she could smell flowers, and trees, and the human odors were fainter.

"This is a good place," she told him.

"Go where you need to go," he answered. "It's safe, and I'll keep an eye on you."

She nodded. A few tears fell in spite of her efforts to hold them back.

He brushed them away, kissed her forehead. "I love you," he said again.

She smiled weakly. "I love you." But she knew it wouldn't change anything.

She found a grove of trees thick enough to make her feel isolated. Sitting on the ground among them, she bent her head over her amber beads and let herself go.

It happened often, in dream meditation, that the dream returned, sometimes whole, sometimes in part, sometimes with details that had escaped notice the first time. It hadn't happened to her before, but this time it did.

There was a world on either side of the bridge. The world behind her was the world of the White Fur People, the forests of Denahault. As she approached the bridge, another world came into view on the other side. Vague and shadowy, it seemed to consist of gray spires and walls. Smoke obscured it, and in her strange, suspended state, she could smell the fouled air.

Her own world. Jeff's world. The bridge between. She stepped onto the bridge.

It was stronger than it had been before. Looking down, she saw thick silver ropes added to the plant fiber ropes that held the bridge's wooden slats together. But, below her, the water still raged.

She studied the mingled silver and brown ropes. Meaning hung in their twisted bond. She could sense it, but couldn't pinpoint it. Feeling the smooth amber beads under her fingers, but no longer able to see them or the Earthbound forest where her body sat, she settled her attention on the bridge.

Would a human dream this? Would a child of the White Fur People see silver cords or

soaring metal houses in a dream?

Suddenly, there was no bridge. It disappeared beneath her feet, plunging her into the raging waters below. The water turned to foam-tipped blood, pounding her body, filling her mouth. Something brushed against her and she jerked away from it, turning at the same time to see what it was. The bloodied face of her human mother bobbed to the surface.

There were bodies all around her, human, white-furred, dead, beaten, bloodied. Their blood rose in harsh waves and swirls to drown her—

Her scream penetrated the half-dream world and threw her back into the reality of the small green park. Her breath tore ragged in her throat as her mind fought to reorient itself. Vaguely, she heard a voice.

“Are you okay?”

She stared toward the speaker. It was Jeff.

“Lark?” he said. “Lark, what’s wrong?”

She stared at him, unable to understand the smooth, hairless lines of his face. Looking down, she saw her hand clutching the string of amber beads. What were they? They meant nothing to her.

She belonged nowhere. Trying to fit into the human world was draining her soul. And she couldn’t go back to the White Fur People, not after everything that had happened. She’d changed too much. But she hadn’t changed enough.

Fear and frustration rose within her and transformed to rage. She ripped the amber beads from around her neck and flung them to the ground, then ran.

Her footsteps echoed her heartbeat. Echoed the heartbeats of the slaughtered who’d floated by her in the river. Her parents had killed her people, her people had killed her parents. She was an orphan in every sense of the word, an abandoned child with nowhere to go, no one who could understand her or the horrible pain and war raging within her. Even Jeff, who knew her better than anyone, couldn’t understand this. He had his world, his life, his dreams. His love for her had only made his choices more difficult.

She ran, not knowing where she was going, unsure where she was. The trees rushed past, smelling of Denahault. Then, suddenly, there were no more trees and strange, furless humans stared at her as she ran by, hair and tears streaming after her.

She ducked back into the trees, dodging and leaping like a wild forest animal. She couldn’t have spoken words if she’d had to. All that was human had left her; all that was White Fur was suspect.

A wall rose in front of her, so suddenly she almost didn’t veer in time. She ran alongside until it rose in front of her again. It seemed to be everywhere, around every corner, trapping her. Overcome, she crumpled to the ground.

Warmth found her then, Jeff’s arms clutching her close. She tried to shrug him away, but he held tight. She tried to speak, but couldn’t form the words, couldn’t control her voice. Her fingers moved against him, over and over, “I don’t belong, I don’t belong.”

He pressed his face against her hair, caught her hands in one of his to still her fingers.

“I love you,” he said. “I love you.”

But she couldn’t help thinking that didn’t matter anymore.

\* \* \*

On the airbus on the way home, she stood silently in the circle of his arms, letting his warmth

and his smell soothe her. He honored her silence until they arrived in front of his parents' apartment building, when he took her hand and said, "What happened on Denahault, with your parents—it doesn't mean anything for us."

She shook her head. "How can it not?" She'd regained control of her voice, but the spoken words felt alien as they formed in her mouth.

"It was a long time ago."

"But it shows me again that I don't belong. The White Fur People raised me out of guilt. The humans on Denahault—even Trieka and Fairfax—took me in out of duty."

"I don't think that's true. But whatever our reasons, all of us grew to love you."

"Does it matter?"

"Yes. It matters a great deal."

She shook her head, not sure of anything anymore. Except for one. "I can't live here."

His hand tightened on hers. "I know."

Rose was the only one home. She was chopping vegetables at the kitchen sink and Lark thought she might cry again at the sight of the simple, familiar work.

"Something came in the mail for you, Jeff," she said, then saw Lark's face. "Is everything all right?"

"Not really," Jeff answered. "It will be, though. I hope."

He flipped on the kitchen computer to check his mail. Lark sat next to him, not wanting to eavesdrop but wanting to know what was going on. When he didn't comment on her nearness, she stayed where she was and listened.

The message was from the admiral. Lark had seen his face briefly before, when Jeff had been going through old messages on his palm unit. He seemed sharp and severe, his hair too short, his face too angular.

"I need a signature from you to get this finalized, Commander," he said, sounding frustrated, if not angry. He'd sounded that way in the other message she'd seen too, so maybe it was just his manner. "Get back to me immediately so we can set up a meeting. And start answering your wrist comm."

Jeff glanced at his wrist. A red light was blinking. He pushed a few buttons, then leaned back in his chair. "I'm on vacation, for Pete's sake," he muttered, then addressed the computer. "Admiral, I'd be happy to meet with you to finalize the paperwork after my vacation is over. In the meantime, you have my official signature on file. I'll be leaving for Denahault in the next few days. I have a personal matter to attend to. When I return, I'll waive the last two weeks of vacation to see that this matter is settled."

He pushed a button while Lark watched him with a dead feeling in her chest.

"This sucks," he said.

Remembering Jenna's use of the phrase, Lark agreed. It felt worse than that, though, worse than any words she could remember. She pressed a hand against her chest. "My heart hurts."

Blinking hard, he took her in his arms. "Mine too."

\* \* \*

Randall took Rose out to dinner that night. Jenna had taken Grampa to Chicago for a concert and wouldn't be back until the next day.

Jeff spent most of the afternoon making arrangements to take Lark back to Denahault. Several times she had to bite her lip to keep from telling him to stop, that she'd stay, but in her

heart, she knew he was right. She would die here—if not in body, then in spirit. It seemed the only place she'd found a happy medium was on Denahault, in the little city where the forest crept into the backyard and birds still perched on windowsills.

Alone in the small apartment that night, they turned to each other for comfort and ended up naked in the middle of the living room floor. Lark wasn't sure, after having spent time with the woman, that Rose would disapprove.

She needed Jeff, in any case. Needed to feel his hands and mouth on her, his heat inside her, his love pouring over her in torrents somehow untouched by pain. In those moments, they could forget the good-byes that lay around the corner.

Later, curled against his warm chest, an unbidden thought plunged her again into tears. She would never have his baby. He asked her what was wrong, but she couldn't say it.

"I love you," she finally managed and let him coax her to sleep.

# FIFTEEN

By the end of the week, they were on Earthstar II again, expecting to catch a small military flight to Denahault the next day. They shared a room this time, as well as a bed, but their lovemaking over the past few days had felt so much like a string of good-byes that Lark wasn't sure she wanted to go through it again.

Jeff, though trying to make the best of things, had also succumbed to the general sense of gloom. His brain insisted there had to be a logical solution to their dilemma, but nothing presented itself. He would take her to Denahault, where perhaps she could find some middle ground and live her life in peace and happiness. Then he'd launch himself into the stars, where his dreams had always pointed him.

There was no point unpacking, since they were leaving the next day, so, after stowing their suitcases in their cabin, they headed for the observation lounge.

The view was as awe-inspiring as ever, with the blue-green curve of the Earth against an endless starfield. Lark watched it with a frown, and Jeff wondered what she was thinking.

Before he could ask, a figure approached their small table. He looked up to see Captain Stanton. He was frowning too.

"Commander Anderson," he said.

"Captain. Good to see you again."

"Mind if I join you?"

Jeff glanced at Lark. She shrugged, then managed a smile. Stanton didn't miss the exchange. "Maybe it's a bad time?"

"No," Lark put in. Jeff couldn't help smiling at her graciousness. "It's fine. Please join us."

Stanton nodded and sat. "I'm afraid this isn't a social call, Commander. I'd like to ask a favor."

"Personal or professional?"

"A little of both. I've got an emergency at home, and my second-in-command is on shore leave. Normally, command would pass to Lieutenant Cabrini, but she's only been on board a week and I just can't turn the station over to her at this stage."

"Understandable. So you need someone to step in to the command position for a few days?"

"Probably a week. Maybe as much as two."

"What's going on?"

"My life-partner was involved in an airbus accident." Pain in Stanton's eyes, quickly quelled. "It was touch-and-go at first, but they're saying now he'll recover...His hands—he's a musician."

"You should be with him."

Stanton looked startled at the sound of Lark's voice, as if he'd forgotten she was there.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," she added.

"It's okay," said Jeff. "If I do this, it means we won't be able to go on to Denahault for a week or two. Are you sure that's okay with you?"

"Yes. His partner needs him. He should go." She hadn't so much as flinched at Stanton's mention of a male life-partner. Were there gay White Fur People?

Jeff shrugged, turning back to Stanton. "That's a yes, then, if the admiral approves."

"I've already talked to him. He said it was fine if I could talk you out of your vacation."

"He's a little miffed with me."

"I got that impression." Stanton stopped, shaking his head. "I can't thank you enough for this, Jeff. I owe you one."

"I'll be sure to collect when I get a chance."

"What's your partner's name?" Lark asked.

"Brendan," Stanton answered after a brief hesitation. "His name's Brendan."

"Brendan," Lark repeated. "I'll think of him and send wishes for his recovery."

"Thank you." Stanton seemed surprised. "That's very kind of you."

He and Jeff conferred for a few more minutes. Jeff would meet with him this evening and first thing in the morning for a briefing on the more obscure duties of a space station commander. This would allow Stanton to catch the late morning shuttle back to Earth. Jeff couldn't help wondering what he'd just set himself up for, but at the same time he knew it was the right thing to do.

As they walked back to their cabin, he slipped an arm around Lark, who leaned into him. She still seemed lost in her own thoughts. "Are you sure this is okay with you?"

"Yes. I'm sure. The captain needs your help. It's not a good thing to be apart from someone you love, especially when he needs you."

He paused to unlock the cabin door. "I'm sorry about all this, Lark."

She went in and sat on the bed, hands folded in her lap. "I think I knew at the beginning where it would end."

"I had a suspicion too, but that doesn't make it any easier." He sat next to her and held her. She leaned into him.

"I wish—" She hesitated. "At least we'll be able to spend a little more time together."

"That's true."

She folded her hands across her chest. "I want to pray for his friend, but I'm not sure how."

"Why?"

"I don't have my beads. I threw them away in the trees..."

"I remember." He stood and lifted his suitcase, hefting it onto the bed. She watched as he opened it, curious. He reached into a pocket in the back of the case and drew out the string of amber. "I picked them up. I knew you'd want them eventually."

Her sad smile rewarded him as she took the beads from his hand and pressed them to her chest. "Thank you."

He brushed her hair, combing his fingers into it. "You're welcome." His hand found the back of her neck, pressing gently at the base of her skull. She liked that caress, he knew. It relaxed her. "Lark, if you want to go on without me—"

"No. I'll stay here. Unless there's some reason I should go. Does it cost you money for me to stay?"

"A little. Not enough to worry about." In fact, putting her up on the space station for two weeks would cost him a pretty penny, unless he could convince someone in charge to accept her as his domestic partner in the absence of an official contract. He could afford it, though, particularly since he'd be getting a promotion in a few weeks. "I just don't want you to feel obligated. If it becomes unbearable for you here, like it was on Earth, I hope you'll tell me. We can work something out."

"I'll tell you." She put her string of beads around her neck. "But I liked it here last time. I

think I'll like it this time too."

\* \* \*

It only took them a few days to fall into a routine. Jeff would wake up at 0500 and they'd go to breakfast together, after which he'd head to the command center. He was off duty by 1800, after which he was available to the crew for emergencies only.

This left Lark with a great deal of free time, but she found herself not minding at all. After the first day, she'd found a routine for herself, and discovered that her path crossed his more times than she'd expected.

The first day, remembering the band at Mabel's and their standing invitation to join them, she tracked them down. Mabel herself took her to the empty storage area where they rehearsed in the afternoons. Lark made a note to come back at 1400. Then she asked Mabel how to read a clock.

Having quickly mastered that skill, she went on. Signs led her to the hydroponics garden. That sounded more promising than the tiny hydroponics closet on the *Starchild*, and gardens as a general rule were good.

She wasn't disappointed. Vague memories of greenery were supplanted by the reality of plants and flowers. Small signs on the walls gave information about the plants and the function they performed for the space station. Lark struggled through a few sentences, then discovered a button which activated a voice to read the lines aloud.

As well as supplying food for the station's inhabitants, the plants made fresh air. This explained the sweeter smell of the station, compared to the staleness of the *Starchild*'s shipboard air and the metallic, dirty taste of Earth. She listened to a soft female voice read the names of the flowers and herbs, then walked the narrow paths through the flora. It was a quiet, mostly deserted place.

At one curve in the path, she encountered a woman with a young boy. She spoke to them for a time. They lived on the station full-time, as the woman's husband was the station's trip coordinator.

"What does that mean?" Lark ventured. Her conversation seemed to be going smoothly, and she was glad for someone to talk to.

"He makes sure there are enough trips to accommodate outbound passengers, and he schedules shuttles from Earth to the station. It's gotten more complicated over the last year or so as traffic has increased. The colony planets are starting to become popular vacation spots."

"How long have you lived here?"

"Oh, goodness..." The woman considered. "Danny's six next week, and he was born about a year after we transferred here, so I guess it's been seven years."

Seven years. Lark thought about that later as she sat on a bench near the center of the garden, fingering her beads and breathing the fresh green smells. They'd seemed happy, and the little boy had been bright and friendly. His mother taught him herself, she said, as there weren't enough children on the station yet to justify a formal school. But the mothers worked together to take care of educational needs. It seemed reasonable. The White Fur People didn't have formal schools either.

She stayed for a time, went to eat lunch, then met the band for rehearsal. They greeted her with smiles and unexpected hugs. Not only was she welcome at the rehearsal, but they asked her to join them for the evening's performance.

Jeff met her for dinner and watched with frank appreciation as she sang with the band. He loved her voice, adored the honey-and-whiskey tones that emerged when she sang. The lyrics were still unclear, marred by her accent and her lack of practice, but it didn't matter. With a voice like that shaping them, nobody really cared what the words were.

"How was your day?" he asked her that evening as they got ready for bed.

"It was good," she said, with the happiest smile he'd seen on her face since they'd left Denahault. "I really like the garden."

\* \* \*

For years, Jeff had heard space station work decried as monotonous, tedious and not much more exciting than running a hotel. So, though he'd felt good about his decision to help Captain Stanton, he hadn't been looking forward to the work.

The first days, though, proved more involving than he'd expected. The job lacked the excitement of hurtling through hyperspace, but the people were friendly for the most part and several of the science officers really knew their stuff. He found himself eating lunch on his third day with the chief engineer, who was working with a station-board team to develop a more energy efficient hyperspace engine. Jeff had always been intrigued by the mechanics of the hyperspace drive and lunch flew by in a flurry of animated conversation.

Then there was Dr. Mitchell, the woman in charge of the hydroponic garden, who supervised a team of geneticists trying to perfect varieties of plants to be grown shipboard. Her practical lab was the hydroponics closet on board the *Starchild*, and she wanted to hear his perspective on how the closet had performed in the past and what improvements he could suggest based on firsthand experience.

As the days went by, he found the routine more and more satisfying. And when he came back to his cabin, he found Lark nearly as happy as he'd ever seen her, often still singing, and in a mood that more often than not had them rolling into bed for a quickie before dinner.

By the end of the week, his thoughts were racing.

\* \* \*

"It's really been nice having you here. I have to say we'll be sorry to see you go."

Jeff shook the hand of his current second-in-command, the Lieutenant Cabrini whose inexperience had led him to this situation. "I know what you mean. It's been an interesting experience so far."

Cabrini laughed, her dark eyes sparkling. "I hope you mean that in a good way."

He grinned back. "Of course."

There were other greetings, other comments about the competency of his command. He'd finished his first full week on board the station and had decided to commemorate the occasion with an informal reception at Mabel's. He'd done it on his own dime too, as he didn't want the admiral getting wind of it right away. The admiral was too prone to odd ideas.

From the back of the reception room, the entertainment purred along with Lark at the lead mike. He watched her for a moment, smiling. Her enunciation had improved greatly. He'd sat in on her rehearsal earlier in the day to find the other lead vocalist coaching her not only on her singing technique, but on her pronunciation. She still had a strong accent, but it gave her an exotic air. At least he thought so.



“Your lady friend has a remarkable voice.” This was from the chief engineer, Lieutenant Perrine. Their first lunch together had turned into several more, until Jeff had found himself helping Perrine write a proposal to the admiral for a new research grant. Jeff judged the man a genius.

“Yes, she does.”

“I heard she’s going back to Denahault.”

He tried to ignore the twinge of pain. “That’s the plan.”

“Too bad. You two look happy together.”

“We are, for the moment. But—” He stopped, uncomfortable with what he’d almost said. He didn’t know Perrine that well.

“But starship command doesn’t mesh very well with a family life.” Perrine stopped to clap as the band finished their number. “Captain Stanton’s been here a year. Brendan’s spent a good amount of that time on board with him.”

Jeff heard what the other man hadn’t said. It was the same thing he’d been thinking for the last few days. But he wasn’t sure it was the right answer. He quickly changed the subject. “Have you heard from the admiral on that latest proposal?”

\* \* \*

Later that night, he lay in bed, watching Lark undress. She stopped halfway through the process to peer at her naked self in the mirror.

“I look different,” she said.

“Yes, you do.” She’d put on weight since he’d met her, due to the extreme lifestyle change. Different food, less exercise, no more traipsing around the woods, picking berries and hunting small animals. She’d gone from wiry and slim to lush, with curves in all the places he liked them. And her tan had faded, while her hair was a bit darker from the lack of sun exposure. Her skin had gone from honey to wheat, her hair in the opposite direction.

“Is that good or bad?” She turned to him to ask the question, her slightly larger breasts bobbing as she moved.

“You’re beautiful.”

She peered at her image a few minutes longer, preening in a way that had him aching. When she finally slid into bed, he didn’t bother to try to keep his hands off her. Laughing, she yielded as he reexamined all her new curves.

Later, with her sleeping in his arms, he reflected on the perfection of their current situation. The idea that had come to him was never a path he’d imagined his life taking, but now it compelled him to wonder why he hadn’t considered it a long time ago.

The next morning, he wrote his own proposal for the admiral.

\* \* \*

“I can’t believe it’s been two weeks already. It seems like you just got here.”

Delia looped her arm through Lark’s as they walked together down the corridor toward the rehearsal room. She played keyboards for the band, while her husband Richie now shared lead vocals with Lark. They’d all become quick friends, and Lark had begun to feel like she’d lived here for months.

“I know what you mean,” she said. “But I also feel like I’ve been here for a long time.”

"You like it here, don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

"You should talk to that boyfriend of yours. It seems like he's doing a pretty good job running the place."

She couldn't say the thought hadn't occurred to her. But, as much as she liked the space station, as much as it seemed to offer her the best of both worlds, Lark couldn't ask Jeff to give up his lifelong dream. Maybe later, when he'd had his time among the stars, she could present the idea to him. If he still wanted her then. If she could find him again.

"I might," she told Delia, but sadness had crept again into her heart.

They arrived at the door to the rehearsal room, Delia still clinging to Lark's arm. Delia had fallen silent, and there was something odd about her smile as the door slid open...

"Surprise!"

The whole band shouted in one voice as Lark stood stock still and wondered if her heart would ever start beating again. Finally it did, hard and fast and feeling like it had a long recovery ahead of it. Everyone was smiling, so it had to be safe, but she couldn't comprehend why they'd all jumped and shouted at her.

At her obvious discomfort, Delia put an arm around her shoulders and shook her gently. "Sweetie, it's a surprise party. Haven't you ever had one before?"

"No," Lark managed. "I've never had any kind of a party before." She stopped, looking at the cake, the brightly wrapped presents, the small circle of smiling faces. "You did this for me?"

And then, to everyone's surprise, she burst into tears.

\* \* \*

A big piece of cake, heaped with pink and white icing, helped her recover. As she scraped the last of the icing from her plate, Delia said, "I can't believe you've never had a party. What kind of parents did you have, anyway?"

"A furry mother who doesn't speak English." She'd told her new friends little about her past, but the answer popped out now, driven by the absurdity of the situation.

"Huh?" said Delia, and Lark explained.

Rehearsal and presents forgotten, the band members sat in rapt attention as she told them her story. The whole story, including the massacres that had led to her adoption. When she'd finished, tears had intruded again and her friends were staring in amazement.

"I heard something about a wild child from Denahault," Richie said. "I had no clue it was you."

"That's so sad about your parents," Delia added. "And you didn't even know until you went to Earth?"

"No." Lark sniffed, then wiped her eyes and nose on a tissue someone pressed into her hand. "I'm still not sure what to think. It hurts."

Delia hugged her. "Of course it does. You've been through so much, hon. I had no idea."

"It's so romantic," gushed Missy, the drummer. "*So Romeo and Juliet.*"

"Who are they?"

Missy told the story briefly and Lark looked at her in horror. "That's an awful story!"

She seemed disappointed by Lark's reaction. "I didn't mean you've had the same story. It's just, you know, the feuding families and all."

"I don't want to feud. But I can't stay on Earth, and he can't stay on Denahault."

"You both seem to like it here," Delia offered.

She shook her head. "I can't ask that. All he's ever wanted is to be a starship captain. It's his dream."

Delia hugged her again and Lark clung to her. Not since her stay at the Fairfaxes had she felt so welcome and at home. It felt good. Jeff's family had been friendly enough, but she'd never been able to relax, knowing what lay outside their cozy walls.

"Let's don't think about it for a while," Delia suggested. "Why don't you open your presents? That'll take your mind off things."

So she did, and it worked. Wearing a new brightly colored cardigan Delia had given her, Lark felt better, though none of her doubts had been relieved.

"You know," Delia said, scooping up a generous fingerful of leftover icing, "there are a lot of things you could do if you stayed here. I don't know if you'd have the same opportunities on Denahault."

"I could get a job as a translator on Denahault." She was certain of that. "They need as many people as they can get to act as liaisons between the White Fur People and the human settlers."

"But what about your music?"

She shrugged. Jeff had mentioned that possibility, but at the time it had seemed so unrealistic, she hadn't thought about it again. She considered her music an amusement more than anything else. "I suppose I could find somewhere to sing."

"But if you stayed here, you could get into a study program through one of the planet-bound universities. You can take long-distance computer classes—it's how most of the kids on board get at least part of their education, and several of the crew members have pursued advanced degrees that way. You could study music. You could study anything."

Lark nodded, intrigued by the idea. "I could study music?"

"Sure. You wouldn't have to be a great performer, but you'd have the option of teaching later if you wanted."

"If I lived here and Jeff took the job on the *Starchild*, I'd see him more often than if I lived on Earth, wouldn't I?"

"Yes, but you'd still be apart for months at a time." She rubbed Lark's shoulders, comforting. "If he's determined to take that job, you need to think about what's best for you. So if you think it'd be better to be with your family, you should go back to Denahault. But if you decide you'd like to stay here, or even just try it out for a while, we'll all be here. We can be your family."

The tears, which had never been far, fell again, soft and warm. "That's so nice." Impulsively, she hugged Delia, then Richie, then Missy, who hadn't said much but who'd contributed numerous serious and encouraging nods. "Thank you so much."

They managed to rehearse once the cake was gone, but Lark could barely sing past her tears. She finally sat out, listening, while Richie took over the vocals. When they finished, there were more hugs and words of encouragement, then she walked to the garden.

She'd intended to return to her cabin, but she had too much to think about. In the sweet-smelling garden, she could meditate, count her beads, and perhaps find a single path through the many that suddenly faced her.

\* \* \*

Returning to their cabin after his shift, Jeff was surprised to find it empty. Lark usually came home in time to meet him, and he'd find her studying her reading or practicing songs from the afternoon's rehearsal. But today she was gone.

Frowning, he considered. He had a gift for her and had been hoping to present it as soon as he got off duty. Then he remembered the surprise party. Maybe it had run late. But two hours? It seemed unlikely. Again, he wished he'd been able to make it, but a sudden call from the admiral had prevented it. He smiled, thinking about that conversation. The admiral hadn't seemed able to decide if he was angry or relieved.

But back to the question at hand—where was Lark? Then, suddenly, the answer was obvious. She would have had a difficult day emotionally, with the party and the knowledge she'd be leaving the station soon. He headed for hydroponics.

She sat on one of the marble benches in the flower garden, sliding her beads between her fingers, her eyes closed. She looked like she'd been crying, and Jeff's heart twinged with pain and guilt. He should have spoken earlier about his plans, but he'd been afraid they wouldn't work out, and, in the end, would have caused her even more pain.

Slowly, as silently as possible, he sat next to her. After a moment she opened her eyes and looked at him.

"Hi," he said, smiling.

"Hi." She leaned into him and he put an arm over her shoulders, scooting a little closer.

"How was the party?"

"It was good. How did you know?"

"Delia told me. She wanted to know what she could get you." He fingered her shoulder, the soft cotton of her bright new sweater. "Looks like she made a good choice."

"I like it."

"I'm sorry I couldn't be there. I got a call from the admiral as I was walking out the door."

"What did he want?"

"I need to talk to you about that. Can we go back to the cabin?"

They walked silently, hand-in-hand, back to the cabin, where Jeff put a disk in the computer and sat on the bed while she watched.

The disk contained an edited version of the proposal he'd sent to the admiral early in the week. Knowing it would be difficult for Lark to read it, Jeff had augmented the written text with video explanations he'd recorded during odd moments of free time. She watched with rapt attention while he tried to judge her reaction. In her lap, her hands twisted the string of amber beads.

When it had finished running, she turned to him, a strange expression on her face. She looked like she was about to cry. He hadn't expected that.

"I can't let you do this," she said.

He hadn't expected that, either. "Why?"

"You've always wanted to command a starship. I can't let you give up your dream. Not for me."

"Come here." When she was sitting on the bed next to him, he put his arms around her, held her close. "You were willing to give up your family for me, your whole life, everything you'd ever known or understood about yourself and who you were. The least I can do is sacrifice a job."

"But it's not just a job to you. It's a dream."

He shook his head. "No. Not really. Not anymore. I had an idea of what I wanted to do and

who I wanted to be, but being here, doing this job, has changed that idea. I can be happy here. There's so much here to do, so many opportunities. With the proposal I gave the admiral, I'd still be available for one trip a year to a colony planet. At least a few of those trips would involve command. The way schedules run on the colony ships, they'll need me at least that often."

"What about Captain Stanton?"

"He's requested to be considered for an Earthbound post. His partner has a long rehabilitation ahead of him and Stanton wants to be available to help. That was partly why the admiral called me today. He'd considered my proposal and was already leaning toward accepting it, but he also wanted to be sure I could stay for a few more weeks while things were settled with Stanton."

"Will we, then?"

"I can't speak for you, but I told him I could make myself available." He kissed her hair, then moved a little away, to look into her face. "Would you stay with me?"

Overwhelmed, Lark pressed her face into his chest. He held her there for a moment, then she looked back up at him. "Jeff, this is too much. I don't know what to say."

"Say yes."

"Are you sure? Are you sure you could stay here and love it and not live the rest of your life wishing you'd become captain of the *Starchild*?"

"I'm sure. I never thought I could get so much satisfaction out of a job that wasn't on board a colony ship, but these past two weeks have been great. I'm working on a research project with Lieutenant Perrine, and if you're interested, I could probably get you a position helping Mitchell's team with their research in the hydroponics gardens."

"I can go to school," she interrupted. "Delia told me today I could study music through an Earth school."

He nodded enthusiastically. "I hadn't thought of it, but yes, you could. And you could keep singing. And we could get married."

"Yes," she said before he'd finished the sentence. The light in her eyes meant more to him than the *Starchild*'s command chair ever could. "Yes. I'll marry you, and I'll stay here with you, and maybe, every once in a while, we could go back to Denahault to visit my mother."

"It can be arranged." He embraced her suddenly, holding her hard against him, barely able to believe he'd be able to do this every day of his life. "It can definitely be arranged."

\* \* \*

A month later, Walks Crooked became the first Denahault native to travel by starship. She arrived on board Earthstar II overwhelmed and a bit disoriented by the trip, but happy beyond words to see her daughter again. There'd been discussion of having the wedding on Denahault, but Walks Crooked had insisted on seeing where her daughter would be living. She wanted to know Noisy Girl would be happy.

And Noisy Girl *was* happy, as she pledged her life to Star Man. Trieka, who'd managed to drag her reluctant husband through an unwelcome bout of hyperspace sickness, provided interpretation of the ceremony for their honored guest. And when her daughter kissed her new husband in front of the wash of stars outside the observation lounge window, Walks Crooked wept, as any mother would.

# About the Author

Katriena Knights wrote her first poem, “Ode to a Pancake”, at the age of three, and has since become the award-winning author of several paranormal and contemporary romances.

Katriena grew up in a Podunkish town in the middle of a cornfield in East Central Illinois, and now lives in a Podunkish town in the middle of the Colorado mountains with her husband, two children, two Siberian huskies, a ferret and several very stupid aquarium fish. In her “spare” time she likes to read, watch TV, catch up on movies and play guitar.

Katriena loves to hear from her readers and can be contacted through her web page at <http://www.bewellweb.com/kkpage.html>.

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# **STARCHILD**

**KATRIENA KNIGHTS**



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any person or persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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# ONE

“Yes, Admiral, I received the updated estimates as soon as I arrived at the space station.”

The fact he spoke via a vidphone link didn’t stop Harrison Fairfax from pressing thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose, trying to quell the dull headache that only worsened his nausea.

“Is there a problem?” Admiral Derocher asked brusquely, managing to cancel the pleasant cadence of his Jamaican accent.

Fairfax looked up, hoping he wouldn’t lose his meager lunch in front of the admiral. “No, not at all. Four billion is still well within my range. I’ve already got my accountants working on it. If you’d like to check back around five o’clock, I can give you an update.”

“That would be fine.” Derocher cleared his throat. “I hope you have a pleasant trip.”

Fairfax swallowed, smiled wryly. “So far it’s been a living hell. But thanks anyway.”

Derocher nodded once. Fairfax, assuming the admiral was finished, broke the vidphone connection and carefully stretched out on the narrow couch. One hand fumbled in the overnight bag on the floor, eventually emerging with a large dark blue bottle. The space station’s doctor had given him a prescription, but Fairfax had left the little foil packet of pills in the bathroom. He’d tried those pills before—they were useless.

He tipped the bottle to his mouth and took a swig. A product of Fairfax Pharmaceuticals, the travel sickness medication lacked a patent and a few levels of government approval, but it worked.

Ever since his parents and older brother had died in a plane crash fifteen years ago, Fairfax hadn’t been able to fly in any vehicle without medication. Fortunately, the nausea had begun to fade when he’d reached the space station. Apparently his subconscious didn’t differentiate between airplanes and space shuttles, but the big, stable space station was acceptable. Hopefully the big behemoth of an interplanetary vessel wouldn’t upset him, either.

He sat up gingerly, and the room didn’t spin. Good. Flipping on his computer pad, he dialed into MediaNet.

Not for the first time, he wondered exactly what kind of situation he was getting into. Two days ago he’d been sitting at home in New SanFran, hacking into State Department files, when Admiral Derocher had called. Nothing to do with the hacking, thank God. Rather, he’d been interested in discussing an investment opportunity. One extended by EarthFed President Schumann himself. Could Fairfax be on a shuttle in twenty-four hours?

Of course, Fairfax could. Even billionaire financier Harrison Fairfax didn’t say no to EarthFed President Schumann. So here he was, over 20,000 miles above the Earth, waiting for his accountants to work up a plan for investing in the Earth colony of Denahault.

He still wasn’t completely sure why.

He took another swig from the bottle, probably putting himself well over the recommended daily dosage. His search of MediaNet had provided a nice selection of public domain files. He scanned the information, nodding to himself from time to time.

Information on the Denahault colony was spotty, but there was no mention of financial problems. Access to the detailed records, unsurprisingly, had been denied. So why was Derocher

in charge of courting Fairfax's investment? It wasn't the kind of thing admirals usually dealt with, and the colony didn't even appear to need the money.

Fairfax had his suspicions. There was nothing for it but to see how things played out.

The next part held more immediate interest.

The departure of the EarthFed starship *Starchild* had been delayed until late tomorrow to accommodate Fairfax's arrival. The ship's captain was one Trieka Cavendish. She'd graduated with honors from the EarthFed Academy, maintaining a spotless record since. Not necessarily a good sign. Unquestionable loyalty, as far as Fairfax was concerned, spoke rather poorly for her.

Then again, he probably knew things she didn't.

He read the rest of her rather impressive professional bio, then turned off the computer. He was scheduled to meet her at six p.m.—he'd size her up then, see if he could get some sense of what she might know.

Not that he expected to be able to trust her. In his position, Fairfax could afford to trust no one.

\* \* \*

Captain Trieka Cavendish was fifteen minutes early for her evening one-on-one briefing because she hated to be late and had little patience with those who were. Hopefully, her guest wouldn't be so punctual, so she could vent some of her annoyance on him.

"Mr. Fairfax," she pictured herself saying. "You may be a civilian, and you may own half the United States and selected chunks of Europe, but while you're on my ship, you'll obey my rules. And one of those is punctuality."

Trieka smiled a little, crossing the small private dining room to look out the viewport. She wasn't normally so vindictive, but it had been a long and frustrating day.

The viewport at the moment afforded a view of Earth, partially obstructed by a protuberance of the space station. Watching Earth drift out of viewing distance with the rotation of EarthStar II, Trieka thought not of the distances and what she would leave behind, but of her desire to begin her mission.

She turned away, her smile turning wry but not quite bitter. Thanks to Admiral Derocher and the too-rich-for-his-own-good Mr. Harrison Fairfax, she'd have to wait another twelve hours.

The door slid open and Trieka glanced toward it, expecting Fairfax. Instead a waiter breezed in, carrying a large tray of fruit and cheese. Mabel's Station Café had supplied private waitstaff to go with the private room. If Trieka had been briefing any other passenger, she would have had to do it shipboard, in one of the claustrophobic closets reserved for the purpose.

"Is this acceptable?" the waiter asked, setting the big silver tray on the big silver table. "Commander Anderson suggested it."

Trieka nodded, eyeing the cheese squares hungrily. "This is fine. Apparently our guest won't be up to rumaki."

The fresh-faced waiter smiled engagingly. "The commander suggested a change to the entrée as well. The cook settled on a bland pasta dish."

Trieka nodded. Now Fairfax was ruining her dinner. She'd been looking forward to that filet mignon. "Sounds appropriate. Thank you."

"Can I bring you anything else?"

"Just water, please." Fairfax wouldn't be up to wine, and Trieka was on duty.

"Good enough. There's a call button under the edge of the table if you need anything else."

“Thank you.”

As soon as the waiter was gone, Trieka pounced on the cheese. Busy with preboard all day, she hadn't had much for lunch. And then she'd gotten the call from Admiral Derocher.

Her departure had been delayed to accommodate Fairfax, who would be joining the two hundred and forty-eight colonists traveling to Denahault, by direct request of EarthFed President Schumann. EarthFed had apparently decided to court private investors to support the colonization effort, and Fairfax was the first target. It was an important development that would draw media and put Trieka in the kind of political position she generally tried to avoid.

The strong white cheddar practically melted in her mouth. No dehydrated, reconstituted shipboard rations here. She glanced at her watch: 1610. He was late.

Trieka wasn't surprised. She'd spent part of the afternoon watching media vidclips of Fairfax and thought she knew something about him. Poised, handsome, self-assured, richer than God, he wasn't the kind of man who would care particularly if he left someone like Trieka hanging. She picked up another cheese square and let herself seethe.

The door slid open again and Trieka turned. The waiter returned, behind him her late guest.

“We've arranged for a private dining room, Mr. Fairfax,” the waiter said, setting two carafes of water down on the table. “Dinner will be served in about half an hour.”

“Thank you, Carl.” Fairfax stepped back to allow the waiter to walk past him out of the room. Trieka quirked an eyebrow. The waiter hadn't worn a nametag. This guy was good.

Fairfax turned his attention to Trieka. “Captain Cavendish, I presume?”

“Correct,” Trieka replied as Fairfax extended his hand. Trieka took it. She had to look up to meet his eyes, but she did it squarely.

He shook her hand once in a comfortably firm grip. “Good to meet you. I'm sorry I'm late. I was tied up on the phone with Admiral Derocher.”

So, not only was he polite, but he had a good excuse. “I suppose I can't fault you for that. Have a seat.”

He moved past her to sit at the table. He was taller than she'd expected, an inch or two over six feet. Not quite as handsome as she'd thought, either, since the vidclips de-emphasized the too-long nose and slightly weak chin. Though well-tailored, his gray-blue suit still hung a bit. Trieka didn't know much about men's fashions, but she knew enough to realize the suit plus the shoes would have cost her a couple months' salary.

She waited until he'd settled before choosing her own chair. He smiled a little as she sat. A nice smile. His mouth was beautifully shaped, his eyes the color of an autumn storm-sky. Perhaps he wasn't the perfectly handsome and incredibly eligible bachelor the media made him out to be, but Trieka had to admit he certainly wasn't ugly.

“How are you feeling?” Trieka asked. “Medical told us you had a rough trip.”

“Better,” he said, “but not quite up to Mabel's famous chili.”

Trieka smiled. “That's all right. We're having a nice, bland pasta dish.”

Fairfax nodded, then made a questioning gesture toward the cheese.

“Help yourself.”

He picked out a few cubes of white cheese, avoiding the yellow ones, and placed them in a neat row on the table in front of him. Then he picked up a grape and looked at it.

“Air travel's never really agreed with me,” he said. “Apparently shuttle trips are no better.” He rolled the grape between long fingers, then set it down. A plain gold band circled his left ring finger. Why? She was fairly certain he was a widower, and the vidclips she'd studied to prepare for his arrival had been careful to mention his bachelor status as often as possible.

“Then may I ask why you decided to invest in off-planet property?” she asked.

“They told me space travel wasn’t as likely to cause me any problems.” He picked up the grape again and put it back on the tray. “They lied.”

“You didn’t have to leave Earth to invest,” Trieka persisted.

Fairfax looked at her, his eyes a bit too shrewd for her liking. “I never invest in property I haven’t seen.”

“I see.”

Trieka poured herself a glass of water, then filled Fairfax’s glass without asking him if he wanted any. He nodded thanks and drank.

“The trip on the *Starchild* will be considerably different from the shuttle trip,” she said. “Have you heard of hyperspace sickness?”

She found his grimace perversely rewarding. “Please tell me I’m not going to spend the entire trip in the head.”

“Probably not. It’s just something you should be aware of. Acute sickness can cause hallucinations and severe disorientation. It has to be caught early.” He seemed to be listening as he switched a slightly too-small piece of cheese for a larger one. She went on. “A list of symptoms is posted on the wall of each passenger’s quarters. Sickbay personnel are available at a moment’s notice if there are any problems.”

He shifted a few more cheese cubes into a pyramid. He still hadn’t eaten any of them. “That’s acceptable.”

Trieka pressed her lips together. “I run a tight ship, Mr. Fairfax. You’ll be expected to follow orders without question. There’s to be no interference with my crew. I’ll go over the basic rules of conduct while we eat. Any breach of these rules could get you confined to quarters at my discretion.”

She paused for breath, and Fairfax leaned forward, looking directly at her. A lock of hair fell down to curl against his forehead. Trieka stopped halfway through the breath, captured in his gaze.

“Captain Cavendish,” Fairfax said mildly, “if you’ve brought me here to tell me not to try to run your ship, you’re wasting your time, because I have no intention of doing so. If, however, you’d like to tell me how to avoid this hyperspace sickness, or explain to me exactly how much more vomiting I can expect to endure before we reach Denahault, then talk away, because I consider that useful information.”

Trieka opened her mouth, then closed it with a snap. He was walking all over her, and quite politely, too.

Fairfax leaned back in his chair, pointing at the pile of dark yellow cheese squares. “Is that sharp cheddar?”

“No, it’s fairly mild,” Trieka answered, still a little off-balance.

Fairfax picked up a few yellow squares and added them to his pyramid. Trieka took advantage of the moment to collect herself.

“I apologize. It’s been my experience that people of your stature are supremely bad at taking orders. Especially from women. I wanted to be certain there were no misunderstandings. I hope I haven’t offended you.”

“I’m not easily offended, Captain.” He had one too many cheese squares for his structure. He ate the extra piece, making a face as he swallowed.

Trieka studied him. She’d transported a few world leaders to various space station summits and they’d carried a similar aura, one Trieka found compelling. It was an unconscious, easy self-

confidence that pulled ordinary mortals into unwilling orbit.

He looked at her again and his power struck her full force. She refused to look away, unwilling to cede even the slightest fraction of authority.

"I get the feeling," he said, "that you don't want me on your ship."

"Earth-lubbers don't belong on colony ships. The people I'm taking to Denahault worked for two years to prepare for this trip. I don't think it's appropriate they should be delayed in this way, and if the order hadn't come from the president I probably would have protested." She paused. "And now you can relay that back to Derocher, and I'll lose my job."

To Trieka's surprise, Fairfax laughed. "I don't think so. Derocher told me basically the same thing. That I should expect a somewhat less than warm welcome. That your concern is first and foremost for the safety and welfare of your crew, and that I wasn't likely to contribute a great deal to that." He added a few more squares of cheese to his growing pyramid, still laughing softly.

Trieka bit down hard on her pride to keep it from escaping. After a moment of recovery, she said, "I don't like politics and I never have. I suppose I'm a disappointment to him in that respect."

Fairfax looked at her, still smiling, and with unwarranted warmth in his eyes. "On the contrary, I got the impression he would have been disappointed if you'd responded any other way."

"I think he knows me a little too well." She folded her hands neatly on the table. "I apologize, Mr. Fairfax. I suppose I have no business telling you how to run your affairs."

"No more than I have any business telling you how to run your ship. I assure you, I'll be as little trouble as possible."

"Maybe not to me, but I think you'll keep medical busy."

Fairfax grimaced. "That's the least welcome prediction I've heard today."

He ate a few pieces of cheese, slowly demolishing the carefully stacked pyramid. Each succeeding piece seemed to go down more easily. Trieka wondered if the pyramid had been an avoidance tactic. She picked a few strawberries from the tray, feeling her stomach rumble. She hoped Carl would bring the pasta soon.

"Anyway, in the spirit of not causing trouble, I *am* going to have to ask you for a favor." Fairfax gave a slight shrug, as if in apology. "This whole situation has caught me rather unprepared. I need to download some information from the EarthFed public archives to complete my overviews, so I've brought my own computer equipment."

Trieka nodded. "I can help you with that. It's a bit tricky downloading from space, but it can be done."

"I appreciate any help I can get."

Trieka smiled a little. "Dairy products are helpful."

He looked up questioningly, obviously unsure how dairy products could help him download from the EarthFed public archives. "For what?"

"Hyperspace sickness. Dairy products usually help."

"Now *that*," he said, his mild voice becoming suddenly emphatic, "is something I need to know."

**Darkscape:  
The Rebel Lord**

**By R. Garland Gray**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any person or persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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To Mom, for knowing I could...

And with appreciation to Sharon, Judy and Dee whose reviews contributed so much, and to Dov, my husband, whose strength and support made it real.

# Prologue

**Braemar Keep of Clan Douglas**  
**Planet Mars**  
**3187 Spring**

“Tell me again about the Dragon Comet, Father.” Kimberly snuggled closer to her father’s solid hip on the big four-poster bed. To the left of the bed, a paladin window opened to a gentle breeze. In the distance, above the black waters of the crater lake and shadowed mountains, milky white star clouds moved against the night sky. The Clan Douglas atmosphere equipment had altered Mars into a planet capable of supporting human life.

Kimberly jammed a pointy elbow into her father’s lean stomach, trying to sit up. He let out a muffled moan.

“And Ancient Earth,” she continued, unaware of her father’s discomfort, “and the shifting of the solar system and how our ancestors came to live among the stars.”

Jon Kinsale, Clan Kinsale’s First Diplomat, chuckled softly at his daughter’s insatiable curiosity. Her relentless energy seemed to peak at midnight and almost always landed in his bed.

This was his daughter’s first and only visit to the Clan Douglas castle base.

Thank goodness his beloved wife had remained behind. Mary Grace needed a rest from the seven-year-old meteorite that was their daughter.

“Shush, little one.” Jon pressed a finger to his daughter’s moving lips. “We do not want to wake our hosts.”

Green eyes, a mirror image of his own, blinked wide in understanding. Jon smiled. He looked down at the blue paper clamped in his daughter’s small fist.

“What’s this?” he inquired softly, fluffing the blue pillows behind his head and shifting into a better position to get a look at the drawing. The white light from the star clouds, brighter than a full moon, illuminated the bedroom almost enough to read by. Shadows moved upon the stone floor, slow moving specters on an endless journey. He examined the planetary drawing, taking note of a blue-white silvery orb and its single golden moon.

“It’s Ancient Earth,” Kimberly said excitedly. She held the drawing up for her father to see. “Lannie drew it for me.”

Jon was thoughtful for a moment. Lannie was his daughter’s name for the Clan Douglas first-line heir, Lord Lachlan de Douglas. They’d played together for a few hours this afternoon.

He took a closer look at the drawing. Not only were the celestial spheres drawn to scale, but he could make out the silver threads of the twelve constellations forming the zodiac of the ancient astrologers.

It appeared young Lord Lachlan’s knowledge of astronomy was superior—not to mention it had captured the interest of his daughter.

“He is very good,” Jon said. His gaze warmed at the sight of Kimberly’s golden curls falling in disarray about her pink nightgown. No braids tonight, he mused.

“This is Polaris.” Kimberly pointed out the bright white star on her drawing.

She had a quick mind, his Kimberly. Jon smiled. As he gazed upon his daughter’s bowed head, he reflected upon the actions he had taken earlier in the day. By signing the betrothal contract he

had safeguarded his daughter's future. Come of age, his beautiful daughter would marry Lord Lachlan de Douglas, a royal, first-line heir from Ancient Earth. Someday he'd tell her of the secret betrothal contract, but not now. For now, she belonged to him.

"Do you like young Lannie?" Jon asked.

Kimberly sniffed then frowned. "Yes, but he is a boy."

Jon chuckled. He pulled his daughter into his arms and hugged her fiercely. He knew in his heart that this would be his last visit to the stronghold of Clan Douglas.

"Tell me the Dragon story, please," Kimberly begged, putting on her best begging face. That always got the job done.

"Then you'll go to sleep?" Jon took the drawing from her and placed it on the wooden nightstand to his left.

"I promise." Kimberly dove under the blue plaid blankets and came up snuggling close to her father's shoulder. He smelled like apples and mother's lavender soap and his green sleeping clothes felt soft against her cheek. "I'm ready," she whispered, holding still.

With a sense of foreboding, Jon looked out at the milky white star clouds that hid the dark sky. War was coming. His daughter's small warm body pressed into his side.

"Father?"

Jon's gaze returned to his daughter. He began the storytelling.

"At first, Earth astronomers thought it was Halley's comet, returning in its seventy-six-year orbit—"

"But it was not Halley," Kimberly interrupted.

"No, it was not Halley," Jon agreed and tweaked her nose. "The cometary astronomers named the new comet Dragon for its large, dragon-shaped nucleus."

"Did the comet breathe fire?" Kimberly asked, having seen pictures of fire-breathing dragons.

"Yes, and ice and darkness as it passed Earth." Jon touched her cheek. "Close your eyes, little one."

Kimberly obediently closed her eyes and waited. She loved the sound of her father's deep voice in the night.

"The astronomers calculated the trajectory of the Dragon Comet."

"Mercury," a small voice added.

Jon's lips curved in a smile. "Yes. They calculated the comet's trajectory and knew the Dragon would collide with the planet Mercury, creating a catastrophic event."

"Very bad."

"Very bad," Jon echoed in agreement.

He looked to the window. "They knew that the destruction of the planet Mercury would be the end of life on Earth," he continued, reliving the event as if it had been in his lifetime. "Earth's orbit would shift, other planets' orbits would shorten or elongate, new places would be born that could support life, thus changing our solar system."

"Forever." Kimberly yawned, covering her mouth.

His gaze returned to his daughter. "Earth governments met in secret. Bases were planned and built on other planets. And when the Dragon collided with Mercury, they were ready. Most died. Some lived. And those that lived are our ancestors."

"Don't forget about the nebula," Kimberly murmured, trying hard to stay awake.

"How could I?" Jon whispered. "The collision spewed a large amount of planetary matter into space which collected in the huge cloud we know as the Moukad Nebula. It is the place of red clouds where no ships dare enter."

“Bad place.” Kimberly pressed her face into her father’s security and warmth. “Not like here on Mars.”

Jon watched the star clouds outside the window shimmer and slide by. Perhaps these star clouds were remnants of the catastrophic event.

His daughter shifted beside him, bringing him back to the present. “When the different stellar patterns formed in the night sky, Earth’s survivors formed clans and sought refuge on these new planets—like Clan Douglas did here on Mars. Life was harsh for them and uncompromising. But they made it,” he whispered.

Jon waited for the little voice to add something to the story. But at the continuing silence, he looked down. His little pink meteorite had landed and fallen fast asleep.

He closed his tired eyes and prayed the differences arising between the clans of Ancient Earth would not lead to war. *Please God, not war.*

# Chapter 1

**Asteroid Ceres, 620 miles (diameter 1000km)**  
**Clans of Ancient Earth**  
**3210 March (Vernal Equinox)**

They attacked at dusk when the pearly gray light of the asteroid Ceres's sky darkened to moody twilight. Located halfway between planets Mars and Jupiter, the large asteroid Ceres had proven a prime planetary outpost for Clan Douglas. The seven main stars of the Ursa Major constellation, better known as the Big Dipper, were low in the purpling, winter sky.

Lord Lachlan de Douglas, heir to the first-line Douglas family of Clan Scotland, stood at his castle base's titanium gate and bellowed evacuation orders.

Behind him, Dunnottar Keep's glimmering white stone walls and massive round towers rose majestically from the protruding cliff in ghostly apparition. Surrounding the keep on three sides and six hundred feet below the gray ledge, an alien ocean of blue ash floated in waves of mercurial and hallucinatory dust.

Lachlan's fists slammed against the gates in anger. Golden brown hair blew about a chiseled face crafted in Scottish glory.

"Herd the animals to the transports and raise base shields," he shouted.

He would not have their beasts trapped in burning paddocks and stables. Soon the courtyard darkened with the squeals of frightened animals in all shapes and colors. The animals were hybrids of Ancient Earth, genetically altered to survive within the dome's enclosure that covered the castle base and surrounding landscape. Above the courtyard, flocks of wee-gadhar flew in general disorder. The wee-gadhar, tiny doglike creatures with gossamer wings, were no larger than a man's index finger. Their hunger for the blood-sucking gnats accidentally brought in by transports made them a favored pet among Lachlan's people.

Fog shields rose around the castle's perimeter about a thousand feet from the walls. Cold fusion, historically controversial and unreliable, controlled the shields that protected the dome.

The older reactor powered the keep's artificial gravity, oxygenated the air, heated the enclosures and maintained the food stores. Most of the scientific community considered the nuclear reaction unstable. Given the current situation, Clan Douglas made do with what it had.

From within the keep sirens screamed to life, warning of imminent attack. In the courtyard, Lachlan swung around on booted feet. His uncommon gaze searched the purple horizon, locking on rows of tiny silver birds, the approaching enemy fighters.

*Shadowkeep.*

His lips curved back in a snarl. His eyes narrowed, hiding larger than normal blue irises behind long brown lashes. The genetic trait was carried through his father's royal line, marking him as "first-line"—able to trace his lineage back through the centuries to Ancient Earth.

Lachlan's fists clenched. He realized with sudden and grim insight that they had come to Dunnottar Keep—for him.

Second Commander Winn de Douglas skittered to a halt behind his young lord's powerful six foot one frame. His white cowlick fell down an aged forehead into angry eyes. The hum of approaching enemy fighters vibrated in Dunnottar Keep's fortified enclosure.

"My liege," Winn rasped. He balanced a large pulsar rifle on his hip.

Lord Lachlan looked out upon his terrified clan. Everything in his stomach churned into acid.

*Bloody liars. There will never be peace among the clans of Ancient Earth.*

With a kind of orderly terror, his people moved through the keep to the ship bays below.

Lachlan glanced at the heavy attack rifle in Winn's hand. His gaze rose to the flush face of his second-in-command.

"No, Winn." He shook his head. "Get the families and animals off the asteroid." He headed back into his doomed keep.

"My liege!" Winn protested. His sweaty hands squeezed the rifle. He wanted to fight.

"Do it!" Lachlan commanded, pivoting beneath the pale gray stone archway. He looked like a warrior of old, savage and merciless. Hard muscle stretched the dark blue tunic and breeches that fitted his tall frame.

Lachlan saw Winn hesitate. "That's an order, Second Commander."

Winn gave a curt nod. He ran across the courtyard to the keep's side entrance and down several levels to orchestrate the escape.

"What do they want?" a terrified woman shrieked while her husband dragged her toward the ship bays. "They promised peace," she whimpered.

Lachlan straightened silver armguards over his forearms. An explosion hit the far end of the keep causing the structure to shudder around him. He braced his hands on a stone wall for balance. Cold seeped into his palms. The shields were draining the reactors.

"Bloody hell."

Lights flickered.

Dunnottar Keep was one of Clan Douglas's planetary outposts. It was named after a Scottish castle, built in Ancient Earth's fourteenth century by Sir William Keith. All Clan Douglas's castle bases were built and named after ancient Scottish castles. And like its namesake, Dunnottar was destined for destruction.

Lachlan charged back into the keep to join the small group of warriors assembling in the main hall. Irreplaceable paintings and runic inscriptions of the Clan Douglas heritage covered the walls of the castle base.

He knew in his heart they were too few in number to win. But damn them, he would fight. He grabbed a pulsar rifle from the stockpile that had been retrieved from the armory and checked the charge. They needed to meet the threat and buy time for the escaping Douglas families.

*If Rama wants me, I'll make the bloody bastard work for it.*

## **Clan Ramayan Warship *Shadowkeep***

**Ceres's orbit**

**24 hours later**

The tentative peacetime agreement between the warring clans was over, at least as far as Rama was concerned. Commander Lin Jacob Rama of the Clan Ramayan Warship *Shadowkeep* stared at the prisoner in the cell. He hadn't lost his resolve, he thought smugly. His highly trained crew of one hundred and fifty men and women obeyed his every command without hesitation. Streaks

of gray colored his cropped blond hair. He looked younger than his sixty-two years with the lanky build and easy grace of an active man. He was still a cut above, he reasoned, better educated, more experienced and trained to command in extreme conditions.

"Let him bleed a little more," Rama murmured. His spotless black uniform added to the air of cruel authority that always permeated his presence. He thought about the potentially embarrassing failure of his little plan but the pressure inside his head refused to back down. Their current deployment here was almost finished. *Just a few loose ends to clean up*, he thought.

He watched the prisoner with the reluctant admiration of one warrior for another. Rama's pale blue eyes appeared to be those of a blind man except when they glittered oddly as they did now. He locked his hands behind his back and turned away.

But Lieutenant Kimberly Kinsale saw. The odd glittering reflected the madness of the other self that lived in her commander's tactical mind. Crouched in the murky darkness of the corridor where he could not see her, she remained unmoving, patiently waiting for her commander to take his leave. She was part of the military's elite pilot core. Trained to fly in strike aircraft over hostile territory and forbidding terrain. She had never questioned her missions until now.

"One hour is not enough to weaken him," Rama continued softly, unaware of his lieutenant's green-eyed gaze. "I want him weak."

The cell guard nodded reluctantly.

Kimberly waited, immersing herself in the darkness and quiet.

*What am I doing here?* she wondered yet again. This had been a snatch-and-grab operation. *Why?*

She served as a combat pilot aboard the famed Clan Ramayan Warship *Shadowkeep*, but she could no longer condone the war against Clan Douglas. The campaign just didn't make sense anymore. So she had secretly joined the rebel faction on board the ship. She just had not been prepared for Commander Rama's growing dementia.

Dementia. Right.

Not that anyone would believe her.

She was a front line officer.

Nothing more. Nothing less.

He was a bloody hero.

But still the questions remained.

Why had Rama violated the tentative peace agreement between the clans? Who was this special prisoner?

She waited, her hearing trained on every sound. Finally footsteps receded, leaving only the low hum of engines. Still she waited, at odds with her decision to be here. But what choice did she have?

When she was sure Rama and the guard had left, Kimberly rose to her slender five foot five height. Her black flight suit, stained with sweat, clung to her skin. A golden brown braid fell over her right shoulder to her waist. She moved on silent booted feet to the prisoner's cell.

Pulsing red vertical bars spewed from the ceiling to the floor, securing a holding cell about ten feet wide. A male prisoner lay on the metal floor just beyond, facing away from her, unmoving, unconscious. Her first impression of him was of power, despite the asylum restraints locking his arms behind his back. Her gaze slid from the restraints to the dark blue breeches caked in blue ash, then down to crusty black boots.

"Why does he want you?" she expressed her thoughts softly. *Why are you important?*

She realized then that she was trembling and tasted her own fear—sour and rancid like nightmares. *Damn it.* She struggled for control of her emotions, edging out the fear. She was a combat pilot. Fear was not a word in her vocabulary.

She took a deep breath.

This night, the night of the First Point of Aries, marked the vernal equinox of Ancient Earth before the solar system had shifted and life irrevocably changed. Centuries ago, this night celebrated life and blessings. But Kimberly had never been to Ancient Earth. It had shifted long before she was born.

She reached over. Her fingers pushed the hard switch that powered down the red bars. A soft click filled the silence. Now nothing stood between her and the prisoner. With a fortifying breath, she stepped into the cell. *This is madness, she thought. What I do here is madness. I should be out looking for assigned targets on the asteroid's surface.*

One amber light in the center of the ceiling kept the cell in shadows. The Douglas prisoner did not move.

*Why did Commander Rama sacrifice the peace for you?*

The Douglas lay curled in a fetal position, facing away from her. His powerful arms bound behind him in asylum restraints of white cloth and silver rods were reminiscent of the straitjackets used to confine the violently insane. Long brown hair matted with blood and blue ash all but covered his features. He smelled of salty sweat and coppery hurt and the sweetness of blue ash from the asteroid's mercurial sea.

Kimberly had no understanding of why Rama had attacked this remote Douglas outpost. But it was enough to make her realize there would be no peace.

Not now.

Not ever...unless she did something. But what could she do? She had no authority. She couldn't begin to understand her commander's actions.

She stared at the prisoner; her eyes wide in awe, her head tilted a bit to one side. In the dull amber light of the cell, the Douglas resembled a sleeping predator. In the pit of her stomach she had the impression of power and danger and something utterly unfathomable. She took another deep breath.

Beneath his hip, a tiny puddle of blood had formed. She could not believe that Commander Rama would let him bleed to death. But he would. Deep down inside her soul, she knew Rama would push the envelope, would experiment with this man just to see how much blood loss occurred before the heart stopped pumping.

Kimberly knelt down behind the restrained warrior.

"I'm going to help you," she said. *And I am mad to do this. If I'm caught, I'll lose my combat pilot status, not to mention Hamlet will have my head on a silver platter.*

The Douglas did not move a muscle.

"Can you hear me?" she asked softly.

No response.

Kimberly entered the restraint's four-digit release code into the tiny silver keypad. The rods popped open with a metallic click, freeing his arms. Gently, she pulled his arms down and tossed the restraint aside. Engraved silver armguards hugged sinewy forearms.

The Douglas tensed.

Kimberly struggled to roll him on his back. There was a lot of him to roll.

"Easy," she soothed. "Let me get you on your back."

He attempted to get up.



“No.” She pushed him back down.

He didn’t like that.

“Stay down.”

He tried to sit up again so she straddled him, using her weight to hold him down.

“Off,” Lachlan grunted. He tried to remove the weight on his hips. Pain slashed through his body.

Kimberly tucked her knees under, pinning his arms to the floor with her full weight.

“Get...off...me,” Lachlan croaked. He felt hot. His drugged stare encountered a two-headed, green-eyed monster woman. She was sitting on him. *What the hell?* He couldn’t move his arms.

“Hold still.” Kimberly shifted her weight, but continued to pin his arms. “You’re hurt.”

She planted her hand on his chest and gently shoved him back. She thought she saw a flash of angry blue behind the mass of hair.

“I have to find your wound and stop the bleeding,” she explained, hoping he understood her.

Kimberly ripped open his sweaty tunic, revealing a wide expanse of muscular chest and mat of crisp brown hair. Her searching fingers glided over firm muscle slick with sweat, blue ash and blood. He felt hot beneath her hands, a sign of fever.

The Douglas growled a throaty warning.

“No need to growl. I’m here to help,” she said calmly. “Tell me your name.” He reminded her of an injured animal—dangerous, distrustful and needy. She never looked up, but continued probing through the ash and blood covering his upper body. *Where is that wound?*

“Do you remember your name?” she inquired.

Lachlan sneered at the two monsters sitting on him.

Kimberly’s fingers slid down his left side.

“Wretched beast of hell!” Lachlan roared, flinging back his head. He broke out in a cold sweat; blackness skirted his vision.

“Sorry.” Her fingers had dipped into wet flesh. Bile rose in her throat. “Here, I-I found it.”

Below his fourth rib, blue ash infested the torn flesh. “It looks bad,” she said through her teeth. “This may hurt, but I must clean it. Do you understand me? It must be cleaned.” She needed medical assistance. She had no training for this. Kimberly gently pulled the torn flesh back and removed the clumps of ash as best she could.

Lachlan hissed in a wave of agony.

“I’m sorry,” Kimberly’s voice trembled in apology. She did not want to add to his pain and suffering. But the ash had to be removed. She knew that much at least. “Okay. I got all of it.”

“Get off me!” Lachlan attempted to roll right, unable to remove the heavy weight pinning his hips. He felt ill and hot and dizzy and bloody angry. Adrenaline pumped through his veins.

Kimberly flinched. Blood from the wound spurted onto her hands. “Damn it!” She choked down her revulsion.

“Hold still before you bleed to death. I’m trying to help you.” She managed to keep the wound closed with one hand while she pressed the commlink at her shoulder to signal for medical assistance. She’d deal with the repercussions later. He needed help now.

Lachlan let loose a string of colorful oaths.

Kimberly’s ears burned. “Someone should wash your mouth out with soap.” She raised her eyes from the wound to his dirty face. Despite the obvious pain and dirt, he had a look of savage royalty about him, dark expressive brows from what she could see beneath the mat of dirty hair, a straight nose with nostrils flaring, and a snarling upper lip. Definitely a blue blood, she mused.

He tossed his head and her gaze collided with blue ice. His feverish eyes were striking; intense; glaring at her from beneath long dark brown lashes and reddened lids. Then it hit her, his eyes—larger than normal blue-gray irises.

A rush of hot emotion washed over her. Kimberly stared at him in open disbelief.

Pain-filled eyes narrowed at her startled reaction.

“First-line,” she murmured in wonder. She’d never seen eyes so oddly beautiful and mysterious. “My God, you’re first-line.” She couldn’t believe it—*the gaze of a first-line Douglas, a direct descendent from Ancient Earth*. Her grip tightened over his wound.

“Bloody hell.” Lachlan closed his eyes and dropped his head back with a resounding thud. In a moment of coherent thought he rasped, “Where?”

Kimberly frowned. Didn’t he know?

Lachlan’s eyes cracked open and focused intently on the young woman sitting on his lap. *Not Rama’s ship*.

“Clan Ramayan Warship *Shadowkeep*,” she said.

The only reaction to her answer was a sudden tightening around his lips.

Silence came to the cell.

*Hell*, she thought. *Here it comes*.

Lachlan bucked, trying to unseat her.

“Stop it!” Kimberly commanded. She sat down hard on his hips. Her hands struggled to stem the flow of blood from his wound. The Douglas released a strangled oath lost again in the fever. The muscles in his face stiffened.

“Stop fighting me!” Kimberly warned. “I’m trying to help you.”

“Get off me!”

An old medic charged into the holding cell. Lachlan’s fevered gaze switched to the trembling, white-haired man.

“What the hell is that?” the Douglas bellowed, seeing a white serpent instead of a man. “What is this, a goddamned alien ship?”

The gaunt medic clutched a large black medical bag to his heaving chest as if it would protect him from the thrashing Douglas warrior.

“Help me.” Kimberly turned in panic to the medic. The Douglas cursed, bucking under her like an untamed mustang. Even in his weakened condition, she could not restrain him for much longer.

“Give me a tranquilizer,” she demanded, seeing fear on the old medic’s face. “He won’t hurt you. He’s feverish, I think...from the blue ash.”

The old medic glanced at the clumps of blue ash on the floor. “Hallucinogen.” The medic nodded in understanding. He pulled a small tranquilizer out of his black bag.

Lachlan growled a warning at the white serpent.

The medic adjusted the dosage, stepped forward and jabbed the needle into the Douglas’s muscular thigh.

Kimberly gasped in surprise as the Douglas’s dirty face slammed into her breasts. But she kept her hands locked over his wound. Pain and heat washed over her, centering at her breastbone. A muffled groan from the Douglas escaped from between her breasts.

Struggling to recapture the air in her lungs, Kimberly looked down. Through her clothes, hot breath feathered her left breast.

Lachlan looked up through his wretched pain. The two-headed monster woman shimmered, changing into a girl with large green eyes. She stared down at him with a concerned frown.

Pillow softness pressed against his lips.

“Why?” he murmured, struggling to remain conscious. *Why did you attack us?*

Kimberly’s mouth went dry. “I-I don’t...”

She watched the Douglas’s striking blue eyes roll back in his head. *I don’t know.*

His head hit the steel floor with a thud.

Kimberly glanced over her shoulder at the medic. “Thanks, Oliver.”

He nodded, regaining his courage now that the Douglas lay drugged and vulnerable.

Kimberly slid off the Douglas’s hips and sat back exhausted. *A first-line Douglas. And one with a temper at that!*

Cold seeped into her bottom from the floor. Blood pounded in her temples, the beginning of a headache. She closed her eyes. First-lines were rare, tracing their lineage all the way back to Ancient Earth before the solar system shifted. They were like royalty in this age and time. In the case of Clan Douglas, if she recalled her history lessons correctly, a first-line descended from Scotland’s Sir James Douglas, one of Robert Bruce’s chief lieutenants.

Kimberly opened her eyes. What did Commander Rama want with him? No, it was not Rama. She hated to admit it even to herself. It was that thing that lived in Rama and she had no way to prove it. She had come to recognize Commander Rama’s other personality by the odd tilt of his head, the deeper menacing voice and the glittering of pale eyes.

Kimberly shuddered.

Once Rama had been a friend, teacher and mentor whom she’d fondly called “Uncle.” Now she thought him deranged, irritable and violent, like a mad gale sweeping the surface of a planet. And, God forgive her, she destroyed upon his orders like the other combat pilots. As was the way, they saw no blood and knew not what they were made part of. It was only when she had come back with a damaged fuel tank that Kimberly found out the true reason for the attack. For in Commander Rama’s demented boast, he had given away his plan for revenge. Her mind flashed back to that moment.

*“Saph-ire.” Glittering angry eyes waited for her reaction. “I have captured him.”*

*“Who?” Kimberly asked, careful not to arouse the mad beast. She placed her black helmet back into the fighter’s cockpit.*

*“I promise you there will be no peace until I have my revenge,” Rama said. He stood beside her fighter’s wing, staring up at her with a blind man’s eyes.*

*“No peace?” Kimberly echoed despondently, holding on to her cockpit for support.*

*But Rama had already stalked away into the white steam of the fighter bay.*

*Who was Saph-ire? She was stunned by his revelation. No peace? Revenge for what? Who had they captured? Oh God. She felt sick inside. What have we done?*

“Lieutenant,” the old medic called impatiently again. He tapped her knee to get her attention.

Kimberly blinked back into the present. “Y-Yes?”

The medic continued, “I’ve sedated him and bound both the side and leg wound.”

“Leg wound?” Kimberly echoed dimly.

“Here.” The medic pointed to the Douglas’s bandaged left thigh. “Bad. The lad lost a lot of blood.”

“What does that mean exactly?” Kimberly stood up, wiping the “lad’s” blood from her hands to her already soiled flight suit.

The medic’s forehead wrinkled. “He needs to be kept warm and under close observation.”

“Medical bay?” she asked, then shook her head. She already knew the answer. The medic sighed. “We are not allowed to treat prisoners there.”

“Very well.” Kimberly looked from the medic to the unconscious Douglas and back again. “Damn.” She could not leave him here.

“I’d have to agree.”

Kimberly glared at the medic. She had no choice.

“Okay, I’ll take him.” *Hamlet is going to kill me.*

The medic nodded. He gathered his things into his black bag and rose to leave.

“Oliver,” Kimberly called him back.

The old medic stopped at the cell’s entrance and turned.

“Thank you for responding to my call,” she said.

The medic glanced at the Douglas. “Any time, Lieutenant.” He turned and left, leaving Kimberly alone with the unconscious warrior.

“Okay, it’s you and me, warrior.” Using two weight modules to lighten her burden, Kimberly eased the Douglas’s limp form over her shoulders. She shifted her load and stepped out into the corridor.

“Phew, you stink.” She looked down the empty corridor. “I’m going to help you.” *And then you will help me regain the peace.* She walked out of the prison holding block and never looked back.

No one interfered with Lieutenant Kimberly Kinsale, Commander Rama’s prized protégé.

\* \* \*

Kimberly carried her unconscious burden to her small private quarters on the fourth level. It was after midnight. The members of her strike force should be back from their mission.

She did not allow herself to think about the consequences that would surely follow this impulsive act.

Yesterday’s operation would probably lead to a decisive battle between Clan Douglas and the rest of the clans. She walked to her quarters, all the time praying she was wrong.

The door of her quarters slid shut behind her. Kimberly stood staring at the two tiny rooms. At least she had a private air shower. That was more than most.

In the smaller back room, she laid the Douglas down on a standard issue cot. Removing the weight modules, she shackled his wrists to the metal edge of the bed.

Kimberly straightened and stared down at the unconscious warrior. Beneath the filth, ash and bandages she could see the dark promise of retaliation and war.

With a heavy sigh, she removed the silver armguards that he wore. The metal felt surprisingly warm in her hands. She brushed the dirt off the armguards. The engraved words *Jamais Arrière* stared up at her. Something about arrival, she suspected. A clan motto, perhaps? She carefully placed the armguards under the cot.

The Douglas began to murmur mindlessly about a monster and daggers. Kimberly wrinkled her nose in distaste.

“You need a bath, Douglas. Tomorrow, I think, when we both are rested.”

Kimberly slumped in the old chair wedged between the cot and the wall. Its familiar blue cushions welcomed her weight. Surprisingly, she felt no fear, just a sense of the inevitable. She listened to the deep rhythmic breathing of the Douglas. The sound lulled her to sleep. For a few hours, she succumbed to sweet oblivion.

\* \* \*

Commander Rama entered Kimberly's quarters silently, like a predator stalking prey. Searching the darkness, his large pale eyes settled on the dimly lit room in the back. A slow smile crept up his face, never reaching his eyes. He walked forward and stopped at the foot of the cot.

Covered in blood and filth, the Douglas's handsome features were hard to make out. Yet, the voice inside Rama's head commented, *Lord Lachlan favors the Lady Saph-ire de Douglas.*

"Yes," Rama agreed, still irritated by his lieutenant's unauthorized actions. He would have ordered the Douglas's wounds treated...eventually.

*It would have been too late by then,* the inner voice berated him. *She did us a service.*

Rama's gaze fixed on the slumbering beauty in the old blue chair.

"Perhaps," he muttered.

Sensual warmth filled his aged loins. He imagined his lieutenant writhing under his thrusts.

*Yes,* the inner voice readily agreed. *Soon.*

"Kim," Rama called softly.

Kimberly bolted upright from the chair, her braid all askew. Strands of golden brown curls tumbled in disarray down her shoulders.

For a desperate moment, blackness invaded her peripheral sight. She stared blankly into Rama's pale glittering orbs and thought frantically. How could she rationalize her actions to her demented commander? Her uncooperative mind refused to assist her.

Rama's gaze dropped to his Douglas prize.

"Lord Lachlan," he murmured, caressing the Douglas's black boot with almost fatherly tenderness. He looked up. "You took it upon yourself, Lieutenant, to care for him?"

"Yes, sir," Kimberly answered cautiously.

"Why?"

Her mind raced for an answer. "Medical does not treat prisoners. And..."

"And?" Rama waited.

"I thought him important to you," Kimberly finished slowly. She held her breath.

"Very well." Rama studied the unconscious Douglas.

Kimberly allowed herself to breathe.

"Lord Lachlan de Douglas belongs to me. Until last month I had not known the ultimate goal," Rama said. "The next phase of the operation brings the reward."

"I don't understand, sir."

"Front line officers sometimes have trouble making sense of the higher command. Did I tell you that Lord Lachlan de Douglas belongs to me? Did you know that?"

Kimberly shook her head. "No, sir." She did not know who spoke to her. Was it Commander Rama or the madness?

Pale blue eyes glittered dangerously at her.

"Desperation breeds foolishness." He looked through her as if she were not there.

Kimberly tensed.

Rama's head tilted. "Do not despair...beloved," his eyes grew misty and far away, "or eternity will damn you as it has me."

"Commander?" Kimberly called the man back from the darkness of lunacy.

Commander Rama blinked in confusion then glared at her. “Do you think me irrational to want Lord Lachlan?”

Kimberly shook her head, not understanding any of it. “No, sir.”

Rama nodded. “Good then.” He stared into the empty air, pivoted and left.

Kimberly collapsed back into the worn blue chair. She buried her face in her hands. A small, wretched sob escaped her lips before she slammed the door shut on her emotions. She did not want to feel the desperation growing inside her. What was she going to do?

She peered through slim fingers at the unconscious Douglas and surveyed his body. It did not make sense. She remembered the fierceness of his pain-filled glare. She thought of the Clan Douglas lord. Would Lord Commander Drumlanrig de Douglas seek revenge and sacrifice his clan’s chance at peace?

Kimberly hoped not. She slumped back in her chair and stared at the old black star chart above the cot. The chart depicted Earth’s solar system before the coming of the Dragon Comet. Back then there had been ninety-five known moons. Now there were substantially more. The solar system shift had happened more than two centuries ago and they were still discovering new places to live.

The star chart blurred.

Kimberly closed her tired eyes. She felt bone-weary. In one month’s time, the Delphi peace summit would take place. A diplomatic attempt to resolve the war, all the clans had been asked to send representatives to it. Commander Rama, along with two other men, would act as ambassadors for Clan Spain.

From beneath lowered lids, Kimberly glanced at the Douglas.

*You are the key, aren’t you?* Kimberly settled back in the chair and closed her eyes, no longer able to think. Her mind tumbled into a troubled sleep.

# Chapter 2

In the blue-gray darkness of her quarters, Kimberly stepped out of the tiny air shower and shivered from the cold. It had to be around four a.m. She shrugged into her crisp black uniform. Her feet cramped painfully in the stiff boots. She moved slowly to the back room all the while flexing her chilled toes.

“God forbid they expend energy to heat this warship,” she muttered. Her fingers fumbled with the buttons on her jacket.

Tossing her braid over her shoulder, she peered in the room. At the head of the cot, a tiny amber night-light gave the Douglas an angel’s halo. He sleeps silently, she mused, not a sound to give away his presence.

He lay on his back, washed and cleaned, thanks to the medic Oliver. The thick blue blanket covered most of him, but fell short of his chest, revealing a tantalizing glimpse of golden skin, sexy collarbone and broad shoulders.

*God, he’s beautiful.* She imagined herself curling up next to his warmth and sipping at his collarbone with slow, indecent licks. Kimberly blushed to her toes with mortification. What was wrong with her? She had a bad case of the smutty. Her gaze slid to his fine-corded neck, strong bristled jawline and handsome face tilted slightly away from her in slumber. Golden brown hair, a darker shade than her own, spread across the small white pillow. Kimberly knew if she ran her fingers through those strands of raw silk that he would awaken. But oh, how she wished to do just that.

“I have to go,” she murmured, not knowing why she spoke. He slept on in a lightly drugged sleep. “Reconnaissance. I’ll help whomever I can. I promise.”

Kimberly turned on a silent heel and left her quarters glad to be out of there and away from the seductive call of the Douglas.

She reported to the fighter bays below deck. Concentration edged out disillusionment. She visualized the mission. Her first recon and she knew what she had to do.

Once her combat fighter took off, she flew straight to the asteroid’s surface. Her first assignment found her escorting a prison shuttle back to the ship. She made sure the Clan Douglas prisoners were put safely in the ship’s holding cells, given hot food and their wounds treated.

She asked Oliver to keep watch on the Douglas lord in her quarters before returning to the planet’s surface. She didn’t like leaving him alone and unprotected.

The second trip to the planet’s surface was harder than the first. Staring at the smoldering ruins of the castle base, Kimberly felt a rush of emotion—shame, regret and anger all mixed and churning together. *How can I be part of this?* she wondered, disgusted with herself.

She kept her turmoil concealed and checked in with the recon officer in the main hall of the smoking base. To her surprise, her next assignment was to search the west tower. Kimberly thought that an odd assignment for a pilot.

“Do I have to repeat myself, Kinsale? West tower—now.”

“Yes, sir.” Kimberly headed for the west tower. It overlooked the sea of blue ash. She crossed the two hundred feet of inner courtyard all the while buffeted by dust and a whistling north wind.

Once she had passed through the entrance to the tower, she stopped to catch her breath, resting her back against the cold stone wall. It was dark and damp due to the faltering power, but she

could see this had once been a place of learning. A blue carpet covered the floor. Benches, armchairs, stools, desks, toys and books littered the hall. Tapestries of blue and gold hung on the walls depicting great deeds of valor and honor. It had been a schoolroom for the children, she surmised. The keep's plans called this place the Tower of Homage. In ancient times, vassals had sworn their oath of allegiance in places like these.

Kimberly listened to the howl of the winds echoing through the dark corridors and damaged stone walls. It sent ghostly chills up and down her spine. She pushed away from the wall and made her way into the darkness. Switching on her searchlight, she felt the trespasser here, especially after stumbling into what appeared to have been a simple chapel. The cold wet air seeped through her black uniform into her body and into her heart.

It felt wrong to be here, almost sacrilegious. She made her way up to the next level. The sound of her booted footfalls on the stone steps echoed in her own ears.

On the next landing, Kimberly stopped in front of an arched wooden doorway. She peered at the inscription above her: *Jamais Arrière*. They were the same words engraved in the Douglas's silver armguards. She pushed through the heavy double doors and peered into the shadows of an octagonal data bank.

"A library," she murmured in astonishment as she stepped through the doors. She studied the shadowy shelves that rose to a white cathedral ceiling. Four wood landings broke up the massive room into cozy reading areas. At each landing, groupings of chairs and benches gave homage to framed paintings of Ancient Scotland. She scanned each painting, taking in the rugged charm of the Scottish landscape, from the snow-dusted peaks of the northern highlands to the stone castles and still blue lochs that had disappeared long ago.

She looked away, not wanting to imagine what had been. There was no going back to a dead planet. She moved deeper into the library, tempted by the knowledge stored there. Besides flying and stargazing, she loved to read.

Out of curiosity, she stopped before a shelf of ships' logs. Kimberly touched the blue disk jacket marked "Clan Douglas Starship *Edinburgh*." *This can't be right.*

A chill raced down her spine.

Reputed to have started the war, the starship *Edinburgh* had disappeared long ago, taking her secrets with her. Hadn't she? The fine tremors in her body grew. What did Lord Lachlan's clan know that the rest of the clans did not?

Kimberly removed the tiny disk from its protective blue jacket and slipped it into her palm reader. Data immediately appeared on the reader's tiny screen. She scanned the entries of Lord Commander Drumlanrig de Douglas:

*The clan leaders arrived today.*

*Explained the energy crystal as a possible renewable energy source.*

*Jealous bastards. They want it all.*

*Will work it out.*

*Rama supportive as usual. Thank God.*

*My heir Lachlan called from Braemar Keep, our home castle base located on Mars. Ian is dying. I promised my friend I'd be there at the end. I have to go home. Asked Rama to keep things calm here.*

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*Yesterday...Was it only yesterday I felt such hope?*



*Drum, my second son, is dead—and my warship Daring destroyed. The energy crystals gone. Stolen.*  
*Returned to Edinburgh and grilled the bastards. Found nothing. Released them.*  
*Lachlan checking for Daring survivors.*  
*Drum, my son...God's blood! How did this happen?*  
*Rama gone. I think he took the energy crystals.*  
*But why? Why?*

With trembling fingers, Kimberly returned the disk to its blue jacket. Clan Douglas had not killed the leaders. Her heart pounded wildly in her chest. Rama had lied to the Council when he returned from the Clan Douglas Starship *Edinburgh*. The energy crystals had been stolen by Rama, not withheld by Clan Douglas. *What has Rama done? What have I done?*

An explosion rocked the floor beneath her. Kimberly glanced down at the engraving. She stood upon the Clan Douglas coat of arms, a silver shield bearing a gold crown atop a man's heart. Above the heart, three silver stars gleamed upon a blue banner. She moved her foot. Above the shield, the words *Jamais Arrière* curved over a knight's helmet crowned with yellow flames. It suddenly dawned on her, a bright light in the darkness. *Oh my God.*

"I have to get him off the ship," she realized in stunned dismay. *Lachlan*. Rama called the Douglas "Lachlan." *Not only is he first-line, her mind raced, but he is also the heir to Clan Douglas. Oh God. That's why Rama wants him—the Clan Douglas heir. I have to get him off Shadowkeep or there will never be peace.*

The disk log promptly disappeared within the folds of her uniform's heavy jacket. Kimberly left the library and headed back to her fighter.

\* \* \*

Slow...gray...painful...Lachlan became aware of his surroundings—humming echoes, metal smells, and things that did not belong.

He was on a ship.

He lay naked beneath a blue blanket. He had had vivid dreams of a green-eyed monster woman sitting on him and stabbing him with...with pointed fingers.

Lachlan pushed up on his arms, gritting his teeth with stubborn determination. He glanced slowly about. It was a small room, with pale blue walls and two dim amber lights in the ceiling.

*Where the hell am I?*

He glanced left. A young woman slept curled in on herself in a blue chair with wooden legs. He did not recognize her.

*What happened?* He tried to remember.

Nothing.

He glanced over his shoulder again and found a pair of green eyes watching him intently.

"Hello." Kimberly did not know what else to say to the pagan warrior-god looking at her.

She was in way over her head. Awake, Lord Lachlan de Douglas emitted a rugged masculinity that alluded to hot, rich sex. The kind that was brutal, stirring and damn near irresistible.

Wrist shackles clanked in the silence. His uncommon gaze dropped to the shackles, then lifted in rebellious anger.

Kimberly tried hard not to flinch from his accusing glare.

"How do you feel?" She uncurled her stiff legs and sat up. Five hours since recon. Another night approached. The mission had been every bit as emotionally grueling as her first kill.

He did not answer. The Douglas's gaze lowered to her *Shadowkeep* uniform. The muscles in his right cheek twitched. His eyes narrowed and returned to her face.

"Release me," Lachlan commanded.

Kimberly stiffened at the velvet darkness in his voice. "No, I cannot."

Lachlan remembered.

All of it.

The battle. Blood and death.

Rage curled in his gut at being taken prisoner by Rama. He tested the strength of the wrist shackles.

Kimberly stared at the straining muscles in his arms, at the sheer physical strength of him.

"Stop," she commanded in her best authoritative voice.

He did not.

Kimberly grabbed at his powerful shoulders. She pushed at the immovable wall of his chest.

A growl erupted low in his throat.

Kimberly looked down. Something hot, dangerous and savage glared up at her.

"Don't sit on me again," Lachlan warned between clenched teeth.

A small jolt of fire went through her. Beneath her hands his body vibrated hotly in suppressed violence. Kimberly stepped back. Her fingers felt like they were burning.

"You must lie still then." She pointed to his side and leg. "Your wounds need time to heal."

Lachlan stared down his bare chest.

Then he felt it.

A swirl of red haze and hurt engulfed him. Sharp raw pain pulsed in his swollen thigh. His side pulled and burned where the healing adhesive held torn flesh. He broke into a cold sweat. With a muttered oath, Lachlan closed his eyes and collapsed back onto the bed.

Kimberly stared down at his pale face. She felt a little shaky herself from this encounter. Moisture dotted his upper lip.

"My men?" Lachlan asked stiffly. His eyes cracked open.

Kimberly looked away. "A few casualties. About twenty men are in the ship's holding cells. I've ordered the wounded treated."

"Food?" he gritted out.

"Yes. They've been fed," Kimberly replied, taking note that he cared more for his men than himself.

Lachlan eyed his jailer. *Better than the normal rank and file. Damned small for a green-eyed monster woman.*

Kimberly met his hard regard. "How do you feel?"

He licked his lips.

"Are you thirsty?" she asked. His irises were so incredibly large and blue it was hard not to stare at him.

Lachlan hated to admit it, but his mouth felt like space dust.

"Yes," he replied tightly.

She inclined her head. "I bet that was tough to admit."

He looked away. "Yes," he grumbled under his breath.

"Here." Kimberly helped him sit up and then held a tall glass to his lips. "The medic left this for you. It's a nutrient drink, I think."

"It's green." Lachlan glared at the glass in disgust, then up into her eyes.

"Yes." Kimberly smiled. "Green, but healthy. It'll replace the nutrients you've lost."

Lachlan peered at the green drink. He knew he would drink anything at this point. He hoped his men were getting better treatment than this.

She held the glass up to his lips.

"Slowly," she directed.

He filled his mouth with the sweet liquid. Cool tendrils brushed his lips.

He drank deeply.

Kimberly set the glass back on the thin rectangular table behind her. "Better?"

Lachlan leaned back on his forearms. He watched his female jailer with disgruntled interest. Delicate. White alabaster skin. A faint rosy hue sprinkled along hollow cheeks. Almond-shaped green eyes watched him from beneath slim expressive brows, and lashes of spiky brown lace. Under her eyes, dark shadows hinted of lack of sleep and other troubles. His gaze dropped to her mouth. She had a large pink bottom lip with a tiny scar to the left of center that could taunt a man into taking a taste. She was blessed with full breasts, a slim waist and long shapely legs. He scowled darkly at being knocked off balance by her arresting beauty.

"I know you will find this hard to believe..." Kimberly sat back in the chair. She spoke softly, trying to hide the tremble in her voice. "I want to help you."

He snorted in disbelief.

"You don't believe me." She nodded in understanding. If she were in his place she would not believe it either.

Lachlan shifted to get a better look at her. From what he could see in the amber light, she had an amazing thick brown braid that fell over her shoulder to her waist. He could well imagine the silken waves in his hands. *Where the bloody hell did that come from?* He did not want to feel this gut attraction to the enemy.

"I want to help you," Kimberly repeated.

Lachlan jerked his gaze back to her eyes. "I don't want your help. A *Shadowkeep* warrior does not help a Douglas."

"This one does," Kimberly responded. He glowered at her.

"Kimberly," she said her name softly.

"Kimberly," Lachlan echoed in disapproval.

"My name." Kimberly smiled. "My name is Kimberly."

Commander Rama stood silently in the doorway. He found the subtle nuances of their exchange very interesting. They didn't even notice him. He knew a sexual dance when he saw one.

"Lieutenant Kinsale, to be exact," Rama stated. "Or if you prefer, Lieutenant Kim Kinsale of *Shadowkeep*. I'm sure you noticed no clan inflection. Irish-American ancestry, but beautiful nonetheless."

Kimberly stiffened. Instinctively, she sealed her emotions behind a familiar mask. She did not belong to the Spanish glory of Clan Ramayan and never would. And somehow that had made her inferior in the eyes of Rama's new personality.

She slowly straightened from her chair. Behind the lanky commander, the medic, Oliver, cowered. He clutched his black medical bag to his chest. Pale white fatigues hung loosely on his short, gaunt frame.

Rama studied his lovely lieutenant and handsome captive. Definitely a sexual dance, he mused darkly.

“You like him in your bed, Lieutenant?” he inquired softly. Too softly. His head tilted.

“He is not in my bed, sir,” Kimberly answered cautiously.

Oliver coughed behind the black bag.

Rama thought about her answer and found it acceptable for the moment. He nodded. “Very well.” He waved her back and entered the room. “Sit down, Kim.”

Kimberly hesitated. She glanced at the Douglas. “Yes, sir.”

Lachlan watched Commander Rama. The man had not aged since last he’d seen him years ago. Rama settled down on the bed beside him like the old family friend that he once had been. The cot creaked with the additional weight.

Rama smiled. “Permit me to introduce myself.”

Lachlan frowned. He raised himself up on supporting elbows. It was then that he noticed his forearms were bare. Anger lanced through his gut.

The missing silver armguards were a gift from his father, engraved with the Clan Douglas coat of arms and motto, *Jamais Arrière*—Never Behind. Lachlan wanted them back.

Kimberly watched the Douglas’s narrowed gaze move from his bare forearms to Rama. With her booted toe, she pushed the deeply etched silver armguards further under the cot. She suspected their importance to the Douglas and did not want Rama adding them to his trophy room.

Lachlan noticed a strange shifting in Rama’s features. It made him uneasy. He glanced curiously at Kimberly. *What is going on?* But the girl’s gaze remained on her commander.

Rama cleared his throat. “I am Commander Lin Jacob Rama of the Clan Ramayan Warship *Shadowkeep*.”

Lachlan’s dark golden brows rose. *Obviously, idiot.*

Rama continued, “Perhaps you have heard of me?”

*What game is this? Is he serious?* Rama knew Lachlan’s family before the war. There were rumors of madness aboard *Shadowkeep*. Could it be true? Was Rama sick, or was this some demented game?

“Ah, I see that you have.” Rama pulled the blue blanket from Lachlan’s chest, revealing a thick white bandage over his ribs.

Lachlan tensed.

Kimberly didn’t like the look of this. “Commander?”

“Quiet, Lieutenant.” Rama’s mouth twisted in an appreciative smile. His pale eyes swung to her. “I wish to inspect the bandage.”

With long fingers, Rama reached out and caressed the white bandages. His gaze locked with the frosty blue glare of the Douglas. “You resemble the Lady Saph-ire Townshend.”

“Douglas,” Lachlan gritted out in disgust. He recognized the lust in Rama’s eyes and it sickened him. Since when did he prefer males in his bed? Lachlan glanced at Kimberly. *Was she a partner in this?*

“Ah yes. Lady Saph-ire de Douglas.” Rama slid his hand up Lachlan’s chest. “Your mother.” He remembered her always and always. “Beautiful,” he murmured.

Lachlan’s nostrils flared in fury. His fists tightened on the edge of the cot. The bastard was stroking him like a lover. Shackles dug into Lachlan’s wrists, preventing him from plowing his fist into the man’s face.

Kimberly stood up. She had to stop this.

“Commander?” She inclined her head. “Sir?” she repeated even louder, leaning forward.

Rama’s shadowed eyes looked up. He studied Kimberly for a long time.

“Sir,” Kimberly echoed. She clenched her fists.

Rama’s gaze slid to Lachlan’s angry face. He saw rugged maleness mated with aristocratic features.

“Lord Lachlan de Douglas,” he murmured. “Military elite. Heir apparent.” *No doubt, he is her son*, Rama mused. *The question remains, is he Drum’s son or mine?*

Lachlan sneered, “Do you like what you see, demented bastard?”

Rama’s pale eyes glittered dangerously. “Perhaps.”

Kimberly touched Rama’s shoulder, intent on drawing his attention away from Lachlan.

“He is injured, Commander.” She spoke softly, bending down to engage the commander’s pale eyes. She expected him to froth at the mouth at any moment.

Rama blinked. “Saph-ire?”

“No, sir.” Kimberly smiled despite her fear. She pressed on, “His wounds, sir.”

Pale eyes focused on her. A black countenance darkened Rama’s face. “Very well, Lieutenant.” His voice deepened oddly. “How foolish of me to touch what belongs to me.”

Instinct prompted her to freeze.

The thing talking to her was not Rama.

“I am not yours,” Lachlan scoffed. “And I do not need a *Shadowkeep* lieutenant fighting my battles.”

Rama tilted his head, looking past Kim. “I wonder...,” he said softly.

Kimberly dared not move. Rama’s two personalities battled at this moment for control of his body. He seemed to examine her, searching for answers.

“Surely you do not side with Lord Drum here, my Lady Saph-ire?” His voice deepened.

In her peripheral vision, Kimberly saw Lachlan look askance at Rama. She slowly drew back. Oliver stood in the corner of the room, trying to be brave.

*What is going on here?* Lachlan watched Rama’s pupils shrink to tiny pricks of night.

“Let her choose, Drum,” Rama said angrily. He punched the bed beside Lachlan’s thigh.

Kimberly and Oliver jumped.

Lachlan’s eyes narrowed. “Choose what?” This was damn bizarre.

Kimberly motioned Lachlan to silence.

Rama stared at Kimberly. “Saph-ire?” he pleaded. “Do not leave me.”

Kimberly’s heart ached for the man Rama had once been.

*Sweet Lord*, Lachlan thought, *the bastard is mad and she knows it.*

“I am Kim, sir...Remember?”

Commander Rama blinked. Features shifted. Slowly, he rose from the bed.

“K-Kim,” Rama muttered. He touched his temple as if in pain. “Yes. Kim. Attend me.”

“Very well, sir.”

Kimberly followed Rama into the outer room of her quarters. Without the amber lights, it was dark here. Shadows revealed a rumpled bed, a small round table, a black lamp and her mother’s old silver music box that played “Greensleeves” when the lid was lifted.

“Kim.” Rama’s voice softened to that of the gentle mentor he had once been. He faced her. “We understand each other, you and I. I know it may be hard for you to consider anything as evil. But Lord Lachlan de Douglas is evil.” Rama’s voice deepened once again. “Clan Douglas is evil. They all deserve to die.”

Kimberly kept all emotions from her face. *No one deserves to die*, she thought despairingly. *Not even you.*

“Very well, sir,” she replied, since he seemed to expect an answer. *He worsens daily*, she thought.

Rama gently squeezed her shoulder. “I knew you would understand.” He turned and left her quarters without a sound to his step. Oliver followed quietly behind him.

Silence crept in.

Lachlan gazed at her silhouette. She appeared fragile to him in the shadows, alone in a sea of lunacy.

“He is mad,” Lachlan stated.

Kimberly continued to watch after the commander. “I know.”

They were well trained for the task, she was not. Kimberly debriefed with the rest of the team after finishing the all-night survey mission. She could attack from the air with great precision. She did not fly shuttle missions for the older, pain-in-the-neck ship scientists.

She was tired. She headed for the sanctuary of the pilot’s locker room.

“Thank you for flying the shuttle,” a woman said from her right.

Kimberly opened her locker and glanced over her shoulder. Plain-faced Annie from science core could talk the pants off of just about everyone on the ship. “No thanks needed. I was assigned.”

“Still, it’s nice to have someone who is experienced behind the controls.”

Kimberly shrugged out of her flight suit down to her black T-shirt and underwear. “Can I help you with something, Annie?” She did not have time to talk with this woman.

“You have a first-line Douglas in your quarters?”

Kimberly did not react. She stuffed her flight suit into her locker and grabbed her pants. She did not want to discuss the unsettling Lord Lachlan de Douglas.

“Is it true?” Annie persisted.

“Is what true?” Kimberly muttered, pulling her pants on. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. She jammed her feet into her boots and reached for her jacket.

“About his eyes, Lieutenant? His eyes?”

Kimberly had the jacket on and then reached for her weapons. She didn’t usually wear weapons inside ship quarters, but something prompted her to do so this time. She strapped the small pulsar guns to her thighs and slammed the locker’s door shut. Annie didn’t even flinch.

“About his eyes?”

Kimberly didn’t like the interest in the older woman’s voice. “Yes,” she answered. *Lachlan’s eyes are mysterious and blue*, she thought, *like the deep oceans of Ancient Earth*.

“Can I see him?”

Kimberly glared at the woman. “No.” She checked her answer when she saw the woman’s disappointment. Annie meant no harm. “Maybe later, Annie, after he heals.”

Annie nodded. “Very well. You’ll let me know?”

“Yes.”

“It’s just that I’ve never seen a first-line.”

Kimberly pasted a smile on her face. Neither had she. “I understand.” She excused herself and made her way back to her quarters.

Panic nibbled away at her.

Something felt wrong.

Urgency pulled at her.

When several crewmen refused to meet her gaze, she ran to her quarters. Kimberly skidded to a halt beside her open door. She peered at the devastation inside and stepped through the doorway into the shadows.

A battle had taken place here not too long ago.

Her gaze locked on the overturned cot in the back room, then jerked to the disk log's hiding place behind her own overturned bed.

She took a step forward. Her gaze snapped back to the cot, searching for Lachlan's silver armguards.

"He wears the armguards." Rama stepped from the corner shadows. "He is a trophy, after all."

Kimberly found herself once again in insanity's realm.

"Do you love him, Saph-ire?" Rama asked hoarsely. Pale eyes watched her with sick hunger.

"No." Kimberly shook her head.

"But you exchanged marriage vows with him. It is not right. You love me."

"Commander," Kimberly called.

Softly.

Sweetly.

Trying to reach him...

"I am Kim, sir. Remember?"

Rama frowned. "Kim?"

"Yes, sir. Where is Lord Lachlan?"

A smile suddenly appeared on Rama's face. "In a holding cell. You may go see the Douglas. See his weakness and treachery and know then that I speak the truth."

"Very well, sir." Kimberly backed out into the corridor. She turned and ran, taking the shortest route to the holding block below the fighter decks.

*Please, she prayed, may I be in time.*

She ran and ran, forever it seemed.

Her heart pounded wildly in her chest.

"Lieutenant!"

Kimberly slid to a halt. Her hands instinctively reached for the pulsar guns strapped to her thighs.

"Over here," Oliver called.

"Oliver?" Kimberly bent from the waist. "Why are you hiding in the air vent?"

Oliver pointed to the left corridor. "They went that way."

"Bless you." Kimberly turned and ran.